

Cullowhee Planning Council

Minutes

January 3, 2022

6:00 p.m.

Department on Aging

Heritage Room

Members	Present	Absent	Members	Present	Absent	Members	Present	Absent
Rick Bennett		X	Jim Lewis	X		Chris Stuckey	X	
Joel Setzer	X		Mike Byers		X	Donna Huguelet	X	
David Claxton		X	Carol Burton	X				

Staff Present

Michael Poston, Planning Director

John Jeleniewski, Senior Planner

Anna Harkins, Planner I

Allison Kelley, Administrative Assistant

Call to Order

Joel Setzer called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. and a quorum was present.

Additions to Agenda

Jim Lewis made a motion to approve the agenda as written. Carol Burton seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.

Approval of Minutes

Jim Lewis made a motion to approve the minutes from July 19, 2021. Donna Huguelet seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.

Public Comment- Sign-up sheet- 3 minutes per speaker

There were no public comments.

New Business

a) Monteith Gap Road Discussion

Mr. Poston stated the NCDOT would be undertaking this project, and when the bridge project was scoped, it included some intersection improvement along the first portion of Monteith Gap Road with sidewalks and biking facilities. After discussing the bridge that it was deficient and needed to be replaced, in addition to experiencing growth in the area with younger drivers NCDOT came up with a plan to improve Monteith Gap Road by replacing the bridge to be higher to avoid the current hydraulic issues such as flooding from Cullowhee Creek. In addition, to allow access for the growth of population in the area, and improvement of traffic flow. NCDOT has money-funding sources from bridge replacement monies, and high impact low cost projects that would yield safety results for a lower cost. He stated they have designed sidewalks on both sides of street, bike lanes on the road to meet the needs of students that will utilize these improvements. In addition, he stated when the road is realigned it would take some property that currently exists including the smoky mountain pregnancy center property. He noted that the center knew going into this space, that a road re-alignment was a possibility as it was being reviewed. He stated the alignment would be going into county owned property where the Cullowhee Community Garden is located. There is some permanent easements, along with natural right-of-way for the road and

both would limit the types of uses of the county owned property. He stated all property owners would go through the right-of-way acquisition process to be compensated. Currently, the proposed plan does not impact the current operations other than some potential power lines from Western's power poles that may come in closer to some of the facilities, and they have reached out to the university to discuss a guide wire from a poll to be relocated as to not interfere with some of the greenhouse operations. Mr. Jeleniewski stated the guide wire that was going to be close to the greenhouse is not going to happen, and the university is designing their system that would not affect the parking area. In addition, he stated they will have a drainage and utility easement, where when the worst storm water would be coming off the road would be managed in that area, and staff is waiting on final stormwater engineered plans to review. Mr. Poston stated staff understands the project would impact the county's property but at this time it is not impacting the actual existing garden area. In addition, there may be some operational issues that may arise that staff would review and determine the best way to work through those issues. This project also offers an opportunity when NCDOT moves the right-of-way, a portion of the area on Monteith Gap Road would be abandoned and be reverted to the deeded property owner (Jackson County), which would potentially create a pocket park or opportunity for public access to the Tuckaseegee River/Cullowhee Creek area.

Mr. Poston stated they could not keep the old bridge, which would have been useful for pedestrian access, but the county would assume liability due to the current conditions of the bridge. NCDOT and their hydrology team could not justify keeping this bridge due to the flooding issues even for pedestrian use. In addition, he stated the Greenway phase one is to connect to this area and South Painter Park. CuRvE and others in the community visualize the Greenway to come in under the new bridge and connect to this area to be a potential River Park access area.

Currently, the NCDOT is working on right-of-way acquisitions and there is no set construction date as they have an 11 billion dollars deficit between committed projects and funding available to complete those projects. In addition, they did receive some funding through the infrastructure bill that was passed at the federal level and they expect about 3.5 billion dollars from that bill, which leaves 8 billion dollars' worth of projects that they do not know where the funding will come from. Mr. Poston stated there are projects that are being pushed from other funded years into 2030. The county passed a resolution stating they would take over and maintain the sidewalks if NCDOT builds them as part of the project. The county is committed to a 20% cost share with NCDOT based on when this project was scoped.

b) Cullowhee Community Garden Update

Adam Bigelow stated he was an employee of the Jackson County Department of Public Health in the Department of Health Education, but his real job title and job is the garden manager for Cullowhee Community Garden. It was proposed for him to come talk to the Council to give some of his potential concerns and issues with the Monteith Gap Road construction, and finished project. In addition, he stated garden member and chairman to the Council, David Claxton asked him to generally provide information about the garden as many people do not know about it. Mr. Bigelow stated approximately 95% of their volunteers are Western Carolina University (WCU) students. The garden, which is approximately under an acre is a project to the Jackson County Department of Public Health to use for the public health. The property is broken up into small individual garden plots that are 15 feet by 30 feet that people from the community can adopt to grow a garden for themselves, friends and family. In addition, he stated they provide all the tools, equipment, and materials that are needed grow a garden using organic cultural methods, except for seeds and plants. Mr. Bigelow stated it is free to adopt a plot and those that adopt a plot can grow any flowers, herbs, and vegetables they wish to share with themselves, friends and family. Instead of charging the community for a plot, they charge everybody half of their produce to donate in the local food relief programs to help our neighbors in Jackson County. He stated this country grows a lot of food and sends it all around the world, and the amount of food is so great they end up throwing away 40-60% of what is grown. Meanwhile, one out of five adults, and one out of four children under the age of 18 are food insecure here in Jackson County. However, all of the work they do at the Cullowhee Community Garden goes towards their greater effort, which is to help grow a garden and grow the community. Mr. Bigelow stated the garden is not just primarily to

grow vegetables, but it also serves as an Environmental Education Center, and offers an alternative conventional way of growing food instead of with synthetic chemically fertilizers. He stated the garden has been in operation for eight years, and starting their ninth season. There are 29 individual plots in the garden and seven plots are open and available for adoption. Mr. Bigelow stated individuals and groups in the community such as nonprofits and departments from WCU have adopted plots. They do not allow WCU undergraduate students to adopt plots because they are not here during the summer, or fall/spring breaks, and it is busy around exam times. However, prior to Covid-19 they had an active double sized plot that was successfully ran by students as part of the community garden club that he hopes to get up and running again in the future. In addition, he stated he is working on getting more of the community involved in volunteering especially when WCU is out of session. Mr. Bigelow asked the Council if they know any groups, individuals, clubs, church clubs, or civic organizations that would like to be involved to refer them.

Mr. Bigelow stated across from Cullowhee Creek and the community garden is the Bellamy student housing that is 400 beds of mostly impervious surface where rainwater is hitting it and not being able to soak into the ground. He stated this construction project was a challenge to be a neighbor to, but now he has a good working relationship with management. In addition, he tries to be friend every resident across the street, because they do have a gravel parking lot and a glass greenhouse. The impact from the construction of the Bellamy development has been stormwater impoundment for the rainwater, and a lot of impervious surface that comes right through their front entrance parking lot with no French drain, which has caused the water to run across the street into the parking lot and into the garden. He stated when they built the gravel parking lot it was designed to handle water from normal rain events, and they have a little dip and a raised mound of bioswale open impoundment with a lot of plants on it to hold in the parking lot, and catch normal rainwater. In addition, he stated he designed an outflow from the bioswale open impoundment to go into the wetland area, which he believes is a natural part of the riparian area in the floodplain that was artificially created not on purpose when Monteith Gap Road was first built that backed up with flooding. Mr. Bigelow stated he had concerns about how the project is going to change and impact the garden area. Growing plants in a floodplain is great, except that every once in a while it floods, and when it was decided to put the garden in this location the adjacent property owners told them that back in the 1980s they had water up to their steps of their house. In addition, he has seen photos of people that lived on this side of the Cullowhee Creek during the same flooding event in a canoe. Mr. Bigelow stated with climate change, the increase of global warming, there are more frequent storm events being forecasted, and these storms are holding more water causing more flooding. The bridge causes some water flow impacts where they will 1-2 feet of standing water that they have handled by doing raised earthen mound building. However, the main flooding is when the Tuckasegee River is filled-up too much to accept any more water from Cullowhee Creek that causes the creek to back up. He stated he is concerned of the impact as the water flows under the surface of soil how it will change the ground. In addition, as part of this construction project NCDOT will be removing a wetland and will have to build an artificial wetland on or off site and he is concerned and interested in how the water will flow into this area.

Mr. Poston stated these concerns could be brought up to the engineers, as they are getting closer to the final plans. Mr. Jeleniewski stated the road has shifted in this plan, as it has to be elevated to get out of base flood, along with the new bridge. In addition, during the construction at the toe of these slopes they will be accepting the drainage that is running off. He stated the road itself is a curb and gutter section which would be contained, and the conduit is going to be in storm pipe and structures. Mr. Jeleniewski stated everything that runs down is captured on the banks and would be slowed down by the friction of vegetation, and then captured in the total slope and swales and likely pulled away from the community garden.

Mr. Bigelow stated the project would not directly impact any of the current layout of garden plots but the flow of water and change in hydrology would be impacted. In addition, reviewing the renderings of potential plans he did not see any road cut or access into the garden from South Painter Road. He is concerned by not having access into the garden as they have trucks that deliver equipment, hay, straw, mulch, and leaves from WCU facilities. However, he stated he believes this project is going to benefit the Cullowhee area and Cullowhee Community Garden to allow pedestrian access along with the future Greenway and River Park. Mr. Poston stated the Planning

Department would meet with Mr. Bigelow on site to review and plan for the future construction. In addition, he stated staff has been working through these issues and concerns with NCDOT and WCU, and they will continue to engage and follow up as they move this project forward.

c) Greenway Update

Mr. Poston stated staff continues to work with the Recreation Department and administration to look at opportunities to acquire land. He stated they have discussed with Mainspring Land Trust about a potential partnerships, and they have some interest in the Tuckasegee river corridor in the area. In addition, he stated the biggest obstacle would be having landowners that are willing to discuss acquisition such as an easement, and staff would continue to work through those hurdles.

Joel Setzer inquired if there was a menu of options for routes established. Mr. Poston stated they came up that the Greenway that would follow the Tuckasegee River. The first phase of the Jackson County Greenway they did an environmental assessment on how to achieve the project that is approximately three miles from Locust Creek to South Painter Park. He stated they discussed that on Ledbetter Road right beside the Monteith Gap Road corner is tight and steep area, and recommended coming up on the road grade with the sidewalk segment. However, it could possibly be difficult to achieve given what is currently on Ledbetter Road and they would review and consider alternative designs to Greenways that would happen in that same type of space.

d) River Park Update

Mr. Poston stated they have had movement on parts of the River Park when they realigned Wayehutta Road with the new bridge. The county requested NCDOT for public purposes to consider giving some of properties and rights-of-way that were left to the county. The county has completed the purchase of the apprentice property that also use to have the Old Speedy's building. CuRvE, WCU, and TWSA have been discussing the dam but he does not believe it would be moved anytime soon because of water supply concerns. Initially, they first started to discuss to remove the dam and rearrange some of that to create a River Park. In addition, he stated he believed NCDOT is at a point where they need to repair the dam or remove it, and as far as his knowledge, unless alternative methods are development and choices are made the dam will not be moved.

e) Cullowhee Small Area Plan Implementation

Mr. Poston asked the Council to start reviewing the action plan of the Cullowhee Small Area Plan to beginning discussing the goals of the community. In addition, he asked the Council to begin to consider which goals they want to prioritize and start moving forward or if there are new concerns in the community, they can begin to address over the next couple of months.

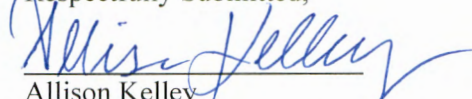
f) Staff Updates

There were no further updates from staff.

Adjournment

With no further business, Carol Burton made a motion to adjourn. Jim Lewis seconded the motion and the meeting adjourned at 7:20 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,


Allison Kelley
Administrative Assistant- Planning


David Claxton
Planning Council Chair