

January 12, 2019

Ms. Rocky Robbins, Planner I
Mr. Perry Huston, Director of Planning
Okanogan County Office of Planning and Development
123 5th Avenue North, Suite 130
Okanogan, Washington 98840

Subject: Comments on the scope of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for revisions to the
2014 Okanogan County Comprehensive Plan and Zoning regulations

Dear Ms. Robbins and Mr. Huston,


As Methow Valley residents, property owners, and tax payers of Okanogan County, my neighbors and I support the comments that have been researched, prepared, and submitted by the Methow Valley Citizens' Council in our mutual efforts to protect the Methow Valley's natural assets, and to protect the air, land, and water quality and quantity for all present and future county citizens.

In evaluating environmental impacts, consideration of the likely effects of climate change in Okanogan County is essential.

Please include the attached comments regarding Alternative Four which presents a responsible voice to guide all County efforts in wisely planning for the future.

Sincerely,

Surya DiModica



Alternative Four

We propose a fourth alternative that we believe would result in fewer significant environmental impacts. Some provisions of the proposed alternative apply County-wide, and a few apply only to the Methow Valley More Completely Planned Area (MVMCPA), formerly the Methow Review District (MRD). This alternative of the Comprehensive Plan proposes policies that reflect the geographic and cultural diversity of Okanogan County and informs further detail to be provided in Zoning, Subdivisions and other implementing regulations.

Summary

Alternative 4 designates Resource Lands to indicate areas where the County will promote long-term, commercially viable agriculture, forest, and mineral uses and will discourage intensive residential, commercial, and industrial development. Larger lot sizes are implemented in the resource designations to avoid conflict with agricultural operations. The city expansion areas are designated in Alternative 4. This alternative includes up to four Rural designations (e.g. Residential, Resource, Transitional, Remote) to recognize areas within the Rural environment with unique attributes, avoid conflicting uses and protect rural assets. Unlike Alternatives 1-3, which rely heavily on underlying zoning for guidance, Alternative 4 applies policies in the Comprehensive Plan describing each Rural land use designation, its intent, the densities and types of uses allowed. While alternative 4 considers the historically low population growth in the county it relies on the cities/towns and their expansion areas to serve most of the population growth and supports the cities/towns in acquiring adequate water to support future growth. Alternative 4 uses regulation and incentives to promote the consolidation of non-conforming lots to achieve a higher portion of large lots in the rural areas. Alternative 4 provides adequate detail in the Comprehensive Plan policies to direct growth at a large scale, while recognizing the supportive role of other regulations such as Zoning, Subdivision Ordinance, Building Code, CAO and SMP in making land use decisions on a site by site basis. Alternative 4 also provides policies that address Water Quality, Water Quantity, Wildfire Protection, Critical Areas, excavation and grading, air quality, public land and aesthetics.

Discussion

A. County-wide Provisions

- **Water Quantity**

Harmonizing watershed and land use planning, ensuring legal and physical water availability, and protecting instream flows and senior water rights holders are critically important objectives of the Comprehensive Plan.

Preventing the sale of water rights to downriver development interests outside of the county is an important step toward achieving those objectives. Doing so would benefit county watersheds and allow for more options to support local agriculture and

appropriately sited development. This alternative includes the following specific measures to achieve these objectives:

- Encourage and support efficient water use and transfer of saved water to towns and designated growth areas.
 - Discourage the transfer of water from agricultural and industrial uses to rural residential development outside of towns and designated growth areas.
 - The County shall only approved developments that comply with the adopted instream flow rules for each watershed.
 - Support water banks and exchanges to allow development in designated growth areas where water is not legally and physically available consistent with instream flow rules and water law, and consistent with adopted land use plans and zoning ordinances.
 - Support establishment of water banks or exchanges, administered by independent non-profit entities, that can buy or accept water in trust for reallocation for agricultural or residential purposes within the County.
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- **Water Quality**
 - Scale density and land use to protect surface and ground water quality.
 - Limit impervious surfaces and require vegetation retention to filter and infiltrate storm water runoff.
 - Require septic system design necessary to protect groundwater, especially over aquifer recharge areas.
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- **Wildfire Protection**

Wildfire will continue to threaten and destroy homes in the County, and especially in the Wildland Urban Interface areas. The insurance sector may refuse to insure some dwellings or raise rates so high that homes become uninsurable. While personal responsibility is an essential part of fire prevention, county government has an important role in land use planning so that risk to families and first responders is reduced.

 - Adopt an appropriately scaled modification of the International Wildland Urban Interface Code, to address new subdivisions, new roads and new building permits.
 - Support programs that provide incentives to retrofit and “harden” existing homes and subdivisions in high risk areas.

- Update the Community Wildfire Protection Plan with meaningful actions to reduce risks to life and property.
- Areas with one-lane roads or only one way in and out, and areas where the fire districts do not have the ability to serve more development, will be designated and zoned for the lowest rural densities or as Natural Resource lands.
- Primitive and remote gravel road rights of way will be retained by the county and designated for fire escape routes and public land access.

- **Rural Designations**

Lands designated as Rural Lands include lands suitable for different kinds of uses including residential development, limited commercial services, agriculture, and rural living. This alternative includes up to four Rural designations (e.g. Residential, Resource, Transitional, Remote) to recognize areas within the Rural environment with unique attributes, avoid conflicting uses and protect rural assets.

Unlike Alternatives 1-3, which rely heavily on underlying zoning for guidance, this alternative applies policies in the Comprehensive Plan about each Rural land use designation, its intent, the densities and types of uses allowed. It provides clear policy guidance to the development of the implementing zoning ordinance.

- The existing mix of agricultural and resourced based activities, recreation, and tourism are recognized for the diversity they provide to the economic base. A mix of residential densities should be allowed to provide an adequate inventory of housing sites for those seeking a rural lifestyle and to provide worker housing in proximity to employment providers.
- Each designation will recognize the varied attributes of the rural landscape that determine the ability of the ability to support residential density and other land use activities.
- Each designation will assign appropriate density as well as permitted and conditional uses to avoid incompatible and nonconforming use conflicts.
- In the Zone Code, the District Use Chart will be amended to harmonize compatible uses with permitting requirements.

- **Critical Areas**

- Update the Critical Areas Ordinance within six months of passage of the zone code.
- Amend the Comp Plan to incorporate the updated CAO as soon as it is complete.
- Protect Aquifer Recharge Areas: areas that have a recharging effect on aquifers that provide drinking water shall have a density of no more than one dwelling per five acres outside urban growth areas.
- Maintain wildlife corridors when creating new lots.

- **Excavation and Grading**

There is no permit required for, and virtually no environmental review of, excavation and grading projects in Okanogan County. This lack of review can result in poorly planned projects, unsightly road cuts on steep slopes, subsequent sedimentation of streams, roads too steep for fire trucks, and agricultural land re-grading that creates dust levels that impair air quality.

- Provide for adoption of a Clearing and Grading ordinance to reduce the impacts of clearing and excavation.

- **Agricultural and forest land conservation**

Agricultural land conversions impact the rural character of the county, as well as reducing incomes and employment provided by local farming and ranching and increasing reliance on outside sources of food and other agricultural products.

- Designate as agricultural and forest land of long-term commercial significance land that is used for agriculture and forest, that is not used for urban development, and that has long-term commercial significance for these uses.
- Lands designated as Resource Lands indicate areas where the County will promote long-term, commercially viable agriculture, forest, and mineral uses and will discourage intensive residential, commercial, and industrial development.
- Support state and federal incentives to conserve farmland including voluntary, market-based conservation easements.
- Support additional incentives to conserve farm and forest land.

- **Air Quality:**

The Okanogan and Methow Valleys regularly experience impaired air quality caused by wood stoves and open burning. Poor air quality is most apparent in the winter from uncertified wood stoves, and in the spring and fall from open burning.

To address these issues this alternative provides:

- Incentives to heat new homes with devices other than wood stoves, especially in airsheds that experience poor winter air quality.
- Encourage programs that assist-low income residents of the airshed to convert from uncertified stoves or fireplaces to pellet stoves, propane, certified stoves, or other affordable heat sources that do not cause air pollution.
- Discourage open burning and support alternatives such as making neighborhood chipping available for a modest fee.

- **State Land Purchases**

State lands are an important resource for recreation and grazing, contributing to the economy of the Okanogan County with opportunities for hunting, fishing, birding, skiing, mountain biking, and other activities. In Okanogan County, residential tax revenues cover only about 7% of the cost to provide services to the new dwelling units. Land purchased by state agencies and land trusts save the county and other local governments substantial amounts of money in avoided costs. The county also receives some payments in lieu of taxes for state conservation lands. Land purchases by state agencies and land trusts are agreements between willing sellers and willing buyers.

- Support state land purchases from willing sellers when the purchase will reduce costs for the county and other service providers and protect fish and wildlife habitats, maintain or enhance public access, or provide other public and community benefits.

B. Methow Valley More Completely Planned Area (MVMCPA)

Provisions:

Since the adoption of the original Methow Review District, the Methow Valley from Early Winters to Gold Creek has been zoned for less density than the rest of the County. This has resulted in higher land values generally, and an influx of new full-time and part-time residents enjoying recreational opportunities and a rural lifestyle. To preserve this economic engine for the County in the face of increased growth, the following provisions should be incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan and Zone Code.

- **Respect the public process when designating and zoning land**

In 2014, three properties in the MVMCPA were rezoned to higher densities without adequate public notice or opportunity for public comment. The stated justification was to make zoning density within parcels consistent when zone maps split a parcel. Rather than conform all properties to the lower density zone (R-20), they were conformed to higher densities (R-5) without adequate public notice and without evidence that water is physically and legally available to support higher densities.

- Restore Rural designation (and underlying zoning) of these properties to R-20, the density the public understood was going to be adopted.

- **Ridge-top Buildings**

New homes built close to the edge on ridge tops are often in harm's way, subject to extreme winds, wildfire and other hazards. These homes and their outdoor lighting also interfere with natural aesthetics from many directions, often from miles away.

- Provide for an ordinance allowing overlays to limit ridgetop development in appropriate locations.

- **Outdoor Lighting/Dark Skies**

The Methow Valley has prided itself on maintaining a rural atmosphere, where lighting does not impair views of the dark night sky or glare into the homes of others. Increased development in towns and rural areas has brought an increase in light pollution, and the problem will only worsen with development expected during the coming years. The Dark Skies initiative, which has been embraced by the Okanogan County Electric Cooperative, is a simple way to increase awareness of and reduce light pollution issues.

- Provide for an ordinance allowing overlays that require new buildings and parking to achieve Dark Sky compliance in appropriate locations.