

Sustainable and Healthy Environment

Ensuring the health and sustainability of our environment is essential for the growth, success, and overall well-being of our entire community. Climate change poses significant risks to our society as well as specific risks to Forsyth County. Through proactive measures such as reducing our carbon footprint, promoting renewable energy, and fostering sustainable development that ensures long-term viability, we can enhance residents' quality of life. Furthermore, in addition to the protection and preservation of ecosystems, habitats, and environmentally sensitive areas, we are dedicated to environmental justice so that all residents have equitable access to clean air, water, green spaces, and essential resources. Through comprehensive planning and conservation efforts, we aim to safeguard our natural resources, enhance biodiversity, and promote the resilience of our ecosystems for future generations.

Just as overcoming our local housing shortage is pivotal to strengthening our economy, how and where we develop new housing is also central to a sustainable and healthy environment. Addressing our housing shortage logically — by building more housing where most people need it and where utilities, services, jobs, and transit already exist — can have the same climate impacts as the most ambitious goals for electric vehicle adoption. A denser urban form is critical to the development of mixed-use areas that support walking, cycling, and transit use. It also lowers carbon emissions by reducing vehicle miles traveled, energy consumption within buildings, and energy transmission to buildings. We also consume less energy building multifamily housing than for single-family housing. And, when we build more housing in our urban core, we are also choosing to preserve productive agricultural land and natural landscapes in our rural areas.

Supporting local agriculture also helps preserve farmland from urban encroachment and maintains biodiversity. Local food economies support the livelihoods of farmers and strengthen community resilience by diversifying food sources and fostering economic opportunities. With a focus on fresh, seasonal produce, these systems also encourage healthier dietary choices, contributing to the overall well-being of our community. In addition to food access, rural land preservation helps create a healthy environment that includes clean air and water, and opportunities to commune with nature that can improve social connections and mental health. Furthermore, land is a finite resource that, once built upon, almost never returns to its natural state as a greenfield or woodlands. In essence, a local food economy can be both the cause and result of sustainable development and a healthy environment.

Goal 1: Assist climate change mitigation and its local effects on Forsyth County.

- 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.
- Promote efficient land use by allowing low-density attached units in all residential districts to utilize existing infrastructure and prevent sprawl.
- Use sustainable design principles when planning new public facilities.
- Identify and eliminate barriers to renewable energy production in City and County codes and ordinances.
- Continue to electrify and decarbonize City and County facilities and vehicles.
- Promote the integration of renewable energy technologies into current and future developments.

- Promote the use of green infrastructure to improve water quality and reduce stormwater runoff.
- Support recommendations on climate action from the Community Sustainability Program Committee.
- Participate in local and regional planning for emergency response and hazard mitigation, including the development of local environmental emergency hub sites.
- Encourage the conversion of unused farmland to clean energy production where appropriate. **(Also See Strong Economic Opportunities, Goal 7.)**
- Consider incentives to increase energy efficiency in new and existing buildings.

Goal 2: Ensure equal access to clean air, water, and green spaces for all residents, regardless of their socioeconomic status or geographic location.

- Integrate the principles of environmental justice into urban planning processes and infrastructure investments. Consider the needs and priorities of marginalized communities in decision-making and resource allocation.
- Prioritize the equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. Prevent the disproportionate siting of hazardous facilities and polluting industries in disadvantaged communities.
- Incentivize the redevelopment of brownfield sites to mitigate pollution and revitalize urban areas.
- Actively involve residents in decision-making processes related to environmental issues in their neighborhoods.
- Maintain urban green spaces and parks in underserved neighborhoods to improve air quality, provide recreational opportunities, and enhance community well-being.

Goal 3: Develop standards and practices to mitigate the sources of pollution in land use.

- Ensure that best management practices are being implemented to reduce water and air pollution.
- Support policies that encourage diversion of solid waste from landfills and promote sustainable waste management practices.
- Continue to coordinate with the Utilities and Stormwater Departments for water and sewer upgrades, stormwater management, erosion control, and hazard reduction.
- Evaluate potential changes to our noise and lighting ordinances.
- Continue to coordinate the development of local environmental regulations with the State and federal agencies.
- Modify land use regulations, such as parking minimums, setbacks, and minimum lot sizes to improve walkability and make better use of existing infrastructure.

Goal 4: Connect parks, greenways, and other open space into an integrated green network for people and wildlife.

- Identify priority areas for the development of parks, greenways, and open spaces based on factors such as population density, access to nature, environmental significance, and opportunities for connectivity.
- Protect and enhance existing parks and green spaces.
- Design parks and greenways to serve multiple purposes, such as recreation, wildlife habitat, stormwater management, and carbon capture.

- Establish partnerships with community groups and volunteer organizations to help with litter cleanup, invasive species removal, and trail maintenance.

Goal 5: Preserve and protect our local ecology and natural landscapes.

- Make more efficient use of our urban core to avoid suburban development and conversion of rural areas to other uses.
- Encourage infill development in areas with access to existing public services and infrastructure.
- Evaluate the creation of a conservation subdivision use that maximizes rural preservation and natural feature protection.
- Streamline the local permitting process for reuse of vacant or underutilized properties while ensuring state and federal guidelines are met.
- Prioritize the preservation of existing environmental features such as streams, wetlands, and wildlife habitat, balancing development with conservation goals.
- Continue to protect the Yadkin River, a vital natural resource and water source, through conservation efforts and responsible land management practices.
- Encourage the use of native species and prohibit invasive species in design standards for required landscaping.
- Support organizations and programs that educate residents about environmental issues.
- Encourage public participation in conservation initiatives through volunteer programs, citizen science projects, and community outreach events.

Goal 6: Develop and support our local food economy.

- Remove land use barriers to food access to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their socioeconomic status, can obtain nutritious and affordable food.
- Support recommendations of the Urban Food Policy Council to build a sustainable, equitable, and healthy local food system.
- Support the development of agricultural infrastructure between the farm and the table, such as processing facilities and cold storage to help small agricultural businesses extend the shelf life of their products, reduce post-harvest losses, and access new markets. **(See Also Strong Economic Opportunities, Goal 7.)**
- Promote agritourism activities to showcase local agricultural activities and attractions, including farm tours, u-pick experiences, cooking classes using farm-fresh ingredients, wine or cheese tastings, or farm stays. **(See Also Strong Economic Opportunities, Goal 7.)**
- Support incentives and expedited processes for grocery stores and fresh food markets locating in underserved communities and identified food deserts. **(Also See Attainable Housing Choices and Stable Neighborhoods, Goal 4)**
- Ensure all residents, regardless of age, ability, and income, have access to food providers.
- Investigate ways to incentivize the use of land for food production.
- Continue to support land use decisions that preserve existing farmland.
- Support organizations that empower individuals to make healthier food choices and provide education courses on healthy food preparation, nutrition, and culinary skills.