

Westmoreland Smart Growth plan will require hard work from local officials

By Richard Robbins
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They can write it, but will municipalities do anything to implement it?

That overarching question dominated Friday's meeting of Smart Growth Partnership of Westmoreland County, as the nonprofit entered the final lap of writing a master plan for Route 30.

Alexander J. Graziani, Smart Growth executive director, urged a roomful of municipal officials and others to "read, critique, help us" with the plan that should be finalized in May.

From that point, Graziani and his staff hope to take their message to the 14 municipalities that border the highway, in what is expected to be a year-long campaign to drive home the point that a balance can be struck between development and less road congestion and more livable spaces.

When the master plan is complete, that is "when the real work begins," Graziani said.

Much of the "heavy lifting" will fall to municipal officials, who will be asked to consider amending regulations and ordinances that govern development.

Graziani's task will be made somewhat easier because 36 miles of the 40-mile stretch of road passes through just four townships -- North Huntingdon, Hempfield, Unity and Ligonier.

Unity Supervisor Jake Blank indicated his three-member board is prepared to move forward. He endorsed a model plan for the Route 30-Route 981 corridor, which today features a jumble of disconnected businesses glued together by several traffic lights.

In its place, planners envision "a complete street network of interconnected blocks and streets" dispersing traffic off the highway and onto "various street alternatives."

"I think it can become a reality," Blank said of the model. The alternative, he said, is more unplanned growth, more congestion and greater hazards to motorists, as they weave their way from one unconnected business address to another.

Hannah Twadell, of the planning firm Renaissance Planning Group, indicated that examples proliferate on Route 30 of poor planning that might actually conform to existing rules, such as the barrier in Hempfield that confronts patrons who want to go from the Barnes & Noble bookstore to the Olive Garden restaurant next door. To do so requires drivers to re-enter the highway: No provision was made for pedestrian traffic.

Many people fear that "developers will go away" if municipal officials begin to tinker with land-use rules and regulations, Twadell said. But, she argued, that is not true, because rules that are clear and consistent can actually "fast track" construction.

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