



STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS: COMMON TOPICS AND THEMES REPORT

OVERVIEW

At the onset of the comprehensive planning process, the consultant team conducted interviews to help support the baseline conditions analysis, to begin the identification of key community initiatives, needs, and priorities, and to help inform key discussion points for public involvement activities. Interviews were carried out with a cross section of Forsyth County stakeholders, including residents, area business owners, local developers, key partner organizations such as the Cumming-Forsyth Chamber of Commerce, University of North Georgia, Northside Hospital, and Forsyth County Schools.

Interviews were carried by the Foster Forsyth planning team as either one-on-one sessions or small groups meetings. Interviewers utilized a prepared questionnaire that included a range of

discussion points, which gave stakeholders an opportunity to discuss Forsyth’s strengths, needs and opportunities and also share their experiences as a member of the Forsyth community. Key challenges and focus areas of the Comprehensive Plan were topics of discussion, including land use, transportation, housing, and economic development. Interviews provide insight into the overall vision and priority needs and opportunities from community leaders.

The majority of interviews were conducted over a two-day period in order to gather concise and timely feedback. Additional interviews were held with stakeholders who were unavailable during the two-day interview period. A record of the interviews conducted is provided in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. Stakeholders Interviewed

Organization	Name And Role	Date Of Interview
Cumming-Forsyth Chamber of Commerce	James McCoy (CEO & President)	April 7, 2016
University of North Georgia	Gerald Sullivan (Associate VP of Auxiliary Services & Real Estate) & Bill Moody (Director, Facilities & Operation)	April 7, 2016
Port Royale Marina	Brent Pearson	April 7, 2016
Midway Building Supply	Phil Bettis (local attorney & representative of family-owned business)	April 7, 2016
Northside Hospital	Lynn Jackson (Hospital affiliate & Resident)	April 7, 2016
Scientific Games	Phil Bower & Joe Stewart	April 7, 2016
Forsyth County	Barry Russell (Resident)	April 11, 2016
Forsyth County	Howard Carson (Developer)	April 11, 2016
Forsyth County	Jayne Iglesias (Planning Commission Chairman)	April 11, 2016
City of Cumming	Scott Morgan (Planning Director) Jerry Weitz (Comprehensive Plan consultant)	April 11, 2016
Forsyth County	Pete Amos (Board of Commissioners Chairman)	April 11, 2016
Forsyth County Schools	Dr. Jeff Bearden (Superintendent)	April, 14, 2016
Sharon Springs Alliance	Phillip Barlag (Resident)	April 15, 2016

Organization	Name And Role	Date Of Interview
Northeast Georgia Mountains	Cheryl Smith (DCA Senior Tourism Manager)	April 21, 2016
Wakefield Beasley & Associates	Lamar Wakefield (Commercial Real Estate Developer)	May 25, 2016

This document summarizes interviewee perspectives on key topics discussed, as identified above, as well as common themes coming out of the interviews.

KEY TOPICS

KEY ASSETS

Forsyth is well known for its natural amenities like its lakeshore, outdoor recreation and parks, trails and the Sawnee Mountain Preserve. Forsyth County schools consistently rank highest in the state of Georgia. Forsyth County's proximity to Atlanta and Lake Lanier make it an attractive community to live in with a great quality of life. Population growth has allowed for the hospital expansion. The hospital also provides more healthcare opportunities and jobs to the community.

SUMMARY OF KEY ASSETS

- Advantageous proximity to Atlanta
- Great quality of life
- Connection to Lake Lanier
- Outdoor natural areas and recreation (i.e. trails, lake, hiking, Sawnee Mountain Preserve)
- Hospital/healthcare

MAJOR DRIVERS OF CHANGE FOR CURRENT AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Developers and residents especially have observed that much of the current development has been over the last two to three years in a horizontal fashion. Residents understand that development has been attractive because of the lower land costs and access to amenities, resulting in many permitted residential projects. Residential developments have provided greater return on investment than commercial development. Expansion of the hospital has led to new employment

opportunities and possible attraction of biotech sector jobs. The school systems have expanded considerably to match the growing population. The University of Georgia has also created a satellite campus with hopes to continue to expand by offering course offerings that connect with Forsyth County's unique strengths and employment needs. There is interest in lakeshore development, but infrastructure and regulatory restrictions around the lake will likely limit future development.

PRIORITY NEEDS & OPPORTUNITIES

The needs and opportunities for Forsyth County include priority and long terms ideas. These include needed updates to infrastructure (such as roads and sewer that can accommodate the continued growth), revised impact fees, natural preservation (in part to deter developers from completely removing natural greenery and older growth trees), and transportation improvements (to reduce congestion and commute times). There was also some concern from businesses and developers that the development regulations need some additional flexibility; current regulations are so strictly adhered to that there are limited opportunities to address unique situations and allow for creative solutions. Those interviewed understand and value the opportunity for long-term strategic planning. Strategic planning suggestions from these stakeholders include investment and growth opportunities to promote a sense of identity

for Forsyth County neighborhoods, to encourage sustainable growth strategies, to leverage attractive amenities, to preserve natural green space, and to provide mixed-use centers that serve as social gathering spaces. These needs and opportunities are highlighted below.

SUMMARY OF PRIORITY NEEDS & OPPORTUNITIES

- Infrastructure updates
- Preservation of natural open spaces
- Transportation improvements
- Flexibility in development regulations

IDEAS FOR LONG TERM OPPORTUNITIES VARIED WIDELY AMONG STAKEHOLDERS; HOWEVER, SOME RESPONSES ARE AS FOLLOWS:

- Further economic development activities, and further promote business growth to reduce strain for residential school tax and keep talent in the County
- Strategic planning to address important elements such as limitation of growth in some areas, tree protection, creation of downtown centers, preservation, traffic reduction
- Create identity and placemaking of developed districts
- Provide social centers, mixed uses and walkable areas
- Better integrate the University of Georgia Cumming campus and Northside Hospital into the County by improving access to transit and amenities
- Increase specialized healthcare and living options for residents aging in place
- Create sense of identity for University of Georgia Cumming campus as it expands and incorporated into new development
- Sustain local business models

- Leverage the lakeside (i.e. events, amenities, hotels, housing, business, tourism)
- Preserve natural green space
- Cluster tech jobs
- Attract more businesses with amenities offered to residents wishing to work and play in Forsyth County
- Incorporate alternative transportation along GA 400 (for example, rail, bus)

CHALLENGES

Stakeholders found common ground in the challenges facing Forsyth County. A major challenge is long commutes and congestion along major arterials, prompting residents to suggest transportation alternatives and additional routes. Several participants, including school affiliates, businesses and long term community members, see a lack of diversity of affordable housing and of housing types such as apartments as a challenge to housing current workers and/or attracting additional jobs. Multiple stakeholders want to improve the permitting process in Forsyth County and to foster balanced development as many feel homeowners are driving the market but want downtown centers, retail, attractive business spaces, and natural vegetation preservation. An additional concern regarding development is access to water and need for sewer lines to accommodate a growing County; many businesses and the hospital cannot rely on septic tanks. The challenge remains to better brand Forsyth County as stakeholders feel that a unified sense of place for the county as a whole is currently lacking.

SUMMARY OF CHALLENGES

- Traffic congestion, long commutes
- Lack of diversity of housing types/affordable housing
- Permit process
- Need for downtown centers
- Attractive business space
- Sewer infrastructure

- Placemaking in a divided community
- Natural environment preservation

FOSTER FORSYTH

Interviewees believe that the Comprehensive Plan should provide policy direction/recommendations for several topics, such as:

- Strategic development process—review of development permits, long-term visioning, balanced project types, necessary infrastructure updates (i.e. sewer, roads)
- Housing stock options—residents understand balanced housing market needs
- Transportation solutions—to reduce increasing traffic congestion
- Placemaking—creating sense of identity, attractive downtown centers, natural amenities preservation

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TRENDS AND NEEDS

Some stakeholders pointed out the existence of an antigrowth sentiment particularly among the older generations of Forsyth and in the northern part of the County. That said, stakeholders believe that balanced and strategic growth is very important for the future of the Forsyth County. Diversity of amenities and housing types can be a selling point to businesses attracting talent, which helps to stimulate the need for better housing. The abundant skilled workforce the County has to offer also serves as an economic strength. There is a need to provide adequate housing for those workers likely to have a single-income household, such as hospital technicians and school teachers. The idea for commercial centers at certain community crossroads within the county would promote cross marketing and benefit all parts of the economy.

SUMMARY OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & TRENDS

- Community crossroads as commercial/downtown centers in exiting area
- Promote workforce, quality of life as economic strength
- Outdoor, recreation an asset (i.e. lakefront, trails, mountain conservancy)
- Frustrations with permitting (i.e. permit process, strict regulations, lengthy review)
- Need for local branding
- Tourism and need for more accommodations
- Ensure economic development addresses local need
- Residential development, but lack of downtown centers

UNDERSTANDING AND EMBRACING A GROWING COMMUNITY

Forsyth County has seen tremendous growth over the last few years due to Forsyth County's land value as well as its proximity to Lake Lanier and other desirable assets, such as the North Fulton jobs market. The developments are primarily residential and the school system is rapidly expanding to accommodate the influx of residents. As the community grows, interviewed community members noted there has been limited business growth as well as shortcomings in the diversity of housing types to provide for this growing community and resultant workforce. Single-income households such as nurses and teachers cannot afford living in Forsyth nor do they have the option for a short commute to work. Many community members suggested strategic growth planning to foster balanced development in which Forsyth can sustain their growth responsibly while continuing to offer a great quality of life, great schools, variety of housing options, and economic development opportunities.

HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOODS

A variety of opinions were provided in regards to housing and neighborhood topics between the *business perspective* and the *resident perspective*. From the Business Perspective (i.e. hospital, County schools, and business stakeholders) the leading frustration was the lack of housing type variation. They are not seeing enough multi-family development and zoning to accommodate single and moderate-income workers. Blended housing growth with a mix of development would help reduce the number of County workers from moving away and commuting into the County for work instead. Also, more affordable, assisted or aging in place living complexes would benefit Northside Hospital and residents planning to spend their older years in the county. Some of the residents interviewed were in support of denser center development as long as capacity is considered. Developers recognize an anti-growth sentiment and simultaneously see a demand for mixed-uses and retail in neighborhoods, like developed town centers. Businesses and residents alike agree on the opportunity for strategic planning and long term visioning, as well as the need for neighborhood town centers. The resident perspective wants to protect open green space and give neighborhoods a sense of place and identity, while leveraging the natural amenities already present. *The summary of Housing and Neighborhood topics from both Resident Perspectives and Business Perspectives are highlighted below*

BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES

- Multifamily dwellings/zoning (apartments do not require taking care of yard)
- Lack of moderate/low-income housing
- Monotony within subdivisions (not enough variation in design)
- Housing types (i.e. more than single family homes, includes townhomes and apartments)

- Single-income housing (i.e. teachers, hospital workers)Lakeside residential
- Collaboration between lake amenities (i.e. park, trails, hotels, restaurants)
- Promote attractive neighborhood amenities (i.e. trails, biking, urban feel)
- Neighborhood identity branding

RESIDENT PERSPECTIVES

- Neighborhood identities (i.e. provide neighborhood centers, recognize local amenities)
- Preserve the residential character of the community, including larger lots in appropriate areas
- Placemaking
- Schools overcrowding and maybe a need for private schools
- Plan for school capacity
- Place density in center

BOTH BUSINESS AND RESIDENT PERSPECTIVES

- Strategic growth/long-term visioning (i.e. accommodate future development, green preservation, attracts businesses, mixture of housing types)
- Tree and natural amenity protection
- Neighborhood downtown and social center
- Walkable mixed-uses

TRANSPORTATION

Prime access to GA 400 is seen as a huge benefit to Forsyth's location; however, the highway brings heavy traffic that some of the County's roads cannot handle.

Shareholders requested additional roads and routes for travelers to use, which would ease the existing traffic. An increase in road connectivity would help to answer requests but also allows for economic development along these new roads. In the long-term, convenient public transit would also greatly benefit the commuting workforce in and out of Forsyth County while reducing congestion. Many Forsyth County workers commute in from nearby counties and many residents commute out for work.

SUMMARY OF TRANSPORTATION TOPICS

- Access to 400 very useful, sustains businesses
- Traffic makes it harder on commuting workforce
- Updated road infrastructure to ease traffic congestion and risk for accidents
- Lack of public transit/MARTA, need better proximity/access
- Better road connectivity to mitigate congestion, while inviting development alongside
- Many hospital workers require a 30 minute commute time, which is hard in traffic
- Workforce such as teachers cannot afford to live in Forsyth commute from outside communities
- Lack of walkability

QUALITY OF LIFE/OTHER

Forsyth's park system and lakefront is one of its greatest assets to overall quality of life. The lake amenities attract business talent into the County. Also, the quality school system makes for an attractive quality for parents. There is a small push for a private school option, but the public schools are still boosted. Lastly, the emerging diversity of residents and possible amenities sells as an important asset to today's society. It allows for more inclusion in government decisions and fosters a more united community.

SUMMARY OF QUALITY OF LIFE ASPECTS:

- Great school system
- Better quality of life/amenities to help attract business talent
- Growing diversity helps as asset
- Desirable place to live
- Taxes
- Safety, low-crime, responsive police
- Location proximity to Atlanta
- Parks, green open space, natural amenities
- Not walkable, communities disconnected
- No downtown center for neighborhoods
- Need to attract more high-paying jobs (tech jobs) with amenities