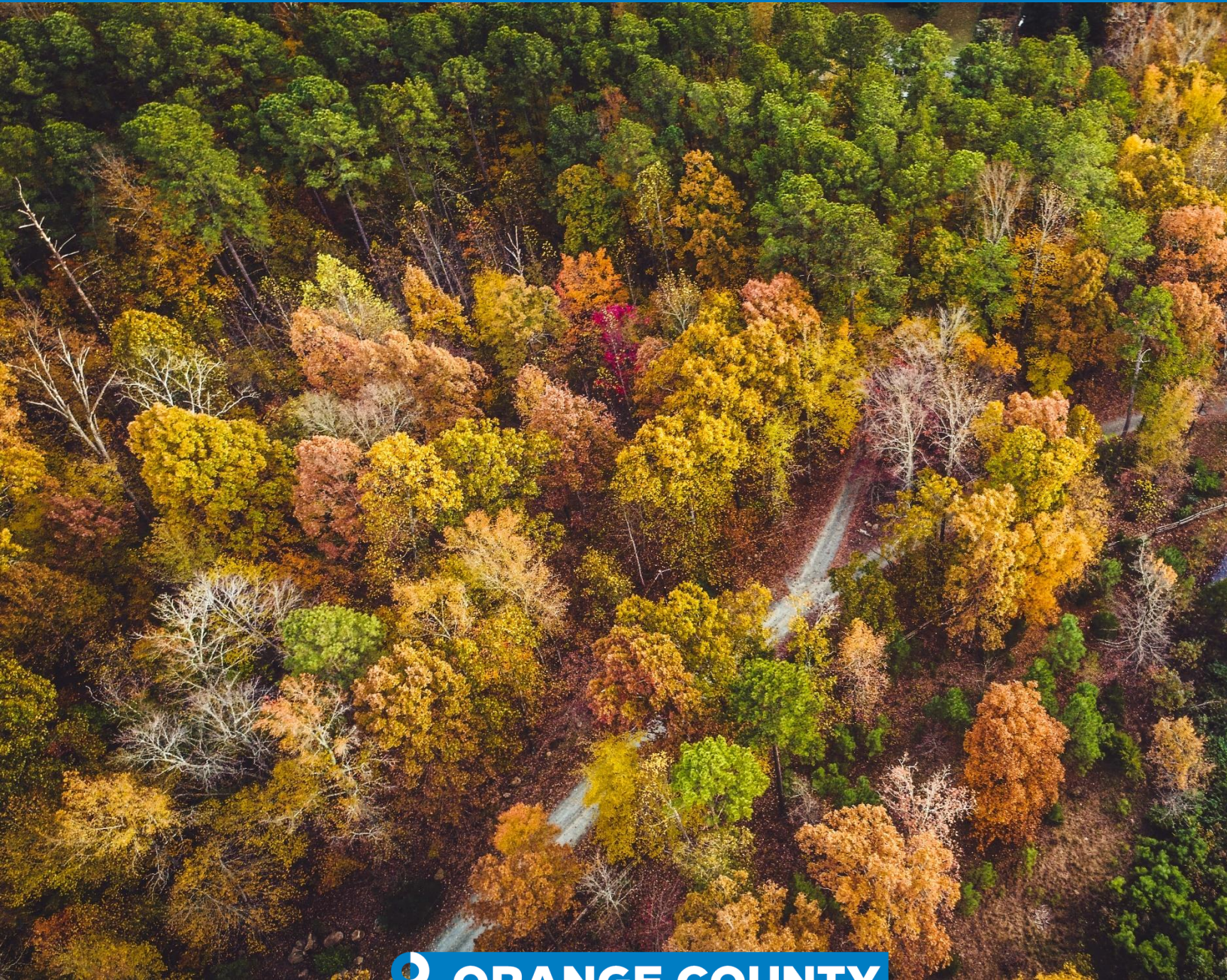


# ORANGE COUNTY LAND USE PLAN 2050

## Phase 1 Stakeholder Interviews Summary Report





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## ABOUT THE SUMMARY REPORT

This document summarizes inputs collected from stakeholders interviewed during Phase 1: Project Launch. The purpose of this summary is to share the key takeaways from these inputs with the County’s project management team. These insights were used in the development of the Community Engagement Window #1 (CEW#1) activities and polling questions.

### List of Stakeholder Interviews

Throughout July and August, the Project Team conducted kickoff interviews with 57 people, in small groups or individually. In addition, email surveys were shared with stakeholders who could not attend in person or virtual interview appointments. Approximately 45% of those invited to participate completed an interview, and the remaining 55% were invited to participate in the email survey.

In-person or virtual interviews included the following:

#### *Elected and Appointed County Representatives*

- Board of County Commissioners
- Planning Board
- Affordable Housing Advisory Board
- Agricultural Preservation Board
- Economic Development Board
- Commission for the Environment
- Parks and Recreation Council
- Historic Preservation Committee
- County Department Leadership
- Community Relations
- County Manager
- Emergency Services
- Economic Development
- Planning and Inspections
- Sheriff
- Solid Waste

#### *County Partners and Utility Providers*

- Chapel Hill Carrboro City Schools
- Chapel Hill/Orange County Visitors Bureau
- Carrboro Planning Department
- Chapel Hill Planning Department
- Chatham County Planning Department
- Durham Planning Department
- Mebane Planning Department
- Hillsborough Planning Department
- Hillsborough Utilities
- Mebane Utilities
- OWASA
- Orange County Public Schools

## Approach for Interviews

Each interview lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours. During the interviews, the Project Team asked stakeholders questions about their perspective and opinions on:

- The role of their organization or agency,
- Key long-range opportunities and challenges facing Orange County and the Triangle Region,
- The current comprehensive plan and their organization's/department's use of it in day-to-day work,
- How current land use decisions impact their organization/department and its mission,
- Desires for what ought to be included in the new comprehensive plan,
- Long-term infrastructure needs,
- Public engagement strategies, education opportunities, and relevant "hard-to-reach" contacts,
- Other key plans/strategies/documents that would be important for the Project Team to see, and
- Areas of common interest/opportunities for collaboration (with partner agencies).

Stakeholders were encouraged to be candid with their responses to provide the most granular possible understanding to members of the project team.

## STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW THEMES

The following is a general, topical summary of interviews that provide the key themes from these discussions. Its intent is to provide an understanding of the state of the County as it stands in 2023 from the perspective of stakeholders, and to identify an initial list of key policy issues that need to be addressed during this effort. These themes will help inform the community engagement approach to include community members in the process of developing the plan that will govern land use in Orange County for the next twenty-five years.

Six themes, presented here in no priority order, emerged from the interviews:

- **Continue Land and Water Conservation Efforts and Address Climate Concerns** - Rural and farmland conservation and environmental protection is strongly supported in Orange County, particularly as it relates to watersheds. More can be done to prepare for severe weather events, reduce the county's carbon footprint, and support sustainable development.
- **Increase Local Employment Opportunities and Enhance Fiscal Health**- Increasing economic development, local job opportunities, and the local tax base are important

objectives that can lead to more living wage jobs for residents and maintaining a healthy fiscal future for the County.

- **Facilitate Development of Affordable Housing** - There is strong concern over the lack of affordable housing for the workforce and residents and that limited land and infrastructure available for development further challenges this issue. This includes housing for lower-income households that hold many jobs in the county as well as the growing challenge for middle-income households to find affordable housing. This is a regional issue that no local government jurisdiction can tackle alone.
- **Grow Transit Service** - Tied to affordable housing is the need to create better transit options that connect workers to employment and other destinations, in and between towns and rural areas. This includes creating “last mile” connections to transit by providing walkable and bikeable developments that provide access to transit.
- **Enhance Rural Area Assets** - There is interest in providing more assets to rural residents, such as broadband, living-wage employment opportunities in the county, accessible daily service needs, and better road connectivity.
- **Plan with Jurisdictional Partners** - Interjurisdictional planning is likely needed in areas of common interest near jurisdictional boundaries to ensure common visions are being developed and successful outcomes are achieved. This also offers the opportunity for partnerships to leverage shared resources, particularly related to land conservation, transit service and transportation planning generally, economic development, and affordable housing production.

The following sections provide more detail on the insights shared during interviews that led to development of the themes.

## Continue Land and Water Conservation Efforts and Address Climate Concerns

- While many people move to Orange County because of UNC/UNC Health, many come for other reasons, predominant among those being the natural beauty and rural character of the county (especially relative to surrounding counties).
- The Rural Buffer is seen by many environment-focused stakeholders as the primary facilitator of preserving Orange County’s rural character outside Chapel Hill/Carrboro, and the main reason why Orange County doesn’t resemble Chatham, Wake, or Alamance counties.
- There are worries that Mebane’s growth eastward, if not managed, will cause unmitigated growth into Orange County and endanger the environment.
- Progressive environmental regulations in Orange County helps further land conservation and have allowed for continued watershed protection.

- Chatham County (and potentially others) could be regional partners in providing recreational facilities, habitat protection, and conservation efforts.
- Environmental justice issues are important, especially because historically minority populations have been subjected to worse environmental conditions than their more advantaged counterparts. The historically Black Rogers Road community, for instance, was located next to an active landfill by virtue of that community having less political voice. Making sure that all populations receive equitable health outcomes, as well as access to natural spaces, which can be key to maintaining and improving mental health, was mentioned by many stakeholders as a key agenda item for the upcoming Plan.
- Making sure that there are more opportunities for passive recreation in the environment (or low-impact transportation, like bicycling) is important.
- There is a strong need to start monitoring and reducing PFAS and PFOA pollution.
- Climate change is seen as a real threat by almost all stakeholders, but there is debate as to whether the county is doing enough to mitigate and adapt to climate change or whether it is doing too much and neglecting some of its other responsibilities, such as economic development.
- Agricultural landowners who are interested in maximizing the return on their land are concerned about zoning limitations and environmental protections that restrict development potential. This problem is especially notable around the Rural Commercial Activity Nodes (RCANs), where much of the surrounding property is currently agricultural or owned by farmers, and the current comprehensive plan projects for commercial development that is difficult to develop.
- Similarly, schools, sanitation services, and utilities can find it difficult to find property to locate their services on by virtue of that land being reserved for conservation purposes or required for set aside by environmental regulations.
- The County could be doing more to support climate action, resiliency, and sustainable development on public and private lands. One concern is being prepared for severe droughts exacerbated by being at the headwaters of the Neuse and Cape Fear River basins.

## **Increase Local Employment Opportunities and Improve Fiscal Health**

- Businesses typically gravitate to Alamance and Chatham Counties because Orange County is seen as less business friendly. Some are concerned that the County does not do enough to change this narrative, which results in businesses exploring other communities in the Triangle. Concerted marketing efforts and clearer regulatory structures that inform businesses of what they should expect when they come to partner with Orange County are important if this narrative is to change.

- Of the four municipalities in Orange County, Mebane is the only one that is actively pursuing larger-scale economic development. While some stakeholders view this as a threat, others consider it to be a good model for how development could look in the county at large.
- Some stakeholders do not believe Orange County is responding competitively to development opportunities throughout the Triangle and Triad regions. Continued industrial development in Chatham and Siler City provides opportunities for Orange County to pursue recruitment of businesses that will be crucial in the supply chains for those industrial hubs. If these businesses locate in Orange County, it is possible that the county would see significant job growth, which would further diversify the economy.
- Emphasis was placed not on Orange County “becoming like Alamance or Chatham counties” but on defining clearly what “valuing conservation” means to businesses. A business that only hears “valuing conservation” might be discouraged from locating in Orange County. If those values are spelled out, then a business can develop plans that comply with those rules, rather than anticipating sunk costs and inevitable rejection.
- Neither UNC nor UNC Health (two of the county’s largest employers and landholders) pay property taxes; however, these entities have provided funding in the past to local governments in Orange County to offset development impacts on services. Limited funding from these institutions impacts the fiscal health of the County government.
- The historical economic center of the Triangle is moving west as Wake County and Cary grow, which could potentially make Chapel Hill/Orange less important overall in regional conversations. However, there is also significant economic growth occurring in Chatham and Alamance, which may result in Orange County finding more economic opportunities in relation to western and southern neighbors with a draw towards the Triad.
- The Rural Buffer (especially along the NC-86 corridor and the area between I-40 and I-85) is one of the primary inhibitors to outward growth in the county and would be extremely in-demand if there was opportunity for commercial development along those corridors. The stretch of I-40 between Hillsborough and Chapel Hill through the Rural Buffer is one of the last undeveloped (and without utilities) stretches of interstate between the western Triad and the eastern Triangle.
- Development permitting (environmental, especially) in Orange County makes it more challenging to locate a business in Orange County, especially when similar benefits can be derived from locating the same business in Chatham or Alamance counties with fewer requirements. Stakeholders used the Walmart just south of the Chatham County line and Buc-ee’s pivot to locating in Alamance as examples of this phenomenon of mixed sales tax revenues.
- Economic development is often contingent on the provision of adequate utilities. Since sewer is typically the most expensive and challenging utility to provide, and since much

of unincorporated Orange County is not connected sewer lines, any future economic development in the county must either require a utility company's partnership and agreement to extend their service or have minimal wastewater needs allowing the business to operate on septic. It has resulted in much of the county's economic development occurring in the west along I-85 and I-40 and producing uses that don't require significant utility service, such as warehousing and distribution, which does not in turn provide a significant amount of new, higher paying jobs.

- Relatedly, there have been various discussions with the City of Durham's water/sewer utility about developing the easternmost economic development area (Eno EDD), but the costs to install gravity mains in areas with significant slopes and challenges related to interjurisdictional goals led to a breakdown in discussions between the county and city. Consequently, it now looks like this EDD will no longer be developed, reducing Orange County's total functional EDDs to two. However, it may be possible for current elected officials and staff to start discussions anew.
- Agritourism (and other local agribusinesses) offer a new way to make farms economically resilient in a modern era where small-scale farming is not as profitable. These uses are supported by the broader county community (generally) and many serve as landmarks in Orange County. Furthermore, these alternative uses of agricultural property allow for their owners to keep those properties in their family, rather than being pushed out by rising property values.
- Economic development stakeholders do not feel like their interests are given as much consideration by decisionmakers as those of environmental groups.
- While the County (and the region) have good jobs for individuals with higher educations, individuals from lower-income, typically minority backgrounds have a harder time finding work, and an even harder time finding work a reasonable distance from affordable housing. Focusing only on technology and research jobs in terms of economic development (instead of industrial or infrastructural labor) can potentially create jobs only for new transplants to the county rather than for the people who already live here.
- The County remains a highly desirable place to move to but has comparatively high taxes relative to other places in North Carolina. Rising taxes could discourage wealthy residents, whose residential property taxes currently make up the largest portion of the County's revenue, from continuing to move to Orange County. Anecdotally, some residents move to Orange County for a time and then move to more affordable areas, in the region, such as Chatham County. This could be exacerbated if taxes continue to rise.
- If wealthy residents left Orange County and started "voting with their feet", the burden of paying for services would fall more to lower-income individuals who might not be able to pay those taxes and would thus also have to leave after a period of paying those higher taxes.



- Nevertheless, people moving from the northeast United States to Orange County do not actually find the cost-of-living as high as people who are from the southern United States. These residents are generally happy to pay the “higher” tax rate since it is lower compared to the tax rate from where they are moving.
- Historically, tax assessment has not been equitable across racial groups of landowners. White residents’ properties are often undervalued, and Black residents’ properties are often overvalued. Assessors have been working to correct this inequity.
- A solid commercial tax base allows for a more diverse revenue base and does not put as much pressure on residents to provide tax funding for services. Commercial property taxpayers are also typically more capable of weathering price shocks, like a tax hike caused by debt servicing a utility system overhaul or upgrade.
- Funding public schools is the County’s largest expense. Based on continued growth in parts of the County, decisionmakers should anticipate having to build (and fund) new schools.
- Environmental stakeholders (and those interested in protecting community character and aesthetics) often oppose economic development that is not compatible with their vision for the county. This often includes chain retail, dollar stores, and other non-local businesses or businesses that do not themselves seem interested in conservation.
- The Buc-ee’s proposed development along I-40 in Mebane is seen as a key example of environmental groups thwarting significant economic development because of a business’ mission being out-of-step with the mission of major county stakeholders.

## Facilitate Development of Affordable Housing

- Rising housing costs have made it difficult for service industry workers to be able to live in Orange County. This has created worker shortages for various businesses in the county (especially in Hillsborough). In some cases, businesses have shortened their workweeks to account for employee unwillingness to drive from their homes in other counties to businesses in Orange County.
- Rising home values raise property tax rates and can make even lower priced housing unaffordable.
- Development of affordable housing in the Chapel Hill/Carrboro area might be more difficult because the Rural Buffer limits available, affordable land and Chapel Hill/Carrboro regulations do not allow for the level of density that would be necessary to offset the limitations created by the Rural Buffer.
- Recent UNC graduates do not have the money to stay in Orange County after graduation. Rising tax rates and limited affordable housing choices do not create any further incentives for them to do so.

- While finding housing for students is important, there are strong worries that any affordable housing in the county will immediately be leased by student renters who do not themselves have an income but who have parents who are willing, able, and have the right credit mix for an expedited renting process. Making sure that there is affordable housing not just for UNC students but also for community members who are experiencing housing insecurity and do not have as much of a social safety net is especially important.
- One affordable housing idea is to reinvigorate the Mobile Home Task Force to support the protection of naturally occurring affordable housing (NOAH) and look for ways to support these households to stay in their homes.
- Chatham County is now working with the Community Home Trust through its Housing Department. This presents a potential opportunity for regional affordable housing partnerships.

## Grow Transit Service

- Regional transit to major employment centers where residents work and to employment centers in Orange County where workers living outside travel to is limited. Improved and new services could alleviate traffic congestion and reduce VMTs.
- Lack of/inadequate/slow public transit disproportionately affects lower income individuals who find it difficult to afford personal vehicles. This is especially poignant with school buses, where parents who have the ability are dropping their children off at school while those children whose parents cannot have hour-long (or longer) one-way commutes, and even get to school late. This is partially due to transportation infrastructure but is also a symptom of a labor shortage for school bus drivers.
- Hillsborough is planning to start construction on a train station in 2027. This station will connect into the Amtrak's Piedmont rail network and is slated to be the anchor for a Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) in Hillsborough, which will likely create a sharp increase in service and utility demand due to the increased population.
- Development in Chatham County has sparked discussion about bus rapid transit between Chatham Park and Chapel Hill, partially to reduce congestion along 15-501. There is much interest on the part of both communities to support this service.
- Bicycling is very popular in Orange County and quite unsafe in the rural areas due to the lack of dedicated bike infrastructure. No dedicated bike lane/easement exists between Hillsborough and Chapel Hill/Carrboro, which requires individuals to share the road with vehicles often going over 50 miles per hour.
- Similarly, pedestrian infrastructure between the two urban cores is nonexistent, forcing individuals to walk on the shoulder of the road, which is often muddy or narrow.

- Hitchhiking is also common at rural nodes like Calvander. The County has historically “not been in the business of sidewalks.”

## Enhance Rural Area Assets

- Broadband expansion and reinforcement of broadband infrastructure offers an opportunity for opening up rural parts of the northern county to development and for taking advantage of telecommuting opportunities. However, increased services (broadband or otherwise) to historically rural areas could raise property values to the point that current residents no longer being able to afford their homes.
- Community septic systems typically face strong regulatory scrutiny, further limiting alternative development and rural density. These regulatory, inspection, and process hurdles often prevent landowners from building accessory dwelling units (ADUs) which are critical to maintaining multigenerational communities and allowing long-time County residents to age in place.
- Many residents living in northern Orange County do not shop in the county but instead shop near where they work or in Roxboro or Durham, where it is easier to access and has less traffic congestion than Hillsborough.
- Connectivity in rural areas of the county is not strong. A road blockage on one road can create a 20+ minute detour because of a lack of cross-streets between large rural “blocks”. This creates problems for school buses and emergency services vehicles.
- Large local service delivery vehicles have trouble navigating/fitting vehicles on narrow private rural roads. A discrepancy between the fire code and the zoning ordinance as to proper road width is one of the sources of this conflict.

## Plan with Jurisdictional Partners

- The DRCHO Work Group – Durham/Chapel Hill/Orange was a regional planning group that formerly met and discussed topics of relevance across jurisdictional boundaries. This model could be considered for other neighboring jurisdictions that share common interests (regional transit, road infrastructure, land use planning in edge areas, utility service across boundaries, etc.)
- With the exception of Mebane, utility limitations and growth management controls limit the amount of potential development in the municipalities. Planning for the remaining developable areas to achieve the highest and best use is paramount.
- The Rural Buffer and the Joint Protection Agreement was built to last. Getting the four jurisdictions (Hillsborough, Orange County, Chapel Hill, Carrboro) back to the table to discuss whether or not it should be revised is perceived by almost all stakeholders to be nearly impossible. Nonetheless, several stakeholders identified opportunities within the

Rural Buffer and just outside that should be reconsidered when updating the County's Future Land Use map:

- NC-86 Corridor between Hillsborough and Chapel Hill, New Hope Market could be a successful mixed-use node
- Northeastern most "triangle" of the Rural Buffer between Chapel Hill and Durham (north of I-40 and including Mt. Moriah Road) – would have impact on Arrowhead area in Durham
- Southeastern most "triangle" between Chapel Hill ETJ and Chatham County line
- Millhouse at railroad tracks (County-owned land outside of USA and OWASA service area)
- White Cross and Rural Industrial Activity Node
- Greene Tract (ongoing effort to be coordinated with)
- Stakeholders from Mebane who understand attitudes in Mebane have a much more reserved stance on development than stakeholders from Chapel Hill/Carrboro and Hillsborough seem to think. While Mebane is likely more friendly to development than other jurisdictions, it is not an "approve anything" jurisdiction. Encouraging communication between the traditional three Orange County municipalities and Mebane will be critical to maintaining (and exploring) an identity for the county over the horizon of the plan.
- Limited utility service areas or service capacity is having an impact on economic development and affordable housing production in the county.
  - Hillsborough's sewer utility is at capacity, likely to shrink, and without extra funding. It is also 10-15 years away from any new expansion by virtue of needing to dedicate any revenue surpluses to maintaining an aging, complex (60+ pump stations for less than 20,000 customers) system. Additionally, since Hillsborough drains its effluent into the Neuse River Basin, it is required to comply with the regulatory authorities governing Falls Creek Reservoir. If the effluent is even more tightly governed than it is now, the utility will likely need to invest in a stronger treatment plant, which will require even more investment that would not otherwise go to assisting new development.
  - Water-wise, Hillsborough does have a substantial allocation from Jordan Lake that it is currently unable to use and would likely require a partnership with Durham's water utility to use that water allocation. Other than that allocation, and the water presently drawn from the Eno, there is not much more available water for use in Orange County because of the county's unique hydrology and water table.



- Orange Water and Sewer Authority (OWASA) is not at capacity, but, per the terms of the Joint Protection Agreement, cannot run services through the Rural Buffer, thus limiting OWASA’s ability to provide services to parts of the county outside of Chapel Hill/Carrboro.
- Mebane Water and Sewer and Orange-Alamance Water supply water to some of western Orange County. The remainder of the unincorporated portions of the county are served by on-site septic systems.
- Many different organizations would like to be included before a development proposal is nearing approval. Utilities companies, partner jurisdictions, various committees, etc., especially those who have a say in whether or not a development occurs, feel like they are often left out of these discussions, and that a lot of time gets wasted pursuing projects for which the resources do not exist to make them happen.
- The State government is not viewed as a partner but as a hindrance to County objectives.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Provided here are insights from stakeholder interviews regarding public engagement approaches that should be used in the planning process. To the extent possible, specific DEI groups identified during stakeholder interviews were included in the DEI database and will be notified and encouraged to share planning engagement opportunities with their communities and members.

- Stakeholders mentioned many different community groups that the project team should reach out to because of the unique perspective they would bring to the planning process. These included the Chapel Hill/Carrboro NAACP and Northern Orange NAACP branches, the Burmese immigrant community, the Eubanks/Rogers Road community, the Efland community, the Hispanic/Latino communities in Chapel Hill and Hillsborough and El Centro Hispano, and the Marion Cheek Jackson Center which does a lot of work with Black community members, etc.
- Indigenous Occaneechi tribe members exist and do not want to be forgotten about in conversations regarding their ancestral lands.
- Stakeholders also emphasized that while racial equity is important, there is a substantial portion of low-income white residents in the county who have challenges and need representation in the process.
- The Handy Andy’s northeast of Schley is a key gathering point in the northern part of the county for a lot of rural residents. This is an important location for advertising community events.