

The Oldham Era

KENTUCKY'S 2005 & 2006 BEST LARGE WEEKLY NEWSPAPER
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Citizen council finishes vision for county

by John Foster

In its much anticipated report to Oldham County Fiscal Court Tuesday, the Vision Council presented a picture of the community in four years that is bright — and tight.

Though members call for Oldham County to be the best rural/suburban county in Kentucky with great schools, an expanded parks system and preserved rural charm, they also call for a scaled-down, more efficient government that does not spend money it does not have and increases taxes only when absolutely necessary.

The 20-member council was a campaign promise for Duane Murner when running for county judge-executive. He formed the group in January with the instruction to bring back a vision of what Oldham County should be like in four years. He appointed former Planning and Zoning Commission Chair Kevin Eldridge as chair.

Group members each spoke to at least 10 residents as well as studied census data, planning and zoning documents and previous county research.

When he first heard of creating a county-wide vision, Eldridge said thoughts of grand, earth-shattering changes crossed his mind. What he and the committee found instead was that most residents may have specific gripes, but most of them like Oldham County and want to keep it the same way it is now, he said.

He said the county comprehensive plan already contains most of the steps needed to manage future growth, but efforts between groups aren't coordinated to take those steps.

“We have a lot of good people working to make the community better, we just need to get them working together,” he said.

And they need to do a better job of communicating with the public, he said.

Eldridge said most people don't know where all county parks are. Many people don't know where their various property taxes come from, and just as he was leaving the fiscal court building after the meeting, he saw a woman “bewildered” wanting to renew her driver's license. There is one group working on a parks master plan, another group

working on a greenways master plan, and another group working on plans for a convention/exposition/conference center.

The vision council suggested that all these efforts would be better served if they were coordinated through Deputy County Judge-Executive Paula Gish.

Other than increased communication, cooperation and coordination, the council suggested seven other areas of concern — utilities, use of bonding capacity, tourism, parks, budget reserves, residential/commercial split in development and paying for the vision.

Utilities. The council suggested exploring alternatives to provide service at the greatest efficiency and lowest cost. Members suggested the county consider contracting with Metropolitan Sewer District, Louisville Water Company and private firms to potentially benefit from economies of scale.

Use of bonding capacity. Bonds should be only used for long-term capital improvements that are in keeping with the county's vision. To do otherwise creates needlessly large budgets, according to the report.

Tourism. The tourism commission should create a county-wide logo that would be used in web- and print-based marketing. The county should explore a fair/convention/exposition center that would possibly provide space for meetings, weddings or graduations.

Officials should encourage ways to draw tourists to the underutilized Ohio River by expanding Westport Park and exploring the creation of a public/private marina somewhere on the riverfront.

Parks. The county should implement recommendations of the parks and recreation department as well as Greenways master plans, while seeking to acquire an additional 1,000 acres of park land by 2030.

Reserve policy. The county should only dip into budget reserves as an exception rather than the rule. Create a balanced budget. A family or individual cannot spend more than they make and neither should the government, Eldridge said.

Residential/commercial split. Stronger communication needs to take place to enable the enactment of the current comprehensive plan.

Paying for the vision. As much as no one wants to talk about raising taxes or levying new taxes, Eldridge said it may be the only way to balance the budget. But before that happens, the council recommended taking every step possible to avoid raising taxes.

“There must be no duplication of services,” the report reads. “There must be every effort to cut cost, every effort to cut waste, and every effort to live and function within the

means that government has been provided.”

In addition to the chair, the council was composed of Ann Brown, Barrie Conner, Frankie Culbertson, Lambert Franklin, Julie Gathof, Bill Hinton, Kathy Hockersmith, Vernon Hodge, Scott Jackson, Deana Karem, Kelly King, Sally Landes, Fariba Muhlheizer, Pat Osborne, Doug Ostwald, Larry Otterback, Raymond Simpson, Doug Wampler, and Wendell Wright.

Eldridge said it was effective to have regular citizens who do not have to run for re-election make these recommendations.

“It didn’t hurt me a bit to say we either have to cut services or raise taxes,” Eldridge said. “It would be a lot harder for an elected official to say that.”

A committee composed of magistrates Steve Church, Steve Greenwell,

Iva Davis and Deputy Judge-Executive Paula Gish will review the report and recommend any necessary action.

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