

Executive Summary

Planning is a responsibility and an opportunity for Virginia localities. Local government planning is designed to identify what needs to happen for the community's best long-term interests. The County Comprehensive Plan should improve public health, safety, convenience and welfare of its citizens and guide growth and development through policy and investments so that public resources are spent wisely and efficiently. It is a pro-active way to address change.

This Plan is written based on facts, analysis and community input received from a variety of forums. Protecting agriculture, forests and water were the top community concerns; on this desired outcome, there was remarkable consensus. Other priority items include increasing light industry, technology and innovation jobs, exploring alternative energy, promoting energy efficiency, and providing more assistance to small businesses, including increasing specialty crop production and local food processing. There was also great interest in developing assisted living in the County and improving recycling.

Floyd County sits atop the Blue Ridge Plateau and thus all water flows out. Water supplies are therefore limited to headwater streams and fractures of relatively young water underground. Floyd County is thus especially susceptible to drought. The flow of private wells are further jeopardized during drought by the addition of more wells nearby which may hit the same fracture network. Due to this sensitivity, major residential subdivisions should be directed to areas that are or can be served by centralized systems.

Over 1,800 residential parcels were created from 2002 to 2009. From 2007 to 2009 alone, over 2,000 acres of farmland were converted to residential-sized parcels. Rapid growth in residences has financial consequences for the County. Whereas, based on recent analysis it is estimated that farms and forests yield \$1 in local taxes for every \$0.35 they cost in services on average, residential development requires \$1.09 in services for every \$1 paid in local taxes. Moreover, recent residential developments have most often been on narrow, unimproved roads far removed from County services because they are cheaper for developers to acquire. This type of development adds considerable time and costs to public safety calls, solid waste transport and school transportation plus adds traffic to roads ill-prepared to handle it.

The protection and continuation of farming and forestry may require new markets and new techniques to keep or attract farmers. It will definitely require the availability and affordability of farm and forest land. Areas now identified via map layers as ideal for farms and forests should be actively preserved as such, or else they will continue being converted to residential parcels. Property use decisions on any given parcel can have immediate effects across neighboring properties and public roads. In the long run, those decisions affect the community at-large, from decreasing food and fiber supply to substantially increasing County service costs.

Historically, the County was first settled by people who enjoyed the mountains and the independence they engendered. Today, Floyd Countians of all types have a strong love of place; the farms and forest lands are still cherished by those who have chosen to stay or come here, as is the attitude of live-and-let-live. Yet, to protect the remaining treasured lands and landscape in much of the County, thoughtful limits need to be placed on development. For example, at present, the vast majority of land in the County could have the future use determined by the highest bidder, who may never live in the community; these uses could be very detrimental to working farms, water supplies, or existing homes and businesses. In short, new policies are needed to protect farm, forest and water resources.

Guiding development and limiting service cost escalations will require some difficult decisions. While preserving flexibility for land owners is important, those freedoms must be balanced by the responsibilities to adjacent landowners and the community at-large. Continuing with virtually unlimited development options has its risks and its costs, both now and later. Most citizens who participated in the community input sessions strongly favored the use of more planning tools over loss of farmland, haphazard development, depletion of water supplies and increasing costs of community services.

Identifying areas most appropriate for business development is also important. For the good of local residents and businesses, it is imperative that the number of good jobs be increased in the County. This might include processing of local foods. Growing local businesses is important, as is targeted tourism growth. Due to local and regional assets, other important opportunities include light manufacturing, technology and innovation. A diverse economy is essential for strength.

At present, the County faces notable financial challenges due, in part, to residential growth, unfunded mandates passed down from the State and Federal governments, and the poor economy. Prioritized strategies identified here include:

- Establishing a Farm and Forest Task Force to identify economic opportunities, prioritize and tap them.
- Establishing a Land Policy Task Force to conduct requisite analysis and draft specific land policy documents.
- Staff and the Economic Development Authority developing an Economic Development Strategic Plan to target best opportunities and coordinate efforts.
- Developing a list of capital needs based on growth trends and life expectancy of current assets, to help manage timing of future expenditures.

In summary, here is a plan for a creative, prosperous and resilient Floyd County that respects its people and protects its farms, forests and water for future generations.