

County planning focuses on sustainability

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writer

A lot of land use planning focuses on what happens inside town limits, consultant Marjo Curgus told participants at a "Planning for Sustainability" forum Monday evening at the Durango Recreation Center.

But in La Plata County, 72 percent of 11,000 homes built county-wide since 1990 have been outside town limits, she said. Curgus is working with the county to create a new comprehensive plan. From that will come a new land use plan.

This was the second monthly forum looking at different county issues.

Speaking of planning in general, Curgus said, "For years we have sacrificed human habitat to automobile habitat. Instead

of parks, we have huge parking lots. ... The way we invest in infrastructure governs the way we do development."

Parking regulations can be an obstacle to development, or they can result in huge parking lots designed for Christmas shopping crowds, she said.

In La Plata County, she said, "All our systems are designed for the way runoff used to flow off the mountains." Runoff patterns are expected to change with climate change. Dwindling natural gas production also will have major implications.

The first step in creating a new comp plan is to determine where not to grow, Curgus said. That includes hazard zones, environmentally sensitive places, cultural or historic sites, valued recreation

areas, the most productive ag land, and places with no infrastructure or no water.

The second step is to determine where and how to grow in rural areas. The third step is to "enable what you want," Curgus said. "A lot of current policies are obstacles. Make doing the right thing as easy as doing the wrong thing."

La Plata County is lucky to have three towns with very distinct boundaries and community identities, she said. "One of the major challenges for every community is the town-county interface."

She asked what constitutes sustainable rural development. She didn't give an answer except the need for regional collaboration instead of the towns and the county all doing their own thing.

In terms of sustainability, an average house in town with a short drive to work is more efficient than a "green" house far out in the country with residents driving their long commute, even in a hybrid car, she said. "Hybrids won't get us out of 'drive til you qualify,'" buying a house way out of town because it's more affordable.

Curgus said a future forum will focus on affordable housing.

She noted that everyone wants to preserve scenic agricultural land, while farm and ranch families are finding it harder and harder to stay in ag. Current land use policies don't give many options.

"Fifty percent of your rural land is in ag. It's habitat, views, water recharge," she said. Land can be preserved by buying it, or

buying development rights, or with conservation easements.

One woman worried that agriculture really isn't economically viable in the county and is going the way of mining. "People aren't going to give up their right to develop their land to protect other people's open space," she said.

Allison area landowner Caryl Schmid countered, "We can't lose it, because then we can't get it back."

Curgus cited the Galisteo Preserve near Santa Fe, where the major part of 10,000 acres is preserved by a private developer by giving over land on one edge to large lot trophy homes and building a new village on the far end of the land. The developer had to jump through a lot of hoops to achieve that.

Curgus tallied what audience members think the county is doing right, and what the county should consider for the new comp plan. There are consistencies that show up in the rambling lists, she said.

She will use those to come back with a list of goals, some of which will conflict and will need trade-offs.

The goals will lead to strategies to achieve them. Curgus said the draft comp plan probably will be ready for public review in January or February.

The monthly forums are the last Monday each month. More information about the comp plan process, along with feedback forms, is on-line at www.laplatacountyplan.com/get_involved; or contact project coordinator Jason Meininger at 382-6267.