

# Revising land use plans: Group prepares for toughest chapter

BY JAMES JACENICH • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — Highland's comprehensive plan review is all but complete. The only major remaining hurdle is a chapter on land use, which promises to be the members' biggest challenge.

Last week, the committee finished chapters on economy, natural environment, community facilities, government and finance. All were approved with minor changes:

■ At the suggestion of the economic development authority, the committee agreed on a strategy in the economy chapter to budget \$5,000 annually to seed local economic development efforts.

■ Under community services, Georgeanne Armstrong suggested adding stage 2 and 3 cost estimates for the Highland swimming pool project being coordinated by the recreation commission. "This is a way to remind them to stay within budget," she said. Under stage 1, the pool will cost an estimated \$350,000 to construct with annual operating costs estimated at \$30,000. Stage 2 is building an adjoining wellness center, and stage 3 is enclosing the pool.

■ Committee chair Jim Cobb noted an objective was added to government and finance to encourage county supervisors to consider expanding the school board and board of supervisors from three to five members, with staggered terms.

County administrator Roberta Lambert said the general assembly would have to authorize such a move. It could not be done with a local referendum. She also said the school board and board of supervisors would have to have the same number of members.

The committee amended the objective, adding a new objective to consider staggering terms for supervisors and school board members, keeping the issues of expansion and staggered terms separate.

Trent Burkholder said he was not in favor of increasing the size of the boards, but that putting it in the plan was a way to get the issue debated publicly.

■ One objective proposes the county institute a citizen-supervisor discussion of county issues, similar to town meet-

ings held in many places throughout the country. Betty Mitchell said such a forum would "decrease anxiety and creates good will."

Jack Flynn, speaking in favor that kind of forum, said, "People who work for the county shoulder a tremendous burden. There is lots of talent in this county. Maybe we can find a way to open this up a little bit and spread this around."

A related strategy asks supervisors to conduct a twice-a-year forum separate from regular monthly board meetings. Cobb said representatives from each county agency should attend.

■ Another strategy asks for an annual report of the county's performance measured against the goals, objectives and strategies of the comprehensive plan. "We have to keep checks and balances on this stuff," said Cobb.

The report, due Feb. 1 each year, would be the responsibility of the board of supervisors and county administrator with the assistance of the planning commission.

Mitchell added her support for a public information clerk position subordinate to the county administrator. The clerk would update the county's Web site, including minutes of public meetings and financial information.

As The Highland Center executive director, Mitchell offered the center's services to set up a group of volunteers to fill the position on a trial basis. If the clerk position is determined to be feasible, it would be turned over to the county at a later date, she said.

■ One proposed strategy would have tasked the commissioner of the revenue with developing new streams of income for the county. Lambert said that exceeds the office's authority and is a function of the board of supervisors.

"It seems if a land-use tax initiative goes through, the supervisors will have to come up with some way to make up for the lost revenue," said Cobb.

■ Another strategy supports the Virginia Tech extension office in developing a land-use tax initiative. Lowering taxes on some landowners would necessarily increase taxes for others, members agreed.

Caroline Smith said there should be a strategy to identify new revenue streams, but that it should be assigned to supervisors.

Burkholder said existing streams of revenue needed to be maximized, too.

"The key is the tax base," said Doug Gutshall. "We have to increase the tax base. We need to lower the tax burden on everybody."

## *Taking up land use*

The final discussion centered how to complete the land use chapter of the comprehensive plan. Cobb suggested dividing the chapter into four parts — narrative, goals, objectives and strategies — one part going to each subcommittee headed by a planning commission member.

"Then we'll go through the chapter as a group to see what we like and what we don't like," said Cobb.

The group modified his plan, assigning farming and timber to the Mill Gap subcommittee; business and economic development to the Monterey subcommittee; housing and population growth to the Blue Grass subcommittee; and tourism and historic preservation to the McDowell subcommittee.

Mitchell said, "We like the agricultural character of our county. How do we grow and do other things?" She suggested the committee look at how other rural counties handled land use.

The next meeting is 6 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 20 at the Highland County Public Library. Subcommittee input is due Feb. 15.

Completed sections are posted on the county Web site: [highlandcountyva.org](http://highlandcountyva.org). The site also has committee member contact names and numbers.

Following final committee review and approval of the land-use chapter, Cobb hopes to have a joint work session and a joint public hearing with supervisors. "That will save us about three months," he said.