

COLUMN

ITA plan revision should protect resources, encourage appropriate uses of vital areas of Virginia Beach

BY KAREN BEARDSLEE KWASNY

VIRGINIA BEACH

One night last month, a handful of concerned citizens came out to hear about a draft update to the city's plans for the Interfacility Traffic Area, or ITA, an overlay zoning district that includes areas south of Princess Anne Road and north of Indian River Road and the North Landing River.

These people were eager to learn more about the final stages of a design meant to encourage the city's goals for economic development and the citizens' demands for quality of life preservation and land conservation.

Throughout the meeting and afterwards, there were concerns from the public about the impact of the plan on the density of specific areas. These residents were keenly aware of the nuances – and balancing act – underlying the plan's proposed increased density on increasingly environmentally fragile land.

There is real merit in the recently proposed update to the Interfacility Traffic Area and Vicinity Master Plan, a plan comprising over 2,300 acres in the Princess Anne District of Virginia Beach.

It includes a biomedical park of approximately 155 acres intended to bring new business and industry to the area. Interwoven throughout the ITA's vast expanse are active and passive recreation areas meant to provide the citizenry ample outdoor amenities. Currently cultivated lands are designated for

continued agricultural production to encourage value and celebration of our agricultural industry and heritage. Notably, this new ITA plan incorporates a natural area slated for a conservation center focused on the area's unique ecosystem.



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Similar to the Brock Environmental Center's localized emphasis on the bay, the "Albemarle Conservation Center," as the plan calls it, would provide a place to study, presumably, the value of

the area's unique natural resources, reasons for their demise and the manner by which they might be protected.

All of this is commendable, but there's also a problem with the ITA plan as proposed at this recent meeting. Significant elements of the plan are somewhat contradictory so that what is of value in the plan is quickly canceled out by another aspect that challenges the former's efficacy.

A case in point is the plan's highlighted conservation center coupled with a proposed increase in residential development in a specific area. The Albemarle Conservation Center is a grand idea in and of itself, with its focus on the very real and imminent need to conserve natural resources unique to this area of the city – the land and waters within and

bordering the southern area.

Outside the area covered by the plan but less than two miles down the road, significant impervious surface is being laid to make way for more and more homes to accommodate more people and to encourage more people to move to this area of the city. There are already approved developments underway in the Transition Area. By incorporating an area called Courthouse East within the ITA plan, tacit approval could be given for even more significant development and density.

This residential development could be in the fragile areas close by the center aimed at highlighting the need for conservation practices in the surrounding area. What a juxtaposition of values.

These proposed plans for increased development in the area are already gathering support and being worked into the final ITA plan. Many question whether this is being done because there's an actual market in this area for the kind of dense housing the plan proposes or for some other reason.

We do know, however, that we need a conservation center because we finally see that there is a real need for us to protect and conserve our natural resources for the future. Although we may not want to admit it, we know that continuing to create dense development on fragile land is not only counterproductive and a waste of taxpayer money, but foolhardy.

Our recently revised and approved comprehensive plan directs significantly

more dense development away from this area's most fragile lands and to the strategic growth areas throughout the city. These more urban-type areas are where dense development is meant to accommodate a millennial lifestyle and to assist businesses also directed to those "special places."

It's not a question of "no development." It is a question of putting dense, urban-type development in the right place at the right time – now, when we're courting new demographics and industry to those places.

Yes, a landowner should expect fair and reasonable use of their property through the fair and reasonable sale of their lands when the time comes.

However, this fair trade should not occur at the expense of the area's threatened natural resources, the city's own publicly created and vetted guidelines meant to protect those resources and the surrounding community's quality of life.

Dr. Karen Beardslee Kwasny, who lives in Ashville Park, represents the Princess Anne District on the Virginia Beach Planning Commission.

A public meeting about the draft update to the 2011 Interfacility Traffic Area and Vicinity Master Plan is scheduled for 6:30 p.m., Tuesday, Oct. 10, in Building 19 at the municipal center. The draft plan and related documents can be reviewed or downloaded online via vb.gov.com/ita.

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