

Citizens' Plan for
Watauga



Summary of Recommendations

The “Citizens’ Plan for Watauga” is an expression of the vision of Watauga citizens and leaders of the County’s goals and objectives for managing change in the community. The plan’s purpose is to provide a balance between managing change, preserving community traditions, protecting the natural environment and enhancing “quality of life.”

Plan Oversight Group



POG members from left to right: Buck Robbins, Fred Badders, Shelton Wilder, Charlie Wallin, Winston Kinsey and Steve Loflin. Absent from photo is Bill Sherwood.

CITIZENS' PLAN FOR WATAUGA - Summary of Recommendations

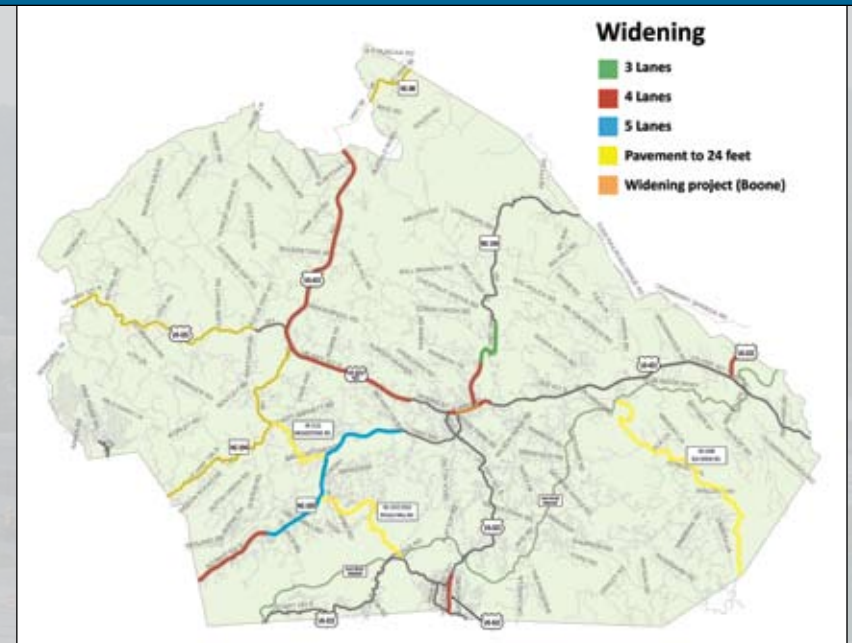
TRANSPORTATION

Highways

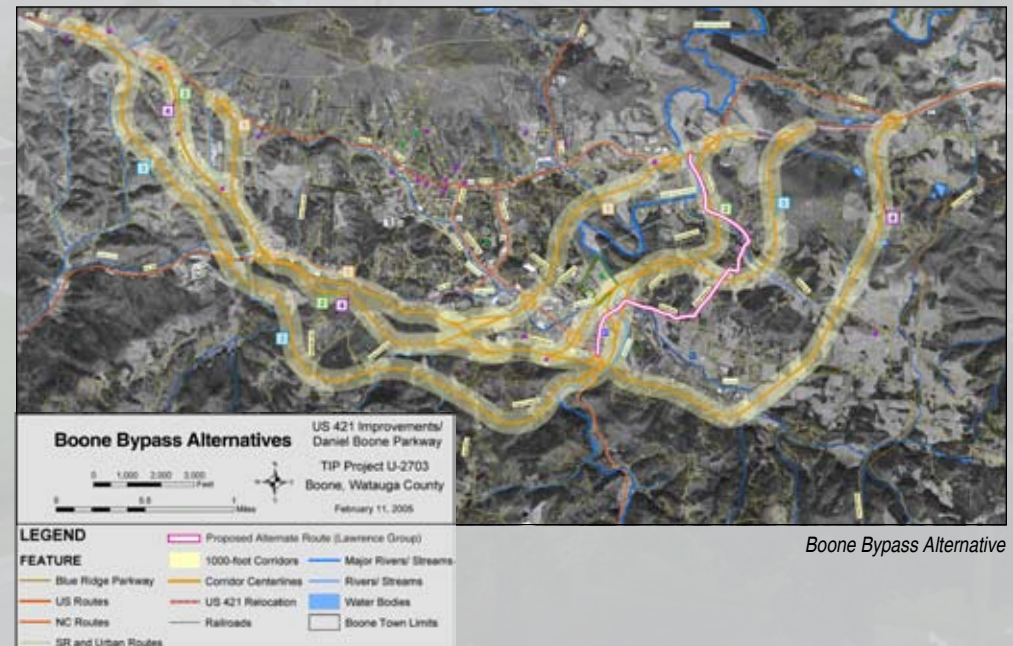
- Update the 2002 Thoroughfare Plan for Watauga County.
- Town of Boone, Watauga County, High Country Council of Governments (RPO), NCDOT, Appalachian State University (ASU) and citizen groups should work together to resolve the issue of routing for a Boone Bypass, which is considered to be the top transportation priority.
- Priority should be given to the following projects:
 - Hwy. 194 to four-lane from U.S. 421 to Howard's Creek Road, and multi-lane from Howard's Creek Road to Jack Hayes Road.
 - U.S. 421 N to multi-lane from Boone to the intersection of U.S. 421/U.S. 321 in Vilas.
 - N.C. Hwy 105 S to multi-lane from the Boone municipal limits to Avery County.
 - Multi-lane U.S. 421 S (King Street) from Hardin Street to N.C. Hwy 194.
 - Multi-lane Old U.S. 421 from U.S. 421 S to the high school.
- NCDOT should schedule paving of all public gravel roads to NCDOT standards as feasible.

Multimodal

- Strong emphasis should be placed on creating roadways that are safe for all modes of transportation, including bicycles and pedestrians.
- Expand AppalCART rural routes and decrease the service intervals between existing stops so more people have the opportunity to ride and waiting times are shorter.
- Expanded corridors for AppalCART should include U.S. 421 in both directions in the County, U.S. 321 toward Blowing Rock, and N.C. Hwy 194 to Green Valley School.
- Assess the most heavily populated areas of the County and provide service as practical to those areas.
- Expand AppalCART service to affordable housing projects as feasible.
- Create Park-n-Ride lots outside of Boone and provide AppalCART service to these lots.
- Boone and ASU should work together to:
 - Promote and provide more environmentally friendly, greener, safer and sustainable transportation modes, especially pedestrian and bicycles.
 - Provide more parking areas for bicycles at ASU and in business areas.
 - Encourage ASU to consider further limiting the number of students who can bring their vehicles to the University campus.



Thoroughfare Plan for Watauga County



Boone Bypass Alternative

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The concern for preserving and improving “quality of life” is a theme that permeates all aspects of Watauga County’s future. All efforts to promote economic development should focus on “better rather than bigger” and enhancing “quality of life.”

Economic development related organizations are charged with various aspects of economic promotion and support in Watauga County. While each is important, there is a growing need to achieve a higher degree of cooperation to ensure that the array of activities collectively promote established core objectives.

Strengthening Organization

- Strengthen the focus of economic development by making the County the core agency for economic planning, policy interpretation and coordination. Adding resources to this ongoing program would enable the County to assume a more assertive role in economic development.
- Invest in the creation of a dynamic and comprehensive economic development strategy to better explore and capitalize on potential economic opportunities.
- Encourage and facilitate the provision of essential infrastructure, such as transportation, water, sewer and natural gas, to provide an attractive business climate for potential economic development.
- Work with and coordinate the wide range of economic development resources available to the County, including Advantage West, Appalachian Regional Commission, ASU Center for Entrepreneurship, Committee of 100, Future Forward, High Country Business Network, Service Corps of Retired Executives, Tourism Development Authority, Watauga County Economic Development Commission, and others, to explore innovative and fresh concepts.
- Organize annual or semi-annual workshops with these entities to create a spirit of cooperation and focus resources.
- Where appropriate, promote regional economic development strategies beyond Watauga County that provide employment opportunities for Watauga County residents.
- Increase promotion of the Watauga Green Business Plan and the concepts it embraces.
- Promote the development of renewable energy concepts and participation in renewable energy initiatives.



Photo courtesy Blowing Rock TDA



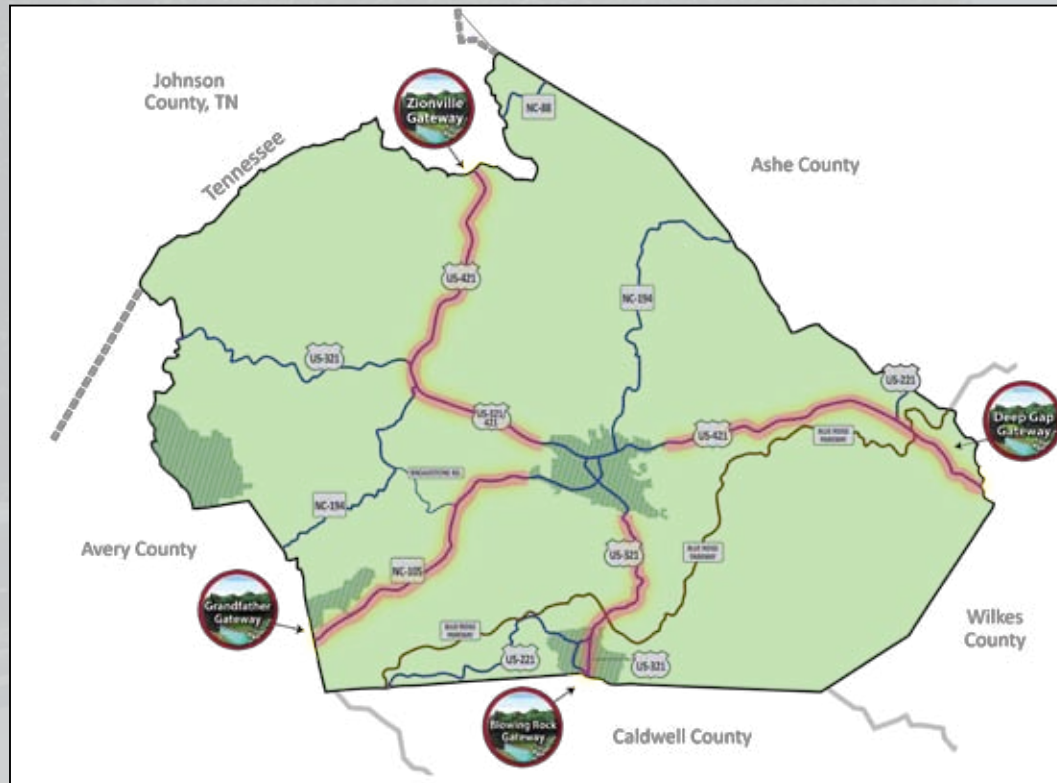
ECONOMIC GATEWAYS

Watauga transportation corridors are also economic “Gateways” into the County and are critical to the County’s economic future. Watauga County should guide development and protect the integrity and potential of these strategic economic corridors.

“Gateways” are defined as the entrances to Watauga County and are identified as the primary arterial highways (US 321, US 421 and NC Hwy 105). Providing attractive as well as functional “Gateways” into Watauga County facilitates both the positive image and economy of the community.

The quality of life enjoyed by Watauga County citizens and visitors is directly related to the natural environment. The “Gateways” are inextricably linked to the perception of this unique environment and the rich quality of life.

- Incentives for property owners and the community should be developed to maintain attractive and compatible development that will enhance the total economic value of the “Gateways” to the community.
- Formulate an individual “Gateway Corridor” strategy for each of the four (4) designated “Gateways,” beginning with the “Deep Gap” Gateway Corridor.



Economic Gateways Map



KEY ECONOMIC SECTORS

Education/Research

- Work with Appalachian State University to capitalize on University research.
- Promote the development of a research park to bring skilled employment into the community.
- Support the University of North Carolina Tomorrow goals mandating that ASU “increase its capacity and commitment to respond to and lead economic transformation and community development.”
- Strengthen the alliance with Appalachian State University and Caldwell Community College & Technical Institute to understand and attain education and skill levels needed by Watauga residents.

Medical/Research

- Watauga County should work with medical professionals and the Appalachian Regional Healthcare System to facilitate a “medical cluster” concept.
- Encourage Appalachian State University and Caldwell Community College & Technical Institute to explore new healthcare ventures.
- Focus on and promote activities and businesses that are involved in technology, research, education and medicine.

Tourism and Recreation

- Capitalize on existing tourism by encouraging the Tourism Development Authorities to enhance and increase strategic marketing of Watauga County.
- Fully develop and promote the greenways concept such as the new greenway connector near the new high school, trails, parks and other eco-tourism assets.
- Promote eco-tourism, defined as “environmentally responsible travel and visitation to natural areas.”

Industry and Business

- Develop a commerce/business park site in Watauga County and explore opportunities for a joint venture with Appalachian State University, Caldwell Community College & Technical Institute, and the medical cluster.
- Plan for a flex or shell building in a commerce/business park to meet the demands of potential new businesses.
- Expand and strengthen support between the community and existing businesses and industry to reassure businesses that their presence is appreciated and their needs are considered.



Agriculture

- Promote the production of agricultural products, especially those produced organically, to capitalize on the growing demand for local food products.
- Conduct relevant market research to support a marketing strategy for such products.
- Find effective ways to facilitate the local farmers markets, and related efforts of the Watauga County Cooperative Extension.
- Promote a grower's cooperative.
- Promote and explore opportunities in niche markets of food production, such as herbs and spices, grapes (vineyards), strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, and local vegetables, and promote as local foods.
- Work with local agricultural interests to create an interest group committee to promote agri-tourism and sponsor demonstration projects, such as organic gardening with a living historic farm.



WATER AND SEWER

The most appropriate alternative role for Watauga County is the role of planner and facilitator of water and sewer services.

- The County should promote sound water and sewer intergovernmental cooperation, facilitating needed and feasible development of infrastructure and services in areas not currently served, and assume a leadership role by participating in planning, policy making and strategic capital investments.
- The County should plan and implement measures that would improve existing public and private services.
- County officials should assign leadership roles at policy and staff levels that would be consistent with the County's assumed role as facilitator.
- County officials should assume a leadership role in identifying and protecting water sources.
- Watauga County should expect and plan for future strategic investments in the planning and the development of water and sewer infrastructure and services for areas of the County not presently served, where feasibility can be demonstrated.
- Watauga County should reevaluate and update the recommendations made by Draper Aden in 2001.
- Watauga County should work with municipalities to help guide water and sewer to areas targeted for economic development and affordable housing.
- Watauga County should provide for the proper disposal of chemicals and substances likely to end up in the water supply by making disposal of such items easier and more convenient, and by increasing the frequency with which toxic substances can be disposed.
- Watauga County should encourage the use of indigenous vegetation for landscaping.
- Watauga County should seek grants and other funding resources to help with the expansion of municipal service to unserved areas.
- Watauga County should work with and support the High Country Council of Governments in reference to a study of ground water resources.
- Watauga County should lead in an intergovernmental endeavor to develop a 10-year Capital Improvement Plan for water and sewer projects in the interest of economic development and public health.

KEY COMMUNITY SERVICES

Schools

- Provide air conditioning in all schools.
- Update the media retrieval system in all schools.
- Construct a new four classroom building for Valle Crucis School and demolish the existing building prone to flooding.
- Add office space and parking area at the Central Office.
- Resurface parking areas at several schools.
- Provide new roofing at most schools.
- Evaluate the prevailing dropout rate and implement a plan to address retention of students.

Community Centers

- Assess the need and financial viability for a community center in eastern Watauga County.
- Encourage greater cooperation between schools and communities for use of County school facilities.
- Facilitate community centers that are attractive, functional, visible, safe and accessible to their communities.



Law Enforcement

- Periodic evaluations should take place to monitor the resources of the Sheriff's Department to insure these resources are adequate to meet the law enforcement needs and demands of Watauga County.
- New policies should be made regarding transport of detainees and mental health patients.
- A Capital Improvement Plan should be prepared to address law enforcement capital needs.
- The Detention Center should be expanded in the near-term to accommodate anticipated needs.

Emergency Services

- Perform periodic evaluations to assess the ratio of population to emergency services personnel, taking into consideration the rural character of Watauga County and the number of miles that must be traveled from emergency service centers to all areas of the County.
- Develop strategies to improve cooperation and coordination between the County and each of the fire departments.
- Create an Emergency Services Master Plan for the County to address:
 - The need for paid personnel in fire stations.
 - The need for central dispatch of emergency services personnel.
 - Alternative approaches to communications to enhance efficiency and effectiveness.
 - Methods to improve cooperation between the County and fire departments.
 - Additional water points for retrieving water to fight rural fires.

Other Human Services

- Although beyond the scope of the Plan, maintaining the "quality of life" in Watauga County must consider other human social needs, such as care for children and the elderly, health care and other fundamental human needs.
- An in-depth assessment of such needs and a plan for addressing the most pressing humanistic issues should be undertaken in the future.

AFFORDABLE (WORKFORCE) HOUSING

- Ensure that subdivision regulations and other land use ordinances do not serve as barriers to the construction of affordable housing.
- Promote mixed land uses that incorporate housing with other uses that can be blended without sacrificing safety, health and welfare of citizens.
- Allow a broad range of housing choices in Watauga County ordinances. Encourage duplex, triplex and quadraplex development.
- Ensure that current and future regulations provide sufficient opportunities for nursing homes and other similar care facilities.
- Consider the use of land use policies that accommodate manufactured housing and mixed-use housing.
- Develop a countywide affordable housing plan in cooperation with municipalities.
- Investigate state and federally funded programs that assist in housing rehabilitation.
- Lead in establishing an affordable housing trust fund in cooperation with municipalities and the County, and seek external funding from other sources.
- Preserve existing housing stock and address substandard housing wherever possible.

PRESERVATION OF UNIQUE COMMUNITY IDENTITIES AND HERITAGE

- Create a strategy for preservation of unique communities that identifies and promotes preservation of significant historic, scenic and cultural features.
- Encourage restoration and use of historic sites and community landmarks to foster community identity.
- Develop uniform and pleasing community identification signage along roadways to identify designated communities.
- Review the Community Planning Guidelines to determine if the guidelines are still appropriate for current needs.
- Develop Small Area Planning guidelines and initiatives to guide land use, open space, transportation improvements, capital improvements and identify opportunities for preservation and revitalization.
- Where appropriate, develop Small Area Plans.
- Enhance community gathering points.
- Explore whether some school sites could be utilized to accommodate other community programs.
- Design and locate public spaces and buildings to reinforce and express the community's unique character.
- Implement programs for removing unattractive elements, such as illegal signs, graffiti, litter, utility poles and billboards, as feasible.
- Promote art and cultural opportunities at appropriate public and private locations in unique communities.

Preservation of Farmland

- Promote the Voluntary Farm Preservation Program and work to ensure the Soil and Water Conservation office continues to provide education and opportunities for persons interested in the program.
- Support the Soil and Water Conservation office in its efforts to provide information about the Agriculture Cost Share Program (ACSP). This program is voluntary and is designed to protect water quality by installing best management practices on agricultural lands.
- Promote and educate citizens on the benefits of establishing conservation easements by involving local land conservancies and Soil and Water Conservation personnel.
- Promote the use of the Present-Use-Value taxation program.



PARKS AND RECREATION

- Develop a countywide recreation master plan.
- The plan should be regional in scope, developed with the cooperation and coordination of all municipalities, the Watauga County Board of Education, ASU, Watauga Parks and Recreation, and the public. The plan should address present and future needs with an emphasis on:
 - Organized Sports
 - Passive Recreation
 - Greenways
 - Blueways
 - Walking and Bicycling
- A Recreation Capital Improvement Plan should be incorporated into the master plan.
- Subdivision planning and development plans of various types for medium and high density developments should include provisions for open space.



Photo courtesy Blowing Rock TDA

PREPARING FOR CHANGE IN WATAUGA COUNTY

It is incumbent upon Watauga County to recognize the importance of acknowledging and managing change and deliberately planning for its impacts. Achieving balance between fostering change and protecting community values and important economic, environmental and cultural resources is the foundation of change management.

Change is inevitable in Watauga County; however, future change can be influenced by many factors, which may be altered or utilized to direct or mitigate such change.

- **Regional Framework**

Managing change should reflect a regional strategy. Therefore, planning for Watauga County's growth should consider similar endeavors across governmental jurisdictions. It is incumbent upon County government to consult with its political neighbors as it plans for future growth. The County's plans and policies should efficiently and effectively mesh with those of the municipalities within Watauga County. Further, the ongoing programs of present and future Community Planning Council Districts should be reflected in the County's planning.

- **Managing Future Change in Watauga County**

Growth management issues in the community are complex. A single planning model for the County is not adequate to comprehensively address the requirements of this transitional planning environment. Therefore, multiple planning paths may better provide for the flexibility to address the range of factors and issues that are presented to the community.

- **Watauga Gateway Corridors (Path 1)**

Watauga County is characterized by distinct and constantly changing primary transportation corridors, which include key segments of highways 421, 321 and 105. These corridors are considered the strategic or key Gateways to the community and managing change within these "Gateway Corridors" should be guided by the principles outlined in the Plan.

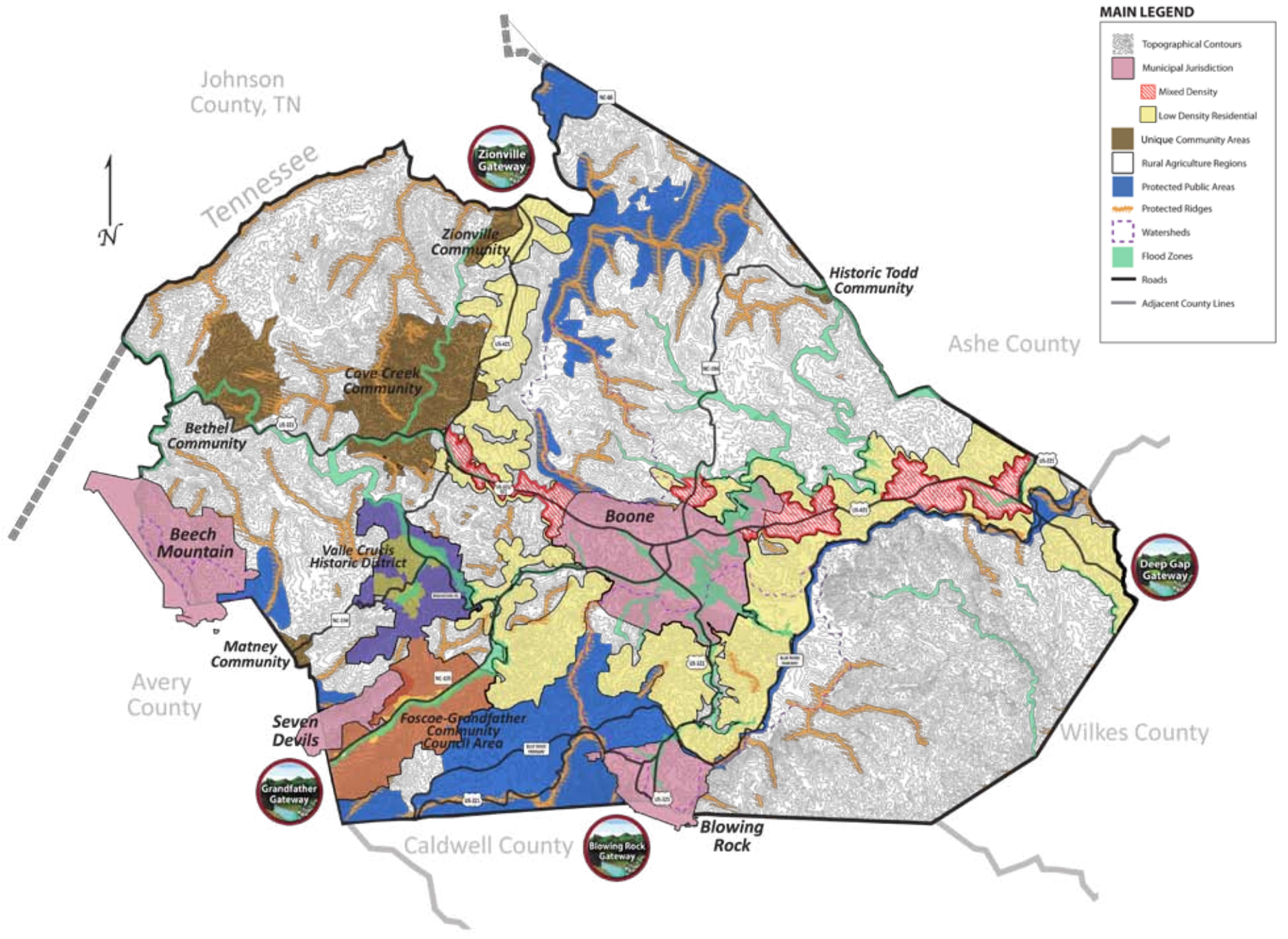
- **Unique Communities (Path 2)**

Beyond the designated "Gateway Corridors" there are other significant areas of Watauga County that are recognized as established rural communities and that exhibit unique characteristics worthy of preservation.

- **Rural/Agricultural Regions (Path 3)**

All areas that fall outside of the Watauga Gateway Corridors and designated Unique Community Areas would be contained within the designated Rural / Agriculture Regions. These areas are predominantly rural and are characterized by low-density residential development with substantial land areas devoted to agriculture and undeveloped forest lands.

MANAGING CHANGE IN WATAUGA COUNTY



IMPLEMENTATION FOR THE CITIZENS' PLAN FOR WATAUGA

The "Citizens' Plan for Watauga" should be the beginning point in a process that carries the community forward into a continuum of deliberate strategies and actions designed to understand, anticipate and manage changes that will occur in the future and to ensure that such change is consistent with the will of the Watauga citizenry and compatible with the fragile natural environment that is the essence of Watauga County.

Public Involvement

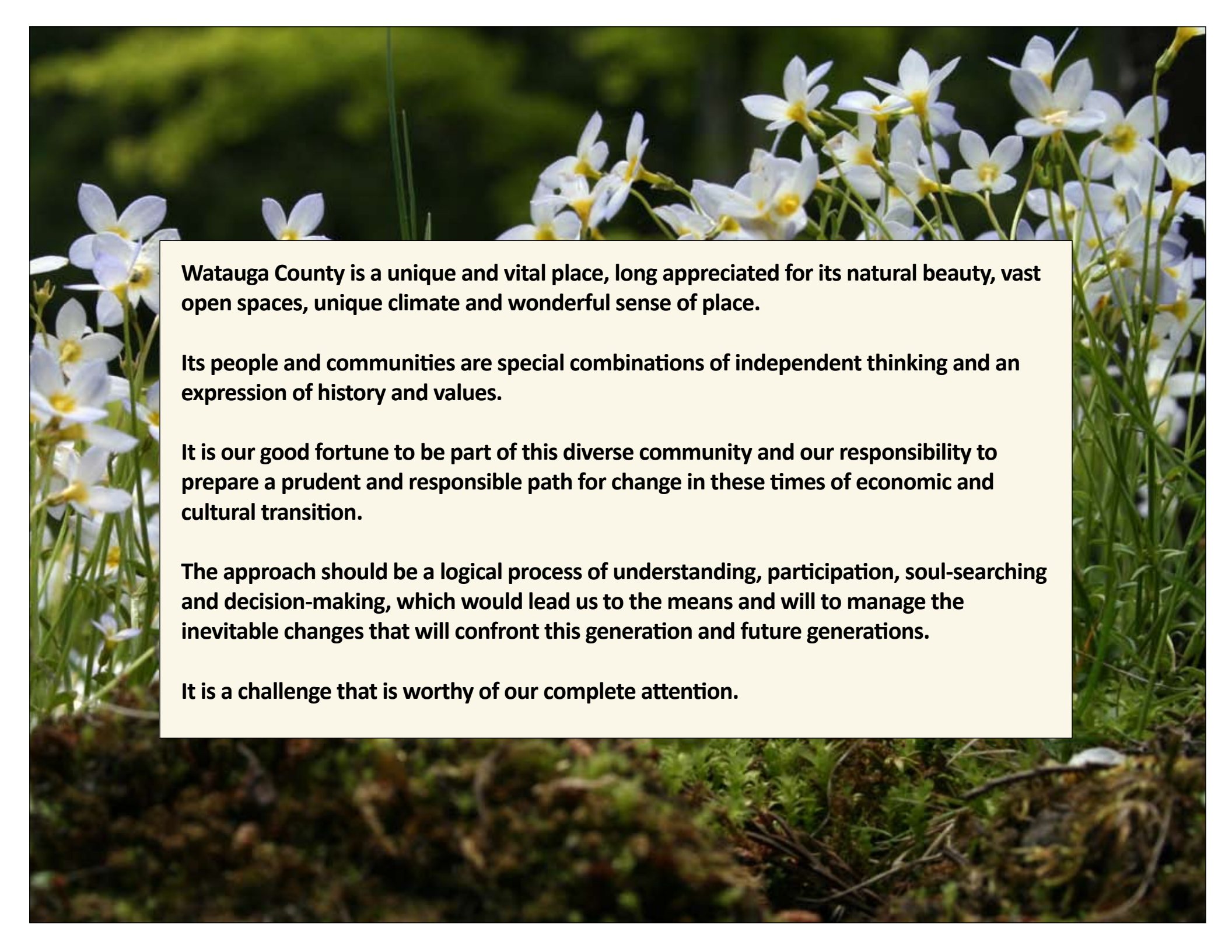
- Establish a "Citizens' Plan for Watauga" newsletter that would be published quarterly on the County's website and further distributed in the community. The newsletter would post news related to important planning and change management initiatives and summarize information and events that relate to this theme.
- Create a "Citizens' Plan for Watauga" Forum composed of a cross-section of community leaders and citizens in Watauga County, including elected officials, business people, institutional representatives, retirees, youth and others who have a stake in managing change in Watauga County. Create an environment in which participation in this forum is both prestigious and meaningful. Meet periodically with this group and present the progress of the preceding year and formulate at least five (5) concrete objectives for the subsequent year.
- Take planning and information about managing change in Watauga County into the schools. The future of Watauga County rests with our children.

Intergovernmental Coordination

- A key consideration in achieving a successful process for plan implementation is meaningful and deliberate cooperation among the local governments, and their management and planning staffs, within Watauga County. Mistrust and competition must not be permitted to delay the creation of a productive and innovative solution to achieving a desirable level of information sharing and collaboration among the County, the four municipalities and ASU.
- Formalize and enhance the planning consortium among the local governments and ASU to foster intergovernmental collaboration on key planning issues.
- Establish quarterly status working retreats of the consortium that are managed by a facilitator that rotates annually among the five governments.
- Formulate specific annual objectives related to plan implementation and sponsor joint participation in work tasks that are of mutual interest to the participants.
- Assign responsibilities among the participants for staffing and participation in the annual "Citizens' Plan for Watauga" Forum.
- Facilitate coordinated involvement in strategic public participation events and processes.



Photo courtesy Blowing Rock TDA



Watauga County is a unique and vital place, long appreciated for its natural beauty, vast open spaces, unique climate and wonderful sense of place.

Its people and communities are special combinations of independent thinking and an expression of history and values.

It is our good fortune to be part of this diverse community and our responsibility to prepare a prudent and responsible path for change in these times of economic and cultural transition.

The approach should be a logical process of understanding, participation, soul-searching and decision-making, which would lead us to the means and will to manage the inevitable changes that will confront this generation and future generations.

It is a challenge that is worthy of our complete attention.

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