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Citizen
Comment
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Comments Before the City Commission
May 29, 2001
by Francine Robinson
Re: the May 31st Comprehensive Plan Workshop

According to the Greater Gainesville community survey initiated by the Gainesville Sun, 47% of those who responded feel that they have little influence in local government decision-making. 22% feel that they have no influence over these decisions. Summing up, nearly 70% of citizens feel that their government is not responding to their opinions and their needs. One out of every 5 respondents rates the leadership qualities of local government as poor. All of this, no doubt, is deeply disturbing to citizens and officials alike.

Your decisions tonight can go far to help change these deplorable statistics. These data are not just numbers. These numbers represent real people who take issue with how their local government represents them and listens to them, individually and as a community.

The survey shows that the environment and education are the top priorities with 52% support for each. I am here as an individual who has been an environmental advocate for more than twenty-five years on the local, state and national scenes. I'd like to highlight a significant opportunity for this local government to demonstrate that it will respond to the wishes of their constituents.

After several years of hard work and many meetings, the City staff has put together its proposal for revisions to the City of Gainesville's Comprehensive Plan which was originally developed in 1990 and is mandated to be reviewed, updated, and if need be, amended, every ten years. This process is complex because of all the data, details and discussion needed to carry out the requirements of Section 9J5-004 of the Florida Administrative Code and Chapter 163 of the Florida Statutes which mandate extensive involvement and consensus of citizens in the development of the document that will determine the destiny of their community. The process needs to include evaluating the interaction of the various elements which make up the Comprehensive Plan: i.e. Transportation Element, Future Land Use Element, Conservation, Open Space and Groundwater Recharge Element, Cultural Affairs Element, etc.

The City Commission responded to citizens' concerns that more time was needed to assess the entire document with all the elements, by scheduling a workshop on May 31st. Unfortunately, this positive response by the Commission, was translated into a format that is inadequate to address the scores of citizen questions and concerns that have come to the fore now that the entire document is available and assessment and reconciliation of the elements is possible. The three hours allotted for the May 31st meeting cannot suffice for the work to be done. Further, the format, which calls for concurrent workshops on different

elements, will impede the sharing of information and will prevent many of the attendees from participating fully in the process. This format was imposed although citizens had specifically requested sequential workshops.

I have been studying the Conservation, Open Space and Groundwater Recharge Element. This element alone would need at least two hours to address the environmental issues inherent in some of the changes made, some of the changes not made, and the need for additions. And as stated earlier here, all the elements require assessment of their mutual interaction. For this to be accomplished, the plan has to be discussed policy by policy, a time-consuming, but doable, task. The importance of the language decided on for every policy cannot be overestimated. Minor changes in wording may well mean major changes in the community. Weakened or inadequate protections pervade this document regarding our wetlands, the integrity of our wellfields, the preservation of native habitat, the regulation of toxics and hazardous wastes and more.

We wish to urge you, as our Commissioners, to act on what your constituents are requesting of you tonight: to change the format of the scheduled May 31st meeting so that it will not function as a rubber-stamp for the Comprehensive Plan at the end of a meeting that does not provide for full citizen participation and effective exchange with staff. In lieu of that, the May 31st meeting can be designed, together with citizens, as a free discussion of the various interacting elements, a meeting that can open doors to whatever is needed for citizens to be meaningfully involved in this process. It should, of course, include the procedural courtesy and respect that can ultimately help change the statistic from that nearly 70% disapproval by citizens of their local government to a healthy vote of approval.