



VISIONING WORKSHOP SUMMARY

PURPOSE

Community members were invited to shape the update to the Forsyth County *Comprehensive Plan* by participating in the first set of public input sessions, the Visioning Workshops, held in April 2016. Residents, businesses, property owners, and community groups were encouraged to participate and help shape Forsyth County's future.

The Visioning Workshops were educational and interactive. Each workshop began with a presentation, from which community members learned about recent County trends in demographics, housing, economic development, and land use. The project team then facilitated small group discussions about the County's future direction and priorities using a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis.

A version of the Visioning Workshop was posted online as a means of gathering input from those who were unable to attend the workshop in person. The online workshop presented the same materials and topics of discussion that were featured at the in-person Visioning Workshops.

DATES, TIMES AND LOCATIONS

Five in-person Vision Workshops were held across the County between April 18 and April 27, 2016:

- Monday, April 18, 6:00 to 8:00 p.m.: Central Park Recreation Center Banquet Room
- Wednesday, April 20, 7:00 to 9:00 p.m.: Fowler Park Recreation Center Community Room
- Saturday, April 23, 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.: Lambert High School Auditorium
- Monday, April 25, 7:00 to 9:00 p.m.: Hampton Library Meeting Room
- Wednesday, April 27, 6:00 to 8:00 p.m.: West Forsyth High School Cafeteria

Each meeting had the same agenda and lasted two hours.

The online visioning workshop was posted to the Foster Forsyth website on April 28, the day after the last in-person workshop, and closed on May 5. Participants were asked to spend approximately 30 minutes interacting with the site and materials.

OVERALL NUMBER OF ATTENDEES

Overall, the Visioning Workshops attracted 135 attendees to the five in-person meetings. Some residents attended more than one meeting. The online Vision Workshop attracted 38 participants during the week it was online.

AGENDA FOR MEETINGS

The agenda for each Visioning Workshop followed the same format. Individual activities are described in greater detail below.

0:00: SIGN-IN AND ORIENTATION ACTIVITIES

As attendees arrived, they were greeted, asked to participate in preliminary input activities, and invited to review a series of boards illustrating existing trends and changes in Forsyth County.

0:15: VISIONING OUR FUTURE PRESENTATION

The project team and County staff welcomed attendees. The project team then gave a presentation that reviewed the Comprehensive Planning process, findings from the *Existing Conditions Report*, and the goals for the workshop.

0:45: SMALL GROUP VISIONING DISCUSSIONS

Attendees broke into small groups for a SWOT analysis, which was used to identify priorities for the County.

1:50 REGROUP & NEXT STEPS

The groups presented their priorities to the assembly of attendees.

2:00 ADJOURN

SUMMARY OF WELCOME ACTIVITIES

After attendees signed in to the meeting, they were directed to three posters, each of which asked the attendee to finish a sentence by writing in a blank space. The questions were oriented to develop an understanding of what matters to community members about Forsyth County today and in the future. Input was collected to help shape development of the overarching vision statement for the plan. The responses written on each of these posters are summarized here.

VISION BOARD HIGHLIGHTS

“In 2037 I won’t want to live anywhere but Forsyth County because...”

A total of 60 responses were received. This question was only asked at the in-person Visioning Workshops. Responses indicated that attendees valued the County’s quality of life, low taxes, rural atmosphere, and green space, and looked forward to having

more walkable places and cultural and social opportunities. Respondents also feared that traffic, unrestrained growth, income inequality, and crime could threaten Forsyth County's ability to be a great place for families and seniors.

“Our County’s biggest hurdles to overcome in the next five years are...”

A total of 115 responses were received from in-person and online Visioning Workshop participants. Responses indicated that attendees felt the biggest issues facing the County were a loss of rural character, traffic, unplanned growth, lack of roadway infrastructure, overcrowded schools, and a lack of cultural opportunities and events.

“The number one thing I love about Forsyth County is...”

A total of 101 responses were received from in-person and online Visioning Workshop participants. Responses indicated that meeting attendees value Forsyth County's schools, low crime, community feeling, low taxes, location, medical facilities, and green and rural spaces.

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION

Amanda Hatton, the consulting team project manager, gave a presentation that reviewed the Comprehensive Planning process, findings from the *Existing Conditions Report*, and the goals for the Visioning Workshop. She stated that the County was updating the Comprehensive Plan to address increasing development interest and the large influx of new residents, and presented the framework, timeline, and key elements of the planning process. The role of the community in this process, and the breadth of public involvement planned for the *Foster Forsyth* effort, was a major element of the presentation.

Ms. Hatton then presented key findings from the *Existing Conditions Report* (full report available online for public review beginning May 2, 2016), including information about shifting demographics, the County's wealth of community resources, and opportunities for changes in land use, housing, transportation, and economic development.

Demographically, the County is experiencing a high rate of population growth, an increasing proportion of minority residents, and a relatively high median family income compared to the region and nation. The County is attracting residents in part because of its well-distributed community facilities, particularly its schools and parks.

Eric Bosman, the consultant team's land use lead, presented information related to existing land use inventory and policy. There is an opportunity to differentiate among places within the County, vary the housing types offered, and re-evaluate the location and character of shopping areas. Home prices are higher than those in surrounding areas. Although single-family homes are the most prevalent housing product in the County, there has been an increase in multi-family housing recently.

Residents are well-educated and unemployment is low (3.9 percent). However, the local labor market is not well-matched with the labor pool, as 69 percent of local employees

commute from outside the County and 71 percent of employed local residents worked elsewhere. The largest industries are professional and technical services, retail, and manufacturing. The transportation network is strained from these commuting patterns, the long trips necessitated by the suburban and rural development pattern, and ongoing population growth.

At the conclusion of the presentation, Ms. Hatton invited the audience to participate in workshops in later phases of the planning process. She then opened the meeting for questions and comments.

In lieu of a facilitated presentation, participants in the Online Visioning Workshop were given the opportunity to review highlights from the presentation or the entire presentation at their own leisure.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSIONS

After the presentation, the project team took questions from attendees. These questions and the project team's answers follow:

Q: Water consumption is a major issue, and seeing as the continued debate with the adjacent two states is not getting resolved anytime soon, are there any plans to address this? Could the quarry, in the future, have any use in storing water to address this issue?

A: Yes, the planning team is considering this issue area, although it is not a focus of the plan. The City has a Water Master Plan that is adjusted based on the future land use plan. The state also requires that each comprehensive plan include an element addressing the locality's compatibility with the regional water plan.

Q. How are these documents used by the Planning Department and by the Board of Commissioners? Will they be used, or is this a waste of everyone's time?

A: The goal of this document is to guide decision making by the Board of Commissioners (BOC) once they have adopted it. The BOC initiated the update to the plan proactively, so it is expected that the BOC will follow it.

Q. Are the population projections consistent with the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC)? Why not use the ARC projections if they are higher than the current projections?

A: We looked at projections from a number of sources and have come to this number preliminarily. The County has concerns about ARC's numbers, which is why they are not being used for this plan. As the process moves forward, this projection will be adjusted to reflect the community's vision.

Q. Do we have the income numbers of inbound and outbound commuters?

A. No, that would be interesting data if we can get it, but we do not have it.

Q: Does this commuting pattern indicate that we are lacking something like jobs, or jobs with higher salaries, or affordable housing?

A: The commuting pattern may indicate that there either are not enough jobs or not enough jobs of the right type for the residents of the County.

Q: The state requires a plan; does the state give less grant money if the last plan wasn't followed?

A: They do look at that, but the state doesn't have oversight, just coordination.

Q: What type of funds?

A: Grants, loans, and money from the ARC as well as state. These funds are allocated on an annual basis. The action plan in particular affects budget allocation.

Q: This is the third meeting. Were there more or less attendees at others?

A: There were roughly 40 attendees at the second meeting, and 20 at the first. We are working to get the word out about meetings.

Q: You mentioned in the presentation that in 2010 about 80 percent of the County was residential, 10 percent was commercial and 10 percent was recreation. Is this comparable to the rest of the GA 400 corridor?

A: The amount of commercial is lower, but may be more comparable to Johns Creek. It is hard to compare the County to cities.

Q: Do we break down race/demographics by district?

A: No, we did not. We looked at race and demographics primarily County-wide.

Q: What year will the projected population (386,621) occur?

A: The Comprehensive Plan has a 20-year planning horizon, so 2037.

Q: What is the long-range transportation project shown near here on the map on the transportation slide?

A: That particular project I don't know the specifics of, but it is likely a roadway widening project. If it is in long range, it may not even be funded at this time and is likely twenty years out.

Q: Is there a survey on the website?

A: It is not live yet, but a link to the survey will be posted when it goes live.

Q: What are the public involvement opportunities on Saturday?

A: Those are one of our community event kiosks. Members of our project team, along with resident volunteers from the Vision and Steering Committees, will be going to

where the people are on Saturdays to get the word out about *Foster Forsyth* to people who may not be otherwise engaged with the plan. We will have flyers about meetings and an activity that they can do on the spot to gather some input and generate some interest.

Q: Is Forsyth growing faster than other counties?

A: Yes. In what has in recent history been a fast growing region, Forsyth County has had a very high rate of growth.

Q: Is it assumed that the imbalance between jobs and residents is a problem?

A: The imbalance is a problem in that it creates issues for residents. For example, if you want to work close to home and cannot, or cannot find the kind of work you want within the County, then that is a problem. The traffic that results from commuting is a problem.

Q: How does Forsyth County compare in density to others? I would hate for Forsyth to become Gwinnett.

A. Forsyth County is lower density than its neighboring counties within the Atlanta Region. Of course, some parts of it are denser than others.

SUMMARY OF SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

At the in-person workshops, the large group counted off into two or three smaller groups depending on total attendance. These groups met with two facilitators who led a SWOT analysis. One project team member led the discussion, and the other captured the brainstorming on large sheets of paper. Once the group had generated lists of the County's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, each member of the group was given ten sticker dots to place by those items they felt were top priorities to address in the *Comprehensive Plan*. Responses that consistently received multiple votes are summarized below. A graph showing a summary of the priorities as determined by small groups at each meeting as well as online is included at the end of this section.

STRENGTHS

- Great schools
- Green space and natural resources, great parks, open space, and recreational opportunities
- Lake Lanier
- Low crime
- Low taxes
- Location – close to high paying jobs, in the Atlanta region, but also near mountains
- Rural feel and character
- Trees
- Undeveloped land remains for future development

- Health care
- Quality of life, good place to live for families and seniors, and good people

WEAKNESSES

- Traffic
- Infrastructure being outpaced by rapid development:
 - Lack of roadway infrastructure to handle growing traffic
 - Overcrowded schools
- Lack of public transportation and transportation options for walking and biking
- Tree loss and weak ordinance for tree replacement
- Loss of agricultural land and greenspace
- Affordable housing and workforce housing
- Water supply concerns
- Lack of jobs and a mismatch between available jobs and the residential population's education and skill level
- Lack of entertainment and cultural options
- High-density housing
- Lack of quality development and architectural guidelines to deliver the desired look and feel of development
- Need for civic identity, for gathering places and town centers, and mixed use centers
- Need for gateways and beautification on corridors like Highway 9
- Lack of trust in the planning process and in Commission to implement the plan
- Monotonous land use and "sameness" in development across the County, lack of sense of place
- Lack in the variety of housing
- Lopsided tax digest

OPPORTUNITIES

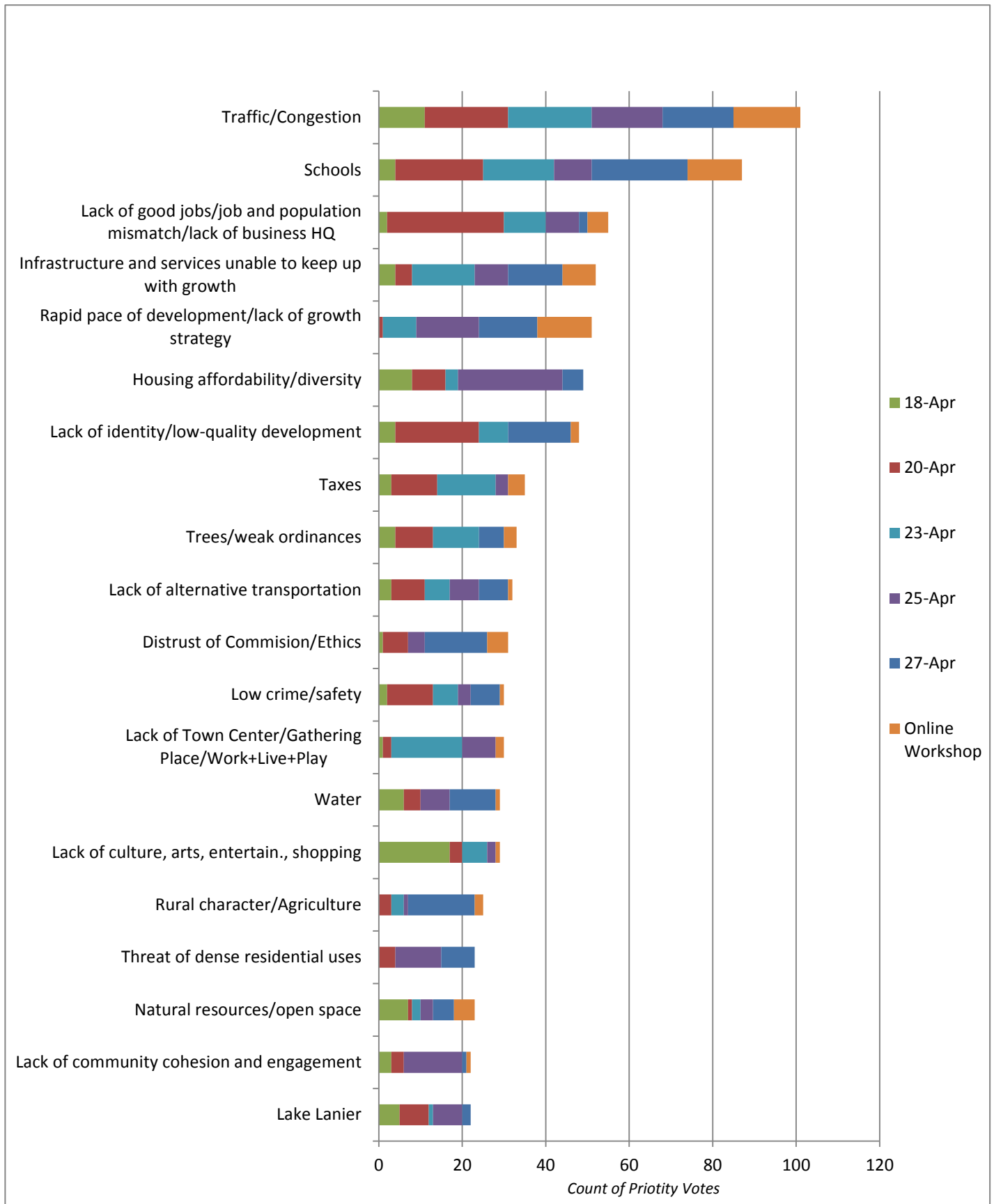
- Develop a high tech cluster in Forsyth County:
 - Work with school system and institutions of higher education to support businesses and high paying jobs
 - Recruit top teaching talent
 - Perhaps start a technical high school
 - Bring in high-speed internet
 - Leverage the highly educated residential population
- Create more communities to differentiate among places in the county
 - Create nodes of development rather than sprawling development
 - Create destinations and hubs
 - Develop a city center with activities for young people; could be a community center day and night, and offer cultural or entertainment venues
- Maximize Lake Lanier as a recreation destination by increasing opportunities for recreation beyond private boat use
- Build connectivity and civic space through redevelopment

- Align housing costs with incomes in the County and broaden housing options for workers
- Become more attractive to businesses
- Improve the transportation system ahead of development
 - Infrastructure could keep pace with growth
 - Multi-modal transportation options such as walking and biking could be supported
- Heighten development standards and impose increased impact fees to address infrastructure needs, build schools, and discourage low-quality development
- Embrace increasing diversity
- Retain a rural feel through the inclusion of lower-density housing and conserving land for green space and parks
- Improve the tree ordinance to retain more tree cover, and not allow clear cutting for new development
- Redevelop office space and other areas
- Slow growth

THREATS

- Water resources
- Traffic could overshadow the benefits of living in Forsyth County
- Crime, including drugs, could increase
- Density
- Decline in the quality of schools from overcrowding
- MARTA and mass transit
- This *Comprehensive Plan* may not be implemented by the Commission; Commission membership could change and throw out this plan
- County debt could have negative consequences and taxes could go up
- Growth could continue unchecked and outpace infrastructure (roads and sewer) and services.
- City of Cumming's control over water and sewer
- Growth could have a negative impact on quality of life and home prices
- Further tree loss, loss of rural land and feel
- Low-quality development threatens home prices
- Lack of affordable housing for young people and the failure to attract Millennials could mean an aging County
- Imbalance in land uses could negatively affect tax digest and cause increased taxes
- Residential development could take land that would be better suited for commercial development or schools
- Lack of businesses and jobs
- Multi-family housing could have a negative impact
- Lack of community cohesion, lack of buy-in for the plan, and splintered communities—fed by social media
- Political decisions made for short-term benefits could trump long term vision
- Loss of large lot residential through smaller lot subdivision development

PRIORITIES SORTED BY MEETING DATE



CONCLUSION

When small group members finished voting, their dots were tallied to determine the top priorities for the County. Then the large group reconvened and the results of small group exercise were shared, either by a member of the project team or by a member of the small group that was reporting. Sharing the top priorities allowed attendees to determine those priorities that were held in common across the small groups, and those issues that they had perhaps overlooked. Ms. Hatton then shared the last slide of her presentation, which reported the outcomes of this exercise from previous workshops.