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Helena growth policy receives critiques

By ALLISON MAIER Independent Record

Accommodations for the area around St. Peter's Hospital, clarifications in wording regarding environmental issues, and more specific guidelines in general were suggested as changes to the city's proposed 2010 growth policy during a public hearing Tuesday evening.

The growth policy lays the groundwork for developing standards like subdivision and zoning regulation. It is not a regulatory document itself, but it helps guide future policy decisions.

Though Tuesday's hearing was well-attended, only a handful of people took to the podium to share their opinions with members of a planning board that includes representatives for both the city of Helena and Lewis and Clark County. The suggestions were well received by the board, which decided to schedule a work session later this month to discuss the issues brought before them rather than passing the policy draft along to the city commission in its current form.

"I didn't hear one thing that wasn't some great help," board chairman Marshall Gingery said following the hearing.

Peggy Stebbins, spokeswoman for St. Peter's, suggested that the growth policy allow for a "medical corridor" in the area around the hospital that would make it possible to put up more signs and include more parking areas than what is currently allowed under Helena's zoning regulations. She said the allowances are necessary because of the number of people who come to the hospital on a daily basis and the stress many of them are under when they get there. She added that the area around St. Peter's is commercial, making it an ideal location for such changes.

Gail Beckner, who works with the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department, asked that the board work with the city's Non-Motorized Travel Advisory Council to address recommendations it has regarding pedestrian and bicycling accommodation.

Janet Ellis, program director of the Montana Audubon Society, said the policy's new section regarding water quality is "right on," but suggested some changes in the chapter regarding the environment. She proposed that the section of the document that lists energy alternatives acknowledge "passive solar" technologies, which utilize the sun as an energy source without mechanical or electrical help.

She also proposed changing some of the wording in a segment regarding wildlife habitat.

“I don’t know what it means and I work in habitat a lot,” she said.

Members of Plan Helena, a nonprofit that aims to preserve a high quality of life in the city, took issue with much of the language in the proposed growth policy. Mary Clark, the organization’s president, said the group was disappointed about the lack of clarity and specificity in the document.

“While we understand a growth policy must be a flexible guide, this document is so vague and flexible that it has very little value as a guide,” she said.

Board members said it is difficult to draft a document that is useful in determining future policy without getting so specific that it goes beyond its role. Though various work sessions, open houses and focus group meetings have been held over the past several years to collect, analyze and share information regarding the policy, the board agreed to extend the process a little longer to go over some of the latest suggestions.

A work session is tentatively scheduled for later this month. Any changes made in that session will have to go before the public again before the board can approve the growth policy and pass it along to the Helena City Commission. Commissioners will have a month to look over the document themselves before holding work sessions of their own to possibly make further changes. Another public hearing would follow that process before the commission could sign off on the policy.

Montana law dictates that city growth policies be reviewed every five years and modified if necessary. The policy in place now was adopted in 2001 and revised a year later because of changes in state law, then updated again in 2008 to include discussion of the “wildland-urban interface,” regions where residential areas meet with forest and pose wildfire concerns. The proposed 2010 Helena Growth Policy aims at addressing the expected demographic and economic situation in the city for the next 20 years.

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