

# Buncombe 2020

## A Comprehensive Plan for Buncombe County, North Carolina

### Summary

No plan is truly comprehensive, and no long range plan provides more than approximate guidelines for the future. A plan is an organized selection of what appears at a particular time to be the best means to reach what are currently desirable goals and objectives. Both the goals and the means of reaching them may change so there must be continuing assessment of the plan if it is to remain useful. This document represents what are now desirable goals and objectives based on the knowledge available. As new information becomes available and new means of implementation are developed, the plan will be analyzed to determine if revision is needed.

This plan is to be used as a reference and guide to the future development of Buncombe County. It speaks to specific as well as general issues and concerns and is designed to better infuse comprehensive planning into the day to day discussions affecting the future of the County.

It should be viewed not as a static or rigid document, but rather as a fluid guide, accommodating change within its broader confines. The plan should be reviewed for accountability and updated at regular intervals to remain an effective and current blueprint for the future.

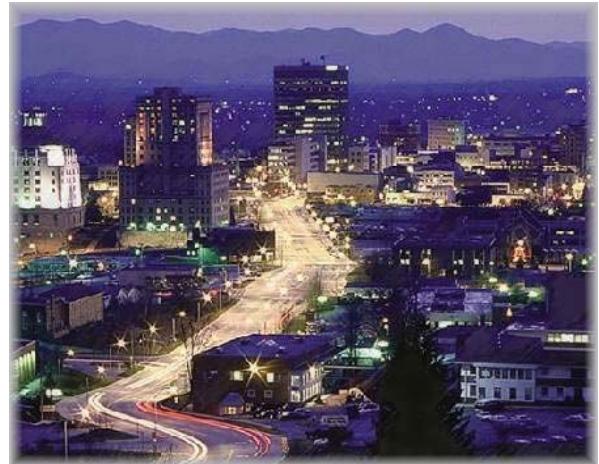
### Introduction

Buncombe County, located in Western North Carolina, is well known for its scenic beauty. Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains and blessed with numerous rivers, streams, waterfalls, lakes, and trails, as well as beautiful fall foliage, Buncombe County is a popular destination which attracts citizens from around the world each year.



The County is approximately 660 square miles with land area of almost 417,840 acres. Of this, approximately 35,400 (8.5%) acres are within the urban boundaries of the six municipal jurisdictions, approximately 186,500 (44.6%) acres are classified as agricultural, and over 42,000 (10.1%) acres are within National Forests, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and a small State Park.

Buncombe County is known for its artisans and arts of all types, from glass work to stagecraft to bluegrass to opera. It serves as the cultural hub for Western North Carolina and is an employment, educational, and medical center for the region. The County offers a variety of choices in community settings for its residents, ranging from more urban residential areas located in and near its incorporated areas, where full municipal services are available, to the second home, resort and retirement communities and more rural development.



## Purpose

The county comprehensive plan grew out of a need to consider the big picture of Buncombe County and to plan for its growth and progress. It is based on the recognition that the value of planning increases when people and organizations work together. The comprehensive planning process requires the involvement of many different groups and individuals, including citizens at large, public agencies, county departments and elected officials. Each of these entities plays an important role in shaping the county's future.

This plan is intended to be a comprehensive guideline in creating, shaping, and pursuing those elements that would be mutually supportive and that can positively guide our future, not only to maintain but to enhance our wonderful home and meet the needs of our residents. The purpose of the comprehensive plan is to serve as:

- A guide to direct provision of core services the state and federal government require counties to provide
- A guide for desirable and beneficial development and redevelopment
- A guide for improving the physical environment of the County as a setting for human activity...to make it more functional, beautiful, decent, healthful, interesting and efficient
- A framework for management, enhancement and preservation of the natural and man-made environment
- A declaration of long range goals and how to achieve them
- An expression of the County's assessment of itself and a vision of what it can become
- A means for guiding, influencing and achieving coordination in public and private decision making...an effort to make sure that today's decision will lead to tomorrow's goal

Some elements may be relatively quickly shaped and implemented, while many may require more extensive research, analysis, cooperative development, and careful implementation to become effective. To craft these approaches, knowledge of trends and projections of the future are needed as a partial basis for our efforts.

## Growth

Between 2000 and 2006, the population of Buncombe County grew from 206,330 to an estimated 222,174 or 7.7%. The average growth of 1.3% per year compares to the State of North Carolina's higher growth of 1.7% per year and the national average of just less than 1% per year. This reasonably moderate growth rate is expected to continue with a projected population of 263,500 by the year 2020.<sup>1</sup>

The addition of new residents over the last six years has been somewhat balanced between local births (43% of the total) and internal migration (49%), with an additional 8% of the growth coming from international migration.

## Demographics<sup>2</sup>

Currently, about 88,000<sup>3</sup> (39.6%) people reside in a municipality and 134,000 people in unincorporated areas. Only about 40% of the county's residents are served by city utilities (water and sewer). The remainder use water wells and septic systems.

Buncombe County's population composition is approximately 48% male and 52% female. The racial make up of the county is approximately 88% non-Hispanic White, 7.3% Black/African American, 4% Hispanic/Latino (up from 2.8% in 2000), and less than 1% Native American, Asian and Pacific Islander. Trends also show a growth in the County's Ukrainian population, .4%, up from .2% in 2000.

In 2000, there were 85,776 households with an average of 2.33 persons per household, slightly less than the State average of 2.49. Approximately 6,800 additional households have been added in the last six years, for a total of about 92,600. The median household income in 2004 was approximately \$37,700, and in 2004, the number of persons below the poverty level was estimated at 13.8%. Educational levels are higher than the State average for those over 25 years old, with almost 82% holding a high school degree and over 25% having a bachelor's degree or higher.

The age of the County's population has been slowly increasing throughout the last several years, though there are possible dramatic changes in the foreseeable future. In real numbers, each of the age groupings have increased from 2000 to 2007. However, as a result of the "baby boom" generation reaching their 60's and internal migration, the number of individuals 65 or older is estimated to increase by more than 30,000 by the year 2020, more than any other age group.

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<sup>1</sup> State of North Carolina--Demographics

<sup>2</sup> US Census and State of North Carolina

<sup>3</sup> Municipal Planning Departments

## County Government

The Buncombe County seat is located in Asheville, the largest municipality in the County. Governed by a five member Board of Commissioners, Buncombe County is professionally managed by a County Manager appointed by the Board. North Carolina counties operate as a subdivision of the State. All authorities the County exercises are derived from the State, whether mandatory or permissive. The County fills two basic governmental roles; first, to implement State required programs and, second, to provide non-mandated services such as libraries, recreation and animal control.

Under State law, Buncombe County is required to perform a number of functions including:

- Providing public health services
- Providing social services such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families
- Providing jails, court security and civil processing
- Funding the construction and maintenance of K-12 public education facilities
- Funding the construction, maintenance of community college facilities
- Providing facilities for the Courts
- Regulating sewer treatment/septic tanks and other environmental health regulations
- Providing watershed protection
- Ensuring solid waste disposal
- Controlling rabies and wild dogs

In addition the County is authorized, though not required, to provide many other functions, including:

- Parks and recreation
- Libraries
- Arts programs, museums, auditoriums, civic centers, and convention centers
- Planning and Land Use regulation
- Code enforcement (Housing and Building Codes)
- Floodplain management
- Patrol and investigation services
- Water and sewer utilities
- Economic Development activities
- Fire protection and emergency medical services
- Animal control services
- Medical Examiner services
- Supporting expanded educational activities

Mandatory activities and services are specifically set forth and closely regulated by the State, although some allowance to exceed the States requirements is provided. Funding is provided, frequently from both the Federal and State government, but is often inadequate to fulfill all the requirements placed on the County. Additional local funding is then required. Discretionary activities

are generally very broadly defined and authorized, allowing substantial latitude in their content based upon the county's purpose and resources available.

## **Vision and Mission**

The County's efforts now and in the future should pursue a common vision that we all share for our community and families. A primary purpose of this Comprehensive Plan is to identify elements that can assist us in reaching our vision of:

*Buncombe County as a caring community in harmony with its environment where citizens succeed, thrive and realize their potential.*

The County exists to enhance the lives of our citizens and we are strong in delivering the traditional responsibilities of county government.

*It is the mission of Buncombe County to promote a healthy, safe, well-educated, and thriving community with a sustainable quality of life; to provide efficient and effective government our citizens can trust; and to deliver needed services through a responsive work force committed to excellence, integrity and teamwork.*

## **Strategic Elements of the 2020 Plan**

### *Defining the Issues*

Participants in the planning process were asked to think about what is at stake for the county in light of the fact that the forces of change are constantly at work. More specifically, participants were asked to identify the likely impacts of change on the County's economy, local services and environment.

Because the scope of the comprehensive plan is very broad, there are countless issues of importance to the County. Several major themes emerged in the effort to define the issues most important to the County, including:

- **Managing/Guiding Growth and Development**
- **Providing Workforce Supports**
- **Preserving the Quality of Life**
- **Enhancing County Services**

Each of these areas has numerous elements to be evaluated, detailed and considered for implementation. Analysis, opportunity, resources, competing needs and other factors will be involved in pursuing these and other approaches to achieving the community vision. Changing conditions over

the years may alter or add elements to be considered, but those elements set forth are considered to be basic objectives needed to begin to address each area.

### **Managing/Guiding Growth and Development**

Continued growth in Buncombe County is projected for the foreseeable future. It is anticipated that the County will have an additional 41,000 residents by 2020 and nearly double that number by 2030. Based on the typical household size from US Census data, this will require over 35,000 additional residential units in the next 20+ years, or approximately 1,500 new residential units per year.

There are many factors that challenge the need for additional development within the County. Limited lands reasonably suited for development, the desire to preserve ridge tops and natural beauty, the lack of utilities and the desire to preserve the small farm agricultural base in the community are just a few of these challenges.

However, the current landscape does have the potential to meet much of our future development needs. Of the 109,145<sup>4</sup> acres zoned or designated for residential use in the County, over 34,600 acres are classified as undeveloped. Of these, almost 4,200 acres of residential property are within the current urban boundaries of the cities in the County. The remainder is in the unincorporated areas of the County. In addition, it is notable that of the total agricultural acreage, over 84,000 acres are designated as unimproved and 1,659 of those acres are within the cities' boundaries and more likely have city utilities and services available<sup>5</sup>. However, both residential and agricultural properties categorized as unimproved include ridge/mountain tops, very steep slopes and other areas in which development may not be desired or feasible.

Assuming half of the residentially zoned urban property is suitable for construction, and that three-fourths of those acres could be used for the construction of single family homes and one-fourth for multi-family homes, there is the potential of accommodating 13,000 residents<sup>6</sup>. If one half of these acres were multi-family developments, the potential exceeds 21,000 residents housed.

However, at most, about only one-fourth to one-half of the growth over the next 20+ years could be accommodated by urban development. Therefore, the County's potential residential areas must also be addressed. Further definition of building criteria and determination of the most suitable properties could be a useful effort in developing a more formal growth plan, especially within the unincorporated areas.

In addition, growth requires the increase of business, commercial and industrial uses within the County. Of the total 20,500 acres of commercial and industrial properties, only 2,405 acres are

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<sup>4</sup> 74,461 acres are improved and hold 103,252 residential units (US Census-2005). Of the total acreage, 3402 acres are for multi-family dwellings and are estimated to serve a population of over 28,000 residents with an average of 8.4 units per acre. The residential category in the County is defined as unimproved parcels with less than 10 acres; over 10 acres is categorized as agriculture.

<sup>5</sup> Land data from Buncombe County Tax Assessor

<sup>6</sup> Currently only 4.4% of all residential properties are used for multi-family developments.

vacant, and of those only 1,185 acres are within city limits. Although not insubstantial, they are not likely to be adequate to house the number of jobs and businesses needed in the next two decades. However, rezoning at the periphery of growing urban areas typically occurs as commercial demand increases with population growth and satisfies a portion of commercial and business needs. Some planning for commercial and industrial uses that are not particularly compatible with an urban environment or large corporate park settings could be considered.

### **Growth and Development Policy Statement**

Buncombe County should position itself to accommodate new growth and development that are efficient and cost-effective; improve the quality of life for its residents; enhance economic vitality; support creativity and innovative design; and protect and preserve the natural, historic and cultural resources and assets of the County.

#### **Growth and Development Goals:**

1. Encourage a thoughtful process of land subdivision and development, considering the importance of preserving open space and the relationship between adjacent developments
2. Preserve character and function of rural areas by supporting preservation of agriculture and conservation of natural resources

#### **Potential Action Steps:**

1. Identify and prioritize unincorporated areas for future growth based on existing population density in an area, availability of utilities, road capacities, housing unit densities, protection of scenic views, environmental impacts, etc. Develop incentives and criteria for construction for future developers. Evaluate the addition of a criteria requiring 10 percent of development be for affordable housing
2. In cooperation with the municipalities and sewer district, develop a Utility Extension Master Plan for extension of water and sewer services to support future development
3. Collaborate with municipalities in development of a Land Use Plan for development through utility extensions; to include community hearings to encourage public input and support. Develop a "utility extension" policy setting forth extension criteria including developer funding responsibilities as appropriate
4. Encourage the collaboration of agricultural agencies and interested parties to develop effective means to improve agri-business

5. Consider strengthening of the current *Slope Ordinance* to minimize major contour changes and building of roads on steep slope areas

### **Providing Workforce Supports**

Substantial and broad programs are in place to provide a "safety net" for those most in need within the County. However, recent trends reflect a growing need for additional support to the broader workforce who provide the tremendous range of services and products that are critical to our day to day lives. This additional support ranges from greater educational opportunities and skill development to affordable housing and better jobs.

In education, the County continues to experience a drop-out rate in our high schools of 20% to 40%<sup>7</sup>. Although similar to the national average, this reflects a large number of our young people who are most likely to be unable to secure employment that will allow them to own a home, raise a family, and enjoy their lives without government assistance. In contrast, unemployment is very low at 3.5%, and the private sector has continuing difficulty in finding qualified individuals for many skilled positions, from machinists to nurses.

Jobs have increased generally in proportion to population growth over the last 15 years. However, the last five years has seen jobs increase at a faster rate, up 10%, while population has increased approximately 7%. Average private industry wages have increased 16% during that same period and 59% over the last 15 years (as compared to a US CPI increase of 51%). Growth areas with higher wages have included construction related jobs, professional and technical services, the financial industry, machinery manufacturing, computer and electronic related business, and health care, especially ambulatory care<sup>8</sup>. These areas require advanced technical and professional education. Unfortunately, the single largest area of job creation has been in the service industry, which also has the lowest wage rate of all tracked job types (less than \$13,000/year).

Currently the household median income is \$37,700 and the median wage for a skilled position is approximately \$35,000. At preferred mortgage ratios, this would allow for home purchase of a value of about \$100,000 to \$110,000 while the median value of homes in the area is about \$175,000 and only 25,400 homes are assessed at a value of \$125,000 or less within the county and provide housing for only about 26% of the population, or about half of that needed for those with median household incomes or less.

In addition, projected population growth will further stress the need for a range of housing options and improved wage rates to meet residents' needs.

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<sup>7</sup> Defined as graduation within four years from the same public high school. In 2006, graduation rates from county high schools ranged from 58% to 80%, with most being between 70 and 80%. In addition, home school and private school enrollments have increased from 2,834 to 5503 in the ten years from 1994-95 to 2004-05.

<sup>8</sup> NC Employment Security Commission

## **Workforce Support Policy Statement**

Buncombe County will maintain its economic development efforts to attract/retain/expand industrial technology and manufacturing enterprises for the purpose of increasing higher paying jobs within the County; provide educational supports to ensure a well-trained workforce; and support affordable housing initiatives for its citizens.

### **Job Creation Goal:**

Identify, target and support new and existing industries that show promise for employment retention and growth

### **Possible Action Steps:**

1. Identify a lead workforce development agency and consolidate workforce development efforts to improve accountability and assign responsibility
2. Work with economic development practitioners to identify workforce needs of existing and future businesses
3. Train workforce to meet the needs of future and existing industries
4. Support land purchase through providing subsidies and/or other tax incentives for worthwhile manufacturing/business projects
5. Support economic development activities that attract and generate "place based" quality jobs and businesses within the community that focus on the unique strengths and capabilities of the community, e.g. tourism, the arts, healthcare
6. Foster our entrepreneurial spirit by increasing incentives for small business job creation
7. Support organizations that create higher paying jobs
8. Identify and prioritize unused commercial sites for clean-up and redevelopment

### **Education Goal:**

1. Provide leadership and support to provide a well-trained and educated workforce for area businesses
2. Zero high school drop out rate by 2020

#### **Possible Action Steps:**

1. Work with school districts to provide vocational training and/or exposure to programs at the earliest possible grade level that prepare students for existing and anticipated jobs
2. Work with colleges and workforce agency to provide vocational training programs that prepare County residents for existing and anticipated jobs
3. Improve and expand the involvement of local public colleges and Universities (ABTCC, UNC-Asheville, Western Carolina University, within the County by seeking and requiring continuing education and training for employment opportunities and economic development outreach from these colleges and universities
4. Require drop out benchmarking and reporting by City and County school systems
5. Devise a program to utilize education and community resources in a cooperative, focused effort toward dropout reduction. Encourage them to work together to leverage their assets and open the community
6. Encourage creation of incentives (e.g. scholarships) for training in high demand/low enrollment training programs. Build a family support system for families to support their children finishing school

#### **Workforce Housing Goals:**

1. Promote affordable housing initiatives countywide to accommodate current and future residents
2. Support affordable housing initiatives in urban areas, in proximity to employment, and in locations with access to existing public transit service
3. Provide a variety of housing types (rental and ownership) countywide that are affordable to a wide range of households and that can be supported by market demand

#### **Possible Action Steps:**

1. Build an inventory of needs/assets. Conduct a substantial analysis of current and projected housing needs by income levels, determine the current rate of supply creation by cost range, inventory those local organizations assisting in creating

- affordable and workforce housing, assess barriers in home acquisition, evaluate the most effective approaches for addressing shortfalls in workforce housing needs, and initiate programs that address those needs
- 2. Expand owner occupied repair and rehabilitative options and emergency repair services with federal and state funding

### **Quality of Life**

Maintaining and improving our quality of life are important aspects to our residents individually as well as our community as a whole. The love of our mountains and valleys is a driving force in our lives, and to preserve our environment for ourselves and our children is a key community goal. Further, our economy has a significant component of tourism and companies that have located or may locate here due to the beauty and culture that is offered. We are uniquely blessed with an abundance of talented artists and artisans. They not only help provide richness and color to the tapestry of our community, they also form a substantial economic element from which we all benefit.

Further, our growth and success as a community generates issues of infrastructure capacities that must be mitigated.

### **Quality of Life Policy Statement**

Provide both passive and active accessible recreation facilities to meet community needs; encourage the open, rural character of Buncombe County by supporting and protecting our natural resources; Promote cultural tourism as an economic development generator

#### **Recreation Goals:**

- 1. Improve quality of life for citizens of Buncombe County through maintenance and improvement of existing parks and recreation facilities
- 2. Improve quality of life for citizens of Buncombe County through creation of new parks and recreation facilities

#### **Possible Action Steps:**

- 1. Support and assist in the implementation of the Parks and Recreation Department's new system wide Comprehensive Master Plan
- 2. Encourage and support joint recreational facilities among State and local organizations

3. Encourage the private sector to contribute to community recreation projects
4. Acquisition of new lands for open space and recreation facilities to meet forecasted needs
5. Explore the feasibility of a general obligation bond or recreation facilities at the earliest practical time (taking into consideration public education and necessary planning)
6. Continue to seek State, Federal, and foundation funding for greenways, bike trails, hiking and water trails, and other recreation projects

**Open Space Goal:**

    Insure preservation of open space

**Possible Action Steps:**

1. Expand conservation easements to protect critical and valuable lands
2. Support future development in areas where there is adequate infrastructure, thus facilitating preservation of open space
3. Consider providing matching funds to municipalities for funding they provide for land preservation
4. Determine the percentage of "open space" that should be conserved within the County

**Cultural Resource Goal:**

    Promote and protect Buncombe County's rich and diverse cultural resources

**Possible Action Steps:**

1. Develop initiatives to support the arts and artisans, including support of public art and showcasing opportunities for artists
2. In cooperation with State and municipalities, pursue the creation of quality performance venues for our growing and successful performing arts groups and talented performers and showcase first-class entertainment for the community and balance that need with a reasonable tax rate
3. Encourage a coordinated "arts community" voice

4. Support the growing area of the media and digital arts

## **Enhance County Services**

Underlying all else, our community depends on and expects a County government that operates effectively and efficiently. The County has actively strived to address community issues as well as deliver State-required programs and services efficiently.

To further address the needs of our residents, minimize costs, and enhance service delivery, a number of strategic objectives will be pursued.

### **County Service Policy Statements**

Buncombe County will seek to maximize effective and efficient provision of governmental programs and services provided to its citizens. Consider location and structural conditions determining support for construction, rehabilitation, or repair of new and existing community facilities

#### **Emergency Management Goal:**

Promote a more efficient provision of public safety services

#### **Possible Action Steps:**

1. Encourage evaluation of public safety services to identify ways for improvement, including potential merger and regionalization efforts
2. Promote and support educational/vocational training for public safety personnel through AB Tech (See also Workforce Supports)

#### **Human Services Goal:**

Improve access to and convenience of County Human Services for all residents

#### **Possible Action Steps:**

1. Install a "Safety Net" computer system with shared data between local Health Care and social service providers
2. Encourage an increase in the number of child care subsidy slots, including drop-in and after hours care

3. Increase Human Services language capabilities through innovative human resource recruitment strategies for non-English speaking personnel
4. Initiate multi-county discussions for potential of joint efforts/information systems/service delivery in health and human services

**County Facility Goals:**

1. Consolidate County administrative offices in efficient facilities to improve organization effectiveness and improve ease of access for residents
2. Provide new or adequate court facilities to both support current and future case loads and better serve the community
3. Create multiple regional full service "satellite" facilities to include Social Service, Health, Child Care and other relevant County services and co-located in/with school facilities where feasible

**Possible Action Steps:**

1. Conduct needs assessments using multiple indicators (population, poverty statistics, health care statistics, etc.) overlaid by zip code to determine areas with highest levels of need
2. Establish and maintain current inventory of community buildings for possible satellite locations including school facilities
3. Complete an overall assessment of the use of county facilities including schools