

Granville seeks way to handle growth

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CREEDMOOR - Faced with continuing growth pressures in southern Granville and the probability of the same in the Oxford area, the Granville County Board of Commissioners spent Friday night and Saturday morning fretting about how to face its challenges.

After hearing from legislators and their attorney, the commissioners quickly concluded they can expect no help from the state; in fact, they saw possible roadblocks from the state level.

Dave Currin described reports from the legislators as "not a promising picture," and Tony Cozart started the Saturday session by wondering "how we will be able to keep up with services."

By the end of the two-day, annual planning retreat, Currin was prompted to ask if the county is looking at a tax increase this year, since it "does not appear we will get any help from the legislature."

As has become traditional, the board started the retreat Friday with a report on development patterns from its planners.

After talking about routine matters such as updating of the land development ordinance, the concept of conditional use zoning and the possible consideration of an "adequate public facilities ordinance," Planning Board Chairman Edgar Smoak cut to the main point.

Saying he is "scared of an explosion - I think we are beginning to see it," Smoak said he is concerned about its effect on schools and roads. The Planning Board has been flooded of late with new subdivision plats.

That brought up the subject of impact fees, a concept that allows local governments to impose special fees on new developments to raise funds to provide the public facilities and services they demand.

Three counties in the state have such fees by special state law, and Durham County has attempted to impose a fee on its own. But the Durham move is being challenged in court and Granville County Attorney William Hopper told commissioner he thinks it will be struck down.

Not only should Granville not expect any court ruling that would allow it to tax new residents, there is no prospect for a change in the state law, according to State Sen. Doug Berger.

Although Berger and Rep. Jim Crawford said they support impact fees, Berger said the home builders lobby is too strong and an impact fee bill can not pass the legislature.

In addition to that situation, Crawford advised the county leaders they will not like the governor's budget, particularly in regard to Medicaid. For years a pressure on both the state and local budgets, Medicaid faces a possible federal cutback this year.

So while Berger said he will sponsor a bill transferring all Medicaid costs from counties to the state, no one was encouraging about that prospect.

Despite the Medicaid problems, the areas in which its growth may cause Granville problems are schools, roads and water and sewer. And the news about them was not good, either.

School officials reported on their progress in using the \$35 million bond issue passed last year, including a suggestion from Superintendent Tom Williams that the new high school maybe should be designed for 700 students to start instead of the 500 planned.

Then School Board Chairman Leonard Peace again delivered the plea for the county to fund an increased local teacher pay supplement. He got some measure of support from Cozart, although the supplement increase has been rejected for the past two years.

As to roads, Crawford had a word of encouragement. He said he has Gov. Mike Easley's support on the county's top priority, widening of N.C. 50 between Creedmoor and Raleigh. He also said there may be a bargaining point with Raleigh, which stands in the way of the project.

But while Crawford said he is "doing everything we know how," there has been no concrete evidence of the state taking on the project.

The main subject on county commissioners' minds remained the water and sewer situation, and in that regard a new concern popped up last week regarding the Oxford area.

Plans to expand the state's sewage plant in Butner already had been put on hold pending further studies, after downstream environmentalists objected to increase flow into the Neuse River basin. That, in effect, severely limits the growth potential in southern Granville.

During the week, it was learned that other downstream interests in the Tar-Pamlico basin are objecting to any increase in use of the Oxford sewage treatment plant until after its expansion, which has started.

If the state listened to that argument, Crawford suggested, it could stop all growth in the Oxford area for up to two years, coming at a time when major housing projects are underway and a Granville site has just been chosen for industrial development as part of the Kerr-Tar Hub.

With all those problems on the table, the understatement of the retreat came from County Manager Dudley Watts when he observed, "We are affected by what the state does."

Watts was referring primarily to any action the state may or may not take regarding Medicaid and how that will affect the county budget.

But with the state also holding the trump cards on impact fees, sewage treatment and roads, Granville officials kept referring to their dependence on the next level of government to help handle its main growth problems.

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