



Make Haste Slowly

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Sunday's article about the ongoing saga of Chesterfield's land-use plan for the Upper Swift Creek area offered a healthy reminder of just how muddled such issues can become. That's because land use is not one issue, but many. It incorporates everything from transportation and the environment to housing and education.

A new Board of Supervisors wants to take the county in a different direction from the last one. It has sent back to the Planning Commission for further review the Upper Swift Creek plan -- which covers 57 square miles, or an area just about the size of the City of Richmond. Supervisor Marleen Durfee, in particular, stresses what she and many others consider a need to grow more slowly and deliberately: The area's roads and schools are growing increasingly clogged. Durfee represents citizen sentiment, as last year's elections suggest.

What's more, from a finance perspective Chesterfield is residence-heavy and business-light, which puts a strain on services. The county needs more commercial and industrial development to provide the funding base to pay for infrastructure and amenities.

But as Vernon McClure, a local home builder, noted, slowing down residential growth can hurt those in need of affordable housing: "Every time you take land out of play, you make existing lots more expensive." Scarcity drives up prices -- not just in the immediate vicinity but throughout the region. That's a serious consideration, particularly for Central Virginia. A report released last September by Virginia LISC, a housing-advocacy group, pointed out that the supply of affordable housing in the area is shrinking.

Chesterfield officials have to take more into consideration than median home prices in Central Virginia. They need also to consider water quality in the Swift Creek reservoir, the price of roadway paint, school capacity, traffic light timing, and a host of other variables. That is why they should heed the perspicacious advice offered by supervisor and former planning commissioner Dan Gecker about rewriting the Upper Swift Creek plan: Make haste slowly. "It should be addressed as soon as there's enough data to address it meaningfully. I'd rather have it done correctly than giving it an artificial deadline." Doing otherwise might mean having to revisit the plan yet again -- to correct all the mistakes.

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