

The Recorder

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One of the options discussed for Hayfields Farm has been to develop it as a state park. Tuesday, that still seemed a popular choice among those attending the Virginia Outdoors Foundation's public engagement meeting. However, most seemed to agree that while a state park could be a terrific outcome, and open the property for Highlanders and visitors alike, the process for state parks is long and other options could be more viable in the short-term. If there are ways to partner with private entities to provide the same kind of recreational opportunities as a state park, perhaps those could be explored now, with the idea of state-park status as a long-term goal. In any case, the overwhelming sentiment was that Hayfields should be accessible, and directly benefit county residents.

We may not be sure yet what we want, but we're pretty sure we know what we don't.

The Virginia Outdoors Foundation and its consultants hosted an interesting meeting Tuesday to get Highland County residents' input on what to do with Hayfields Farm south of McDowell. The VOF acquired the 1,100-acre tract this year, and it's an unusual piece of land for the foundation to hold, with a vast array of possibilities.

The roughly 35 folks attending had several shared visions and ideas about how the farm could benefit Highland, but one opinion stood out — the worst thing that could happen is for nothing to happen at all.

The sense that Highland has given up too many opportunities for development in the past was prevalent. Longtime residents have a long memory. They recall in the 1970s when the county lost the chance to do something economically viable with the Jack Mountain Village property near Monterey. Some believe the county missed out when Virginia was establishing state prisons, and we could have had one here. Others lament times when Highland could have taken advantage of road improvement programs or chances to develop better infrastructure for water service.

The mutual feeling this week was: the last thing we need is for another opportunity to go by the wayside.

In addition, there seemed to be agreement among the majority of those at the discussion that whatever gets developed at Hayfields, it should be something that benefits Highland County residents directly, and allows the people who live here to have access to that property.

We agree.

One of the trickier aspects about how to use the land will be meeting the foundation's mission of conservation. Some residents staunchly believe much of this county should be left undeveloped, but most agree there's already enough land here under conservation or other protections (i.e., national forest land, wildlife areas, state-owned forests) and there's a much stronger need for development that will provide access to natural assets, job creation, and a boost to our economy.

We agree with this, too.

Is there a way to meet VOF's conservation values and stimulate our economy at the same time? We think so. That's a lot of land. As several people pointed out this week, there's room to develop something on, say, 30 acres, and leave the rest to farming pursuits, recreational trails, fishing along the Bullpasture, and other activities that keep much of the property in forests and fields.

One of the most interesting questions VOF asked residents to answer was, what are our fears regarding use of the property?

That nothing happens at all, or that Highlanders don't directly benefit or have access, topped the list, but there were other important issues that arose as well. They included things like how to handle any increased traffic along the river road; how to accommodate development without disrupting the peace and enjoyment of neighbors nearby; and how to monitor and control things like trash, or water and sewage.

As one person noted, even if the property attracts another 100 people a week to Highland County, how will we feed them all? There is, for sure, a chicken-and-egg problem. The county lacks the kind of fundamental infrastructure and services to accommodate even a moderate

increase in visitors. Do we push harder to put those things in place first, or wait until there's enough need (and money) to provide them?

There are other obvious challenges. For example, if the farm is used as a park of some kind, with recreational opportunities, some of those will negate the use of others. If it's built to accommodate camping, can it support recreational vehicles, large RVs in need of hookups? Or only primitive tent campers? If trails are built, and they be used both for horseback riding and ATV riders? How do pedestrian hikers fit in among motor-powered four-wheelers? What kinds of recreational opportunities most likely to generate jobs, and get visitors to Monterey for meals and shopping? Why not grow hay there for local farmers (at a profit)?

Lots of questions. All can be answered, eventually.

The foundation next will consult with statewide policy makers. As a state agency, it must discuss possible plans with those who don't live here (and don't know what Highlanders want or need). Hopefully none of those discussions will get in the way of primarily serving our own community.

In the end, we know one thing: Let's keep moving, keep talking, and keep generating concrete, practical ways to develop that farm. If we stall, or allow cynicism and skepticism to creep in, we will lose our focus.

We urge our county leaders to step up and stay involved. Communicate with VOF and state legislators. Remind them Highland County does not intend to miss this opportunity to bring something here for the benefit of our residents. Something that could turn our economy around, finally, put us on the map as a destination, and share our assets and culture with others.

Stay on the ball, folks.