

We Must Stop Squandering Our Farmland



A common sight: Piles of concrete and dirt and the stubs of roads litter an unfinished, weed-covered residential development project in the middle of harvestable farmland in western Canyon County.

Conditional Use Permits Are A Big Part Of The Problem

Conditional Use: A use that would not be appropriate generally or without restriction throughout the zoning district but which, if regulated, would not be detrimental to public health, safety, or general welfare. Every use which requires the granting of a conditional use permit is declared to possess characteristics which require review and appraisal by the commission to determine whether or not the use would cause any damage, hazard, nuisance or other detriment to persons or property in the vicinity. (Canyon County ordinances)

As communities grow, land is going to be needed for new industries and residential development. In Idaho, most communities are surrounded by lands zoned for agricultural use. That means agriculture must provide the lands for that growth to take place. That is necessary and proper as communities mature and grow. Let us be clear. The Coalition does not oppose the expansion of development into productive farmland provided the growth and development is properly managed.

Good growth management is based on specific land-use zoning that strictly controls to what use land can be used. It also sets down a stringent set of qualifications that must be met before those uses can be changed, thus providing citizens a degree of protection against land use abuse and poor planning.

Conditional Use Permits (CUP) are an important part of growth and development procedures that let local governments, under strict guidelines, authorize land uses forbidden under the zoning rules that govern a parcel of land. However, in recent years a practice has developed involving using CUPs as vehicles for residential development that causes us a great deal of concern because of its huge impact on the agricultural industry, especially the loss of harvestable farmland.

For some reason, local government has repeatedly approved CUPs that let developers use the "planned community" category to end-run land-use rezoning restrictions and ignore or disregard comprehensive plans.

The result has been a steady growth in "spot development islands," situations in which residential developments authorized via a CUP are dropped willy-nilly into the middle of productive farmland, rather than being part of the normal outward growth of a community.

For example. Zoning rules for lands zoned "Agriculture" dictate that parcels less than 80 acres in size can contain only two residential lots. Under zoning rules, a residential subdivision would not be allowed. But an 80-acre "planned community" approved via a conditional use permit could result in hundreds of homes on that 80-acre parcel.

It is a practice used in only a very small handful of Idaho counties, including Canyon County which has lost well over a quarter of its agricultural land to development in the past 15 years. We believe it's also why you see so many weed covered development projects, like the one pictured above, scattered across our rural landscape. What they really represent is valuable farmland lost forever. The development project may fail, but the land never again will be used for farming – pickles can never again return to being cucumbers.

What Can We Do To Stop This Loss of Our Farmlands??

Canyon County wants to revise its Planning and Zoning ordinances to fix the problem. It's an idea that deserves our unanimous support. Call, email or write the Canyon County Board of Commissioners. Tell them it's time to fix this CUP problem once and for all. Study the proposed changes. A copy will soon be available on our web site. Attend the public meetings on the proposals and voice your opinion. The dates will be available on our web site when they are set. Also, visit our website to learn more about CUPs and how the process works so you better understand the issue.

How To Contact The Canyon County Board of Commissioners

Phone: (208) 454-7507 ~ **Email:** commissioners@canyonco.org ~ **Address:** 1115 Albany, Caldwell, ID 83605.



The Coalition for Agriculture's Future is formed from 30 of the area's largest agri-businesses, financial institutions, ag-related associations and other companies and individuals with agricultural interests in the Treasure Valley. You can learn more about the Coalition and the issues with which it deals by visiting our web site:

www.agriculturesfuture.org