

# nw Observer

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## Board recommends Couch's text amendment request

Residents spar over 'true Summerfield' as the Planning Board's recommendation goes to Town Council later this month

by **CHRIS BURRITT**

**SUMMERFIELD** – Summerfield's Planning Board voted 3-2 at its meeting on Jan. 26 to recommend the approval of landowner David Couch's application for a text amendment to the town's development regulations.

The board's recommendation goes to the Feb. 21 meeting of Town Council, which will make the final decision on whether to accept or deny Couch's request. The owner of Summerfield Farms is seeking the creation of a new zoning district to accommodate his plans for the Villages of Summerfield Farms, a development consisting of 11 villages spanning his 973 acres in town. It would require water and sewer services paid for by residents of the development, not Summerfield taxpayers, according to Couch.

If the council were to approve the creation of the new district (called open space mixed use – village), the developer would face two additional steps before he could begin construction. Even so, opponents characterized his text amendment request, if approved, as cracking open the door to apartments and other higher-density development.

"It's going to ruin the true Summerfield," said homeowner Adrian Williamson, one of 40 speakers voicing opposition and support for Couch's proposal during the board's Jan. 26 meeting, which lasted more than four hours. "We don't need houses on top of houses."

**"I understand that this amendment is going to be the catalyst for a lot of changes to come," said James Bartorelli, another opponent of Couch's proposal.**

"I think we all realize that, whether you are for it or against it," he noted.

*...continued on p. 18*

## That's one tall tree!



A 180-foot-tall communications tower disguised (somewhat) as a pine tree was erected behind Oak Ridge Military Academy's gymnasium in December. It will serve Verizon customers as well as provide space for up to three other cellular service carriers. For more details, see article on p. 3.

Photo by Chris Burritt/NWO

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## TEXT AMENDMENT REQUEST

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A supporter of Couch's plans, Summerfield Realtor Betty Smith said town leaders "have an opportunity here that is once in a lifetime" to break the town's pattern of building cul-de-sac neighborhoods that don't put an emphasis on preservation of "long views and vistas."

Couch reiterated his pledge to preserve half of his property as open space in exchange for denser housing. Without greater variety in housing, resident John Watson said, "this town will lose one rural vista at a time with one-acre cul-de-sac development. I prefer controlled and respectable growth and development" by Couch, a Summerfield resident who has owned property in town for 25 years.

If the developer's text amendment application wins the council's approval, he would need to return to the board and the council with a request to rezone his property under the new zoning district. At the same time, Couch's team and town staff and council members would negotiate a development agreement specifying design and construction standards for housing, commercial buildings, streets, lighting and other aspects of the project.

**"You will not be asked to approve a pig in a poke," said Couch's lead designer, Victor Dover, addressing criticism by some opponents who said Couch's proposal, so far, lacks details.**

The council's consideration of the rezoning request would go "hand in hand" with a detailed development agreement, noted Town Manager Scott Whitaker.

Kicking off the process, the planning board's meeting in Summerfield First Baptist Church drew a crowd of about 165 people. The debate among speakers was essentially a replay of the meeting last March when the board voted by the same 3-2 margin to recommend Couch's text amendment request. A month later, the council voted 4-1 to deny the developer's request.

In response, Couch submitted a new text amendment application that halved to about 600 the number of apartments he proposed to build. He also reduced the number of locations for those apartments from four to two – behind the proposed Saunders Village shopping center on N.C. 150 at Interstate 73 and behind the mobile home park on the southern end of Summerfield Road.

During last month's meeting, Dover said the development process would be stretched over 20 years. Rather than replicate Summerfield's pattern of "piece-meal subdivision sprawl," constructing a wide range of housing at differing prices, building walking and biking trails and preserving open space would meet the recommendations of the town's comprehensive plan.

To pay for those "goodies," Dover said the development would

require construction of higher-density housing. Last month, as in earlier meetings, the prospect of apartments – coupled with fears of crime, congested roads, crowded schools and property devaluation – galvanized opponents.

"We definitely do not want apartments," Summerfield resident Walter Opyd said. "And we want to retain the rural atmosphere."

"What brought us here was the country appeal," said Bartorelli, who moved to Summerfield three years ago. "I don't mind driving 10 or 15 minutes into Greensboro to get food or activities.

"I like the big plots of land," he said. "We worked hard...and were finally able to make it to the town we always wanted to live in."

**"I'm sorry for people that want to live in Summerfield (but) can't," added Cynthia Sundermann, a Henson Forest homeowner. "We all have places we'd like to live. That's life; that's capitalism."**

Supporters of Couch's proposal offered differing views.

"You moved here; there are a lot of other people would like to live up here," said Summerfield Realtor Jason Smith, who owns Smith Marketing with

his mother, Betty, and his brother Jeff. "Not everybody can buy a half-million-dollar house. Some people need town-homes that are maintenance-free."

**"We need to think about inclusivity," Smith added. "There are many people at different stages of life and different income levels. Who are we to tell someone they can't live in Summerfield, whatever stage of life they're in?"**

Smith also addressed concerns by opponents that approval of Couch's text amendment application would attract other developers of high-density housing. As proposed in the application, the new zoning district would only be open to developments of 750 or more acres.

Assembling parcels of that acreage in Summerfield would be challenging for developers, Smith said.

Describing himself and his wife as empty-nesters, homeowner Ted Vanhoy said he likes the idea of possibly downsizing in the Villages of Summerfield Farms so the couple can remain in Summerfield.

**"I do like the concept of building smaller, walkable communities," added Brantley Williams, who lives in the Elmhurst Estates subdivision. "I see a lot of potential in it."**

Comments by residents during a public hearing consumed about half of the meeting. Afterwards, board members talked among themselves and asked Couch and his

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File photo courtesy of Dover Kohl

The final decision on whether to approve David Couch's text amendment request will be made by Summerfield Town Council on Feb. 21. If approved, the landowner/developer would need to go through two additional steps before beginning to develop the 973 acres he owns in Summerfield. Shown in aerial photo at right is Summerfield Farms, which is owned by Couch and includes an events center and marketplace.

representatives questions about their text amendment application.

The crowd dwindled as the discussions went on, and on. Chair Dick Feulner sought an assurance from Couch that he would set aside 50% of his property as open space. The developer concurred.

Separately, Couch offered to stipulate in his text amendment request that overall gross density in his project wouldn't exceed 3.62 units per acre – higher than the typical one-acre residential lot in Summerfield. Later in the meeting, the board removed that stipulation from the motion to approve Couch's request.

Board member Kathy Rooney offered the motion. Building a variety of housing would "accommodate people who have different needs," she said. Current zoning favors development of "big houses on big lots,"

eventually turning Summerfield into "one giant cul de sac," she said.

Board members Clark Doggett and Trudy Whitacre joined Rooney in voting in favor of Couch's request. Feulner and member Clint Babcock voted against it.

"I, too, very much like the village concept and I think it would be a benefit to Summerfield," Feulner said. "But I'm going to vote 'no' because I cannot accept density that is equal to Greensboro."

## ..... what's next?

The Town Council plans to consider landowner David Couch's text amendment application during a 6:30 p.m. meeting Tuesday, Feb. 21, at Summerfield First Baptist Church at 2300 Scalesville Road.



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*Grins & Gripes are published based on available space and editor's discretion.*

### GRINS to...



■ Our fabulous Stokesdale Elementary teachers and staff! Congratulations on a great second quarter – we are halfway through the year!

■ “Keep Summerfield Rural” for creating an excellent survey to collect the opinions of Summerfield residents regarding the future of Summerfield. The survey asks the “real” questions that matter for our town’s future!

■ Temo, the college student working at McDonald’s in Oak Ridge, for having such a positive attitude and making it a pleasure to come to the drive-through window for my weekly Egg McMuffin.

■ Rick Dunlap, Guilford County Schools’ bus driver, who wrote a check for \$100 to help pay for an EP Pearce student’s delinquent lunch bills/fees.

■ The public safety gripe (in Northwest Observer’s Jan. 19-Feb. 1 issue) regarding N.C. 65, Ogburn Mill Road, Kingsbranch Drive and Guilrock Court area, where people associated with drugs have lived for nearly two decades. One bad apple can ruin it for all. Glad to see action taken.

■ Dear little Lola, the funniest, furry four-legged friend in Oak Ridge Park. Where have you been? We all miss your irrepressible exuberance and joie de vivre. Come back and say “hi”!

■ The person who took my wallet

to Lowes Foods last Saturday around 2 p.m. when I dropped it near the pet food/supply store while walking my dog. Much appreciated!

### GRIPES to...



■ Guilford County School Board for not seating Michael Logan, duly nominated by the Guilford County Republican Party to serve the remaining term of Republican Pat Tillman.

■ Northwest Observer for not covering the sentencing of the driver involved in the alcohol-related death of two teenagers in Oak Ridge in June 2021. (I recognize it’s a sensitive topic and lives were changed forever, but thought I’d see something.)

**Editor’s note:** I, too, recognize the sensitivity of this topic and that the lives of the two teenagers who survived this accident, including the driver, and all those who know the survivors and who knew the two teenagers who were killed have been altered forever. The lack of coverage, however, was not intentional, rather a matter of me not being aware of the sentencing until the reader submitted this gripe. I try to stay on top of all things local, and apologize that sometimes I fall short and have to rely on members of the community to bring news such as this to my attention. Although it is weeks after the fact, please see News Briefs

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Tracy Williams, attorney

in this issue for coverage on the sentencing of the driver in the June 2021 accident that resulted in the death of two teenagers.

■ The Guilford County Schools' bus driver who blew right through the red light while turning left on N.C. 150 from U.S. 220 on the morning of Jan. 20. Glad we decided to sit and wait, even though we had the green light!

■ Capt. Hall's response (in the Northwest Observer's Jan. 19-Feb. 1 issue) about School Resource Officers not directing traffic. Northwest High students cannot see to pull into the road, which is very dangerous! My daughter gets her license soon and I am very nervous. This needs to be revisited!

■ Summerfield Town Council, for all the conflict and drama. I love living in Summerfield, but I'm so embarrassed by our council. Can we stop being so political and underhanded and get to the business you were appointed for?

■ David Couch. What is so wrong with developing according to Summerfield's current UDO, like the rest of us?

■ Northwest-area youth recreation

leagues. It's a shame there are a number of inconsistencies our families have to deal with involving several sports teams that don't play other towns because of the lack of cooperation, communication and overall leadership.

■ The griper about Republic Services' trucks leaking hydraulic oil. We are not the only ones using the public roads – other heavy vehicles use those roads also.

■ David Couch's wants, not needs, which will destroy Summerfield. Does he care? Doesn't he have enough money? All I can do is pray to God my Savior that he has a change of heart. He needs to read Luke 12:16-21.

■ The young man who runs on Bunch Road after dark for wearing all dark clothing and nothing reflective. You startle me every time I see you!

■ Summerfield Planning Board. If approved, development of 600 apartments begins. How will the area provide education, medical and fire protection services, water, traffic control, etc.? Summerfield will have to be annexed into Greensboro for this to work. Thus, our town dies.

## Coming March 30

Spring 2023 edition



Home-grown stories about everything from maintaining and improving your home, to housing trends, history and humor of life in northwest Guilford County

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