

4.0 KEY ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

An analysis of existing conditions and trends discussed in the previous two chapters has helped to answer the question of “where is Rockingham County today?” This chapter further refines and narrows the focus in order to identify key growth management issues and challenges that help answer the question of “where does Rockingham County want to go in the future?” These key issues must first be taken into consideration before adequate growth management strategies and guidelines can be formulated.

4.1 Growth Issues Identified in Other Plans

Several plans have been prepared over the last several years that may affect Rockingham County’s future growth and development. These plans primarily focus on economic development rather than land use planning, but they do outline general growth and development policies that will affect Rockingham County’s land use decision-making processes. Included are the:

- Piedmont Triad Regional Vision Plan 2005
- Rockingham County Commissioners’ Strategic Planning Retreat 2005
- Northwest North Carolina Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) 2004
- 21st Century Communities Plan 2003
- Partnering for Economic Progress 2001
- Rockingham County Future Development Plan 1999
- Rockingham County Tomorrow 1996

The recurring theme cited in the majority of these reports is the urgent need for Rockingham County to make a successful transition from an economy that has long been dependent on agriculture and low value-added manufacturing enterprises such as textiles and furniture to a new economy based on the skills of a well-educated and highly skilled workforce. The role of quality development in this transition cannot be overstated since an attractive and efficiently functioning landscape, along with a healthy environment, will be demanded by a highly skilled and well-educated workforce. Companies and industries seeking to capitalize on an information and knowledge based economy will want to locate their operations in communities that value and protect their community assets and that provide a high quality of life for their workers. In addition, the community’s amenities can serve as a stimulus for attracting tourists and retirees who can contribute positively to the economy.

The Target Cluster Analysis prepared as part of the Piedmont Triad Regional Vision Plan lists specific industries that have been targeted for the region. This report identifies primary business sectors that have the highest probability of sustained success for the future of the Piedmont Triad region’s economy. The Piedmont’s target clusters are categorized into tiers. The **first tier** represents

targets that have the strongest growth prospects for all counties in the region. These are: **Health Care (including Biotechnology), Logistics, and Wholesale Trade**. The **second tier** includes target clusters that are more specialized in the region. **Finance and Insurance** is a recommended target cluster because of high average wages and strong national growth prospects. However, the bulk of employment in Finance and Insurance is in Guilford and Forsyth Counties. Due to existing strengths, a skilled workforce, and proximity to urban areas, growth in this target cluster is likely to be concentrated in these two counties. The other second tier target cluster is **Food Processing**, particularly higher-end products. It is recommended because of the potential to provide job opportunities for lower-skilled workers. The **third tier** of target clusters is comprised of the **Arts**, which includes design and film. This target is still emerging and is fairly fragmented in the region. In addition to these target clusters, Market Street has identified “areas of emphasis” for the Piedmont Triad region to develop increased job growth opportunities. These are important components of economic development that cut across cluster categories but represent areas of potentially significant job creation. The areas of emphasis are: **Tourism, Entrepreneurship, Homeland Security and Defense, and Education**. The Target Cluster Analysis describes the Piedmont Triad Region’s assets and weaknesses in each target cluster. Goals and specific action steps for growing these target clusters are included in the Regional Vision Plan.

Similarly, the 2004 CEDS study targets the following industries specifically for Rockingham County:

- Logistics and distribution
- Design
- Materials
- Transportation equipment
- Food processing
- Value-added agriculture
- Hospitality

The CEDS study also identified several core themes for the Northwest North Carolina (NWNC) region that includes Rockingham County:

- NWNC is in the middle of an economic transition. It is more important than ever before to invest in strengthening the core of the communities, including leadership, education, and urban revitalization.
- External marketing and business recruitment will be made easier long-term if internal investment is concentrated on today. Investments in local schools, businesses, downtown, and quality of life need to take place now to lay the foundation for future economic growth.
- The ability to attract and retain quality workers is of equal importance as the ability to recruit new companies.
- Entrepreneurship and small business growth will drive economic growth in the future. The tradition of design in NWNC differentiates the area.

Design-oriented activities will help NWNC transition from traditional manufacturing into the industries of the future.

- Local leaders must strongly commit to economic development, both in policy making and resource allocation, to reach long-term goals.
- Reducing disparity throughout the region will ultimately lead to more interest in the region from business prospects.

Regional Economic Connectivity

In the new economy, *regions* will serve as the basic geographic building blocks of economic activity. As the pace of economic globalization accelerates rapidly, the focus of economic development efforts is shifting from individual communities, cities, or counties to regions such as the Piedmont Triad. Regional participation, initiatives, and competitiveness will become increasingly important to the future of Rockingham County as it transitions from an economy based primarily on agriculture and manufacturing to a newer economy in which knowledge and information are vital resources.

The Piedmont Triad Regional Vision Plan stresses the connectivity of the many communities within the twelve-county region. The need to coordinate and maximize the competitive advantages of the region's physical infrastructure (i.e., highways, water and sewer, education facilities, etc.) is assigned a high priority. Equally important is the need for the region to function as an integrated unit, for example, through the coordination of workforce training and development programs in the region's rural counties with targeted industrial clusters in the region's more urban counties. Other important initiatives include regional information-sharing, strategic partnerships, and leadership development.

Community Appearance

Rockingham County was selected by the North Carolina Department of Commerce in 2001 as one of ten communities to participate in its 21st Century Communities program. As part of this process, interview teams met with over forty representatives of business, industry, education, local governments, and others. The purpose of these interviews was to hear first hand from many of the individuals who have been directly affected by the economic downturn that has gripped much of North Carolina. A number of recurring themes were identified from the interview process that must be addressed for Rockingham County to emerge from the current economic recession as a competitive player. One of these themes is community appearance and image.

There is a general consensus that the County could benefit from a concerted effort to improve its physical appearance and image. Rockingham County is a predominantly rural county composed of small to medium size municipalities. In its natural state it is a beautiful and impressive landscape. Unfortunately, some unsightly development patterns have evolved which detract from the County's overall appearance and image. Of particular concern are gateways into

communities, litter along roadsides, and a proliferation of unattractive strip development. Such scenes make a negative impression on visitors, and perhaps most importantly, reinforce a lack of pride within the community. Local residents can begin to take such circumstances for granted and negative development patterns are then perpetuated. The County should work to counteract these forces by encouraging public involvement in programs such as “adopt-a-highway” and by improving entrances into communities.

It is critically important to build a sense of pride among the County’s citizens and involve them in this process so that a positive appearance and image become a part of the ingrained value system of the community.

4.2 Growth Issues Identified Through This Planning Process

An extensive effort was made to conduct public outreach meetings in order to gain valuable Land Use Plan input and “buy-in” from citizens. The sections below offer a brief summation of key points resulting from various meetings that were held throughout Rockingham County during the development of this Plan. See *Appendix A6* for a complete listing of public outreach and committee meetings.

Land Use Plan Stakeholders Group

Community stakeholders representing a cross-section of Rockingham County’s population participated in a series of workshops held on August 19, 2005, December 9, 2005, and August 11, 2006 for the purpose of providing input and policy guidance for this Plan. One of the planned outcomes of the first meeting was to identify their preferences concerning key issues related to development and growth management in the County. The results of this session are presented by the number of stakeholders preferring a specific response to each issue:

Issue 1 – Residential Growth in Rural Areas

Much Less	Less	Same	More	Much More
2	4	2	5	-

Issue 2 – Residential Growth in or Near Municipal Areas

Much Less	Less	Same	More	Much More
-	1	-	6	6

Issue 3 – Large Scale Residential Developments

Much Less	Less	Same	More	Much More
1	-	2	7	3

Issue 4 – Protected Open Space / Natural Areas

Much Less	Less	Same	More	Much More
-	-	-	4	9

Issue 5 – Commercial / Industrial Design Guidelines

Strongly Oppose	Somewhat Oppose	No Opinion	Somewhat Supportive	Strongly Supportive
-	-	-	6	7

Issue 6 – Retail Opportunities

Much Less	Less	Same	More	Much More
-	-	1	8	4

Issue 7 – Protected Farmland &/or Agricultural Areas

Much Less	Less	Same	More	Much More
-	2	2	-	9

Issue 8 – Public Water / Sewer Availability

Much Less	Less	Same	More	Much More
1	-	-	6	6

Issue 9 – Affordable Housing

Much Less	Less	Same	More	Much More
1	1	7	4	-

Issue 10 – High End Housing

Much Less	Less	Same	More	Much More
-	-	-	10	3

Issue 11 – Designated Growth Areas

Much Less	Less	Same	More	Much More
1	3	-	4	5

Issue 12 – Parks / Recreation Opportunities

Much Less	Less	Same	More	Much More
-	-	-	5	8

Issue 13 – Traditional Industry

Much Less	Less	Same	More	Much More
-	8	2	3	-

Issue 14 – High-Tech Industry

Much Less	Less	Same	More	Much More
-	-	-	5	8

Issue 15 – Population Growth (Over the Next 20 Years)

75,000 (-20%)	92,000 (+0%)	100,000 (+10%)	125,000 (+35%)	150,000 (+65%)
-	-	2	9	2

Stakeholders also discussed the outcome of the Key Issues Preference Survey and provided the following comments:

- There is a logical connection among strong support for the availability of public water and sewer, commercial and industrial design guidelines, and

- the designation of growth areas – especially along major corridors (e.g. US 220).
- One member would prefer to see public water and sewer throughout the County, while most others support water and sewer extensions along targeted growth areas.
 - There should be a balance between traditional and new high-tech companies – with a focus on the creation of good paying jobs.
 - Tourism is another important alternative economic development opportunity and a key emerging industry to pursue.
 - We like who we are and what we already have. We want growth but not rampant growth at the expense of our rural character, open space, farmland and outstanding water resources.
 - We need to protect our water resources while also taking advantage of the long-term benefits of water for both traditional and emerging industries.
 - Residential growth in rural areas may be more strongly supported within designated growth areas.

Stakeholders gave feedback on the Land Use Plan draft as presented at the third meeting that included:

- The Land Use Vision Statement should mention the identification of other natural resources (in addition to prime farmland).
- Encourage adaptive reuse of buildings (historic).
- Transfer Development Rights (TDR) programs should be mentioned – may be more appropriate in higher density areas.
- Planned Unit Developments (PUDs) should be “process streamlined” for incentive purposes.
- Natural lagoons used for wastewater treatment and disposal should be given incentives and promoted through education.
- Incentives should be developed to tie into local public water and sewer resources—revenues could be generated for the County (as opposed to Aqua NC).
- Low impact (environmental) design standards should be mentioned.
- The reuse of stormwater should be encouraged.
- Educating citizens and requiring County oversight on pumping septic tanks key to reducing pollution and increasing septic system longevity.
- A pilot program for cluster development should be encouraged.
- More needs to be stated on mechanisms to fund schools. Future education needs are just as important as utility infrastructure and economic development.

Stakeholders were also asked to state their level of support for the Land Use Plan draft at the third meeting. Overall, Stakeholders were very positive and supportive. Members voiced the following opinions:

- Comfortable with the plan background and process.

- Supportive of the plan.
- Good process. Land Use Vision Statement is excellent. On the right track.
- Excited about the plan. It is proactive.
- Plan process is key—interaction of different opinions and expertise. Good stepping stone for next level of planning.

Land Use Plan Joint Work Sessions

Joint work sessions were held with members of the Board of County Commissioners, Planning Board, and County Management Team (i.e., County Manager, Assistant County Managers, and County Attorney) in February 27, 2006 and August 28, 2006. Project staff presented the draft plan and provided participants an opportunity to discuss the draft in detail and provide input on refining the report and maps. Some main points of discussion from the February meeting were as follows (see *Appendix A1* for a detailed summary of this work session):

- Rockingham County has unique economic development and tourism opportunities due to existing natural resources.
- We need to do a better job of protecting our primary transportation corridors (e.g., US 220) and addressing junk vehicles and junk mobile homes.
- Land development guidelines need to be more flexible and clear.
- The draft plan is a good start and there is a willingness to continue to move the plan forward.
- The land classification map needs greater specificity including the type and density of residential uses.
- The mixed-use concept is a good idea – especially in certain areas of the County.
- The possibility of alternative septic systems for cluster developments (e.g. neighborhood septic fields, created wetland septic systems) should be explored.
- The County should consider expanding buffer requirements along streams and rivers to improve water quality, habitat and recreational benefits.
- A very high level of support for the draft plan was expressed by most members.

Land Use Plan Community Meetings

During April 2006 a series of community meetings was held in the western (Madison & Mayodan), central (Wentworth) and eastern (Reidsville) portions of the County. These public involvement meetings provided multiple opportunities for citizens from throughout the County to review the analysis and recommendations outlined in the draft plan, to ask questions and to provide input

on refining the draft (see *Appendix A2* for a summary of community meeting citizen input). Among the key discussion points were as follows:

- Agricultural uses and rural character need to be preserved.
- Need better projections of new residential development impacts on schools.
- Too many incompatible urban uses with inadequate buffers are approved.
- Require development to provide parks and maintenance funding.
- The plan seems very general – not a clear sense of what it actually says or does.
- More citizens need to be informed of the plan process (e.g. the elderly).
- The use of overlay districts to provide greater protection to the County's southern tier should be considered.
- Prefer more contact and involvement with the public.
- The plan needs to balance multiple interests including farmers, developers, residents, business owners, and residents.

Land Use Plan Civic Organization Meetings

A final piece to gathering community input and identifying key growth issues resulted in County planning staff presenting the draft plan to several local civic organizations during March through May 2006. These organizations included the Grange Group (agricultural and farming interests), Rockingham County Partnership for Economic and Tourism Development Executive Committee, Rockingham County Realtors Association, and Rockingham County Home Builders Association. Salient themes of interest included:

- Concerns over restricting land development options – farmers invest in land similar to a 401K and need flexibility.
- Cluster development is an option worth pursuing further.
- Farmers need more incentives or options to continue farming.
- A growing consideration for new industry and business investors is whether a community has an updated land use plan that support economic growth and quality of life.
- The land classification map should exhibit more economic development zones in order to convey more options for potential investors (e.g., US 29/I-785 Corridor).
- Cluster development has worked in other communities and mixed use (i.e., commercial component) is an incentive to help make these developments successful.
- There should be more incentives for affordable housing development.
- Preservation is key to protect natural resources.
- Large scale development difficult within municipalities due to lack of large tracts.
- Lack of incentives from municipalities to build within urban areas or tie into utilities.

- Mixed use retirement communities will be key for Rockingham County – the market/need is growing.
- Growing local demand for condominiums and townhouses – Greensboro provides the nearest market.

4.3 General Plan Goals

General goals for this Plan were formulated based on an analysis of existing regional trends and County development conditions, and from the discussions and observations conducted throughout this planning process. The following goals (listed in alphabetical order) are the first step in determining “where we want to go tomorrow,” and serve as an initial guide in developing an overall County vision:

- Achieve a moderate rate of population growth
- Develop a sense of vision for the overall future of Rockingham County
- Development should pay more of its way when possible
- Encourage high quality growth
- Encourage the provision of a wide range of goods and services for the citizens of the County through appropriate commercial development
- Ensure that the costs of new development do not exceed the service demands that are generated
- Equip leaders to make good development decisions
- Limit uncontrolled commercial expansion (strip development, etc.)
- Maintain a positive identity for the County and its individual communities
- Maintain quality of life
- Maintain rural character
- Offer more housing choices, including affordable housing, but limit the rapid proliferation of manufactured housing
- Plan for the orderly conversion of agricultural lands to more urban, higher intensity uses
- Preserve agriculture and family farms, as well as the agricultural heritage of the County
- Preserve open space and natural areas
- Promote flexibility in development regulations
- Protect highway corridors from unwise development
- Provide a forum for communications with the citizens of the County
- Provide public infrastructure in areas where there are strategic reasons to invest public resources, such as to key industrial sites which exhibit potential for success
- Seek a realistic balance among the many diverse interests in the County, and especially between economic and environmental concerns
- Strengthen County unity
- Strengthen the existing traditional manufacturing industrial base of the County while pursuing opportunities for the expansion of the industrial

base in new directions (high tech, distribution centers, tourism, retirement, etc.)

4.4 Growth Management Continuum

In order to build consensus necessary for vision building, a continuum of future growth scenarios was presented to the stakeholders group for discussion at the August 19, 2005, meeting. The following five options summarized into their key components were discussed:

OPTION A: Less Active Approach to Planning and Land Use Management

OPTION B: Status Quo/Continue Current System of Planning and Land Use Management

OPTION C: Promote Higher-Quality Development/Emphasis on Moderate Population Growth/Stabilize and Strengthen Traditional Economic Base

OPTION D: Promote Higher-Quality Development/Emphasis on Moderate Population Growth/Retool and Diversify Economic Base for a New Economic Era

OPTION E: Promote Higher-Quality Development/Emphasis on Stimulating Population and Economic Growth/Significantly Accelerate the Pace of Growth and Development

From the options described above, **Option D was selected unanimously.** Under this option, the County would more actively seek higher quality development while not significantly accelerating the overall pace of development. The economic base would begin to develop in a manner that seeks not just to be a “strengthened” version of what currently exists, but to retool and diversify in a different direction.

A general summary of Option D is presented below (see *Appendix A3* for a summary of Options A, B, C, and E):

OPTION D: Promote Higher-Quality Development/Emphasis on Moderate Population Growth/Retool and Diversify Economic Base for a New Economic Era

Under this option, the County would more actively seek higher quality development while not significantly accelerating the overall pace of development. The economic base would begin to develop in a manner that seeks not just to be a “strengthened” version of what exists currently, but to retool and diversify in a different direction.

Policies

- More active role of County government in planning and economic development than in Options A-C
- Provide limited water/sewer or other key public infrastructure beyond municipalities, especially to key sites having development potential; be “strategic” in extending infrastructure by seeking to maximize return on public investment
- County enforces basic land use regulations and actively seek some clear goals beyond basic management of development, especially those that generate higher quality development and facilitate conversion to a new economy
- Actively seek new economic opportunities such as tourism, distribution, high-skill manufacturing, logistics, technology, etc.
- Consciously seek higher quality residential development; encourage moderate population growth of somewhat higher income residents
- Out-commuting to jobs in surrounding areas will continue to occur, but seek to contain more jobs within Rockingham County as well as to capitalize on rather than be victimized by this phenomenon. For example: (see next item)
- Provide broad range of services, retail, etc. within the County to stem outflow of consumer dollars to surrounding areas

Potential Results

- Freedom of individual landowner to make choices regarding land development is somewhat less than under Options A and B
- County is made less vulnerable by reducing dependence on traditional industries subject to intense global competition
- County becomes more attractive to business investment as well as new residents
- Tax base begins to improve and less pressure on public services and tax rates is generated
- A broader range of jobs and consumer choices is made available within Rockingham County
- Public schools receive a broader cross-section of students through in-migration and retention of existing residents

- Demand for housing is increased
- Conversion of farmland to higher-end residential uses with greater profit potential due to increased market demand for mid or higher-end residential
- Greater opportunity for developer to profitably build affordable “stick-built” or modular housing due to availability of public water, which allows for greater residential densities
- Agriculture would continue to operate as it currently does, consistent with market forces; intensive livestock operations would be discouraged
- Property more protected from land uses that detract from rural environment

4.5 Land Use Visioning Analysis

There is a direct link between land use planning and the overall vision of the future that a community has for itself. For example, an innovative and strongly planned urbanized community such as Orange County may have a very different vision of its future than does a rural county that is not zoned. We are living in an ever-changing, dynamic society. Solutions that worked well for many years may not be applicable over the coming decades, and each community is different. In the absence of a community vision, it is virtually impossible to craft a Land Use Plan that will be meaningful for Rockingham County. It is therefore extremely important to build consensus and articulate a clear future vision, to proactively shape it where practical, and to respond realistically as needed. The desired future growth scenario, Option D summarized above, provides a general direction in which to begin forming a more precise land use vision of the County's future. Option D's primary components of **promoting higher-quality development, emphasizing moderate population growth, and retooling and diversifying the economic base for a new economic era** now became a foundation from which to further build upon.

Some remaining fundamental questions that need answered are:

- 1) Should the County play an active role in reshaping the economy for a new era by targeting specific industries for recruitment? Should public infrastructure such as water be used as a stimulus for industry?
- 2) Would the County prefer to be a "bedroom community" that places less importance on creating jobs *within* Rockingham County and instead serves as a residential area for workers who commute outside the County to jobs?
- 3) If the County chooses to have a strong economic base of its own, is it important that it provide affordable housing for workers? To what extent should the need for affordable housing be met by providing manufactured housing, affordable stick-built housing, etc.?
- 4) How important is it for the County to consider the costs of providing public services when guiding land use decisions? How does the County continue to provide a range of housing opportunities and adequately fund and maintain schools and other public services?
- 5) What levels of density are optimal to maintain a desired quality of life and in which areas of the County should these be encouraged? Should the County identify areas for growth and define their characteristics? How should the County manage the conversion of agricultural, forested, and other natural lands?

Although the County will not be able to totally direct its future through local planning efforts, there are actions and policies that it can undertake to shape or respond positively to its future. For example, the forces of the national economy, and increasingly a global economy, are beyond the control of Rockingham County's leaders. Most economists forecast that traditional industries such as textiles, furniture, and tobacco, which have been the foundations of Rockingham County's economy for many years, will continue to decline. How, then, should Rockingham County respond? The land use vision statement presented below attempts to refine and integrate the issues discussed previously in this section into a cohesive picture of Rockingham County's desired overall state 20 years into the future.

4.6 Land Use Vision Statement

In the year 2026, Rockingham County will be widely known throughout the Triad region as a stable and high-quality community in which to live, work, and recreate. Overall population will have risen approximately 35% to 125,000. The County's commitment to sound land development planning programs will have assisted in curbing patterns of unrestrained sprawl and unnecessary consumption of undeveloped land that characterized much of the region in the last quarter of the 20th century. Higher intensity development will occur in and adjacent to designated growth areas and municipalities. Residents will enjoy greater access to public open space, reserved natural areas, and recreation options that emphasize connectivity. Environmental protections will enhance the enjoyment of river corridors resulting in tourism and economic development opportunities. Less dependence on the automobile and greater access to alternative transportation will create a more pedestrian-friendly community. The County's prime farmland and other significant natural resources will have been identified and appropriate incentive measures taken to preserve such land for future generations while providing economic benefits for landowners.

The County will have provided a high level of public facilities at a reasonable cost by incorporating innovative provisions into its growth management policies. Such policies will have the effect of enabling new growth to better pay its way while reducing financial burdens on the public at large. Public water service, as well as limited sewer service, will be provided in strategic areas of the County. Public schools and other education and technology infrastructure will benefit from improved growth management practices and expanded funding sources.

The County will have capitalized on its strategic location within the Piedmont Triad by becoming a leading distribution center as well as by revitalizing its industrial base. The County's high quality of life will have attracted high-tech "knowledge-based" industries and workers, many of whom operate from their homes or telecommute to a vast range of activities throughout the world.

Realizing that not everyone in the County will have participated in a high level of economic progress, appropriate measures will be taken to ensure that such residents will have access to a wide-range of quality affordable housing.

4.7 Summary of Key Points

- Other community plans completed over the past 10 years have cited several common themes important to Rockingham County's future growth potential that include: facilitating a successful economic transition (i.e., traditional to new economy), increasing quality development and quality of life, fostering regional economic connectivity (i.e., pool/coordinate resources), and improving community appearance (i.e., key gateways/corridors).
- Land Use Plan community feedback has emphasized targeting growth to areas that can best accommodate it, preserving agricultural lands and natural areas, developing recreation and tourism opportunities, creating incentives to farm, providing incentives for more housing choices, and recommending more plan specificity.
- A preferred growth management option for Rockingham County emphasized higher quality development, moderate population growth, and retooling and diversifying the economic base.
- The land use vision statement integrates all key plan issues and community feedback, and articulates the County's desired state in 2026. The vision statement reveals that the County will aim to become denser within targeted growth areas, but not at the expense of unrestrained land and natural resource consumption. Growth management policies will prioritize public service facility expansion and mitigate costs, and assist in cultivating a smoother transition to a knowledge-based economy.