



Macon Voices: A Preliminary Report

On Thursday, August 25, 2005, in Highlands, local sponsors and producers of the documentary program *Macon Voices* documentary program concluded the last of eight public presentations in 30 days. The documentary, produced by Carla Norwood and Gabe Cumming and supplemented by research from Margaret Browne, combines sophisticated analyses of land use trends in Macon County with interviews with 50 residents about their connections with the landscape and their concerns for the future. Already, the project has been celebrated as a unique conversation-starter in a discussion that too often polarizes citizens and paralyzes decision-makers. Its impact will be studied by academic experts since the *Voices* project plays a major role in the work of Norwood, Cumming and Browne, all of whom are Ph.D. students at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Between its debut at Western Carolina University on July 29 and the August 25 presentation in Highlands, some 250 people saw the *Macon County Voices* program and at least 170 participated in four facilitated discussions about coping with exploding growth in the region.

Asked to list their concerns for a report to county leaders, citizens in those discussions came up with 127 topics that could be grouped under 59 recurrent themes. Only a half-dozen of the 127 argue against taking any kind of action to deal with growth pressures. And none of the 127 included concerns under consideration in the only current effort at land use planning, Macon County's proposed High Impact Ordinance.

Far and away, the leading category of concern had to do with the need for planning in broader and more aggressive ways. After planning, came the 10 themes below, listed in order of how frequently they were mentioned in discussions. The majority of the 127 concerns (69) are represented under the theme of planning or under these 10 categories:





Planning Is Chief Concern

After Planning, These 10 Themes

- 1) Protecting water quality and watersheds and properly managing storm water.
- 2) Expanding restrictions on building on ridge tops.
- 3) Encouraging incentives for voluntary conservation by land owners and developers (7)
- 4) Clustering development in appropriate areas.
- 5) Regulating development on steep slopes.
- 6) Encouraging economic development that delivers quality jobs.
- 7) Harmonizing growth with community traditions.
- 8) Protecting and improving the appearance of main commercial corridors.
- 9) Assuring and expanding affordable housing opportunities.
- 10) Expanding flood plain protections.

Here are all 60 theme categories with the number of mentions in parentheses:

- 1) Planning (13)
- 2) Protecting water quality/watershed and storm water management (9)
- 3) Expanding restrictions on building on ridge tops (7)
- 4) Encouraging incentives for voluntary conservation by land owners and developers (7)
- 5) Clustering development in appropriate areas (6)
6. Regulating development on steep slopes (6)
- 7) Encouraging economic development that delivers quality jobs (5)
- 8) Harmonizing growth with community traditions (5)
9. Protecting/improving appearance of main commercial corridors (5)
- 10) Assuring and expanding affordable housing opportunities (5)
- 11) Expanding flood plain protections (4)
- 12) Restricting signs and billboards (3)
- 13) Improving site design (3)
- 14) Preserving trees (3)
- 15) Protecting and enhancing recreation opportunities (3)
- 16) Expanding erosion controls (3)
- 17) Ensuring provision for and access to emergency services (3)
- 18) Preserving and enhancing sense of place and community for all citizens (3)
- 19) Limiting growth to protect open space (3)
- 20) Limiting regulation (3)
- 21) Encouraging mixed use development (3)
- 22) Imposing impact fees on developers (3)
- 23) Developing and encouraging better leadership (3)
- 24) Preserving farms and farmland (2)
- 25) Protect cultural and historical heritage (2)
- 26) Requiring appropriate lighting/dark sky (2)
- 27) Planning adequate and safe roads/restrictions to ensure safety (2)





- 28) Enforcing current and future ordinances (2)
- 29) Having tourists and seasonal residents bear more of the burdens (2)
- 30) Maintaining rural and scenic beauty of rural community (2)
- 31) Establishing and protecting buffers
- 32) Regulating junkyards
- 33) Mandating an environmental review process
- 34) Supporting and preserving National Forests
- 35) Planning for elder needs
- 36) Seeking expert guidance in planning
- 37) Supporting heritage tourism
- 38) Encouraging working forests
- 39) Strengthening schools
- 40) Limiting additional highway development
- 41) Protecting and supporting local businesses
- 42) Fostering better collaboration between county and town
- 43) Engaging more people in conversation about county's future
- 44) Revitalizing downtowns
- 45) Concentrating development along existing infrastructure; use capital improvements as planning tools
- 46) Coaching developers on best practices
- 47) Providing incentives and tax breaks for preferred development practices
- 48) Supporting public education about conservation in harmony with growth
- 49) Limiting dense development on steep slopes
- 50) Providing models of successful planning processes
- 51) Holding referendum on planning
- 52) Including public health in planning process
- 53) Protecting cultural diversity
- 54) Maintaining area as is
- 55) Cleaning up river camp sites
- 56) Establishing and maintaining historic districts
- 57) Establishing and enforcing design guidelines
- 58) Involving seasonal residents in planning
- 59) Encouraging and preserving traditions of self-reliance and independence

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