

Bulloch County Ag Community Concerns and Recommendations

Prepared for the Bulloch County Land Use Steering Committee

The following document was compiled after consultation with a group of Bulloch County farmers and agribusiness persons as well as other interested parties within the county. An effort was made to keep the concerns and recommendations as concise as possible and further discussions may be needed concerning these items. Six (6) of the items relate directly to the land use plan of the county and the proposed amendments. One (1) item is an additional item of general concern of the ag community.

Concerns:

1. That, while there seems to be incorporated in the Smart Growth Land Use statement (Chapter 6) at least a tacit recognition of the value of agricultural lands, it continues to be a concern of many within the agricultural community that this recognition does not in fact translate into tangible efforts to preserve these types of lands. It is further felt that some within the county authorities and among developmental bodies fail to recognize the fact that productive agricultural land is an irreplaceable natural resource as evidenced by the relative ease with which it is converted to other uses.
2. That the scope and scale of the proposed South Bulloch County Utility District in conjunction with changing the character area classification from rural open space to suburban neighborhood will not accomplish its stated purpose. While purporting to be an attempt to discourage sprawl and leapfrog development, many in the ag community believe it will in fact encourage those exact things. (It is noted that such a reclassification would require a jump of 3 levels in allowable density.) It is a related concern that the proposed change has the stated intention of preserving agricultural lands (as noted in the Smart Growth matrix on page 81) but will instead have the effect of converting such lands to other uses.
3. That the proposed 4 wells to be drilled within the southern portion of the county and the estimated 10 million gallons per day draw down of the aquifer may have a negative impact upon existing residential and agricultural wells. There are also concerns as to what recourse property owners and farmers would have if said negative impacts did in fact occur.
4. That present developments create long-term costs for county services over and above the property tax revenues generated by such developments and that this should be addressed in some measure.
5. That the Planning and Zoning Commission, if not often, regularly have their recommendations overturned by the Board of Commissioners.

6. That the development of land zoned Ag 5 requires little or no plans or study of impacts such developments have upon the county service infrastructure which includes roads, schools, law enforcement, and emergency services to name a few.

An Additional Ag Community Concern:

7. That in the maintenance of county roads (both paved and unpaved), there needs to be an awareness of the width and height clearances needed for currently used ag equipment to be able to safely traverse these roads without damaging equipment or endangering other motorists. Problems arise due to the close proximity of mail boxes and signage to the road borders and with overhanging and encroaching vegetation upon the road ways.

Recommendations and Proposed Actions:

(Note: numbers correspond to concerns)

1. That a statement be included in county documents (comprehensive plan or wherever appropriate) that the county recognizes that productive ag and forest lands are a natural resource and that many of the soil types within the county have been designated officially as being of state-wide importance. Therefore, the conversion of such lands should only be done with careful thought and consideration.
Additionally, it is recommended that as a condition for development on property that adjoins agricultural lands vegetative buffer zones of appropriate width and opacity be required. Such buffers would serve the dual purpose of protecting home owners while allowing farmers to continue agricultural operations safely.
2. In regard to the proposed utility district, we would advocate for an initial reduction in the scope and scale of said district, thereby confining the area for the district to a corridor nearer in proximity to the Bryan County line and to the I-16 corridor. This would also result in a reduction in the area recharacterized as suburban neighborhood.
3. As regarding the proposed wells on the southern border of the county, we recognize that to a large degree this is a state issue that may in fact be a foregone conclusion as to the permitting of these wells. However, it is the counties of Bryan and Bulloch which will be requesting the permits for said wells. It is the understanding of those within the ag community, having contacted an official within the industrial permitting division of the Georgia Environmental Protection Division of the Department of Natural Resources that no official impact study has been done though in-house impact studies are being conducted.
That being said, questions arise as to who would be responsible to home and land owners should there in fact be consequential negative impacts of these wells. Would the county

in some way be liable for such negative impacts? And if the county feels it would be the state's responsibility, would the county serve as an advocate with the state on behalf of county residents concerning those possible negative impacts?

4. We propose that the county implement an impact fee structure upon all developments (such as at least one neighboring county has in place) and that such an impact fee structure be based upon existing county policies and practices by which proposed developments are assessed as to negative and/or positive impacts. Such an impact fee structure may assist the county in recovering some of the long-term cost developments place upon the county taxpayers.
5. We propose that, if legally permissible, in the event that the Planning and Zoning Commission makes a unanimous vote it would require a like unanimous vote by the Board of Commissioners to contradict the recommendation of the Planning and Zoning Commission.
6. We propose that in regard to the subdivision of land into 5 acre lots a sketch plan would be required to be presented to the Planning and Zoning Commission for consideration and for approval by the Board of Commissioners and that such a sketch plan requirement would result in an impact study be done by the county.

Addressing the Additional Concern:

7. As concerning the maintenance of county roads to allow for the safe passage of current farm equipment, we request that the county implement a course of maintenance that would maintain at least 25 feet of lateral clearance and 20 feet of vertical clearance and that placement of mail boxes and signage have sufficient offset from the edge of the road ways that the lateral clearance can be maintained and to allow equipment to meet traffic safely and for motorists to be able to safely pass ag equipment.

Closing Statement:

We ask that the board of commissioners as well as the county staff carefully consider these concerns and recommendations which, as has been stated, reflect not only the thoughts and opinions of the farmer members on the committee but of a broader cross section of farmers in the county as well as those of residents in the area. County officials should be fully aware, if they are not already, that these proposed amendments and changes evoke very strong emotional responses by many residents. And that these emotional responses reflect a feeling that their homes, property, sense of place and well-being are threatened by these proposed changes.

Finally, we would say that it is possible to have a vision for South Bulloch County as well as the county as a whole that includes a prosperous ag community with generational farms that co-exist with focused developments for housing and needed business concerns. We thank you for the opportunity to express these thoughts, concerns and recommendations.

Will Groover

Wade McElveen

Addendum

The following are statements concerning the changes to the land use plan by two South Bulloch Farmers that reflect their concerns for the personal impacts they perceive will be felt in their family operations.

There is concern that changing character areas away from rural to suburban including water and sewer services will result in commercial farm operations being unable to continue long term. Investing in this type of infrastructure begs the question: Does this create the need for Bulloch County to promote development in order to justify costs associated with said infrastructure? Development brings competition for land use but also brings increased real estate prices, higher valuations, larger tax liabilities and ultimately the inability of some to maintain ownership. The agriculture community is apprehensive of the proposed changes coming, fearful of losing the ability to exist as viable businesses. A steady decrease of farm lands and thinning profit margins requiring larger economies of scale creates an untenable situation for many farmers. Even if a farmer is able to maintain operations, the likelihood of a succeeding generation having the opportunity to farm becomes even more questionable. Continuing the pursuit of development, or as some say a "higher and better use" will result in a diminished agricultural community. Will an agricultural community continue to exist if Bulloch County proceeds on this path? Will Groover

Agriculture is an important industry in Bulloch County, but it is a rural industry. It works best in a rural area. Redefining a large swath of the county as suburban and allowing suburban-type land uses will result in the decline of the agriculture industry in that area. Specifically, the farm operations located in this area will have their businesses impacted negatively. Their land's value as farmland will be reduced when a subdivision is placed beside it. Many common farm practices necessary for a farm to remain sustainable will no longer be possible to implement. Chicken litter, for example, is widely used to improve soil health and productivity. However, the odor will likely result in so many complaints from new residents that farmers will no longer be able to use it. Also, many common farm chemicals require a buffer zone (the size of which is specified on the product label) around residential areas. A subdivision being built beside a farmer's field will result in limitations on what products he or she may use to produce crops, which will affect that operation's bottom line, possibly to the point of shutdown. At this point, the domino effect of unintended consequences will start. When a farming operation shuts down, it is not the same as an individual landowner deciding to sell. That operation likely owns a fairly large amount of land, which will likely immediately be for sale. On top of that, many landowners from whom that operation rents land may take the farmer's cue and sell as well. This would result in a large amount of land being converted to another, much more costly use all at once. The county will not reasonably be able to tell folks no, but the infrastructure cost to convert a very rural area to a suburban one will be staggering, especially if it happens quickly. County leadership must understand the fragile nature of the agriculture industry, and just how quickly it can unravel under pressure from development. Ryne Brannen