

Guilford County Open Space Report



**Adopted by the Guilford County
Parks and Recreation Commission
May 9, 2000**

**Adopted by the Guilford County
Board of Commissioners
July 20, 2000**

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INTRODUCTION

History

Nearly two years ago, a diverse group of citizens concerned about the rapid conversion of rural and urban open space in Guilford County to other land uses began meeting on an ad hoc basis. These citizens began to develop grass roots support for a long-term program to acquire and preserve open space in the county. By common definition, "open space" means undisturbed or undeveloped land. The group agreed that open space serves many useful functions and provides many different benefits. They found that the functions and benefits of open space range from environmental to economic, from conservation to recreation, from corridors for wildlife to paths for people, from buffers to connectors, from quality of water to quality of life, and from soothing the eye to soothing the soul. They also agreed that open space in Guilford County was disappearing fast.

The Citizens for the Preservation of Open Space acknowledged Guilford County's progress over the last decade in parks and open space. They praised the effective use of the twelve-million dollar 1988 parks and recreation bond issue to acquire and develop six regional parks, and to establish portions of a greenway connecting the communities of High Point, Jamestown and Greensboro. They applauded and urged approval for the ten-million dollar 2000 parks and recreation bond issue intended to complete the Bicentennial Greenway and develop park facilities in the regional parks that had been acquired with 1988 bond funds. However, the group also noted that, despite a continued need to acquire park land and open space, Guilford County at this point had no more bond funds earmarked for that purpose.

Through numerous meetings and presentations, the Citizens for the Preservation of Open Space discussed, formulated and then sought community endorsement for the following concepts:

- ❖ The County needs an active, focused, long-term open space preservation and acquisition program.
- ❖ The program should operate from a plan, but be flexible enough to respond effectively to threats to high priority tracts and to take advantage of special acquisition opportunities.

- ❖ The plan should be focused on the multiple uses, functions and benefits of open space.
- ❖ The plan should be built on the concept of corridors and bubbles, so that in thirty years, there would be strategically located open space bubbles or core areas throughout the county linked together by stream corridors, utility easements, greenways, bike trails and walking paths.
- ❖ The plan should include a proposal for a Cape Fear Headwaters State Park located in the upper reaches of the Haw River Watershed in Guilford County, possibly connecting to park land or river trails in surrounding counties.
- ❖ Acquisition and preservation strategies would be based on working with cooperative and willing property owners. There would be no takings as part of this initiative.

With these principles in mind, the group sought and received endorsements from a wide range of local groups and organizations:

Advisory Board for Environmental Quality
 Citizens for Responsible Government
 Greater Greensboro Builders Association, Inc.
 Greensboro Parks & Recreation Department
 Greensboro Parks and Recreation Commission
 Greensboro Beautiful, Inc.
 Greensboro Fat Tire Society
 Greensboro Host Lions Club
 Greensboro Regional REALTORS Association, Inc.
 Guilford County Parks and Recreation Commission
 Haw River Assembly
 High Point Chamber of Commerce, Environmental Issues Committee
 The League of Women Voters of Guilford County
 Piedmont Environmental Center
 Piedmont Land Conservancy
 Piedmont Plateau Group, North Carolina Sierra Club
 T. Gilbert Pearson Audubon Society
 Town of Summerfield

On February 25, 1999, with these endorsements in hand, the Citizens for the Preservation of Open Space asked the Guilford County Board of Commissioners to endorse and act on the principles outlined above. The County Commissioners accepted the group's recommendations, and referred the matter to the Guilford County Parks and Recreation Commission for a report back to the Board.

On May 20, 1999, the Parks and Recreation Commission reported back. The Commission recommended to the Board of County Commissioners that the Board:

- ❖ Direct the Planning and Development Department to complete an inventory and map of existing parks and open space;
- ❖ Direct the Parks and Recreation Commission to share the inventory with other local governments and invite them to get involved in completing the inventory and formulating open space preservation strategies;
- ❖ Approve the Planning and Development Department proposal for staffing; and
- ❖ Direct the Parks and Recreation Commission to prepare and propose back to the Board of County Commissioners a specific vision, plan and map, including a budget and proposed source of funds, for open space preservation and acquisition throughout Guilford County for the next thirty years, and to include several initial projects that could be completed within a relatively short period of time.

The Board of County Commissioners approved these recommendations, and asked the Parks and Recreation Commission to proceed. The Parks and Recreation Commission, through its Open Space Subcommittee and as a whole, has worked toward these goals. The Open Space Subcommittee has been meeting for almost one year and reporting periodically to the full Commission. Months of work and discussion have led to the preparation and approval of this report for consideration by the Board of County Commissioners. Work on a draft report was completed in January, 2000. That draft has been reviewed, revised, and finalized by the subcommittee, and returned to the Commission in May, 2000 for approval.

The stage for this report has been set by the recent approval by county voters of the \$10 million dollar parks and recreation bond issue. The bonds will allow for the completion of crucial next steps in the Guilford County parks and open space program. However, neither the 2000 bond issue nor other county program addresses the need to acquire and preserve additional open space. This report addresses that need and recommends how to meet it.

In this report, the Guilford County Parks and Recreation Commission provides information and recommendations which, if implemented, will set in motion a coordinated plan for open space preservation and acquisition in Guilford County. The plan provides an inventory of existing open space and parkland in Guilford County, along with recommendations concerning the establishment of criteria for land acquisition, the identification of funding sources, and specific strategies for implementing a comprehensive open space acquisition and preservation program.

Current Trends

Current research shows the importance of open space to the environment, the economy and our quality of life. A 1991 study by the American Water Works Research Foundation concluded that, "...the most effective way to ensure the long-term protection of water supplies is through (government) land ownership."¹ According to a 1997 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Report, open space, parks and recreation factors were ranked number one by small businesses when choosing to relocate.²

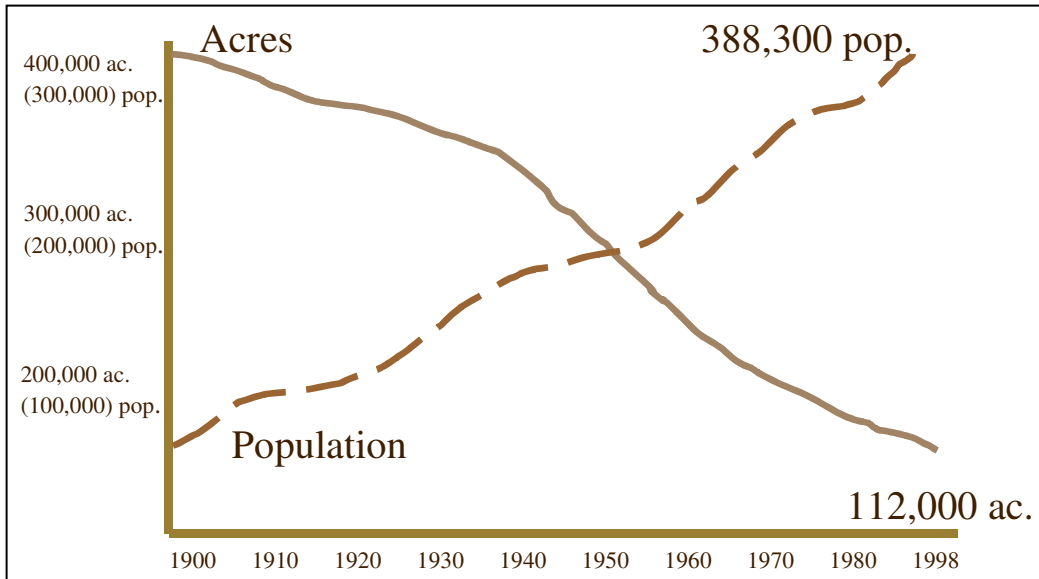
One 1998 real estate industry analysis concluded that "...there is no greater risk to land values than unrestrained development."³ For a 1995 poll, researchers queried nearly 2,000 people from around the country about quality of life. The major elements cited as crucial for a satisfactory quality of life were low crime with safe streets and access to greenery and open space.⁴

Across the nation, issues concerning open space are receiving unprecedented attention. In 1998, voters considered 148 separate referenda concerning park or open space acquisition. Of these, 84% passed with voters giving approval for roughly \$5.28 billion dollars in funding.⁵ The broad base of community support for the Citizens for the Preservation of Open Space proposal, and strong voter support for the 1988 and 2000 park bonds mirror the strong support nationwide for open space preservation.

Open space in Guilford County is disappearing fast, a fact that is self-evident if one travels around the county. There are other indicators of this trend as well. One such indicator is the decreasing amount of acres in agricultural use (Figure 1). Over the last century, Guilford County has seen a 72% reduction in agricultural acreage due to various causes, and the proportion of farm land to urban land continues to decrease.⁶

Nationwide estimates indicate that the United States may be losing up to a million acres of agricultural land per year to other uses.⁷

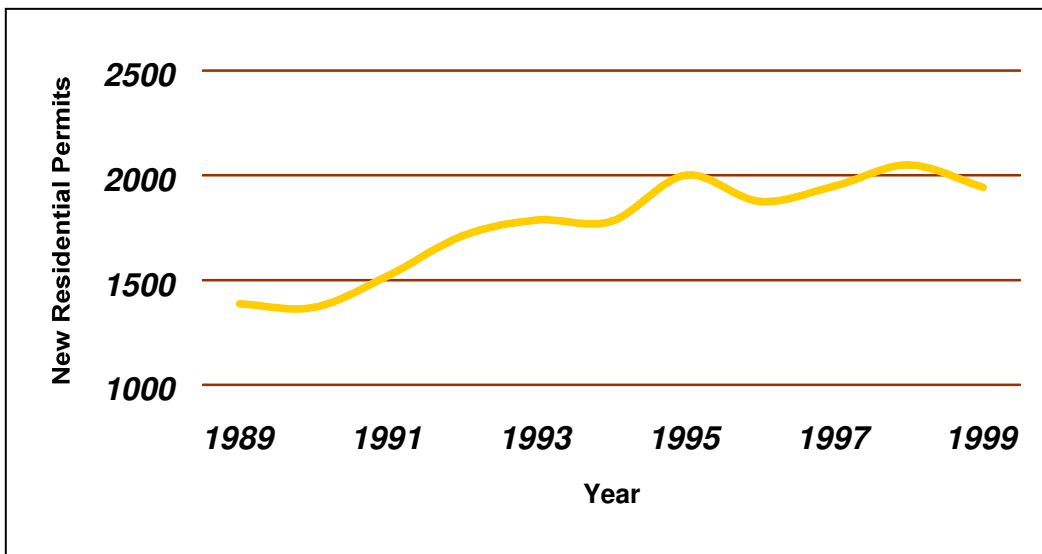
Figure I. Agricultural Acres Compared to Population, 1900 - 1998, Guilford County, NC



Source: Guilford County Soil and Water Conservation District

Another indicator of threatened open space is the number of new housing starts outside urban service areas (Figure 2). Over the last decade, the number of new homes permitted in rural Guilford County has increased steadily. In both urban and rural areas, growth is occurring. As it occurs, it uses up open space and highlights the need for an open space acquisition and preservation plan that will keep pace with growth.

Figure 2. New Housing Starts in Guilford County, NC, 1989 - 1999



Source: Guilford County Planning and Development Department

Current Measures

There have been several initiatives over the past decade which have resulted in the acquisition and protection of open space in Guilford County. Through a twelve-million dollar Parks and Recreation Bond approved in 1988, Guilford County has acquired six regional parks over the last decade and had a seventh park donated. The county also constructed portions of the Bicentennial and Lake Brandt Greenways, enhanced rural community recreation facilities, assisted in the construction of an environmental education center, and constructed shared use recreational facilities at several school sites. Through these efforts, a total of 2,300 acres has been acquired for park and open space purposes.

The Guilford County Watershed Acquisition Program has identified and acquired land within Tiers One and Two of the Watershed Critical Area over the past decade. Now nearing completion, this program was funded by a 1988 Watershed Protection Bond shared by Guilford County, the City of Greensboro, and the City of High Point. In acquiring protective buffers around drinking water resources, the Watershed Acquisition Program has reserved approximately 1,200 acres for open space in Guilford County.

In addition, the process of subdividing land has led to the preservation of floodplain areas through the dedication of land for open space based on the County's Greenway Plan and the granting of conservation easements. Although generally small and often disconnected, these areas are beginning to accumulate after more than a decade of consistent enforcement by Guilford County, the City of Greensboro, and the City of High Point.

The Piedmont Land Conservancy (PLC), a local non-profit land trust established in 1990, has been instrumental in negotiating several high profile land dedications and conservation easements in Guilford County, including the Lake Brandt Greenway, Lindale Farms and Price Park, as well as preserving a number of working farms in neighboring Alamance County. In addition, the PLC also provides information to the public describing the federal, state and local tax benefits of dedicating conservation easements and providing land gifts.

FINDINGS

Master Plans

Over the years, several planning documents produced by Guilford County and its municipalities have addressed the issue of open space.

Draft Guilford County Master Parks and Recreation Plan, July 1991

"While it is feasible and appropriate to adopt population based standards for park types and facilities, it is not quite as simple for open space. Perhaps the most appropriate standard is to say that a community needs whatever open space is necessary to protect perceived important areas."

Forecast 2015: A Citizen Plan for the Future - The Environment

"The county-wide land use plan will include a 'county natural heritage inventory' that identifies open spaces, such as native forests and wetlands, that should be preserved for educational, recreational, historic and environmental purposes... In addition, a bond referendum will be held to fund an ongoing purchasing program of strategically targeted parks and open spaces. Continued support of this program will be ensured by a yearly allocation from each jurisdiction's general fund and through state open space funds."

Northwest Area Plan, Comprehensive Plan Series - Open Space/Trails

"...the Plan recommended protecting those areas shown as Critical Habitats on the Environmental Constraints Map from any future development. Should growth occur in critical habitat areas, proposed protection strategies should be included in the development proposal for review."

City of Greensboro Master Parks and Recreation Plan

"The City should continue to acquire natural areas to fortify its existing holdings through the Greensboro Development Ordinance... The City should try to acquire properties adjacent to existing parks to increase buffers and possibly expand use."

City of High Point Parks and Recreation Master Plan

City of High Point Park and Recreation Standards - Total Open Space: 55 acres/1000 persons."

Natural Areas Inventory

In 1991, the *Natural Areas Inventory of Guilford County* was completed under the supervision of the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program. A second phase of the inventory was undertaken in 1995, with a total of seventy-eight sites surveyed to identify local plant communities and individual plant species. Each site was ranked by its natural significance. Several sites were identified as having regional significance to the Piedmont.

The initial inventory indicates that mature, undisturbed terrestrial communities are rare in Guilford County due to our high degree of development. Much land not already in residential or agricultural use is in some stage of secondary succession.⁸ The inventory also recommended that more work be done to identify additional sites with scenic, open space value and wildlife habitats.

Parks & Open Space Inventory

The Open Space Subcommittee was charged with compiling an inventory of existing park land and open spaces. This inventory was to include lands located not only in unincorporated Guilford County, but also those lands within its municipalities as well.

The inventory was compiled through the use of tax records, the watershed acquisition database, park and recreation records and with the assistance of staff members from the City of Greensboro, the City of High Point, The Town of Jamestown, and the Town of Gibsonville.

A parcel was included in the inventory if it met the following minimum criteria:

- ❖ Owned by a Government Entity or Local Land Conservancy
- ❖ Consisted of Undeveloped Open Space or Recreationally Developed Park Land
- ❖ Recorded Conservation Easement on Property

A complete copy of the Parks and Open Space Inventory can be found in Appendix 1. The Open Space and Parks Map was then prepared to help illustrate the location, size and relationship of these parcels.

The inventory revealed that 4.69% of the total land within Guilford County is currently protected by some form of government ownership or conservation easement (Figure 3). In other words, of the 417, 308 total acres of land in Guilford County, 19,565 acres (including 5,308 acres of surface water) are currently protected.

Figure 3. Parks and Open Space Inventory Summary, 1999

Property Type	Acres	Acres/1,000 Persons*
Flood Plain/Open Space	783.89	1.99/1,000
Greenway	5.44	.01/1,000
Park Land	7,035.47	17.88/1,000
Watershed Land	5,273.61	13.40/1,000
Surface Water	5,379.51	13.67/1,000
Farm	900.15	2.29/1,000
Conservation Easement	112.10	.28/1,000
Water Quality Conservation Easement	70.49	.17/1,000
Total	19,565.66	49.72/1,000

** Based upon 1999 Guilford County Population estimate of 393,496*

Guilford County: 417,307.69 acres

Source: Guilford County Planning and Development Department

The inventory did not include property held in common by homeowner's associations, state DOT remainder parcels or utility rights-of-way. An inventory of these potential open spaces would require additional in-depth research, and for the purpose of this report, were considered less likely to be significant in terms of open space functions and benefits.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Guilford County Parks and Recreation Commissions makes the following recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners, and respectfully requests that the Board take appropriate action to adopt and implement these recommendations:

1. Basic recommendation

That the County establish an active, focused, long-term open space preservation and acquisition program ("the open space program").

2. Guiding principles for the open space program

That the following principles govern the open space program:

- a. The program will establish, through a nomination and review process, priorities for acquisition of open space and will reflect them on a program map that will be updated periodically, but the program will be flexible enough to respond effectively to threats to high priority tracts and to take advantage of special acquisition opportunities.
- b. The program will be focused on the multiple uses, functions and benefits of open space.
- c. The program will be built on the concept of corridors and bubbles, such that, in thirty years, there would be strategically located open space "bubbles" or core areas throughout the county; those open space core areas would be linked together by stream corridors, greenways, bike trails, walking paths, utility easements, or other linear connections; and each site would have a variety of uses appropriate to that site.
- d. The program will include a proposal for a Cape Fear Headwaters State Park located in the upper reaches of the Haw River in Guilford County, possibly connecting to park land or river trails in surrounding counties.
- e. Acquisition and preservation strategies will be based on working with cooperative and willing property owners. There will be no takings as part of this initiative.

3. Staffing for the near future

That the open space program be supported in the near future by equivalent of one full-time staff person, in accordance with the proposal made by the Planning and Development Department.

4. Citizen advisory board

That a citizen advisory board, serving under, and as a subcommittee of, the Parks and Recreation Commission, provide leadership and oversight for the program.

5. Encouragement of continued cooperation

That continued cooperation be encouraged between Guilford County and its municipalities, adjoining counties, the Soil and Water Conservation District, the Piedmont Land Conservancy, the Guilford County School District, and other interested groups such as the Haw River Assembly, to identify, plan, fund and carry out open space acquisition and preservation projects.

6. Efforts to protect agricultural lands

That the protection and preservation of agricultural lands in Guilford County be supported where reasonable and appropriate, and that the Parks and Recreation Commission be directed to work with the Piedmont Land Conservancy to take steps to achieve this objective.

7. Participation in Smart Growth discussions

That a representative or representatives of the subcommittee participate in ongoing Smart Growth discussions as they relate to acquisition and preservation of open space and to the provision of incentives to developers to preserve open space in their developments.

8. Development of acquisition goals

That the program set appropriate goals for the open space program after studying other open space initiatives and programs, such as Governor Hunt's million acre initiative and the State of Georgia's 20% initiative; that, in the interim and as a foundation to which open space that serves other goals should be added, there be established an initial minimum goal to protect 100 acres of park and open space per 1,000 residents of Guilford County by 2030, based on National Recreation and Parks Association standards; and finally that the goals take into account additional research, refined needs assessments, improved mapping, and the

consideration of goals and standards established by other communities. *(Note: Should it prove successful, the establishment of a State park in Guilford County is not intended to and would not supplant the need for open space throughout the county easily accessible to all its citizens.)*

9. Timing

That, because open space is disappearing fast and the cost of acquiring it is rising fast, acquisition of open space under this program should occur sooner rather than later in the next thirty years.

10. Acquisition process

That the County establish a process and evaluation criteria for responding to acquisition proposals and opportunities, and that the process be similar to that described in the attachments to the report.

11. Funding

That Guilford County seek grant funding over the next year for proposed projects, from sources such as:

- a. NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund, averaging \$49 million dollars each year in state-wide funding;
- b. NC Natural Heritage Trust Fund, averaging \$6 million dollars each year in state-wide funding;
- c. NC Farmland Preservation Program, a new program which received \$500,000 in initial funding;
- d. NC Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, averaging \$18 million dollars each year in state-wide funding;
- e. NC Water Resource Development Grants, averaging \$750,000 dollars each year in state-wide funding;

- f. NC Wetland Restoration Grants, a relatively new program which received \$9 million dollars in initial funding;
- g. Conservation Tax Credits, which can equal up to 25% of the fair market value of donated interests, up to a maximum allowable credit of \$250,000 for individuals and \$500,000 for corporations; and
- h. Various Federal programs;

And, that the Parks and Recreation Commission reevaluate funding strategy after one round of grant applications to determine if a County appropriation above and beyond current resources is needed; if so, that the Parks and Recreation Commission discuss and recommend funding options with Board of County Commissioners.

12. Consideration of pilot projects

That the open space program get started with a number of pilot projects that will provide the program with some early success and some ability to demonstrate, on the ground, the multiple benefits and uses this program will provide to the citizens of Guilford County; and that the program contact potentially interested parties to evaluate the feasibility of the following ideas for pilot projects and what role the County and other local governments and community groups could play:

- a. Mears Fork Creek and the Upper Haw River in cooperation with the Mears Fork Creek Steering Committee.
- b. A Downtown Greensboro / NC A&T University / Keeley Park / Northeast Park / Haw River Greenway, the goal of which would be to provide open space and parks easily accessible to the Northeast quadrant of Greensboro and Guilford County, with possible connections to the Reedy Fork Ranch development.
- c. A farm land preservation project in Southeastern Guilford County, in partnership with the Piedmont Land Conservancy.

13. Public education campaign

That the program include a highly visible public information campaign concerning the open space program, plan, scope and goal as well as information describing conservation options and tax benefits, that the campaign take advantage of opportunities to provide information via the Internet, and that the campaign target certain groups who may be particularly able to assist the open space program, such as professional financial advisors and the corporate community.

14. Future research projects

That, as time and resources allow, the County pursue the following future research projects:

- a. Map boundaries of the Natural Area Inventory sites
- b. Inventory of privately held lands providing functional open space
- c. Inventory active farms and farm exempt property
- d. Forest land canopy inventory
- e. How to create incentives for dedication of open space
- f. How to encourage environmentally sensitive development
- g. Inventory flora and fauna in open space and park lands

15. Types of land to acquire and preserve

That the following types of land be considered for acquisition and preservation under this program:

- a. Lands identified in the Natural Areas Inventory of Guilford County and Riparian Corridor Conservation Design for the Upper Haw River, Mears Fork and Benaja Creek.
- b. Suitable properties adjacent to existing parks and open space lands
- c. Wetlands, meadows and mature forests
- d. Creek, stream and river corridors
- e. Groundwater recharge areas
- f. Buffers for drinking water supply lakes and streams.
- g. Corridors connecting parks, open spaces, schools, neighborhoods
- h. Sites of geologic or historic importance
- i. Sites providing significant plant or wildlife habitat
- j. Sites providing significant water quality protection
- k. Additional sites as indicated on the open space program map

END NOTES

¹ Trust for Public Land, "Protecting the Source: Land Conservation and the Future of America's Drinking Water," Trust for Public Land, San Francisco, CA, 1997

² Andrew Laughland and James Caudil, "Banking on Nature: The Economic Benefits to Local Communities of National Wildlife Refuge Visitation," Washington DC, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of Economics, July, 1997.

³ ERE Yarmouth and Real Estate Research Corporation, "Defining New Limits: Emerging Trends in Real Estate," ERE Yarmouth and RERC, New York, NY, 1998.

⁴ Garvin and Berens, *Urban Parks and Open Space*, 27.

⁵ Russell Shay, "Voters Invest in Parks and Open Space: 1998 Referenda Results," Land Trust Alliance, Washington DC, 1999.

⁶ Guilford County Soil & Water Conservation District, "Long Range Resource Conservation Program and Work Plan," Guilford County Soil & Water Conservation District, Greensboro, NC, 1999

⁷ Daniels, Dr. Tom, "Policy Guide on Agricultural Land Preservation", American Planning Association, Chicago, IL, 1999.

⁸ North Carolina Natural Heritage Foundation, "Natural Areas Inventory of Guilford County," NC Department of the Environment, Health and Natural Resources, Raleigh, NC, 1991.