

Locals told about land use, water

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TOMBSTONE — The “Learning to Grow: Options for a Changing Landscape Symposium” was held Saturday in an effort to raise awareness about the challenges and impact of rapid development.

The one-day event at Tombstone High School was the first of its kind held in Cochise County, and about 100 people attended. Organized by the Cochise County Planning and Zoning Department and the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension of Cochise County, the symposium offered a series of lectures on several aspects of urbanization.

“We need to connect land use to the water supply,” said Kathy Jacobs, Executive Director of the Arizona Water Institute, who spoke about the impacts of growth on the water table. “The most beneficial thing about the symposium is that it allows people to focus on what concerns them the most.”

During a question-and-answer session, Jacobs addressed the issue of sustainable yield, a process by which water can be used in moderation and conserved.

“You can’t pump more of the surface water than what’s going back into the aquifer,” she said. “It’s a big issue here in Cochise County because the surface water is still available.”

Part of the goal for organizers was to give the public information about how development can be structured to promote both environmental and economic strategies.

“This is about taking a step forward and getting the broader community involved,” said Barron Orr, a geospatial extension specialist from the University of Arizona. “We have an opportunity in Cochise County, much like Tucson did 10 years ago, to control and manage growth appropriately.”

Orr spoke on the exurbanization of traditionally rural areas.

“This happens when a small subdivision expands at an extremely high rate, sometimes tripling or quadrupling in size, much like what has been happening in Benson,” he said. “If that growth is unmanaged, the tax dollars available per capita can rapidly decline. By making decisions about growth together, the chance goes up for both the environment and the economy to be protected.”

Similar symposiums were already taking place over the past two years in Tucson, Orr said, and Cochise County planners wanted to promote such knowledge locally.

“We are eager to learn not only from the public, but from these experts. It’s part of a countywide visionary process to educate citizens, and planning and zoning staff about growth in the community,” said Judy Anderson, Cochise County planning director, who spoke at the end of the afternoon session.

In an attempt to involve local residents in future planning activities, the Cochise County Planning and Zoning Commission will be sending out surveys early this summer to find out how residents feel about land use.

“It will be an opportunity for people’s voices to be heard — their ideas and concerns, and how they feel about land use design,” Anderson said.

Other activities included lectures about plan designs for affordable housing by Michael Pyatok of the Arizona State University Stardust Center, and ideas for improving subdivision plans to include land and wildlife conservation.

“I hope to see more of these types of meetings,” said Cochise County Supervisor Paul Newman. “It’s great information for people to hear. The general supply and amount of information directed to people is of the highest quality.”

Newman said the cooperation from Pima County Planning and Zoning is of great benefit to Cochise County planners as development continues to expand.

“It’s important to figure out a plan where water resources are conserved, and establish what will hopefully be a visionary period to control rapid growth in the county,” he said.

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