

POLK COUNTY VISIONING COMMITTEE REPORT

INTRODUCTION

In May 2007, The Polk County Board of Commissioners appointed a 22 person Visioning Committee to develop a vision for the future of Polk County and to recommend priorities for future planning. The members (*Appendix A*) included representatives of the County and the three municipal governments, the Planning Department, Economic Development Commission, St. Luke's Hospital, Polk County Schools, Emergency Services, Parks and Recreation, Social Services, the Chamber of Commerce, and representatives of each township. Joe Epley was appointed to chair the committee.

This report represents the Committee's work over the past year. The members met as a whole or as sub-committees at least once a month. Their work included the creation of a SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat) analysis for the County. (*Appendix B*)

- an extensive written survey mailed to every household in the County, with more than 21 percent of the households participating by mailing their opinions to Wofford College's Leadership Initiative for tabulation. The data were analyzed and presented to the Committee and Board of Commissioners by The Mayberry Group of Candler, N.C. (*Appendix C*)
- community meetings in each of the County's six townships. (*Appendix D*)
- documentation of findings from various services, organizations and situations within the County. (*Appendix E*)
- review of existing reports including the 2004 Land Use Plan for Polk County (*Appendix F*), the preliminary work on the I-26 corridor for Spartanburg, Polk and Henderson Counties by Clemson University, and other studies.
- combining all the data and input to produce ten priority recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners.

The strongest sentiment expressed both within the Committee and by the public concerned growth and development and an intense desire to keep the rural, small-town atmosphere in Polk County. There was also strong support in the Committee, household surveys and township meetings for farmland preservation, as well as effective protection for our natural environment and natural resources.

Overall, with the exception of the growth/development issues, people generally feel good about the County and the services provided. Future planning requires that these services be monitored and enhanced as circumstances warrant.

The 2007-2008 Visioning Committee findings mirror the findings of a similar study made in 2004. Strong sentiment was expressed at township meetings and by

Committee members that there is an urgency to implement the recommendations. There was also criticism expressed for what a number of people called lack of attention to the needs described in the 2004 Land Use Plan.

The Visioning Committee's activities received extensive promotion and coverage in the *Tryon Daily Bulletin*. In addition to reporting in depth about the public survey, the newspaper staffed each township meeting and provided good coverage of what was said at the meetings.

Based on the sentiments expressed by the public survey, citizen comments and Committee members, the Committee concluded that the County's vision statement should be the following:

VISION FOR POLK COUNTY

Polk County's rural atmosphere and serene natural beauty will be vigorously protected. Visionary and pragmatic county and municipal governments will work together in a cooperative manner as they continue to enhance the quality of life for all Polk County citizens.

The Committee's prioritized list of recommendations (summary of recommendations next page) support the achievement of the people's vision.

The rationale and support for the recommendations are presented on the pages immediately following.

The Committee also recommends that the Board of Commissioners and other local government leaders (elected and appointed) review the full public survey report, SWOT analysis and citizens' comments from the township meetings which are included in the appendices to this report.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS:

FUTURE GROWTH/DEVELOPMENT: In a collaborative effort with municipalities, create as soon as possible a professionally designed Comprehensive Land Use Plan. This plan will achieve the vision that citizens want for the community. It will more effectively guide future development, quality of life standards and delivery of services county-wide. Such a plan should also include the mechanisms to insure future compliance.

ENVIRONMENT: Develop and aggressively enforce appropriate regulations to preserve and enhance the beauty and quality of our natural resources, including slope and ridge-top protection as well as forest preservation. Activities should include effective waste management programs that encourage greater participation in recycling efforts.

FARMLAND PRESERVATION: Maintain the rural character and beauty of Polk County by aggressively creating and supporting programs to protect and preserve farms and open areas, along with forest preservation.

HOUSING: Include within the Comprehensive Land Use Plan for the County a means to reconcile the contradiction between support of affordable housing and opposition to multi-family units and mobile homes.

WATER: Develop an effective system to insure adequate safe water for the future needs of the community, and create contingency plans to better cope with water emergencies. This requires an ongoing program to aggressively monitor quantity and quality of both ground and surface water in the County.

HEALTH CARE: Monitor closely and provide the necessary leadership and focus to improve availability and quality of health care services to all citizens of Polk County.

EDUCATION: Support public education effectively to maintain high achievement standards in academic and performance excellence with minimum dropouts.

PUBLIC SAFETY: Insure that law enforcement, fire service and emergency medical (ambulance) services are properly equipped, trained and staffed to maintain the high standards necessary to provide good security to the public, continually seeking both effective and efficient coordinated efforts among the various agencies throughout the County.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: Enhance efforts to achieve the County's economic goals and to provide strong leadership dedicated to improving the economic vitality of the County.

GOVERNMENT SERVICES: Insure that County staff members maintain high-quality standards of public service and professional competence with enhanced recruiting and in-service training programs designed to permit the government to adequately meet the public's needs. Work should continue to improve cooperative relationships among all levels of government – federal, state, county and municipal.

RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATIONS TO ACHIEVE THE DESIRED VISION FOR THE COUNTY

FUTURE GROWTH/DEVELOPMENT

The Polk County citizens have overwhelmingly voiced concerns about uncontrolled growth and the need to more effectively manage the future development of the County. These concerns include a passionate desire to preserve Polk County's rural character, beauty and small-town charm. The County currently is not utilizing a plan to guide government decisions needed to achieve the vision described in the introduction of this report.

From the citizens' survey, the Committee found

- nearly half (45.1%) the residents feel that Polk County has done a poor job of managing growth and development. Almost an equal number (43.5%) said growth management had been “fair”, while only 4.6 % felt an excellent job had been done.
- more than two-thirds (68%) said the County should better regulate the location and amount of growth in the County; 14.4% said the County is doing a reasonable job regulating growth, and 7% said the County should stop all growth, while 6.3% said the County should not regulate growth.
- In asking, “Which of the following statements best describes your point of view?”
 - 44.5% responded, “We must preserve those qualities that make our community special by substantially limiting growth.”
 - 42.3% responded, “Growth is necessary for the economy, but current regulations need improving.”
 - 4.5% responded, “Growth is necessary for the economy and current regulations are satisfactory.”
 - 3.8% responded, “Growth should not be a government concern.”
- More than half (61.8%) are dissatisfied with how the rural character of the County has been protected.
- 52.5% agree with the statement, “Limit the amount of population growth in the County.”
- Over half (52.5%) have no confidence in private developers making the best land use decisions, and another fourth (26.2%) have “very little confidence” in developers. Only 15% said they had some or a great deal of confidence in developers.

- 41% said they had some or a great deal of confidence in County government making good land use decisions, but a third (33.6%) said they had ‘very little confidence’ and 18.5% said they had no confidence. State and municipal government confidence levels were slightly lower than County government, with land trusts and conservation groups garnering the highest levels of confidence.

In the SWOT analysis, Committee members determined

- the greatest strengths of the County are the small town, rural atmosphere, beauty and clean environment.
- rapid, uncontrolled growth is a major concern.
- growth, lack of planning and water issues are among the greatest weaknesses in the County.
- concerns over uncontrolled growth and development; water resources and lack of environmental protection are among the greatest fears for the County.
- good planning to effectively manage growth, water, and our natural resources are among the top objectives for the County.
- controlling growth and adopting an effective Land Use Plan are the top two priorities for the County.
- insuring adequate water resources and protecting the environment were also named as major priorities for the County.

Notes from the Community Meetings

- Managing growth was the most dominant issue discussed by citizens at the Community Meetings.
- Many concerned citizens pleaded for a workable Comprehensive Land Use Plan that will be fully implemented and that has the necessary mechanisms to enforce the provisions needed to achieve the purpose of the plan.
- Elements of the plan should include preservation of open space, water sustainability, affordable housing, and ridgeline and slope protection.
- There were numerous calls for quick action.
- While growth should not be stopped, it should be limited and well managed.
- Speakers wanted the comprehensive planning to be done by outside professionals who understand predominantly rural counties.
- Several suggested that in creating the Comprehensive Plan, input from the people and from the municipalities must be included.

- Some suggested that a citizens' committee be appointed to provide oversight or to work with the comprehensive planning process.

RECOMMENDATION:

Future Growth/Development: In a collaborative effort with municipalities, create as soon as possible a professionally designed Comprehensive Land Use Plan. This plan will achieve the vision that citizens want for the community. It will more effectively guide future development, quality of life standards and delivery of services county-wide. Such a plan should also include the mechanisms to insure future compliance.

ENVIRONMENT

From the citizens' survey, the Committee found

- nearly half (46.6%) of the respondents are dissatisfied with how "green space" is protected in the County. Slightly more than one-third (36%) indicate they are satisfied.
- more than half (61.8%) are dissatisfied with how well the rural character of the County is being protected. Slightly more than one-fourth (26.8%) are satisfied.
- more than two-thirds (68.5 %) are dissatisfied with how well we are protecting mountain views. Less than a fourth (21.7%) are satisfied.
- on the positive side, more than half (61.3%) are satisfied with parks development in the County; a fourth are not.
- nearly all (83.9%) say they support farmland preservation programs.
- more than three-fourths (79.1%) would like to see more open space and natural areas; only ten percent said we do not need any more open space.

In the SWOT analysis, Committee members agreed

- one of the greatest strengths of the County is its beauty and clean environment.
- one of the greatest fears for the County is that we become poor stewards in protecting our natural resources.

Notes from the Community Meetings

- Protecting the environment was as important as the need for a Comprehensive Plan.
- A call for more recycling efforts was heard at most meetings.
- A number of people called for more effective protection of ridgelines and mountain slopes.
- A number of citizens spoke on the need for forest preservation and support for the state's Woodland Management program.
- There was a call for more support for the land conservancies.

RECOMMENDATION:

Environment: Develop and aggressively enforce appropriate regulations to preserve and enhance the beauty and quality of our natural resources, including slope and ridge-top protection as well as forest preservation. Activities should include effective waste management programs that encourage greater participation in recycling efforts.

FARMLAND PRESERVATION

From the citizens' survey, the Committee found

- an overwhelming majority (83.9%) of respondents indicated they support farmland preservation programs. Only 4.8% stated they did not support farmland preservation.
- a clear majority (61.8%) of respondents said they were dissatisfied with how the County is protecting its rural character. Slightly more than a fourth (25.8%) said they were satisfied.
- there is overwhelming support for more open space and natural areas within the County. Nearly half (48.5%) said we need a lot more open space, while 30.6% said we need a little more. Only 10% indicated we do not need more open space or natural areas.

In the SWOT analysis, Committee members agreed

- overwhelmingly, what they liked best about Polk County is its rural character and beautiful countryside.

- The total area environment and small-town/rural atmosphere were listed among the greatest strengths of the County.
- There is a fear of losing the rural quality of life we now enjoy.

Notes from the Community Meetings

- Citizens spoke clearly in favor of keeping the rural character of the County.
- A number of citizens spoke passionately in support of farmland preservation.
- Comments were made with concerns for rising costs and land values, and how difficult it is for farmers to make a living from the small family farms.
- Some recommended that public funds be used to buy development rights from farmers.
- The Comprehensive Plan should include Farmland Preservation.

RECOMMENDATION

Farmland Preservation: Maintain the rural character and beauty of Polk County by aggressively creating and supporting programs to protect and preserve farms and open areas, along with forest preservation.

HOUSING

From the citizens' survey, the Committee found

- Nearly half of respondents (46.1%) are satisfied that there is sufficient affordable housing in the County, but more than a third (36.1%) are not satisfied.
- 52.8% support the “creation of more affordable housing,” while a fourth (25.6%) do not support creating more affordable housing.
- 64.1% support “more options for senior housing,” but 15.2% do not support more options for senior housing.
- 69.7% do not support new residential developments that include mobile homes; 18.1% do support residential development with mobile homes.
- 53.6% support “new residential development that only have single family homes,” and 59.6% do not support “new residential development that includes multi-family units.”

- More than half (51%) say "...the County should not encourage any more subdivisions."
- A fifth (19.9%) say "...the County should encourage subdivisions with larger lots," while about an equal number (18.6%) say "the County should encourage subdivisions with small lots and natural areas set aside for that subdivision."

There seems to be a contradiction between support for affordable housing and the creation of multi-family and mobile home units which are usually associated with lower-cost housing.

In its SWOT analysis, the Committee felt that affordable housing is an unmet community need.

Notes from the Community Meetings

- While several people mentioned the need for affordable housing, one person wrote the County should not be providing housing.
- There were comments about difficulty of young people being able to afford living in the County.

RECOMMENDATION

Housing: Include within the Comprehensive Plan for the County a means to reconcile the contradiction between support of affordable housing and opposition to multi-family units and mobile homes.

WATER

From the citizens' survey, the Committee found

- slightly more than a quarter (26.6%) of the respondents are satisfied with the quality of drinking water for future needs, but half (49.7%) are dissatisfied with water quality.
- on the issue of water resource management:
 - 59.4% agree with the statement, "Require a water conservation program for all commercial and residential development."
 - 52.5% agree with the statement, "Limit the amount of population growth in the County."

- 37.8% agree with the statement, “Require water lines for all future development.”
- 19.2% agree with the statement, “Limit the number of wells.”
- about a third (32 %) are satisfied with sewage treatment in the County, but 19.6% are not satisfied. However, nearly half of the respondents (45.5%) had no opinion on this issue.

In its SWOT analysis, the Committee determined

- the lack of water and sewer infrastructure is a weakness in the County.
- a fear for the future is not having an adequate supply of water to meet our needs.
- creating a mechanism whereby County and municipal governments can insure safe and adequate water should be a priority need.

Notes from the Community Meetings

- There is a need to insure sustainability of water for the future.
- There was a plea for the towns and County to come together with a mutually agreeable water supply program.
- Several speakers supported a countywide water system.
- A biologist expressed concerns about the quality of water in the Green River.

Note: During the course of the Committee’s work, several major events involving water occurred in Polk County.

- (1) The County experienced its most severe drought in its history during the last half of 2007.
- (2) Efforts to create a countywide water authority in partnership with the three municipalities were unsuccessful.
- (3) The County agreed to purchase Lake Adger as a water source and to build a water treatment plant.

RECOMMENDATION

Water: Develop an effective system to insure adequate safe water for future needs of the County and create contingency plans to better cope with water emergencies. This requires an ongoing program to aggressively monitor quantity and quality of both ground and surface water in the County.

HEALTH CARE

In the public survey, we found that

- St Luke's Hospital received more positive ratings than negative.
 - 20% = excellent
 - 37.1% = good
 - 22.4% = fair
 - 12.5% = poor
 - 6% = no opinion

- In rating the availability of family doctors, slightly more than half felt good about the situation.
 - 13.3% = excellent
 - 39.9% = good
 - 28.3% = fair
 - 11.3% = poor
 - 5.5% = no opinion

- In rating availability of medical specialists, more than half had low opinions.
 - 7.1% = excellent
 - 26.1% = good
 - 34.2% = fair
 - 22.1% = poor
 - 9.3% = no opinion

- In rating availability of pediatric care, less than 15% felt satisfied.
 - 2.4% = excellent
 - 11.4% = good
 - 17.8% = fair
 - 22.6% = poor
 - 42.5% = no opinion

- In rating eldercare, there were mixed feelings.
 - 8% = excellent
 - 31.8% = good
 - 25.8% = fair
 - 10.4% = poor
 - 21.1% = no opinion

- Emergency medical services received high ratings.
 - 17% = excellent
 - 45.6% = good
 - 19.2% = fair
 - 6.2% = poor
 - 9.3% = no opinion

- Mental healthcare was not rated high in the County.
 - 2.9% = excellent
 - 12.9% = good
 - 19.9% = fair
 - 24.6% = poor
 - 36.8% = no opinion

- Healthcare for the uninsured did not rate well.
 - 3.3% = excellent
 - 6.4% = good
 - 14.7% = fair
 - 33.3% = poor
 - 37.7% = no opinion

In the SWOT analysis, Committee members determined:

- public health and safety is one of the County’s strengths.
- an equal number believe there should be planning for public safety and health for the future, including a better hospital.
- on a scale of 1 to 5, the County’s hospital is rated 2.85 in its adequacy for the community.

Notes from the Community Meetings

- There were several positive comments supporting St. Luke’s Hospital.
- There was concern raised about the adequacy of mental health programs serving the County.

(NOTE: As this report was being prepared, St. Luke’s Hospital was in negotiation with Carolinas Healthcare System to provide management services to help the hospital better serve the County.)

RECOMMENDATION

Health Care: Monitor closely and provide the necessary leadership and focus to improve availability and quality of health care services to all citizens of Polk County.

EDUCATION

From the citizens' survey, the Committee found

- the public school system in Polk County is highly regarded.
- more than two-thirds (69.2%) of residents say they are satisfied with the quality of schools in the County. Only 10.5% said they were dissatisfied.
- elementary schools ratings are
 - 26.5% = excellent
 - 37.6% = good
 - 8.1% = fair
 - 2.4% = poor
 - 23% = no opinion
- high school ratings:
 - 24.2% = excellent
 - 26.2% = good
 - 9.3% = fair
 - 2.9% = poor
 - 22.9% = no opinion
- Isothermal Community College ratings:
 - 16.2% = excellent
 - 40.5% = good
 - 16.7% = fair
 - 5.9% = poor
 - 18% = no opinion

In the SWOT analysis, the Committee agreed

- Polk County schools are one of our greatest strengths.
- being able to adequately meet the educational needs created by future growth is a fear.
- planning for growth is a concern for the future.

Notes from the Community Meetings

- There was praise for Polk County schools at most of the meetings.

RECOMMENDATION:

Education: Support public education effectively to maintain high achievement standards in academic and performance excellence with minimum dropouts.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Law Enforcement

From the citizens' survey, the Committee discovered

- law enforcement received over 50% in the good or excellent category; however, no distinction was made between the sheriff's department and municipal police.
 - 14% = excellent
 - 48.5% = good
 - 22% = fair
 - 8.9% = poor
 - 6.1% = no opinion
- more than half (57.3%) are satisfied that the County has well trained police, while 22.1% are dissatisfied.

Courts

From the citizens' survey, the Committee found

- more than a third (37.5%) feel the courts are doing a good or excellent job, 21.6% said fair, while 6.4% stated poor.

Fire Services

From the citizens' survey, the Committee determined

- more than three-fourths (79%) are satisfied with the fire protection services in the County; 7.4% are not satisfied.
- the County's fire service has a high degree of respect. All fire departments were consolidated for the survey. In rating fire services
 - 25.3% = excellent
 - 54.4% = good
 - 9.3% = fair
 - 1.8% = poor
 - 6.7% = no opinion

In the SWOT analysis, the Committee felt that law enforcement, fire service and emergency medical responders are doing a good job.

In the Community Meetings, there was no negative comment about emergency services.

RECOMMENDATION:

Public Safety: Insure that law enforcement, fire service and emergency medical (ambulance) services are properly equipped, trained and staffed to maintain the high standards necessary to provide good security to the public, continually seeking both effective and efficient coordinated efforts among the various agencies throughout the County.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

From the citizens' survey, the Committee found

- nearly two-thirds (60.7%) support an increased variety of retail business in the County, but a fourth (24.1%) do not agree.
- more than half (57.2%) support more service businesses locating in the County, but 23% do not agree.
- more than half (55.7%) support new industry moving to the County, but nearly a third (30.2%) do not agree.
- half the respondents (50.1%) say the County needs more locally owned craft stores to attract tourists, but nearly a third (30.7%) do not agree.
- nearly half say the County needs more hotels/motels, (11.9% -a lot more; 43.6%- a little more), a third (32.1%) do not believe more hotels/motels are needed.
- in rating travel and tourism promotion for the County
 - 6.5% = excellent
 - 32.4% = good
 - 27.1% = fair
 - 10.8% = poor
 - 19.7% = no opinion
- more than half the residents said they were not satisfied with the County having good paying jobs
 - 16.4% = satisfied
 - 53.8% = dissatisfied
 - 27.0% = no opinion

- in rating economic development
 - 3.1% = excellent
 - 21.5% = good
 - 31.3% = fair
 - 18.4% = poor
 - 21.8% = no opinion

In the SWOT analysis, the Committee showed

- lack of job opportunities is a weakness in the County.
- more needs to be done to enhance the economic development effort.

Notes from the Community Meetings

- At several meetings there were comments about needing better paying jobs in the County.
- Several citizens expressed views that economic development emphasis should be on small businesses, not large industries.
- Residents need to provide more support for local businesses and farmers.
- The County should do more to protect existing businesses.

RECOMMENDATION:

Economic Development: Enhance efforts to achieve the County’s economic goals and to provide strong leadership dedicated to improving the economic vitality of the County.

GOVERNMENT SERVICES

From the citizens’ survey, the Committee found

There is generally high regard for the County employees

- 11.5% = excellent
- 46.1% = good
- 19.3% = fair
- 4.9% = poor
- 14.4% = no opinion

County tax office was rated as

- 11.5% = excellent
- 48.3% = good
- 19% = Fair
- 8.3% = poor
- 12.3% = no opinion

Social services received a mixed review

- 5.5% = excellent
- 28.1% = good
- 21.3% = fair
- 9.1% = poor
- 32.5% = no opinion

In the SWOT analysis, the Committee found

- County employees are doing a good job.
- There needs to be more cohesiveness and harmony between federal, state, county and municipal governments.

Notes from the Community Meetings

- One person commented, “We need to have a responsible, effective, useful Land Use regimen in which the towns and the County have an equal partnership.”
- Several comments were made about the towns and County having similar zoning and rules.
- One person asked that conflicts of interest be avoided when appointing members to the Planning Board.

RECOMMENDATION:

Government: Insure that County staff members maintain high-quality standards of public service and professional competence with enhanced recruiting and in-service training programs designed to permit the government to adequately meet the public’s needs. Work should continue to improve cooperative relationships among all levels of government – federal, state, county and municipal.

QUALITY OF LIFE

(**Note:** These issues were not placed in as high a priority as the first ten were, but the Committee believes that local governments should be aware of public sentiment. No recommendations were made.)

Social services

- In the public survey, respondents rated social service programs as
 - 5.5% = excellent
 - 28.1% = good
 - 21.3% = fair
 - 9.1% = poor
 - 32.5% = no opinion

- In rating programs for the aging
 - 9.9% = excellent
 - 33.5% = good
 - 23.9% = fair
 - 10.8% = poor
 - 19% = no opinion

Recreation

- In rating recreation facilities in the County, the respondents reported
 - 8.3 % = excellent
 - 33.5% = good
 - 29.9% = fair
 - 10.8% = poor
 - 19.7% = no opinion

- Two-thirds believe more recreation areas are needed for children (25% = a lot more; 40.5% = a little more); less than a fifth (17.2%) do not believe more recreation is needed.

- On the issue of horse trails, a fourth (26.6%) feel more are needed, (17.8% a little more, 8.8% a lot more); nearly half (48.9%) do not believe more horse trails are needed.

- Nearly two-thirds (62.6%) felt the need for more recreational activities for those with physical challenges, while only 10.7 percent did not.

- There is little support for more golf courses. More than three-fourths (78.3%) said we do not need any more.

Culture

From the citizens' survey, respondents rated the arts with the County as

- 23.8% said excellent
- 38.7% said good
- 14.6% said fair
- 5.8% said poor
- 14.7% had no opinion

Transportation

From the citizens' survey, the Committee found

- more than half (51%) support new roadways to meet future transportation needs of the County. A third (34.1%) do not agree.
- most (83.2%) support improving existing roads. Only 6.8% do not support improving existing roads.
- nearly half (46.7%) support creating more public transportation services.
- a third (33.8%) are satisfied with "convenient public transportation" in the County; however, nearly an equal number (32.9%) are not satisfied, while almost a third (30.1%) have no opinion.
- more than half (59.4%) are satisfied with current road situations while slightly more than a third (34.1%) are not satisfied.

CONCLUSION

This report provides a vision for our future. The vision was determined in collaboration with the members of the Visioning Committee, an analysis of a citizen survey sent out to all residents of Polk County, as well as citizens' comments made at public meetings held in each township. We trust you will dedicate your efforts and resources to implement the recommendations from this report.