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Citizens rally against floodplain fill

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The Macon County Planning Board has just begun their review of the county's Flood Ordinance, but area citizens and groups are already expressing their opposition to an amendment being considered to the document that would allow fill in the floodplain.

Local farmer Joe Deal, who farms about 458-acres in the Cullasaja community, told planning board members in public comment session last Thursday that from a farmer's standpoint, allowing fill in the floodplain will have some detrimental effects.

"As a local producer, much of our most productive farmland in the county is in our floodplains," said Deal, noting that roughly half of his farmland lies in the floodplain. "If

a neighbor downstream fills in, and we get a flood event, it's going to back the water up higher on our property. If we're downstream from that, that velocity is going to be greater, the erosion potential for that will be greater downstream."

"I'm speaking today as a stakeholder in all of this," added Deal who serves as Macon County Farm Bureau president. "These floodplain areas are my livelihood. The majority of our operation consists of growing food in the floodplains."

Macon Watershed Council chairman Barry Clinton, a retired staff scientist and ecologist with Coweeta Hydrologic Lab, who as a council member helped draft the Flood Ordinance, voiced his support for the current or-

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Press photo/Rachel Hoskins

Several citizens voiced their concerns at a March 21 planning board meeting over consideration of a possible revision to the Flood Ordinance that would allow fill in the floodplain. Concerns included greater flooding downstream from a fill area.

Ordinance: More floodplain data needed

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ordinance and said its members would be glad to work with the board and explain why they included the section on prohibiting fill in the floodplain.

"The person filling the floodplain is placing other property owners at risk," Clinton said. "Not only personal injury—life, property damage. And part of the philosophy for developing this was to minimize risk of property damage, personal injury, or loss of life. It can happen, it has happened."

Otto citizen Jason Love, who works with Coweeta Hydrologic Lab, expressed his support for the current ordinance. "I feel the ordinance does a fine job of common sense regulations to protect lives and property from floods," he said. "Floodplains function to store floodwater. Filling in floodplains reduces the storage capacity which can lead to greater flooding downstream."

Land Trust for the Little Tennessee deputy director Sharon Taylor, who spoke on behalf of the Franklin-based nonprofit conservation organization, submitted a letter to the board voicing support for the current Flood Ordinance and the current floodplain filling restrictions. They requested that the ordinance not be weakened.

"Fill in the floodplain and floodway causes flood water to be diverted from the location of such fill applications,

and the water diverted will increase flooding on neighboring property across from or downstream of the fill," the letter states. "Some citizen or business, not the landowner filling his floodplain, will experience greater flooding and/or flood water depths."

Planning board chairman Karl Gillespie asked Taylor for LTLT staff to come share their expertise with planners during the ordinance review process, to which Taylor said they would be amenable.

'In the county's best interest?'

At the request of commissioners, planners are starting their review on a possible amendment to the county's Flood Ordinance. The proposed revision would examine allowing fill in the floodplain if certain requirements were met.

FEMA allows fill to be placed in the floodplain, but not a floodway.

A floodplain is defined as "any land area susceptible to being inundated by water from any source."

Some neighboring counties including Jackson and Haywood allow fill to be placed in the floodplain.

Planners discussed the potential pros and cons of the proposed revision, noting that while permitting fill could benefit the property owners placing the fill, it could adversely impact others' property downstream and also cause stream erosion issues

on the property where fill is placed.

"We need to find out if it's in Macon County's best interests" (to allow fill in the floodplain) said planning board member Lamar Sprinkle. "To answer the question, 'are we going to be better off if we allow this?'"

Commissioner liaison to the planning board Jimmy Tate sought to dispel the rumor that county commissioners had already made up their mind on how to vote on the floodplain fill issue. "That couldn't be further from the truth," Tate said.

The board agreed that they needed to gather information from several more sources before making any decision. Planner Susan Ervin said she wanted to hear formally from Watershed Council members to help answer some of the questions the board has.

County planner Matt Mason was also asked to get statements from the Farm Bureau, the Economic Development Commission and Jackson County planner Gerald Green, and to research how many parcels in Macon County are in the floodplain.

To view the county's current Flood Ordinance online visit the county website maconnc.org, and click on the "Your Government," heading.