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Planning commission: 'No outdoor shooting ranges in Jefferson County'

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Jefferson County's volunteer planning commission has advised the County Commission to block all new outdoor shooting ranges.

The planners voted 7-0, with one abstention, on Nov. 20 to recommend the county's ordinances be amended to require that all new shooting ranges be built indoors, grandfathering in the Jefferson County Sportsmen's Association range, which leases country property.

"There is a lot of community support around this position," said planning commissioner Lorna Smith, who worked with fellow commissioner Cynthia Koan to draft the new language. "The main factor behind that support is the many benefits of indoor shooting ranges."

The planning commission is a group of selected volunteers appointed to help make nonbinding recommendations on land use regulations for the elected Board of County Commissioners, which has final say over those regulations.

"The main purpose of these changes is not to restrain anyone from developing a shooting facility, but to mitigate some problems we've heard from the community," said Mike Nilsen, chair of the planning commission.

The new version of the ordinance states that outdoor shooting ranges, except for those that qualify as a “legal nonconforming use,” shall not be allowed in Jefferson County in order to “protect the rural lifestyle, peace, health and safety of Jefferson County residents as well as to avoid impacts to both wild and domestic animals.”

The planning commissioners also added language that describes the health hazard posed by lead and noise pollution. State of the art HVAC systems keep the air clean for clients and workers at indoor facilities, reads the ordinance.

But according to Jay Towne, president of the Jefferson County Sportsmen’s Association, creating and maintaining these facilities is too expensive to be realistic in a rural county.

“No more outdoor shooting ranges means no more shooting ranges in Jefferson County,” Towne said. His organization is protected by a 20-year agreement with the county. “They cost millions to build and about \$10,000 per month to maintain. In an area with low population density like ours, what the planning commission really means is ‘no more ranges.’”

Towne said lead at an outdoor range is not a problem, since it disperses into the ground.

“When you fire a round, you get lead vapor and as it hits cool air, it condenses and goes down to the ground in dust, where it does not migrate,” he said. “It’s so heavy, it just goes right down in the ground where later it can even be mined and recycled.”

The planning commission’s new changes to the ordinance also include language about noise pollution, saying “above certain levels, particularly persistent, repetitive, percussive noise pollution associated with shooting ranges is deleterious to humans and animals alike.”

Noise complaints are something the Jefferson County Sportsmen’s Association has had to get used to. The club has been located on Gun Club Road off South Jacob Miller Road for more than 50 years. But as Port Townsend grows and more people move in near the gun club, noise complaints have increased.

Recently, unrelenting complaints from a neighbor of the range prompted the county commissioners to change their license agreement with the gun club, which is located on county property. In the negotiations, the club agreed to decrease its hours and have a noise study done.

Towne said the conversation around ranges has cost them hundreds of thousands of dollars already.

“We had to double our dues,” he said. “We lost a lot of members and lost a lot of hours.”

But the planning commission’s changes to the ordinance do not aim to close down the local range, Smith said.

“What we heard a lot of was that people thought that some of the language in Title 8 has the potential to shut down the existing shooting range, the Sportsmen’s Association,” she said after the public hearing held on Nov. 5. “I’m committed to finding a way that won’t impact the existing range.”

The new language grandfathers in the existing range, while banning all new outdoor ranges. That means the Cedar Hills Recreational Facility, a business venture of Fort Discovery owner Joe D’Amico, will not fly, even though he has already started building the range on his property near Tarboo Lake.

D’Amico declined to comment on the planning commission’s vote on new shooting range regulations.

“We are no longer talking to your paper,” he wrote in an email, citing recent editorials critical of his conduct.

The Tarboo Ridge Coalition, a group of Jefferson County residents who oppose D’Amico’s new range, has been advocating for indoor ranges since the county first drafted the ordinances in 2018.

The planning commission will present their recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners at a meeting in December. Last year, the commissioners did not take any of its recommendations.

“We’re hoping there is a different result this year,” Nilsen said.

Towne thinks the planning commission is “reciting the manifesto of the TRC.” He is hoping the Board of County Commissioners won’t take the recommendations.

“What you really have with the planning commission is a bunch of totally clueless people making decisions on a topic about which they know nothing,” he said. “One would hope the county commissioners will run these recommendations through the paper shredder.”

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