

## **Study Session on Sustainable Land Development Code - Part I**

Dear Santa Fe County residents,

At our last Board of County Commissioners meeting there was a study session devoted to the roll-out of the new Sustainable Land Development Code (SLDC). The actual Code was not released, but instead, staff presented an explanation of some of the important features of the Code, along with the timetable for how the process will go forward to get public feedback and ultimately, to adopt the Code.

Why did the BCC embark on the process of rewriting its land development code? The short answer to this is that the current code has weaknesses that have become more and more apparent over time. I think that everybody in the County understands, at least to some extent, that the way that development has been occurring does not adequately protect our water resources, and that we have in place very weak growth management. By this, I mean that growth over the last couple of decades has proceeded in a haphazard way. It has occurred in areas that do not have adequate roads, facilities, water/wastewater infrastructure, and County services, such as fire and police protection.

Let me give you one example of what I mean: water supply. In the old days, it didn't really matter if someone wanted to split off a piece of land out in the rural area to build a home. The prospective owner could just drill a well and be assured of an adequate water supply. In the 1950s, there were roughly 500 wells in the County; now the aquifer is burdened by some 7,000. A significant number of these wells now have problems, either with water quality or quantity, or both. This means that the way that we have developed in the past has to come to an end.

Over time people in the rural areas have also come to expect better-quality roads, as well as services like community and senior centers. People also demand quality fire protection and law enforcement services, no matter where they live. If we continue to develop haphazardly, rather than in an intelligently planned way, good roads and adequate services everywhere will end up costing huge sums of money to the residents of Santa Fe County.

If we want to maintain our quality of life, as well as the unique character of the very special place where we live, we need to plan for development in a smarter way.

The first step in improving our development model was to come up with a growth management plan. The County did this with countless community meetings, and the BCC passed a new Sustainable Growth Management Plan (SGMP) in November, 2010. I have discussed this Plan with you in great detail over the last several years, so I won't say much more here. I would like to emphasize, though, that staff made every effort to ensure that our Plan truly reflects the vision of the people of Santa Fe County. It was put together with the help and input of hundreds of people, both individually and as members of many, many groups. The Plan covers almost all aspects of life in the County. The Code, however, will only deal with how future development should proceed, so is only a part of what the County will ultimately have to implement.

The SGMP identified a number of different concepts with regard to new development that the Code will have to implement:

- Growth should be directed to those areas where services can be most cost-effectively delivered.

- Zoning should preserve the rural character in certain areas by maintaining separation between traditional communities.

- Growth should be phased in such a way as to not place undue burdens on the County budget (both operations and capital).

- New development should pay for itself, rather than depending on the current residents to subsidize it.

So the question of the day is: How will the SLDC implement these principles? The new SLDC will entirely replace the existing code, although certain ordinances, like the current Oil & Gas Ordinance, will be maintained as is, until they can be incorporated into the new code structure. The new code will:

- Implement a growth management strategy.

- Ensure that there are adequate public facilities and services in areas where major developments occur.

- Establish base zoning districts, as well as mixed-use, commercial, and industrial districts.

In Part II of this e-mail series, I will highlight some of the important ways in which we expect the new code to differ significantly from our existing code.

Sincerely,  
-Kathy

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