



MEDIA RELEASE

July 16, 2021

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Local citizen action group releases statement on virtual master planning session

The first Building Blocks Master Plan workshop was held virtually on Thursday, July 15, led by Farr Associates and sponsored by the cities of Akron and Cuyahoga Falls. Several members of the local citizen action group Preserve the Valley (PTV) were in attendance and offer the following observations on the meeting and processes to date.

- As a whole, PTV came away believing that the focus of last night's meeting was largely development-based. The majority of the session focused on development-related data, surveys, and outside experts in development. Citizen input was limited to approximately 15 - 20 minutes, primarily focused in outlets not conducive to an open sharing of ideas or dialogue (i.e. comments in a chat room format, completion of a Zoom survey).
- The presentation did not address the major environmental challenges this region will continue to face due to climate change and increased rainfall (flooding, landslides, stressed infrastructure/roads), as having an impact on decision-making.
- Although an official vision statement, scope, and objectives have not yet been finalized according to Farr Associates. PTV believes the process must start with the **recognition of the Merriman Valley as a National Park Gateway Community and the fundamental understanding that the environmental assets in this area are the driver for 2.8 million people visiting the area generating \$80+MM in economic activity annually**. PTV believes the environmental assets must be at the center of any discussion of the Valley's future -- and stewardship of these natural assets and watershed protection is critical. In other parts of the country, overdevelopment near National Parks is a major issue that is driving both visitors and residents away, as well as creating lasting impacts on the environment.

"We need a Master Planning process that recognizes, amplifies, and protects the fundamental assets that keep residents here and bring visitors here – assets that make this the seventh Most

Visited National Park area in the US. A big box retailer isn't a tourist draw. It's what the people who live here are trying to get away from," says Andrew Holland of Preserve the Valley's core leadership team.

What PTV supports in the process:

- 1.) cities of Akron and Cuyahoga Falls working together in conjunction with major stakeholders such as the parks, CVSR, and school districts to create an asset-based plan
- 2.) the re-development and re-imagining of the numerous **existing** developed areas in the Merriman Valley - i.e. a "facelift" for the Valley
- 3.) the focus on improving roads, bikeways, connectivity and walkability
- 4.) the focus on improving ways to connect visitors and residents with the river through scenic overlooks and vistas.

What PTV does NOT support:

- 1.) expanding development and sprawl into the undeveloped/greenfield areas of the Merriman Valley when substantial space is already available in developed areas
- 2.) bringing "big box" retailers to the Valley when the focus should be on encouraging local businesses and entrepreneurs (example: Akron breweries, recreation outfitters, artisans, restaurants) which offer a higher rate of economic return to the community -- and drive visitors to stay and to spend money here
- 3.) promoting the need for more housing and increased population in the Valley without environmental impact studies.

"Local citizens deserve more input in this process that taxpayer dollars are being spent on," says Pearsall of Preserve the Valley. "There are lots of creative people here who have great ideas for the Merriman Valley, and they need to be heard in an open dialogue format."

PTV challenges the cities of Akron and Cuyahoga Falls to give more opportunity for open public input and conversation than Thursday's meeting offered. Further, PTV believes increased attention should be given to understanding all of the natural, recreational, and cultural assets that keep people in this area.

PTV believes that citizen voices are critical in the process of planning for the future of the Merriman Valley, and thanks all of their supporters who joined the workshop. The fact that more than 150 concerned citizens joined the virtual meeting is a testament to the importance of this region and its natural assets to the people who live, work, and play here

For more information on Preserve the Valley and ways to be involved with the master planning process, please visit preservethevalley.com

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