

# HIGHLANDS COMMUNITY PLAN

2021 UPDATE

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## INTRODUCTION

The Highlands Community Plan is more than just an update to the 2005 Land Use Plan. It captures a community's goals at the time it was written and distills their thoughts and feelings about their town into a set of policies that will guide decision making for the next 10-20 years. It serves as a guide for policy changes, land use and transportation planning, economic development, housing strategy, capital improvement planning, and more. The Highlands that is cherished today is due to decisions made decades ago, and will continue to be cherished thanks to all of those who participated in the creation of this plan and to those who will use it for future decision makings in the years to come.

## PROCESS

A plan of this magnitude would not be possible without extensive input from across the community. Input from a wide variety of community members and stakeholders was essential to crafting a plan that accurately reflected residents' visions, concerns, and hopes for Highlands' future. The public engagement process included a diverse set of engagement opportunities in an effort to engage different people through the many formats. These included:

- » **Steering Committee** - The town board appointed ten representatives who met regularly during the process to provide feedback and guidance.
- » **Stakeholder Interviews** -A series of hour-long interviews were conducted with stakeholder groups in Phase One of the project.
- » **Survey** - The project team carried out two surveys, one community-wide and one for business operators, during the engagement process. The first was a broad survey of respondents concerns and preferences across all plan-related topics such as recreation and housing. The second was an open-ended comment form once the public reviewed the draft plan.
- » **Public Meetings** - Two public meetings were held at the Highlands Community Building. The first, the Visioning Workshop, collected general feedback early in the analysis phase of the project. The second was held in conjunction with the release of the draft plan and allowed attendees to give feedback.



## VISION STATEMENT

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**“Highlands is a vibrant and scenic mountain community founded on the beauty of the plateau’s natural environment, the uniqueness of its village character, and the richness of the area’s culture and history.”**

## PLAN GOALS

While the vision statement encapsulates the overarching image of Highlands in the future, the goals represent more discrete targets for the town. These six goals rose from public and stakeholder input, and together will help achieve the vision.



### TOWN CHARACTER

Maintain and enhance the town center's village character that is surrounded by mostly low-density housing that blends with the natural environment.



### PEDESTRIAN FOCUS

Create a downtown and commercial areas that emphasize pedestrian comfort and safety.



### ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION

Preserve and enhance the natural environment and the scenic beauty of Highlands.



### PARTNERSHIPS

Cultivate ongoing community partnerships with area organizations and governments to plan for and protect the plateau.



### CULTURE AND HISTORY

Preserve and promote the rich cultural and historic resources of Highlands.



### LOCAL ECONOMY

Support and sustain the local economy, including downtown businesses, tourism, the arts, and outdoor recreation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TOPICS

The recommendations section outlines the policies and strategies that the Town will use to achieve the vision and goals. These policies are statements that will guide decision-making in Highlands. The recommendations section is divided into the following topics.

- » Future land use map
- » Land use and Housing
- » Downtown and Tourism
- » Recreation and Natural Resources
- » Transportation
- » Infrastructure and public services

## RECOMMENDATIONS & POLICIES

POLICIES	GOALS ADDRESSED					
	TC	EP	CH	PF	P	LE
<b>LAND USE AND HOUSING</b>						
LU 1: Regularly evaluate and update the Community Plan and Unified Development Ordinance.	TC	EP	CH	PF	P	LE
LU 2: Reinforce the existing town character through the design of new development and land use decisions.	TC	EP	CH			
LU 3: Manage growth along major entry corridors and edges.	TC	EP			P	
LU 4: Encourage a limited mix of housing types in defined areas.	TC			PF		LE
LU 5: Encourage lodging and tourism related rentals while limiting negative impact on existing residents and businesses.	TC		CH			LE
<b>DOWNTOWN AND TOURISM</b>						
DT 1: Maintain and enhance Highlands' small-town feel and village character.	TC	EP	CH	PF		LE
DT 2: Improve pedestrian facilities and increase wayfinding.	TC			PF		LE
DT 3: Monitor and manage existing parking.				PF		LE
DT 4: Further study potential improvements to Downtown streetscapes.	TC			PF		LE
DT 5: Continue marketing and events that encourage visitation.			CH		P	LE
DT 6: Preserve and enhance the Town's parks and green infrastructure.	TC	EP		PF		
<b>RECREATION AND NATURAL RESOURCES</b>						
RNR 1: Support recreation options and outdoor tourism.		EP	CH		P	LE
RNR 2: Discourage intense development on steep slopes and mountain ridges.	TC	EP				
RNR 3: Protect views and natural resources in Town and on the greater Highlands plateau.	TC	EP			P	
RNR 4: Encourage open space preservation and tree protection in new development.	TC	EP	CH			
RNR 5: Protect the Plateau's water quality.		EP			P	LE

TRANSPORTATION	TC	EP	CH	PF	P	LE
T 1: Maintain a resilient transportation system that caters to a variety of users.	●	●	●	●	●	●
T 2: Encourage context-sensitive design of roadways.	●	●	●	●	●	●
T 3: Prioritize pedestrian safety, connectivity, accessibility, and comfort.	●	●	●	●	●	●
T 4: Fill sidewalk gaps and improve accessibility.	●	●	●	●	●	●
T 5: Continue to improve Highlands' Greenway System.	●	●	●	●	●	●
T 6: Balance needs for parking with aesthetics and environmental impacts.	●	●	●	●	●	●
T 7: Partner with Macon County Transit.	●	●	●	●	●	●
T 8: Plan for electric vehicles in Highlands.	●	●	●	●	●	●

INFRASTRUCTURE AND PUBLIC SERVICES	TC	EP	CH	PF	P	LE
PS 1: Ensure adequate waste disposal and sanitation services.	●	●	●	●	●	●
PS 2: Maintain and enhance the electric grid.	●	●	●	●	●	●
PS 3: Encourage energy efficiency and alternative fuel vehicles.	●	●	●	●	●	●
PS 4: Improve access to high-speed internet and expand cell coverage.	●	●	●	●	●	●
PS 5: Focus water and sewer service improvements on existing Town limits.	●	●	●	●	●	●
PS 6: Allow for limited extension of water and sewer to areas near town limit boundaries if conditions are met.	●	●	●	●	●	●
PS 7: Encourage an efficient, financially sound water and sewer system.	●	●	●	●	●	●
PS 8: Protect water quality in Lake Sequoyah.	●	●	●	●	●	●

**Goals Key**

<span style="color: orange;">●</span> TC Town Character	<span style="color: brown;">●</span> PF Pedestrian Focus
<span style="color: green;">●</span> EP Environmental Preservation	<span style="color: darkgreen;">●</span> P Partnerships
<span style="color: red;">●</span> CH Culture and History	<span style="color: darkred;">●</span> LE Local Economy

## MAKING IT HAPPEN

Writing a plan is only the first step in crafting Highlands' future. These action items transform the policies into actionable steps that the Town can take to make improvements. This list captures the primary action items from the Plan. To view the full detail see Chapter 5.

### LAND USE AND HOUSING ACTION ITEMS

1. Evaluate and update the Unified Development Ordinance and the Community Plan
2. Evaluate rezoning requests for conformity with the Community Plan
3. Maintain the scale and character of Highlands
4. Manage growth along major entry corridors
5. Allow a mix of housing in appropriate areas in order to address the housing shortage
6. Refine criteria for allowing accessory dwelling units
7. Monitor and mitigate the impact of short-term rentals (STRs) on the Highlands community

### DOWNTOWN AND TOURISM ACTION ITEMS

8. Study of town owned properties to determine future uses
9. Wayfinding and streetscape plan and improvements
10. Continue marketing events that encourage visitors
11. Develop a Downtown pocket park south of Main Street

### RECREATION AND NATURAL RESOURCES ACTION ITEMS

12. Pursue improvements at Recreation Park
13. Work with partners to improve access to parks and nearby public lands and nature preserves
14. Consider updates to the Unified Development Ordinance to protect natural resources, heritage tree, and water quality
15. Protect the Plateau's water quality by proactively managing stormwater runoff from development

## TRANSPORTATION ACTION ITEMS

16. Prioritize the implementation of the Master Sidewalk Plan in Downtown and adjoining residential areas

17. Coordinate and support the Highlands Plateau Greenway in their efforts to improve Highlands' Greenway System

18. Develop an ADA Self-Assessment and Transition Plan

19. Manage and expand vehicular parking.

20. Encourage walking, biking and use of electric vehicles

## INFRASTRUCTURE AND PUBLIC SERVICES ACTION ITEMS

21. Sanitation services improvements

22. Evaluate ways to improve electric system customer service, including outage reporting options

23. Pay off fiber project and improve public WiFi

24. Public safety improvements

25. Pursue grants to connect homes with septic systems in close proximity to Lake Sequoyah to the town sewer system







# 1 INTRODUCTION

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The Highlands Community Plan will function as the Town of Highlands' comprehensive plan.

Just as Highlands in 2021 is the product of generations of stewardship of the built and natural environments, Highlands in 20 years will reflect the decision, visions, and values of today. The Highlands Community Plan builds on previous efforts, plans, and hopes, and will shape Highlands in 2025, 2030, and beyond. This plan provides policy guidance for land use, transportation, housing, open space preservation, and other aspects to provide for the quality of life for Town residents. It builds on, updates, and replaces the **2005 Land Use Plan** as the principal long-range planning document for the Town.

# COMMUNITY PLAN OVERVIEW

## Purpose

The Highlands Community Plan establishes a framework for growth and development while maintaining the character and the livability of the town that Highlands residents hold so dear. The Plan is a policy document that will guide zoning and development decisions. It will also affect future updates to the Unified Development Ordinance, development design, infrastructure investments, and staff work plans. State law (NC General Statute Chapter 160D) now requires that towns have a comprehensive plan to retain authority to enforce zoning and development regulations.



## Process

In July of 2020, the Town of Highlands undertook a yearlong process to draft the Community Plan. Staff was tasked with creating a new comprehensive plan that would serve as an update to the 2005 Land Use Plan and address other issues in addition to land use, including infrastructure, parks and other topics important to the quality of life in Highlands.

With assistance from an appointed Steering Committee and consultants, Town Staff facilitated a four-phase planning process. The first phase included an assessment of existing plans and an analysis of demographics, environmental issues, infrastructure, and land use trends.

The second phase of the process included public engagement and review and refinement of the vision for the Town. The project team solicited public input from stakeholders, steering committee members, town leadership, and the general public to evaluate what residents would like to see, protect, and enhance in Highlands. A full description of the public engagement process is available on page 38 of this document.

After the analysis and visioning phase, the project team utilized the input and research results to create recommendations and the plan. To ensure the draft plan accurately reflected the community’s vision, it was then reviewed by the Steering Committee and presented for review and feedback at a public meeting upon its release. Following further refinements, it was adopted in **MONTH** 2021.

## Project Process



◆ *Steering Committee Meeting*

## STUDY AREA

The Town of Highlands is located in Western North Carolina, about 50 miles Southwest of Asheville. The town is mostly within Macon County with a small portion within Jackson County. Highlands sits on a plateau in the southern Appalachian Mountains just miles away from the Georgia and South Carolina borders. US 64, NC 106, and NC 28 are the main roads connecting Highlands to the surrounding area. The 2019 American Community Survey states that the permanent population within the corporate limits was about 1,164. Other data sources estimate the population of the entire study area as being 1,495. During the summer months it is estimated that the population swells to three to four times its permanent population.

### Boundaries

The study area for this plan encompasses the town limits of Highlands and significant areas of unincorporated land directly adjacent to Town on the plateau. The Town currently does not have a defined extraterritorial jurisdiction, but land adjacent to the town limits could be part of voluntary annexation requests in the future. The land in the study area that outside the current corporate limits includes much of the residential areas north of the Highlands corporate limits, as well as the Highlands-Cashiers Hospital. Recommendations will address issues experienced over the entire study area, but the Town currently can only enforce land use policies and regulations on the land within its jurisdiction.

### Character

Highlands is a small, village-style resort town with a rich history. Its location and natural environment are unique and have shaped the town physically and culturally. The plateau was an important hunting ground for the Cherokee for thousands of years. It was also a place that held great importance in Cherokee mythology. Cherokee heritage is alive today in many of the area's features'

names. Satulah, for example, is a corruption of Sudalidihi, meaning Six-Killer.

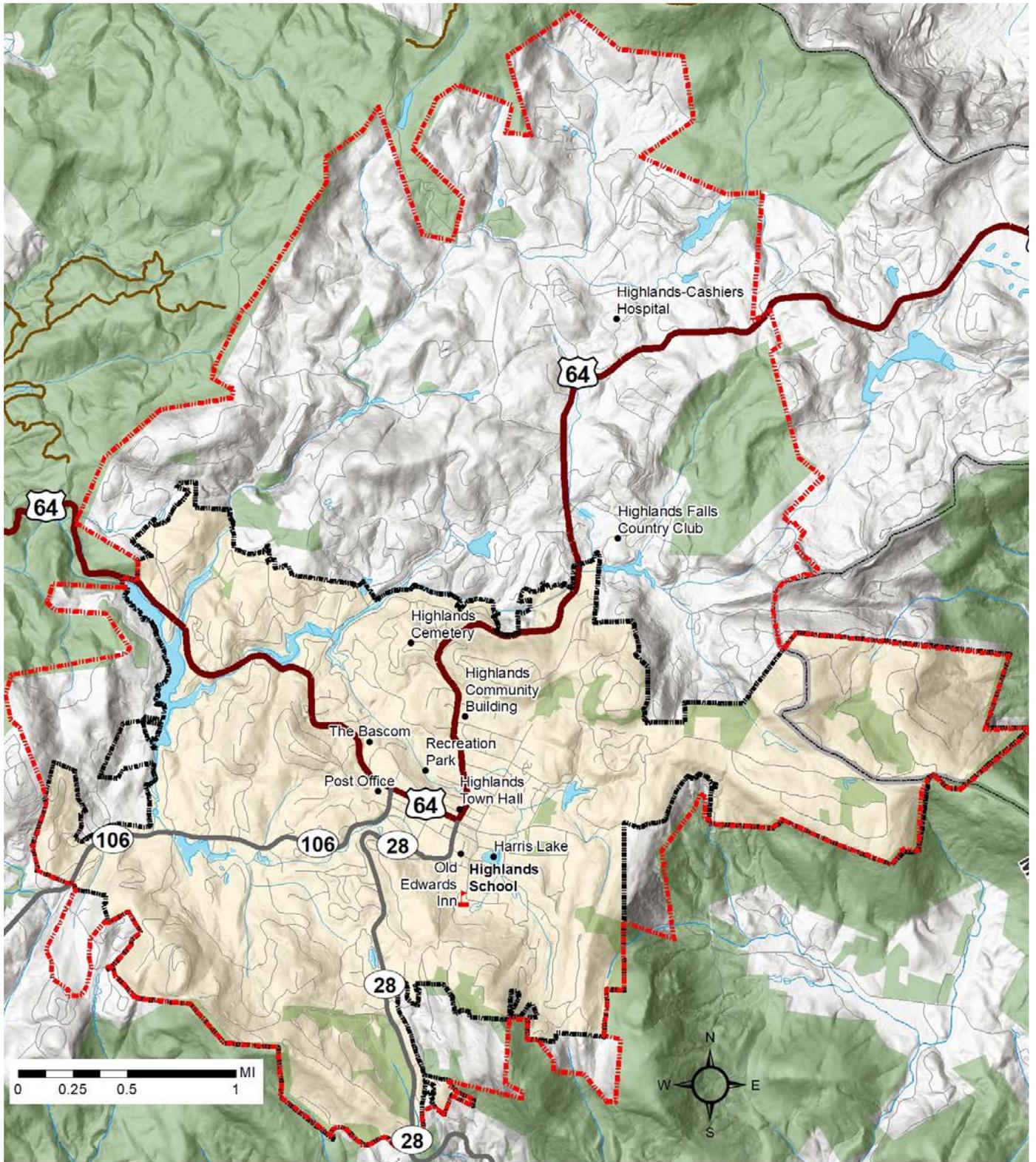
More recently the town has been a mixing ground of sorts and home to pioneers, tradesman, Scotch-Irish laborers and wealthy southern aristocrats. It has served as a cultural center for well-known artists, musicians, actors, authors, scholars and scientists who have thrived in its natural setting. The result, as the Highlands Historical Society describes, is "a town too cosmopolitan to be provincial, too broadly based to be singular in attitude and perspective, too enamored of its natural surroundings to be totally indifferent to them, and just isolated and small enough to be anxious about the benefits and setbacks of growth and development."

The town sits on a plateau nestled between protected ridges within the Nantahala National Forest. Steep slopes and protected lands on the perimeter of the plateau mean that the Town has natural boundaries, and cannot grow outward like most municipalities.

The town has an average elevation of 4,118 feet and is the second highest incorporated town east of the Mississippi River. Its elevation contributes to cool summers and abundant rainfall. Highlands sees about 100 inches of rain per year and is within one of two temperate rainforests in North America.

Highlands is known for its quaint downtown, located in the geographic center of town and radiating outward from the area around the Main Street and Fourth Street intersection. The original street pattern was laid out by the Kelsey Map created by Samuel Kelsey in 1881. Downtown is where most of the commercial land uses are found, though there are some outlying commercial uses and clubs along the primary roads that lead out of Town.

## STUDY AREA MAP



The study area, shown in red in the map above, includes all of the municipal limits, includes area adjacent to the town that could petition for voluntary annexation and extends north to the Highlands-Cashiers Hospital.

## HISTORY

### Establishment

Highlands was founded by two developers from Kansas who drew two lines on a map, one from New York to New Orleans, and one from Chicago to Savannah. These men, Samuel Truman Kelsey and Clinton Carter Hutchinson, predicted that the intersection of these major trades routes would someday become a great commercial crossroads. They arrived in Highlands in 1875 with the intent on founding a town. They delighted to find cooler weather and unique fauna on the elevated plateau in the Blue Ridge Mountains and founded a community.

### A Resort Destination Emerges

Highlands evolved as a thriving resort community. The area became known for its clean mountain air and water, and temperatures that provided respite from the hot southern summers. The town incorporated in 1879. The Highlands Inn, built in 1880, is on the National Register of Historic Places and was the first hotel in Highlands. It was soon joined by others such as the Old Edwards Inn. The Town's proximity to Atlanta meant that it was a convenient getaway for the well-to-do who needed to

escape and relax. Around the turn of the 19th century, Highlands became a noted location for tuberculosis treatments, with the fresh mountain air believed to work wonders on the disease. The Town found its niche after the opening of the Highlands Country Club in 1928, which helped it become a noted golfing and resort destination. By 1931 the Town's population had increased to 500 with 2,500 to 3,000 summer guests.

The Highlands Biological Station has existed in some form since 1927 due to the rich natural environment on the plateau.

Starting around the 1950s, lovers of the Town began buying second homes there. Many residents share a similar story of visiting Highlands and then deciding to make it their primary or secondary residence. Today seasonal residents and tourists are keystones of Highlands' economy, with the population swelling by many thousands in the high season. The Biological Station also is a part of the University of North Carolina systems ensuring a constant presence of biologists and students studying the biodiversity on the plateau. Thanks to the unique geography of the town, Highlands has remained a relatively exclusive, close-knit community made up of people from diverse backgrounds. Highlands now faces the challenge of protecting this delicate environment and character that have made it a destination for almost 150 years.

### References

- [www.highlandschamber.org/about/history/](http://www.highlandschamber.org/about/history/)
- [www.highlandsinfo.com/activities/history.htm](http://www.highlandsinfo.com/activities/history.htm)
- [www.landmarkvacations.com/blog/history-of-highlands-nc/](http://www.landmarkvacations.com/blog/history-of-highlands-nc/)



The Highlands Inn when the circus came to Town, date unknown.



Bug Hill, Dr. Mary Lapham's tuberculosis clinic 1908-1918 Source: *The Laurel Magazine*



The Kelsey Map, 1881. Source: [highlandshistory.com](http://highlandshistory.com)

## PREVIOUS PLANNING

### 2005 Land Use Plan

The 2005 Land Use Plan has functioned as Highlands' Comprehensive Plan since its adoption. Overall recommendations included:

- » Adopted mission statement to include protection of community character, and cultural and historic heritage.
- » Included strategies that are abstract and visionary.
- » Contained few suggestions for implementation.
- » Mentioned overbuilding relative to lot size, allowing limited multifamily developments, and clustering of open space for residential development.
- » Suggested adding a mini-park on Main Street and improving streetscape and aesthetic standards.
- » Included significant green space goals.

### 2018 Community Design Standards

- » Introduced urban design principles and regulations for new development.
- » Included a checklist of requirements for structural placement and scaling, façade design, roof structure, and exterior lighting.
- » Recommended Planning Board review all final elevations and plans for commercial and multifamily projects.

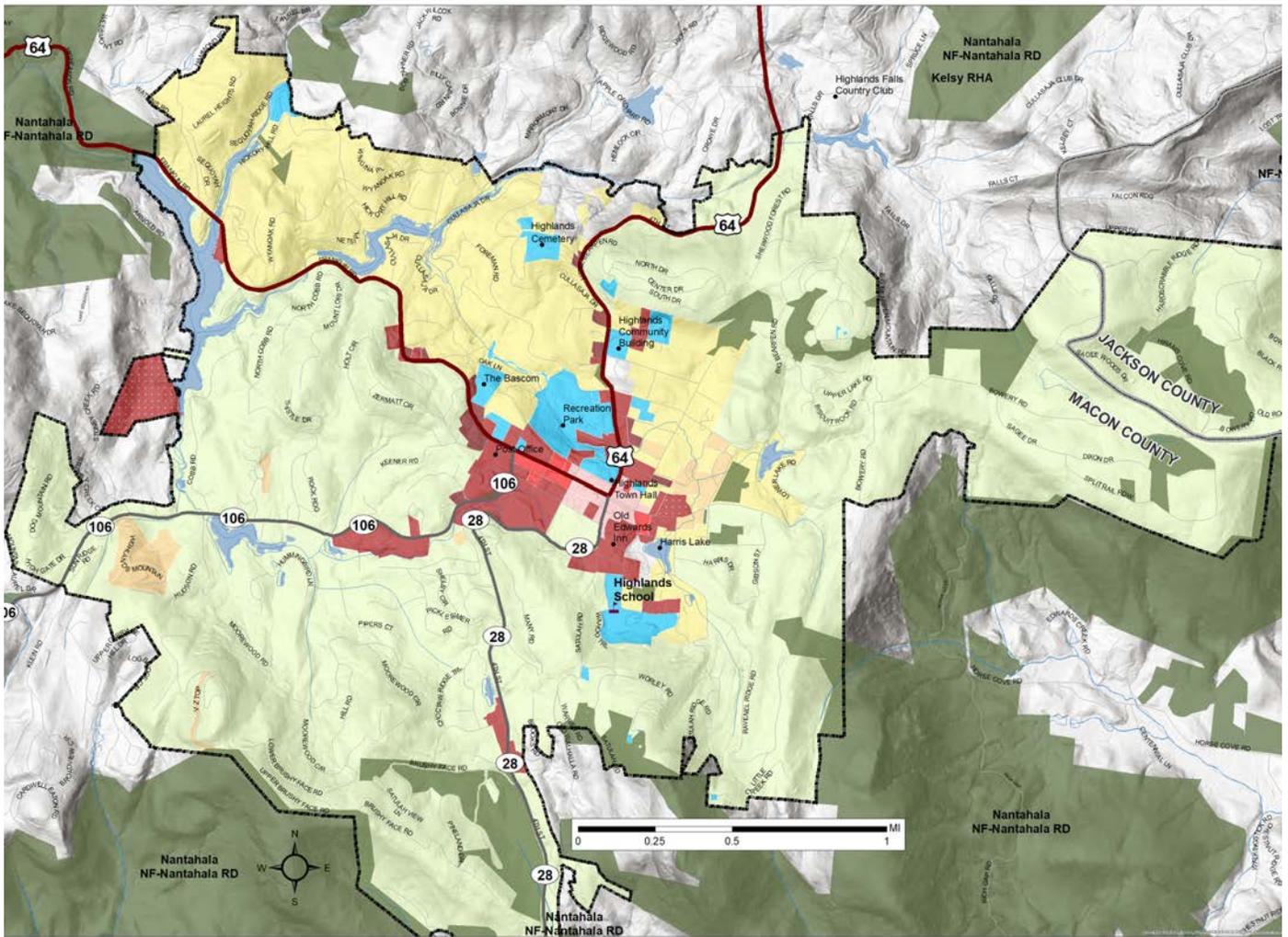
### Unified Development Ordinance

The Town of Highlands has a Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) that includes application, review and approval processes, zoning district regulations, infrastructure, parking and landscaping standards, and natural resource and environmental protection standards. The UDO is accessible at: [https://library.municode.com/nc/highlands/codes/unified\\_development\\_ordinance](https://library.municode.com/nc/highlands/codes/unified_development_ordinance). The UDO includes three residential zoning districts (R-1, R-2,

and R-3) and four commercial or mixed-use districts (B-1, B-2, B-3, and B-4). There is also a Government/Institutional (GI) District, an allowance for conditional zoning, and watershed overlay districts. A review of the UDO shows the requirements that currently shape development in Highlands:

- » Residential Development
  - Single Family dwellings are allowed in all districts except for the GI District.
  - Residential developments must meet relatively high minimum lot size standards unless they are part of a Planned Cluster Development which allows for smaller lots in exchange for larger amounts of open space.
  - Multi-family dwellings are only allowed in the R-3 district, are restricted in density, have larger buffer requirements, and require a special use permit.
- » Building height is generally limited to 35 ft with a maximum 3 habitable stories. Allowed for some exceptions for attic and basement space.
- » Commercial Districts
  - Incidental apartments are allowed in commercial zoning districts, but are regulated based on minimum square feet per unit.
  - Hotels and motels are allowed in the B-2 and B-3 districts, and a special use permit is required.
  - Commercial buildings must meet exterior materials and color standards.
- » Natural Resources
  - Established limits of disturbance based on slope and disturbance size thresholds.
  - Limited built-upon area in watersheds (12% built-upon area in critical watersheds, 24% in balance of watershed).

# ZONING MAP



**ZONING DISTRICT**

- |  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#d9ead3;"></span> R-1 - Residential District              | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#f4cccc;"></span> R3CUD - Res District w/Conditional Uses     | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#f4cccc; border:1px solid #a00;"></span> B3CUD - Bus District w/Conditional Uses                         |
| <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#fff2cc;"></span> R-2 - Residential District              | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#f4cccc;"></span> B-1 - Business District                     | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#f4cccc; border:1px solid #a00;"></span> B3CZ - Business District Conditional Zoning                     |
| <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#fff2cc;"></span> R2CUD - Res District w/Conditional Uses | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#f4cccc;"></span> B1CZ - Business District Conditional Zoning | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#a00;"></span> B-4 - Business District   |
| <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#fff2cc;"></span> R-3 Residential District                | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#a00;"></span> B-2 - Business District                        | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#4f81bd;"></span> GI - Governmental / Institutional District   |
|  | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#a00;"></span> B2CZ - Business District Conditional Zoning    | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#4f81bd; border:1px solid #a00;"></span> GICZ - Governmental / Institutional District Conditional Zoning |
|  | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:#a00;"></span> B-3 - Business District                        |   |

The current zoning districts in the Town of Highlands are shown in the above map. There are three residential districts, four business districts, areas with conditional zoning, and a Government/Institutional district.

## Downtown Highlands Parking & Circulation Study (2009)

The study was designed to be a dynamic tool to help influence infrastructure improvement decision-making – with goals to increase parking supply where needed while ensuring mobility and the safety of motorists and pedestrians. Recommendations were developed to address the parking supply and demand, traffic circulation, and pedestrian safety concerns. Recommendations focused on:

- » Increasing the parking supply within the Central Business District.
- » Enhancing traffic circulation.
- » Enhancing pedestrian safety.

Specific recommendations focused on making the intersection of 3rd Street and Main Street safer, reducing truck traffic along Main Street, and ensuring that sidewalk connectivity and crossings enabled safe walking throughout the downtown core.

## Wayfinding Master Plan (2012)

As this plan states, the Town of Highlands prides itself on its magnificent mountain scenery, pure watersheds, and a bustling historic downtown. These resources create immense tourist traffic between June and December. To better direct these visitors and promote their natural and cultural attractions, the Town of Highlands contracted with Frazier Associates and Arnett Muldrow and Associates to create a branding program along with a system of directional and informational wayfinding. The result was an image and signage plan that conveys the Town's natural mountain beauty and promotes its many attractions. These signs are located at gateway locations to welcome visitors to town and residents to their home.

## Sidewalk Master Plan (2008)

The Town maintains a sidewalk master plan that outlines the location of existing and needed future sidewalks.

## 2009 Parking & Circulation Study

This plan included recommendations for a number of issues:

- **Unified sign system to direct tourists to off-street parking and public destinations** Branding and signage improvements were made based on this recommendation, additional signage is still needed.
- **Consider making N. Third Street and Maple Street a truck route to get trucks off of Main Street** Town Board felt more analysis was needed on this topic.
- **Add landscaping to Main Street** Board did not support a center median but supported bump-outs or nodes at intersections to improve pedestrian safety.
- **Construct parking along north side of Main Street between 1st and 3rd Street** .Board recommended installation of sidewalk in the near-term and discussed a potential future project in this area for parking.
- **Traffic signal at Main Street and Third Street** Board supported a traffic signal, the intersection was later reconfigured to prevent northbound left-turns and southbound left turns, which has helped the traffic situation.
- **Convert Spring Street to one-way east bound and construct a sidewalk along the north side.** This has not been implemented, and there are still sidewalk gaps along Spring Street.
- **Install a traffic circle at Fourth Street and South Street** Town Board endorsed the idea of improving the design of the intersection, this has recently been done.
- **Midblock crossing on Main Street** Board was divided on this topic.



### DOWNTOWN MARKETPLACE STUDY

HISTORIC DOWNTOWN HIGHLANDS, NORTH CAROLINA  
MARCH 2011



The Downtown Marketplace Study included market, physical environment, financial, and organizational recommendations.

### 2011 Downtown Marketplace Study

This study was conducted by the Small Town Main Street program administered by the North Carolina Department of Commerce and focused on the central business district. The study found that empty-nesters and seniors were the principal demographic segments who live and own property in the area. The study included a customer survey and retail market observations. The study found that Downtown Highlands' commercial space was 97% occupied and that the seasonality of market activity was due to second homes. Recommendations included

- » Studying the preferences of baby boomers and needs of an aging community;
- » Developing eco-tourism opportunities;
- » Targeted marketing, event planning and promotion;
- » Addressing workforce housing;
- » Establishing a brand identity;
- » Supporting local business community and employees;
- » Creating wayfinding initiatives and improving the pedestrian experience;
- » Enhancing parking management strategies.

## County Plans

### 2005 Macon County Recreation Master Plan

- » Comprehensive inventory of park facilities, schools, and private amenities
- » Recommended coordination between Macon County and Town of Highlands
- » Near term needs: land acquisition and budgeting for greenway project
- » Long term needs: pilot greenway project from Greenway Master Plan
- » Identified funding sources and grant programs

### 2012 Macon County Comprehensive Transportation Plan

- » U.S. 64 from NC 106 to NC 28 recommended for expansion and addition of bike lanes (Town did not accept recommendations because of existing central business district storefront patterns)
- » Buck Creek Rd. (SR 1538) improvements recommended from US 64 to NC 28 to US 64
- » Recommended bus connection
- » Sidewalk improvements in Town

### 2015 Clay-Macon Hazard Mitigation Plan

- » Evaluated natural hazard risks across Clay and Macon Counties
- » Provided historical data on damages and occurrences
- » Examined vulnerability of community facilities including the Highlands-Cashiers Hospital, Highlands Library, Town Hall, etc.
- » Prescribed actions to prevent damage; protect property, natural resources, and infrastructure; and improve emergency services, and public awareness.

# HIGHLANDS

Elev. 4118





# 2 EXISTING CONDITIONS

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Who lives in Highlands? Where do residents work? How has the Town changed in the last decade?

This chapter answers these questions by providing an analysis of the current conditions in Highlands. Demographic data, population estimates, housing information, economic data, and land use analysis provide an objective understanding of the trends and issues in Highlands at this time. Analysis of the data, along with community feedback, has formed the policy and land use recommendations.

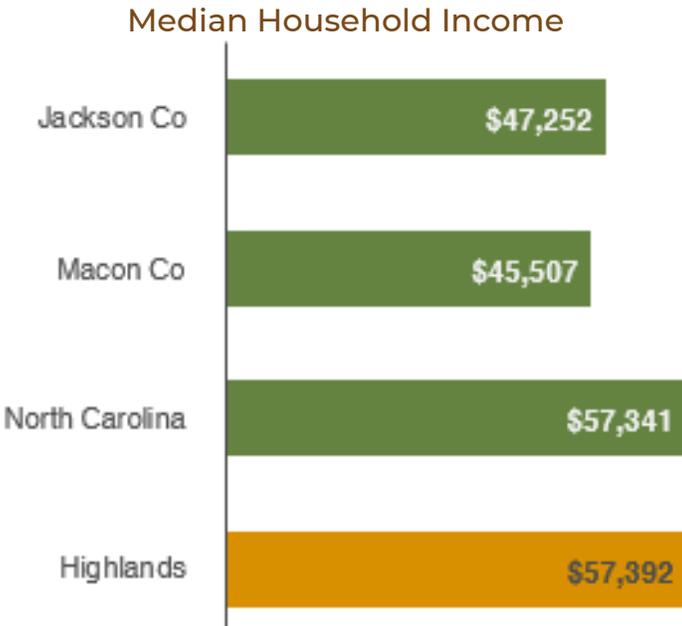
# POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHICS

## Population Characteristics

The U.S. Census estimates Highlands has a year-round municipal population of 1,164, and the study area has a population of 1,495. The population has a higher median age than Macon County, with its largest age bracket being those between 65 and 74 years and 58% ages 55 years or older.

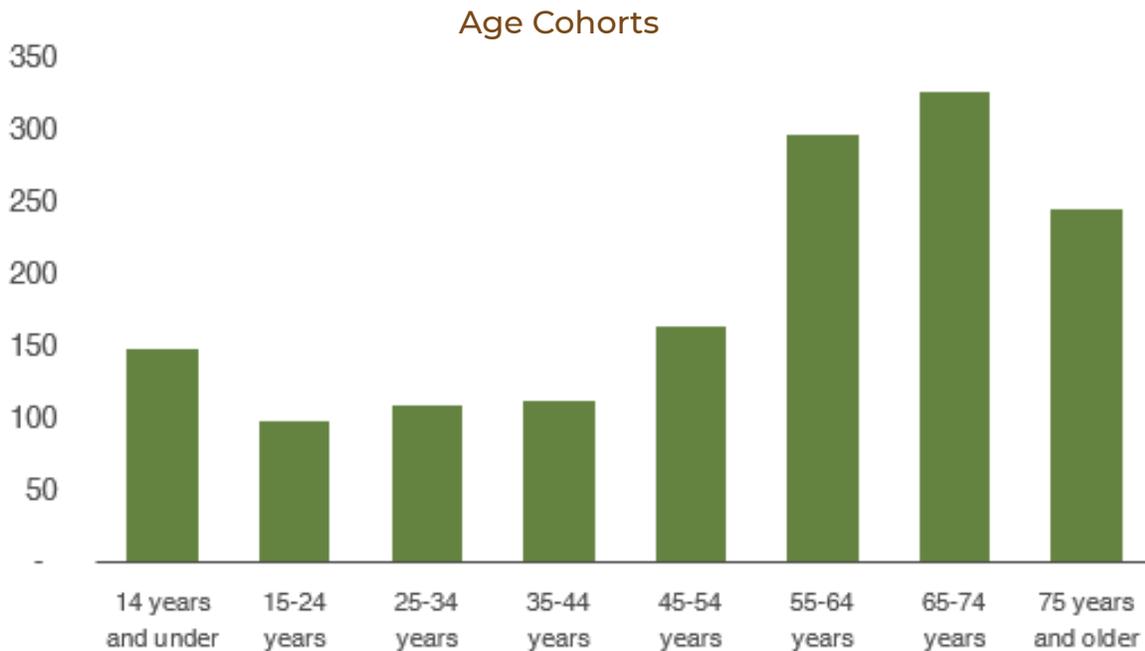
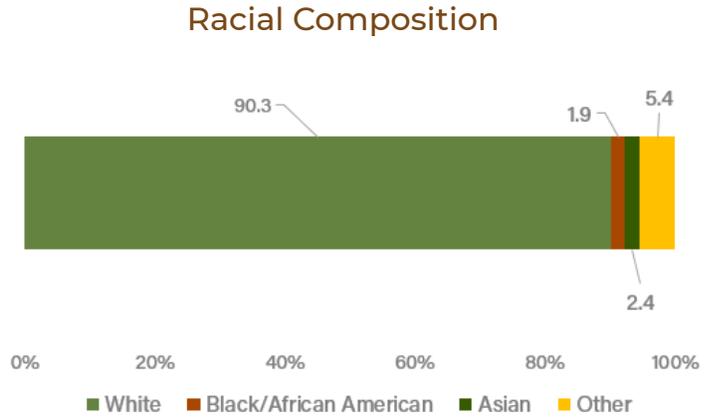
# 18,000

The Highlands Chamber estimates that the seasonal population for the “plateau” rises from 3,200 to 18,000 in peak season.



### Seasonal Population

It is estimated that 1,473 homes are used as seasonal residences or rentals in the town. Seasonal population in the town and study area is likely 3 to 4 times the year-round population.



STUDY AREA

1,495

POPULATION



+9%

POP. CHANGE  
SINCE 2000

59.9

MEDIAN AGE

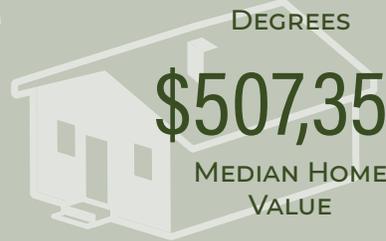


8.5%

MINORITY  
POPULATION

21%

ADULTS WITH  
BACHELOR'S  
DEGREES



\$507,353

MEDIAN HOME  
VALUE

MACON CO.

34,813

POPULATION



+17%

POP. CHANGE  
SINCE 2000

50.1

MEDIAN AGE

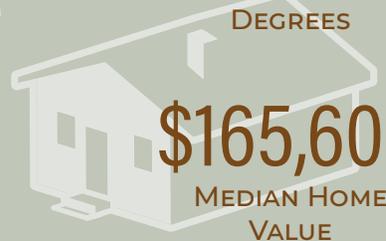


6.5%

MINORITY  
POPULATION

23.8%

ADULTS WITH  
BACHELOR'S  
DEGREES



\$165,600

MEDIAN HOME  
VALUE

STUDY AREA

1,409

2018 JOBS



HOSPITALITY

LARGEST EMPLOYMENT  
SECTOR

.94

JOBS/  
RESIDENT

\$56,834

MEDIAN  
HOUSEHOLD  
INCOME

60.5%

COMMUTE MORE  
THAN 10 MILES



16%

HOUSEHOLDS  
EARNING  
\$150K+

MACON CO.

8,832

2018 JOBS



RETAIL

LARGEST EMPLOYMENT  
SECTOR

.25

JOBS/  
RESIDENT

\$45,507

MEDIAN  
HOUSEHOLD  
INCOME

47%

COMMUTE MORE  
THAN 10 MILES



5.5%

HOUSEHOLDS  
EARNING  
\$150K+

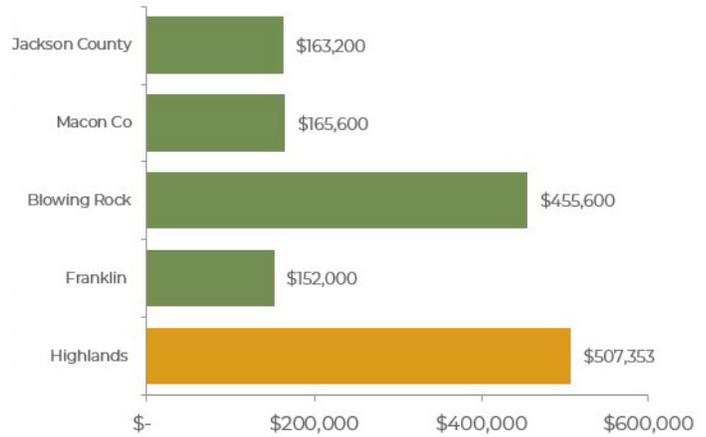
# HOUSING

Housing in Highlands is dominated by single-family homes, which represent 85% of housing units in town. As of 2019, there are 3,344 housing units within the project study area, 2,223 of which are within the town’s corporate limits. Of those homes within the town’s corporate limits, 639 are primary residences with the other 1,584 units being another type of residence. These homes are likely seasonally used homes and vacation rentals but could also be unoccupied whilst for sale or for other reasons.

Likely due to its popularity as a tourist destination and limited land available for building, homes prices in Highlands are much higher than average for the County or State. The median home value in 2019 was \$507,000, about three times the average home value for Macon County.

Most of the homes in town were built after 1970 which is consistent with when Highlands became a very popular location for second homes.

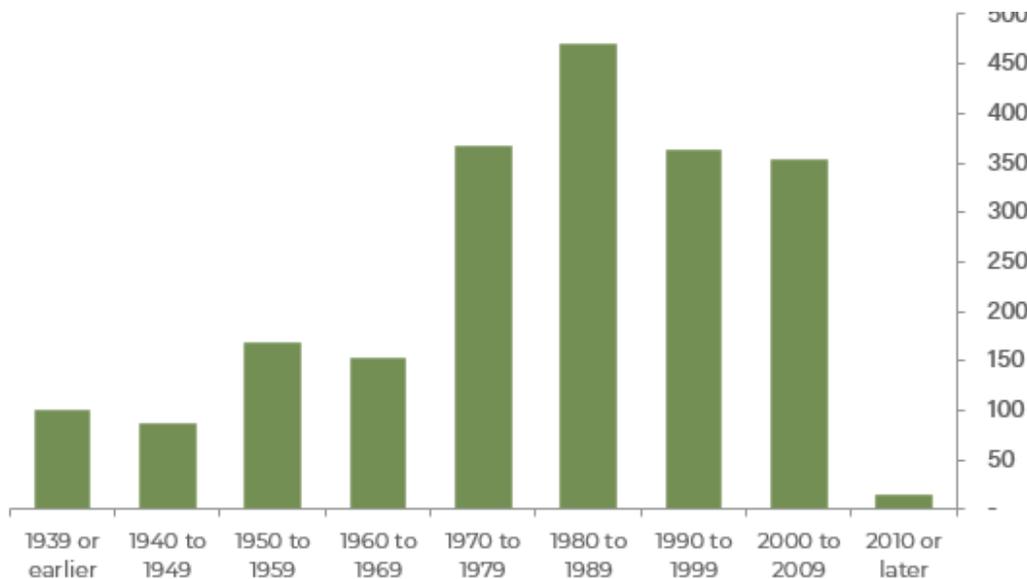
Median Home Value 2019



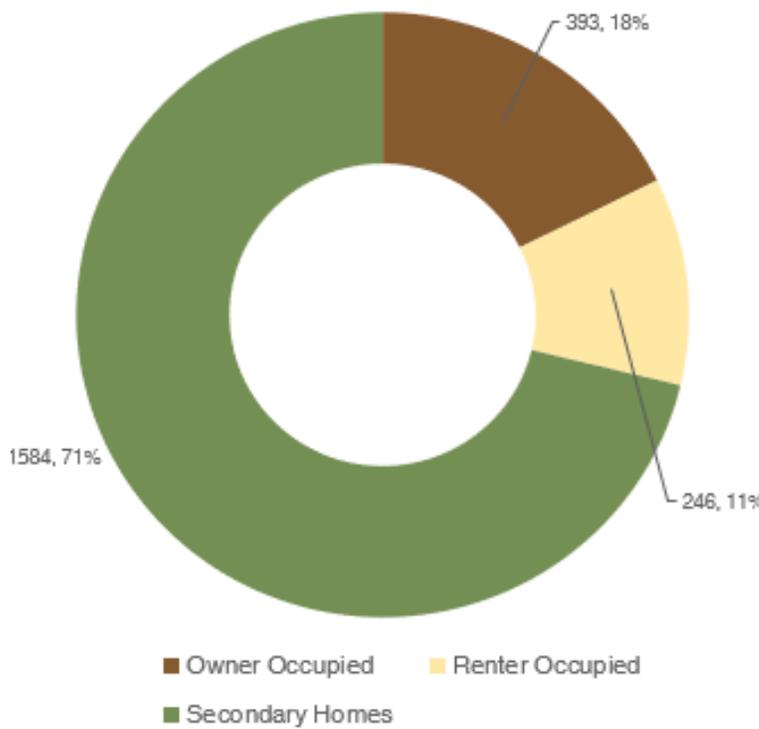
The median home value in Highlands is **3X** the median home value in Macon County.

Home value has increased **20%** in the past 10 years.

Housing by Year Built



### Housing Tenure



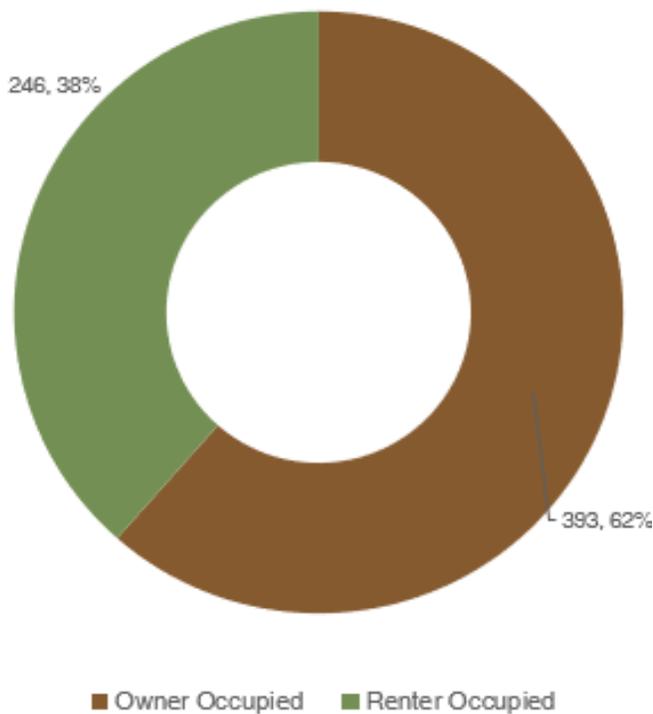
### Defining Primary and Secondary Residences

How do we know who lives in Highlands full-time? Using the US Census data definitions of “occupied” and “vacant” housing units, we can determine how many homes are primary residences and extrapolate secondary residences.

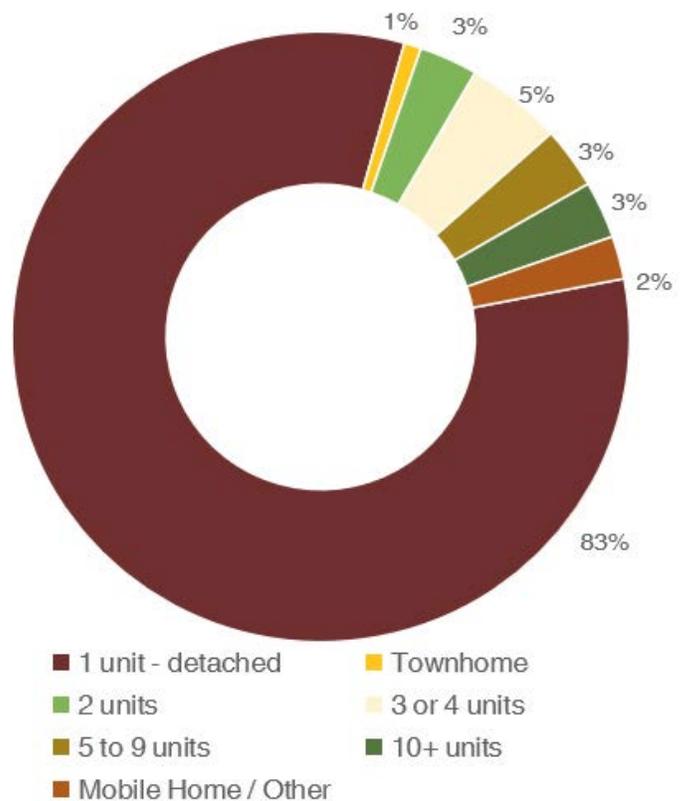
**“Occupied” housing units** are defined as those that are the “usual place of residence” for persons or a family.

**“Vacant” housing units** are defined as units where no one is living, or units owned by people whose “usual place of residence” is elsewhere. In popular tourist locations, “vacant” units are generally second homes or vacation rentals.

### Housing Tenure for Primary Homes



### Housing Type Distribution



Sources: American Community Survey, 5 year estimates, 2010, 2019

# NATURAL RESOURCES

Highlands is located in one of the most biologically diverse areas in the world. The topography, climate, and natural history of the area has led to a unique mix of northern species and southern species. The majority of areas within the study area are ranked as being high value for biodiversity and wildlife habitat by the N.C. Natural Heritage Program. There are 36 designated Natural Heritage Natural Areas located near Highlands. The Highlands Biological Station is a facility located in Highlands where researchers study the natural heritage of the area. The facility contains the Highlands Nature Center and Highlands Botanical Gardens.

A number of streams in the area are designated trout streams and serve as headwaters to public water supplies. Stakeholder interviews and the survey indicated that environmental protection is a priority. Citizens voiced concerns about increased pressure on resources, development impacts, and water quality.



Mill Creek parallels Main Street just north of downtown and eventually drains into Lake Sequoyah which is the water source for Highlands and the Cullusaja River a scenic river that is also a designated trout stream.

**Near Highlands, there are**



**42,736 ACRES**

OF PUBLIC LAND AND CONSERVATION AREAS\*

\*INCLUDES NANTAHALA NATIONAL FOREST WITHIN 5 MILES OF TOWN



**107**

MILES OF TROUT WATERS WITHIN 5 MILES



**36**

ECOLOGICALLY SIGNIFICANT NATURAL AREAS (DESIGNATED NATURAL HERITAGE NATURAL AREAS)

**GREENWAYS, SIDEWALKS, HIKING TRAIL, AND MULTI-USE PATHS**

**54** MILES

OF TRAILS ON FOREST SERVICE PROPERTY

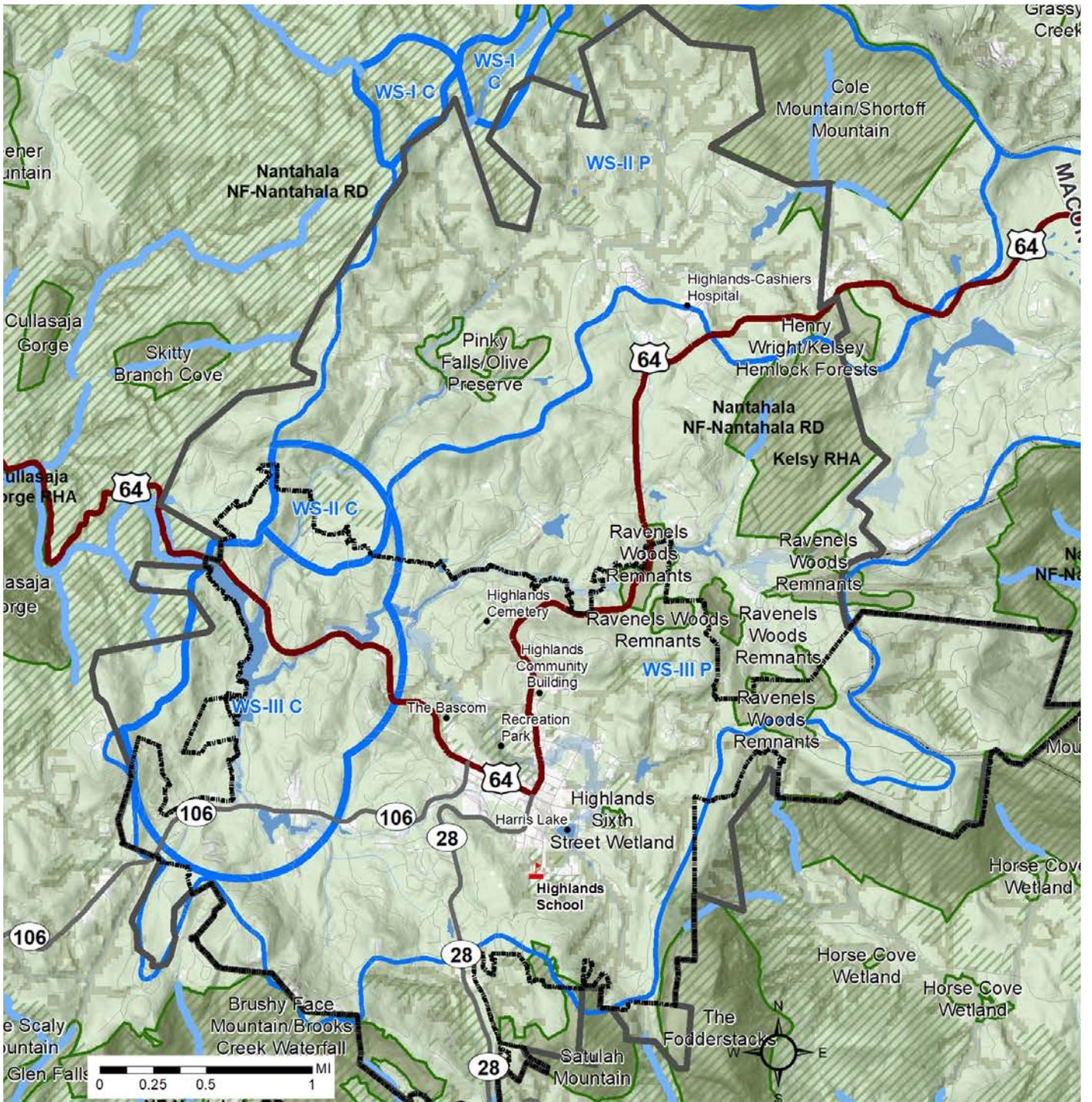


**7** MILES

OF EXISTING AND PROPOSED TRAILS PART OF THE HIGHLANDS PLATEAU GREENWAY



# NATURAL RESOURCES MAP



**Legend**

**Parks and Natural Resources**

- Parks and Conservation Areas
- Natural Heritage Natural Areas
- Lakes
- Streams
- Trout Streams
- Floodplain

**Water Supply Watersheds**

- Critical Areas
- Protected Areas

**Biodiversity and Wildlife Habitat Value**

- Very High
- High
- Low-Medium

## PARKS AND TRAILS

Highlands is nestled on a plateau between large tracts of public land in the Nantahala National Forest that provide outdoor recreation opportunities. The Town works with Macon County to maintain a number of parks and recreation opportunities. Highlands Recreation Park is a hub for local recreation that offers a gym, year-round pool, skatepark, playground, tennis, pickleball, programming, and a network of trails. Kelsey-Hutchinson Founders Park is located downtown and serves as a public gathering place with concerts and ice skating in the winter. The Town coordinates with the nonprofit group Highlands Plateau Greenway that develops and maintains a system of trails for walkers and hikers in town. A number of other publicly accessible greenspaces are located in the area and are owned by the Highlands Cashiers Land Trust (HCLC).



### Parks and Recreation Facilities

#### KELSEY-HUTCHINSON FOUNDERS PARK

FOUNDERS PARK IS AN ASSET TO DOWNTOWN HIGHLANDS, OFFERING RESIDENTS AND VISITORS A PUBLIC GATHERING SPACE IN THE HEART OF DOWNTOWN. PROGRAMMING INCLUDES PUBLIC EVENTS SUCH AS CONCERTS AND ICE SKATING.

#### HIGHLANDS RECREATION PARK

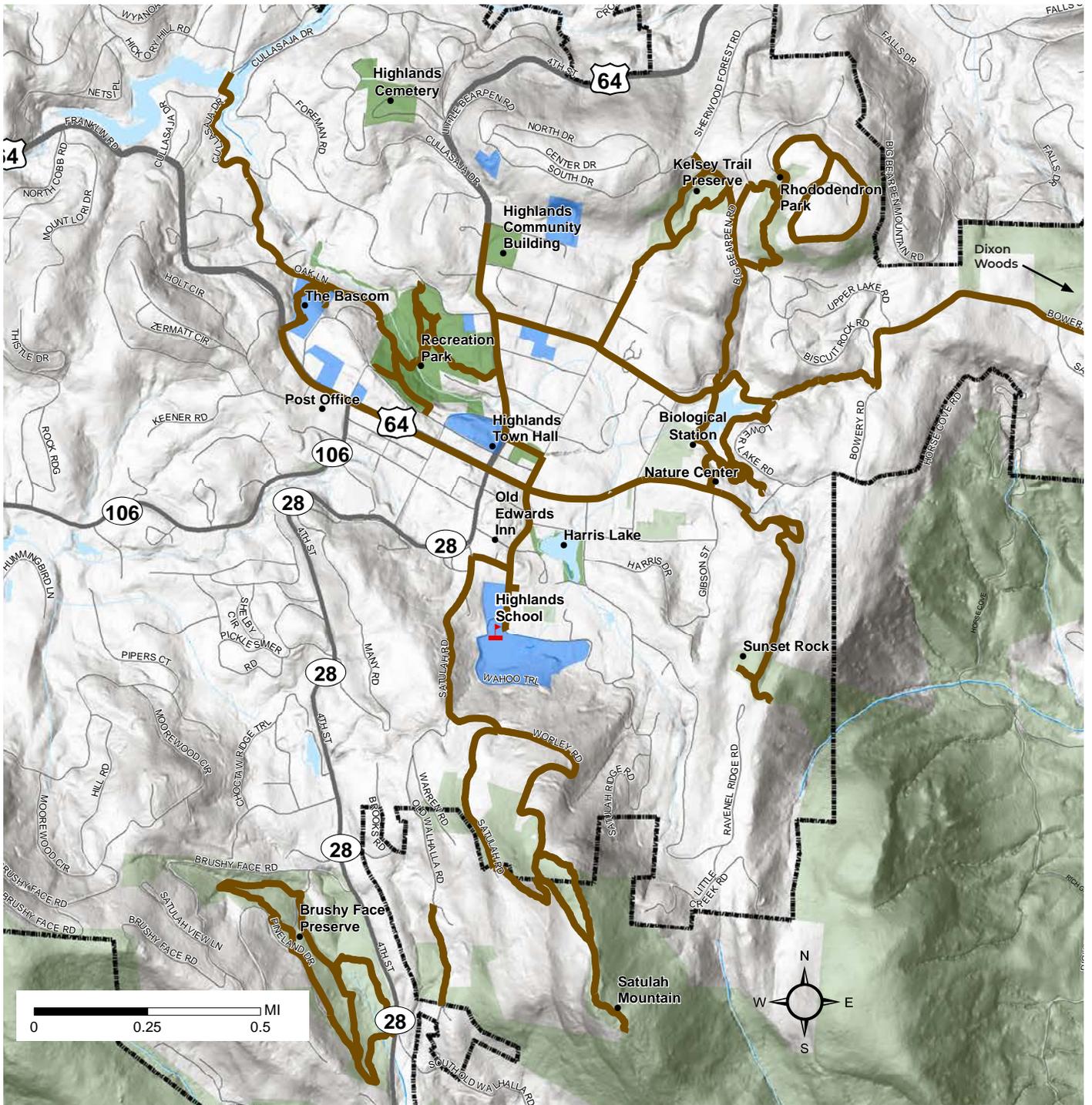
THE RECREATION PARK IS LOCATED ON A 30 ACRE PROPERTY JUST NORTH OF MAIN STREET. IT INCLUDES A GYM, CIVIC CENTER, POOL, SKATEPARK, PLAYGROUND, AND DOG PARK.

#### OTHER RECREATIONAL FACILITIES

- COMMUNITY BUILDING AND BASEBALL FIELD
- HARRIS LAKE PARK
- HIGHLANDS GREENWAY
- ZACHARY PARK (COUNTY-OWNED AND JOINTLY MAINTAINED)



# PARKS AND TRAILS MAP



## Legend

- Trails
- Lakes
- Civic
- Parks and Open Space
- Municipal Boundary
- Managed Areas
- Streams

# HISTORIC RESOURCES

## Historic Districts

The Highlands has three National Register Historic Districts within its municipal limits: the Highlands North Historic District, the Playmore-Bowery Road Historic District, and the Satulah Mountain Historic District. These districts recognize remnants of Highlands' history as a mountain outpost and as an early vacation and recreation destination. Land use policies can ensure that new development within and near historic districts helps to preserve the character of town.

Visitors who wish to take in Highlands' historic offerings can visit the Highlands Historical Society or walk along the Highlands Heritage Walking Trail, which features sites and buildings near Downtown.

### Satulah Mountain Historic District

The Satulah Mountain Historic District is an well-preserved neighborhood of resort houses built between 1890 and 1940, set within the rich natural environment of the area surrounding Satulah Mountain. The District contains 46 contributing resources including the Henry M. Bascom House, The Rankin House, and the Calhoun House.

### Other Districts

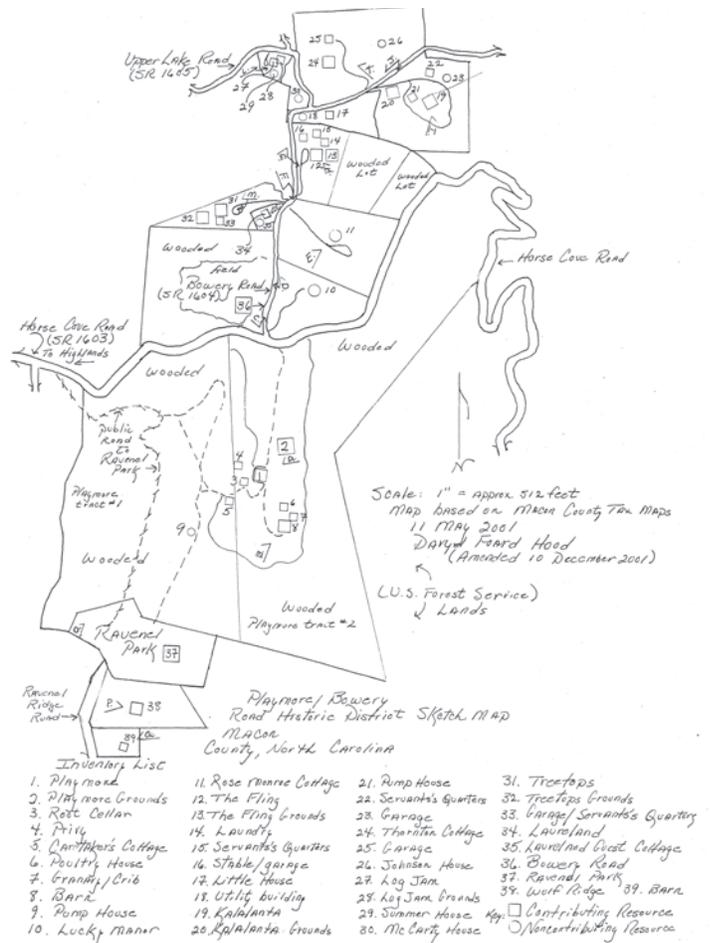
There are other areas in Town that are either on the study list to become a National Register Historic District or have been deemed eligible for the list: US 64 Highway, Mirror Lake Historic District, and the Webbmont Historic District.

## Historic Structures

There are over 49 structures on the National Register List or located in a National Register Historic District in Highlands. These structures are located inside and outside the three official Historic Districts. Notable structures include the Highlands Inn (1880), the Edwards Hotel (constructed in 1880, with additions in 1930), the Elizabeth Wright Prince House (1877, with additions in 1935), and the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation (1896).

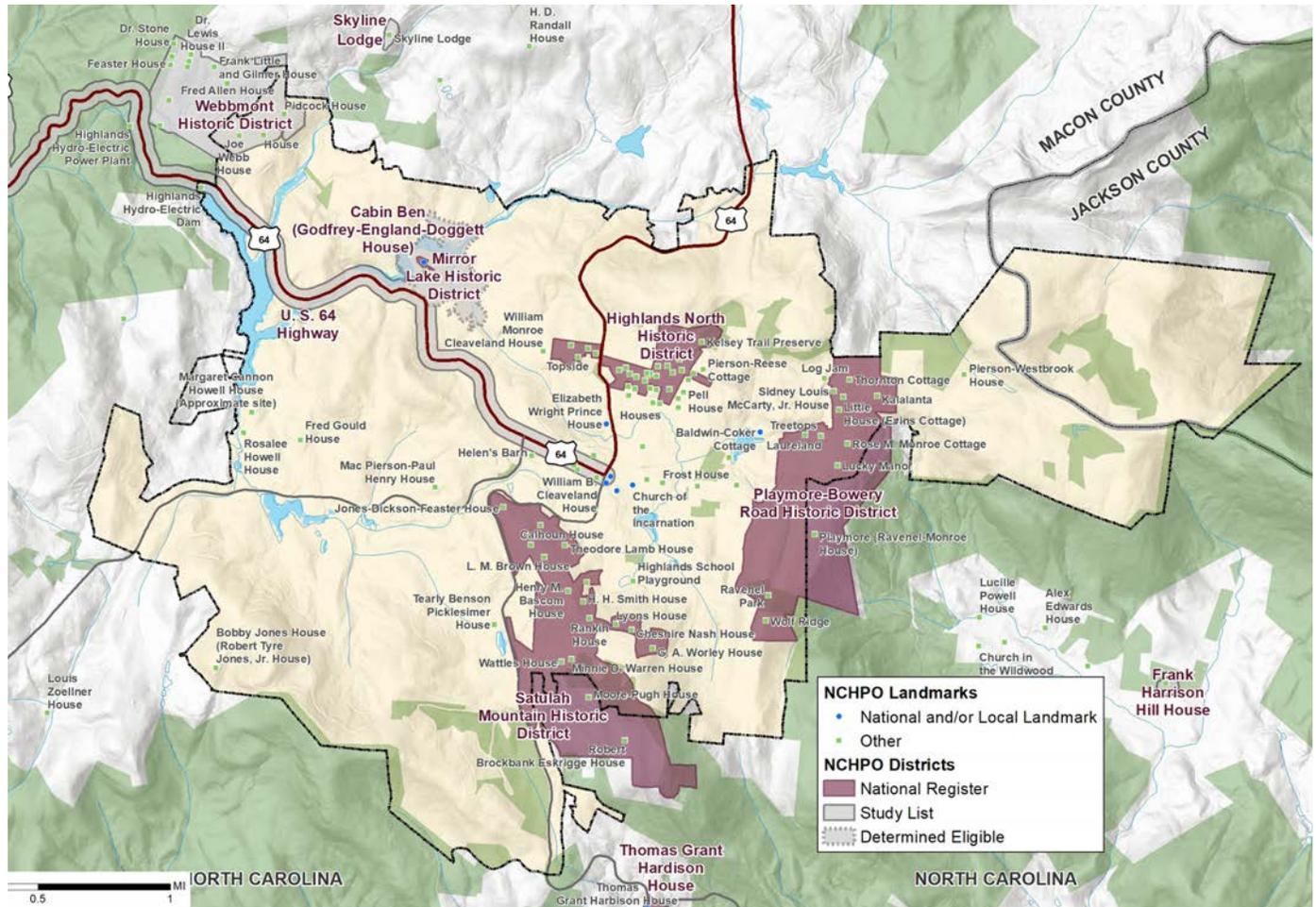


Elizabeth Wright Prince House, Fourth Street



Map of the Playmore-Bowery Road Historic District

## HISTORIC RESOURCES



Highlands has three designated historic districts: the Highlands North Historic District, the Playmore-Bowery Road Historic District and the Satulah Mountain Historic District

*There are significant historic structures located outside of the defined National Register Historic Districts and other areas in and near Town that are being studied for potential listing including the Mirror Lake neighborhood, the US 64 corridor to and through the Cullusaja River Gorge and the Webbmont area just west of Town.*

## DOWNTOWN & ECONOMY

### Economy

Highlands' economy is unique, and its health is nearly inextricable from the prosperity of its downtown. Most businesses in Town are small and depend on the Town's status as a thriving tourist destination. Highlands is also the commercial hub of the Plateau, drawing customers from a wide area. There are an estimated 300 different businesses within the project study area (2020, NAICS).

#### Downtown

Downtown Highlands is the heart of activity on the Plateau. Spanning the blocks of the original Kelsey Plan, it resembles a quintessential mountain town that draws in locals and tourists alike. Its small-town feel is enhanced by a mix of businesses, alpine architecture, active facades and pedestrian friendly environment. It is also the commercial heart of Highlands. The business survey results on page 41 and in the Appendix provide more insight on the relationship between the downtown environment and the business community.

#### Employment

A common sentiment during stakeholder engagement was that Highlands' workers cannot afford to live in the town. Data shows that about 90% of employees in Highlands commute to work. Most of those who commute come from more than 10 miles away, from more affordable areas such as Franklin. The business operator survey found that over half of those who run businesses are concerned about availability of housing for their employees.

#### Economic Shifts

Many of the businesses in Town primarily serve and are dependent on tourism. This also means most of their business occurs between May and October, with the winter season presenting a challenge. However, local stakeholders indicated that tourist season is becoming longer over time.

# 93.5%

or **\$309,174,350**, of the value of commercially-zoned properties in Highlands is located downtown.

Source: Macon County Tax Data 2018

A change in the duration of tourist season is not the only transition Highlands' economy is experiencing. Business owner feedback indicated that customer demographics are changing. Business owners and operators are seeing younger customers, including families, more often.

A big driver of this shift is the Highlands' Chamber of Commerce and its efforts to promote Highlands' tourism in the off-season through promotion and events. These events draw out-of-town visitors to downtown and include:

- » Highlands Food and Wine Festival
- » Highlands Motoring Festival
- » Bear Shadow Music Festival
- » Meander in May Downtown
- » Holiday events in December
- » Weekly live music events



Main Street during the summer tourist season

Data demonstrates that Highlands' economy is becoming increasingly tourism-focused. The project team examined data that showed the number of employees per industry sector for jobs within the Town from 2010 and 2018. Figures showed :

**83% growth** in hospitality-related jobs (arts, entertainment, accommodation, and food ) (40% of total jobs)

**43% growth** in retail jobs (24% of total jobs)

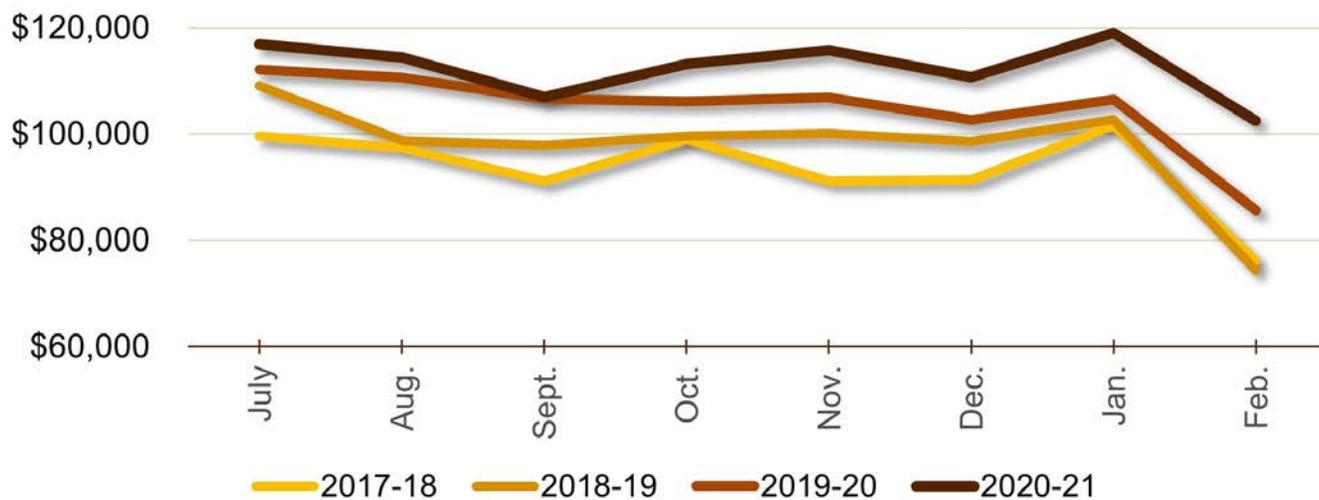
Source: US Census



Events like the Highlands Motoring Festival help people discover the Town every year.

Photo source: Plateau Daily News

### Sales Tax by Month 2017-2021



The graph above show how 2020 was a record year for visitation and sales tax revenue despite and perhaps because of the coronavirus pandemic.

## TRANSPORTATION

### Roadways

Many of Highlands' roads are in good condition, and the Town is appropriately connected via US-64, SR-106, and SR-28 whose crossings form the heart of Highlands. US-64 is a scenic highway that serves as a significant facility for tourist traffic but is also used extensively by trucks. A review of NCDOT's average daily traffic along these corridors indicated that traffic volumes have not increased over the past several years, though the Town has some congestion during peak rush hours. This congestion is attributed to the interface between motorists, truck traffic, pedestrians, and those attempting to park or leave their parking space. It is not attributed to high traffic volumes.

### Downtown

Highlands' downtown still shows the original grid from the Kelsey Plan, making the area well suited for walking. Stakeholder conversations and responses from community members indicated a strong desire to be able to walk to downtown from residences. Sidewalks exist along many of the primary Town streets. Main Street has wide sidewalks constructed of a combination of brick pavers and traditional concrete with amenities like shade trees, benches, and other landscaping elements. However, sidewalks on other streets are often narrow by current construction standards and many do not meet current ADA standards (frequently due to steep grades). A complete pedestrian network is necessary to provide connections for those who choose to leave their automobiles at home. This includes travelers for work, school, shopping, and recreational trips.

### Parking

Parking in downtown was a common theme amongst stakeholder and community feedback. With the influx of tourists in peak seasons, parking along Main Street in Highlands is in demand, and motorists have expressed having difficulty finding parking spaces near their destinations. In addition, with numerous pedestrians crossing town streets and intersections, the conflicts between motorists and pedestrians creates some safety and operational concerns.

On-street parking is available with very few established restrictions to encourage turnover and maximize utilization. While employees are technically restricted from parking on Main Street, this practice does not consistently work due to enforcement challenges. There are currently no parking meters installed to regulate on-street parking, though this strategy has been previously considered and was mentioned during the public input period for this Plan.

Highlands' on-street parking on Main Street between Third Street and Fifth Street is often full or near capacity (with peak hours between 1pm and 2pm), leading to a perception that there are not enough parking spaces. While the most convenient and accessible parking spaces along Main Street were typically full during the peak times, spaces were available along Oak Street, Spring Street, and Church Street, only a short walk from Main Street. The Parking and Circulation Study (from 2009) indicated that almost a third of total parking spaces were found to be unoccupied during the peak 1 to 2pm period.

There are **962** free parking spaces within the downtown core.





The intersection of Fourth and Main Streets is the busiest intersection in Town but lacks sufficient space for pedestrians to wait on corners. It could benefit from additional safety upgrades.

Sidewalks in Highlands are prevalent in the downtown core and currently provide a suitable level of accessibility and connectivity. However, there are many roads that would benefit from new sidewalk construction or widening of existing sidewalk. Narrow roads are common due to the topography of Highlands, and it is understandable to only have sidewalks on one side, especially outside of the major corridors and downtown area.

From Third Street to Fifth Street, Main Street is a two-lane roadway with angled parking along both sides and a center angled parking area which is accessible in both the eastbound and westbound directions. Often motorists, instead of backing out of the center parking area, pull through and make a U-turn to travel in the opposite direction. This type of movement causes confusion,

congestion, and safety concerns. However, it is clear from discussions with various stakeholders that this parking is valuable and changes to Main Street's configuration would be met with resistance.

### Recent Improvements

No major NCDOT roadway projects are slated for the near term to change alignments, widen segments, manage access, or add new signals at intersections. Recent improvements along Main Street (US-64) in Highlands include repaving and restriping all parking areas (including updates to handicapped parking pavement markings) and incorporating changes to pedestrian crossing infrastructure.

### Transit

Regular bus service is not available in Highlands, and passenger rail service is not used in Western North Carolina. While NCDOT studies have indicated a long-term goal of linking major municipalities along an east-west rail corridor, this is not relevant to transportation in the Highlands area. Macon County Transit has been operating on-demand bus service for two decades, with a mission to "provide transportation services in an efficient, coordinated, cost effective manner that is responsive to the current needs of the residents of Macon County." There has been a focus on the Town of Franklin, with the agency located there and most trips scheduled in that area. If Highlands seeks growth in transit service, it will require a concerted effort to advocate for those needs and possibly a commitment to supporting the budget of Macon County Transit.

## EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE & SERVICES

### Sanitation

Garbage is picked up twice a week in residential areas in Highlands, and commercial trash is picked up seven days a week. All garbage must be placed in heavy plastic or metal containers with handles and tight-fitting lids no larger than 100 gallons in capacity. Voluntary recycling is available at the Macon County convenience centers outside the town limits.

New bear-proof garbage cans have been installed throughout the downtown area in an effort to be a “BearWise Community.” The new cans are bolted to the ground and have smaller openings to discourage bears digging through the can. These small openings also discourage residential and commercial trash from being disposed in them.

As the Town struggles to find the right balance to the sanitation department budget, there will arise a need to either raise rates or cut services. The Town could consider going out of the trash collection business altogether, but public input indicates general resistance to this option due to a perceived change in overall level of service.

### Electricity and Internet

Depending on location, electricity is provided through the Town of Highlands, Haywood Electric Co-Op in Waynesville, or Duke Power in Franklin. The Highlands Electric Utility serves over 3,000 accounts, operating a municipal electric utility that owns more than 2,600 utility poles and 110 miles of line, most of which is aerial based. Interestingly, some of the customers reside in the areas of north Georgia.

Reliable electric provision and high-speed fiber optic Internet connectivity will benefit residents by providing telecommuting options and the capacity to operate businesses remotely. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, this capability is



*Bear Resistant Toters required by August 1st, 2020. Toters can be purchased locally at Reeves Ace Hardware, at Home Depot and online.*

*For more information, please feel free to call Town Hall at (828)526-2118 or look at the ordinance online at: <https://highlandsc.org/notices/803-new-sanitation-rules-and-regulations/file>*



Bear-proof trash can campaign

essential and can mean the difference between success and failure for many small businesses, freelance workers, and others. It also has made clear that the digital divide is widening the disparity of students, as those with reliable Internet at home are more able to attend remote classes and complete assignments, while some struggled to make it through the year.

Depending on location, Highlands residents may choose from a total of 4 broadband providers; Frontier, Vyve (formerly Northland Cable), Highlands Cable, or Hotwire (assuming the town signs the contract with Hotwire in August) which utilizes Highlands own dark fiber network.

The Town initiated the project in 2015, after the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) struck down a state law that prevented local governments from building broadband networks. However, the FCC ruling was later overturned by a federal court, and the Town now partners with, Hotwire Communications, a private firm to lease and operate its network. The dark fiber network is nearing completion (mostly deployed via aerial fiber using the town's electric infrastructure) and will link every business and home in the Town to a dedicated fiber optic connection with spare fiber in all likely growth areas. Once completed, the fiber network will improve local broadband access as well as enable smart city applications, like enhanced utility systems monitoring. With better Internet connectivity, more Highlands residents will

be able to work from home successfully, attend remote school (including college classes), and start businesses that rely on online platforms. Some seasonal residents might stay for extended periods of time if they consider Highlands to be more of a home than a vacation destination.

### Water, Sewer, and Stormwater

Inside the town limits, water is provided to most households and sewer is provided to 35-50% of households. Outside of town limits, private wells and septic systems are common, and several of the private clubs have their own community water and/or sewer system. The Town of Highlands water supply is the Lake Sequoyah reservoir. In the 1920s when the Town's water distribution system was born, the Town got its water from Houston Lake on Buck Creek Road. At that time, the Town received a permit from the United States Forest Service (USFS) to build a small reservoir at the headwaters of Big Creek to provide the Town's public water system. The water was chlorinated and traveled by gravity from Houston Lake to the water tank on Little Bear Pen and was pumping 65 gallons per minute. By 1965 Highlands was outgrowing the flow from that lake and EPA rules had changed. People could no longer drink surface water that had only been chlorinated; it had to be filtered, too. The Town built the current water treatment plant on Lake Sequoyah/Big Creek on Hickory Hill Road at the lower end of the Highlands watershed (1,500 gallons of water per minute) and applied for a permit to install an intake valve on the north side of the US-64 bridge, a much bigger reservoir.

The USFS took out the dam at Houston Lake and restored the creek, which feeds Lake Sequoyah. In the mid-1990s, projecting new demand, the Town applied to have Lake Sequoyah classified as a Class I Public Water Supply which meant, if necessary, the Town could draw from the main body of the lake. To address silt accumulation concerns, the Town installed an intake valve at the Lake Sequoyah Dam, which was property already owned by the Town. Now the Town has three options: draw from the creek at the water

plant, draw from the first intake in Lake Sequoyah near the bridge, draw from the intake valve at the dam, or a combination as needed. This allows plant operators to adjust according to water and turbidity levels.

Since 1993, the Town of Highlands' Water Supply Watershed Protection (WSWP) ordinance has included a stringent sediment control plan to keep silt and other pollutants from contaminating Lake Sequoyah and prevent runoff degrading water quality. The Town requires low-density development to limit impacts to water quality. Valid concerns exist regarding stormwater runoff draining into Lake Sequoyah, which serves as a drinking water source. The surface drinking water sources in this area are particularly important because the well water in the area contains naturally high concentrations of sulfur and metals and is not considered potable. Second, the Highlands Plateau is home to a unique ecosystem, with a wide variety of rare and endangered plants. The steep slopes of the surrounding land cause erosion from developing lots, threatening these species.

The Town's water system includes a Water Treatment Plant that can produce up to 2 million gallons per day (MGD), 9 ground storage tanks and 8 booster pump stations. A Water System Asset Management Plan was completed in 2019. Findings include:

- Water use is projected to increase significantly in the next 20 years.
- 30% of water distribution pipes and a number of hydrants, valves meters and storage tanks are in poor condition.
- There are \$35 million in capital needs over the next 20 years.

In 2007 a Stormwater Master Plan was created to identify priority improvements to stormwater conveyance and treatment in the Town of Highlands. The plan included a description of capital projects targeted at addressing inadequate stormwater facilities through replacements and the addition of new stormwater infrastructure that would improve water quality in local creeks and Lake Sequoyah.





# 3 PROCESS & VISION

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How does the Highlands Vision and Goals for the next 20 years come together? Community conversations over the course of the yearlong planning process shape and inform the guiding concepts for the future.

This Chapter documents the public engagement process and demonstrates how public feedback has directly led to the vision, goals, and recommendations.

## PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

A plan of this magnitude would not be possible or credible without significant public engagement. Throughout the yearlong planning process, residents and stakeholders were engaged at every step. The team prioritized engaging with vulnerable populations and ensured that the demographics of participants accurately reflected the demographics of Highlands.

### Steering Committee

The Town Board appointed a 10-person Steering Committee of residents, business owners, and members of appointed boards. The Steering Committee met five times throughout the project to provide their valuable perspective on the community's strengths and needs and steer the direction and content of the plan.

### Stakeholder Interviews

A series of hour-long interviews were conducted with stakeholder groups in Phase One of the project. These stakeholder groups consisted of 5 to 10 people drawn from across the Highlands community. Property and business owners, real estate professionals, nonprofit and community group members, education and healthcare representatives, elected officials and Town staff were represented. The lively conversations focused on what people valued about Highlands, their goals for the Town, and what priority issues should be addressed with this Plan. The meetings provided insight into the unique challenges and opportunities facing the Town and the broader plateau.

The public engagement process received feedback from the community through

**1,662** Project Website Visits

**1,015** Survey Responses

**62** Business Survey Responses

**2** In-person Public Meetings

**2** Online Meetings

**1** Walking Tour

**5** Steering Committee Meetings

**6** Stakeholder Meetings



The project website ([www.highlandscommunityplan.com/](http://www.highlandscommunityplan.com/)) included information on the project and was regularly updated throughout the process.

## Visioning Workshops

In October 2020, Town staff and consultants conducted a series of public meetings to gather input on Town issues and the community's vision for the plan. Meetings were held October 21 to 23 at the Highlands Community Building and included the following:

- » Traditional public meeting
- » Downtown walking tour
- » Stakeholder interviews
- » Steering Committee meeting

Meetings were conducted using CDC recommended social distancing protocols to limit potential spread of the COVID-19.

The in-person visioning workshop was followed by a virtual public meeting in November 2020 for those who preferred a remote format. This online meeting reached over 50 full- and part-time residents who were able to discuss Town issues directly with project staff and each other, replicating the experience of a traditional public meeting.

## Draft Plan Meetings

In June and July of 2021, two public meetings, one in person and one virtual, were held to gather feedback on the draft plan. Both meetings included a presentation that provided an overview of the plan, the process, and the recommendations, before opening up for discussion and questions with

the attendees. Attendees were provided with options for making comments on the plan, either on a written comment card or through an online comment form. Feedback received was incorporated into the final Plan.

## Surveys

The project team created two surveys to gather data about the community's vision, concerns, and goals for Highlands. This included a broad 19-question survey that asked respondents about their vision and goals for the Town. The project team also conducted a business owner-focused survey to learn about the unique needs of Highlands' businesses. The survey data was used to inform subsequent parts of the plan so that it accurately represents priorities from different segments of the community.

## COVID-19

The project's schedule meant that it was directly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to stick to the project schedule and continue learning from the public while maintaining social distance, staff had to find creative solutions for the remaining engagement. Accommodations included extending survey closing dates, virtual Steering Committee Meetings, and virtual Public Meetings that were posted online afterward. Engagement numbers were either similar to or above the number of attendees of a typical in-person meeting.



The project team held meetings during October and November of 2020 to gather feedback for the Community Plan.

# COMMUNITY SURVEY

As part of the analysis and visioning process, the team conducted a survey so that the community could communicate their concerns, preferences, and aspirations for Highlands' future. The survey opened in conjunction with the public meeting in October 2020 and ran through January 2021. It was hosted online and available in English

and Spanish, with paper copies available. In total, 1,015 people took the survey. Their responses covered topics such as values, concerns, downtown development, housing, land use, and demographics. The survey format included multiple choice, visual preference, and open ended questions. Select questions have been summarized below. For the full survey results, see the Appendix.

## WHAT ARE YOUR BIGGEST CONCERNS FOR THE FUTURE OF HIGHLANDS?

- Environmental Preservation
- Maintaining a Vibrant Downtown
- Expanding and/or upgrading infrastructure
- Historic Preservation and Cultural Resources
- Controlling short-term rentals

## WHICH DOWNTOWN IMPROVEMENT IS MOST APPEALING TO YOU?

- Improved/additional open spaces and parks
- New shops, businesses, and restaurants
- Parking
- Activities and special events
- Improvements to sidewalks and crossings

## IF HOUSING WERE DEVELOPED IN AREAS CLOSEST TO DOWNTOWN, WHAT TYPES OF HOMES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE?



## BUSINESS SURVEY

Because downtown and the larger business community is so integral to life in Highlands, the team conducted a separate survey for business owners and operators. The goal of this survey was to identify how the Plan and the Town can better support the Highlands business community. It asked more in-depth questions about the relationship between Highlands' character and built environment and their businesses.

The Chamber of Commerce helped distribute the survey and was a key partner in advertising it. The survey ran from January to April 2021 and received 62 responses. These responses represented a total of 1,203 employees. Full responses can be found in the Appendix.

## RESULTS AT A GLANCE

- 78%** Agree that the look and feel of Downtown helps businesses
- 61%** Agree that more hotels or rentals Downtown would help their businesses
- 51%** Agree that more residential housing Downtown would help their business
- 0%** Agree that housing for employees is readily available
- 25%** Have issues with Downtown waste receptacles
- 59%** Feel increased wayfinding signage would help their business

WHAT IMPROVEMENT DOWNTOWN OR ELSEWHERE IN HIGHLANDS COULD MOST BOOST YOUR BUSINESS?



WITH YOUR BUSINESS IN MIND, PLEASE RANK THE COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENTS YOU WOULD MOST LIKE TO SEE IN DOWNTOWN HIGHLANDS:

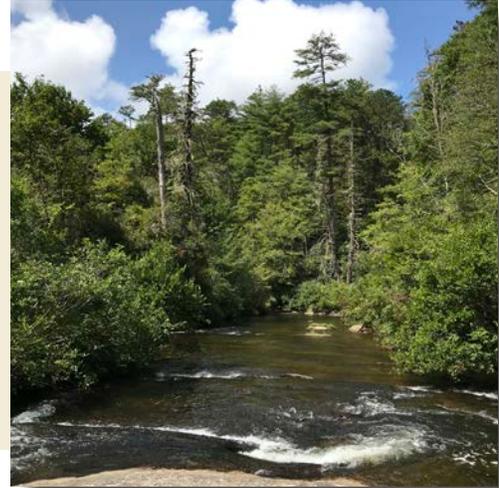


## EMERGING ISSUES

Through technical analysis, background research, and community engagement, a common set of issues emerged. Residents and tourists love the Town because of its rich natural environment, welcoming downtown, culture, and community feel. However, rising popularity threatens the most-loved qualities that attract people to the community. The issues described here are often interrelated, and solutions accordingly must be innovative and sensitive. The Vision, Goals, and Policies described in the following pages can help address these issues over the coming years.

### Environmental Preservation & Parks

Much of the land around Highlands is protected; however, significant natural resources exist within and surrounding the Town. Care should be taken to ensure development design that protects water quality, wildlife habitat, and significant viewsheds. Engagement indicated that the park facilities in town, although exemplary for a town of Highlands' size, do not fully meet the needs of all demographics.



### Downtown Parking

The Town has over 900 parking spaces for downtown visitors, but the downtown area still experiences some shortages during special events. Competition for spaces in the most desirable blocks of downtown is high and traffic accumulates when people drive slowly to find a spot, or have to back out into traffic to exit a space.

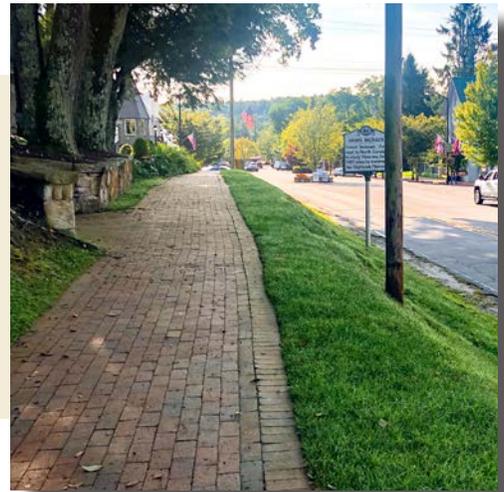
### Downtown Development

The Town will have to balance preservation of structures and local character with demand for more shops, offices, and residential uses. As developable parcels are a dwindling resource, the Town will have to decide if and how it will accommodate additional commercial and residential development to meet demands.



### Sidewalks and Pedestrian Environment

While downtown has good sidewalk connectivity, the condition and accessibility of some sidewalks require updates, and there are some missing links. Sidewalks should extend from the business district to nearby neighborhoods to increase safety for pedestrians and reduce demand for parking.



### Housing

Highlands has a large portion of second homes that are used seasonally or rented out, which has reduced housing that is available to full-time residents. As demand for housing rises, so have the home prices throughout town, pricing out groups like young families, business owners, and workers.

### Short-term Rentals

Housing demand issues are magnified by short-term rentals. Using housing for vacation rentals takes away housing stock that is available for residents, and is particularly an issue downtown, where the few existing apartments are increasingly being turned into rentals.



### Utilities and Infrastructure

Infrastructure and critical services including water and sewer, electricity, and solid waste need to keep pace with a growing year-round and seasonal population. Issues surrounding waste disposal and receptacles were discussed throughout the public involvement, from inadequately sized downtown bins and lack of recycling options to issues with trash at short-term rentals.

## VISION



“Highlands is a **vibrant and scenic mountain community** founded on the **beauty of the plateau’s natural environment**, the uniqueness of its **village character**, and the richness of the area’s **culture and history.**”

## GOALS

1

## TOWN CHARACTER

Maintain and enhance the town center's village character that is surrounded by mostly low-density housing that blends with the natural environment.

## ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION

Preserve and enhance the natural environment and the scenic beauty of Highlands.

2

3

## CULTURE AND HISTORY

Preserve and promote the rich cultural and historic resources of Highlands.

## PEDESTRIAN FOCUS

Create a downtown and commercial areas that emphasize pedestrian comfort and safety.

4

5

## PARTNERSHIPS

Cultivate ongoing community partnerships with area organizations and governments to plan for and protect the plateau.

## LOCAL ECONOMY

Support and sustain the local economy, including downtown businesses, tourism, the arts, and outdoor recreation.

6



Highlands Wine Shoppe



# 4 LAND USE

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The Land Use chapter of this plan includes a Future Land Use Map and defined character areas. These sections are meant to guide future growth and development in the Town of Highlands.

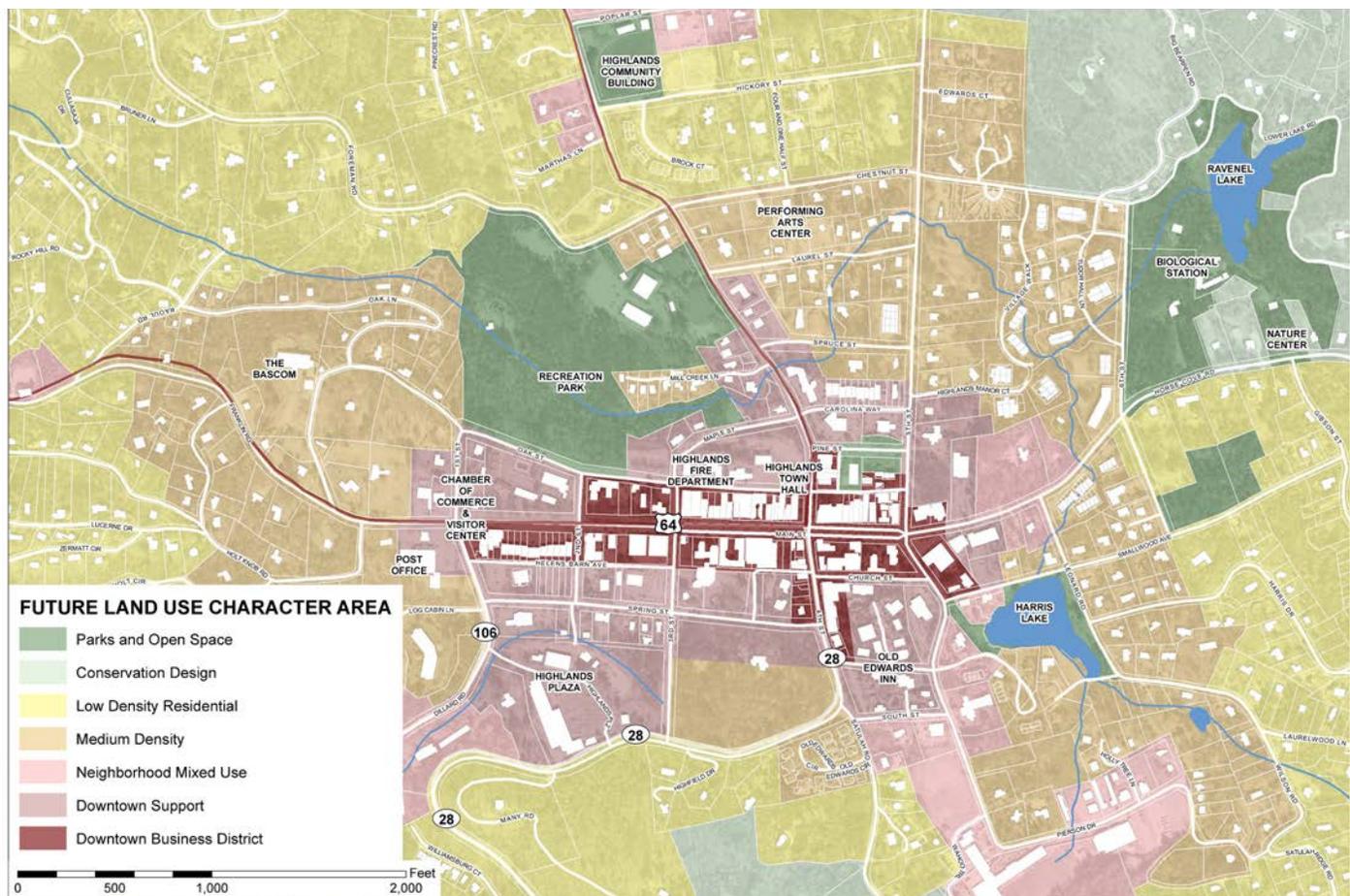
## FUTURE LAND USE MAP OVERVIEW AND HIGHLIGHTS

The Future Land Use Map and associated character areas are meant to guide land use and infrastructure decisions within Highlands' corporate limits and the greater project study area.

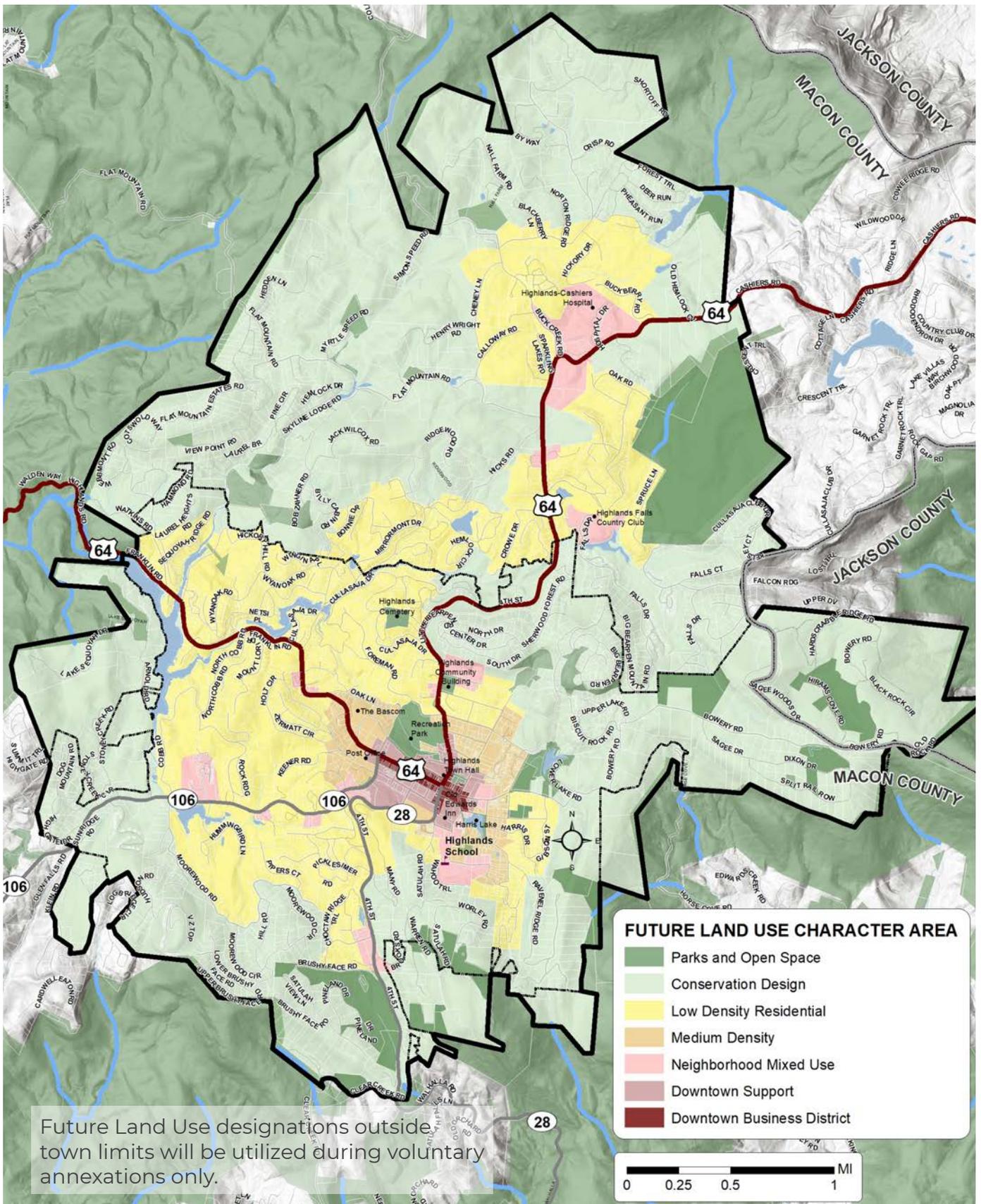
The future land use map illustrates the desired land use pattern in the Town of Highlands. It has been designed to help realize the Plan's Vision and Goals and includes:

- » Two downtown character areas that allow for different uses, character and densities
- » An area for small mixed use nodes that transition away from downtown to residential areas called Neighborhood Mixed Use
- » Small mixed-use nodes along major corridors
- » Three residential areas of varying densities
- » Areas for new housing types near downtown
- » Sensitive areas where lower density development should be integrated with the landscape to reduce impacts on natural resources

### 1: DOWNTOWN FUTURE LAND USE MAP



## 2: FUTURE LAND USE MAP



## FUTURE LAND USE CHARACTER AREAS

The Future Land Use Map provides a generalized guide for land use decisions in Highlands. The character areas on the map are defined below and describe intended uses, density, scale, and design features of new development. These descriptions and the associated map should be utilized to guide regulations, private investment, infrastructure decisions, and rezoning decisions.

### DOWNTOWN BUSINESS DISTRICT



The Downtown Business District covers the heart of downtown and fosters and reinforces the quintessential mountain village character of downtown Highlands. It supports a mix of uses including commercial, office, and residential. Ground floor uses are primarily active retail and services with offices and apartments found on upper stories. Hotel uses are limited to what already exists. Design in the Downtown Business District focuses on creating an attractive, pedestrian-friendly environment. Building height and bulk are limited and parking requirements are significantly reduced for new development. The streetscape caters to pedestrians with generous sidewalks and plantings where feasible, on-street parking, and safe street crossings.

### DOWNTOWN SUPPORT



The Downtown Support character area provides for mixed-use development adjacent to the Downtown Business District, serving as a transition from the heart of downtown to surrounding neighborhoods. Like the Downtown Business District, Downtown Support areas cater to a mix of uses including commercial uses, hotels, office, retail, and residential. Building footprints may be slightly larger and vertical mixed-use development is encouraged. This district also allows for a wider variety of residential housing, including apartments, townhomes, and cottage courts. The form of the Downtown Support area is like the Downtown Business District in that it emphasizes careful architectural form and a safe pedestrian environment, but has more requirements for on-site parking.

### NEIGHBORHOOD MIXED-USE



The Neighborhood Mixed-Use area provides a commercial area that helps transition to and works in harmony with residential areas. These areas can be found as a transition from Downtown and/or highway commercial areas to neighborhoods. They allow low-intensity commercial uses, with some larger institutional, civic, and recreation buildings. They allow a mix of housing types including townhomes and pocket neighborhoods in addition to single family residential at medium densities. It has a well-connected street network, open spaces, and pedestrian facilities. Transitions to low-density neighborhoods are typically accomplished through design techniques such as preservation or planting of vegetated buffers, location of open space, utilizing topography, etc.

## MEDIUM DENSITY RESIDENTIAL



The medium density residential area is comprised predominantly of neighborhoods within walking distance to downtown. Dwelling units are mostly single-family on medium-sized lots with some other small-format housing types incorporated, provided their design and density is compatible with the context. Because these areas are intended to be within walking distance to Downtown, pedestrian facilities should be provided.

## LOW DENSITY RESIDENTIAL



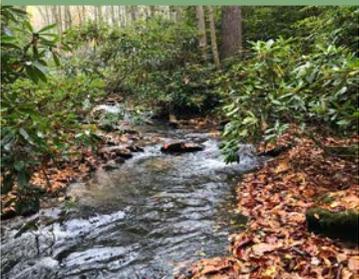
The Low Density Residential district consists of low-density single-family homes and neighborhoods. The areas are more mountainous in character and generally have a density of 1 to 2 dwelling units per acre. Many of these areas are located within the water supply watershed for Lake Sequoyah and have built-upon area (impervious surface) limits as well as minimum lot sizes or density restrictions. This area also includes portions of designated historic districts where low-density single-family development is encouraged to maintain the character of the district.

## CONSERVATION DESIGN



Conservation design areas are comprised of very low-density residential uses near sensitive natural and/or historic resources. These areas should be limited to very-low-density developments and feature context-sensitive design. Development should be clustered away from sensitive natural resources including streams, riparian areas, Natural Heritage Natural Areas, steep slopes and mountain ridges. These areas may not have public sewer access, in which case lots should be larger. Conservation subdivisions, which feature smaller lots and more open space (>40%), are encouraged if new development is connected to sewer.

## PARKS AND OPEN SPACE



The Parks and Open Space designation is intended for environmentally sensitive lands (e.g., floodplains and steep slopes), or preserved areas with the potential for some recreational use. In most instances, this land is to be preserved in its natural state unless minimally developed for a recreational use.

WILL HENRY  
STEVENS BRIDGE

NO  
EXIT



A vertical photograph on the left side of the page shows a weathered wooden building. A white sign with black text that reads "NO EXIT" is mounted on the door. The building is surrounded by green trees and foliage.

# 5 RECOMMENDATIONS

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This Chapter offers policy recommendations and strategies related to land use and housing, downtown and tourism, recreation and natural resources, transportation, and public services and infrastructure.

The policy recommendations provide overarching guidance on key topics. Individual strategies provide more specific direction for different areas of Town, revisions to regulations, programs, and projects.

Recommendations are divided into five sections, and each section includes a short list of implementation steps meant to be addressed by ongoing, short-term or medium-term action items.

## LAND USE & HOUSING

### Overview

Land use and housing recommendations in this Section seek to continue the historical stewardship of the built and natural environments that has contributed to the unique character of Highlands. These recommendations help to protect natural resources, encourage sustainability without stagnation, enhance downtown, and address housing issues.

### Primary Goals Addressed by Land Use and Housing Recommendations

#### **GOAL #1 - Town Character:**

Maintain and enhance the town center's village character that is surrounded by mostly low-density housing that blends with the natural environment.

#### **GOAL #2 - Preservation of the Environment:**

Preserve and enhance the natural environment and the scenic beauty of Highlands.

#### **GOAL #5 - Partnerships:**

Strengthen partnerships to plan for and protect the plateau.

### **Policy LU 1: Regularly evaluate and update the Community Plan and Unified Development Ordinance (UDO).**

**LU 1.1:** Regularly evaluate the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO), zoning districts, and map. Consider adjustments to support implementation of the Highlands Community Plan.

**LU 1.2:** Evaluate rezoning requests based on adherence to the Future Land Use Map, character area descriptions and policies included in the Highlands Community Plan.

**LU 1.3:** Amend the Future Land Use Map as needed based on approved rezonings.

**LU 1.4:** Update the Community Plan every 5 years or as infrastructure changes or market conditions necessitate.

### **Policy LU 2: Reinforce the existing town character through the design of new development and land use decisions.**

**LU 2.1:** Encourage a development pattern that follows the Future Land Use Map.

- » Focus commercial land uses, mixed-use development and residential options in the Downtown Business District and the Downtown Support area.
- » Encourage context-sensitive infill and redevelopment of underutilized commercial areas.
- » Encourage low-intensity non-residential uses, mixed-use development and residential land uses in Neighborhood Mixed-Use areas.
- » Limit the scale and density of new development in Low Density Residential and Conservation Design areas identified on the Future Land Use Map.

**LU 2.2: Maintain policies and standards that encourage construction of new buildings and developments that are consistent with the scale of existing development and character of Highlands.**

- » Continue to maintain building size limits that ensure that new development fits into the existing built and natural environment.
  - Limit buildings to 3 stories with a height limit of 35' at the front entrance.
    - » *Consider some flexibility for changes in grade, attics and/or basements and/or unique conditions such as where a new building will incorporate a publicly accessible parking deck*
  - Encourage small footprint buildings and articulation in building facades.
  - Continue to specify building material requirements and encourage architectural detail in new

commercial, mixed-use and multi-family development.

- » Maintain and revise built-upon area and/or impervious surface maximums in residential zoning districts to protect water quality and neighborhood character.
- » Encourage the use of adequate buffers and setbacks to reduce visual and noise impacts on existing development.
  - Exceptions to this include areas in and near downtown where required buffers should be reduced or eliminated between compatible uses to reinforce the existing character.
- » Encourage the use of native landscaping in new development, on town-owned land and in public projects.



### BUILDING SIZE

The size of buildings in downtown Highlands has been managed to create a pedestrian scale Main Street. The design of buildings also has been regulated to encourage quality development that matches the character of existing structures. Existing regulations limit the floor-to-area ratio of new buildings in the B-1 zoning district to 1.4. There is an allowance of 0.35 for finished attic space. Building maximum is set to 3 floors (exclusive of basement).

Building size in the B-4 zoning district is also regulated to the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO). There are watershed regulations that limit impervious surface in B-2 and B-3 zoning districts, however a policy or standards specifying a maximum building size is suggested.

### **LU 2.3: Preserve the historic character of downtown and designated National Register Historic Districts and increase awareness of historic sites.**

- » Encourage the preservation of historic buildings in commercial and residential districts.
  - Consider methods of encouraging the preservation of facades and exteriors of signature buildings downtown, including the Highlands Inn and the Old Edwards Inn.
  - Consider additional development regulations to protect the character of historic neighborhoods.

### **LU 2.4: Ensure new development adheres to design principles that reinforce the character of different commercial areas of Highlands.**

- » Encourage new development in the Downtown Business District to adhere to the following design principles:
  - New buildings should front Main Street or 4th Street and include the main building entry facing the sidewalk and the public right-of-way.
  - Buildings should be designed at a pedestrian scale and should have frequent building entrances, architectural details and intricate facades including building offsets, awnings, covered entries, varied building materials, windows and other features noted in the Community Design Standards.
  - Maximum (not minimum) setbacks near public roads and adjacent buildings.
  - Limit required buffers, especially between compatible uses.
  - Parking in rear of buildings if provided.
  - Discourage auto-oriented uses including drive-thru restaurants.
  - Streets should have narrow turn radii, wide sidewalks, safe crossings,

plantings where feasible.

- » Downtown Support areas
  - Allow for buildings in the Downtown Support area that are slightly larger footprints than in the Downtown Business District.
  - Consider implementing a maximum building size or maximum floor-area (FAR) ratio to keep the scale of new development compatible with downtown and surrounding neighborhoods.
    - › *A maximum building footprint size of 10,000 square feet is recommended with exceptions for redevelopment sites with larger existing buildings and prominent civic/institutional buildings*
    - › *A floor-to-area ratio maximum could also be studied to limit the scale of infill and redevelopment*
  - New buildings should front public rights of way and include the main building entry facing the primary public right-of-way unless the building is screened from view.
  - Focus new commercial and residential uses on principle streets or public spaces (e.g., a plaza, courtyard, or greenspace).
  - Parking in rear or side of buildings if parking is required.
  - Include a mix of housing types where feasible, such as upper-story residential, townhomes, or small multifamily buildings.
- » Neighborhood Mixed-use areas
  - Allow for renovation and redevelopment of existing commercial areas, new small scale commercial uses, and commercial or civic centers.
  - Allow for a mix of housing types and lodging uses.
  - Screen larger buildings and parking lots from principal roadways.

## DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR COMMERCIAL AREAS

## Downtown Business District (DBD)

- » Building close to the street
- » Active facades, with frequent entrances and many windows
- » Parking provided in rear, if at all
- » Smaller block size



## Downtown Support

- » Buildings fronting the street or public spaces
- » Buildings slightly larger than in DBD
- » Active facades with awnings or other features
- » Mix of housing types



## Neighborhood Mixed Use

- » Small-scale commercial centers
- » Mix of housing types
- » Parking lots screened from roads

**Policy LU 3: Manage growth along major entry corridors and edges.****LU 3.1: Enforce and refine design standards for new commercial development along major roadways.**

- » Continue to require that parking and storage areas be screened from view using structural elements, topographic features, and/or plantings.
- » Encourage that larger buildings larger (i.e. greater than 5,000 square feet)

be screened from view along major roadways, including US 64, NC 28 and NC 106.

- » Encourage Macon County to establish a zoning overlay district that requires design standards along US 64 and other main corridors outside of Highlands.

**LU 3.2: Encourage the conservation of natural areas along major roadways on the edges of town.** *See Natural resources recommendations for more detail.*

## Policy LU 4: Encourage a limited mix of housing types in defined areas.

### LU 4.1: Continue to allow for flexibility in lot size for Planned Cluster Developments that meet defined design criteria.

- » Number of lots shall not exceed total number of lots allowed in underlying zoning district or Watershed Overlay District (whichever is more restrictive.)
- » Maintain high standards including buffers, setbacks and requirement for 50% open space.

### LU 4.2: Create opportunities for small, single-family homes with shared open space (pocket neighborhoods) near downtown and/or other commercial areas.

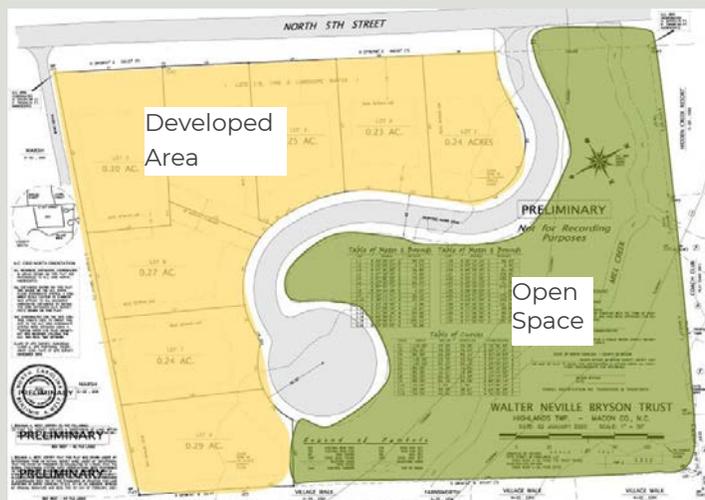
- » Consider defining pocket neighborhoods as a use in the Unified Development Ordinance and allowing them in certain areas if design criteria are met.
- » Modifications in dimensional standards and/or a modest density increase may be needed to allow for this type of housing.



The image above depicts a “pocket neighborhood” in Langley, Washington. This type of development includes small single-family homes oriented around a shared greenspace. Encouraging these types of developments near downtown and other commercial areas could be a way to allow housing variety while preserving the single-family character of some streets.

## CLUSTER DEVELOPMENTS

Current regulations in Highlands allow for Planned Cluster Developments, also known as Conservation Subdivisions. This option provides flexibility in design in order to preserve environmental or historical features. It allows for lots that are smaller than the minimum lot size specified in the zoning district, in exchange for larger amounts of open space. Other criteria must also be met. The number of lots cannot exceed total number of lots allowed in an underlying district and other standards must also be met including a 40-foot Buffer, 10-foot building setbacks and at least 50% open space.



The image above shows a recent cluster development proposed on Fifth street. The cluster development option allowed smaller lots in exchange for preserved open space along Mill Creek.

### LU 4.3: Continue to allow incidental apartments in B-1, B-2, and B-3 zones.

- » Clarify allowable density of incidental apartments in development code.

### LU 4.4: Consider limited multi-family opportunities consistent with the village character of Highlands.

- » Consider allowances for additional residential housing types in CMU, NMU, and MDR areas based on context if design criteria are met.
  - Consider all housing options as part of redevelopment of underutilized commercial properties in the B-3 zoning district.
  - Allow for 2nd story residences, townhomes, and house-scale multi-family structures in NMU areas.
  - Allow for house-scale multi-family structures as part of new development in MDR areas via existing special use permit process.



The above conceptual rendering shows a redevelopment scenario for Highlands Plaza. This area, located in the B-3 zoning district could be a target area for allowing some multi-family housing as part of redevelopment. Design criteria could include a maximum density, screening requirements and minimum open space requirements.

## WHERE AND HOW TO ALLOW HOUSING VARIETY

Existing regulations and public preferences were evaluated as part of the Community Plan. There is a strong desire to preserve the character of Highlands and a recognition that some mix of housing may be beneficial. The survey indicated a preference for pocket neighborhoods and live/work units near downtown. The business survey also recognized that it is very difficult for employees and in some cases owners of businesses to find housing in town.

Current regulations allow for some incidental apartments and multi-family housing but are very restrictive. The code limits the number of apartments based on district and regulations require a 2-acre minimum and have maximum density allowance of 4 dwelling units per acre (DUA) for all multi-family housing. Recommendations in this plan suggest ways to provide some additional flexibility on housing types while preserving the character of town.

Recommendations include:

- » Consider allowing pocket neighborhoods near downtown and other commercial areas. Establish standards for these. Potentially allow at slightly higher densities (6 DUA) if design criteria are met.
- » Consider modest increases in allowances for incidental apartments in the Downtown Support Areas.
- » Consider allowing additional residential density and/or housing types on underutilized B-2 and B-3 zoning district properties, especially in the Downtown Support area. Allowing 6-8 DUA may be appropriate.

#### LU 4.5: Refine criteria for allowing Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs).

- » Consider establishing performance based criteria for permitting ADUs in order to reduce potential conflicts.
  - Current standards for accessory dwelling units require building must be attached to principle structure.
  - Performance-based criteria for permitting new Accessory Dwelling Units (with living quarters) could include a minimum parcel size, maximum building footprint and other design criteria.

#### LU 4.6: Look for opportunities to partner with landowners and regional partners to increase the amount of workforce housing accessible to those employed in and around Highlands.

- » Consider extension of water and sewer to workforce housing developments near city limits.
- » Coordinate with Macon County, Jackson County and nearby towns to improve availability and access to workforce housing on and off the plateau.

#### ADDRESSING EMPLOYEE HOUSING

While some large employers in Highlands have taken steps to provide employee housing, worker housing is still at a premium. Encouraging partnerships between homeowners and businesses with seasonal employees, in exchange for services at the business, is a model found in other remote, seasonal towns.



Accessory dwelling units can be configured in a variety of ways, with some options being nearly indistinguishable from single family homes.

Image via American Planning Association

#### Policy LU 5: Encourage lodging and tourism related rentals while limiting negative impacts on existing residents and businesses.

##### LU 5.1: Encourage lodging uses in defined areas where limited conflicts exist.

- » Encourage new lodging in the Downtown Support Area on the Future Land Use Map and in compatible zoning districts (B-2 & B-3).
- » Encourage new small-scale lodging in Neighborhood Mixed Use areas on the Future Land Use Map.
- » Encourage the renovation of properties and structures with historical lodging uses
- » Continue to require a Special Use Permit (SUP) in B-2/B-3 or a conditional zoning process in other areas.

**LU 5.2: Strike a balance between the need for home ownership, long-term rentals and the increase in demand for short-term rentals.**

- » See LU 2 for recommendations related to housing types that may lead to increases in long-term rental options.

**LU 5.3: Consider establishing standards for permitting event venues.**

- » Currently there is not a formal process for approving temporary event venues such as home rentals for weddings. This could lead to conflicts, especially in residential areas. A formal permitting process for larger events is needed.

**LU 5.4: Monitor and mitigate the impact of short-term rentals (STRs) on the Highlands community.**

- » Create an inventory of known short-term rentals and improve tracking of nuisance complaints.
  - Allow landlords to voluntarily register their units or use a third party service to track rentals.
  - Consider a no fee business permit.
  - Improve tracking of complaints.
- » Continue enforcement efforts (i.e. noise and trash ordinances)
- » Begin education and outreach effort to rental owners to emphasize existing trash and noise regulations.
- » Encourage HOAs to regulate STRs

**LU 5.5: Consider updating land use regulations to define short-term rentals as a use and establish geographic restrictions, approval requirements and/or performance-based standards for the use.**

- » Facilitate additional study and discussions related to short-term rentals, economic benefits, impacts and regulatory options.
- » Define Short-term rentals as a use in the Unified Development Ordinance.
  - Consider potentially differentiating full-time short-term rentals and occasional rentals.
- » Where short-term rentals are allowed, ensure the following requirements are met:
  - Specify no more than 1 contract on a property at a time.
  - On-site parking is available at 1 space per bedroom.
  - Landlords must provide information on proper waste disposal within each rental unit.
- » Consider requiring a minimum length of stay for short-term rentals throughout town or in residential areas (i.e. 2, 3 or more nights).
- » Consider updates to regulations to prohibit full-time short-term rentals or require special use permits in residential zoning districts (R-1, R-2, R-3), allow STRs in business districts (B-1, B-2, B-3, and B-4 districts).

### DEFINING AND REGULATING SHORT-TERM RENTALS

Short-Term Rentals can be defined as: the rental or lease of an attached or detached residential dwelling unit to guests for a duration not to exceed thirty (30) consecutive days. North Carolina has unique strict laws regarding how local governments can regulate short-term rentals. Many regulations utilized in other states are not legal here, increasing the challenge of regulating STRs. The state regulates STRs through the Vacation Rental Act, and updated it in 2020 with new limitations. Highlights from the act include:

- » Requiring rentals to register is unlawful
- » Local governments cannot levy a tax or fee on residential rental property that is not levied against other commercial and residential properties

It is argued that the Vacation Rental Act leaves room for regulating STRs via local zoning, which is similar to Asheville's strategy. For more information on short-term rentals see the recommendations above and the Appendix.

## LAND USE ACTION ITEMS

The items below list priority regulations, plans and programs that, if implemented, will advance town goals. Implementing the recommendations of this plan will involve town staff, elected officials, appointed boards, partners, residents and business owners.

**Action Item 1:** Evaluate and update the Unified Development Ordinance Update and the Community Plan. (LU1)

- » 1A: Regularly evaluate the Unified Development Ordinance and consider updates to support implementation of the Community Plan.
- » 1B: Update the Community Plan every 5 years or as infrastructure or market conditions change

**COST: N/A**  
**TIMEFRAME: ONGOING**

**Action Item 2:** Evaluate rezoning requests for conformity with the Community Plan. (LU1)

- » 2A: Rezoning requests should be evaluated by the Planning Board, Zoning Board and Board of Commissioners on a case by case basis.
- » 2B: A table that shows where rezoning requests may be appropriate and in-line with recommendations in the Community Plan is included below.

**COST: N/A**  
**TIMEFRAME: ONGOING**

Highlands Community Plan Future Land Use Category		Residential			Government / Institutional	Business Districts				
		R-1	R-2	R-3	GI	B-1	B-2	B-3	B-4	
Parks and Open Space	OS									
Conservation Design	CD									
Low Density Residential	LDR									
Medium Density	MD									
Neighborhood Mixed Use	NMU									
Downtown Support	DS						*	*		
Downtown Business District	DBD						*	*		
		=rezoning is likely appropriate.								
		= rezoning <u>may</u> be appropriate, but only if compatible with the neighborhood and surrounding uses. Conditional or Special Use restrictions may be advisable.								
*		= current zoning districts may need revisions to support implementation of the Community Plan								

**COST KEY**

- N/A = NO COST / CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED WITH EXISTING RESOURCES AND STAFF TIME
- LOW = COST > \$10,000
- MEDIUM = COST \$10,000-100,000
- HIGH = COST >\$100,000

**TIMEFRAME KEY**

- ONGOING = UNDERWAY AND RECOMMENDED TO CONTINUE
- SHORT-TERM = 1-2 YEARS
- MEDIUM-TERM = 2-3 YEARS
- LONG-TERM = 3+ YEARS

## LAND USE AND HOUSING ACTION ITEMS (CONTINUED)

### Action Item 3: Maintain the scale and character of Highlands. (LU2)

- » 3A: Evaluate and update Community Design Standards as necessary
- » 3B: Consider establishing a maximum building size for B-2 and B-3 zoning districts.
- » 3C: Encourage the preservation of historic buildings in commercial and residential districts, consider additional development regulations to protect the character of historic neighborhoods.

**COST: LOW**  
**TIMEFRAME: SHORT (3B), MEDIUM-TERM (3A & 3C)**

### Action Item 4: Manage growth along major entry corridors. (LU3)

- » 4A: Encourage the screening of parking, storage areas and larger buildings along US 64, NC 28 and NC 106 outside of existing commercial areas.
- » 4B: Encourage Macon County to establish a zoning overlay district that requires design standards along US 64 and other main corridors.

**COST: LOW**  
**TIMEFRAME: ONGOING (4A), MEDIUM-TERM (4B)**

### Action Item 5: Allow a greater mix of housing in appropriate areas. (LU4)

- » 5A: Continue to allow incidental apartments in mixed use development and clarify code language related to allowances. The current code language is confusing and may be a barrier to development.
- » 5B: Consider allowing additional residential types and slightly higher densities near downtown and on underutilized commercial properties. Establish standards for pocket neighborhoods near downtown and other commercial areas. Potentially allow at slightly higher densities (i.e.. 6 dwelling units per acre) if design criteria is met (*the current maximum is 4 dwelling units per acre*). Consider allowing additional residential types and slightly higher densities on underutilized B-3 zoning district properties, especially in the Downtown Support area if design criteria is met.
  - Allow for *Small-format apartments and condominiums, townhouses and house-scale multi-family (duplex, triplex, quadruplex) if they meet defined design criteria. Criteria could include a maximum gross density (i.e. 6-8 dwelling units per acre), maximum building size, screening and minimum open space requirements.*
  - *Refine design, dimensional and density standards for multi-family in B-3. Adjust minimum parcel size for multi-family in the B-3 zoning district. Current minimum is 2 acres.*

**COST: LOW**  
**TIMEFRAME: SHORT (5A AND 5B)**

#### COST KEY

- N/A = NO COST / CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED WITH EXISTING RESOURCES AND STAFF TIME
- LOW = COST > \$10,000
- MEDIUM = COST \$10,000-100,000
- HIGH = COST >\$100,000

#### TIMEFRAME KEY

- ONGOING = UNDERWAY AND RECOMMENDED TO CONTINUE
- SHORT-TERM = 1-2 YEARS
- MEDIUM-TERM = 2-3 YEARS
- LONG-TERM = 3+ YEARS

## LAND USE AND HOUSING ACTION ITEMS (CONTINUED)

### Action Item 6: Refine criteria for allowing accessory dwelling units. (LU4)

- » 6A: Consider establishing performance based criteria for permitting ADUs in order to reduce potential conflicts. Potential performance based criteria includes:

- *Parcel size > 1.25x or 1.5x district minimum\**
- *Max footprint 800 sq ft or 0.5x of home size, whichever is less\**
- *If design can meet basic criteria:*
  - › *1 parking space*
  - › *Setback and buffer from neighbors\**
  - › *Disturbance of existing vegetation is limited in size\**
  - › *Must be on a permanent foundation*
  - › *Must be connected to sewer and water*

*\*Criteria should be further defined in ordinance*

**COST: LOW**

**TIMEFRAME:  
MEDIUM-TERM**

### Action Item 7: Monitor and mitigate the impact of short-term rentals (STRs) on the Highlands community. (LU5)

- » 7A: Voluntary registration of units or 3rd party tracking
- » 7B: Enforcement of trash and noise ordinances
- » 7C: Begin education and outreach effort to rental owners to emphasize existing trash and noise regulations.
- » 7D: Encourage HOAs to regulate STRs
- » 7E: Consider updates to land use regulations to define STRs as a use and establish restrictions or an additional approval requirement.
  - *Consider requiring a minimum length of stay for short-term rentals throughout town or in residential areas.*

**COST: LOW**

**TIMEFRAME: ONGOING  
(7B), SHORT-TERM (7A, 7C,  
7D, 7E)**

#### **COST KEY**

- N/A = NO COST / CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED WITH EXISTING RESOURCES AND STAFF TIME
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- MEDIUM = COST \$10,000-100,000
- HIGH = COST >\$100,000

#### **TIMEFRAME KEY**

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## DOWNTOWN & TOURISM

### Overview

Downtown Highlands serves as the civic, cultural and commercial center for the town and the greater plateau. This chapter includes recommendations that support downtown, nearby neighborhoods and the local economy.

### Primary Goals addressed by Downtown and Tourism Recommendations

**GOAL #1:** Town Character: Vibrant village center with distinct character that is surrounded by mostly low-density housing that blends with the natural environment.

**GOAL #6:** Support the local economy including downtown businesses, tourism, the arts, and outdoor recreation. Incorporate support for downtown businesses, tourism, housing, outdoor recreation and natural resources.

### Policy DT 1: Maintain and enhance Highlands' small-town feel and village character.

**DT 1.1:** Develop green and/or open spaces, plazas and other areas that invite gathering and create an experience around the town's charm and character.

**DT 1.2:** Continue focusing recruitment of local businesses as opposed to national chains.

**DT 1.3:** Enhance and codify design standards for development in the Downtown Business District and the Downtown Support area.

- » Codify portion of the Community Design Guidelines.
  - For example, façade transparency standards, mechanical equipment placement, lighting standards.
- » Update community design guidelines to include pedestrian access and streetscape standards.



The main building of the Old Edwards Inn, built in 1935 embodies the architectural detail and pedestrian scale of buildings that contribute to the village character of Downtown Highlands. The three and a half story building has a brick foundation with a tri-gable asphalt-covered roof and has been described as Italian Alpine in architectural design.

**Policy DT 2: Improve pedestrian facilities and increase wayfinding.**

DT 2.1: Increase sidewalk facilities between residential, parking, and retail and improve pedestrian crossings.

DT 2.2: Improve wayfinding for public facilities, shopping, parking, historical attractions, and amenities such as the greenway.

DT 2.3: Extend landscaping, brick pavers and other furnishings (lights, benches, etc.) along sidewalks downtown and onto secondary streets and alleys.

DT 2.4: Work with the Highlands Plateau Greenway to improve connections from neighborhoods to downtown through greenway extensions or sidewalk connections.

**DOWNTOWN IMPROVEMENTS MAP**



 Intersection Improvements

Intersection and Roadway Improvements would prioritize pedestrian safety with crosswalks, a midblock crossing is recommended on Main Street.

 Streetscape Improvements

Streetscape Improvements continue work done downtown to improve pedestrian amenities and add parallel parking and shade trees. Note, lighting enhancements may be needed on other streets in addition to those highlighted.

 Greenspace Improvements

Greenspace Improvements would include beautification, trail improvements, and new and improved downtown park spaces.

 Redevelopment Opportunities

Redevelopment Improvements can provide new commercial and residential opportunities in and adjacent to downtown, as well as potential parking.

### Policy DT 3: Manage public parking and study opportunities for increased on-street and off-street public parking.

#### DT 3.1: Monitor and manage existing parking.

- » Continue to regulate public parking zones and designate areas that are employee restricted, handicap parking, 15-minute, loading zone and unrestricted areas.
- » Consider additional time limitations or metering on portions of Main Street.
- » Regularly monitor parking usage by conducting parking counts periodically throughout the year.

#### DT 3.2: Study improvements to town-owned rights-of-ways to improve conditions for pedestrians and increase on-street parking.

- » Street retrofit candidates include Spruce Street, West Main Street and Oak Street.

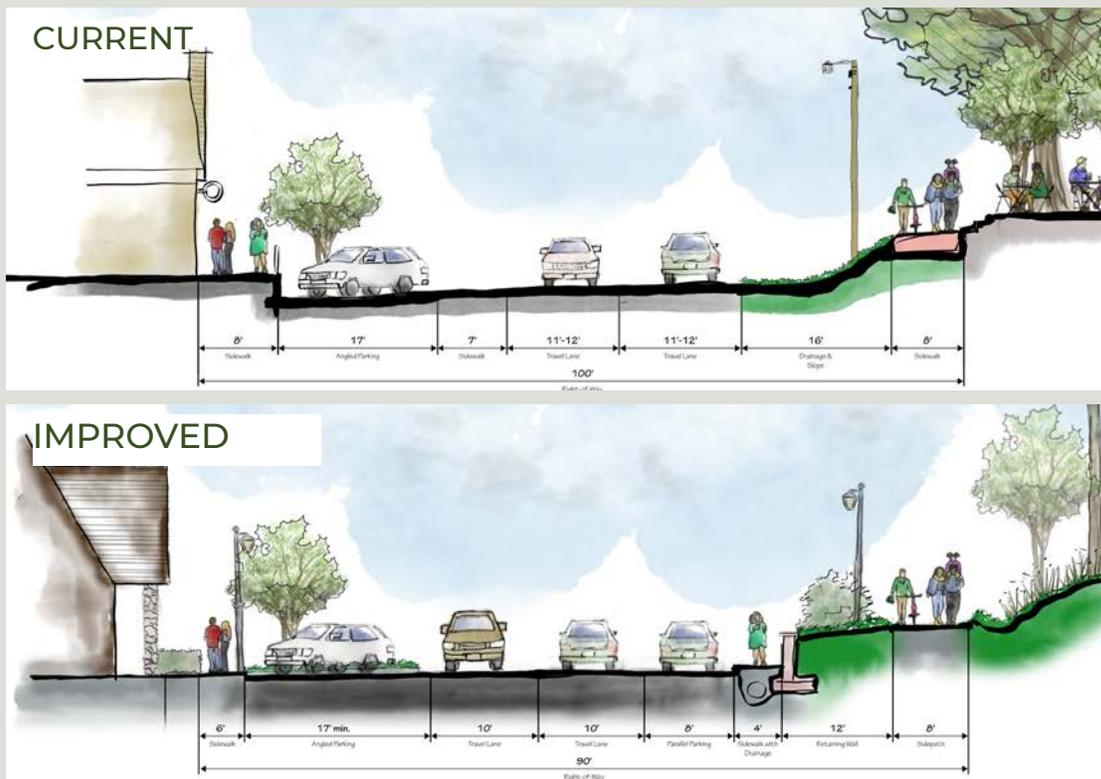
#### DT 3.3: Study opportunities for additional publicly accessible surface lots or a parking deck.

- » Study opportunities for additional public parking and redevelopment near Maple and Oak Street.

#### DT 3.4: Entertain potential public-private partnerships to increase available parking.

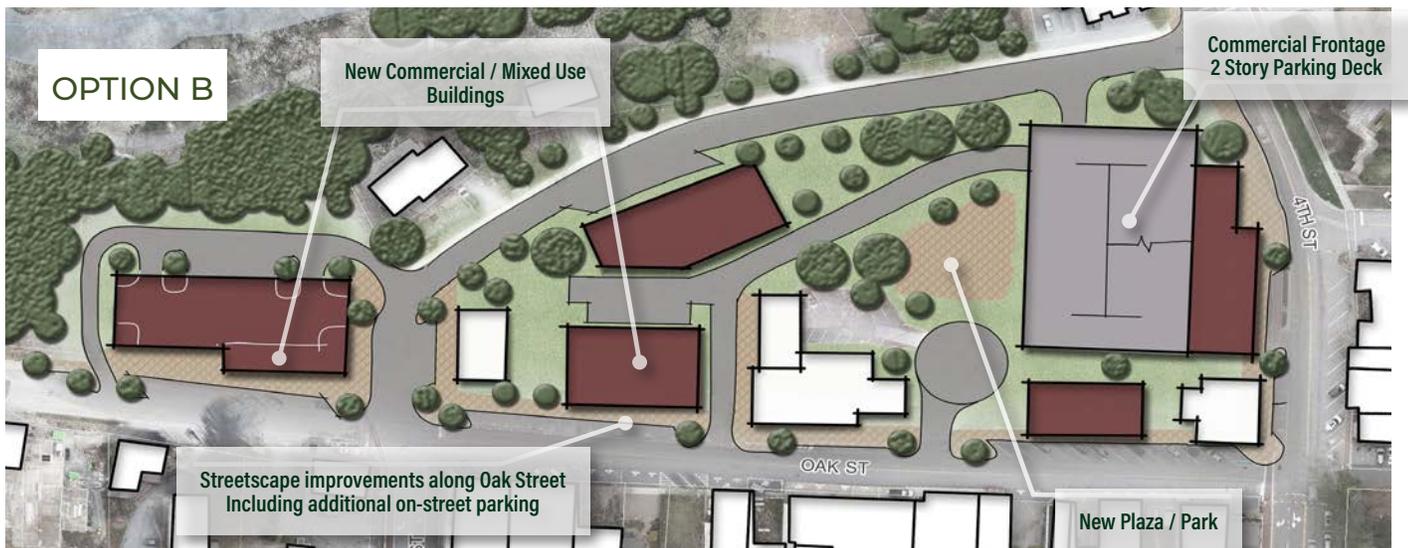
- » This could include a cost-share approach for a parking deck.

### WEST MAIN STREET ALTERNATIVES



The images above show the current cross-section of Main Street west of 3rd Street and a potential improvement that includes additional on-street parking. It is recommended to study making the best use of its 100-foot right-of-way by adding parallel parking on the north side, with stormwater retention devices and ADA accessible sidewalks. This will continue the “downtown” feel further west along Main Street and add new parking opportunities. Additional study is needed, but it is estimated that an additional 20-24 parking spaces could be added between 3rd St and 1st St.

## MAPLE STREET BLOCK REDEVELOPMENT CONCEPTS



The concepts above show two options for redevelopment on land in the vicinity of the old fire station near Oak Street and Maple Street. The two scenarios show the footprint of two different sized parking decks and also illustrate potential infill development, access and improvements along Oak Street. New development in this area could help activate Oak Street, add parking and potentially include a new plaza or public space. The options are further described below:

- Option A: Streetscape improvements along Oak Street. New commercial or mixed use buildings on Oak and 4th Street. Additional surface parking. A public / private partnership could include a two level deck at the corner of Oak St and 3rd St with entrances on Maple Street and Oak Street.
- Option B: Streetscape improvements along Oak Street. New mixed-use buildings and a new plaza or park. Town owned land may be able to accommodate a deck with an entrance on 4th Street and Maple Street. This option could require the

**Policy DT 4: Further study potential uses of town-owned properties and improvements to Downtown streetscapes.**

**DT 4.1:** Conduct a study of town-owned properties to determine future uses.

**DT 4.2:** Pursue the creation and adoption of a Downtown Master Streetscape Plan that phases streetscape improvements.

**Policy DT 5: Continue marketing and events that encourage visitation.**

**DT 5.1:** Work with the Chamber of Commerce to create campaigns that attract younger visitors and potential residents.

**DT 5.2:** Support a year-round economy by scheduling festivals and other events in the shoulder and off-season.

- » Consider additional festivals or events during the shoulder or low season with a similar draw as that of the Highlands Food and Wine Festival.

**DT 5.3:** Support the creation of an online Guide to Local Businesses.

**Policy DT 6: Preserve and enhance the Town's parks and green Infrastructure.**

**DT 6.1:** Maintain and enhance existing park facilities.

- » Pursue planned upgrades at the Recreation Park
  - Playground expansion / addition
  - Remodel bathrooms
  - New multi-purpose building
- » Upgrades should be considered for the community field and Harris Lake
  - New lighting at Community Field
  - Evaluate improvements to Harris Lake including pedestrian facilities along Smallwood Ave, parking and signage improvements and a dock or seating.



The vacant lot (e.g. the Loafer's Bench lot) just west of Main Street and 4th Street would be a great opportunity for a pocket park near the center of town. See the Downtown Improvements Map for location.

**DT 6.2: Work with the Highlands/Cashiers Land Trust and the Highlands Biological Station to identify and preserve important natural areas and resources.**

**DT 6.3: Encourage the preservation of existing tree canopy in and around downtown.**

- » Review and update standards related to tree preservation in the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO).

**DT 6.4: Explore opportunities for additional publicly accessible greenspace near downtown.**

- » Need/demand exists for the following facilities:
  - A park or greenspace on the south and/or west sides of downtown
  - Play facilities for very young children (i.e. a baby swing near downtown)
  - Play equipment that appeals to a greater age range (i.e. older kids) than the existing playground at the Recreation Park.
- » Develop additional greenspaces in the Central Business District.
  - Consider partnerships to purchase all or part of the vacant lot (e.g. the Loafer's Bench lot) just west of Main Street and 4th Street and create a pocket park.



Bronze sculptures greet those that pass the Corey James Gallery located at the corner of Spring Street and 3rd Street.

**Policy DT 7: Promote the cultural heritage of Highlands and its diverse forms of expression.**

**DT 7.1: Promote and publicize the dynamic interaction between the cosmopolitan interests and the traditional mountain and Cherokee culture of Highlands - in the areas of theatre, art, music, continuing education, etc.**

**DT 7.2: Encourage location of cultural activities in or near the village center.**

**DT 7.3: Support public-private partnerships with non-profit organizations that support the above strategies.**

## DOWNTOWN AND TOURISM ACTION ITEMS

The items below list priority regulations, plans and programs that, if implemented, will advance town goals. Implementing the recommendations of this plan will involve town staff, elected officials, appointed boards, partners, residents and business owners.

### Action Item 8: Study of town-owned properties to determine future uses (DT4)

- » 8A: A study should consider future operational needs of the town and evaluate potential divestment options of underutilized town-owned land. The study should include options for the block that covers 3.4 acres just north of Main Street. A portion of this block will remain occupied by town services, however the town could enter into a developer agreement for the remainder and outline conditions including additional parking, streetscape improvements and/or commercial space.

**COST: MEDIUM**  
**TIMEFRAME: MEDIUM-TERM**

### Action Item 9: Wayfinding and streetscape plan and improvements (DT 2 and DT4)

- » 9A: A study should build on work in the Community Plan to prioritize and determine costs and phasing for streetscape improvements. The study should include more detailed evaluation of the benefits of streetscape improvements including the addition of on-street parking, landscaping, and pedestrian lighting in the rights-of-way.
- » 9B: The town should partner with the Chamber of Commerce to determine and implement priority wayfinding improvements. Wayfinding can also be addressed in the potential streetscape plan.

**COST: LOW-MEDIUM (9A), MEDIUM (9B)**  
**TIMEFRAME: MEDIUM (9A), MEDIUM-LONG-TERM (9B)**

### Action Item 10: Continue marketing and events that encourage visitation. (DT5)

- » 10A: Work with the Chamber of Commerce to create campaigns that attract younger visitors and potential residents.

**COST: LOW**  
**TIMEFRAME: ONGOING**

### Action Item 11: Develop a Downtown pocket park south of Main Street. (DT6)

- » 11A: Consider partnerships to purchase all or part of a vacant lot south of Main Street (i.e. the Loafer's Bench lot) or another property to create a pocket park.

**COST: HIGH**  
**TIMEFRAME: LONG-TERM**

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#### TIMEFRAME KEY

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## RECREATION & NATURAL RESOURCES

### Overview / Issues to Address

Due to a history of community involvement, philanthropic giving, and town investment, Highlands has a remarkable system of parks and trails. Maintaining and building on this system can help maintain the high quality of life for permanent and seasonal residents while supporting a healthy community. During the development of this plan community feedback indicated environmental preservation was a top priority. Protecting the rich natural heritage of Highlands will require careful planning of future development and continued stewardship of the environment.

### Primary Goals addressed by Recreation and Natural Resource Recommendations

**GOAL #1:** Town Character: Vibrant village center with distinct character that is surrounded by mostly low-density housing that blends with the natural environment.

**GOAL #2:** Preservation of the Environment: Preserve and enhance the natural environment and the scenic beauty of Highlands.

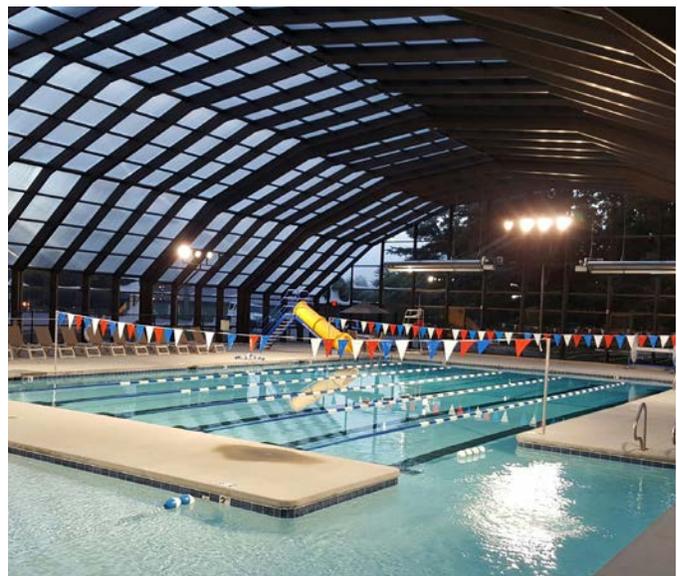
### Policy RNR 1: Support recreation options and outdoor tourism.

#### RNR 1.1: Improve connections and access to green space and parks.

- » Improve sidewalks and trail connections to existing parks and nature preserves.
- » Work with partners to make other basic access improvements at parks and nearby nature preserves (i.e. parking, information, etc.)
- » Coordinate with the US Forest Service to improve safe access to trails and public lands near Highlands.

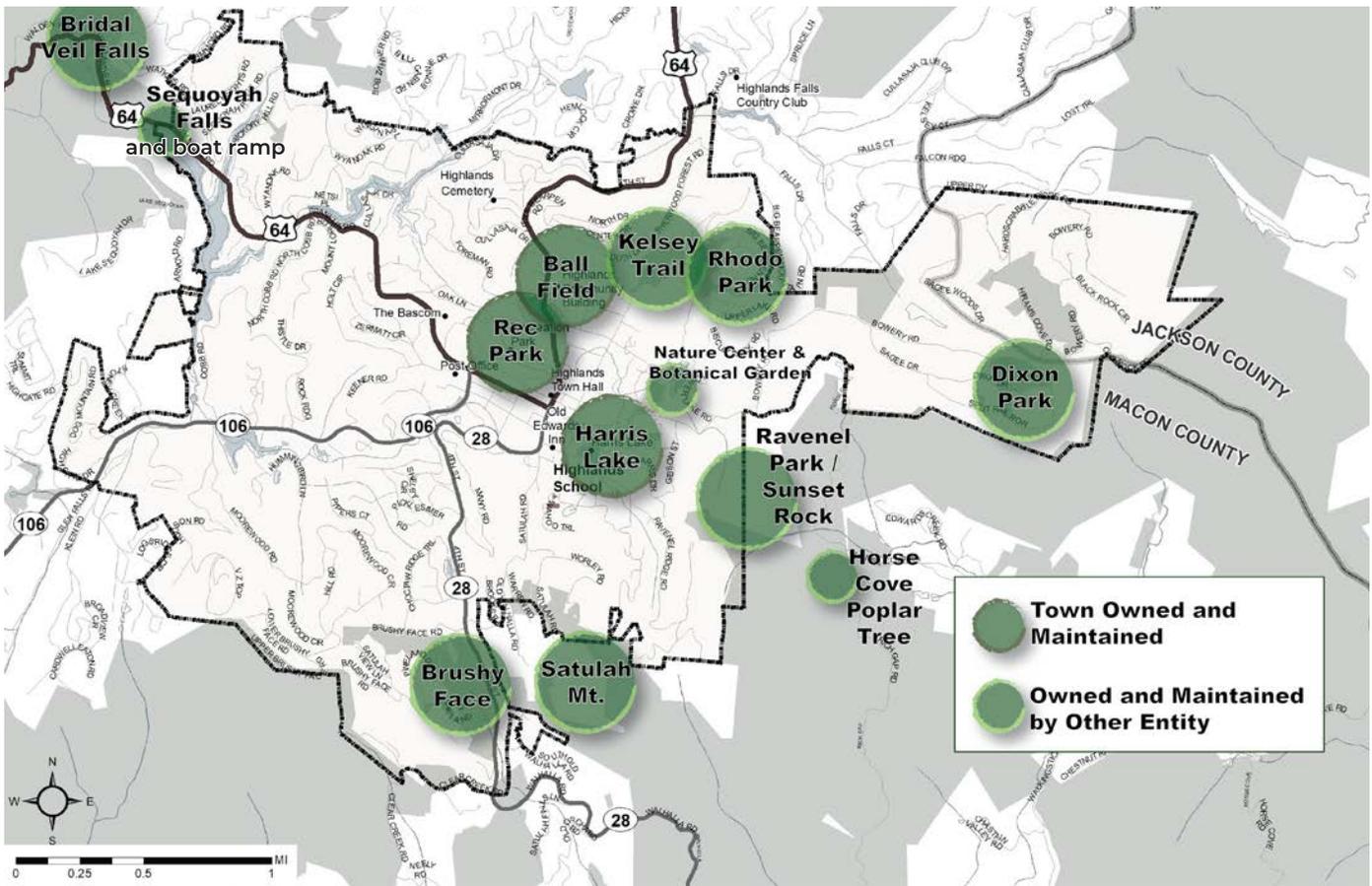
#### RNR 1.2: Work with Macon County and other partners to address recreation priorities.

- » According to the survey and other feedback received during the Community Plan, priorities included:
  - Natural areas and trails
  - Playground equipment for older age children
  - Indoor fitness & programming
  - Tennis/pickleball



The Highlands Pool Complex is a year round facility and is located on the Recreation Park property, next to the Civic Center.

## EXISTING PARKS AND RECREATION ASSETS



The Town of Highlands has a number of parks and recreational assets in and near the town limits. A number of facilities are owned and maintained by the Town. The Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust and Forest Service also maintains areas for public recreational access.

### Policy RNR 2: Discourage intense development on steep slopes and mountain ridges.

#### RNR 2.1: Continue limitations on removal of vegetation on steep slopes.

- » Continue to enforce limits on disturbance based on slope thresholds and size of disturbance.
- » Monitor impacts and consider modifications to slope thresholds and when site plan category 1, category 2 and erosion and sediment control plan is needed.

#### RNR 2.2: Continue to require the submission of topographic info when making application for development permit.

#### RNR 2.3: Adhere to North Carolina Ridge-top Development Regulations.

- » The N.C. State Ridge Law regulates development on “protected mountain ridges” that include ridges that are 500 ft or more above the adjacent valley floor and lie at an elevation >3,000 ft. No buildings may rise more than 35ft above the crest of the ridge.
- » Exemptions include utility and communications towers, vertical projections (i.e. chimneys or steeples) and historic structures.
- » Town ordinance has limit of height of 35ft as well.

### **Policy RNR 3: Protect views and natural resources in Town and on the greater Highlands plateau.**

#### **RNR 3.1: Encourage sensitive design around key natural resources.**

- » New development, especially in the Conservation Design areas on the FLU Map, should be designed in a way to reduce grading and clear-cutting and limit impacts to viewsheds.
- » Development should be clustered away from natural resources on the property and on adjacent properties.
  - Priority features that should be preserved include steep slopes, rock outcrops, streams, rare species, habitat corridors and designated Natural Heritage Natural Areas.

#### **RNR 3.2: Work with Macon County to consider establishing additional land use protections on the plateau surrounding Highlands.**

- » Of particular concern is the US 64 corridor north of Highlands. Currently this area has no zoning and limited land use protections from large-scale commercial or residential development.
- » A zoning overlay district could help ensure that new development in the county jurisdiction protects natural resources and is in keeping with the character of existing development.

- » Re-establishing a limited ETJ along major corridors could also be considered.

#### **RNR 3.3: Utilize water and sewer service as an incentive for new development to meet natural resource and character recommendations in the Highlands Community Plan.**

- » Consider water and sewer service for new development near existing municipal boundaries if the provision of utilities can help reduce impact on natural resources and/or views from main roads.
- » By-right development in the county jurisdiction without water and sewer may necessitate more grading and clearing of trees for septic drain fields in addition to potentially straining groundwater resources.

#### **RNR 3.4: Encourage land conservation on the Highlands plateau.**

- » Coordinate with Highlands Cashiers Land Conservancy, landowners and other partners to protect views and high-value natural resources.
- » Lobby at the state level for the ability to create a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) Program
- » Consider changes to regulations to enable the transfer of built upon area (impervious surface) within the same watershed

### **NATURAL HERITAGE AREAS WITHIN AND SURROUNDING HIGHLANDS**

There are 36 designated Natural Heritage Natural Areas within 5 miles of the Town of Highlands. Nineteen of these sites are rated Exceptional or Very High conservation value based on the quality of the site and its statewide and global significance. The Highlands Plateau, Fishhawk Mountains and Cullusaja Gorge to the northwest and the Escarpement to the southeast are home to granitic domes, spray cliffs, rich cove forests, hemlock forests, montane white oak forests, cedar glades, southern Appalachian bogs and other unique natural communities. These ecosystems host a diverse array of flora and fauna including many rare plants and animals. Rare fauna present includes the rock-dwelling green salamander, southern water shrew, and peregrine falcons. In addition, there are old growth and mature stands of hemlocks that were recommended for treatment and monitoring against the ongoing woolly adelgid infestation.

- » Work with partners to establish a land bank and study a mechanism to fund it. Could include title transfer tax or other sources.

**RNR 3.5: Support the continued and additional treatment of mature hemlocks against the woolly adelgid.**

**RNR 3.6: Conduct efforts to remove invasive species on town-owned land and in rights of ways**

**RNR 3.7: Encourage open space preservation and tree protection in new development.**

**RNR 3.8: Evaluate existing minimum lot size allowances, open space requirements impervious surface limits and consider revisions to protect neighborhood character and water quality and allow sufficient flexibility in design to protect natural resources on larger properties.**

**RNR 3.9: Require tree protection in commercial development.**

- » Continue to encourage property owners to save existing trees eighteen inches or more in diameter whenever possible by requiring approval.

**RNR 3.10: Discourage heritage trees from being felled in residential developments.**

- » Consider updates to the Unified Development Ordinance to incentivize preservation of old growth or “heritage” trees.

#### **Policy RNR 4: Protect the Plateau’s water quality.**

**RNR 4.1: Require new development that meets a disturbance or density threshold to manage the velocity and amount of run-off.**

- » Currently land disturbances greater than 1 acre or commercial development or redevelopment with >8,000 square foot of new impervious



Large trees such as this large white pine along the trails at Brushy Face Preserve provide valuable habitat and food for animals, capture rainfall and air pollution, and sequester large amounts of carbon.

surface need a stormwater permit.

- » Based on recommendations in the 2007 Stormwater Master Plan and a study of peer communities with similar high quality water resources and terrain, consider revisions to stormwater requirements for new development.

**RNR 4.2: Require the use of stormwater management best practices in new development to closely mimic natural hydrological patterns.**

**RNR 4.3: Encourage the preservation and planting of riparian vegetation in new development.**

- » Consider specifying riparian areas as priority open space type in Planned Cluster Developments.

**RNR 4.4: Ensure that stormwater infrastructure is appropriately sized and well-maintained.**

- » Maintain staff resources and expertise related to stormwater permitting and inspection.

- » Require new development to build and maintain stormwater infrastructure.
- » Carefully consider current policies and standards related to underground stormwater devices.
  - Ensure underground storage devices are sized appropriately, designed to include an upstream water quality inlet or stormwater treatment BMP to trap sediments, located in a way that anticipates maintenance needs and approved only with a detailed maintenance and inspection plan.

#### **RNR 4.5: Encourage low-impact development techniques and green stormwater infrastructure in new development.**

- » Disconnected impervious surfaces, pervious pavements, bioswales, stormwater planters, cisterns, rain gardens, and green roofs can help reduce impacts of new development.

#### **RNR 4.6: Support public and private improvements that reduce impacts on water**

#### **quality, moderate in-stream temperature and flow and improve conditions for the natural reproduction of trout and the biological integrity of streams.**

- » Continue to apply for NCDOT grants to replace undersized storm water culverts with arches that can accommodate existing and future storm water runoff along state-maintained and Town-owned roadways.

#### **RNR 4.7: Consider implementing impact fees or a stormwater utility fee to fund improvements to existing stormwater infrastructure.**

- » Projects should seek to decrease the peak volume of run-off, moderate the temperature of urban runoff and/or improve the quality of run-off from more developed areas of town.

### STORMWATER AND WATER QUALITY

Stormwater and runoff from developed areas impacts water quality on the Plateau and in communities downstream. The majority of Highlands drains to Lake Sequoyah that serves as the water supply for the town. Downstream of Lake Sequoyah the Cullasaja River flows north to Franklin and eventually the Little Tennessee River. Areas south and east of Highlands drain into the Chatooga River, a designated Wild and Scenic River. Headwaters that form in and around Highlands contribute to drinking water sources used by thousands of people and host trout fisheries, including native brook trout, and populations of other rare fish, mussels and invertebrates. Encouraging on-site stormwater retention, treatment and infiltration will be key to preserving water quality on the Plateau.



The Cullasaja River rambles free and clear beside the Mountain Waters Scenic Byway between Highlands and Franklin.

- » Recommended projects from the 2007 Stormwater Master Plan include:
  - Significant upgrades to the Central Business District that could be constructed in tandem with other utility improvements, streets and sidewalk upgrades including:
    - › *Water quality treatment structures*
    - › *Installation of a new stormwater trunk line on Fourth Street and Fifth street*
- › *Improvements near the Episcopal Church*
- › *Installation of landscaping and pervious pavers along Main Street*
- › *A naturalized stormwater treatment amenity at Recreation park*
- › *Stream restoration on Monger Creek*
- › *Improved stormwater treatment near Highlands Plaza and Spring Street*

## RECREATION & NATURAL RESOURCES ACTION ITEMS

The items below list priority regulations, plans and programs that, if implemented, will advance town goals. Implementing the recommendations of this plan will involve town staff, elected officials, appointed boards, partners, residents and business owners.

### Action Item 12: Pursue improvements at Recreation Park. (RNR1)

- » 12A: Conceptual design for an indoor recreation center / multi-purpose building.
- » 12B: Expand the playground and renovate existing bathrooms.
  - *Incorporate play equipment for a variety of ages (older and younger kids).*
  - *Determine location for a baby swing*

**COST: MEDIUM**  
**TIMEFRAME: SHORT-TERM (12A), MEDIUM-TERM (12B & 12C)**

### Action Item 13: Work with partners to improve access to parks and nearby public lands and nature preserves. (RNR1, DT6)

- » 13A: Improve sidewalks and trail connections to existing parks and nature preserves. Work with partners to make other basic access improvements at parks and nearby public lands and nature preserves (i.e. parking, information, etc.)
- » 13B: Evaluate improvements to Harris Lake including pedestrian facilities along Smallwood Ave, parking and signage improvements and a dock or seating.

**COST: MEDIUM**  
**TIMEFRAME: MEDIUM-TERM (13A), LONG-TERM (13B)**

#### COST KEY

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- HIGH = COST >\$100,000

#### TIMEFRAME KEY

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## RECREATION & NATURAL RESOURCES ACTION ITEMS (CONTINUED)

**Action Item 14:** Consider updates to the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) to protect natural resources, heritage trees and water quality. (RNR3, RNR4, RNR5)

- » 14A: Encourage Conservation Subdivision design using the Planned Cluster Development option currently available in areas with sensitive natural resources.
- » 14B: Evaluate the UDO to determine how to improve the quality of open space and protect heritage trees in new development.
  - *Consider revisions to the Cluster Development option to specify priority open space types including riparian areas, seeps, wetlands, mature forest and other valuable wildlife habitats.*
  - *Encourage low-impact development techniques and green stormwater infrastructure in new development including disconnected impervious surfaces, pervious pavements, bioswales, cisterns, rain gardens and green roofs.*
  - *Consider revisions to incentivize the preservation of heritage trees in residential developments.*

**COST: N/A (14A), LOW (14B)**

**TIMEFRAME: ONGOING (14A), SHORT-TERM (14B)**

**Action Item 15:** Protect the Plateau's water quality by proactively managing stormwater runoff from development. (RNR5)

- » 15A: Evaluate peer communities with similar high quality water resources and consider revisions to stormwater requirements for new development.
  - *This could include modifying the threshold for land disturbances and/or impervious surface thresholds that require a stormwater permit.*
- » 15B: Maintain adequate staff resources and expertise related to stormwater permitting and inspection.
- » 15C: Support public and private improvements that reduce impacts of stormwater runoff on water quality.
- » 15D: Consider implementing impact fees or a stormwater utility fee to fund improvements to existing stormwater infrastructure.

**COST: LOW (15A), LOW-MEDIUM (15B, 15D), HIGH (15C)**

**TIMEFRAME: SHORT-TERM (15A), MEDIUM-TERM (15B, 15C), LONG-TERM (15D)**

### COST KEY

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## TRANSPORTATION

### Overview / Issues to Address

Increases in residents and visitation brings more people driving on Highlands' roads. To maintain the quality of life for which Highlands is recognized the Town must plan for future transportation needs. Highlands' primary commercial areas are designed with a few blocks of grid pattern and have sidewalks, making the downtown well suited for walking. Balancing the needs of automobiles, including parking demand, while maintaining the character of the town and improving pedestrian crossings and connections from downtown to other areas of town is a theme throughout the recommendations in this chapter.

### Primary Goals addressed by Transportation Recommendations

**GOAL #1:** Town Character: Vibrant village center with distinct character that is surrounded by mostly low-density housing that blends with the natural environment.

**GOAL #2:** Preservation of the Environment: Preserve and enhance the natural environment and the scenic beauty of Highlands.

**GOAL #4:** Pedestrian Focus: Create a downtown and commercial areas that emphasize pedestrian comfort and safety.

### Roadway Recommendations

#### Policy T 1: Maintain a resilient transportation system that caters to a variety of users.

**T 1.1: Coordinate transportation facilities and improvements with development activities, and with regional transportation and land use plans to achieve maximum benefit with limited funds.**

**T 1.2: Use data-driven analysis to manage transportation improvements in Highlands.**

- » Municipalities that generate and maintain certain data can more effectively justify allocating funds to certain projects. By indicating a need, Highlands can prepare itself for any debate about budgeting for projects and demonstrate that there is benefit for warranted investments. For instance, counting parked cars, intersection turning movements, pedestrians and bicyclists, and surveying residents about public

perceptions can all help the Town justify making changes to the transportation network.

**T 1.3: Consider enhancing roadways using existing right-of-way to accommodate as many users as possible.**

- » Improvements should be studied to improve vehicular flow, add parking and increase safety for pedestrians.
- » Study street retrofits on Spruce St, Main Street, and Oak Street.

**T 1.4: Maintain and build on the existing street grid pattern by encouraging a high level of roadway connectivity and short block lengths in and near downtown Highlands including areas shown as the Downtown Business District, Downtown Support, and Medium Density areas on the Future Land Use Map.**

- » Specifically encourage:
  - The extension of Poplar Street to N 5th Street.

- Development of external street connections to Highlands Plaza, including a continuation and upgrade of 2nd Street past Spring Street to directly link to Highlands Plaza.

## Policy T 2: Encourage context-sensitive design of roadways

### T 2.1: Continually monitor NCDOT roadway projects in town to effectively leverage state funding for local goals and communicate with the public for input on design.

- » Future projects may involve major infrastructure improvements that will affect all modes of travel, and Highlands needs to make sure that NCDOT understands the Town's needs and plans for adjacent land use.

### T 2.2: Continue to plan and engineer streets for their context (with adjacent land use influencing overall design).

- » A successful example is Pine Street, which was designed with a pedestrian focus, aesthetic appeal, and sensitivity to the adjacent park space without

losing any functionality as a two-way street. Make sure every roadway improvement makes sense for the people who will use it.

### T 2.3: Reduce the environmental impact of existing roads, new roads, and road improvements.

- » Street design should seek to minimize grading and avoid natural resources and historic features.
- » Take a proactive approach to storm water management along Highlands' streets, using vegetated buffer areas, medians and other features to capture sedimentation and filter excess rainwater.
- » Consider culvert retrofits as needed to improve drainage and improve habitat for wild trout populations.

## STREET DESIGN

In the future it will be necessary to balance the needs of all users in future street design in town. Employing Complete Streets policy and design prioritizes the safety and comfort of users of all abilities. In Highlands the historic features and environmental assets need to be factored into street design as well. To ensure safety and comfort across the travel modes, some balancing of priorities must occur. Street improvements should include consideration of placemaking elements, the need for bicycle and pedestrian facilities, the target speed of automobiles, topography and right-of-way constraints, shade and landscaping, parking, stormwater management, and redevelopment opportunities.



- » Consider modifications to road standards to allow for movement of aquatic organisms.

## Pedestrian and Greenway Recommendations

### Policy T 3: Prioritize pedestrian safety, connectivity, accessibility, and comfort.

#### T 3.1: Prioritize intersection improvements along Main Street at 3rd Street and 4th Street.

- » 4th Street: These should include curb extensions/bulb-outs to allow room for people to congregate as they wait to cross, and consideration of a lead pedestrian interval or a pedestrian “scramble”/diagonal crossing, wherein pedestrians get an entire light cycle to cross any length of road, including diagonally. This option could improve ease of crossing during peak tourism months.

- » 3rd Street: These should include crosswalk striping along the western edge, installation of a traffic signal with pedestrian countdowns (with sufficient time to cross), curb extensions/bulb-outs to allow room for people to congregate as they wait to cross, and ADA access to each sidewalk connection, including in front of the Highlander Mountain House.

#### T 3.2: Look for opportunities to install pedestrian refuge islands at midblock locations on Main Street.

- » Refuge islands can shorten the length of the crossing and giving pedestrians the chance to only cross half the street width at a time, improving safety for children and the elderly. Medians and refuge islands also enclose the visual perception of the roadway, encouraging heightened awareness of surroundings and greater compliance with speed limits and other traffic laws.

#### INTERSECTION IMPROVEMENTS AT 4TH AND 3RD STREET



The concepts above show potential pedestrian crossing improvements at Main Street and 4th Street (left) and Main Street and 3rd Street (right). Minor improvements to curb ramps will be made in the Summer of 2021 with the resurfacing of Main Street. Future improvements shown above could include pedestrian refuges to reduce crossing distances and the addition of trees and landscaping in key locations.

### T 3.3: Study opportunities to increase shade trees and landscaping along roads downtown.

- » Plant street trees along sidewalks, either in a designated planting area (i.e. buffer) or in designated grate structures.
- » Continue maintenance of street trees and landscaping at regular intervals along primary streets.
- » Study the conversion of several on-street parking spaces along Main Street into bulb outs, with shade trees and landscaping.
  - These should serve to buffer pedestrian crossings at both midblock locations and intersections, providing areas of refuge while crossing and shortening the distance of each crossing. This will improve safety, comfort, and aesthetics.

### T 3.4: Consider hosting an “Open Streets” event downtown.

- » Highlands’ well-connected central business district could host an “Open

# 57.8%



**Of survey responses indicate that people want more landscaping and trees downtown.** Adequate room in the right-of-way exists for adding trees and landscaping, but may require the removal of a few parking spaces. Replacement of spaces should be balanced with a reassurance that additional parking spaces elsewhere are planned for the near term. Placement of trees and landscaping should also seek to minimize impacting views to businesses.

Streets” event (temporarily closing one or several streets to automobiles on a weekend day to provide a safe space for walking, bicycling, socializing, and other outdoor activities). Main Street is ideal for such an event, with wide pavement width and effective detour options for through traffic. This would serve as a strong declaration in support of pedestrians and provide an opportunity to encourage healthy behavior.

### POTENTIAL MIDBLOCK CROSSING ON MAIN STREET



The concepts above illustrate options for a midblock crossing on Main Street between 3rd Street and 4th Street. The addition of a formal pedestrian crossing in this location would break up a 650ft block and create an easy and safe way for pedestrians to cross the street. It would also provide space for the addition of plantings. The exact design of the crossing will need to be refined through future study and coordinated with NCDOT. Ideally, the crossing would be implemented along with the creation of additional parking elsewhere.

## **Policy T 4: Fill sidewalk gaps and improve accessibility.**

### **T 4.1: Strategy 4.1: Update, expand, prioritize, and implement the Master Sidewalk Plan in the downtown and adjoining residential areas.**

- » Update Master Sidewalk Plan based on recommendations in the Community Plan.
- » Review types of sidewalk facility planned and refine recommendations based on available right-of-way and existing and potential development.

### **T 4.2: Work with NCDOT and other partners to address sidewalk extension priorities including:**

- » NC 106 (downtown to Highlands Country Club)
- » US 64 (Will Henry Stevens Covered Bridge to Mirror Lake Road)
- » Oak Street (downtown to The Bascom)

### **T 4.3: Improve pedestrian crossings by studying modifications to light cycles, the addition of pedestrian actuated signals, and adding curb extensions and/or pedestrian refuges along major corridors.**

- » As NCDOT makes improvements to key roadways through Highlands, Town staff should indicate a desire for intersections designed with curb extensions (bulb-outs) and reduced curb radii wherever feasible to shorten the distance that pedestrians must travel to cross a street, while slowing vehicular traffic as cars make turns. Narrowing the travel lane and reducing vehicular speeds during turning movements helps create a safer pedestrian environment.

### **T 4.4: Maintain a comprehensive sidewalk condition survey to prioritize infrastructure improvements and adhere to ADA accessibility standards for all new sidewalk construction.**

- » Completing the sidewalk network throughout the downtown is a priority, with a need for additions along the primary routes into town. Low-cost measures such as painted pavement can be evaluated.

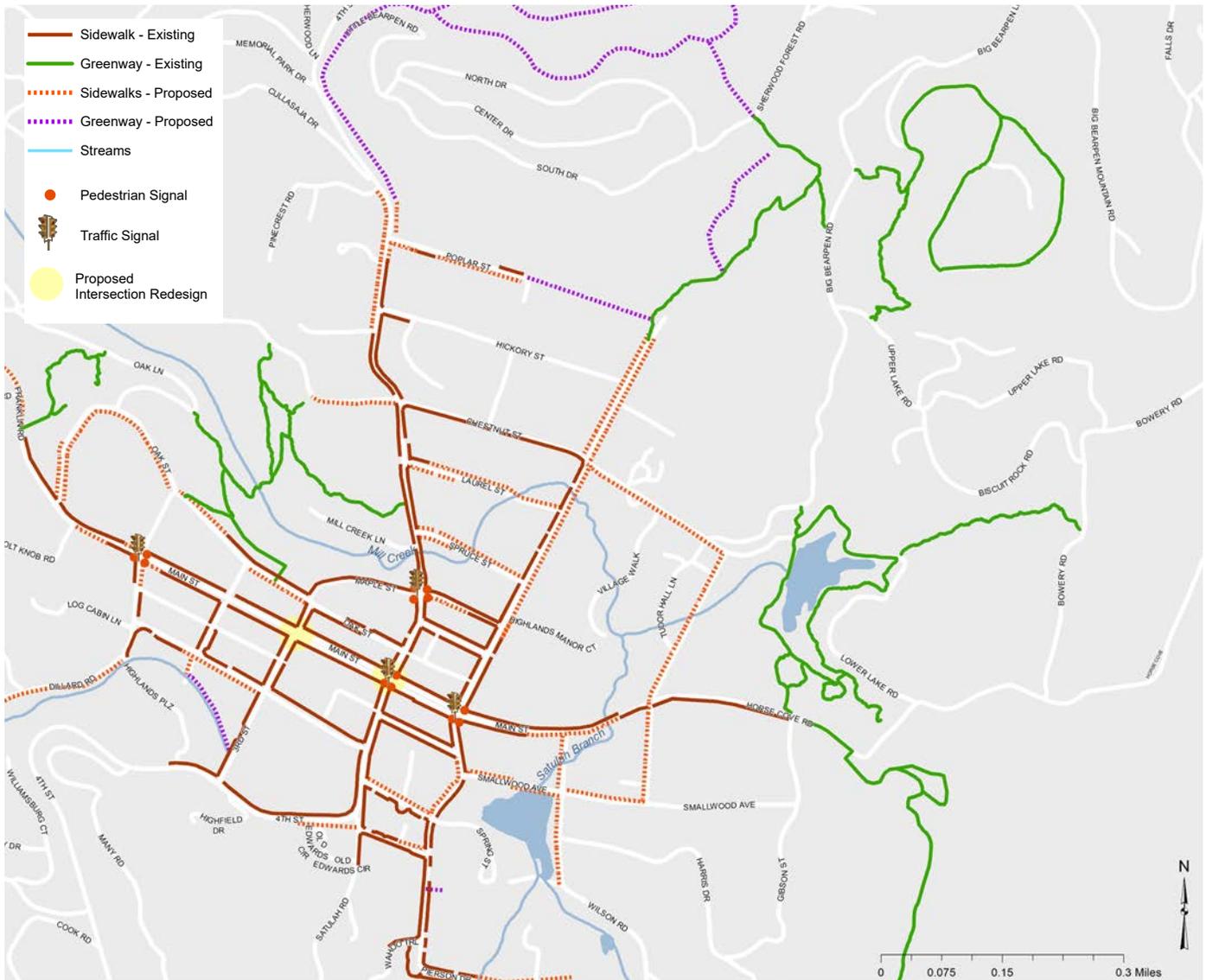
### **T 4.5: Develop an ADA Self-Assessment and Transition Plan.**

- » Work with NCDOT to formalize a document highlighting key accessibility priorities, improvement schedules, and accountability metrics (including designating an ADA Coordinator to respond to resident questions and concerns).

### **T 4.6: Establish a pedestrian task force, responsible for providing input to decision makers on projects, programs, and policies.**

- » This task force should make sure to receive and respond to citizen ideas and concerns, holding regular quarterly (or biannual) meetings to discuss all issues related to walking and pedestrians, including major projects (e.g. bridges, street repaving, comprehensive plans).
- » Pedestrian advisory groups can help spur innovation by providing a community forum to work through complicated issues such as sidewalk funding prioritization.

# EXISTING AND PLANNED SIDEWALKS AND GREENWAYS MAP



The map above shows existing and planned sidewalks and greenways in the Town of Highlands.

## Policy T 5: Continue to improve Highlands' Greenway System.

**T 5.1: Support the Highlands Plateau Greenway, a non-profit organization focused on developing a system of walking and hiking trails that protect the natural settings and historic sites of the Highlands area.**

- » The Town of Highlands should be a voice of support and a committed presence at meetings and support greenway extensions and formalizing existing paths.

## T 5.2: Work with property owners and new development to add internal and external sidewalk connections in new development

- » Candidate locations include along streets without adequate sidewalk facilities and greenway along creeks or connecting existing trails or key destinations.
- » All greenway easement agreements on private property should specify adequate room for both the construction and maintenance of the trail. The Town should consider

using available sewer easements and unused rights-of-way as a trajectory for possible future greenway paths.

- » Collaborate with the Highlands Plaza property owner to incorporate a greenway trail and/or pocket park along the creek at the north end of the property as part of future redevelopment site planning. Encourage a pedestrian connection from 2nd Street into the plaza and potentially to 3rd Street.

**T 5.3: Consider utilizing existing right-of-way for sidewalk, greenway or trail improvements.**

- » Work with NCDOT to discuss feasibility/cost of a multi-use path within the right-of-way along Dillard Road (NC 106) from Spring Street to the Town limit (or at least to Highlands Country Club). A sidewalk is a priority here, but a wider path is recommended to accommodate bicyclists and a greater number of users. This path could spur additional residential and commercial development along that corridor, while providing a safe multi-modal transportation and recreation corridor.
- » Engage with partners on long-range regional greenway planning projects, including a 10-mile multi-use path along Cashiers Road (US-64) connecting Highlands to Cashiers. Adequate right-of-way exists along this corridor, but considerable investment in financing and engineering will be necessary. Highlands should be represented at any regional planning level to ensure that the needs of the community are met.

**T 5.4: Improve visibility of the Highlands Greenway System through signage (wayfinding, markers or stencils, and maps) so that people understand how to access the trail system more intuitively.**

- » Develop a new Highlands Greenway Map that clearly differentiates between sidewalks, hiking trails, and paved paths. It is important for visitors to understand what a specific segment is supposed to look like and whether they are still on the right path, especially for users with mobility constraints. This will help ensure that the trail system is used correctly, comfortably, and easily. The map should highlight points of interest, parking areas, and other public amenities like bicycle parking and restrooms.

**T 5.5: Establish new pedestrian signage and trailhead enhancements to heighten visitor awareness of existing trails, enable access, and encourage use.**

- » Priority enhancements include pedestrian signage on 2nd Street to direct trail users to Oak Street trailhead, the northern terminus of 5th Street, and at Highlands Rec Park.
- » Existing and future public parking areas are also candidates for a trailhead for the Town's greenway system.

## Parking & Transit

### Policy T 6: Balance needs for parking with aesthetics and environmental impacts.

**T 6.1:** Consider utilizing paved portions of the right-of-way to address stormwater runoff on the Town's streets through strategic location of landscaping and/or permeable pavement.

**T 6.2:** Plan for a future parking garage near Main Street.

- » Continue to study town-owned land between Maple Street and Oak Street and the corner of Oak Street and Maple Street as potential locations for a parking deck with capacity for 75-200 or more vehicles.
- » The design of any multi-level public parking structures should incorporate commercial or residential uses wrapped around the structure's façade where feasible to maximize the use of space and improve aesthetics.
- » To encourage use, consider free parking at the garage coupled with increased restrictions and/or fees for parking on Main Street.

**T 6.3:** Consider long-term implementation of metered parking along portions of Main Street.

- » Metered parking could be implemented on a portion of Main Street between 3rd Street and 5th Street, where occupancy is typically highest.
- » These parking spaces are highly desirable and should reflect that value through a fee structure. The goal is to disincentivize people from parking all day in locations that benefit from turnover (i.e. commercial uses) and encourage people to park for free at peripheral locations (Oak Street, Spring Street, and 3rd Street) or future parking garages.



Main Street is the heart of Downtown, but prioritizes parking over pedestrian comfort and safety.

- » Coordination with downtown businesses will be necessary to determine an acceptable balance between free parking and metered parking.
- » Revenue could contribute to an enterprise fund used for the construction of additional on-street spaces, streetscape maintenance and beautification efforts on or near Main Street.

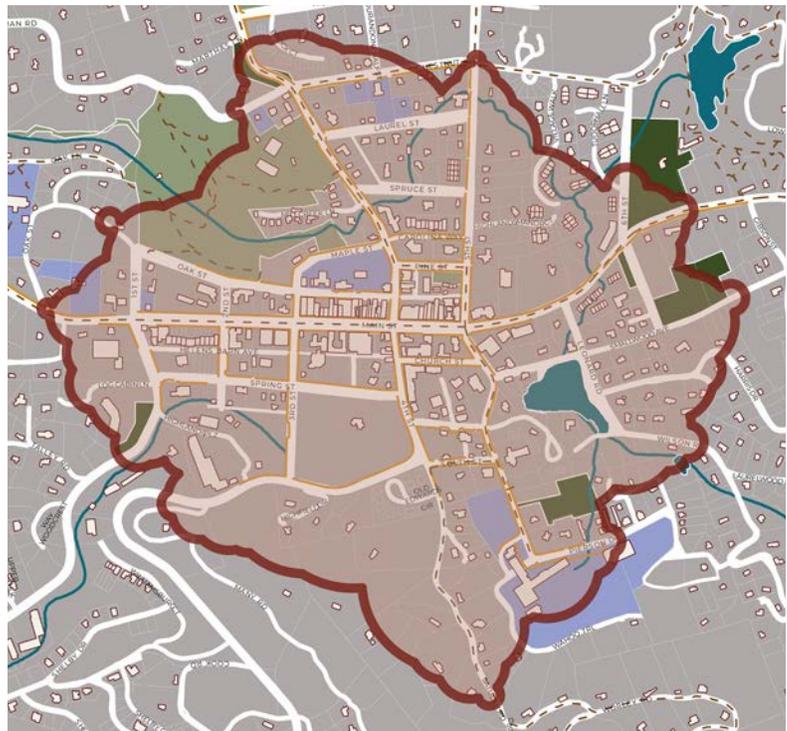
**T 6.4:** For new developments, allow off-site parking and enable shared parking arrangements for adjacent or nearby uses.

- » For example a bank can share parking spaces with a bar, since their peak business hours occur at different times of day.

**T 6.5:** Allow for lower minimum parking requirements (or offsets for bicycle parking) where appropriate.

- » Areas within walking distance to downtown and high rates of potential pedestrian or bicycle trips are candidate locations for reduced parking requirements.

- » Continue to allow reduced parking requirements in the Downtown Business District.
  - › *No parking requirement for B-1 uses or for first 2 accessory apartment units*
  - › *1 space per unit after 2 accessory units*
- » Downtown Support Area
  - Encourage shared parking agreements.
  - Consider reduced parking requirements.
    - › *Current code allows reduction of 20%, consider increasing this reduction to 33% if the development meets other defined criteria.*
    - › *Criteria could include a mix of residential and commercial development, access to sidewalk infrastructure, available on-street parking nearby, provision of bike parking on site, age targeted housing, etc.*
- » Medium Density Area
  - Require only 1 space per accessory dwelling unit (ADU.)



Shaded area represents a 10-minute walking distance from the intersection of Fourth and Main Streets. via Walkscore

### **T 6.6: Work with Highlands residents to design and implement a “Locals” parking system.**

- » The system could allow for year-round residents to purchase a parking permit with a decal that enables them to park in a restricted area on either Oak Street or Spring Street.
- » The total number of restricted spaces should equal the number of permits. This would enable them to confidently find parking a block from Main Street, even during the busiest peak seasons, while adding revenue to support an enterprise fund or other initiative.
- » Enforcement would be critical to success.

### **T 6.7: Begin to install bicycle parking infrastructure on Main Street and develop a systematic approach to placement selection and prioritization.**

- » Consider installation of bicycle parking on town-owned properties
- » Consider initiating a Town-sponsored bike parking application program for businesses and property owners, creating a streamlined process to apply for bike parking in the public right-of-way
- » There is an opportunity to rely on public demand and business support to influence placement location decision-making – using an application form whereby property owners or tenants can request installation of a bike rack.
- » Standard options for both on-the-sidewalk inverted u-racks and in-the-parking-lane bike corrals should be developed, with up-to-date design standards for both types.

## Policy T 7: Partner with Macon County Transit.

### T 7.1: Seek representation on the Macon County Transit Advisory Board.

- » A representative from the Town of Highlands should attend all Board meetings in Franklin to keep abreast of new endeavors, advocate for investments in the Highlands area, and ensure that the interests of Highlands residents are voiced.

### T 7.2: Coordinate a study to gauge the feasibility, cost, and need for a fixed bus route in Highlands.

- » The service could be similar to Franklin’s Mountain Gem route, whereby a daily shuttle navigates the primary streets with service to major employers and medical facilities in the area.
- » Having reliable regular bus service can be beneficial for employees, people who are not able to drive a personal vehicle, and visiting tourists.
- » Consider subsidizing this effort so that fares could be free or affordable (the Mountain Gem route is \$1 per boarding).

### T 7.3: Begin a dialogue with Macon County Transit about the possibility of implementing a seasonal (i.e. summer) circulator shuttle system.

- » In the short-term, this can ease parking demand on Main Street by enabling people to park farther away (Oak Street, Spring Street, 3rd Street, etc) but still access their destination on Main Street.
- » In the long-term, this can provide incentive for people to park at a nearby parking garage knowing they can easily ride the shuttle bus to other location in Highlands.



A custom bike rack could be design and used around downtown, starting with a few locations on town owned property or in the right-of-way, then included near other destinations.

## Policy T 8: Plan for electric vehicles (EVs) in Highlands.

### T 8.1: Combat “range anxiety” by investing in new EV charging stations.

- » Highlands should work with business leaders, benefactors, and other agencies to incorporate charging stations at schools, public parking lots and garages, retail outlet parking lots (like Highlands Plaza and Wright Square), country clubs, hotels, workplaces, and other major trip origins and attractions in Highlands.
- » The Town should consider a goal of adding one charging station on each block of Main Street, Oak Street, and Spring Street within the downtown business district.

**T 8.2: Replace all or a portion of the Town of Highlands' gas-powered vehicle fleet with zero-emission electric vehicles.**

- » In the short-term, this should include any cars and light trucks. Prioritize buying electric cars when the price is within 5% of the cost of a gas car.
- » Heavy-duty vehicles used for snow removal and other needs might be phased out as technology advances and they become reliable for those uses and more cost-competitive.

**T 8.3: Consider new development standards for multi-family residential and non-residential construction that require developers to install electric charging stations.**

- » These standards can be incorporated into existing parking requirements and can become more stringent over time. Consider requiring one (1) EV charging station for every twenty (20) conventional parking spaces (or 5% of the total).

**T 8.4: Encourage new single-family residential homes that are "EV Ready"**

- » EV Ready homes have appropriate electrical panel capacity, conduit, and circuitry to accommodate future charging of EVs.

### ELECTRIC VEHICLES (EVs)

While the internal combustion engine automobile has dominated the 20th century, prevalent electric vehicle (EV) technology will be the future. Introduced in 2010 as the world's first mass-market electric vehicle, the Nissan Leaf has led the way in making the excitement and convenience of electric driving accessible to non-luxury buyers. Coupled with the success of higher-end electric vehicles like those designed and produced by Tesla, EVs are poised to dominate the market share of vehicles on the road within a few decades.

It is assumed that sales of electric and hybrid vehicles will quickly increase as charging infrastructure expands and battery costs decrease. Owners of electric and hybrid vehicles in North Carolina pay less in combined gas taxes and registration fees compared to owners of gasoline-powered vehicles. This shortfall will add up as the use of these vehicles continues to grow.

These challenges have prompted many states and local governments to consider actions that increase or modernize their transportation revenue sources. As more drivers alter their mobility patterns that reduce miles traveled and shift to more fuel-efficient vehicles, motor fuel tax revenues will decline. As a result, new or better revenue sources will be necessary to offset those losses and ensure that North Carolina can meet its future transportation investment needs. Highlands should be prepared for a near-term drop in Powell Bill fund levels for Town-maintained roads and prioritize maintenance strategies to accommodate those changes.

## TRANSPORTATION ACTION ITEMS

The items below list priority regulations, plans and programs that, if implemented, will advance town goals. Implementing the recommendations of this plan will involve town staff, elected officials, appointed boards, partners, residents and business owners.

**Action Item 16:** Prioritize the implementation of the Master Sidewalk Plan in downtown and adjoining residential areas (T4).

- » 16A: Priority connections include NC 106 (downtown to Highlands Country Club), US 64 (Will Henry Stevens Covered Bridge to Mirror Lake Road), and Oak Street (downtown to The Bascom)

**COST: MEDIUM-HIGH**  
**TIMEFRAME: MEDIUM-TERM**

**Action Item 17:** Coordinate and support the Highlands Plateau Greenway in their efforts to improve Highlands' Greenway System (T5).

- » 17A: Implement priority signage and trailhead enhancements
- » 17B: Pursue priority trail extensions
  - *Study a greenway/trail extension along US 64 north of town*
  - *Formalize trail between Poplar Street and the trailhead at the end of 5th Street for the Kelsey Trail Preserve. Also consider adding a formal turn-around and signage.*

**COST: LOW (17A), MEDIUM (17B)**  
**TIMEFRAME: MEDIUM-TERM**

**Action Item 18:** Develop an ADA Self-Assessment and Transition Plan (T4).

- » 18A: Designate staff resources or hire a consultant to document highlighting key accessibility priorities, improvement schedules, and accountability metrics (including designating an ADA Coordinator to respond to resident questions and concerns).

**COST: MEDIUM**  
**TIMEFRAME: SHORT-TERM**

**Action Item 19:** Manage and expand vehicular parking. (T6)

- » 19A: Continue to manage existing parking and consider additional steps, including metering in some areas, to encourage turnover for visitation of businesses.
- » 19B: Study feasibility and costs of adding additional on-street parking on Main Street, Oak Street and Spruce Street.
- » 19C: Study additional public parking lot and/or parking deck options and costs.

**COST: MEDIUM**  
**TIMEFRAME: SHORT-TERM (19B), MEDIUM-TERM (19A), LONG-TERM (19C)**

**COST KEY**

- N/A = NO COST / CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED WITH EXISTING RESOURCES AND STAFF TIME
- LOW = COST > \$10,000
- MEDIUM = COST \$10,000-100,000
- HIGH = COST >\$100,000

**TIMEFRAME KEY**

- ONGOING = UNDERWAY AND RECOMMENDED TO CONTINUE
- SHORT-TERM = 1-2 YEARS
- MEDIUM-TERM = 2-3 YEARS
- LONG-TERM = 3+ YEARS

## TRANSPORTATION ACTION ITEMS (CONTINUED)

### Action Item 20: Encourage walking, biking and use of electric vehicles. (T6, T8)

- » 20A: Consider reduced parking requirements in walkable areas.
- » 20B: Locate new bicycle parking and EV charging stations downtown.

**COST: N/A (20A), LOW (20B)**

**TIMEFRAME: MEDIUM-TERM**

#### COST KEY

- N/A = NO COST / CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED WITH EXISTING RESOURCES AND STAFF TIME
- LOW = COST > \$10,000
- MEDIUM = COST \$10,000-100,000
- HIGH = COST >\$100,000

#### TIMEFRAME KEY

- ONGOING = UNDERWAY AND RECOMMENDED TO CONTINUE
- SHORT-TERM = 1-2 YEARS
- MEDIUM-TERM = 2-3 YEARS
- LONG-TERM = 3+ YEARS

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## INFRASTRUCTURE & PUBLIC SERVICES

### Issues to Address

Each summer and well into the fall the population of the Town of Highlands swells by many thousands from an influx of seasonal residents, overnight visitors and day trippers. Managing sanitation, electric, water and sewer and public safety infrastructure and services for current demands is challenging. If more seasonal residents become year-round residents and if post-COVID population growth continues, Highlands can anticipate future increases in infrastructure and services needs. It is imperative to plan for strategies to meet those needs before they become a problem.

### Primary Infrastructure and Service Goals

**GOAL #1:** Town Character: Vibrant village center with distinct character that is surrounded by mostly low-density housing that blends with the natural environment.

**GOAL #2:** Preservation of the Environment: Preserve and enhance the natural environment and the scenic beauty of Highlands.

**Goal #3:** Local Economy: Support and sustain the local economy including downtown businesses, tourism, the arts, and outdoor recreation.

### Policy PS 1: Ensure adequate waste disposal and sanitation services.

**PS 1.1: Continue enforcement of existing regulations related to waste disposal.**

**PS 1.2: Regularly evaluate the balance of expenditures and revenues for the sanitation department.**

- » Consider hiring a third-party accounting firm to perform an unbiased audit and develop creative and practical long-term solutions.

**PS 1.3: Regularly evaluate the need for increases in garbage collection fees for both residential and commercial customers to cover town service costs.**

- » The short-term need is likely an additional \$3-\$4/month per customer in order for the department to remain solvent.
- » Explore options for phasing that cost in over time or allocating more of the burden to businesses instead of residential customers (e.g. raising rates

for commercial weekend pickup only or targeting fees for businesses that require additional pick-ups).

- » Consider cardboard and other recycling services needs and costs during the evaluation.

**PS 1.4: Consider reducing residential garbage pickup to one time a week instead of two.**

- » Many communities follow this schedule, and it could help lower overall costs while still providing adequate services.
- » Allow residents to weigh in on this decision, with a public survey to gauge acceptance of this change versus an increase in monthly fees.

**PS 1.5: Continue to commit to bear-proof refuse containers.**

- » Bear-proof containers are needed for public use downtown and for residential and commercial customers.
- » Replacing all shared commercial dumpsters with 95-gallon "toters"

(cans on wheels) is also advised.

**PS 1.6: Identify a location for a convenience center within or near town limits.**

- » Residents and businesses can take their waste and recycling in between scheduled pickups.
- » This would enable the department to simultaneously shift its pickup schedule to a more limited basis because it would offer a solution for those with more of a need.

**Policy PS 2: Maintain and enhance the electric grid.**

**PS 2.1: Maintain and work to improve the resiliency of the electric grid.**

- » Continue regular maintenance activities
- » Enhance operational capacity coincident with increased demands
- » Evaluate replacement and upgrade projects on an annual basis

**PS 2.2: Evaluate ways to improve customer service including outage reporting options.**

- » Consider establishing an after-hours answering service and/or a website based or mobile application for reporting outages

**PS 2.3: Reduce visibility of utilities.**

- » Encourage underground utilities, especially in the downtown area
  - Consider developing a formal policy specifying where underground utilities are required.
- » Consider the replacement of existing utilities with underground utilities wherever feasible.
  - Consider the pursuit of grant funding to support this effort.
  - Candidate locations include:
    - › West Main Street between 3rd and 1st Street
    - › US 64/Franklin Road gateway area

**Policy PS 3: Encourage energy efficiency and alternative fuel vehicles**

**PS 3.1: Encourage energy efficiency in new buildings (i.e. LEED certification, solar energy, or other measures).**

**PS 3.2: Consider electric vehicles or hybrids when purchasing new vehicles for the town fleet.**

**Policy PS 4: Improve access to high-speed internet and expand cell coverage.**

**PS 4.1: Support activation and completion of the fiber network.**

- » Will benefit residents by providing telecommuting options and businesses.
- » Support completion of the fiber network, with a goal to reassess the lease agreement after the term expires.
- » Encourage gradual expansion beyond the Town limits, in an effort to ensure rural connectivity throughout Macon County.

**PS 4.2: Improve public WiFi.**

- » Market/advertise existing public WiFi hot spots.
- » Determine opportunities for future hot spots (coordinate with businesses).

**PS 4.3: Explore options for “Smart City” technologies like real-time meter reading that make use of the expanded fiber optic Internet capacity.**

- » Smart meters are the foundation for intelligent measurement, monitoring, and control of electricity and water usage.
- » These systems can make a significant contribution to the transparency of actual power and water consumption bringing benefits to all parties involved.

**PS 4.4: Work with partners to improve 5G coverage.**

- » Consider partnerships with Macon County and other entities to improve cell phone coverage in and around town

**Policy PS 5: Focus water and sewer service improvements on existing town limits.**

**Policy PS 6: Allow for limited extension of water and sewer to areas near town limit boundaries if conditions are met.**

**PS 6.1: Consider limited extension adjacent to town limits if new development advances town goals, such as environmental preservation.**

- » Contiguous development is encouraged to prevent leapfrog development.
- » Water/sewer extension should be contingent upon annexation.

**Policy PS 7: Encourage an efficient, financially sound water and sewer system.**

**PS 7.1: Regularly evaluate connection and usage fees to allow for maintenance and necessary capital recovery.**

**PS 7.2: Consider updating policies to require utilities to be built to town standards.**

**PS 7.3: Continue policies to ensure new development is responsible to fund sewer extensions for private development.**

**PS 7.4: Continue policy of requiring grand-**

**fathered existing users outside of town limits to pay double rates.**

**PS 7.5: Explore options for “Smart City” technologies like real-time water meter reading that make use of the expanded fiber optic Internet capacity.**

**Policy PS 8: Protect water quality in Lake Sequoyah.**

**PS 8.1: Continue to limit impervious surface in water supply watersheds.**

**PS 8.2: Continue to prioritize stormwater best management practices (e.g. green roofs, on-site bioretention).** See the Natural Resources chapter for more recommendations.

**PS 8.3: Encourage subdivisions to include tree canopy preservation areas.**

**PS 8.4: Pursue grants to connect homes with septic systems in close proximity to Lake Sequoyah to the town sewer system.**

**LAKE SEQUOYAH WATER SUPPLY PROTECTION PROJECT**

There are a number of homes with older septic systems in close proximity to the water supply of Highlands.

Lake Sequoyah is the only source of water for the plateau and many homes (100-150 homes) have septic systems. Some of these homes are as old as 1920. A major retrofit project is needed to convert homes on septic drain fields to sewer. A similar project complete for Mirror Lake many years ago.

The Town has pursued grants but none of the \$5-6 million project has been completed yet. Due to its impact on the water supply this is the #1 priority sewer project inside the city limits.

**PS 8.5: Continue to monitor water quality in the town water system.**

- » Regularly clear the Lake Sequoyah intake and the Big Creek intake to ensure that sedimentation does not impair water supply allocation or distribution.
- » Continue to test water at peoples' homes at a rate of 20 homes every three years.

**PS 8.6: Continue to plan for maintenance and replacement costs of essential utilities infrastructure.**

- » Fund the replacement of a large clarifier tank, which has been in operation for over 50 years and is reaching its serviceable limit.
- » Plan for and fund necessary upgrades to the water and sewer system.
  - › *The 2019 Water Asset Management Plan notes proposed capital improvements that total \$35.9 million.*

**PS 8.7: Continue to pursue federal funding and prioritize local funding for major treatment upgrades and waterline replacement projects.**

- » Maximizing cost-sharing for essential projects will help keep long-term costs down by minimizing leaking pipes and improving overall capacity by keeping pipes free from debris and made from long-lasting material.

**PS 8.8: Develop a Water & Sewer Master Plan every five years in an effort to address ongoing needs, gauge success of maintenance and improvements, and remain eligible for state revolving loan projects and grants.**

- » Having up-to-date master plan documentation provides data to support projected future needs, which is helpful in the grant application process.

**PS 8.9: Work with the Upper Cullasaja Watershed Association to continue the bi-weekly newsletter, Know Your Watershed, with the Town of Highlands newspaper and the storm drain stenciling initiative.**

- » These activities help raise awareness of water quality and the efforts to protect drinking water in Highlands. In the future this can be coupled with a water conservation public education program.

### **Policy PS 9: Maintain adequate fire and emergency management response.**

**PS 9.1: Continue to coordinate with Macon County regarding fire coverage and response.**

**PS 9.2: Monitor personnel needs in order to maintain adequate fire coverage.**

- » Consider additional personnel in order to transition to 24 hour fire coverage.

**PS 9.3: Coordinate with Macon County Emergency Services Office to maintain and improve emergency response in Highlands and on the greater plateau.**

### **Policy PS 10: Maintain adequate police coverage in the Town of Highlands.**

**PS 10.1: Monitor personnel and equipment needs in order to maintain adequate police coverage.**

- » Encourage officer health and fitness.
  - Consider the addition of gym equipment at police station.
- » If growth in year-round population and visitation continues there may be a need for another officer per shift, especially at night.
  - In the long-term an additional rotating split-shift position may be needed.

**PS 10.2: Monitor speeds downtown and consider additional enforcement activities as needed**

- » Low speeds have kept downtown a safe place for pedestrians
- » Lower speed limits, roadway changes and/or additional enforcement activities should be considered as needed to keep pedestrians safe.

**PS 10.3: Continue coordination with Macon County Sheriff Dept. for mutual aid calls within established policies and confines of defined coverage area.**

**PS 10.4: Continue and expand community-oriented policing efforts**

- » Outreach to local businesses
- » Bike and foot patrol downtown
- » Education efforts
  - Crime reduction measures for seasonal residents
  - Outreach and education related to Short Term Rentals for owners and neighbors
  - “Coffee with a cop” events
  - Articles in paper, radio station recordings.

**PS 10.5: Encourage Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) on town owned properties**

- » Ensure adequate lighting and sight lines.
- » Consider the addition of CCTVs on public properties as needed.

## INFRASTRUCTURE AND PUBLIC SERVICES ACTION ITEMS

The items below list priority regulations, plans and programs that, if implemented, will advance town goals. Implementing the recommendations of this plan will involve town staff, elected officials, appointed boards, partners, residents and business owners.

### Action Item 21: Sanitation Services Priorities

- » 21A: Evaluate fee structure and pick-up schedules.
- » 21B: Identify a location for a convenience center within or near town limits.

**COST: LOW (21A), MEDIUM (21B)**

**TIMEFRAME: SHORT-TERM**

### Action Item 22: Evaluate ways to improve electric system customer service including outage reporting options.

- » 22A: Consider establishing an after-hours answering service and/or a website based or mobile application for reporting outages

**COST: LOW**

**TIMEFRAME: SHORT-TERM**

### Action Item 23: Pay off fiber project and improve public WiFi

- » 23A; Continue to make loan payments according to the amortization schedule for the initial \$4.6 million fiber optic construction project. Principal payments of approximately \$306,666 (plus interest payments) will continue through the year 2034.
- » 23B: Improve public Wifi by advertising existing hot spots and expanding coverage.

**COST: LOW (23B), HIGH (23A)**

**TIMEFRAME: SHORT-TERM**

### Action Item 24: Public Safety Priorities

- » 24A: Enhance community-oriented policing activities
- » 24B: Short Term rentals education and outreach
  - *Develop educational material in Winter of 2021*
  - *Coffee with a Cop / Q&A for STR - Citizen training in Spring of 2022*
- » 24C: Fund fitness equipment in police station and transition to SUVs for patrol vehicles.
- » 24E: Consider additional personnel in order to transition to 24 hour fire coverage and maintain adequate police coverage.

**COST: N/A (24A, 24B), LOW (24C), MEDIUM (24D, 24E)**

**TIMEFRAME: SHORT-TERM (24 A-C), MEDIUM-TERM (24E)**

#### COST KEY

- N/A = NO COST / CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED WITH EXISTING RESOURCES AND STAFF TIME
- LOW = COST > \$10,000
- MEDIUM = COST \$10,000-100,000
- HIGH = COST >\$100,000

#### TIMEFRAME KEY

- ONGOING = UNDERWAY AND RECOMMENDED TO CONTINUE
- SHORT-TERM = 1-2 YEARS
- MEDIUM-TERM = 2-3 YEARS
- LONG-TERM = 3+ YEARS

## INFRASTRUCTURE AND PUBLIC SERVICES ACTION ITEMS (CONTINUED)

**Action Item 25:** Pursue grants to connect homes with septic systems in close proximity to Lake Sequoyah to the town sewer system.

COST: HIGH  
TIMEFRAME: MID-TERM

**Action Item 26:** Plan for and fund necessary upgrades to the water and sewer system.

- » See the Water Asset Management Plan and Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) for details.

COST: HIGH  
TIMEFRAME: SHORT-TERM

### COST KEY

- N/A = NO COST / CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED WITH EXISTING RESOURCES AND STAFF TIME
- LOW = COST > \$10,000
- MEDIUM = COST \$10,000-100,000
- HIGH = COST >\$100,000

### TIMEFRAME KEY

- ONGOING = UNDERWAY AND RECOMMENDED TO CONTINUE
- SHORT-TERM = 1-2 YEARS
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