



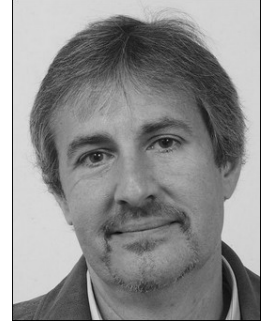
# Times-News

## Planning Henderson County's Future

Monday, December 15, 2008

David Weintraub

ECO NOTES



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Henderson County took a big step forward recently when the Etowah/Horseshoe Small Area Planning Committee drafted a plan for its community's future. Not surprising to anyone who has lived here for more than 15 minutes, the primary issue expressed at community input sessions and in the final draft plan is preserving Etowah and Horseshoe's rural character. This community has faced the brunt of overdevelopment by having some of the worst waterways in the county (Gash Creek, Shaw Creek, Mill Pond Creek), the largest development (Seven Falls) and a preponderance of package plants (and many new ones planned) along the French Broad River. Whether one lives in this community or not, the future of our county could depend on the success or failure of what happens in Etowah and Horseshoe.

The objective of the small area planning process is to get communities actively engaged in planning for their future. When the process works well, communities have the opportunity to put into place stronger rules that guide development, protect sensitive natural resources, preserve farmland, plan walkable communities, and more. The small area planning committee in concert with the Planning Board and the Planning Department did a commendable job on a range of issues including restricting public water in rural areas, limiting building on steep slopes (given the public safety concerns of mudslides, the destruction of viewscapes, and the difficulty of bringing water to such areas), adopting an open space plan to protect rural spaces, requiring environmental assessments prior to development approvals, expanding parks and greenways and much more.

Not only do these proposals serve to protect this community's rural character, but they offer an excellent model to the rest of the county on strengthening our land use rules. By raising the bar for developers, Etowah/Horseshoe can expect to attract good quality development that benefits the environment, brings in jobs and minimizes the drain on county coffers, i.e. our tax dollars. And the developers will profit as well.

One of the most dramatic issues the small area plan raises is the potential catastrophic harm that may result from lax oversight of sewage treatment from new developments. Once Seven Falls and Biltmore Farms come on line, there may be as many as twelve wastewater treatment plants (package plants) on the French Broad River, just upstream from our county's future water supply intake. Given Henderson County's expected growth rate coupled with anticipated persistent drought, we will be unable to rely on the Mills River alone for drinking water. Within the next few years, an intake system will be established on the French Broad River just north of the Mills River.

Package plants are notorious for their breakdowns and their damage to waterways from sewage, bacteria and other toxins. Relying on developers, homeowners' associations and private operators to keep our drinking water safe is a recipe for disaster. Periodic and unforeseen breakdowns of any of the current or proposed package plants could seriously affect this drinking water supply and in turn harm tens of thousands of its customers. If we don't want our water supply to become a witch's brew simmering from previously unregulated growth, our policymakers must take immediate steps. The Small Area Planning proposal recommends consolidating wastewater treatment into one publicly owned facility. We agree. Additionally, we propose that the county create a Regional Wastewater Treatment Authority to centralize existing and future wastewater treatment facilities on and around the French Broad River. The county can ultimately pay for this facility through user fees and connection charges. But without such a regional authority, our future water supply remains on shaky ground.

Any sewer infrastructure plan must also be coupled with an Open Space Plan to prevent urbanization. Such a plan should require that every major development maintain at least 35% open space while making conservation subdivisions that protect open space the preferred method of developing land.

To give your input to the county's Planning Department, contact them at [planning@hendersoncountync.org](mailto:planning@hendersoncountync.org). Most of all, stay involved, our natural heritage is too valuable to let it slip away! And happy holidays...

*David Weintraub is the Executive Director of ECO, the Environmental and Conservation Organization, an organization dedicated to protecting the mountain region's natural heritage. For more information contact ECO at (828)692-0385 or on-line at [www.eco-wnc.org](http://www.eco-wnc.org).*