

Rural Area Plan: Public Comments

7/1/16

Public comments were solicited from Monday, May 16, 2016 through Friday, June 10, 2016. Comments were submitted via email, phone, and in-person conversations. Comments and questions were also collected at the two public meetings held during this time period for the Planning Board and Board of Commissioners. Responses are provided for each comment or question to clarify context and resolution.

*Abbreviations are used as follows: Rural Area Plan (RAP); Davidson Planning Ordinance (DPO).

I. MOBILITY/CONNECTIVITY

STREET CONNECTIONS

1. Street Network/Conceptual Roads:

- a. **Traffic:** A few citizens asked whether allowing more development would increase traffic.

Response: The RAP presentations outlined how the Town has intentionally done nothing and/or resisted development and nonetheless the area has still changed. This plan allows the Town to accommodate increased development and, perhaps counterintuitively, improve connectivity and open space preservation through thoughtful development according to Davidson's principles. It allows the Town to capture the benefits of development and not just the negative effects currently experienced.

- b. **Conceptual Roads:** Several residents asked whether the proposed roads were final and would be built as shown (i.e. through certain properties).

Response: The network is conceptual – intended to illustrate Davidson’s principles regarding a smaller, interconnected network of streets in the event that such parcels come forward for development. The plan does not propose dedicated right-of-way on particular properties.

2. **Davidson Bypass:** Several different parties indicated that they prefer the RAP’s proposed connection from Concord Rd. up through Presbyterian Rd. to the previously proposed "Davidson Bypass" shown on other transportation plans. The previous plans identified a connection through the Davidson College Ecological Preserve and active farms; this plan does not support that connection.

3. **June Washam/River Ford Dr. Connection:** A variety of comments were received about this particular connection, with some in favor and some against. Those in favor cited the increasing traffic burden being born by June Washam Rd., with this connection identified as a helpful relief to distribute traffic more broadly across the area in accordance with Davidson’s principles. Concerns about the proposed connection centered on the existing topographical and floodplain constraints of the crossing.

4. **Fisher Farm Connection:** Several comments were received during the Public Comment Period that opposed a road of any type through Fisher Farm. Other comments noted that a connection to Fisher Farm from the west, but not penetrating the site, was appropriate if the land west of the park and across the West Branch of the Rocky River develops.

Response: In the event that the land to park’s west develops, a connection to the park from this side enjoys general support. A connection through the park is not generally supported. The RAP

will be revised to remove the proposed connection Fisher Farm and instead recommend consideration of a connection from the west to Allison Farm Regional Park (i.e. Abersham) since the road network with this facility already exists and extends nearly down to the West Branch of the Rocky River.

- 5. Shearer Road:** A few comments concerned the speed of traffic on Shearer Rd. and how the proposed three-lane cross-section, including a turning lane, is not desirable.

Response: The Town of Davidson does not prefer the three-lane cross-section. However, it's important to include this section as an alternative in the RAP because Shearer Rd. is an NCDOT roadway, which means Davidson has less control over the roadway design. Therefore, the plan makes this cross-section available for targeted application at specific intersections where NCDOT would otherwise propose its own design, which may not be congruent with the Town's approach to connectivity and roadway design (i.e. more smaller streets that disperse traffic and enhance neighborhood character rather than fewer larger streets that lead to more congestion). Simply put, it's a safeguard against incompatible street types that would threaten Shearer Road's rural character.

EAST ROCKY RIVER ROAD

- 6. Scenic By-way:** A few comments suggested utilizing a scenic overlay district for this corridor, as proposed on Grey and Shearer Roads.

Response: After close review of the East Rocky River corridor, the RAP does not recommend extending the scenic overlay standards to this corridor. The proposed scenic overlay standards for Grey and Shearer Roads mirror the existing NC Scenic Byway designation or represent an extension of this designation along a previously-designated corridor. The East Rocky River Road is not a part of this program.

GREY ROAD

- 7. Road Shoulders:** Should Grey Rd. feature shoulders on the proposed street cross-section?

Response: Charrette participants conveyed to the project team the importance of preserving Grey Road's character. The proposed cross-section preserves that character by not including shoulders and including a greenway set back from the roadway. Also, the 10' vegetated swales featured in the cross-section serve as a natural shoulder.

JUNE WASHAM ROAD

- 8. Traffic Calming:** Comments cited the increasing traffic on this road and the need for speed along this roadway to be mitigated.

Response: The proposed development of the Washam tract (PID #00743103) will include the installation of a three-way stop intersection at the southern portion of June Washam Road's "S" curve. This feature will reduce speeding through the area. Additionally, new development proposed along June Washam Road will contain streets designed according to meet the current DPO standards, which limit the lane width, require on street parking within developments, and include street trees (all features that help reduce speeding). With these proposed and required improvements already included with the development process, the Rural Area Plan does not need to address these features specifically.

DAVIDSON-CONCORD RD.

- 9. Greenway from Robert Walker Drive to NC 73:** Questions were asked about a potential greenway connection from the existing greenway at Robert Walker Dr. and Davidson-Concord Rd. to NC 73 should be included as part of the Rural Area Plan.

Response: This section of roadway is not in the Rural Study Area; but, this facility is proposed within the Town's Walks & Rolls Plan – so it is documented as a needed facility.

GREENWAYS

- 10. Extension to June Washam:** Planning Board members asked if it was possible to extend the proposed West Branch Greenway south to June Washam Rd.

Response: The current greenway network in this part of River Run features on-street connectivity and/or sidewalks, but not a dedicated extension of the greenway. The Walks & Rolls Plan does not include a recommendation for an off-street extension of this facility, which would require crossing a golf-course in middle of a fairway.

- 11. Way Station:** Comments were made in support of the way station facilities and requesting clarification of their inclusion in development plans.

Response: The plan identifies potential “way stations” or trail facilities at various points along the West Branch Greenway. It should be noted that these are potential locations; the plan does not ask for four specific facilities but illustrates potential locations at four different points along the pathway. They are not mandatory as part of the development process. The facilities are envisioned to be part of the larger Carolina Thread Trail and would serve as useful destinations within this larger trail network. The plan recommends adequate separate between facilities, generally considered to be a mile or more. The RAP will be revised to further clarify that these are potential locations, not mandatory, and are recommended to meet certain spacing requirements.

II. OPEN SPACE/LANDSCAPE

- 12. Tree Preservation:** A few inquiries were received regarding provisions for preserving tree canopy or saving particular trees.

Response: The current DPO contains provisions for maintaining tree canopy (9.3.1.A) and saving trees of a certain size (9.3.2).

- 13. Hunter/Smith/Whisnant Tract:** Some asked why this area, which is in Cornelius' jurisdiction, is featured in Davidson's Rural Area Plan.

Response: It is listed as part of the RAP because the plan seeks to identify areas of significant open space value with rural character and to which Davidson and/or organizations such as the Davidson Lands Conservancy or Mecklenburg County Parks & Recreation may have the opportunity to contribute, as is the case with this large tract adjacent to the Town's southern border at the end of Pine Road.

- 14. Viewsheds:** Some comments contemplated a viewshed restriction to preserve a view without development for users of Fisher Farm park when standing at the West Branch of the Rocky River and looking west across the river.

Response: The RAP establishes significant buffers, proposing 600' of preserved wildlife corridor on each side of identified tributaries – including the West Branch. These buffers represent best

practice as identified by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC). In their review of the draft RAP, the WRC commended the RAP's forward-thinking approach in proposing this standard.

15. Contiguous Open Space: One comment sought an increase in contiguous open space, particularly around Allison/Fisher Farms.

Response: The RAP illustrates contiguous open space throughout important floodplains, especially the West Branch of the Rocky River. This corridor currently serves and is envisioned to remain a significant ecological corridor. The RAP endorses the NC Wildlife Resource Commission's recommended buffer of 600' on each side of the waterway to support wildlife habitat. Natural connections west towards McConnell neighborhood and east towards the Rocky River Bluff Nature Preserve are also proposed. These major connections are in addition to minor connections threaded throughout potential development areas; each affords contiguous open space to be achieved through the private development process. This plan continues to support public, private, and non-profit efforts to promote conservation through stewardship and acquisition.

The RAP will be revised to include discussion of the importance of preserving upland areas within the 600' buffer, in addition to floodplain areas.

16. Habitat Preservation: Comments were received recommending the creation of additional provisions to ensure adequate habitat preservation, including the targeted expansion of existing preserves.

Response: The RAP will be revised to prioritize land next to the Rocky River Bluff and West Branch Nature Preserve for targeted acquisition of additional lands. Additionally, the RAP will be revised to recommend that new development projects must create – or not preclude – connections with existing natural space, or to be located so as to allow future natural space connections on adjacent properties. Lastly, as noted earlier, the RAP will be revised to include discussion of the importance of preserving upland areas within the 600' buffer, in addition to floodplain areas.

17. Incentives for West Branch Greenway Development: During the comment period, it was noted that there are five parcels that lie between Narrow Passage and Fisher Farm (on the east side of the West Branch of the Rocky River). Is there a way to incentivize easements to ensure that land east of the river features the proposed West Branch greenway?

Response: Along with the Davidson Planning Ordinance, the RAP looks to the adopted Walks & Rolls Plan to determine greenway locations. In the event these properties develop the greenway would be required to be constructed because it's illustrated on the adopted Walks & Rolls Plan. Any incentives for easements prior to the land's development would need to be worked out with individual land owners and likely in partnership with the Davidson Lands Conservancy and Mecklenburg County Parks & Recreation. Any parcels currently adjacent to county-owned recreation land would be eligible for county bond funding targeting acquisition of future park properties.

To further facilitate these efforts, the RAP will propose a new Action Item to establish incentives for and/or target the acquisition of these specific parcels for greenway easement. The Action Item will recommend an incentive that offers a 1:1.5 credit; so, for every acre (or portion thereof) that a party contributes to securing land for these parcels as part of the West Branch Greenway, they will receive a 1.5 acre (or portion thereof) reduction in their required open space contribution as part of a development proposal.

18. Retain Rural Character: A couple comments stressed the need to maintain the area's rural character as it was when residents moved to the area.

Response: The RAP strives to balance both conservation aims and development interests in the midst of a rapidly-changing landscape. Development has been occurring in the rural area for many years, sometimes on a large scale. Oftentimes, even natural features such as fence lines or stands of trees are relatively new features of the landscape, having been installed within the last couple decades. Buffers along stream corridors, scenic overlay standards, detailed street cross-sections that respect historic development patterns, and allocation of Planning Areas that fit with the surrounding or future context are ways in which the RAP attempts to retain the area's most important rural characteristics in the midst of great development pressure.

III. MASTER PLAN

19. Historic Resources: How were historic resources identified? How was it determined what was significant historically and what was not? How should we use the inventory?

Response: The resources were identified by working with individual landowners and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Landmarks Commission to create an inventory of potential resources. The inventory should be used a development comes forward for particular sites, to evaluate historic resources on a case-by-case basis. The RAP will be revised to include this inventory within the plan's Implementation section.

20. Encouraging Development: Will this plan encourage more development in the rural area?

Response: That's not the plan's intent. It's a 30-year plan to proactively determine how the Town of Davidson's planning principles should be applied to the rural study area. Given the significant development pressures within and surrounding the rural area, and the expressed desire of many rural landowners to exercise their development rights, the plan endeavors to acknowledge such rights and utilize the development process to increase dedicated open space and habitat area. The build-out for this plan may not be realized exactly as depicted; it is not envisioned to begin immediately and as it evolves it may look different than the plan. But, the plan gives the Town and its citizens an idea of how development should plan for connectivity, walkability, and open space preservation in the event that development comes forward.

21. Study Area NE Corner: The plan contemplates the merits of low-density, conservation-oriented development in the study area's NE corner across from Allison and Fisher Farms. One benefit of development in this area would be to allow walkable access to these amenities. During the comment period discussed occurred regarding whether walking facilities should be in place in this area prior to development approval.

Response: The Town incorporates walkability into each development, which may take different forms in different contexts (sidewalks with street trees in urban areas, versus gravel paths in rural areas). Certain landowners in this area have expressed an interest in developing their land. If development in this area is proposed, it would be subject to the Town's connectivity requirements for sidewalks and/or greenways, as applicable.

22. Fiscal Impact/Metrics: Planning Board members asked whether it was possible to conduct a detailed Fiscal Impact Analysis of the entire Rural Area Plan proposal(s). They voiced the need for metrics against which the plan could be measured.

Response: Staff analyses will include information on a project-by-project basis. The information will be drawn from the Town's Cost of Fiscal Land Use Impact Study undertaken in 2014. The study

provides prototypes for different development styles that can be used to understand, generally, potential implications of a development.

23. Retail Nodes:

- a. **Barger Node:** At the May 2016 Planning Board meeting citizens asked how the proposed node would be similar or differ from the St. Alban's node.

Response: The Barger Node is intended to have greater visibility along Concord Rd. and offer a larger variety of building types and uses than permitted in the St. Alban's commercial component. The size and composition of the Barger Node, in combination with the manner in which it will address the adjacent streets, will distinguish this node from St. Alban's.

- b. **Shearer/East Rocky River Node:** Some comments expressed a desire for small-scale commercial and residential opportunities at this intersection. Other comments stated that no commercial development should be allowed here, with particular concerns voiced about a potential gas station and strip mall.

Response: The RAP contemplates a small commercial node at this intersection. The plan utilizes the Neighborhood Services designation for land parcels immediately adjacent to the intersection. This designation does not permit gas stations, and no standard in the DPO permits strip mall development in Davidson. Rather, Neighborhood Services permits a variety of commercial uses, all scaled to fit within a low-density and/or residential context. Commercial Services, Professional Services, and Retail/Secondary describe the majority of commercial uses permitted in Neighborhood Services areas. These allowed uses cover a wide range of smaller-scale services and establishments: Personal services (i.e. dry cleaning, hair salons); professional services (i.e. financial, architectural, and real estate offices); and, retail services/goods (i.e. bookstore, coffee shop, specialty food store).

- 24. Existing/Planned Nodes:** When identifying potential commercial nodes as part of the RAP, did the plan consider commercial areas at NC 73?

Response: Yes. The RAP centers are intended to serve different retail markets than the NC 73 commercial areas; the RAP nodes are envisioned as neighborhood-oriented, not regional-oriented.

- 25. Density:** Several persons inquired about the plan's proposed densities and whether density maximums should be required throughout the entire rural study area (including the Neighborhood Services, Neighborhood General, Neighborhood Edge, and Rural Planning Area designations within this area).

Response: Outside of the specific Rural Planning Area designation, the Davidson Planning Ordinance (and Rural Area Plan) do not specify densities. This is because density can be a poor predictor of the quality of a development. Instead, Davidson regulates density indirectly by limiting the type of building and building height that can be constructed in a particular place. Provision of open space factors into this, too; with Davidson's mandatory open space requirements (ranging from 20% in Neighborhood General to 40%, 50%, and 70% in the Neighborhood Edge and Rural Planning Areas), the amount of development that can occur on a site – and, therefore, its density – are limited by this criteria. Density caps are not recommended by the plan except in the Rural Planning Area.

- 26. Planning Areas:** Why re-designate parcels as different Planning Areas such as Neighborhood Services, General, and Edge? Why not just change the standards for the Rural Planning Area that exists today?

Response: Parcels near the existing Town fabric provide greater opportunity for the logical, organic expansion of the Town's existing village areas; so, revising Rural Planning Area standards and applying such standards in these areas may not be the best fit. Village-based standards such as those contained in the Neighborhood General and Neighborhood Services are a better fit for such areas, including crossroads that may develop as small commercial nodes in the future. Likewise, there are undeveloped rural parcels surrounded by existing development – the Neighborhood Edge Planning Area, which contains a 40% open space requirement, makes more sense in many of these cases. For areas that are neither where the Town could expand organically or not adjacent to existing or anticipated development, revised Rural Planning Area standards with a strong emphasis on open space preservation are more appropriate contextually.

27. Farms: Comments were received regarding agricultural uses in the rural area:

1. The RAP should contain a greater focus on supporting local food production; and,
2. Will existing agricultural or farm operations be in conflict with future development?

Response:

1. The RAP specifies an explicit aim (Action Item 5) that the Town would work with developers to design and realize local food production opportunities. Further policy work or approaches could be developed as a result of this plan.
2. The state's "Right to Farm" law, NC Statute 106-700, outlines provisions that permit such operations in existence for a least a year to continue without being considered a nuisance. Note that areas that receive sewer access are required to annex to be within Town limits, which subjects applicable parcels to the Town's Municipal Code.

28. Agrarian Development: Several positive comments were received regarding agricultural-focused developments, such as the Serenbe, GA example highlighted in the RAP. Many suggested this paradigm is worth embracing and state that the Town should explore how this would work in Davidson. At least some realtors believe this would be a successful undertaking in this community. It was discussed whether the Town could/should incentivize open space areas to be utilized as agricultural plots.

Response: Within the NC statutory context, there are limited tools available to directly support this emerging development concept. Neither the RAP nor the Davidson Planning Ordinance preclude this type of development. However, as with Serenbe, such development in this context is contingent upon willing landowners and a willing market. The plan allows for this to happen in the event that interest arises. Action Item 5 explicitly states that local food production should be encouraged.

In terms of incentivizing such development, the RAP focuses on the preservation of open space through mandatory open space set-asides, which can be utilized for agricultural purposes if desired. The RAP will recommend revision of the Davidson Planning Ordinance to allow land set aside for agricultural purposes to be credited towards a development's open space requirements.

IV. OVERALL/PROCESS

29. Process: At the Planning Board and Board of Commissioners meetings a citizen asked about the sewer extension process and the impacts of re-designating land that requires sewer in order to be developed if sewer is not currently planned for different areas.

Response: The Board of Commissioners meeting included discussion of the sewer extension process and how land owners may elect to construct facilities on their own and seek reimbursement from CLT Water once those systems are dedicated to the authority. These requests are made and considered by the BOC and CLT Water.

30. Participation: A few comments were received on the notification process and at the Planning Board meeting board members asked how many people participated.

Response: 70-80 persons participated in the 2015 charrette, with the total rising to more than 100 once including participation in the May 2016 Planning Board Meeting; June 2016 Board of Commissioners Work Session; and, Public Comment Period in which staff met with multiple landowners. Moreover, as of mid-July the RAP website has received over 900 views, with 700 being unique visits. The draft RAP has been downloaded over 100 times, with more than 80 unique visitor downloads. See the RAP website for further information on public engagement that has taken place to date.