Managed Growth and Land Use

Growth management is a strategic tool that allows our community to steer future development while balancing the competing needs for our remaining land. As our population grows, it is crucial to prioritize the preservation of natural and rural environments. However, there is an increasing demand for new housing, which can lead to suburban sprawl, the expansion of suburban areas into previously rural regions. At the same time, the county aims to attract and retain businesses to boost the local economy, necessitating the allocation of land for manufacturing uses.

Forsyth County also faces unique challenges due to its relatively small land area. Our total population is fourth in the state, but we rank 60th in land area. This means we must be more efficient in how we use our land compared to neighboring communities. Forsyth County's physical growth is further constrained by the Muddy Creek Basin, the portion of the county that can be easily and efficiently served by sewer. Sewer expansions beyond this area are costly and must be made strategically. Enhancement of transportation networks, schools, and other public services to accommodate new growth must also be considered.

To effectively manage these competing interests, we need a comprehensive strategy that promotes development where our infrastructure can adequately support it while discouraging development in areas lacking such infrastructure. The Growth Management Plan divides the county into five Growth Management Areas (GMAs), each with distinct characteristics and development priorities: GMA 1 (City/Town Centers), GMA 2 (Urban Neighborhoods), GMA 3 (Suburban Neighborhoods), GMA 4 (Future Growth Area), and GMA 5 (Rural Area). The plan emphasizes careful and deliberate investment to support growth in areas with existing infrastructure, thereby preventing suburban sprawl and promoting more sustainable land use. It also recognizes that the newly constructed Northern Beltway will attract development near the highway's interchanges. The plan serves to guide the preservation of existing neighborhoods, natural areas, farmland, and employment sites, and to identify areas for redevelopment and revitalization.

By carefully planning and balancing development, Forsyth County can ensure a future that accommodates growth while preserving its natural and rural environments for future generations. Prioritizing development where infrastructure already exists will not only preserve rural lands but also enhance the livability and sustainability of the county's urban centers. This strategy also strengthens municipal finances by maximizing the efficiency of public expenditures and increasing the tax base in already serviced areas, ensuring balanced and prosperous growth for the county.

Goal 1: Preserve our rural areas for agricultural uses and natural landscapes.
- Encourage conservation of undeveloped land in the Rural Area (GMA 5).
- Explore the creation of programs that could bank undeveloped land for specific uses, such as for recreation and open space, preservation purposes, or the expansion of farmland. (Also See Vibrant Character and Identity, Goal 6.)
- Support farmland preservation programs to ensure the viability of local agriculture. (Also See Strong Economic Opportunities, Goal 7.)
- Consider ordinances, regulations, and/or programs to facilitate the transfer of development rights from rural to urban areas, allowing for denser development in urban centers while preserving rural landscapes.

- Maintain unique or distinctive view corridors. (Also See Vibrant Character and Identity, Goal 5.)
- Continue to support land use decisions that preserve existing farmland. (Also See Sustainable and Healthy Environment, Goal 6.)
- Encourage cluster development to balance growth and the preservation of open space in appropriate areas. (Also See Vibrant Character and Identity, Goal 6.)
- Support local food initiatives and farmers' markets to promote the economic viability of agricultural land. (Also See Strong Economic Opportunities, Goal 7.)
- Establish partnerships with local land trusts and conservation organizations to facilitate land preservation efforts. (Also See Vibrant Character and Identity, Goal 6.)
- Offer incentives to landowners who commit to long-term conservation easements of unique or distinctive rural or natural areas. (Also See Vibrant Character and Identity, Goal 6.)

Goal 2: Prioritize development where infrastructure already exists.
- Prioritize and potentially incentivize denser, mixed-use, urban development patterns closer to the city center, along growth corridors, and in activity centers to minimize suburban sprawl and the conversion of rural landscapes into housing. (Also See Sustainable and Healthy Environment, Goal 1.)
- Promote efficient land use by allowing low-density attached units in all residential districts to utilize existing infrastructure and prevent sprawl. (Also See Sustainable and Healthy Environment, Goal 1.)
- Make more efficient use of our urban core to avoid suburban development and conversion of rural areas to other uses. (Also See Sustainable and Healthy Environment, Goal 5.)
- Allow mixed-use development wherever commercial zoning is allowed.
- Redevelop underutilized or vacant properties for housing or economic development.
- Promote transit-oriented development (TOD) around public transportation hubs to maximize access to existing infrastructure and reduce reliance on private vehicles. (Also See Connected and Accessible Spaces, Goal 5.)
- Implement brownfield redevelopment programs to revitalize contaminated or abandoned sites for new uses, such as housing, commercial, or recreational purposes.
- Prioritize high-density housing in activity centers and along growth corridors. (Also See Attainable Housing and Stable Neighborhoods, Goal 4.)
- Strategically invest in transportation and sewer/water infrastructure to support housing density and choice. (Also See Attainable Housing and Stable Neighborhoods, Goal 1.)
- Encourage the redevelopment of underused parking lots. (Also See Attainable Housing and Stable Neighborhoods, Goal 4.)

Goal 3: Strategically expand Forsyth County's developable land area to best accommodate future population growth, preserve rural areas, strengthen municipal finances.
- Prioritize infrastructure expansion to fill gaps in Growth Management Areas 2 and 3 before extending sewer into GMA 4 and 5.
- Prioritize density, diversity of uses, and connectivity in areas served by existing infrastructure.
- Promote mixed-use developments in expanding areas to create vibrant, walkable communities with access to amenities and services.
- Allow more intense development around beltway interchanges.
- Promote economic opportunities, including business development sites, at beltway interchanges. (See Strong Economic Opportunities Goal 3)

Goal 4: Create compatible transitions between land uses.

- Prioritize low-intensity commercial as transitions between single-family residential and larger commercial areas.
- Prioritize large-lot residential and low-intensity commercial as transitions between rural and suburban development.
- Locate any commercial uses in rural areas along major roadways, specifically at major intersections.
- Prioritize neighborhood-serving uses, such as cafés, medical offices, and grocery stores, instead of large-scale commercial uses, near residential areas.