

Zoning Audit: Stakeholder's Webinar Responses & Input

September 2020

1. Below are a few thoughts/comments regarding the revisions to the Zoning Ordinance to create a “sense of space” in Ruckersville. Some of them are just ‘stream of consciousness’ thoughts – others are ‘engineering practicality’ that may seem to be ‘discouragements.’ I don’t mean them to be. A “sense of place” could be defined as something that distinguishes a specific location from that which surrounds it. We are looking to revise Ruckersville’s “sense” from its existing “sense” to a different one – one with a sense of welcoming, calm, beauty, and provision. This is difficult with existing roadways required to handle 18,000-30,000 vehicles per day with four/eight lanes and a 50’+ median that is all owned and controlled by the State. Another complicating factor is determining what could be done with all of the existing businesses that line Route 29 and don’t fit the idea of “sense of place. I realize you already are aware of this. Perhaps a parallel road west of Route 29 extending Stoneridge Road S parallel to 29 behind the existing commercial properties with enough distance to allow new multi-use development between those properties and the extended road. There is enough undeveloped land on the west side of what would be Stoneridge Road Extended to continue multi-use development creating a village similar to what is shown in the third webinar. Stoneridge Road Extended could be reconnected to Route 29 south of the Ruckersville Gallery. A similar approach could be applied to the area northeast of the 29/33 intersection. This, of course, does not alter what is experienced by folks driving through Ruckersville on Route 29 or Route 33. I don’t have any creative thoughts about how to address this. I also don’t have any creative zoning ordinance suggestions, either. (9/22/2020)
2. Restructuring the comp plan and zoning ordinance to focus on placemaking is a great long-term strategy. I think Euclidian zoning will be viewed in the long-term as a failed fad. It is a fairly widely held view that the free market created better places before the era to today’s zoning ordinances, which were largely developed in response to a complete dependence on cars. We’re moving beyond that era now in many communities and our zoning should too. 10/20/2020
3. Consider very carefully what the likely future of transportation is for Greene County. For the foreseeable future it is likely that most residents will still depend on cars, but perhaps not in the same commuter-oriented style. People are finding that driving long distances to work is less desirable and less necessary. Same for shopping. This trend supports mixed use zones. 10/20/2020
4. Be careful not to fall into the same trap as places like Albemarle and Arlington, which have instituted so many restrictions and requirements that the cost of building housing and commercial space has skyrocketed. When new housing costs go up, all housing costs go up. Requiring intense landscaping, instituting architectural requirements, requiring sidewalks, etc all sound nice in the abstract, but those desires MUST be considered along with their impact on people’s ability to afford them. Sure, something might only add \$1,500 to the cost of a new home, but if there are 30 such requirements then a new house just got really expensive! The word “requirement” is a synonym with “cost” in this context. Keep that in mind as you balance what is truly important. We risk pricing out the very people that make Greene the desirable community that it is. 10/20/2020

5. If something like form-based code is desired, consider adding it as an optional overlay that comes with significant by-right increases in density and other incentives for developers. Using incentives rather than requirements avoids the pitfall of driving up costs. 10/20/2020
6. I think landscaping, pedestrian access and other feature could achieve this with a few tweaks to the ordinance. I think the lack of density surrounding this area (able to walk from their homes) is the biggest hurdle to overcome at this point. The one thing I would caution you on is going as deep into this as Albemarle. With all the regulations, requirements and ARB's will only deter business from moving in and increase the housing cost to support these businesses. 10/20/2020
7. This is helpful. Part of my struggle in providing reasonable feedback to you has been that different areas would benefit from entirely different approaches to zoning. So I'll focus first on areas where you'll want more a more urban sense of place, such as Rte 29 between Albemarle and 33.

Setbacks and build-to lines: Except perhaps for having a setback from major arterial roadways like 33 & 29, eliminate setback requirements. Fire code will still govern, and that serves the primary purposes of setbacks in an urban situation. If setbacks are eliminated then build-to lines are unnecessary and probably just create difficulty for applicants to comply.

Pedestrian orientation: Mandate pedestrian circulation systems, but they don't have to necessarily be traditional sidewalks adjacent to roadways. Internal sidewalks or paths can often be built in locations that are more likely to be useful than sidewalks in VDOT ROW are. They're commonly known as "desired paths." Examples [here](#) and [here](#). Focus on mandating pathways that people will use rather than being formulaic about it. Allow discretion. Require gathering places.

Street Trees & landscaping: Mandate canopy trees in certain quantities or canopy coverages, but as with sidewalks, avoid being formulaic. Having trees precisely every 40' along a roadway may not be the most practical or the most beneficial. A larger grove of trees next to a parking lot may be more appealing and have more benefits than the commonly-seen tree islands every ~10 parking spots, which inevitably are surrounded by too much pavement to thrive. Allow creativity as long as canopy thresholds are met. Do require landscaping, generally, but again, give flexibility. Screening often creates barriers between parcels that are only desired by regulators. Screening between complimentary uses is counterproductive to their interaction. And a shopping center and an apartment building would be complimentary uses in this example. We want those uses to interact.

Road networks: Encourage interparcel connectivity, including connectivity between private parking lots. This applies to all modes of transportation, including pedestrians. The ability to go

from place to place without going out to a main road is critical to infrastructure resiliency and capacity. Only allow waivers for purposes of significant environmental or topographical limitations. Do not allow waivers because neighbors are worried about new traffic on their previously dead-end street. That's a recipe for long-term bad planning.

Density and massing: Focus regulation and limits on the massing of the development. Regulating max densities is an American fad that will last about 100 years and go away. We're on year 80 or 90 right now. Instead, think about the urban places you love. Generally, as long as the building forms are appealing, then the more people who live there the more vibrant it is. If you're concerned about traffic, regulate max parking allowances so that people have to walk or take alternative transportation if they want to live in higher density. This is the norm in denser places all over the world. A form based code is a great concept to achieve this goal, but too often once everyone has their input in the form based code it becomes so prescriptive that new development is cookie-cutter once built. Instead of density, focus on FAR. Give FAR bonuses in exchange for provision of public spaces, green space, or other things desired by the comp plan.

Uses: Regulate externalities, not uses. For example, if we don't want a giant industrial manufacturing building in Ruckersville, find a way to require that buildings in that area be of a human scale and that they not emit certain levels of pollutants or noise. That way, if someone wanted to have a modern high-tech manufacturing facility on the 2nd floor of a building where the 1st floor is retail and the 3rd and 4th floor is residential, they could. That's unlikely, but you get my point. Consider requiring mixed uses in some areas, but not specifying how uses are to be mixed. E.g. retail shopping in front and apartments behind would be fine. Some localities are requiring them to be in the same building, which is often not feasible except in redevelopment of existing structures or in very dense locales.

Street frontage: There is a perception that buildings should address the primary street. But in mixed use situations, buildings do not really interact with larger roads (like 29 & 33). Buildings should be interacting with their "place" whether that's a smaller street that serves them, a parking area, or a central pedestrian area where building users will gather. You need to create secondary accesses, away from major arterial roads, to these various places. Once people get into the secondary access they don't know they're close to 29 and the place can be itself.

Other things: Avoid regulating block length focused on roadways. Instead, allow "blocks" to be separated by pedestrian pathways, public park areas, parking courts, or other ways to go from block to block and separate building masses. Above a certain FAR, require lighting or publicly accessible areas, but be flexible about how lighting is provided. Pole lamps aren't always the answer and don't have much character.

Provide professional planning staff the latitude to allow some waivers or innovative concepts. Too often our planning decisions are made by committee, which typically softens all the edges, flattens the curves, and removes the appeal because people are usually thinking about the last thing they saw somewhere that they didn't like instead of thinking about creating a great thing for the future. Innovation requires some risk and experimentation, and if regulations are written too tightly they will only allow mediocre stuff—nothing terrible, nothing great. Though one mediocre thing is fine, a hundred mediocre things is awful. Allow enough latitude for mistakes in order to get great stuff. Guaranteed this will upset people who don't like change. In the long run that's good.

This is about as specific as I can get. I hope it helps. If you have specific questions, either now or along the way, I'm always happy to give my opinion. What you do with it is up to you!

12/17/2020

8. Some of the elements listed below fall into the category of form-based code (FBC) and I don't think Greene is ready for it. Albemarle and Charlottesville are having a hard enough time with it and have not successfully implemented a FBC and constructed any projects using it, yet. Some additional things to add to the list:
 - Standard development vs. cluster development (different lot standards and density in exchange for preservation of open space)
 - Signage standards
 - By right mixed-use districts – create the opportunity for horizontal mix of residential and commercial (I don't see vertical mixed use being viable in Greene – density is not high enough)

A lot of what is listed below are design standard items and are important. However, they generally all increase the cost of development and it is a careful balance of refining the zoning code, refining the design standard(s), and promoting development, while being mindful of development cost.

Albemarle adopted the neighborhood model standards and in one decision, they nearly doubled the cost of residential development in the growth areas. Sidewalk, street trees, curb and gutter, underground storm pipes, and higher density all come at a cost. 2/15/2021

9. Albemarle is wrestling with implementation of a form based code in the Rio/29 area. Information is available on their website. Among the problems they've wrestled with are orientation of parking, quantity of parking, building orientation, responsibility for and cost of public infrastructure, preserving by right development options and architectural guidelines.

Albemarle has recognized that developers can only build what they can afford to pay for and banks are generally the ones making the rules. Public placemaking requires active participation from the County or it simply doesn't happen. We've been working on a public/private project in Crozet for 7

years now and took 4 of those years to convince the County that we needed their help to realize their master plan goals.

As for the specific items you listed, I offer the following comments:

Build to line – Good idea. Allowing a range should be considered.

Pedestrian access (sidewalks vs paths, etc.) – Critically important but they need to be connected. This can be a problem when you're relying on individual property owners or developers.

Street trees – Very important when used as a buffer between the road and the sidewalk.

Parallel connections (via connected internal drive lanes or parallel roads) – Also critically important for a successful transportation network.

Building stories – Taller buildings are desirable when you're trying to create a downtown. Can be more challenging due to ADA related costs. Retail developers don't like taller buildings because they require a mix of uses which is harder to underwrite. Stonefield is perfect example. County wanted vertical mixed use and ended up settling for horizontal mixed use.

Facade requirements – Advisable but leads to architectural review which becomes subjective. I serve on the Albemarle ARB and am often frustrated by the degree to which staff and certain members want to micromanage architecture.

Landscaping features – Public or private? Who will maintain?

Street lighting – Decorative is desirable in an urban/town context.

Minimum Floor to ceiling heights – Valuable to preserve flexibility of future use. Buildings that might be retail or commercial on the first floor at some point in the future but can't support it now. Uses will change over time and there should be flexibility. Albemarle has struggled with this and in Crozet, they have mandated commercial uses on the first floor of all buildings in their downtown district, despite the fact that market studies have shown that they'll never be able to fill them all.

Minimum density /building floor ratio – FAR's are, in my opinion a better way to regulate building size than using maximum density. Unit sizes can vary widely.

Street standards and types – Important, especially when placemaking. VDOT standards don't work so well in an urban context. They're getting better but they have a long way to go.

Parking (location and required spaces) – This is a big issue. Localities want more dense development in the urban areas and relax parking requirements but, without enough residents within walking distance most people are still driving to their destination. Parking structures will ultimately be necessary, unless self-driving cars change that equation but that will take decades to achieve.

Buffers/Screening – Between uses.

Green space – yes.

Block length – Depends on the context. In Charlottesville, most blocks are 200-300 feet. In more suburban settings, they can be 600 or even 1000 feet.

Pedestrian /building entrances – Entrances should be provided for pedestrians. This can become problematic when the parking is oriented to the rear of the building and the front faces street. Stores then have to essentially have 2 fronts which can be very difficult for many retail/restaurants uses. The classic form without function example is the Whole Foods store on Hydraulic Road. The City forced the parking behind the building and now the entrance on the front of the building is not functional access for pedestrians because all the storage and back of house uses are in the front of the building.

Building front vs lot front – Seems site specific. 2/16/2021