'Does the county want to preserve rural character?' As Williamson building permits spike, vote on density approaches

Kerri Bartlett, Nashville Tennessean  Published 5:00 a.m. CT Feb. 5, 2020

Sixth-generation Williamson County resident Louise Lynch has been on the front lines of the county's growth for decades.
As Williamson County building permits spike, density vote approaches

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Williamson County is expected to more than double in population by 2040.
- Since 2000, 59 subdivisions have been built in the unincorporated county.
- From 2018 to 2019, single-family residential home permits increased by 73% in the unincorporated county.

Sixth-generation Williamson County native Louise Lynch sits in the heart of county growth — her sunny living room, a haven of family photos and old memories at her home in College Grove.

Lynch’s 15-acre property in unincorporated Williamson County overlooks The Grove, a multimillion-dollar subdivision full of soaring rooftops on a sprawling golf course amid gently rolling green hills and winding Arno Road.

Lynch, who served as the county historian for nearly 20 years, sold a portion of her 600-acre property to make way for the subdivision. A rustic wooden fence separates her property and the adjacent neighborhood — demarcating "old" Williamson County from new growth.

That growth is gaining momentum, and as county Planning Director Mike Matteson says, the unincorporated county has reached "a fork in the road."

In 2019, Williamson County saw the largest spike in new building permits in the unincorporated areas of the county since the 1990s.
As Williamson County building permits spike, density vote approaches

Louise Lynch, 87, is a sixth-generation Williamson County resident. She once owned a farm where Sam's Club is now located in Cool Springs. She and her husband then moved out to College Grove, where The Grove subdivision is now in her backyard. She has served as the Williamson County historian for decades and the county archives building is named in her honor. (Photo: Shelley Mays / The Tennessean)

"Does the county want to preserve rural character? Or do we conclude that suburban development sprawling into rural areas is appropriate?" Matteson said last month at a meeting about growth between the Williamson County Commission and Franklin Board of Mayor and Aldermen.

In early spring, the county commission will have to decide which direction to take when the 24-member body votes on the updated Williamson 2040 land use plan. A vote by the commission 12 years ago to leave some portions of the county zoned as one unit per acre led to some of the suburban sprawl seen today.

"That has hindered us in being able to preserve rural character," Matteson said.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT GROWTH? Join the conversation with Tennessean reporters and your neighbors in the Franklin Hub.

County growth follows Lynch family

Judy Lynch Herbert, Louise Lynch's daughter, calls her mother "a magnet for interstates."

Herbert, who now lives on remote Flat Creek Road in the county, grew up on her parents' 125-acre farm in Cool Springs, where Sam's Club now sits on Mallory Lane.

Herbert and her mother recalled the demand for Lynch farm pick-your-own strawberries, which were open to the public in the early 1980s.
As Williamson County building permits spike, density vote approaches

Louise Lynch works on her farm where she grew strawberries in the '70s and '80s. Her farm was located in what is now Cool Springs where Sam's Club and the Thoroughbred 20 Theatre are located. (Photo: Courtesy of the Lynch family)

"They sold like crazy," Lynch said. "Some people could be seen jogging out to pick them. Sometimes there were up to 200 people out in the field."

For almost her entire life, Lynch and her family have been on the front lines of county growth.

First Interstate 65 split through Louise and the late Clyde Lynch's property in Cool Springs. Then development followed the family when Interstate 840 cut through their College Grove farm in the 1990s.

"I never dreamed it would follow us," Lynch said.

**Building permits spike in 2019**

And growth is not showing any sign of stopping.

In 2018, the county issued 392 new residential building permits for unincorporated areas. In 2019, permits issued jumped to 530, an increase of 35%.
As Williamson County building permits spike, density vote approaches

The increase is reminiscent of a similar spike in the 1990s, when the number of new building permits issued in the county reached 566 in 1998 during a building boom, Williamson County Mayor Rogers Anderson said.

"We had a growing community with growing job opportunities, the development in the Cool Springs quarter with the mall and GM-triggered growth in Spring Hill with the opening of the Saturn plant," Anderson said.

By 2040, Williamson County's population is expected to more than double, to a little over 536,000 people.

"We can't close the gate, though some might want to," Anderson said.

Historically, the unincorporated county makes up about 15% to 18% of the county's overall growth, he added.

Since 2000, 59 subdivisions with more than 15 homes apiece have been built in unincorporated Williamson County.

'Fork in the road':  Williamson looking at growth plans in unincorporated areas

A debate over density

The county commission set the stage for the development of larger subdivisions in a 2007 vote. It seemed as if the commission was leaning toward lower density, or one dwelling per 5 acres. However, commissioners suddenly changed course, voting 21-0 on Sept. 10, 2007, in favor of higher density, or one unit per acre, in some areas of
As Williamson County building permits spike, density vote approaches
the unincorporated county.

The decision made way for projects such as The Grove, Hillsboro Cove on Old Hillsboro Road and Stephens Valley on Sneed Road, in which a percentage of overall green space is traded for smaller lots, some a little less than an acre.

The Grove is a gated golf community in College Grove with 820 homes planned on its 1,000-acre tract. (Photo: Shelley Mays / The Tennessean / File)

Williamson County Commission Chairman of the Board Tommy Little, 5th District, said he believes pressure from constituents led to the vote.

Some landowners supported the one unit per acre density to help their property values grow.

Anderson recently said if the vote had gone differently in 2007, Williamson County might have ended up on a path of less density and less growth.

"Eleven or 12 years ago, there were cold feet, and there are results of that in our county," he said.

More: Williamson County Commission lays groundwork for half a billion in capital over five years

Commission to vote on Williamson 2040 plan

In early spring, the 24-member Williamson County Commission will vote on the issue again when revising the county’s comprehensive land use plan, known as Williamson
As Williamson County building permits spike, density vote approaches 2040.

County commissioners choose one of two options — a "business as usual" option, which reflects current zoning in some rural areas with one dwelling per acre, or the "town and country" option with lower density, or one dwelling per 5 acres.

Their decision will affect the future of unincorporated Williamson County for decades to come.

An old pickup truck at Hatcher Dairy Store sits alongside Arno Road across from the multi-million dollar subdivision The Grove in College Grove. (Photo: Kerri Bartlett / The Tennessean)

County consultants estimate that the "business as usual" option could bring up to 82,700 new homes with $330 million in road improvements, whereas the "town and country" option would bring 48,400 homes with $220 million in road improvements.

Of the residents who responded to an online county survey about Williamson 2040, 92% prefer the town and country option.

And a few commissioners say they are "leaning" toward it.

Commissioner Betsy Heßter, 2nd District, said she is concerned that allowing more rooftops will lead to the need for more school funding.

"We are desperately trying to pay for new schools and keep up with traffic," said Heßter, who lives in the unincorporated Goose Creek area. "Residential growth doesn't pay for itself. Because of the public's response, I am leaning toward town and country."
As Williamson County building permits spike, density vote approaches

 Commissioner Chas Morton, 9th District and a Williamson native, said constituents in his district are "overwhelmingly" for the town and country option.

"From an infrastructure standpoint, it just makes sense," Morton said. "Development needs to grow in an orderly fashion."

*Getting serious*: County mayor urges commissioners to make wise land use decisions

Citizens petition for town and country

Kathy Webber, a 26-year county resident, said she was surprised when the commission voted to approve higher density in 2007.

"We were blindsided at the last minute," she said.

This time around, Webber said she is speaking out wholeheartedly in favor of the town and country option.

She has joined forces with other concerned residents in circulating a petition "Upcoming Williamson County Land Use Plan Vote" on thepetitionsite.com to support the option. It had drawn more than 800 signatures by Monday afternoon.

Residents also launched the website, https://www.keepwilliamsoncountylivable.com/, with a goal to "slow growth" in the unincorporated county.

Janet Curtis, a county resident since 1990, who lives in the Mayes Creek Basin area, agrees.

"We want everybody's voice. It affects all municipalities," she said.

Join the conversation in the Franklin Hub
As Williamson County building permits spike, density vote approaches

Kerri Bartlett covers education and issues affecting children and families. She can be reached at kbartlett@gannett.com, 615-308-8324 or @keb1414 on Twitter.

Tennessee Launches New Policy For Cars Used Less Than 50 Miles/Day

Stop Wasting Money - This App Finds Every Promo Code on the Internet

Experts In Money | Honey | Sponsored