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Gainesville City Commission Meeting
Responses to Planning Staff Presentation
(Dean Mimms re: Citizens' Document of October 3, 2001)
Presented by Francine Robinson
December 10, 2001

This is a response to City Staff member Dean Mimm's presentation on the evening of November 26th, 2001 on behalf of the Planning Department regarding the Citizens' Document of October 3, 2001. The Citizens' Document reflects on-going concerns that citizens brought forward as early as April 9, 2001. Due to a lack of response from Staff or Commissioners, the document of October 3, 2001 had been prepared in a good faith effort to again draw the City's attention to serious flaws in the proposed Conservation Element of the Comprehensive Plan.

The citizens were not provided with the Staff Response until Staff's presentation began. No time was provided on November 26th for public comment or on November 27th when the meeting was continued.

These comments represent the positions of several organizations including the Greenspace Preservation Association and the Glen Springs Preservation Association, among others. I submitted that October 3, 2001 document on their behalf, as Ms. Paula Stahmer stated here for the record at a prior meeting.

It is of deep concern to us that almost every change in wording that we offered to strengthen a number of policies were rejected in the Staff's response, and many good requirements under our current Plan were weakened as delivered last night by Mr. Mimms. But the terms of rejection were mainly couched as: "We think..."

"It's our feeling..."

"It's more appropriate..."

"Staff prefers..."

"That's addressed in..."

Substantive policy choices were glossed over and treated as mere matters of style or inappropriate to context. It was clear that valid reasons for each rejection were eschewed, for the most part, in favor of an atmosphere of "Trust us. We know better."

At some points, the Staff merely deferred to state or national statutes even though Gainesville has the latitude to impose more stringent standards. This is not very comforting since all we need to do is look around at our county, state, and indeed, our nation, to see rampant environmental degradation in the absence of adequate regulations. Actually the proposed policies do not even rise to some of the protection levels provided for by the County.

The County has a buffer of 75 feet around surface waters and wetlands; the City, 35 feet around wetlands. The county has a buffer of 300 feet from areas where there are listed plant or animal species (i.e. Endangered or Threatened Species); but this is not specified in the City and remains to be determined.

One of Staff's responses did not correctly address the citizens' requested change. The request was to retain wording to "...maintain air quality levels which comply with county, state and national ambient air quality standards..." The Staff reply is: "The City does not have the resources to implement a program that will improve air quality levels beyond those of the county, state and national standards."

Our requests for either retaining or substituting the word "preservation" instead of the weaker "conservation" were dismissed summarily, as if the choice were of little consequence.

The issues we raise are far more substantive than the Staff response suggests. For example: Our current plan states: "The City shall continue to provide customers with education and incentive programs to encourage reduced energy consumption." The Staff change reads: "The City shall continue to provide customers with education and incentive programs to encourage natural resource conservation and pollution prevention." Staff explains its position on this: "Staff feels that reducing use of natural resources reduces energy usage." Why was energy consumption removed?

Two more significant examples of weakening our current Comprehensive Plan:

The Staff opted to eliminate the current requirement for "state of the art" criteria, in favor of the weaker "best management practices", the criteria proffered mainly by those who are to be regulated. This particular change would impact on stormwater management. (2.2.2)

The Staff removed "large-scale chemical businesses" from its current prohibition from siting in the unconfined zone of the Floridan aquifer; from requirements for stringent storage and containment designs, monitoring, etc.; and removed the requirement for them to maintain large setbacks from surface waters, wells, and floodplains, etc. (2.2.3a,c,d) Large, chemical businesses can generate materials that may be potentially harmful to the environment although not technically in the hazardous materials or waste category; for example, nitrates and phosphates.

Citizens were promised that Staff would respond to the October 3, 2001 Citizens' Document and that citizens would meet with Staff to attempt to resolve our concerns before the Conservation Element was brought forward for its First Reading. That did not happen. As I said earlier, citizens did not even see the Staff Response until it was presented

at the City Commission Meeting of November 26th, 2001.

Tonight, we citizens wish to state for the record that the proposed Comprehensive Plan weakens current environmental protections, opens the way for destruction of irreplaceable wetlands, does not adequately protect our lakes and other surface waters, our heritage and champion trees, our urban forest and habitat, and sets the health, welfare and safety of our city at risk.

Many fundamental policy changes are reflected in the proposed Conservation Element but, contrary to the requirements of the law, are not supported by information in the Data and Analysis Report previously adopted by the City.

We are more than willing to discuss any of the items in the Staff Response or the Citizens' Document. Now is the time, Commissioners, to ensure the highest levels of environmental protection so that the City and its citizens do not lose their valuable and irreplaceable resources.