

Accomack Supervisors Blasted With Issues

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Change seems inevitable in Accomack. It's a place where rockets explode, poultry houses multiply, planes fly low late at night and the beautiful Atlantic coastline is looking to off-shore oil drilling.

County supervisors were told Wednesday that all of these could affect the economy, public health and property values.

The rocket that malfunctioned at Wallops Island in October 2014 showed a grim picture of what could happen to nearby landowners. NASA's blast zone is worrying those who reside inside, people whose families have lived on the farms for generations. Some are scared of property damage while others are wondering just how the designation will shape their future.

"It ought to be a big concern to anyone who lives in these circles," said Fred Darby of Assawoman, adding that those who live farther south haven't escaped because if his property values go down, those who live or own in Belle Haven or Parksley or elsewhere will have to "take up the slack." Darby warned, "There has to be a balance." And he noted the effect on the local "quality of life."

Garnett Kellam, who lives just across Assawoman Creek from the launchpad, wonders about his family's property. "We don't see ourselves putting up a housing development ... but whatever we decide we want to do, you all are starting to put restrictions on our land."

Supervisor Grayson Chesser pointed out that Kegotank Elementary School, which his granddaughter attends, is right at the border of the rocket zone. "That doesn't make me feel good," he said.

County Assessor Brent Hurdle reported that new assessments for real estate are going out in the mail. "Overall, the changes ... resulted in a decrease of approximately 2 percent in the fair market value real estate tax base," he said. Between 10 percent and 25 percent of the 40,000 parcels went up in value.

Asked if he'd seen anything negative in the blast zone, Hurdle answered, "I really haven't as yet."

Residents wanted to know about the obvious increase in air traffic. They were told the Navy is continuing training missions with two routes — one along the bay and another along the sea.

The supervisors asked the Planning Commission to continue to study land use which includes both Navy and NASA activities. Officials agreed they have no power over either.

A consensus of the panel was that all are against the quest for oil. It was unanimous except for Supervisor Reneta Major, who was absent due to a death in the family. The message will be sent to the governor via County Administrator Steve Miner.

Matt Cormons of Parksley reminded them that no jobs will come with the drilling. "We face a lot of risk ... if there is a mishap.... aquaculture, tourism could be destroyed."

And there were those who didn't want to wait for the public hearing early next month on poultry house ordinance changes. They included warnings from Dr. Jillian Fry, a faculty member of the Environmental Health Sciences Department at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. She urged the supervisors to consider the possible "infections, respiratory illnesses, cancers, pathogens, drug residues, ammonias and heavy metals" involved with the chicken production. She was cut off after the usual four minutes allotted for those speaking during the public participation segment.

Supervisor Robert Crockett discounted her comments. He read the disclaimer on a study about poultry houses that came from her department.

"We are disappointed the supervisor attempted to discredit the letter, particularly given that the five authors possess clearly unassailable credentials," Eastern Shorekeeper Jay Ford said later. "A disclaimer is standard procedure whenever any ... program within a university system makes policy recommendations in order to shield the parent university from legal liability. If we are to follow the supervisor's line of thought. ... We would be discounting VIMS reports as they often carry disclaimers that they do not speak for The College of William and Mary. We appreciate that the supervisors are working hard ... however, we are becoming increasingly concerned that any voices that run contrary to the recommendations made by the poultry lobbyists are being discredited rather than responded to."

Lee Ann Fick of Pungoteague, who owns an oyster aquaculture business, wants to "make sure the county grows in a positive way. ... If you want to bring better jobs to the county, you have to maintain better living conditions. Make sure the setbacks don't impair the living conditions for the future as well as the current residents."

Benny Hall of Temperanceville, a grower, reminded the officials about the number of people employed by the poultry industry. "We all would have to be home tonight guarding what we have. We would be hungry" without the business. "I have never observed runoff from the chicken house. Ditches have clear water. We have to abide by nutrient management ... soil samples are taken every year ... the industry is looking for other uses for chicken manure."

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