

Staff Land Use Workshop and Focus Group Key Takeaways

June 22, 2022

This document outlines key takeaways from the staff land use workshop and topical focus groups that were held from May through July, 2022, for Suffolk 2045, the comprehensive plan update for the City of Suffolk, Virginia. This is intended as an internal document for review and consideration by Staff.

Staff Land Use Workshop

1. Place types have been successful and offer a chance for minor improvements

The current place types were introduced in 2015 and allow for appropriate flexibility when considering new development. However, there are opportunities to characterize place types differently given the surrounding context and expand upon the current descriptions. Locational criteria, design features, specific uses and other similar information can help reinforce the types of development desired throughout the City.

2. Expanding the growth boundaries may provide opportunity

While there is still vacant land for development in both growth areas, there is some interest in expanding the boundaries and/or potentially combining the areas to accommodate anticipated pressure. In particular, the US-460 and US-58 corridors will continue to experience growth given their connectivity to the regional industrial / logistics network.

3. Development needs to maintain a balance between inward and outward growth

Vacant, rural land provides areas for transformative development projects but is still an important piece of Suffolk's identity. The growth boundaries allow for some outward expansion, however there is a need for additional investment in more established areas of the City. Downtown, surrounding neighborhoods and the rural communities are examples of inward investment that can be encouraged in the future.

4. Collaboration is critical to encourage specific types of development

Infrastructure construction, environmental design, entitlement procedures and educational proffers are important financial considerations. However, in some instances, these can be barriers to essential types of development. Collaborating with various entities and establishing appropriate policies will help open pathways for bringing new housing, healthcare, retail, and service oriented uses to the community.

5. The City should embrace entertainment and amenities in development

Quality of life features like recreation and entertainment areas provide an important element to a community. In certain areas of Suffolk, these features are missing or insufficient, making it a challenge for to retain or attract residents. The development growth offers an opportunity to expand recreational areas through new park spaces, trail development and open spaces. Similarly, improvements to regulations and policies will allow for entertainment uses, businesses and experiences that bring vibrancy to the City.

Industrial and Logistics

1. Community services (education, healthcare) and amenities (entertainment, recreation) are important to maintaining and attracting workforce.
2. Demand is there for continued growth; the City can choose how they want to pursue.
3. Corridors are critical for industrial development, specifically US 460 and US 58.
4. Employers are looking for efficient and predictable review processes, “speed to build” or will look at other communities.
5. Suffolk has an incredible story to share, both within the region and nationally.
6. Infrastructure costs (water, sewer, and roads) can become barriers for industrial development.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

1. Rural communities are often neglected and left to fend for themselves (civic leagues advocate for these communities).
2. Suffolk has a diverse identity that can be celebrated.
3. Investments should be balanced among several geographic areas, not solely focused where new development is occurring.
4. Economic development (financial support) is a major factor in determining where additional investments occur.
5. A comprehensive housing plan, with focus on affordable housing, is vital to planning.
6. Supporting the community takes several forms (services, education, transportation, and financial opportunities).

Housing

1. Growth of industrial areas is what drives many of the housing developments (US 58 and US 460).
2. There is a shifting need to invest in infrastructure prior to building homes (initial investments for long-term returns) would assist developers.
3. There is misalignment between review procedures and developer expectations; need to provide clarity and predictability.
4. The types of housing products needed/desired are changing; there are several types not currently offered in the City.
5. Proffers are a barrier for development; more units in a multi-family means more investment upfront. Utilities (water service) are also high for the region and lead to increased costs.
6. Residents are looking for nearby amenities and attractions that may not be available in certain areas of the City.

Commercial and Business Community

1. Comprehensive plan and UDO don't always align, if the City wants growth, then it needs to provide it through regulations.
2. Plan should recognize what is happening from a demand standpoint and support the anticipated growth (framework for certain types of uses).
3. Transportation is a challenge for businesses and residents, roadways become congested quickly.
4. Partnerships and vocational training opportunities to connect the younger generations with local employment opportunities.
5. Leadership guides investments and priorities from the public, private, and non-profit sides. If

these aren't in agreement, then it becomes a barrier to success.

6. Incentives don't always support desired development types, developers expected to invest more early on which doesn't align with the community.

Transportation and Mobility

1. Freight movement severely impacts the transportation network, need to identify alternative routes and options to improve the system.
2. Short-sighted development can severely impact the road network, long-term strategies are important to avoid creating more problems.
3. Rails provide an opportunity to remove truck traffic but would require investments for improving crossings to not further impact the road network.
4. Truck movement is a regional discussion, many entities working on it that will require continued collaboration to address (expected to get worse with industrial development).
5. Public transit and alternative modes (ridesharing) can provide some relief on the network if regionally connected or expended.
6. Trail development is growing within the region; several corridors identified and underway in Suffolk.

Environmental Resources

1. Suffolk is not consistent in how it applies regulations; some regulations are based on outdated standards or information.
2. Wetland and open space areas are an asset to the community, adding to the diversity of places.
3. Green infrastructure has been evaluated but not necessarily supported, implementation is lacking for encouraging green infrastructure
4. Water access, natural parkland and other similar elements can become attractions for the community (both local residents and visitors).
5. Solar energy is viable for the region; focus i near "dead areas" like highway medians or encourage it on the smaller scale.
6. Need to balance the agricultural community and environmental implications (mitigate potential harm to wetlands, native species, etc.).

Community Services

1. Equitable investments are essential to supporting the community (providing resources, accessibility and collaboration).
2. There is a desire to map health indicators across the City; varies depending on geographic location (Chesapeake has a good example of a program).
3. Local community centers can provide support systems (shelter, elderly, mental health) that are available to all neighborhoods.
4. Business investment should also include community strengthening; help build programs that support the workforce and their families.
5. Transportation limits many services (accessibility to public transit, roadway congestion, etc.).
6. There is a desire to change the perception of Suffolk and tell the real story of the community both locally and regionally.

Land Use Planning for Growth

1. Suffolk needs to decide on its identity; the City should either allow for more industrial development or limit based on current boundaries; there is demand so this is a choice for the City to make.
2. Development costs don't always align with the levels of service (school funding as an example).
3. Providing buffers between different land uses is critical; UDO doesn't necessarily provide clarity.
4. Specific growth areas are defined: industrial along US-58 and US-460, residential along Route 10 and within proximity to new industrial.
5. Comprehensive plan needs to be intentional in where it is directing growth; this is a healthy problem for a community to have but requires specifics to implement.
6. Renewable energy is looking within the region, planning for this in rural areas is important.

Builders (CVBIA)

1. This process should not take too long; they have already been waiting years for it to begin.
2. There is a negative public perception in Suffolk about higher density housing and people don't understand how it can be improved through good design.
3. More development can be accommodated along major corridors (Routes 77, 58, 10 and 460 as well as Carolina Road to the South.)
4. Utility planning is critical and the City should be thinking ahead about providing utilities where they want growth.
5. The UDO is restrictive, which hinders housing development.
6. There should be more housing around the villages to revitalize them, but infrastructure is needed.

Agriculture (Agriculture Committee)

1. Development in rural areas (southern park of Suffolk) feels as if it has been unchecked and over the past seven to ten years, the pace at which farms have been cut up and sold off has increased.
2. People move to Suffolk for its rural quality of life but that is eroding.
3. Agricultural land is a limited resource that must be preserved; once it is lost or compromised, you don't get it back.
4. The City should look at specific tools and incentives (e.g. Transfer of Development Rights, conservation program like in VA beach, conservation subdivisions) to promote rural and farmland preservation.
5. If housing is developed in rural areas, it should be concentrated in larger subdivisions or the villages so as to preserve more land elsewhere.
6. Rural areas all have wells and septic systems, and they are increasingly at risk of failing; they are permitted by the health department and people don't fully understand the problems they pose.
7. Siting utility-scale solar facilities on agricultural land is considered wasting a limited resource and has negative impacts on aesthetics of rural areas and the environment; solar could be located on roofs of warehouses and other buildings instead.
8. It is important that we hear from a lot of people through the planning process and that we hear from people in rural areas.