La Plata, MD - A proposal to revitalize the town of Hughesville was introduced to the Charles County Planning Commission at a public hearing Monday, April 10 and some welcomed the proposal. Others weren’t so sure.

The plan, according to Amy Blessinger, planner for Charles County, is to create a walkable village setting for the town, which was adversely affected when the Route 5 bypass skirted traffic around the town it once went through. Blessinger also said it is the county’s intention to retain the agricultural heritage of the town.

“Hughesville has always been a traditional agricultural area,” Blessinger noted. “We want to continue to allow agricultural uses in the new zoning. It would have to comply with regulations,” she added.

Planning Commission Member Wayne Magoon wanted to know where the College of Southern Maryland fell in the new map designations.

“We did not propose to rezone those areas where the college sits,” Blessinger replied, “There was no need to rezone specifically for the college.”

Walter Sullivan, a self-professed bicycle and pedestrian advocate, suggested that the plan include more space between travel areas and the roadway. He suggested that the Three Notch Trail, which currently ends near McKay’s Foodland at the entrance to the county, is envisioned to extend up to Hughesville.

“You might want to consider a pedestrian-friendly area,” Sullivan said. “Further extension of Three Notch Trail will allow Hughesville to be on the trail head and accommodate those taking advantage of the trail.”

Martin Friend, who owns property in the Hughesville Industrial Park was curious about how the new zoning would affect his business. “The main thing I need to find out about this new zoning is, how is that going to impact the property?” he asked. Since it wasn’t a question and answer session, Planning Commission Chair Angela Sherard suggested Friend talk to Blessinger.

Friend’s brother John said that when such changes are made, “People who live there see their taxes go up,” he said. He pondered if an outside firm was used to do the analysis. “If they hire people from outside, they don’t know the community,” he suggested. “They don’t take into consideration how you’re going to pay for all this.”

An issue which grew great ire when originally proposed a few years ago is gaining new steam with the proposed revitalization. Les Gooding of Hughesville Properties LLC owns the tobacco barns in Hughesville. He said he worked closely with staff to make recommendations on the proposal. “Some of the proposed programs set up an agricultural processing center,” Gooding said. “It was a great place to collect tobacco back in the day. We’re now looking for other ways to enhance farming by raising livestock, vegetables and baked goods. In one of our buildings, we’re proposing setting up an indoor farmers market. A seafood processing area was also one suggestion.”

David Jenkins, CEO for the Southern Maryland Association of Realtors said he “supports this effort and the plan to upgrade traffic plan and pedestrian walkways.”

Gilbert Bowling III, whose family owned the Hughesville Tobacco Warehouse, said he wanted to speak on, “the agricultural aspect of what ya’ll are doing.

“Your family has a very personal tie to the Hughesville area,” Bowling explained, adding his support for a meat processing plant. “We spent many a summer, spring and fall in Hughesville. When I come to you to talk about this, it’s a very personal thing to me. I took out tobacco there for 30 years. We’ve lost that. From a farming perspective, we need it, not only for Hughesville, but for the entire county.

“We need jobs for banks, business owners, those things we lost because we lost tobacco,” he said. “Hughesville is very similar to Indian Head. We need to do something about it. We can effect some positive change in Hughesville. This is something we need and we need badly.”

Paula Bartlett, who moved to the town in 2008, said she didn’t want any of it.

“I don’t understand why you’re proposing this,” she said. “I don’t want to fight every day, people trying to get into businesses. It’s just fine the way it is. They built the bypass. All this is going to do is put it back. We don’t need businesses there,” Bartlett suggested. “Prince Frederick is 15 minutes to the east and Waldorf is 15 minutes north.”

Michel Fisher also admitted he was concerned about a few things.

“My business almost shut down when the bypass went through,” Fisher said. “I’m concerned about the zoning. It would require me to make very expensive changes as to how I operate my business. It may lock me out of future changes I was considering.”

David Hancock of Bel Alton said he strongly supports a meat processing plant in the new plan.

“Tobacco farming was the heartbeat of agriculture and smack dab in the middle was Hughesville,” Hancock said. “What drove the economic engine of the county was Hughesville. Please consider allowing the meat processing plant in Hughesville. Direct retail meat sales and produce is the future of agriculture. We have to start thinking about what people want. They want local grown, next to us produce. We like things grown in the same area we live in.

“Our business is thriving,” he said. “Every year our business doubles. Our biggest concern isn’t going out of business, but how do we keep up? If we can do this in Hughesville, which was what once drove agriculture in this county, it would help agriculture.”

Contact Joseph Norris at joe.norris@thebaynet.com