

Avon Hills Initiative Meeting Minutes
February 21st, 2004

Panelists in attendance:

Jennifer Buchentine, Stearns County Environmental Services
Allan Davison, Collegetown Township Planning Board, Chair
Ernie Diedrich, Professor of Economics, CSB/SJU
Margie Evans, Mayor, City of Avon
Garth Fuller, The Nature Conservancy
LeRoy Gondringer, Dairy Farmer, landowner
Abbot John Klassen
Mike Lee, DNR County Biological Survey
Bill Mock, Landowner
Steve Plantenberg, Avon Township Planning Board
Vince Shaefer, Stearns County Commissioner
Chris Schellinger, Collegetown Development Group
Tom Wicks, Landowner
John Wittrock, Landowner
Lori Wolf, United States Fish and Wildlife Services

Panelists not in attendance:

Ralph Einyck, St. Joseph Planning Board
Judy Schmidt, Developer and Business Owner

I. Introduction

- Kim Chapman articulated the purposes of the map-making process to take place throughout the afternoon in addition to introducing Allan Davison. Allan Davison, chair of the Collegetown Township planning board and local landowner gave a brief presentation on the cultural climate of the Avon Hills.

II. Allan Davison: History and Character of the Avon Hills

- Personal involvement with the Avon Hills, background in hog farming, majority of adult life spent in the area, noted dramatic change of area since the 1960's, including a rapid increases in land value. Large parcels of land are currently worth seven figures.
- Expression of Common elements in the Townships including:
 - Religious commitments have played a dramatic role in the shaping and character of the area, depth of catholic church as an influence upon the cultural history in the area
 - Growth of small industry (granite, refrigerators, farming, Christmas card design, home based computer design), characteristic of a hardworking and active community
 - Conservative family and social values families in the area,
 - Evolution of an environmental ethic: Environmental development strategies have evolved from an antithetical relationship to a valued relationship,

- Shared sense of place: Knowledge of the uniqueness and distinctness of the hills. This perhaps drew monks and nuns to the area in the 1800's.
- Common problem of ever increasing land values: Will this lead to a stratified community creating a wealthy uniform population? A predominantly white population? How do we diversify? How can people with a median family income continue to thrive in the Avon Hills?

III. Comments by other Panelists on Cultural History:

- Chris Schellinger: 100-125 year history of place, family/generational land, mid-60's as a point of change in the area, state park feasibility strategy evolved during this time, area was noted for its distinct landscape.

-How do newcomers look at the land? Is it the same as the current residents? I think we would all agree the hills are wonderful place to live. We are in a location ideal for commuters. There is an aesthetic beauty to this place.

-Ernie Diedrich: As a Non-native resident, moving around the country a lot, I didn't write an assignment because of a lack of connection and history with the land. I do however, appreciate comments of rooted sense of place from those who have been in the area longer.

- Chris Schellinger: The hills are a place where people want to be, this will never change. There are shared values and obstacles that come with living in the hills. A 3rd generation farmer facing land value issues needs help in order to stay here. This whole process is a step towards reaching a solution for the needs of those people, if this is not achieved, we will not protect what is valued so much. In my mind there are three distinct cultures of people here in the hills.

-Cultures: Natives (3rd generation history, Respect of family farmers), Newcomers (people who have been here for the past 35years), and Future-Comers. The potential residents or future-comers will want development until they live here. Then they most likely will want to close the doors.

-Allan Davison: I think there is another culture group of the hills and I guess I would call them contented visitors. These are people who come and visit the hills and return on a regular basis.

-Sister Phyllis: I think while we are talking about culture and about generational sense of place, we also need to think about family. Will our children be able to afford to stay here? Land values need to accommodate financial needs of those who have been here or who want to stay, farmers make their income only when they sell and it is the same with lakeshore property.

- Allan Davison: I think ultimately we need to provide solutions to monetary problems, and think about preservation of core, large tracts of land. If we fail...we fail in the goals, Avon Hills is in danger of becoming a suburban community. People want to be in this area because it is beautiful, but I think we are in danger of turning into another Minnetonka if what we do fails. Because of the land values, classes of people are unable to live here.

- LeRoy Gondringer: Because we have immediate access to the freeway there are going to be more people who want to live here and commute to Saint Cloud or down to the cities. How will these people feel about the area? I think we have a strong ethic here and that shouldn't change.

- Kim Chapman: I think that is why we have to think about wise use of design strategies, looking at density issues and preservation areas. I agree that keeping generational family farms in the area is a large challenge.

- Allan Davison: There needs to be a push for legislation which will compensate landowners for staying on their land. There are things like the Minnesota Land Trust. There needs to be tax deductions or other creative policy thinking to compensate people for stewardship and keeping the land from developers. Establishment of laws at state and county levels are needed. We need to look at development plans, overlay development with zoning, and keep a libertarian feeling. Belief in legal procedures and parameters can help us. Collegeville ordinance in '79 was extremely effective, people didn't ask because they understood the ordinance, this is an effective strategy for land development, not constricting but effective.

- Ernie Diedrich: A Lack of legal tools means a lack of legal defense. We endanger ourselves to a tragedy of the commons otherwise. Legislative tools are crucial as a means preserving the area.

- Derek Larson: Statewide land zoning has taken place in Oregon. Environmental legislation preventing dissolution of family farms, creating a sense of place and protecting landownership has worked in other places. We are not the only people sitting around trying to figure out solutions to these problems. It is happening everywhere. Legislation has been effective in other places; money and the market will be the solution.

Other General Comments:

- We are one of 11 states financing services through county property taxes. Pressures on landowners are increasing along with property taxes and this is problematic for family farms. Selling the family farm is a money maker, if selling the farm ensures livelihood after retirement or security for the family, how can a farmer not use this opportunity?
-How is the legislature going to deal with this when they pass unfounded mandates through the counties? There are interesting and considerable financial pressures. We need to figure out with the legislature and county governments how to protect our landowners.
-Larger tracts of land maintain the land better. It takes a broader vision to see this. As taxes continue to rise, maintaining large tracts of land is going to become more difficult.
- There are variable zoning ordinances between townships which are fitting to the specific needs of each township. Each township need to figure out what its specific needs to adopt township specific plans and ordinances consistent with the goals and vision we come up with here.

IV. Closing Remarks: Cultural History

-Kim Chapman: I am quite touched and impressed with the sense of home and place and community that I feel when I listen to you talk about this. I just caught myself thinking how land shapes people and how it evolves in these times with so much mobility and ruthlessness. From what has been said, these are the things which should be considered in the following months.

- Land values- In many ways land values are at the root of everything. In June the solution to land values most likely will not be clear. This is the next step and at the center of this whole process, as land becomes less and less available, land prices increase. In a place like the Avon Hills, the land is already owned by and large. Future -comers, are forced to then compete against the newcomers and the natives for land and that drives the prices of the land up. Conservation activities have an effect upon land values, zoning and other ordinances also have an effect upon land values. This is at the core of the conservation debate. As taxes and land values increase on the property, it has a drastic effect upon the entire community. All of this needs to be fixed, and coming up with a solution is the next step in the process
 - Access to land and water: From a visual, recreational, spiritual, aesthetic viewpoint this is a foundation for the next step in this process. Even though acreage ordinance appears to retain the rural aspect of the Avon Hills, it may not be as efficient of a tool. The more concentrated the development the more open space you can afford. How development is done is the issue (i.e. concentrated development vs. acreage ordinance). Sustainable design and development can take place. There are appropriate and inappropriate places to put lots of land in terms of ecologically sensitive areas. Concentrated development creates green space/open space. I believe the “flight to the suburbs” is a result of lack of open space. Developments must feel like they are in the midst of nature.
 - Legal tools: We are unsure of what is going to happen in terms of culture. Legislative tools provide a framework for individual and group decision making until the ethical framework develops in the mind of the individual. Legislation is a temporary tool that will hopefully go away as people develop and ethical framework. Population growth is going to stabilize eventually; development has to get us there without destroying all we have.
 - Spirituality/Ethical Decision-making: Consumerism is a problem in all facets of society. People are consuming more and more even when they do not need it. People want to buy the larger house, amenities and prime location on lots. People don’t need a larger house. How do we get people of moderate incomes in the area? The builders created what they think the market needs, when the market has no idea what it needs. We have to recognize the market realities.
- Incentives must be created for developers to create small amenities; sell quality of design in opposition to size, bigger is better mentality.
- What drives the market is the merchant, they see the need rather than creating the need, formulas out there right now are driving people to make decisions, disconnection from reality in creation of place in the Avon Hills, education of developers to create

V. Separation into Specific Township Groups charged with considering:

- Conservation zones- Core areas which sustain ecological conditions, native habitats, and rare species. For example, a 650 buffer around rare forest bird nesting sites increases chances for long term nesting. (Green color code).
- Enhancement zones-Additional areas that change the shape of Conservation zones and make them rounder, larger and better connected. (Yellow color code).
- Water quality zones-Areas of high quality wetlands and rare aquatic species. A 200m buffer ensures that wetland animals have enough upland to survive. A 30m buffer around lakes and streams provides water quality protection (Blue color code).
- Storm water management zones-Additional areas outside Water Quality Zones that influence water quality and quantity (Pink color code).
- Conservation connections-Areas that connect all zones into a network of important areas (Teal color code).
- Development zones-Areas well suited to development because of the absence of important natural features, including water quality, rare species and other sensitive areas (Brown color code).

**Groups could create their own standards specific to the township needs

V. Reactions to the Mapping Process/Final Discussion

Suggestions for Improvement:

-Aerial photos may be helpful in order to see specifically what is there to help with creation of zones

-This exercise pulls you out of really considering what is on the land and the resources which are available. The GIS maps were somewhat difficult to read because it didn't square with what land is really there and what memories of the land people had.

-In response to the previous comment, Kim explained the GIS technology as an inventory of what we have and what land is left. The 1991 GIS data is the most current data available in digital form. The landscape has undoubtedly changed in the last twelve years and we will have to do our best to work around these problems.

-I think it would be important to include information on damns in the area. Observers would like an explanation of the maps as opposed to providing that information solely to the panelists.

-Tom Kroll suggested sending interested observers additional information in subsequent mailings.

-There are organizations such as SJU, The Nature Conservancy and the DNR that are committed to conservation. Is there anything in our plan that includes promoting the ideals of conservation to our communities? We have the maps and can create zones, but how do we implement our values and have them resonate with the people here?

- We need to tell existing farmers they are valued. We need to make them understand that this whole process isn't setting out to limit farming or to make the area a wilderness preserve. There is a history of farming in this part of the county and it is valued and something we wish to continue in ways that preserve waterways and soils. One of the greatest preventions of development is to make it known to farmers they are valued and that their way of life is valued.

-Kim Chapman: Action must be taken in the government. We need to begin thinking about this now, while energy is high. While Tom would like this to stay as neutral as possible we should start to think about these things. We need to act upon desires to change legislation in a sensitive way. Perhaps a smaller group of people can go back to the notes, work together, talk to one another and create a vision for this change in Avon Hills, as a subcommittee of efforts here. Chris Schellinger is asked if he would be willing to take charge of a coalition committed to legislative action and change.

-Tom Kroll: One of the main hopes for this group is that we come out of it with a laundry list of delegated responsibility and contacts for helping us. Who does the implementation? Who can help us with a cost benefit analysis? Which areas should be conserved? I think a small subcommittee would be really powerful and I am not against taking steps to influence change. Subgroups however, need to be sensitive to the issues facing the members of the Avon Hills Community, conceive a way of land preservation that isn't a taking for anybody, and stay away from regulation driven strategies at this stage. As a grassroots group we should avoid telling people what to do. This should be a self-driven and self-motivated process.

-Chris Schellinger agreed to the establishment of a smaller subcommittee to work in a more pro-active way. Representatives from each township were chosen to be a part of the committee. The committee was agreed to stay at our around 8 members including the township representatives selected as follows:

- Bill Mock/John Wittrock-St. Wendell Township
- Steve Platenberg- Avon Township
- Sister Phyllis Plantenberg- Saint Joseph Township
- Allan Davisson- Colledgeville Township

- Jennifer Buchentine: Stearns County does have provisions for open space. Conservation development is already in ordinance. The county board has instructed us to look at our standards and cluster developments to really accomplish what cluster development are set out to do. I am all for giving people options however realistically without an ordinance in place; I don't know what would happen.

- We are dealing with powerful economic drivers; land prices go up and there is an increase in land value when you provide site infrastructures to build homes on the land. There are costs associated with development and getting ready for increase in land value, to reduce costs you provide an incentive for developers, cluster development reduces costs.

- Developers are given a bonus for implementing various conservation measures in there development...are they the right kinds? The strategy group that Chris will form and get under way is going to have to wrestle with the conversation we had this morning dealing

with land values. We need to remove the tax burden from the farmer who wishes to continue to farm. Government can help to solve this problem through economic incentives. Lots of ordinances are in place to do this. If you want to achieve the division an integrated township/county levels are going to have to mesh a cohesive policy. Lastly I would say....avoid telling people what to do and I wouldn't preclude new policies at state and local levels to create economic incentives. This would be beneficial.

- We also need to educate our children so when they grow, they will continue our tradition of valuing this area. These children will be come resources and advocates for this community. I think this is fundamentally important.

-Inheritance issues: Children from generational farms cannot afford to own the land, state taxes are too high. This is a problem.

- I think what we need to do is take the work we do together here and allow the subcommittee to use these resources to further the goals of the people of Avon Hills when we are done working here together. What we are working on today is a start, a step towards an integrative and difficult process.

Other Comments from Discussion:

- Biological survey information and the GIS map comparison made it important to see what was on the GIS maps and to keep as much of what is on the biological survey in tact as possible.

- There are concerns with how little land is left and how fragmented the land actually is. There is an elevated the sense of importance, values and concerns about how within our lifetimes the land could be gone if we don't do something to prevent it. It is impossible to comprehend how much was here and how fast it has disappeared.

- Within a ½ mile of Bill Mock's homestead there are no longer any wooded natural areas. That was not the case 40 years ago.

-inheritance issues, children cannot afford to own the land, state taxes are too high

- Ernie Diedrich suggested to be involved using his resources to conduct an economic analysis of some of these various situations including:

- Property taxes
- Availability of land
- Income generated from development (large numbers, and could be put toward assisting land value issues, property taxes)
- Formula for valuing land

- Bill Cofell may be also be resource for this economic analysis and the changes which have taken place over the last 40 years

V. Conclusion

Kim Chapman- Extension of thanks for a wonderful day, productive map-making session and good discussion. Chris is encouraged to get his group started and an establishment of future meeting time takes place.

Next meeting to take place:

May 15th, 9:00 am @ Saint John's University