

Comprehensive plan remains unsettled as officials weigh next steps

By Courtney H ughett Brown County Democrat

Brown County officials are still searching for a way forward on a new comprehensive plan after a joint meeting Tuesday, May 26, between the Brown County Area Planning Commission and the Brown County Commissioners made clear that both boards want an updated plan, but do not yet agree on how quickly the county should move ahead.

The county has been working from an older comprehensive plan adopted in 2011. The Planning Commission spent months working with Veritas to prepare a new draft plan, but the commissioners have not accepted it. Their biggest concern has been that the draft did not include enough public input before being sent to them.

The Planning Commission met with the commissioners to talk through the status of the draft plan, possible amendments, future public input and zoning problems that continue to come before the county. The discussion also touched on the longdelayed need to update Brown County's zoning ordinances, which many officials said is the part of the process that most directly affects property owners and businesses.

Commissioner Tim Clark summarized the commissioners' concern by saying that the last joint meeting had focused on problems with the draft and possible ways to address them. He said the next step was to give the Planning Commission a path forward. That path could include hiring REA, a planning firm that worked on Nashville's comprehensive plan, to help gather more local input and build amendments into the draft plan.

The proposal discussed Tuesday was not a finished amendment. Officials made clear several times that it was only a suggested process. REA had provided an outline at no charge showing how the county could begin with a "prototype" or "proof of concept" in Van Buren Township, then possibly repeat the same process in other townships.

The idea behind starting with one township is that different parts of Brown County have very different needs. Officials talked about how Hamblen Township, Van Buren Township, Jackson Township and Washington Township are not the same in geography, housing, income, transportation, business needs or

The comprehensive plan is a guide for future development, but the zoning ordinance is what actually says what people can and cannot do with their land. Members said the current 2011 plan is so vague that it does not give the Plan Commission enough direction when residents or businesses ask for zoning changes.

One example discussed was a recent request involving a business property. Officials said Brown County has many small businesses that do not fit neatly into the current zoning rules. Some members said the county needs better rules for service businesses and other small-business uses that are not quite the same as full general business zoning, but also do not fit well in residential areas.

Planning Commission members repeatedly said they were not against more public input. Their concern was that the county could spend another year or more on the comprehensive plan and still not have updated ordinances. Commission member Andy Voils compared the draft comprehensive plan to a basic car that may not be perfect, but could at least get the county moving while it works toward something better.

Commissioners, however, said they were not ready to accept the draft plan as it is. They said they need to see a stronger public input process before they will move the plan forward. At the same time, they said they were not trying to throw out all the work already done. Their position was that the draft could be enhanced with better local input, not necessarily scrapped.

There was also discussion about whether REA would automatically get the work or whether the county would need to seek proposals from other firms. Officials said that question needs to be reviewed by Plan Commission Attorney Dave Schilling. Patrick said professional planning services may not always require the same bidding process as other work, but Planning Director Kayla Robertson said the county had used a request-for-proposals process when it hired Veritas and may need to do something similar again.

Funding remains another major question. The previous draft was funded with money from the county and the Brown County Community Foundation. Clark said the county had tried to obtain state grant funding through OCRA but did not qualify because its low-to-moderate-income numbers were not high enough countywide. He

development pressure. Some areas are more rural and agricultural. Others are more connected to Nashville, the lakes, tourism, commuters or possible sewer expansion.

Commissioner Kevin Patrick said Van Buren Township was suggested first because it has a mix of Brown County's issues, including agriculture, timber, commuters and a strong local identity. He also noted that the Van Buren Volunteer Fire Department has been active in the community and could help bring people into the public-input process.

The proposal caused a long discussion about cost and timing. Plan Commission members said they liked the idea of more public input, but they worried that doing one township at a time could take too long and cost too much. The outline discussed at the meeting listed three months for early work and three more months for the Van Buren Township plan. Some members questioned whether the county would then have to spend months repeating the process in each township before the new comprehensive plan could be adopted.

Several members said they did not want the county to spend more time and money on the comprehensive plan without moving toward the real problem, which is the zoning ordinance.

also said an effort to get money for community engagement had not worked out.

Budget timing was another concern. Officials said budget discussions are approaching, so if the county wants money for more planning work, the request needs to be put in front of the County Council. At the same time, no one at the meeting had an actual price from REA for the township-based process.

The Planning Commission eventually gave support to the commissioners' suggested direction, but not to a contract or spending decision. The commissioners will now approach REA again to get a cost breakdown.