3. VISION FOR FOSTERING OUR FUTURE
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3.1 OVERVIEW

The community goals frame community members’ vision for Forsyth County’s future growth and development. Key components of this include the Vision Statement, Overarching Goals, and the Community Character Area Map. These visionary aspects of the Comprehensive Plan represent a long-term view of Forsyth County’s future.

- The Vision Statement and Overarching Goals are new aspects of the County’s Comprehensive Plan. They reflect a high-level, County-wide vision for the future that focuses on maintaining and enhancing the County’s unique character and quality of life for the next 20 years.

- The Community Character Map identifies 11 unique areas of the County, known as character areas. These areas acknowledge the diversity of communities within the County and their differences in character, location, and history. Associated narratives identify appropriate future development types and development characteristics for each area.

As a part of the visioning process, initial projections for future growth were communicated to the community. These preliminary projections—which showed the population nearly doubling in the next 20 years—were based on recent growth trends, and represent the “business as usual” future if there are no policy changes in the County. The Comprehensive Plan visioning process sought to answer two questions about this growth:

1. What is most important to us as community members now and in the future?
2. If we know our population will grow significantly, what is most important to guiding our future growth and investments?

While input varied, the planning team consistently heard from multiple members of the community that the County should achieve the following:

- Demand high quality design and character in new developments.
- Place emphasis on site-sensitive design that is respectful and seeks to preserve natural characteristics.
- Facilitate a better balance of jobs and housing to further a more balanced tax base.
- Create more accommodation for varying needs of our multi-generational community in our transportation network and housing.
- Facilitate nodes of commercial and social activity in the community.
- Protect and enhance our natural environment, schools, and community.
3.2 VISION STATEMENT

Forsyth County will promote responsible use of our natural assets and green space while advancing a balanced growth management strategy that strengthens and sustains quality of life for everyone.

FORMATION OF VISION STATEMENT & GOALS

The Vision Statement and Overarching Goals were developed over the course of the visioning and prioritization phases of the planning process. They are based upon a series of input channels, including in-person and virtual community workshops, stakeholder interviews, the community survey, and direction provided by citizen Vision and Steering Committees. By integrating input gathered from community members including residents, businesses, community groups, and other leaders, the Foster Forsyth Vision Statement is a true reflection of the public process.

From top to bottom: aspects of Forsyth’s high quality of life; Sawnee Mountain Preserve; groundbreaking at new Forsyth County Fire Station; and Forsyth County schools
3.3 OVERARCHING GOALS

A) INVEST IN OUR QUALITY OF LIFE
Continue to invest in quality schools, parks, and access to amenities, as well as protect natural and cultural resources.

B) IMPROVE MOBILITY
Make getting around Forsyth County easier by improving existing roadways and connectivity, adding opportunities for walking and bicycling, and advancing opportunities for transit and new transportation technologies to serve the long-term transportation needs of residents and businesses.

C) ENHANCE COMMUNITY CHARACTER
As new growth and development occur, maintain character, particularly in the most rural sections of the County, while establishing a high standard for quality design in private developments, streetscapes, and other initiatives.

D) EXPAND INFRASTRUCTURE THAT FURTERS OUR VISION FOR GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT
Ensure water, sewer, and transportation infrastructure plans and programmed investments further our community’s future development vision and keeps pace with community needs.

E) FACILITATE JOB OPPORTUNITIES
Attract job opportunities that create a better match between the County’s workforce and nearby employment opportunities. By attracting more employers to the County, the tax base will become better balanced and more sustainable.

F) MAINTAIN & EXPAND GREENSPACE
Protect our cornerstone greenspaces—Sawnee Mountain Preserve, public areas surrounding Lake Lanier including the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area, parks, and rivers and streams—while furthering site-sensitive design that respects the environment and incorporates meaningful open space.

Figure 3.1: Overarching Goals
3.4 COMMUNITY CHARACTER MAP

MAP OVERVIEW

The Community Character Map complements and expands upon the Forsyth community's Vision Statement and Overarching Goals for the future by creating a location-based vision for Forsyth County. The Community Character Map provides a vision for future growth and development within these distinct areas of Forsyth County through the plan horizon year of 2037.

The map defines a series of subareas—known as character areas—that respect and reflect each area's unique role in the County based on its character, location, and history. The Community Character Map will serve as the County's guide for future rezoning and development decisions. The map and corresponding narrative will be used by County staff and elected and appointed boards to make recommendations and future land use decisions, including additions and updates to the County's zoning code, place-specific design standard considerations, and future zoning and development approvals.

Through the public engagement process, 11 unique character areas (in no particular order) were identified:

1. McFarland
2. South Georgia 400
3. Big Creek
4. Haw Creek & Daves Creek
5. Lanier
6. Vickery Creek
7. Campground
8. North GA 400
9. Chestatee/Jot Em Down
10. Etowah
11. Sawnee Mountain

Figure 3.2 illustrates the location of each character area.

HOW THE MAP WAS CREATED

The character areas were defined from a place-based approach to planning and future development. Throughout Foster Forsyth's visioning process, community members expressed their desire to enhance the sense of place within the County. Specifically, the community wants to create a stronger identity that recognizes the attributes of its communities. The Foster Forsyth Steering Committee created a first draft of character area boundaries, which were then presented to participants at public Design Workshops for input and revisions. From this input, the Community Character Map was refined into the 11 character areas.

This place-based, character area-specific approach builds upon—yet differs from—the Future Development Map in the County's 2012 Comprehensive Plan. The Future Development Map generally defined character areas based on their proposed land use classifications and focused on establishing and enhancing development along major transportation corridors. As a product of this approach, the vision for much of the County's land outside of major corridors is defined by its proposed housing type, predominantly suburban living.

To define appropriate growth and development policies for each character area—as well as disperse development in a manner consistent with Countywide and area-specific policies—the proposed Community Character Map identifies 11 character areas within unincorporated Forsyth County that have different attributes and development expectations for the future. Not only is each character area defined based on its current state and envisioned future, this approach will promote a series of community nodes that build on the identity of each area. These nodes are envisioned to function as centers of activity for surrounding neighborhoods and will allow for more intensity of development in appropriate locations. They will primarily be mixed use and will vary in look, feel, and scale depending on their location within the County.
Figure 3.2: Community Character Map

Character Areas:
- North Georgia 400
- South Georgia 400
- Chestatee/Jot Em Down
- Campground
- City of Cumming
- Haw Creek and Daves Creek
- Lanier
- McFarland
- Etowah
- Sawnee Mountain
- Big Creek
- Vickery Creek

Nodes:
- A - Silver City
- B - Matt
- C - Coal Mountain
- D - Hammond's Crossing
- E - Chestatee
- F - Lake Lanier / Mary Alice Park
- G - Highway 20 (Community Node)
- H - Highway 20 (Neighborhood Node)
- I - Castleberry / Bethelview
- J - South GA 400 / Highway 141
- K - Haw Creek
- L - Peachtree Parkway
- M - McFarland/Shiloh Rd.
DEVELOPMENT NODES

Through the Foster Forsyth engagement process, development nodes were identified within each character area. Development nodes are areas where employment, commercial, and higher intensity uses should be concentrated to create regional, community, and neighborhood activity centers.

Nodes were identified by community members at Foster Forsyth design workshops and then detailed and adjusted based on feedback from the Steering Committee and comparison with the current Forsyth County Comprehensive Plan. The nodes were then adjusted to include existing industrial, commercial, and available vacant land based on the existing land use map. Lower intensity residential neighborhoods were specifically excluded from the development nodes. Based on this methodology and the need to maintain flexibility for future subdivisions and assemblages, the nodes took on more organic shapes and forms.

Throughout the Foster Forsyth process, there were discussions of “town center” areas. These discussions generally focused on areas that foster a mix of uses, particularly office and higher end commercial uses, a high level of walkability, and often a central open space. As the process evolved, the team and community defined three scales of “town centers.” “Regional centers” are larger in scale and are intended to reach a regional market area within and outside the County, while “community centers” are intended to be smaller scale commercial centers with complementary office and residential uses for a more local audience. “Neighborhood nodes” are intended to be neighborhood scale shopping centers that may be adjacent to other uses and foster a greater level of local connectivity.

Each node falls into one of three categories reflecting the appropriate types of uses, density, and intensity for that node.

REGIONAL NODES
- Serve the region and County as a whole
- Located along major arterial roadways and corridors
- Higher concentrations of employment and commercial uses
- Allow for larger developments and larger facilities
- High density residential should be considered as part of mixed-use developments

COMMUNITY NODES
- Serve larger areas or more populated areas of the County
- Located along major arterial streets and corridors
- Higher concentrations of commercial and office development
- Higher density residential should be located within these nodes or in adjacent areas subject to Planning Commission and Board of Commissioners review

NEIGHBORHOOD NODES
- Serve the collection of local neighborhoods and communities around them
- Located along arterial streets and corridors
- Commercial development should be predominant and clustered around prominent intersections
- Smaller scale and intensity with a “small town core” feel
3.5 CONNECTING THE VISION WITH MARKET REALITIES

The residential real estate market in Forsyth County is very healthy. Since emerging from the Great Recession in 2009, property prices have risen steadily while days-on-market have decreased. Residential home builders—from small, local builders to large national companies—have been very active in the County delivering predominantly detached single-family homes. Development has mainly occurred in stand-alone subdivisions and on scattered lots that were developed prior to the housing market downturn.¹

The initial population projections developed during the Existing Conditions phase of the Comprehensive Plan update process have embedded assumptions about market demand for new housing. Namely, past levels of new construction (as measured by the issuance of building permits) are projected forward over the 20-year planning horizon. These projections are the basis for considering a plausible amount of growth in different types of development that could be anticipated during the 20-year planning horizon, and then used to help further discussion with community members about the appropriate location for different types and scales of land uses in the future.

A detailed market study would be required in order to develop more specific forecasts for residential and commercial demand; however, in general, development in the County will continue to be driven by regional employment growth. Companies that relocate to or expand within the Atlanta area create jobs and demand for office or industrial real estate. Their employees require housing, goods, and services, and those households in turn generate demand for retail real estate. Therefore, the pace and volume of population growth directly influences (and is influenced by) the opportunity to develop new office, industrial, and retail space in the County. If population growth lags behind projections, development will take longer or take on a lower intensity format. If population growth exceeds projections, development will happen faster and possibly at a higher intensity.

Over the last five years, the Atlanta region has absorbed an average of 2.8 million square feet of office space per year. Approximately 12 percent of that absorption (320,000 square feet per year) has occurred in the north Fulton County submarket, which includes most of Forsyth County. Currently Forsyth County captures only a modest share of north Fulton County office absorption. If Forsyth County were to capture 25 percent of north Fulton County demand, over 20 years this would equate to roughly 1.6 million square feet or about 12 five-story buildings. Based on current market trends, this is an aggressive outlook but could represent the “upper limit” of potential outcomes.

Retail demand is tied directly to population growth and household spending; however, the amount of retail supported per capita in the United States is declining, and retail formats are constantly evolving to meet the changing preferences of the market. Nation wide there is approximately 23 square feet of retail space per capita. Based on the “business as usual” growth rate of about 9,300 people per year, the County would require roughly 215,000 square feet of new retail space per year, or 4.3 million square feet over 20 years. The Taubman and Halcyon mixed use projects in south Forsyth County could account for half of that space. However, given market trends, a more realistic vision would be for substantially less retail square footage per person, delivered in grocery-anchored neighborhood centers and in existing nodes redeveloped at a higher density.

Considering the nature of economic cycles and the housing market, some years will see more growth than others and predicting those fluctuations is challenging; however, it is assumed that for the foreseeable future demand for housing in Forsyth County will remain strong given its outstanding schools, quality of life, and location in the Atlanta metropolitan area. From this perspective, the preliminary projections reflect a continuation of current trends both regionally and in Forsyth County. Therefore, barring another market downturn, land use policy will be the primary regulator of population growth going forward.

¹ Zillow Market Trends
Raising the standard for quality development in Forsyth County—through lower density or more effectively through stronger development regulations irrespective of density—should not result in lower demand, but may result in higher values. This could lead to fewer new homes built over the next 20 years than would have been constructed under current policies, but higher quality developments. The character areas identified in Section 3.4 reflect the public’s vision of the future, which is more aligned with this approach and, therefore, will likely lead to slower population growth than is reflected in the preliminary population forecast provided in the Existing Conditions Report and available in Appendix A.

Adjusted population projections that align with the land use vision are provided in Section 3.6. This slower residential growth would result in less commercial office and retail space being developed over the planning period and would also impact the format in which that space is delivered. For example, slower population growth would likely delay the creation of new town centers or result in town centers with fewer retail offerings.

3.6 POPULATION PROJECTIONS ALIGNED WITH LAND USE VISION

Once the land use vision for Forsyth County was defined, it was possible to better project the future population of Forsyth County. Based on the future land uses envisioned in the Foster Forsyth process, the County could support an additional 145,645 residents in unincorporated areas. When coupled with population projections from the City of Cumming and added to the current population, the Comprehensive Plan envisions a total population of approximately 361,182 residents. It is estimated that this population will be reached in approximately 2037. This pace of growth was determined by slowing down the current rate of County permit approvals (3,172 new units approved per year) by 25 percent. The assumption of a slowdown reflects Foster Forsyth’s recommendations to apply a more rigorous approval process for permitting that requires developers to meet a higher standard of design and connectivity.

Ultimately, projections are just the informed calculation of one growth scenario. The ultimate growth that Forsyth County experiences over the next several years will be the result of a variety of factors, including how closely the County’s future land use plan (the Community Character Map) is followed by County leadership, changes in market interests, the overall health of the metro Atlanta economy, the activities of surrounding jurisdictions, and other unforeseen factors.