



# North Ada County Foothills Association

One voice. One goal. One plan.

February 4, 2007

Mr. Jay Gibbons, Deputy Planning & Zoning Administrator  
Mr. Jerry Armstrong, Development Services Director  
Ada County Planning & Zoning Commission  
Ada County Board of Commissioners

Re: North Foothills Sub-Area Plan Recommended Revisions, January 30, 2007

Dear Ada County Staff and Decision-Makers:

Please accept this letter as NACFA's formal commentary on the County's Recommended Revisions to the Draft North Foothills Sub-Area Plan.

As with our comment letter on the original Draft Sub-Area Plan last year, we begin by commending the County team. We see, at the bottom line, that the County has not "backed off" on the paramount premise of the original Draft Sub-Area Plan—the fundamental message voiced repeatedly and clearly by the community (locally and valley-wide) throughout this planning process: "The North Foothills is one of the least appropriate areas of the County for large scale development."

The County Team has demonstrated integrity and courage by not capitulating to the undoubtedly intense pressure for significant increases in the development intensity shown in the Plan. Although there are signs of this pressure in the recommended revisions (commented on below), the Plan overall is still faithful to the public process in which it was created.

Our comments on the revised Sub-Area Plan fall under two headings: [1] Overall Development Intensity and Character, and [2] Level of Detail and On-The-Ground Specifics.

## Overall Development Intensity & Character

As we have noted before, the draft Sub-Area Plan does a good job of striking a balance between those in the community who would like to see no development in these foothills beyond that allowed by existing zoning and the developers who have come on-scene proposing (in aggregate) that these foothills host a population exceeding that of Eagle (2005) and Meridian (2005) combined.

In fashioning this balance, the County team has heard the community/public voice, as expressed during the Sub-Area Plan process and underscored by the broader County Comprehensive Plan and Blueprint for Good Growth processes, and the regional-scale Communities-In-Motion process. The community/public message has consistently been (as noted in the recommended revisions, page 4): The Boise Front and North Foothills are less appropriate for significant development and more appropriate for resource management and protection, open space and recreational use.

Following from this perspective, our comments are:

- The County's recommended development intensity overall (12,500 dwelling units total, with roughly 2,500 west of highway 16 and 10,000 east of Highway 16/west of Highway 55) is workable in these foothills, given the character, terrain, and resources of the land, its relationship with adjacent communities, and the rights of landowners. This is especially true when viewed in context of the Plan's objectives for clustering/concentrating development near the two state highways and preserving the largest portion of the land for open space/habitat/recreation.

We note in this context that, based on preliminary results from traffic studies being carried out as part of Eagle's concurrent planning effort for this area, a development intensity of more than 10,000 units "between the highways" would very likely result in unacceptable traffic impacts "downstream" in the neighborhoods, as well as in the City of Eagle.

- We applaud the County's strongly articulated decision to include planned communities in the recommended development intensity (i.e., eliminating planned communities as the "wildcard" or "escape clause" they currently represent in attempting to plan for the future).
- We note that density bonuses or more intense development may be considered in some areas if higher percentages of open space (beyond the Plan's open space targets) are preserved. We believe this incentive is an excellent vehicle to both:
  - Achieve additional open space, habitat, and recreation land preservation, particularly in the central core between Highways 16 and 55; and
  - Better accommodate landowner/developer objectives for higher unit yields in select areas near the state highways. We remain open to the possibility of higher density targets in Areas B and C, subject to location of development in those Areas near (with access to) SH 55 and not in the central portion of the North Foothills.
- Questions remain as to whether the recommended intensity of development is appropriate or workable from the standpoints of the regional transportation system and/or water supply.
  - With respect to traffic, we have consistently and strongly supported emphasis on clustering development near and routing traffic to State Highways 16 and 55 in order to avoid severe impacts to existing, adjacent rural neighborhoods to the south. However, it is becoming widely

recognized that development in North Ada County overall, as well as development anticipated in Gem, Boise, and Valley Counties to the north will cumulatively result in either [1] traffic nightmares on highways 16, 55, & 44, through to Interstate 84, or [2] very costly, and currently unfunded, expansions to this highway network.

- With respect to water resources, development in these foothills is being proposed to rely largely, if not exclusively, on groundwater (whether tapped from the foothills area itself or delivered from the wells of the City of Eagle, Eagle Water or United Water). We are on record requesting and will continue to press for the establishment of a North Foothills water budget, relying on a reasonable estimate of groundwater carrying capacity as defined through studies sufficient to demonstrate that proposed development will not adversely impact existing groundwater users.

We commend the County for recognizing these critical issues, stating:

“...Development of any intensity should be conditioned on the ability to construct and pay for transportation and other public facilities...This should include...impact of development on existing facilities outside the proposed development, both within and outside the Sub-Area...”, and

“...Agree with recommendation for water budgeting and analysis...as an implementation measure for the North Foothills and Comp. Plans...”

It is imperative that the County retain this focus, that the facts be known (impacts, plans, funding, schedule, adequate supply/capacity, performance assurances, etc.), AND a detailed plan be articulated BEFORE developments are approved. We strongly recommend that the County insist that these issues are addressed and resolved up front, rather than addressing them as conditions of approval or dealing with them by some vague “mitigation action” with no real teeth or follow-through.

- We strongly object to the change from “...preserve the area’s rural character...” to “...preserve elements of the area’s rural character...” This change is at cross purposes with the fundamental basis of the sub-area plan—its reflection of the vision of the future articulated through the public process. The fact is that we, among others in the community, are intensely focused on retaining a rural environment in these foothills, even in the face of growth and development. We do not accept the assertion heard frequently among development interests that Ada is becoming an urban county and current residents must simply pipe down and accept it. This may be true in much of the County, but it need not be true of the entire County. The North Foothills are perhaps our best opportunity for retaining a rural environment. Furthermore, if this change is ultimately incorporated, it would behoove all concerned if the County would add definitions of what specific “elements” are to be preserved.
- Our strongest objection to proposed Plan revisions is to the statements [1] “More detailed planning, construction of new transportation facilities, or changing public attitudes about the appropriate level of development in the Foothills could lead to amendments to this Plan and its development targets in the

future”, and [2] the density targets “...are intended to guide development [but] may be re-evaluated [even during the Plan’s 20 year time horizon] ... as constraints to development—particularly the ability to meet transportation needs—are met...”.

These statements at best weaken an otherwise good general Plan and at worst make it virtually meaningless, removing any confidence that the basic intent and vision of the Plan will be faithfully implemented. We are constantly reminded by all manner of officials/staff that, by their nature and due to changing attitudes and needs, comp plans are “only a guide” and may be amended. Recitation of this fact, obvious to all, seems an invitation to undercut the guiding principles the Plan contains. We strongly recommend that both these statements be eliminated.

The driving reason for NACFA’s initiative in pursuing this Sub-Area plan, a four year effort to date, has been the achievement of some degree of certainty about the future of this area and its long-term relationship to the community. We do not want to, nor should we have to, be constantly on alert to make sure that the County honors the Plan’s basic intent, objectives and commitments. It is our belief that many, if not all, of the major landowners and developers involved in these foothills would welcome the same kind of certainty (i.e. not having to run the gauntlet of public scrutiny or outcry at every turn).

The addition of these statements is an obvious response to developer protests that the Plan’s intensity/density targets are too low or too restrictive. As noted above, we might even agree with this perspective in some cases/locations. However, the proposed addition of these caveats is a very poor and unacceptable substitute for the level of detailed planning necessary to see where such adjustments are reasonable and where they are not.

At minimum, if these caveats are to be included in the Plan, they must be placed in some context, within some boundaries. Otherwise, they function readily as an escape clause (as in: “don’t worry, as soon as no one is looking, we can change this...”).

Thus, we strongly request if such “amendment statements” are included in the final Plan, they be accompanied by statements to the effect that:

[1] potential future amendments to this Plan must honor the Plan’s basic intent, objectives, and commitments (i.e., preservation of major open space, habitat and recreation resources in perpetuity; protection of rural environments; minimizing impacts on surrounding communities; pay as you go, etc.); and

[2] any proposed amendment that sets a precedent significantly departing from the plan’s objectives, commitments and density targets will trigger a full, open public process to reconsider the plan for the entire Sub-Area (i.e., individual proposals will not be allowed to incrementally and fundamentally undermine the intent of the Plan).

At the bottom line, however, we reiterate that this “we’ll figure it out later” approach is a poor substitute for the level of planning needed to resolve the questions that motivate addition of these statements in the first place.

### Level of Detail/On-the-Ground Specifics

- Our request for additional detail regarding the locations of future roadways, developed v. open space areas, etc., is a matter of prior record. We recognize that this level of detail has not been possible within the budget established by the County for the Sub-Area Plan. Nevertheless, we reiterate our believe that such detail is vital to answer the many difficult questions regarding potential development in these foothills. This point is clearly and strongly reinforced by the above discussion of the “amendment” clauses included in the recommended plan revisions.

It is notable that the concurrent City of Eagle planning process for the North Foothills may be exploring some of these questions in the kind of detail we believe is essential. Perhaps there will be a way to bring the two processes together in some fashion, assuming there is reasonable compatibility between the City’s eventual recommendations and those contained in this County plan. It does appear that the City will be analyzing an alternative that corresponds closely with the development intensity recommended in this County Sub-Area Plan. It remains to be seen what overall intensity will characterize the City’s preferred plan. The City intends to complete its process by May of this year.

- Areas A and D: Given differences in relative development pressure and specific neighborhoods/parts of the community that would be affected, we suggest that data regarding acreage, development intensity, etc., be reported for Areas A and D east of Highway 16 and west of Highway 16, as well as for these two Intensity Areas as a whole.
- Area A: Please note that for (at least substantial parts of) Area A, like Area B, “access would be via roads through neighborhoods to the South with limited capacity.”
- Area D: We have the several questions about this Area:
  - Are existing dwelling units included in the recommended limit of 2070?
  - Is the recommended increase in development limit for this Area a response to one or more specific landowner/developer requests? If so, please show the location of the subject parcels/properties.

We ask these questions because a review of recent aerial photography suggests that well over half of the private/developable land in Area D is already developed, largely in 5-10 acre residential, golf course residential, or other very low density patterns. If the Plan revisions are suggesting addition of another 2000+ dwelling units to this Area and the actual acreage of undeveloped private land is less than 1000 acres (which we believe may be the case), the Plan is actually recommending a residential density much higher than currently characterizes the Area. Such a change, whether intentional or unintentional,

would likely result in severe land use compatibility conflicts as new development is proposed.

We therefore, request that the County's intent for this Area be clarified:

- What is the actual developable acreage in Area D (v. already developed land)?
- Based on this analysis, what actual, average density of development would result from addition of 2070 dwelling units on the currently undeveloped acreage?
- How does this density relate to adjacent developed lands?

We appreciate your attention to and consideration of our comments. We look forward to participating in the evolution of this Draft Plan, and to its ultimate adoption by the County Commission. If you have any questions or need further information, feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Petrovsky', with a stylized, cursive script.

John Petrovsky  
NACFA Chairman

Copy: Idaho Transportation Department  
COMPASS  
Ada County Highway District  
City of Eagle