



# Times-News

## A County with a Vision

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David Weintraub

ECO NOTES

Henderson County was once a county with blinders on. We were considered easy, so developers from around the nation came to turn our green spaces into their gold, knowing that in Henderson County anything goes. Build where there is no water? No problem. County leaders will always come through with a public water hookup. Build on steep slopes where there's a danger of mudslides, massive erosion and little access to water? Come build on us, we don't want to hinder growth and damn the impact on our viewscapes, waterways and our sensitive habitats. Want to turn our apple orchards into cookie cutter clutter? Make it so. Farmland is disposable. Real men like concrete, cement and large metal gates.



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Of course, the people who actually live and work here had something entirely different to say. In the year 2000, more than a thousand county residents were surveyed and participated in community discussions as part of the "Designing Our Future" visioning process. The results can be summarized in their final report:

*"The residents of Henderson County indicate that people, the mountains, and the natural beauty of the landscape are the main things they love about the area. They also expressed an interest in preserving natural unspoiled views. They urge cleaning up and continuing to keep clean our mountains, air, and water. Areas where people can hike, bike, and be outdoors are highly valued by residents. Moreover, citizens desire more greenways and open space in both new and existing developments."*

A few years later, Land Of Sky Regional Council conducted another regional visioning process called the Regional Vision 2010, which had very similar results. In 2003, the county went through a Comprehensive Plan. In the course of accumulating over 10,000 responses and holding 14 community input sessions, the overwhelming response was that:

*"The rural / scenic qualities of the county should be protected, that development should be visually attractive, that development should steer away from flood prone areas, and that the County should protect the natural environment."*

Yet time and time again, when our leaders were asked to put our community's concerns to paper, the results were the same. "We can't do anything to hinder growth." There's no argument that development is a fact of life in the mountains. Once the economy turns around, growth will once again be on the front burner. The question is, will growth be responsible, consistent with protecting what's most valuable about this place, or will it be scorch-and-burn leading ultimately to the loss of jobs, industry and tourism, turning our county into another non-descript "Anytown, USA."

The truth is Henderson County has found its vision. The good people of the Etowah-Horseshoe community came together over the past year and a half and drafted a community plan that would protect the rural character of this community. Their plan which was part of the county's small area planning process calls for stormwater rules that will protect water quality and aquatic life and restrictions on public water in rural communities which was called for in the Comprehensive Plan. It also calls for establishing an Open Space Plan for the community which would protect land in its natural state, thereby creating green corridors for people and habitats, restricting development on steep slopes, asking the county to oversee wastewater treatment, a Pandora's soup waiting to boil over, and much more.

Should the Etowah-Horseshoe plan be approved by the Board of County Commissioners, it would establish a tremendous precedent for the county, making our community more sustainable and more economically sound. Developers who come here under the new rules will likely be more financially successful since recent studies have made it clear that people want to live where there is massive open space more than they want a mega-mansion hanging off a mountaintop. This is the kind of twice green proposition where everyone comes out a winner.

The plan needs to get past the county's Planning Board and the Commissioners first. If we're going to take the county in a greener direction, these boards need to hear from you. Tell them how important it is that they listen to the community's desires and pass these important proposals. For the contact information of these boards, please log onto the ECO website, [www.eco-wnc.org](http://www.eco-wnc.org). Please write them today and attend the Planning Board meeting on Thursday, February 19<sup>th</sup> at 5:30 PM at the old Commission Chambers at 1<sup>st</sup> and King Sts.

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