Zoning requests strike balance between development, rural living

By **Chloe Beaver** on Thursday, October 3, 2024

Meetings

The Oglethorpe County Zoning Board meets at 6 p.m. Mondays, two weeks before the Board of Commissioners meeting. The next meeting is scheduled for Monday, Oct. 21 in the BOC meeting room at 105 Union Point Road.



Oglethorpe County zoning board members Janet Hill (from left), JF Hansford, Morgan Robinson, Robert Drew and Jimmy Shealy call the September zoning board meeting to order. The board discussed a request to subdivide land on Morgan Road in Comer. (Chloe Beaver/The Oglethorpe Echo)

Oglethorpe County has seen a significant increase in zoning requests, said Janet Hill, chair of the Oglethorpe County Zoning Board.

Hill said zoning is one of the county's "biggest issues" as many of the challenges facing residents — economic development, property rights and rural living — are intertwined with zoning decisions.

"How should we develop, should we develop, do we want more businesses?" Hill said. "These are the kinds of things people in the community talk about, and all of that touches on zoning."

Hill, who has been on the board for six years and is second year as chair, has seen an increase in zoning requests over the last 18 months.

"In the first several years that I was on the board, we might not meet for months because we had no zoning requests," Hill said. "But in the last 18 months, we've had something on our zoning calendar almost every month."

Previously, the board might have had one item on the agenda. Now, Hill said it often handles "three, four, or five" decisions.

The most common requests came from property owners looking to subdivide their land, either to sell or give to family members. These requests are usually classified as minor subdivisions.

"A minor subdivision is defined as being a split of three lots," Hill said. "No more than three lots."

Larger requests, like the five-lot proposal discussed at the most recent meeting on Sept. 23, are considered major subdivisions.

Property owner Linnel Faust submitted a request to rezone a five-lot parcel from agricultural to residential. The land is on Morgan Road, a county-maintained, 30-foot wide dirt road which serves three homes.

Board approval would further subdivide the land into seven tracts.

Major requests require a more complex evaluation, relying on county regulations and individual judgment.



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WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST

Major requests require a more complex evaluation, relying on county regulations and individual judgment.

"You could possibly end up with seven driveways within 750 yards," board member Robert Drew said at the meeting.

The Board denied the request due to traffic concerns.

"I'm not 100% confident that the road could handle it," board member JF Hansford said.

"Me neither," board member Jimmy Shealy added.

During a time of significant growth across the county, zoning cases like this reveal an ongoing search for solutions that allow economic development and rural life to coexist.

"We need to be able to generate a medium ground where you can have businesses that contribute to the county growing and thriving, and at the same time, preserving the rural lifestyle," Hill said.

Hill said the board has encountered pushback from residents who view zoning as "the government trying to tell them what they can do with their property."

Hill believes the volunteer Board's mission actually aligns to protect rural property owners.

"We like our rural lifestyle," Hill said. "We don't want to become Gwinnett County. We don't want to become a suburb of Athens."

Hill said her decision-making often boils down to: "What does the community want you to do?"

She encourages more residents to be involved in the zoning process by attending monthly meetings, either in person or over Zoom.

"It'd be nice to have somebody express whether they think it's good or not," Hill said.

Hill added that written input is also encouraged through the county website (oglethorpecountyga.gov).

As the county continues to grow, zoning decisions will require more engagement from board members and residents in order to protect property rights, preserve the rural landscape and allow economic development, she said.

"The county is growing, and there's going to be more requests," Hill said. "I can envision a time when one full-time employee on planning and zoning won't be enough to handle the workload."

63 views

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST CRUCIAL ISSUE IN OGLETHORPE COUNTY RIGHT NOW?

Results

Broadband access

44% (459 votes)

Sludge dumping

28% (294 votes)

Economic development

21% (224 votes)

Other

7% (71 votes)

Total votes: 1048



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