

ORANGE COUNTY LAND USE PLAN 2050

NEW ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES REPORT



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May 8, 2024

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ABOUT THE NEW ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES REPORT

In 2023, Orange County launched a major effort—called the Orange County Land Use Plan 2050—to establish a cohesive, county-wide land use vision for the future and an actionable strategy to achieve that vision. This planning process will result in a rewrite of one of Orange County’s key policy documents—the Land Use Plan.

The Orange County Land Use Plan 2050 will serve to guide the County's conservation and growth efforts through the year 2050. By setting goals and objectives, County officials can use the document to guide policy decisions that effectively provide a high quality of life for community members. The Land Use Plan will consider a variety of topics related to physical planning in the community. In North Carolina, local governments must have a reasonably maintained comprehensive plan or land use plan in order to retain the authority to adopt and enforce zoning regulations (G.S. 160D). This statute also requires that zoning regulations are “in accordance with a comprehensive plan” and that local governments make statements of consistency when making rezoning decisions on a development application.

This report identifies new issues and opportunities based on vision and policy themes generated from stakeholder interviews, Staff Working Group discussions, and inputs received through public engagement, as well as community trends and conditions that have changed since the last plan was adopted. This document will serve as the foundation for policy discussions with County Staff, the Staff Working Group, the Planning Board, and the BOCC that will guide development of the new Land Use Plan.

For further reading regarding detailed technical information and data related to this effort, please see the Fact Book, available on the [Resources page of the website](#).

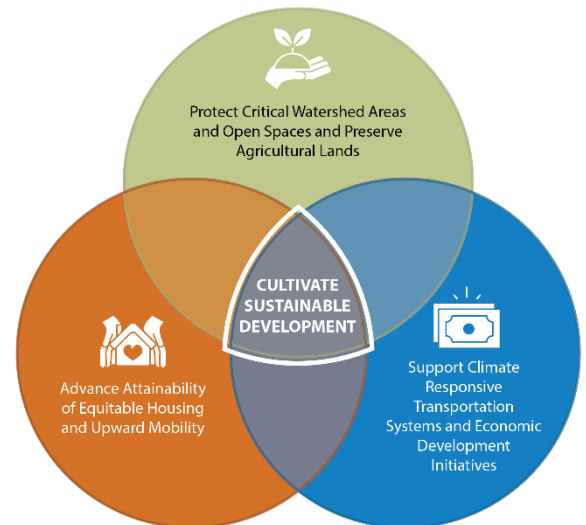
KEY PLANNING THEMES FROM ENGAGEMENT

Inputs received from [stakeholders](#), [community members participating in Community Engagement Window #1](#), the Planning Board, and the Board of County Commissioners during the first two phases of the project were reviewed and organized by the project team, revealing four prominent planning themes that have strong support across the community.

Key Planning Themes

- Protect Critical Watershed Areas and Open Spaces and Preserve Agricultural Lands
- Advance Attainability of Equitable Housing and Upward Mobility
- Support Climate Responsive Transportation Systems and Economic Development Initiatives
- Cultivate Sustainable Development

The first three themes are critical components that comprise the final theme. While closely related to the traditionally known “three-legged stool” of sustainable development that includes social, environmental, and economic dimensions, these planning themes more accurately express Orange County’s unique conditions and aspirations.



CHANGES SINCE THE 2030 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Changing Conditions and Trends

Orange County’s 2030 Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 2008. The 2030 Plan noted that from 1970 to 2000, Orange County’s population more than doubled. However, the county’s population has experienced modest growth between the timeframe of the 2030 Comprehensive Plan and the current 2050 Land Use Plan, with a difference of about 23% between 2005 (population of 121,991) and 2022 (150,477). From 2010 to 2020, the greatest increase in population numbers in Orange County was in the unincorporated areas. The portion of Mebane in Orange County experienced the greatest percent change in population growth from 2010 to 2020 compared to the other municipalities. (For more information, see the [Fact Book on the Resources page of the website](#).)

North Carolina ranks 8th nationally in the portion of the population over the age of 65. Since the last plan, the median age of an Orange County resident has increased from 30.4 years old in 2000 to 36.0 in 2022. In 2022, 22% of Orange County’s population was over the age of 60; according to Orange County’s Master Aging Plan, this will be expected to increase to 26% by

2040. Orange County's share of population growth due to ages 65 and older between 2010 and 2020 was 62%, which is higher than surrounding counties and North Carolina as a whole.

From 2000 to 2022, Orange County has seen an increase in the Hispanic/Latino population, the Asian and Pacific Islander population, and the percentage of the population identifying as some other race or two or more races. However, the percentage of the population who is African American has seen a decrease in Orange County in the past two decades.

Within the context of these population changes, Orange County has experienced shifts in four key topic areas related to land use planning: agriculture, natural and water resources, housing, and climate action.

Agriculture

Currently, nearly 75% of Orange County consists of prime farmland soil. However, farmland conversion—the change of farmland to non-agricultural uses, such as low-density residential uses—continues to be a threat to Orange County's working lands. According to the 2022 USDA Agricultural Census, Orange County has about 53,068 acres of land in farms, compared to approximately 71,000 acres in 2002 (and a marked decrease from 69,908 in 2017). The average size of farms in Orange County has also decreased (113 acres in 2002 to 77 acres in 2022) and the number of farms overall has increased (627 in 2002 and 687 in 2022). While the number of farms owned by African American farmers has increased, the loss of overall farmland in acres and number of farming operations is concerning for the area's farmland preservation efforts.

Natural and Water Resources

Deciduous forest and agricultural lands (pastureland and cropland) comprise the majority of unincorporated Orange County. Within Orange County, 10,589 acres of land are designated as State-identified "Natural Areas", or areas of special biodiversity significance. Much of this land is permanently protected or within the Rural Buffer. In addition, more than 1,500 acres of publicly held and protected open space is included within the County park and preserve inventory.

Orange County is a headwaters area of three watersheds: the Upper Neuse River Basin, the Cape Fear River Basin, and the Roanoke River Basin. The health of larger streams and rivers depend on an intact primary headwater stream network. Within these river basins, Orange County is a headwaters community of the Jordan Lake and Falls Lake Watershed Management Areas. Both of these have nutrient management strategies through the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality which require regulation and investment to protect water quality.

Portions of 7 Orange County waterbodies are listed as impaired by the North Carolina Division of Water Resources and the U.S. EPA: East Fork Eno River (Lake Orange), Cane Creek (above Cane Creek Reservoir), Collins Creek, Terrells Creek, Morgan Creek, Bolin Creek, and Booker Creek. The majority of Bolin Creek and Booker Creek are within the municipalities of Chapel Hill and Carrboro, although portions of Bolin Creek extend into unincorporated Orange County. The other impaired waterbodies listed are in unincorporated Orange County.

Over 90% of residents of unincorporated Orange County are served by private wells/groundwater. It's important to monitor water quality and water quantity due to the number of residents who rely on groundwater. Septic systems on individual private properties collect and treat sewage before the treated water is released back into the environment. Aging septic systems (and septic system failures) present both environmental and equity concerns due to their significant financial costs and contamination of well water and nearby water bodies. The Orange County Department of Environmental Health provides information on maintaining septic tanks for residents. Orange County was the first county in North Carolina to adopt watershed protection zoning (1981) and a sedimentation and erosion control ordinance (1987), which bolstered water quality protections. In addition, since the previous plan, Orange County has implemented a network of groundwater observation wells to monitor and publicize how groundwater levels are affected by drought or other climatic events.

Housing

The following discussion of housing supply, home sales prices and income, and housing cost burden apply to Orange County overall, including both the unincorporated areas and the municipalities of Hillsborough, Chapel Hill, Carrboro, and Mebane.

Housing Supply

The 2030 Plan was adopted in 2008, when the United States was experiencing what we now identify as the subprime mortgage crisis. The 2008 housing crisis contributed to a global financial crisis and severe economic recession. In the years since, some areas of the United States have continued to experience slow housing growth and worsening housing affordability. Orange County, including its municipalities, are no exception to this trend. Housing supply is a key factor in housing affordability; fewer for-sale housing units were built in Orange County between January 2010 and June 2023 compared to nearby counties. These housing trends impact the cost of housing, both for home sales prices and the cost of rent.

Home Sales Prices and Income

The median homes sales price in Orange County (including municipalities) continues to increase, while the median household income has not proportionately increased. The median home sales price in Orange County increased 65% from 2014 to 2022 (from \$267,000 to \$439,280). The steepest increase occurred from 2020 to 2021, when the median home sales price increased by 24% in a single year. However, during the same time frame, the median household income only increased by 50% (from \$57,261 in 2014 to \$85,785 in 2022).

Housing Cost Burden

Housing cost burden is defined as spending more than 30% of income on housing costs for renters or homeowners. In 2022, approximately 23% of homeowners were cost burdened, compared to 27% in 2010. One possible, but not definitive, explanation of this decrease is the ability of higher incomes being able to afford to remain in Orange County.

Approximately 36% of Orange County residents are renters. The percentage of renters who are cost-burdened has declined across our region, except for in Orange County. In 2022, approximately 59% of renters were cost burdened, which was the same percentage in 2010. While this percentage is undoubtedly influenced by the number of college students living in the county, it does not detract from the overall picture of housing affordability in the county. Currently, to live in Chapel Hill and Carrboro and afford the average rent of a one-bedroom apartment, a worker earning minimum wage would have to work 147 hours a week.

Climate Action

In part due to higher housing costs, a greater number of Orange County workers do not live in the county and commute from elsewhere. Transportation and mobile sources represent the greatest portion of Orange County's greenhouse gas emissions (43%) compared to other sources such as residential, solid waste, water and wastewater, agricultural, and commercial uses. When evaluating Orange County governmental operations, employee commuting also represents the highest percentage of emissions (33%), above other categories like water and wastewater usage, buildings and facilities, the vehicle fleet, and the transit fleet. Climate action was increasing in community consciousness at the time of the 2030 Plan; now, it is more pressing and valued in community priorities. In 2023, Orange County adopted its first Climate Action Plan, which urges action on the climate emergency, prioritizes equity, and encourages carbon neutrality and climate resiliency.

New Policy Guidance

Since the 2030 Plan, Orange County, regional partners, and other entities have developed new policy documents that contain guidance and recommendations to be incorporated into the Orange County Land Use Plan 2050. Significant policy documents include:

- Orange County Strategic Plan (2024)
- Orange County Climate Action Plan (2023)
- One Orange Countywide Racial Equity Framework (2022)
- Orange County Transit Plan Update (2022)
- Eno-Haw Regional Hazard Mitigation Plan (2020)
- A Landscape Plan for Wildlife Habitat Connectivity in the Eno River and New Hope Creek Watersheds, North Carolina (2019)
- State of the Environment (2019)
- 2030 Parks and Recreation Master Plan (2018)
- Orange County Mountains-to-Sea Trail Route – Progress Reports (2018)

For more information about these documents, please see the Community Policy Profile on the [Resources page of the project website](#).

NEW ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The following table identifies more detail on new issues and opportunities categorized by the four planning themes:

- Protecting Critical Watershed Areas and Open Spaces and Preserving Agricultural Lands
- Advancing Attainability of Equitable Housing and Upward Mobility
- Supporting Climate Responsive Transportation Systems and Economic Development Initiatives
- Cultivating Sustainable Development

The planning themes and new issues and opportunities will serve as a foundation for policy guidance and plan development.

New Issues and Opportunities for Key Planning Themes

Planning Theme	Issues	Opportunities
Protecting Critical Watershed Areas and Open Spaces and Preserving Agricultural Lands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of agricultural lands • Impaired surface water bodies • Increasing hazards from severe weather events, including drought, extreme heat, severe weather, flooding, and tornados • Threats to wildlife habitat connectivity across Eno River and New Hope Creek watersheds • Increasing development in rural areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VAD and EVAD voluntary agricultural district programs • Commissioner-initiated Unified Development Ordinance amendment(s) to better enable conservation and farmland preservation residential subdivisions as an expedited or potentially by-right development choice • Conservation partnership efforts with private landowners and conservation organizations and agencies • Agri- and nature-based tourism • Maintaining robust groundwater and surface water regulations to protect drinking water sources and headwaters and streams feeding the Cape Fear, Neuse, and Roanoke Rivers

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conserve land to meet multiple goals, including recreation and ecosystem protection • Developing Mountains-to-Sea Trail and other greenways connections through county • Revisit Interlocal Agreements to identify challenges and partner with municipalities to absorb the majority of county population growth, allowing unincorporated areas to be better protected from sprawl • Continuation or potential expansion of the Lands Legacy program
<p>Advancing Attainability of Equitable Housing and Upward Mobility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Median home sales prices increasing disproportionately to median household income • Increasing number of renter cost-burdened households • Combined housing and transportation costs make housing in county unattainable for some workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships with municipalities to support development of affordable housing • Protecting naturally occurring affordable housing, such as manufactured housing • Consideration of targeted areas for expanding housing opportunities in unincorporated Orange County • Revisit Interlocal Agreements to identify challenges and partner with municipalities to absorb the majority of county population growth, allowing unincorporated areas to be better protected from sprawl • Revisit Unified Development Ordinance standards for acreage requirements for duplexes or even quadplexes as a single use
<p>Supporting Climate Responsive Transportation Systems and Economic Development Initiatives</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern about traffic congestion and the volume of commuters, which increase air pollution and contribute to greenhouse gas emissions • Increasing traffic congestion and concern for capacity of roads (or transit) for new future development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of the Orange County Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan • Reduce greenhouse gas emissions per 2023 Climate Action Plan • Implementation of County’s Complete Streets and Vision Zero policies • Completed and future corridor plans (such as the completed US-70 Multimodal Corridor Study, completed

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing volume of daily commuters (especially as it relates to those who live outside the county and work in Orange County) • Highest percentage of County operation greenhouse gas emissions (33%) from employee commutes • Highest percentage of overall county emissions (43%) from transportation sources • Lack of utility infrastructure to support development of economic development districts (EDDs) • County’s reputation of not being business-friendly 	<p>NC 54 West Corridor Study, implementation of the 2022 Orange County Transit Plan, and the upcoming Short-Range Transit Plan)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying opportunities to support infrastructure expansion to economic development districts (EDDs), including allowance of package plants to enable light industrial/heavy commercial development in these areas • The North-South Bus Rapid Transit service planned for Chapel Hill is Orange County’s first bus rapid transit in the area, and represents future opportunities for expanded connections, supporting higher density development in town centers, and reducing development pressure from edge areas
<p>Cultivating Sustainable Development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing development pressure in unincorporated Orange County as municipalities near build out • Development and soil septic suitability is low in some areas currently identified for development on Future Land Use map (soil septic suitability for the majority of unincorporated areas in the county are somewhat limited or very limited) • Increasing broadband service will likely increase demand for rural housing • Concerns that Rural Buffer is creating “rural sprawl” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships to support growth within municipalities where public utility and transit services are available • Undertaking a joint planning agreement with Mebane to define growth areas • Supporting sustainable development designs, materials, and operations for new development projects • Improving access to recreational amenities for community members living in rural areas • Improved subdivision standards to better enable development that is intentionally sustainable