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*Citizen Comment
5/29/01*

Mr. Tom Saunders
Director, Community Development
PO Box 490, Station 11
Gainesville FL 32601

Dear Tom,

Ralph Hilliard listed for me by phone late last Friday, May 25th the elements of the format you and Mr. Bowers have chosen for the Comprehensive Plan workshop scheduled for May 31.

According to Mr. Hilliard, the format is as follows:

1. 6:00 to 6:30: Presentation by planning staff.
2. 6:30 to 7:30: Attendees divide up into individual tables and at each discuss a separate element of the plan, under the guidance of a member of the planning staff.
3. 7:30 to 8:30: The conclusions of the discussions at each table are summarized and reported to the entire group. This report forms the basis of a report on the findings of the entire workshop to be conveyed to the commission.
4. 8:30 to 9:00 "Open mike" period when any of the attendees can address questions or comments to the staff, time permitting.

This format has many problems. I wish you had consulted me and my colleagues before deciding on it. We fear it will defeat the purpose the workshop was scheduled to serve.

The Commission directed staff to schedule a workshop in response to our request for an opportunity to present our concerns about problems in the new comp plan to the Commission and to the public. You provide no opportunity for us to address workshop participants.

The idea of dividing attendees into several concurrent discussion groups, each of which focuses on a single element, was rejected by us and by the Commission. Holding concurrent mini-workshops will inhibit the broad dissemination of information to the concerned public, and will unfairly and arbitrarily exclude many interested persons from fully participating in whatever discussions may evolve. The people with whom we have been working are concerned about all the elements of the plan because they recognize that none of the policies will function in isolation of the other policies.

It is entirely proper that members of various advisory committees and appointed boards who have participated in comprehensive plan preparations during the last year or so should be welcomed at this workshop, along with staff members. But I must point out that these individuals have already expressed their positions on all the comprehensive plan issues they think are important. Furthermore, they are not representatives of the public,

but of the government, as they occupy official or semi-official positions in it. It is not appropriate to allow them to dominate this meeting, or to take up the very limited time available for our presentation or for public comment.

We expected that the pending workshop would provide adequate time for the sequential, coherent presentations necessary to make problems with the plans clear to the audience. The subjects are very complicated. Many of the public feel they have never been given sufficient information to develop even an elementary understanding of how the new plan is liable to impact them and the town. The public has a right to know the meaning of the terms in which major policies are expressed, and how those policies will affect them. Furthermore, we have a right to present our concerns to the public and the commission, not just to the staff.

Staff and other members of the government have had many opportunities to convey information to the public. They have failed in this task, perhaps partly because the workshop format used in the past, and proposed for next Thursday, is inherently flawed.

I appreciate that your staff and many others have worked hard for long time to produce drafts of the plan elements. Nevertheless, no one can honestly claim that this plan represents a community consensus until the public has an opportunity to hear how they are likely to be impacted by the many substantive policy changes incorporated in it, and to express their opinions about the wisdom of those changed policies. The public has not so far had an opportunity for a full and free discussion of critical issues. Staff presentation of summaries of policy changes cannot substitute for informed public debate.

I also want note that since last year we have been diligent in our efforts to gather all the documents needed to understand and evaluate the plan. By the city's own admission, the plan was not available in its entirety until March. Data and analysis sections that support the plan elements were not made available until the final drafts of those elements neared completion.

Your staff has, for the most part, attempted to be responsive to my many requests for information, and I am grateful to them and to you for their efforts. But in spite of this we have encountered numerous obstacles to obtaining essential information, obstacles that would have defeated all but the most tenacious efforts. As you know there were problems downloading information from the city web site. Other materials referenced in the plan or in its data and analysis sections have proved especially elusive. In one case a public document originating in a sister agency was withheld for a long time, through what must have been a series of simple communication errors.

After a delay of nearly an entire month, staff recognized that the web site and other alternatives for communicating basic information were just not working, and they decided to prepare the CD originally suggested in April. It wasn't ready until late last Friday afternoon, less than a week before the scheduled workshop date. I requested 12 copies to accommodate other people interested in participating in the review.

When I arrived at the Thomas Center to pick them up, I was told that I could not have them unless I provided the name of every recipient who would use one. The issue was not one of cost. I would have gladly paid a reasonable fee on behalf of others.

Why was I required to supply a list of names? I believe the city owes an explanation to me and to the community for this demand. Where is that list now? For what purpose is it being used? In what file, or on whose desk, does it now lie?

Surely you realize that this insistence on getting names of participants in this project will be viewed by many as intimidation and an implied threat of exposure that could in the future be directed against those whose names I disclosed. I am heartily sorry now that I complied with this outrageous demand.

I am sure that the many problems encountered in obtaining information were due to a variety of unfortunate coincidences or crossed signals and unintended mishaps. Nevertheless, whatever their cause, the result has been that I and others working with me have felt stymied in our efforts to reasonably exercise our due process rights to be informed about, and to comment upon, the evolution of major city policies affecting our community.

I respectfully request you to revise the format of the upcoming workshop so as to insure adequate time for us to present fully and clearly some of the problems we have discovered in this very complicated plan. I must also to point out that we expect to be given the opportunity at some future date to make presentations to the city commissioners in a forum that allows us time to brief them adequately on our findings, and also promotes genuine dialogue between the commissioners and ourselves and other members of the public. I believe few of the sitting commissioners fully understand the implications of the policies stated in the plan. No summary prepared by staff can possibly convey the essential information needed to comprehend many of the problems we perceive, nor substitute for the dialogue we seek. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Dian Deevey
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cc: W. Bowers, FAX 334-3119
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