



Rural Land Use Plan



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Thanks and Acknowledgements

The Union County Rural Land Use Plan is the result of many years of effort in helping preserve the essential aspects of Union County while guiding growth into the future. The process started in 2019 with the initiation of the Union County 2050 Comprehensive Plan. One of the recommendations was to create a rural land use plan for the half of Union County designated as rural. This plan is a result of that process.

The Union County Board of Commissioners directed staff to initiate the process in early 2024, and Union County was awarded a \$10,000 grant through the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission's Green Growth Toolbox Program. This program provides support for local government planning projects that consider wildlife and natural resource conservation in land use and development planning, incentives and ordinances. Union County matched this grant with \$10,000 to contract with the Catawba Lands Conservancy to provide technical assistance in analyzing Union County's agricultural and environmental resources to help focus conservation efforts. Staff from the Commission and Conservancy were instrumental in helping ensure the Plan's recommendations incorporated best practices for protecting agricultural lands and natural resources.

Finally, Union County benefited from the insight and experience of County residents who served on the steering committee or provided comments during the Plan's development.

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Executive Summary

Union County has added an average of more than 5,000 people per year for the past quarter-century. This development pressure is projected to continue into the future as well as continue to expand from the Charlotte urbanized area into the more rural areas, placing pressure on environmental resources, rural character, and agricultural operations. Previously adopted plans identified many goals and aspirations for protecting agriculture and controlling growth, but few substantial actions had been taken. In the past two years Union County has initiated an agricultural development easement purchase program, requiring 30% open space for major subdivisions in rural areas, and expressing concern over development pressure in the rural area due to proposed roads south of Waxhaw, Marshville, and Monroe. The Union County Rural Land Use Plan was proposed in early 2024 to identify ways to provide flexibility to property owners while protecting the environment, rural character, and agricultural operations into the future.

In partnership with the Catawba Lands Conservancy, Union County Soil and Water Conservation District, NC State Agricultural Extension Office, and NC Wildlife Resources Commission, the Union County Planning Department led the development of this plan, starting in October 2024 with the first meeting of the seven-member steering committee. Public engagement was a key part of the process. All committee meetings were open to the public, and two rounds of public engagement ensured that what the committee adopted included significant public review. This committee developed a vision statement that was reviewed by over 200 Union County residents and followed up with a series of strategies that was reviewed by over 160 residents.

The Union County Rural Land Use Plan includes a series of strategies that would permanently protect 10% of all agricultural land in Union County by 2050, limit impacts of large-scale residential development, reduce development pressures, and provide additional flexibility for property owners. The most impactful strategy – significantly increasing the agricultural easement purchase program – would require adding several million tax dollars per year. The recommended funding source would require a successful public referendum be implemented, meaning voters would decide whether this strategy is worth the cost.

This Plan represents a year's worth of work between Union County and outside agency staff, the steering committee, and the hundreds of Union County residents who asked to be kept apprised of progress as this plan was developed. The recommendations propose concrete steps to influence the drivers of development pressure, be good stewards of the land, protect rural character, and respect property rights.



The Plan serves as foundation for making land use and public investment decisions for the next nearly 30 years. The Union County Rural Land Use Plan refines the 2050 plan by making recommendations for the rural part of Union County. For purposes of the Rural Land Use Plan study area, rural Union County is considered those areas in dark green in the [land use map](#) of the [Union County 2050 Comprehensive Plan](#), shown in Figure 1. For purposes of the plan, rural residential means development of no more than one home per acre, as well as agricultural uses. There are employment corridor and rural commercial node recommendations as well, but these areas are limited to specific parts of the rural area.

The 2050 planning process in 2019 through 2021 included a subcommittee specifically focused on agriculture. This committee supported many strategies for environmental and public safety initiatives but did not want to facilitate development by allowing additional clustering incentives for new developments or funding water and sewer expansions to support municipal planning efforts.

Agriculture is the dominant land use in the rural parts of Union County, and the following strategies are included in the 2050 Comprehensive Plan to support agriculture:

- Advocating for, or even financially supporting, expansion of high-speed internet into rural areas with high levels of agricultural activity
- Advocating for interstate status for US 74 and the Monroe Expressway to support agribusiness development
- Continuing the short line water extension program to take homes with unsafe well water off of wells
- Lowering density for major subdivisions in rural areas to preserve rural character

The Board of Commissioners authorized implementation committees to further research cluster standards and open space in rural areas. These committees met in 2021 and 2022 to make recommendations on how to balance accommodating residential development with minimizing impacts. The Board of Commissioners supported the recommendations of the open space committee, although they did not support many of the incentives for clustering development proposed by the cluster committee.

The overall vision for Union County from the 2050 process remains a guide to be referenced throughout implementation processes such as the Union County Rural Land Use Plan.



Rural Union County

Development Pressure

The rural area identified in the Union County 2050 plan represents approximately three quarters of all land in unincorporated Union County and more than half of all land in Union County. These areas are home to significant agricultural and environmental resources and have been facing continuing development pressures as development continues to expand outward from Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The [map below](#) (Figure 2) shows recent, current, or proposed development in unincorporated Union County as of June 2025. The residential developments, shown in yellow, represent developments of eight or more lots.

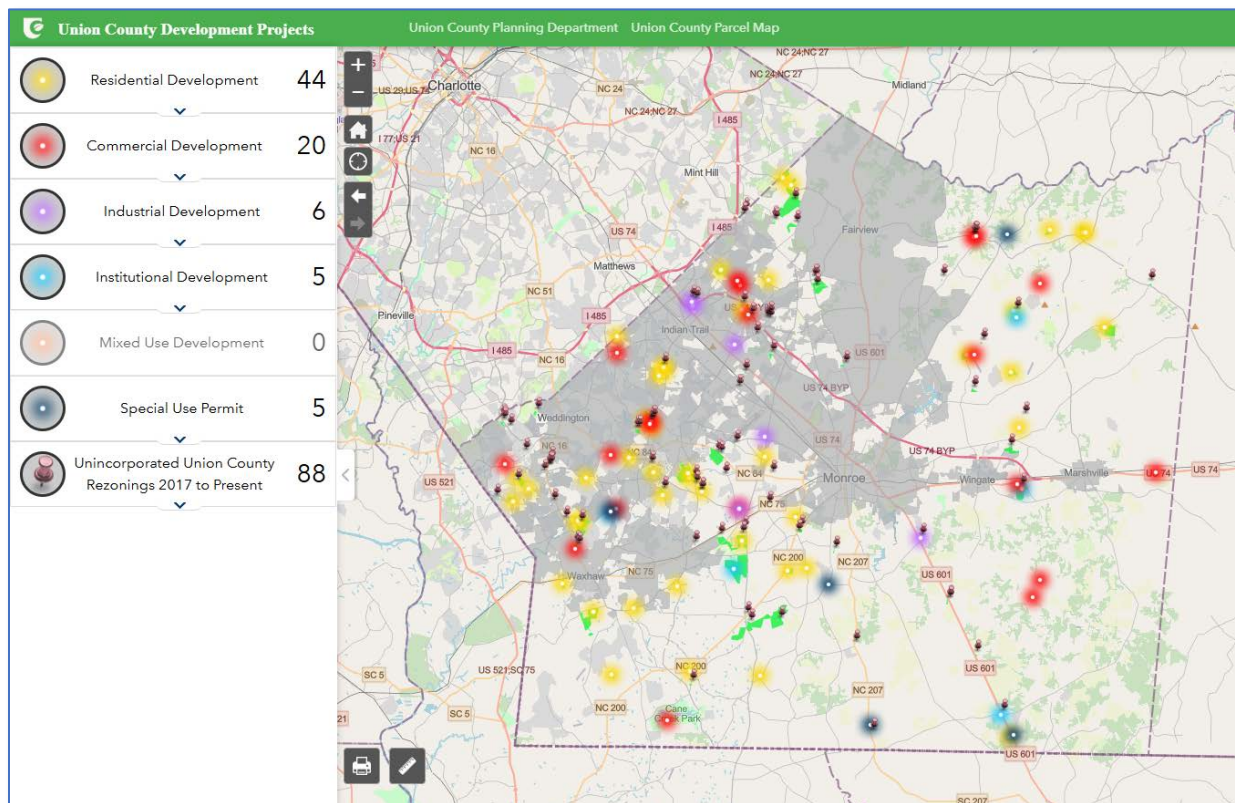


FIGURE 2

Minor residential developments, involving subdivisions of fewer than eight lots, are common in the rural parts of Union County. The [dashboard below](#) (Figure 3) shows minor subdivisions since 2020 in the rural parts of Union County, excluding Monroe, Sandy Ridge and Vance townships. Approximately 1,000 residential lots were created over this time. The rural parts of Union County are projected to add approximately

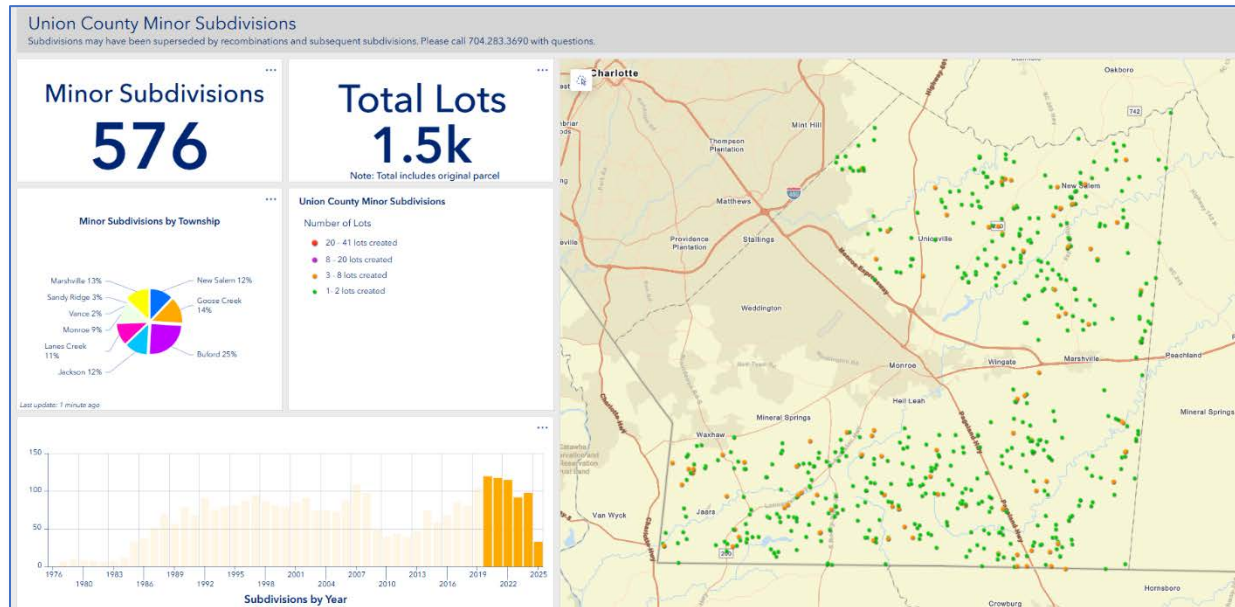


FIGURE 3

6,500 dwelling units between 2023 and 2055, or approximately 200 per year. At approximately three people per household this means an additional 20,000 residents over this timeframe. The major and minor subdivision totals since 2020 are consistent with this trend. Over the same period only approximately 1,200 jobs are projected to be added in the rural parts of Union County, further adding to Union County's imbalanced tax base.



FIGURE 4

While Union County residents and community leaders are strong supporters of property rights, there is a growing recognition that continued development and transition of agricultural and undisturbed lands impacts agricultural and environmental systems.

Agriculture



FIGURE 5

Union County is one of North Carolina's most important agricultural centers, which includes forestry activities. Despite being home to nearly a quarter-million people, Union County is still the third-most agriculturally productive county in the state, with a half-billion dollars in annual sales (Source: Monroe – Union County Economic Development).

Approximately half of all land (over 186,000 acres) in Union County was used for agricultural activities in 2017.

This is down seven percent in just five years. Despite this loss of land, Union

County ranks fourth in North Carolina for value of agricultural products sold. This productivity ranges from crop production (#1 in both soybeans and wheat) to cattle (#10) and poultry (#1 in egg layers, #2 in broilers, and #4 in turkeys). In addition to growing and raising crops and livestock, Union County is home to several animal processing plants, grain silos, and related industries.



FIGURE 6

The [2022 North Carolina Census of Agriculture](#) determined Union County has nearly 190,000 acres of farmland and loses approximately 3,000 acres of farmland per year. The County also ranks 13th highest nationally for open space loss according to a [2022 study by the American Farmland Trust](#). In response to these reports, the Union County Board of Commissioners approved an agricultural easement program in 2024, funded with the tax revenues from properties coming out of the agricultural tax program. [Union County's Land Preservation and](#)

[Easement Program](#) helps protect working farms and rural landscapes for future generations. As the County continues to grow, this program ensures Union County can balance development with conservation by keeping agricultural land in agricultural use.

A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and Union County Soil and Water Conservation District. It permanently limits certain uses



of the land to protect its conservation value, while allowing the landowner to continue owning, using and even selling the land. These easements are tailored to each property and designed to preserve its agricultural, natural or scenic qualities.

Easements are recorded with the property deed and remain in place if the land is sold or inherited. Union County staff monitor each easement to ensure compliance and continued protection from residential development.



Field Research

Union County partnered with Catawba Lands Conservancy (CLC) and the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) to develop objective assessments of resources and priority areas to conserve to protect the county's rural nature and environment. Specifically, CLC and NCWRC identified rural areas important for sustaining the county's agricultural economy and natural resources (Figure 7) and advised Union County on open space preservation strategies.

Catawba Lands Conservancy (CLC)

Catawba Lands Conservancy protects land in Union County through conservation easements or ownership. CLC considers projects that provide quality habitat for wildlife, protect our region's water quality, support the local farming heritage, and provide outdoor recreational opportunities. Specifically, CLC prioritizes projects that expands protected parks and natural areas, supports habitat for rare and imperiled species, adequately protect lands around streams and wetlands, protects family farms and farmland with prime soils, or supports expansion of the Carolina Thread Trail network.

Union County partnered with Catawba Lands Conservancy (CLC) to identify important areas to conserve to protect the county's rural nature. Specifically, CLC identified rural areas important for sustaining the county's agricultural economy and natural resources (Figure 7). To identify the key areas for conservation, CLC evaluated five conditions for agricultural lands and eight conditions for natural resources, described further below. In CLC's analysis they evaluated 640 square miles of land across Union County which includes 395 square miles of rural lands. Within the rural areas there are thousands of acres of quality farmland and important natural resources, but the analysis focused on those that need protection now to protect the region's rural character. Further detail is provided below.

Methodology: Utilizing a Geographic Information System (GIS), the rural areas of Union County were broken into a grid of 30x30 meter cells. Within each cell a score is assigned for each variable and then totaled for the conservation score. The higher a score, the more important the cell is to protect the natural rural character for the county. Scores for Priority Natural Areas were out of 100. These areas are shown on Figure 7 on the next page and highlight the areas south of Waxhaw and Mineral Springs as priority areas from an environmental and agricultural basis. This analysis covers all of Union County and could be used by municipalities looking to protect environmental and agricultural



resources in their jurisdictions.

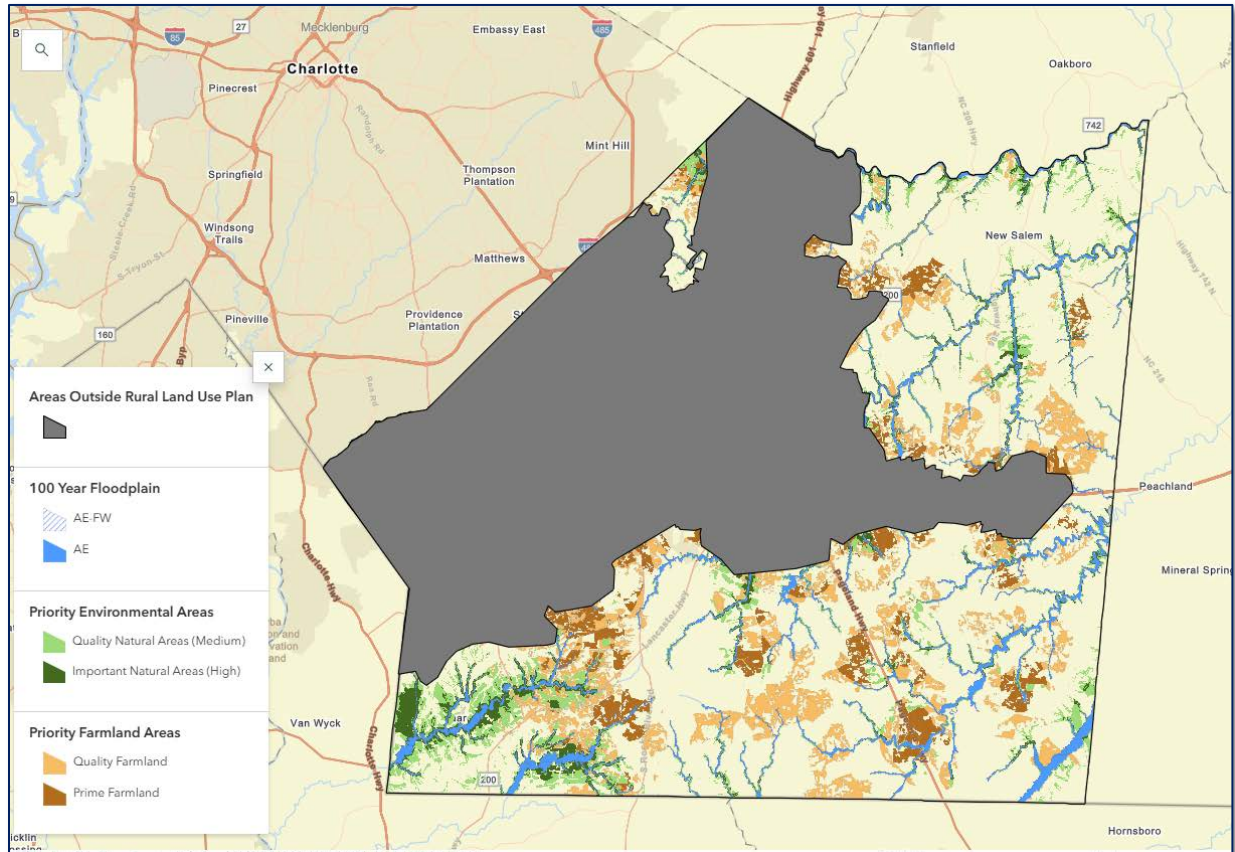


FIGURE 7

Natural Areas

The natural areas in Union County provide multiple benefits including aesthetics, protecting water quality, mitigating floods, filtering air, and providing habitat for plants and animals. The conservation plan identifies concentrated areas at threat of development that provide multiple benefits for the county's natural resources. To identify these areas, the CLC evaluated eight metrics which are described below (Table 1).

Close to Other Protected Lands: Adding additional conserved land to existing parks and natural areas helps to enhance the protection of those existing areas.

Additionally, growing existing parks and natural areas protects the aesthetics over a larger area.

Large Intact Forests: Larger natural areas provide greater benefits for wildlife and the public. Larger natural areas provide more room for wildlife to move, feed, and nest. Some priority conservation species require larger habitats for foraging, sheltering, finding mates, and smaller-scale migration, especially for young adult and fledgling animals finding new territories. Larger natural areas also help wildlife survive through major catastrophic events, such as floods, fires, and storms since larger natural areas provide greater refuge and areas with quality food.

Significant Natural Areas: Significant Natural Areas are identified by the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program as containing a concentration of high-quality habitat and rare or imperiled species. This designation does not provide any legal protection but does highlight land that is critical to protecting our state's biodiversity and natural areas. Natural Heritage Natural Areas (NHNAs) within the study area are listed in Table 2. The NC Wildlife Resources Commission recommends that development be avoided on and around NHNAs. In cases where development is proposed on or near an NHNA, cluster subdivisions may be an option to buffer these natural areas as open space set-asides.

Natural Resources Score Matrix	
Close to Other Protected Lands	20%
Large Intact Forests	20%
Significant Natural Areas	13%
Unique Natural Areas	10%
Interior Forests	10%
Steep Slopes over Streams	10%
500-Year Floodplain	10%
Rare or Imperiled Species	7%

TABLE 1: THE WEIGHT EACH METRIC PROVIDED OR THE NATURAL RESOURCES SCORE

Natural Area	Biodiversity Significance
Waxhaw Creek Aquatic Habitat	Exceptional
Richardson Creek Ledges	Exceptional
Goose Creek Aquatic Habitat	Exceptional
Polk Mountain	Very High
Jackson Blackjacks	Very High
Andrew Jackson Ridges	Very High



Crooked Creek Aquatic Habitat	Very High
Crooked Creek Ledges	Very High
Waxhaw Creek Floodplain	High
Jackson Sunflower Site	High
North Fork Crooked Creek Rare Plant Site	High
Fish Road Basic Forest	High
Lanes Creek Aquatic Habitat	Moderate
New Salem Branch	General
Lanes Creek Floodplain	General
Cane Creek Park	General

TABLE 2: LIST OF SIGNIFICANT NATURAL AREAS IDENTIFIED BY THE NORTH CAROLINA NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAM.

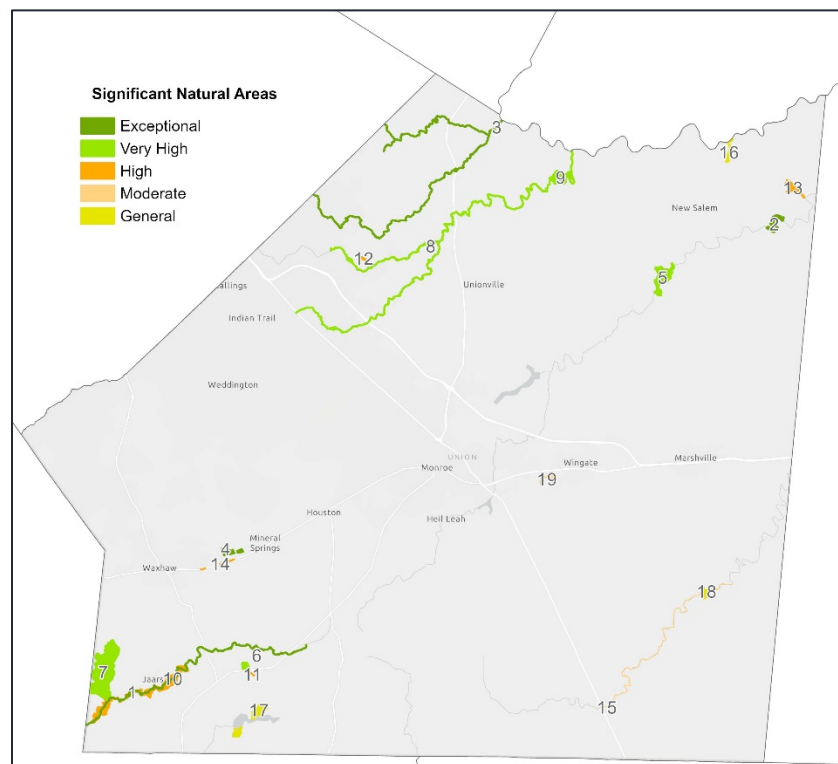


FIGURE 8

Unique Natural Areas: Within the broad categories of pasture, grasslands, hardwood forests, and floodplains are unique habitat types. Some are rare and unique to the piedmont of North Carolina and to Union County. For example, xeric hardpan forests are only found in North and South Carolina in the Charlotte area. They result from a special soil type that is very tight, leading to very dry conditions and a grassy forest floor with stunted trees.

Interior Forests: Some animal species are more sensitive to human disturbances than others. Additionally, they prefer the cover a forest canopy provides from predators.

Therefore, they are often found deeper in woods, away from forested edges. Protecting forests more than 300-feet from a forest edge provides the appropriate habitat for interior forest species.

Steep Slopes over Streams: Riparian areas along our rivers, creeks, and streams help to filter out pollutants and sediment, and keep water cool. However, as steepness increases the velocity of stormwater flowing into our water also increases. Protecting steep sloped areas along water bodies is important to limiting sedimentation. Additionally, the cool and moist conditions created by this setup provide habitat for plant and animal species more often found in the mountains of the Carolinas. These areas are important for protecting the county's biodiversity.

500-Year Floodplain: Our region has seen increasingly larger storms with flooding at or exceeding the 100-year floodplain. Protecting areas outside of the 100-year floodplain promotes flood resiliency in the future.

Rare and Imperiled Species: This includes species listed by the Endangered Species Act as Threatened or Endangered and species listed by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission and the NC Plant Conservation Program as Threatened, Endangered, Species of Concern, or Significantly Rare. These are only known locations where these species are currently found. This does not include species identified by the NC State Wildlife Action Plan as Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

Farming Community and Economy

Farmland in Union County supports the local economy and provides food for our region. The CLC's land analysis identifies clusters of farmland located on Prime or Statewide Importance land that can support the local farming community. To identify these areas, CLC evaluated five metrics which are described below (Table 3).

Contiguous Areas of Farmland: Protecting larger areas of farmland supports more viable and resilient agricultural operations, strengthens local food systems, and creates greater economic benefits. This also reduces potential interactions with residential development and farming operations.

Prime or Statewide Important Farmland Soils: These are soils that the Natural Resources Conservation Service identified as particularly productive because they can produce higher yields with minimal inputs or modifications. Statewide important soils are found by the NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to produce higher yields with property soil management.

Farmland Score Matrix	
Contiguous Acres of Farmland	30%
Prime or Statewide Important Farmland Soils	30%
Close to Other Protected Lands	15%
Close to Markets (Urban Areas)	10%
Density of Farm Related Businesses	15%

TABLE 3: WEIGHT EACH METRIC PROVIDED FOR THE FARMLAND SCORE



Close to Other Protected Lands: Proximity to parks and other natural lands provide a buffer for farms to reduce interactions with development.

Close to Markets: Reducing the distance between farms and markets helps to improve the profitability of local farms by reducing transportation costs. Additionally, it improves the likelihood of supporting farm-to-table partnerships and Community-Supported Agriculture systems.

Density of Farm Related Businesses: Farms require specialized services and stores to continue operations such as large equipment repair shops, large animal veterinarians, grain and animal processing facilities, and farm supplies. These businesses require a certain mass of farms to remain profitable and in business. Protecting farmland around these businesses ensures the resiliency of the local farming economy.



North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission

The NC Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) developed the Green Growth Toolbox program to provide conservation guidance for local government planning projects that consider wildlife and natural resource conservation in land use and development planning, incentives and ordinances. The Green Growth Toolbox is designed to help communities conserve high quality habitats as communities and developers build new homes, workplaces, and shopping centers. The toolbox helps communities plan for growth in a way that will conserve natural assets such as fish, wildlife, plants, streams, forests, fields, and wetlands. Included in the guidance are recommended conservation data to identify conservation priorities, science-based conservation strategies to protect wildlife habitat and ecosystem services and planning best practices. The program also offers the Partners for Green Growth cost-share grant for local

governments to implement conservation in their planning activities and Union County was awarded funding in June 2024. As part of the Partners for Green Growth award, NCWRC staff assisted in identifying conservation priorities and associated planning strategies for Union County.



FIGURE 9, PHOTO CREDIT NCWRC



FIGURE 10, PHOTO CREDIT: USFWS

Open Space Prioritization

Open space site selection for natural landscapes should prioritize NC Natural Heritage Program Natural Areas, wide riparian buffers along rivers and streams, floodplains and wetlands, connected forests and grasslands, and buffers adjacent to properties

managing for agriculture and conservation. North Carolina Natural Heritage Program Natural Areas are areas of high special biodiversity significance identified by the NC Natural Heritage Program. These areas may not be protected but have rare species or significant high-quality natural communities. The NC Natural Heritage Program provides free mapping services that identify the locations of these natural areas. Property owners and engineers can access these GIS layers at <http://www.ncnhp.org> to identify any potential natural areas to prioritize in their open space set-asides. The NC Natural Heritage Program also provides a free managed land GIS layer that identifies properties managed for conservation. Open space can be prioritized to buffer these managed areas from development to allow for continued functional management of those protected lands.

The same buffers can be used for lands in current agricultural uses to ensure continued agricultural management. For most streams and rivers in Union County, the NC Wildlife Resources Commission recommends a minimum riparian buffer of 100 feet for perennial streams and 50 feet for intermittent streams. For streams in watersheds with federally-listed aquatic species, such as Waxhaw Creek and its tributaries, the NCWRC recommends a minimum riparian buffer of 200 feet for perennial streams and 100 feet for intermittent streams. Larger upland set-asides adjacent to riparian areas are recommended to be between 300-600 feet from the water's edges as they protect water quality, floodplain function and water storage capacity to reduce the impact of flooding, and protect wildlife habitat. Large tracts of native forests and grasslands not adjacent to riparian areas also provide water quality protection and facilitate water infiltration and groundwater recharge. Prioritize forest and grassland open space to be adjacent to other intact natural areas on adjacent properties and avoid fragmentation or the creation of natural habitat "islands" on properties.

Open Space Uses

For the purposes of conserving natural and working lands in the rural areas of Union County, open space set-asides should primarily be utilized and managed for low impact uses or agriculture. Working lands can be leased to local farmers for agricultural uses, and forests can be managed for timber production. There are several options for the use and management of open spaces for natural resource uses. The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission recommends management of the open space for the health of the landscape. If not being managed for agricultural purposes, there are several options for the management and development of open space if not entering into an easement or other program. These can include planning and managing for outdoor recreation opportunities like nature trails for local residents or managing for pollinator habitat. These management strategies are generally maintained through a Homeowners Association (HOA) or deed restrictions. A final method of management would be to not manage the open space for any specific use.



Visioning Process

The Steering Committee's first task in November 2024 was to develop a vision statement for the rural parts of Union County. A vision statement is a written document that describes Union County's long-term goals and aspirations for the future. It serves as a roadmap for the County and inspires the community. Specifically, a vision statement:

- Communicates value: A vision statement communicates the organization's value and commitment to achieving its goals.
- Guides direction: A vision statement directly motivates the organization's direction and purpose.
- Inspires growth: A vision statement inspires the organization's growth.
- Uses abstract language: Vision statements often use abstract language instead of vivid imagery.
- Can be daring: A vision statement can be daring, distinct, or even disagreeable.

The committee developed a draft vision statement in December 2024 that was released to the public for a comment period of January 1-31, 2025. The draft vision statement distributed for public feedback is below.

In the rural areas of Union County, we cherish a way of life where farms and protected open spaces define our community. As stewards of the land, we treasure the balance between living close to nature and preserving our agricultural heritage. Expanses of productive farmland remind us daily of where our food comes from, and by supporting flexible and managed land uses, we protect our environment and encourage public appreciation while ensuring agriculture thrives. This approach will sustain our rural character and provide a vibrant future for generations to come.

The County and committee members distributed informational handouts to local businesses, community contacts, and at County facilities, such as Cane Creek Park. In addition, Union County posted the survey link through the weekly County newsletter, plan web page, and social media. [A total of 210 residents provided comments on the vision statement.](#) Respondents overwhelmingly supported the draft vision statement, but did have concern about overly vague statements and flexible land uses.

In response to this public feedback, the steering committee revised the vision statement to clarify uses and protections for the environment. The vision statement on the



FIGURE 11



following page was approved by the steering committee at its February 25, 2025, meeting.

In the rural areas of Union County, we cherish a way of life where farms and protected open spaces define our community. As stewards of the land, we treasure the balance between living close to nature and preserving our agricultural heritage. Expanses of productive farmland remind us daily of where our food comes from, and by adding options for property owners, lowering density, and enhancing environmental protection requirements we preserve our natural resources and encourage public appreciation while ensuring agriculture thrives. This approach will sustain our rural character and provide a vibrant future for generations to come.



Strategy Development

The steering committee and staff took four months to review potential strategies to implement the approved vision for rural Union County. The committee operated under the following understandings of effective strategies:

- Are a policy or action designed to achieve a goal.
- Are the teeth of the plan.
- Need to be thought through to avoid unintended consequences.
- Ideally are effective on their own and not require other strategies to achieve effects.

The committee members discussed existing issues in the rural parts of Union County, and reviewed revisions to development standards, new or expanded programs, and changes to existing plans in order to implement the vision.

The committee reviewed the following issues but decided to not present to the public for feedback or recommend to the Board of Commissioners:

- Privately permitted septic systems
- Recommendations for modifying minimum lot sizes

The committee did not recommend taking these strategies to the public because the privately permitted system option is legal to use in North Carolina, so they did not feel Union County would have the ability to influence this status. The committee was split on the benefits of requiring larger lot sizes as well as allowing smaller lot sizes as ways of protecting open space.



FIGURE 12

The committee took the following strategies to the public for feedback, which was held from June 20 through July 20, 2025.

- Expansion of areas considered rural - The area immediately west of Monroe, totaling approximately six square miles is outside Union County's established sewer service basin, so higher

density development recommendations could be replaced with a rural residential designation. This would impact open space requirements and rezoning recommendations.

- Increasing/reducing the number of commercial nodes - Rural Centers function as small scale civic and commercial centers for rural areas of the County.



These Centers are clusters of low-density, non-residential uses located at a crossroads of two or more major or minor thoroughfares. Appropriate uses include convenience stores, civic buildings, gas stations and others. Rural Centers provide limited commercial and community services while still maintaining the rural nature of the community.

- Enhanced buffering along streams and water bodies – Local governments are prohibited by state law from enacting buffers beyond those established by the state, but could prioritize stream buffering in 30% open space requirements or as part of rezonings.
- Prioritization of land set aside in major subdivisions - This requirement applies to major subdivisions, which typically are eight or more lots or involve installing infrastructure such as roads or utilities. Union County does not currently specify which land to set aside in major subdivisions.
- Conditions for allowing commercial uses on residential land without rezoning - Commercial or industrial uses such as landscaping, plumbing, and storage facilities would be allowed on parcels of at least five acres without rezoning in exchange for four acres of protected open space for every one acre of development.
- Expanding conservation efforts to purchase easements - Union County has recently implemented an agricultural easement program with an allocation of approximately \$1 million per year from the General Fund. This strategy would recommend increasing the funding per year.
- Remove bypasses from [transportation plan](#) - There are four proposed bypasses south of Waxhaw, Monroe, and Marshville that impact the rural part of the County. These bypasses will likely increase development potential for new areas, like what was experienced with the Monroe Expressway. The removal process would involve the municipalities and NCDOT but would start with a Union County



position.

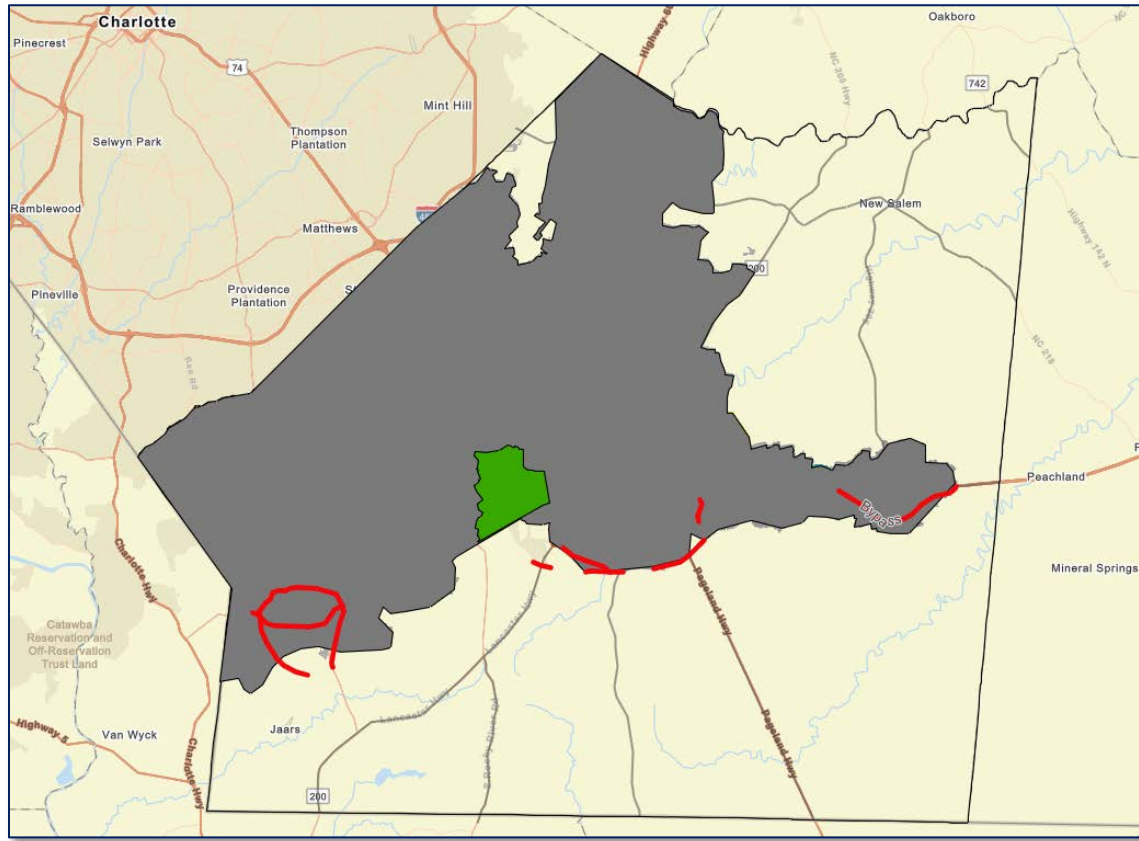


FIGURE 13

- Limit subdivisions in certain zoning districts - The Unified Development Ordinance includes a table with a list of uses allowed in each zoning district. Subdivision of land would be removed as an allowed by right use in certain zoning districts, requiring additional conditions or approvals to allow additional residential development in identified areas.
- Allowing property owners to pay into an open space fund in lieu of setting aside 30 percent open space within their development when no priority agricultural or environmental features are on their property.

The comment period was conducted through an [online StoryMap](#) and [embedded survey](#). The story map included maps such as the one above, which depicts the proposed addition to the rural area (shown in green) and the proposed bypasses near Waxhaw, Monroe, and Marshville.

Union County shared this information with the public through social media posts, announcements in the weekly Union County Horizons newsletter, email to the more than 500 people who have provided their email address to be kept apprised of the plan process, post cards distributed to businesses in the rural parts of Union County, and an interview on the local WIXE radio station. A total of 166 people submitted [feedback and comments](#) on the strategies. The demographics of the respondents

did skew older and more established than the County as a whole, with nearly 2/3 of respondents having lived in the county more than 20 years, and over 40 percent 60 years or older. Only five respondents were under 30, for example. Nearly all respondents (88 percent) lived and/or worked in the rural parts of Union County.

The public generally supported more restrictions on development and strongly supported protection of the environment and agricultural lands. They were somewhat supportive of adding additional rural centers and expanding the rural area to areas immediately west of Monroe. They opposed flexibility for developers to be able to “buy back” land otherwise required to be set aside as open space if no priority agricultural or environmental features were found on site, and expressed skepticism over the opportunity for owners of large lots (five acres or more) to be able to establish low-impact businesses on their property in exchange for significant open space requirements.

The chairman of the steering committee, Allan Baucom, presented the proposed strategies and public feedback to the Land Use Board and Board of Commissioners for their awareness and feedback as well. The [Land Use Board received this information at](#)

[its July 15, 2025, meeting](#). The Board was generally supportive of the strategies but did express concerns over how to pay for the proposed agricultural easement program expansion.

The Board of Commissioners received a similar update at its [August 11, 2025, meeting](#).



FIGURE 14

Strategy Recommendations

The committee then evaluated the strategies at its August and September meetings, where they voted to recommend the following strategies as part of the plan.

Expand agricultural easement purchase program: The committee voted to recommend expanding the existing program, with a goal of protecting 10% of the agricultural land in Union County by 2050. This is estimated to cost \$3-5 million per year in additional funds to protect 10% of the approximately 190,000 acres used by agriculture in Union County. The soil and water conservation district property tax referendum strategy is recommended as the preferred funding source, which would cost ½ cent to one cent per \$100 in value in property taxes per year to fund and would raise \$3 to \$6 million per year. A general increase to the property tax, as well as a ¼ cent sales tax allowed in North Carolina under Article 46 Optional Quarter Cent Sales Tax, could also be considered to fund the program.

Require contiguous areas for open space in major subdivisions: Union County currently requires 30% open space in major subdivisions, excluding floodplains, stream buffers, or road right of way. The open space currently can be scattered throughout the neighborhood, which may not help protecting environmental features. The committee discussed options from 50 to 80% required contiguous areas before recommending 60% as a minimum. This open space requirement would first be applied to intact forests, which were the first priority of the committee and public. The committee considered rare and protected species, wetlands, or stream buffers as the second priority. Stream buffering was ultimately recommended as the second priority. These priorities would be implemented through amendments to the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO).

Purchase priority land with fee in lieu for open space requirements: The committee recognizes the burden of a small development maintaining a parcel of open space, so it recommends allowing the developer to pay into the County's Land Preservation and Easement Program based on the value of land that is no longer required to be kept in open space in the proposed development. Eligibility would be limited to smaller developments, such as ones that do not require new roads.

Add flexibility for commercial uses in rural areas: Small business owners looking to start or expand low traffic commercial or industrial businesses such as landscaping, plumbing, and similar trade-type uses would be allowed on parcels of at least five acres without rezoning in exchange for four acres of protected open space for every one acre of developed area. These new options for property owners would be implemented through amendments to the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO).

Express concern over impacts from bypasses: Union County has experienced significant development pressures along the Monroe Expressway in recent years. There are several proposed bypasses that extend into the rural parts of Union County and the committee felt these bypasses could have similar impacts on development patterns. The committee has concerns about ease of development in rural areas if the southern Waxhaw and Monroe bypasses are built. The committee supports the Marshville



Bypass, noting the long-range plan for upgrading US 74 to interstate standards and the potential of building it using toll revenues. The committee acknowledges that the County does not have the authority to unilaterally remove any of the bypasses from the CTP. This position would allow the Board of Commissioners to engage with the NCDOT, Charlotte Regional Transportation Planning Organization (CRTPO) and affected municipalities on concerns raised through this plan.

Limit major subdivisions in certain zoning districts: The committee has concerns over large subdivisions being allowed anywhere in the rural parts of Union County. Current North Carolina general statutes limit County authority to downzone or otherwise reduce uses allowed on a property. The subdivision of land is not a use, so the committee recommended limiting major subdivisions (those that create eight or more lots) to where water and/or sewer can be provided by a central service provider. A central service provider is defined as any sewage treatment facility owned and operated by a sanitary district, a metropolitan sewage district, a water and sewer authority, a county or municipality or other public utility, or a private utility. This strategy would be implemented through amendments to the UDO.

Expand rural area in the Land Use Map: The committee supports expanding the rural area by approximately six square miles west of Monroe, shown in Figure 12. This designation would reduce development impacts for new subdivisions in this area and instead incentivize such development to request annexation into an adjacent municipality. This strategy would be implemented through amendments to the Land Use Map.

Add six rural centers to the Land Use Map: Rural Centers function as small scale civic and commercial centers for rural areas of the County. These Centers are clusters of low-density, non-residential uses located at a crossroads of two or more major or minor thoroughfares. Appropriate uses include convenience stores, civic buildings, gas stations and others. Rural Centers provide limited commercial and community services while still maintaining the rural nature of the community. The committee acknowledged the flexibility from having additional small-scale commercial nodes in the rural areas, particularly where existing commercial operations already occurred and therefore recommend nodes at the following intersections be added as amendments to the Land Use Map.

- South Providence Road and NC 200
- South Rocky River Road, Parkwood School Road, and NC 200
- Plyler Mill and Griffith Roads
- New Salem Road, Carl Polk Road, and Sugar and Wine Road
- Love Mill Road and NC 218
- Lawyers Road and Mill Grove Road

Create a Conservation Development Brochure: Part of the scope for this overall plan development involved creating a development brochure to assist property owners and developers understand how to apply open space requirements in new major subdivisions. This brochure will be created as part of the implementation of this



plan, along with amendments to the UDO and funding commitments by the Board of Commissioners.



Conservation Strategies and Funding Sources

There are many private, public, and non-profit organizations and programs that can help with open space preservation. There are also different ways of protecting land. The traditional way is to purchase land for permanent protection. This method is more expensive and requires upkeep of the land by the owner. A conservation easement is a more common approach and is an agreement between a property owner and a conservation non-profit or government agency that allows landowners to retain ownership and use of their property but restricts development on the property. Each conservation easement is different because they are negotiated by the landowner and the conservation entity. Depending on the terms, a conservation easement will allow for farming, timber management, agrotourism, and wildlife management activities. The restrictions are permanent and apply to future landowners. Landowners can realize certain property and income tax benefits from these agreements.

The CLC prefers projects that provide enhanced protection beyond regulatory or zoning requirements such as FEMA floodplains, tree saves or required open space. However, in special circumstances, CLC will consider projects in FEMA floodplains, tree saves or required open space that have significant conservation values such as state recognized significant natural areas or rare species that require specialized management. In these situations, CLC would need adequate funding for long-term management. Additionally, CLC will consider projects along adopted Carolina Thread Trail corridors to advance trail development.

The list of resources listed below is not exhaustive but provides options in North Carolina.

NC Resilience Exchange (<https://www.resilienceexchange.nc.gov>): A central resource to identify funding for conservation activities that improve community resiliency including land conservation, land stewardship, and utility improvements.

State Programs

NC Land and Water Fund: An annual fund that provides grants for land conservation, stream restoration, and conservation planning. The program focuses on conservation projects that support water quality, protection of impaired species and natural areas, and historical sites. Funds can be used to purchase conservation easements or full ownership. A match is not required but suggested to be competitive.

North Carolina Parks and Recreation Trust Fund: PARTF provides dollar-for-dollar matching grants to local governments for the acquisition and/or development of park and recreational projects to serve the general public. A local government can request a maximum of \$500,000 with each application. Local governments can apply to acquire land for parks and build recreational facilities for use by the public. A PARTF grant can also be used to protect the natural and scenic resources or renovate older park facilities.



NC Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund: Annual fund that provides grants to support local farming economies, conservation of farmland, and planning for farmland conservation. Projects in Union County require a 30% match which can be cash, in-kind, or donated property value. These funds can be matched with the USDA's Agricultural Land Easement Program.

Federal Programs

USDA Agricultural Conservation Easement Program: The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) helps landowners, land trusts, and other entities protect, restore, and enhance wetlands or protect working farms and ranches through conservation easements. Land eligible for agricultural easements includes private or Tribal land that is agricultural land, cropland, rangeland, grassland, pastureland and nonindustrial private forest land. Priority is given to farms that maximize protection of contiguous agricultural lands and have soils identified as Prime, Unique, or Other productive by the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF): Provides funding through different programs to local governments. The Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund provides grants to local governments through the state to protect and conserve Federally listed threatened and endangered species and the habitats on which these species depend. The National Park Service State and Local Assistance Programs provides 50/50 matching grants to local governments, through the states, for the acquisition and development of public outdoor recreation areas and facilities.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program: This program is a partner-driven approach to conservation that addresses identified resource needs on agricultural lands. Through this program, project partners support farmers, landowners, and the community by providing matching funds for conservation activities and purchasing conservation easements. Activities can include implementing best management practices, land restoration, purchasing conservation easements, and public work projects that address a natural resource need. Partners do need to identify a combination of 1-to-1 cash and in-kind match.

Local, Private, or Non-Profit Programs

Present Use Value (PUV) programs: PUVs provide property tax deferments for property owners that commit to utilizing their property for forestry, agriculture, or wildlife conservation purposes. The intention of any PUV program is to tax property for its current use, which is lower than the theoretical market value that is used to value property taxes. Properties enrolled in a PUV must follow each program's requirements. Any property that is disqualified due to falling out of compliance will be required to pay "roll back" taxes or the sum of the previous three years of unpaid deferred taxes plus interest and the current year's theoretical market value.

- o Forestry PUV: Properties managed and utilized as commercial forestland can qualify for North Carolina's forestry PUV program. Property owners can contact the [Union County NC Forest Service](#) office for more information.



- o Agriculture PUV: Properties actively engaged in agricultural or horticultural uses may qualify for the agriculture PUV program through the NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. Qualifying properties must generate a minimum of \$1,000 gross per year in farm production. Contact the Union County NC Cooperative Extension office for more information.
- o Wildlife Conservation Land Program (WCLP): The Wildlife Conservation Land Program allows private landowners who manage their property for protected wildlife species, priority wildlife habitats or as Wildlife Reserve Land to apply for a property tax deferment. Visit <https://www.ncwildlife.gov/wclp> for more information and an outline of qualifying requirements.

Conservation Fund: [The Conservation Fund](#) is a non-profit founded on the idea that environmental protection and economic vitality are mutually reinforcing strategies that make our society stronger. They are twin pillars of a national strategy: economic growth without environmental protection is unsustainable, and environmental protection without economic growth is equally unsustainable. For more than 40 years, The Conservation Fund has been [buying at-risk land](#) with high conservation value to protect it from degradation, putting protections in place to ensure it is managed for environmental, economic, and human gain before finding long-term owners, ideally operations relatively new to farming. The Fund has a 10-year goal of protecting 5,000 acres of land over the next 10 years in the Charlotte region.



Adoption

The Rural Land Use Plan Steering Committee was tasked with developing a plan, but the Land Use Board likewise plays a role in making recommendations on all planning initiatives and proposals. The Steering Committee recommended the plan to the Land Use Board at its October 7, 2025, meeting. Union County then emailed the more than 500 Union County residents who previously provided their email address and requested updates on the plan and its development.

The Land Use Board reviewed the plan at its October 21, 2025, meeting. A total of XX residents spoke at the meeting. After reviewing the plan, the Board recommended XXX. Add detail from their discussion.

The Board of Commissioners held a public hearing at its November 17, 2025, regular Board meeting. A total of XX residents spoke at the hearing. Add details of adoption process.



Conclusion

Union County currently is home to over 270,000 people and will continue to add thousands of additional residents each year for the foreseeable future. Remote work, desire for a quieter lifestyle, and lower land costs have increased development pressure in the rural parts of Union County. This development comes with impacts, both as a loss of agricultural land and as impacts to environmental features. This plan was initiated in 2024 to help develop strategies to protect environmental and agricultural resources, as well as provide options for small business owners and farmers who want to stay on their land.

The Union County Rural Land Use Plan was resident-led, starting with the advisory committee that guided the work, and ending with three rounds of public comment opportunities regarding the vision, the strategies, and the overall plan. Over 500 residents were kept apprised of progress, and over 300 provided their feedback on at least one phase of the plan development. **The plan was adopted by the Union County Board of Commissioners on November 17, 2025.**

If fully implemented, the Union County Rural Land Use Plan would permanently protect 30 square miles of working agricultural land, allow community-scale commercial development at identified intersections, allow small business owners to establish and expand their low-impact businesses in exchange for protected land, and better protect forests and streams as residential development occurs.

Union County would like to thank its steering committee, the Catawba Lands Conservancy, and the North Carolina Resources Commission for their time and support over this year-long process. Together they developed an effective, focused, and endorsed guide for protecting the rural parts of Union County for the next 25 years.

