



# Times-News

## Help Protect the Places We Hold Dear

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ECO NOTES



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Just four years ago, our county commissioners passed a Comprehensive Plan based on a community consensus that:

- 1) Agriculture and open space should be protected,
- 2) Growth should be shaped through the provision of services,
- 3) Development should be environmentally responsible, and
- 4) Development should be visually attractive and should respect the rural and scenic character of the county.

For nearly two decades before the comp plan process began, county residents were engaged in numerous efforts to protect our county's natural resources including "Designing Our Future," "Sustainable Henderson" and dozens of community hearings which were held, leading to the adoption of the Comprehensive Plan (CCP). Interestingly enough, each of these efforts produced the same results: residents were concerned about the disappearance of our open spaces, the sacrificing of our natural heritage on the altar of uncontrolled development, and the need to create some balance between growth and natural resource protection.

Once the CCP process ended, the next step was for the county to develop a code to insure that "balanced, sustainable growth is environmentally sustainable in that it maintains the integrity of complex ecological systems while promoting economic viability and social equity." Last year, county commissioners passed the Land Development Code (LDC) which was a good first step. However density restrictions, without rules on controlling infrastructure, lead to sprawl turning our community's unique character into "any other place."

As our comp plan wisely declares, growth is balanced and sustainable when government creates rules that limit the connection of infrastructure (public water, roads and sewers) to our rural landscapes. What seems to be a no-brainer for most folks who live here has eluded many of our commissioners. You cannot connect public water to every rural corner of our county without paying a steep price. If history is any guide, once public water, roads and other infrastructure are brought to the countryside, the countryside goes by the wayside. Nothing prevents development from overtaking farmland, hardwood forests and wetlands.

That's why it is hard to understand how our commissioners can simultaneously support our "hometown character" by doing things like restoring our historic courthouse and then turn around and approve bringing public water to developments in Zirconia, Etowah and Bearallow Mountain. Could it be that there's something in the water in commission chambers?

Many local residents have been calling attention to these contradictions. The response by some commissioners has been that the CCP is a "living document." A living document is one that can be amended to better fulfill its purpose. Living documents cease to be "alive" when they are steadily chipped away, turning our rural character into the familiar grey of so many other places.

It's time our local politicians heard from us. They need to know that it is possible to foster both growth and protection of our natural heritage. It is possible to offer our farmers a better choice than selling their land in order to stay afloat. If farmers were allowed to sell density credits to developers, they could receive financial benefits enabling them to keep their farms. If our commissioners established rules that guided growth, builders and developers would build things that would be more valuable and the sacred green places that we love would remain.

If we raise the bar on what kind of development is acceptable (development that protects open space with interconnected greenways and protection for natural heritage areas) we all win. By doing this, development does not become a race for the bottom, which benefits all of us, including developers who care about this place. If we kill the goose that laid the golden egg, who would want to move here? Who would want to remain? Finally, if we build housing that's affordable, our native population does not become an endangered species, but can continue to thrive.

Some have suggested that bringing city water to rural spaces is imperative to increase fire protection and to provide all of the modern conveniences of life. There is no denying that living in the country has its benefits and its costs. Waking up to Carolina wrens and babbling brooks rather than tractor trailers and non-stop construction vehicles are some of them. Our rural communities have no Wal-Marts down the block or shopping malls across the street and this is certainly a reason why people live there. If we want to keep it that way, commissioners have to be mindful of limiting our infrastructure in these communities.

Our government officials need to hear from us: Homeowners, small businessmen, farmers, and renters who live here knowing it's the next best place to heaven. In a perfect world, builders would only build where higher density already exists. In a not-so-perfect world (the one we live in), government needs to set the rules of the games while we still have something left worth protecting.

That's why ECO is launching a campaign to protect our rural spaces. We will be circulating a petition expressing our concerns to our commissioners, holding town hall meetings in selected communities to discuss these issues and present well thought out proposals to our commissioners.

I fully supported the resurrection of our old courthouse because restoring it was about restoring our community's legacy, who we are, what we care about, and our small town integrity. If it was only about fixing up an old building, what was the point? Historical preservation means little unless we take steps to preserve our past by protecting our future.

Our historical courthouse was more than a decrepit old building. So are our mountains, our waterways and our forestland. Let's protect our family jewels and leave future generations a legacy by protecting the places that we hold dear. Won't you join us? To sign and distribute our petition and find out about our town hall meetings, please log on to our Web site: [www.eco-wnc.org](http://www.eco-wnc.org).

Don't wait, once it's gone, it's gone.

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