

## Clashing Visions In Bell's Bend

*by Martin Holsinger*

Last fall, residents of the Scottsboro-Bell's Bend area felt they had reason to celebrate. They were wrapping up a community organizing and visioning effort that found the residents of the NW Davidson County rural neighborhood largely united in their determination to maintain the country character of the area and work towards encouraging a renaissance of sustainable agriculture to feed Nashville's booming demand for locally grown food.

A move by one of Nashville's richest families changed that. The May brothers, whose family made its wealth in manufacturing and then increased it exponentially by judicious investment in real estate, bought about 1500 acres on the southern tip of the bend and proposed building an "improved" version of Cool Springs on their property, envisioning tens of thousands of residents and daily commuters in a high-density development that would rival downtown Nashville in size—and be serviced by only one, or maybe eventually, two bridges connecting it with the rest of Nashville. The "improvements" on the Cool Springs model involve making the development more high density/pedestrian-friendly, LEED standards in all building, and maintenance of a wide "greenbelt" around the proposed new development. These are good ideas, but are they good ideas in the context of Bell's Bend?

Area residents have risen to the challenge. They have already defeated proposals for a large manufacturing plant, a landfill, and a 1500-home suburban development in the Bend, and could see that, for all the assurances the May brothers were offering, putting 40,000 people in highrises and office parks where there once were only cows and trees would have a degrading effect on the whole neighborhood. There has been a series of spirited community meetings, and plenty of behind-the-scenes politicking.

Residents don't want to sabotage the possibility of agriculture in the Bend by driving land prices so high that farming doesn't make economic sense. The Planning Commission argues that Nashville's future is as a business center, not an agricultural one, so it's OK to sacrifice farmland and open space only 7 miles from downtown to achieve that goal.

The Maytown Center proposal has numerous weaknesses, beginning with the already-mentioned restricted access. There are also plenty of reasons to question the wisdom of adding millions of square feet of retail, housing, and office space to a saturated, falling real estate market. Further, the Planning Commission, which is not, by its job description, supposed to take "economic benefits" into account when considering such a massive rezoning proposal, has been advocating for the Maytown plan on the grounds that it promises a 75 million dollar-a-year increase in Metro Nashville's tax base—but that's based on the developer's estimates, not on an unbiased outside study, which has yet to be done. Another question mark involves the access bridges, which will cost at least a hundred million dollars each, a sizable chunk of the state's highway money. Many political insiders doubt that this will happen. The May family claims they will build their own bridge

if they have to. Are they bluffing?

The Bell's Bend-Scottsboro community's struggle between preservation and development is a microcosm of what has been happening all over the world. Now, with peak oil and the ongoing financial crisis raising questions about how long we will be able to continue living as we "always have" here in America, we need to proceed with great caution when considering proposals like Maytown Center. It would have been the economically logical thing to do a decade ago—but does it really make sense any more?

At the August 14 Planning Commission meeting, Commissioners expressed a variety of doubts and faint praise for the project, calling it "visionary" and "ahead of its time." Maytown supporters groaned when one commissioner said, "It looks like Oz." Everybody agreed that Tony and the Mays just didn't have the numbers to make their case, that it was unclear who would be liable in case of failure a la Metro Center, and that the traffic plan was not realistically integrated into the neighborhoods south of the river. Recognizing the hard work that has gone into the Bell's Bend-Scottsboro Area Plan, the Commissioners ultimately voted to adopt the plan, but put the "special use area" (the proposed Maytown Center) on indefinite hold, which means that Tony and the Mays are free to bring it up any time they think they have the Commission's questions answered. Aw shucks, they already thought they had 'em answered. Will there be another round? Stay tuned.

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