

Subdivision proposal draws skepticism

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BASIN, Wyo. — The scene has played out many times before across the West — a real estate developer facing pointed questions about plans for a housing development that would encroach on rural farmland.

But this time, the proposed 137 tightly clustered homes weren't part of suburban sprawl near Denver or Salt Lake City. These were planned for the wide-open spaces of Big Horn County, which has a population density of four people per square mile.

"This is driven by the concept that you can reserve farmland while creating housing, instead of just taking the land and chopping it up," said Bob Elliott, who is proposing the development. He is an organic cattle rancher seeking to subdivide his Dorsey Creek Ranch.

Elliott's 750-acre property is situated along the banks of the Greybull River six miles west of Basin on a mostly flat expanse of wind-swept valley in the shadow of northwest Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. Home to about 1,300 people, Basin is an agricultural community and the county seat for Big Horn County.

More than 30 people crowded into a cramped courthouse basement meeting room in mid-February for a tense and emotional public hearing on Elliott's proposal.

The issues that came up — housing density, water rights, wastewater treatment, wildlife habitat and property values — are hardly new to the West. But they are new to some in Big Horn County and reflect a growing trend of development reaching into isolated communities whose zoning regulations don't address such complex issues.

"We've never had any kind of proposal this big, ever," said county planner Jim Waller. "Just to give you an idea, in the last 18 months, we approved only two major subdivisions. One was 10 lots on a

40-acre parcel, and the other was four lots on a six-acre parcel."

An earnest and soft-spoken man with a professorial manner, Elliott grew up in upstate New York and started organic farming in Virginia in 1972.

He strikes an odd figure in a part of Wyoming where taciturn beet farmers and ranchers live in tight-knit but spread-out communities, places where outsiders are rare and most folks are relatives or life-long friends.

His idea of creating rows of closely spaced homes, each on a lot of about one-third acre, has been met with quizzical indifference from some and outright hostility from others.

"I think it's a very good concept," Elliott said before Tuesday's hearing. "It requires homeowners who really want to be part of something, instead of having their own enclave.

"This is housing within a community where people want to be surrounded by working farmland," he said. "Instead of keeping a few acres of their own, they'll have use of a 750-acre ranch and hundreds of square miles of adjacent public land."

But after listening to Elliott's proposal, many at the meeting remained unconvinced.

Some expressed concern about lot density, traffic and dust along unpaved county roads.

Others had concerns about the impact on wildlife, particularly near an existing 3,400-foot dirt landing strip that Elliott, a pilot, said some homeowners might use.

A few didn't think buyers would ever be interested in small lots amid the sprawling properties nearby.

"I'd be very careful about this if I were you," said Andy Dowling, who warned Elliott of developments around the region that have failed.

"This is a very difficult area, where everybody has a large piece of ground," Dowling said. "We have 80 acres, and we're the small guy on the block. I think

you're pushing very hard with this many houses in this type of area."

Adjacent landowner Tom Anderson had concerns about the site of the proposed wastewater effluent leach field, which would be about 1,000 feet from his water well.

"That's right on top of us," Anderson said. "It would be right in our backyard." County regulations require a minimum of 100 feet between septic systems and wells.

In an effort to explain his vision for the project, Elliott passed around a bag of edge sage seed, explaining that he didn't anticipate yards on the lots, but saw instead xeriscapes of drought-tolerant native grasses.

"It's not a gated community," he said. "It's not 'McMansions.' It's going to be modest-sized homes for people who want good views and a nice atmosphere."

At one point, Elliott handed out copies of a landscape by painter Paul Cezanne, saying it was the inspiration for arranging the rows of homes in his development to face the Bighorn Mountains.

"I think it is a model for saving farmland," Elliott said. "I got the idea in when I was in Fort Collins, Colo. When farms there were going to be chopped up, this was a way to have housing and keep the farm."

Clustered development has been promoted around Fort Collins for about seven years, said Larry Timm, planner for Larimer County, Colo.

"It makes a lot of sense for a lot of folks because if you own 35 acres, you have to maintain it," Timm said. "Sometimes it might be better to have smaller parcels but also have an open area owned and maintained by the whole group."

Timm said the concept is to locate homes along the edges of the property, as Elliott's plan generally calls for, leaving open space for agricultural use.

Though it's been practiced for more than 20 years in other parts of the country, Timm said the concept is relatively new in Colorado and the West.

"Sometimes we get some adverse public reaction from people that live on adjacent property, close to where you are going to put the clusters," Timm said. "But it seems to be working pretty well here."

Though Colorado's Larimer County offers zoning incentives for clustered developments, Big Horn County has no such provisions.

The county has essentially no zoning restrictions on much of its rural land, including Elliott's property, Waller said.

"There are no zoning controls in this area," Waller said. "This whole thing could be busted up into 150 five-acre lots. But as it is, he's only taking up 20 percent of the area for housing."

Not everyone in attendance was opposed to Elliott's vision. Rod Collingwood chastised his neighbors for failing to see the opportunity in a development like Dorsey Creek.

"I don't understand it," he said. "I've heard nothing but negatives. I've heard some valid concerns, but nobody has looked at the positives."

The Planning and Zoning Board voted to advance Elliott's proposal to the state for environmental review, the next step in the approval process.

"You've got a man willing to put a lot at risk to hopefully develop something and make the community better, and you have to admire him for even thinking about it," said Reed Williams, board chairman. "How many of us are willing to lay it on the line in the same proportions he is?"

"If you can look on the positive side a little bit, stretch your imaginations a little bit, you'll see this type of thing is coming no matter what," he said. "Now do we want to just sit back, or do we want to help things along a little bit?"

With that, Williams turned to Elliott and said he should prepare to move forward in the subdivision approval process.

"You've got a lot of work to do," he said.