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Making the Mountain Landscapes Initiative a reality

By Julia Merchant • Staff Writer

The Mountain Landscapes Initiative is arguably the largest and most well-funded regional planning project ever conducted in Western North Carolina. The months-long process spanned seven counties and involved hundreds of people. Organizations supported the effort so strongly that they donated staggering sums — the Community Foundation of WNC gave \$100,000, the largest sum ever in its history; Winston-Salem based Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation recently threw in \$50,000.

The project's goal of mapping the future of the WNC mountains isn't the first of its kind. In the end, will the MLI's legacy be different, and will it be able to breach the difference of opinion on planning in this region?

Background

The immense amount of time put into the MLI and bottom-up approach it took sets it apart from other planning initiatives. The Community Foundation of WNC and the Southwestern Commission both pitched in. University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill graduate students Carla Norwood and Gabe Cumming interviewed 70 community leaders and collected hours of footage on the open-ended topic of, "What do you love about the mountains?" The answers were turned into a 20-minute documentary.

The film was shown at a series of presentations held in all seven counties. Community members came and watched the film, then broke into groups and brainstormed priorities for preserving and protecting their own communities for the future.

From those meetings, a list of 10 top priorities was formed. They range from responsible development to affordable housing to preserving culture, natural resources and open space.

Then, a team of experts was called in to study the questions and provide solutions in a multi-day presentation held at Western Carolina University. The consultants were top-notch and represented planning firms and experts from all over the state in a variety of fields.

Four case studies using real-life examples became the focal point for addressing the major topics posed. Mountain Watch followed a Haywood County development as it grappled with ridge-top and cluster development in the interest of preservation; the Cowee community and preserving its lengthy history was the focus of another. The future look of rapidly growing Cashiers was a central point of discussion in another study; and preserving a family farm rounded out the field.

Illustrations throughout the final presentation showed what towns could look like with nicely blended architecture and preserved open spaces. Slides detailed low-impact development methods that bucked tradition with an almost "new urbanism" feel. The excitement of possibility felt by audience members was nearly palpable during the final presentation.

Ready for planning?

As officials with the Mountain Landscapes Initiative repeatedly acknowledge, counties in WNC are in much different stages of the planning process. Jackson County has some of the toughest development regulations in the state, for instance, governing everything from house color to the number of trees that must shade a property; in contrast, adjacent Swain County's first-ever development regulations —

a subdivision ordinance — were tabled after stiff opposition.

But a general awareness of the need to plan for the future — or at least the acknowledgment of the planning process — seems prevalent in most WNC communities. There are currently state regulations on the books that govern some aspects of development — like those that make it illegal for any runoff to flow into creeks during development — but it's at the local level where the need for some kind of planning is becoming apparent.

"In the end, the decision belongs to the local community," says John Herrin, head of the Coalition for Private Property Rights.

"Counties need to be involved in deciding what their future looks like," agrees Bob Wagner with the Community Foundation of WNC.

This means taking a hard look at the big, long-term picture — a process that's often difficult for communities to do.

"A lot of times we're short-sighted and we're not thinking about the longer term. Now is a good time for counties to step back and look at growth projections," Wagner says.

It also means realizing that what is done today will affect the future.

"You have to look at things in the bigger picture and determine what will be beneficial," says Bob Brannon, the developer of the Mountain Watch project. "What your children and grandchildren will inherit and what will be left for them."

Differing views

Though an awareness of planning is fairly pervasive, opinions on just how to go about charting the future for the mountain region run the gamut.

The notion of private property rights is deeply embedded in the culture of the area and doesn't always jive well with planning efforts, particularly when local government gets involved.

"The bigger government gets, the fewer freedoms individuals have. Where does it stop? Where is the line in the sand here?" asks Charlene Blankenship, a property rights advocate from Swain County.

Some are downright scared of how projects like the Mountain Landscapes Initiatives could jeopardize individual freedoms.

"I think it's very dangerous. They're coming in and trying to appear that they're working with the communities. I just think it's kind of a socialistic view of things when people think they have the right to have other people's private property," Blankenship says. "These groups want to preserve everything, lock up property rights and throw away the key."

Eric Romaniszyn with Haywood Waterways, a non-profit conservation group, ran up against the private property rights sentiment when his organization helped lead another planning effort called the Haywood Growth Readiness Roundtable.

"There's a lot of people with some ideas that they have somehow instilled in their heads. I don't know where they come from," he says.

Romaniszyn says planning opponents labeled the Roundtable effort with taboo phrases like zoning and backdoor planning. He said trying to get past that sentiment poses difficulty to any planning effort.

"That's a challenge — trying to change the mindset a community has," he says.

Ron Moser, director of Haywood Waterways, is all too familiar with the stance of some private property rights advocates.

"If they perceive it as any kind of regulation, they're going to come out guns blazing and trash whatever you do," he says.

Moser said attempts to strike up dialogue with members of that camp posed a frustration to the Roundtable project.

"They won't come and they won't participate," he said. "It's troubling that people who don't participate and didn't participate in our roundtable trashed it as being, 'they're trying to zone us off our land.'"

Wagner says the goal of the MLI wasn't to force anything on anyone, but rather to provide suggestions and ideas.

"We're not going to push anything. I think sometimes it's more pull. Our vision is really making it very available so that anybody getting into this work will at least take a look and see what's available," he says.

Wagner said the Mountain Landscapes Initiative tried hard to incorporate all points of view.

"I do feel like we went very far out of our way to make sure that people felt heard, and that people were not excluded from the process," he says. "Certainly if there's been opposition, we've invited them to participate in the discussion. That adds value. We don't want people to be on the outside — we want everyone in the tent."

Still, a number of editorials and letters were written to local papers accusing the MLI of attempting to make laws. That wasn't the intent, contests Eric Moberg, chairman of the Cowee Community Development Organization. Moberg says many of those opposed to the project didn't understand it.

"I think people didn't understand this was their opportunity to voice their opinions," he says.

But Blankenship says she and others are jaded by attempts by planning groups to bring the opposition to the table and doubts their sincerity.

"They're not going to change my mind, and we're not going to change theirs. I feel like they just want to pick my brain to come up with counter arguments," she says.

Of the private property rights views represented through the MLI, Blankenship says they probably did little to contribute to an understanding between the two sides.

"I truly felt like the people that were so pro-property rights were not the best spoken of the group," she says.

Difficulty at spreading their message shouldn't cause planning groups to throw up their arms in defeat, advises Moser. To the contrary, encouraging more dialogue will hopefully lead to better understanding and a common vision.

"The more it's said by more people more times, hopefully you can get past some of the suspicion. I really want these people to come to the table because their concerns are just as valid as anybody else's," he says.

Participants hope increased awareness and community involvement will be the legacies of projects like the Haywood Growth Readiness Roundtable and Mountain Landscapes Initiative.

"We're hoping to see people talking about the issues and talking about the positive — not just coming in here with the mindset they've had for many years and automatically assume this is a bad way to go about doing things," says Romaniszyn.

"I hope it gets communities thinking and gets a wider base of community participation," agrees Bob Apsey, a board member of the Cowee Community Development Organization. "That hopefully will be one of the important things that come out — getting people in the process before instead of fielding complaints

after.”

Changing a mindset that has been around for generations is tough, admit Romaniszyn and Moser. Romaniszyn says he’s not sure just what the best plan of action is to do so.

“It’s a tough sell,” acknowledges Moser. “A lot of people are suspicious, but we’ve just got to keep hammering.”

The culmination of the Haywood Growth Readiness Roundtable was a book of suggestions for smart growth, somewhat similar to those discussed through the MLI. The finished product has garnered some interest. The town of Maggie Valley’s planning board and the Haywood County Homebuilders Association have both asked Haywood Waterways for a presentation of the guidelines.

County officials have been somewhat less receptive and are taking a more reactive approach to planning. They have asked interested groups to come forward if they’re interested in starting up a community planning effort, rather than initiating that dialogue themselves.

Natives vs. newcomers

A difference in opinion over planning efforts is partially rooted in the divide between natives of the WNC mountains and newcomers who own second homes or have moved here.

An audience member at the final presentation of the Mountain Landscapes Initiative criticized the project for being conducted based on the pretense that second-home owners should have a say in the region’s future. In reality, the audience member said, many don’t want the newcomers here in the first place.

Wagner defended the inclusion of the second-home demographic in the MLI.

“We’re not saying second-home owners are good or bad. We’re just saying that’s what’s here,” he said. “The economics of most of the western counties are very reliant on second homes. If you say we don’t want those, you’re basically helping to shut down the county.”

Moberg, a former second-home owner who now lives in Macon County full time, said development is contributing to the area.

“People need to accept the fact that the development of Macon County is going to continue to improve the economy here. We don’t have industry here, we only have the service industry to support tourism and growth,” he said. “Without some growth, we really don’t have an economy.”

Blankenship doesn’t disagree that the second-home population helps the economy of the area. But some of the views the demographic holds of the future of WNC aren’t realistic, she says.

“Some of these people moving into the area, they just have this grand view — it’s kind of unrealistic. I think they want to take you back to old Europe, with rolling hills, a center market, no cars, everybody walks. I just don’t think it will fit too well with the private landowners up here,” she said.

The idea of a European-style cluster development in mountain towns was a partial focus of the MLI’s final presentation.

Herrin says the ideals held by the people who have been here for generations must be heavily weighed in any talk of planning.

“Say you’re the first one there. You have a certain amount of rights, and just because somebody else moves in and starts talking about zoning and regulations, you still have to recognize the original field of owners,” he says.

Ironically, Herrin says, the somewhat unregulated, laid-back, small-town feel is what many love about the region.

"You don't want to go in and impose regulations that would change the culture or heritage of the area," he says. "We have to be very careful to balance growth with the original culture of the area."

Rethinking traditional development

Models of future housing developments were a major focus of the Mountain Landscapes Initiative. Project consultants touted the multiple benefits of shifting from traditional, multi-acre lots to smaller, cluster-type developments. Open space could be preserved, views could be shared and communities could be less reliant on fuel for transportation.

"There will still be people who want their five or 10 acres with one house, but with energy costs and issues of water and sewer, we'll have to look at things a little differently in the future," says Moberg. "I think (the MLI) opened our eyes to the fact that there are alternative ways to develop land."

"I do think the future demands that we do more planning and respond to green ideas and open spaces," agrees Brannon.

The idea of cluster developments isn't popular with everyone. Many cherish the amount of space they have in the mountains compared to more urban environments and wouldn't relish being pushed up next to their neighbors.

"That's great for people that want the community feel, but I personally like the more secluded feel," says Apsey. "That's part of the reason we're here. I moved from an area that was a neighborhood with row houses."

Apsey respects others' decision to reside in clustered communities, but doesn't think they should be the only option.

"If it's voluntarily done and the people that appreciate it can live there, that's fine, but if it gets to the point where that's the only choice, I got a problem with that," he says.

"I think that will be one of the challenge for any kind of low-impact development project — how can they create these developments where people have their privacy?" says Romanizyn.

That's not the only challenge. To build these types of developments, a developer must have some incentive.

"If a developer comes in here and wants to make money, the most money they'll get is from high-end homes," Romanizyn says. "The low-impact cluster homes are more labor intensive and might take more planning."

And are developers even interested in this type of construction? Is the market there for it?

Brannon says yes.

"I think people in development are moving that way. I think the statistics have shown that projects that follow good planning and have open spaces and conservation easements do as well or bring in as much money as those that go in and checkerboard the property," he says. But he adds, "I guess we'll be dictated by a lot of the people that are coming and what their desires are."

The Next Steps fund

Within two months, a "toolbox" of planning and development recommendations provided by Mountain Landscapes Initiative experts will be available both online and in hard copy. To ensure the lasting impact of the project, a Next Steps fund has

been established. The fund will provide matching donations to communities wanting to engage in a local planning process of their own. To find out more about the Next Steps fund, visit www.mountainlandscapes.org and click on "explore next steps."

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