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La Plata County rich in sites to develop new commercial space

Consultants: Build on existing strengths when developing new nodes of commerce



Photo by:
Westendorff

By **Jessica Pace** Herald staff writer

Findings of a business park feasibility study presented Tuesday indicate La Plata County could need as much as 1.2 million square feet of new office and industrial space to accommodate job growth over the next 10 years.

Since the 1970s, La Plata County has grown by more than 30,000 jobs and 36,000 people. Growth is inevitable and space is scarce, which begs the question of where to locate future job sites. So last fall, the La Plata County Economic Development Alliance hired a consulting firm to conduct a study on the feasibility of building a county business park.

But consulting firm Gruen Gruen + Associates reported to La Plata County commissioners and Durango city councilors that the county should and can make use of existing assets.

“Build on your strengths,” co-owner Aaron Gruen said. “Downtown is your strength. It will reinforce existing business and be more cost-effective.”

Population is expected to expand in the next 10 years by about 13,400.

Consultants predicted the county could add 1,500 new jobs by 2025, which is a conservative estimate. On the high end, the county could grow by 2,900 jobs. That means the county will need an additional 600,000 to 1.2 million square feet of new office and industrial space to accommodate the growing labor force.

“We have the capacity to accommodate a lot of industrial space,” said Andrew Ratchford, a senior analyst. Ratchford pointed to about 20 acres in Three Springs, 5 acres at the Durango Tech Center and 25 acres at Bodo Industrial Park for potential development.

Those three areas, he said, could accommodate about half of the 1.2 million square-foot need. If projections fall on the low end, closer to 600,000 square feet needed, those three development areas could likely satisfy most of the county’s needs.

An additional 19 acres on South Camino del Rio could also be redeveloped, and great potential lies in Ewing Mesa, which could be a new location for the fairgrounds and free up its current space on north Main Avenue for office space.

But county and city officials questioned how they might effectively reconfigure space already in use.

“From an individual party standpoint, how do those transactions take place?” Commissioner Julie Westendorff asked. “You can say hey, Bodo is a good place for higher-density use, so someone using it for storage might only relocate if they can sell that property, get permits and still have money in their pocket.”

Funding for future office and industrial development could come from a reallocation of a portion of taxes to a public improvements fund, as officials discussed Tuesday. Using that system, a portion of tax money could go toward redevelopment projects for a limited time.

“The notion that we may actually have the space we need if we can leverage our tools, that’s interesting,” Councilor Dick White said. “Developing green fields is very expensive. The key things we have in the city are water and sewer. This is clearly step one.”

A committee of county and city stakeholders will now prioritize the next steps.

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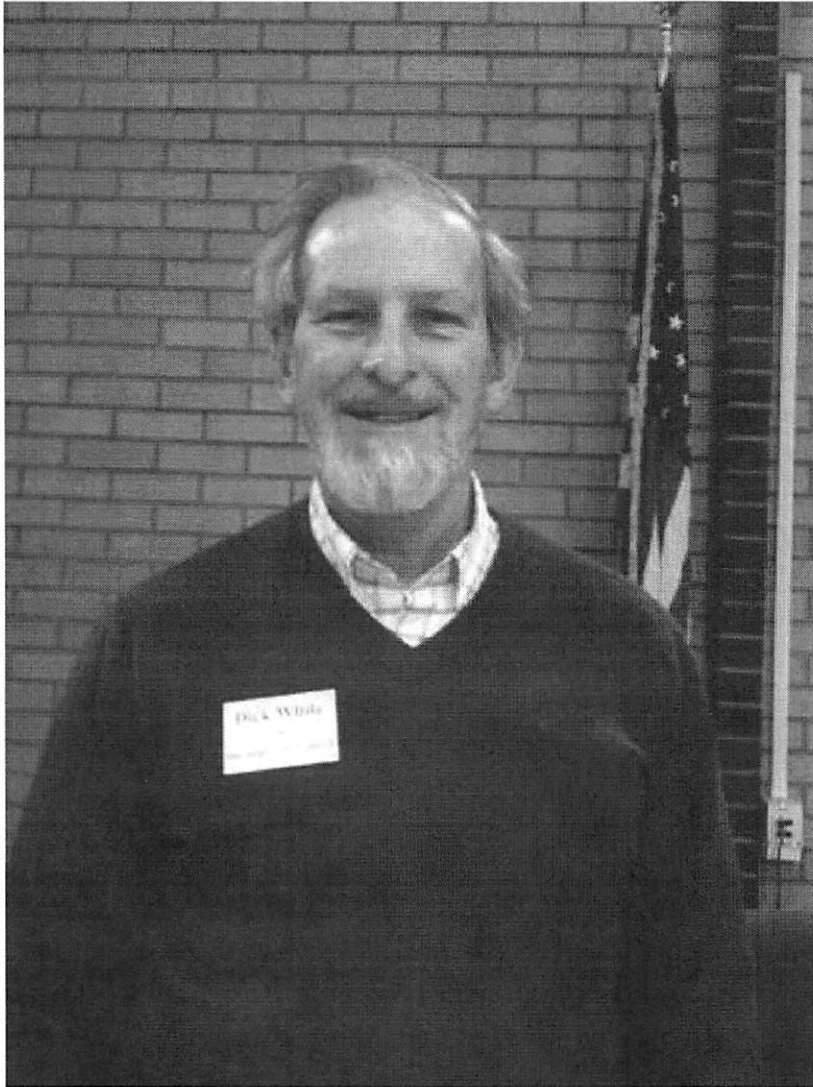


Photo by:
White
