



28 October 2022

Mr. John Mitchell
County Manager
Henderson County
100 North King Street
Hendersonville, North Carolina 28792

Dear John:

Many thanks to you, the Commission, the Planning Board, and county staff for your obvious desire to protect the county's rural areas, and for your openness to public comments on the draft Comprehensive Plan.

We're grateful, too, that you've included a local land conservation fund in the draft (page 58). Our thanks as well to Vice-Chair McCall and county staff for meeting recently with the Trust for Public Land. By designing a public referendum that tracks voter preferences — which may be broader than farmland preservation — Henderson County can establish a local land fund that's ample enough to make a difference.

Still, a local land fund won't be enough to protect the county's rural landscapes. So, as a nonprofit that's worked extensively with Henderson County residents on this issue, we'd like to suggest three changes to the draft Plan:

- Reduce rural housing densities;
- Protect rural areas from inappropriate commercial development; and
- Shrink the Urban Services Area.

Rural Housing Densities

Working with a GIS specialist, we discovered that housing densities in the county's most iconic rural landscapes range from about one dwelling unit per 10 acres (Jeter Mountain area) to one dwelling unit per 25 acres (Green River area). These landscapes, which surveys indicate the public urgently wants to protect, are visually pure and consistent, without the intrusion of suburban-style subdivisions.

Yet the draft Plan allows new subdivisions as dense as one unit per two acres to spoil the visual integrity of rural landscapes (pages 40-41). What the draft Plan calls a "conservation" subdivision would allow even greater densities (pages 60-62). After opening every rural

landscape to suburban-style subdivisions, the plan then attempts to soften the blow by using setbacks and design standards (page 58), which won't make much of a difference.

This isn't effective rural protection. The best way to protect landscapes that are one unit per 10 to 25 acres is to keep their density at one unit per 10 to 25 acres. That's why communities nationwide keep their rural landscapes looking rural by requiring that housing densities stay roughly the same over time. Not only does this protect rural character; it also reduces all the negative consequences of sprawl, including increased air and water pollution, unnecessary infrastructure costs, and damage to the agricultural and tourism economy.

The county might be able to justify the negative consequences of dropping suburban-style subdivisions into rural areas if there were a pressing need to accommodate new residents there. But that's not the case. Our research reveals that there's already more than enough vacant land in and near the municipalities to accommodate decades' worth of anticipated population growth (see discussion of our buildout analysis, below).

RECOMMENDATION: Lower densities in the Agriculture/Rural and Very Low Density character areas to at least one unit per five acres, and lower if possible, to discourage suburban-style subdivisions. Our thanks to the planning staff for their efforts to move the discussion in this direction.

Inappropriate Commercial

As you know, the county has suffered in recent years from battles over inappropriate commercial intrusions into rural communities. Saluda, Crab Creek, and Green River have fought a gun range, a thousand-unit storage facility, a commercial hotel, and more. Crab Creek spent nearly \$90,000 to defeat the storage facility, and it wasn't a permanent win. Appeals could cost citizens up to \$50,000 more, and we still might be defeated.

Yet the draft Plan proposes no meaningful solutions. There's a suggestion (page 55) that land uses which currently require administrative approval should, in the future, require conditional zoning or special use permits. Unfortunately, that's not enough. Crab Creek's storage facility required a special-use permit, and fighting that permit cost is costing residents a fortune.

On that same page of the draft, there's a recommendation that the county "discuss the option to enhance design standards for nonresidential development ... in rural areas." Unfortunately, discussion isn't enough. Nor will enhanced design standards help a gun range or a thousand-unit storage facility fit better into a quiet, traditional rural valley.

RECOMMENDATION: Disallow rural commercial uses that are incompatible with traditional rural landscapes. Borrow language from other communities that protect rural areas by using limits on commercial square footage, limits on the number of employees, and/or a home occupancy requirement, while allowing greater leeway for agriculture-related businesses such as farm stands, farm implement sales and repair, and agriculture-related event venues. Our thanks to the planning staff for their efforts to move the discussion in this direction.

Urban Services Areas

Our third recommendation is that the county shrink its Urban Services Area. Often, the county's response to this request is that it's powerless to do so, and that only the City of Hendersonville, the Metropolitan Sewerage District, and private providers can reduce the extent of future infrastructure.

We'd like to suggest that the county empower itself in this interagency dialogue by undertaking its own, more precise version of our buildout analysis, which reveals that there's already enough space in the municipalities, and on vacant land served by both sewer and water in unincorporated areas, for many times the population increase expected by 2045.

We're grateful to county planning staff for critiquing our original buildout analysis. After revisions based on their comments, the analysis indicates there's enough vacant residential land in the municipalities, and in unincorporated areas served by both water and sewer, to accommodate more than 80,000 new residents under current zoning. (Note: this analysis is conservative, leaving appropriate space for roads, utilities, and commercial/industrial development.)

Not every piece of vacant land, of course, can be developed. But vacant land is so abundant in these areas that there should be enough *developable* vacant land for the 32,000 new residents expected in the county by 2045. If growth were directed toward the municipalities, and toward unincorporated areas with sewer and water, the county wouldn't need to lay additional sewer lines for decades. This would represent an enormous savings for taxpayers, while providing much more effective protection for the county's rural areas.

RECOMMENDATION: Undertake your own, more precise buildout analysis, using data that the public can't access. Then use the results to negotiate much tighter urban services boundaries. This includes restraining the desire to run sewer through apple country, which poses an obvious threat to landscapes and values that the public urgently wants to protect.

Again, our thanks to you, John, as well as to your staff and our elected and appointed officials, for your openness to public comment. In finalizing the Comprehensive Plan, we trust that you'll take the county's desire to safeguard our rural areas from aspiration to reality.

Sincerely,

/s/

Nina deCordova
Executive Director