

Mebane City Beat: Town sets forth Mebane 2045 plan

BY KELLY HUNTER
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS OF ORANGE

Every municipality should plan for the future and consider how they would like to grow and what they envision their community will look like twenty years down the road. But how do you plan for growth and set guidelines to refer back to? The answer is through a comprehensive plan! Comprehensive plans are a long-term planning tool that guides a community's development and preservation. A comprehensive plan is used by local governments in North Carolina to set a vision for the future and to serve as a policy guide. While not legally binding, the plan provides guidance to elected and appointed officials on planning-related decisions. All local zoning and land-use regulations must be in accordance with the comprehensive plan; therefore, zoning is used to establish the rules to achieve the vision established in the planning documents.

The City of Mebane adopted its current Comprehensive Land Development Plan, known as Mebane By Design, in 2017. The plan established a 2035 vision for Mebane with development goals based on the community input the City had received. Mebane By Design describes existing conditions related to demographics, land development infrastructure, land use, zoning, and land suitability. Most notably, the Comprehensive Land Development Plan defines growth strategy areas in and around Mebane. It sets specific goals and actions for these areas related to growth management, public facilities and infrastructure, community appearance, open space, natural resource protection, and coordination.

Since the 2017 plan was adopted, Mebane has grown exponentially and continues to see significant growth. So far, the City has approved more than 3,400 residential units, five million square feet of industrial space, and 210,000 square feet of new commercial space for development. In the last several years, development approvals have demonstrated a growth trend in the southern and eastern areas of greater Mebane. Approximately 40% of recently approved residential development is planned south of Interstate 40/85, and half of the new Mebane neighborhoods are in Orange County. More than 80% of new industrial development occurs in eastern Mebane, along Buckhorn Road and West Ten Road. Most of the commercial development that has been constructed or approved for development is south of Interstate 40/85, around the major corridors of Mebane Oaks Road and NC Highway 119. The 2017 plan, Mebane by Design, also identified Secondary Growth Areas. Since then, more residential and commercial developments have been in the Secondary Growth Areas, suggesting that more specific guidance and recommendations for these locations may need to be developed. Due to these observations and growing trends, the City is working on updating its Comprehensive Land Development Plan in a planning process referred to as Mebane 2045—Planning for a Charming Tomorrow.

Comprehensive plans are typically updated every five to ten years to meet a community's emerging needs and changes. In March 2024, the Mebane City Council adopted a new Recreation and Parks Comprehensive Master Plan and an updated Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation Plan. These updated plans will help guide the process for the new comprehensive plan. In addition, the Mebane City Council also accepted an updated Long-Range Utility Plan (LRUP) in July 2024, discussing Mebane's future water and wastewater treatment. The updated LRUP examined Mebane's growth trends and provided an expanded study area to consider when updating the comprehensive plan. To successfully establish and assemble a new Comprehensive Land Development Plan, the City will refer to these updated plans and include the community's input to guide the plan's development.

The first step in updating the 2017 Plan was to release a Request for Proposals (RFP) on March 1, 2024. Mebane sought proposals from qualified consultant firms that could provide the necessary planning services to update the Comprehensive Land Development Plan.



COURTESY OF THE CITY OF MEBANE

Mebane's Community Advisory Committee presentation

The RFP description explained to interested firms that the new plan would deliver a vision derived from community and stakeholder input to guide future development policies, regulations, and decisions. The City of Mebane received five proposals total and, from there, chose Green Heron Planning, LLC, from Durham, North Carolina, and their frequent collaborator Nealon Planning, PLLC, from Hickory, North Carolina.

Green Heron Planning (GHP) owner and principal Ben Hitchings has received recognition for exemplary planning through his Fellow of the American Institute of Certified Planners (FAICP) award. Ben is a Certified Zoning Official (CZO) with more than 30 years of experience in planning issues. He has developed award-winning plans at the local and regional levels. He has extensive public sector experience, including working as a former planning director for Morrisville and Chapel Hill. Ben will manage the project, co-lead the public engagement component, assist with the land use analysis, and lead the development of effective implementation strategies to help Mebane realize its updated vision. Meg Nealon of Nealon Planning is a planner and landscape architect certified by the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) and carries the title of Professional Landscape Architect (PLA). Meg brings more than 30 years of design experience for public and private sector clients, communicating development concepts to shape visions for the future. She will lead the land use planning component, co-lead the public engagement work, and assist with developing effective implementation measures. In addition to Ben and Meg, Matt Noonkester of City Explained, Inc. and Kathleen Rose of Rose & Associates will contribute to specific parts of the process, such as housing and retail analysis and developing document maps. Planning Director Ashley Ownbey stated, "The proposal submitted by Green Heron Planning and Nealon Planning stood out to staff as a group of professionals who understand the importance of crafting a plan around a community's vision while considering emerging trends. I believe Ben and Meg will help the City of Mebane produce a plan that is responsive to the growth pressures we experience from our location between two major urban areas. One of my favorite lines from their proposal is: 'Sometimes the places in between become the places to be.' Mebane's charm appeals to many, and a well-crafted comprehensive plan will help us maintain this charming place that our community loves."

The next step in drafting a plan for Mebane 2045—Planning for a Charming Tomorrow was to ensure community members are active in the planning process by creating a Community Advisory Committee. Members of the Community Advisory Committee are charged

with acting as a sounding board for the project. These members serve as community ambassadors for the planning process, becoming knowledgeable about the Plan and serving as champions for all that is good about the Plan. Individuals were encouraged to apply online via the City's website to become a Community Advisory Committee member. Overall, the City received 19 applications, and during the August 5 City Council meeting, 14 applicants were appointed to serve on the Committee. Ben Hitchings, principal of Green Heron Planning, stated, "The Community Advisory Committee plays an essential role in the project by providing local knowledge and insights and helping to connect the community with the planning process. We've got a great group that will help make the development of the Mebane 2045 comprehensive plan another Mebane success story!"

Updating the Comprehensive Land Development Plan is a yearlong process that began in July 2024. The planning process will proceed in three phases: 1) discovery, 2) plan development, and 3) direction and documentation. Participation from the community will be critical throughout the three phases. Right now, the City is seeking input from the community as the next crucial step in the process. Citizens looking to get involved in planning Mebane's future can do so by visiting <https://cityofmebanenc.gov/mebane-2045/>. Here, you will be able to access a link to a survey, where citizens can share what they love about Mebane and what type of development they would like to see in the future. The survey is open now until November 30, 2024. Another way citizens can participate in the planning process for Mebane 2045—Planning for a Charming Tomorrow is to attend the public forums that will be held during the developing and drafting phase of the plan. The first public forum is on Tuesday, November 19, from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Mebane Arts and Community Center. The following public forum will be announced via the City's social media accounts in the coming days/weeks. You can also sign up to receive updates on this process from City staff by emailing planning@cityofmebane.com.

The entirety of the planning process for Mebane 2045 is estimated to be completed within 12 to 18 months. The Mebane Planning Department will work closely with the selected consultants to ensure the finished Plan aligns closely with the City's goals and community input. Once a draft is completed, the Mebane Planning Board will review the Plan and make a recommendation to the Mebane City Council. City staff expect to present a draft of the updated Comprehensive Land Development Plan to the City Council in the summer of 2025. From there, the City Council will consider the Plan and make the final decision to adopt or alter the Plan.

Kids Voting NC to provide mock voting experience for youth in Orange Co.

STAFF REPORTS

Beginning as a program of NC Cooperative Extension Durham County Center, Kids Voting NC 4-H has grown to include approximately 20 counties around the state including here in Orange County through the local 4-H Program. The Kids Voting NC program builds youth's civic knowledge, skills, and agency through an authentic election experience. All opportunities and materials through the Kids Voting NC Program are non-partisan, youth-led, and equity-oriented to ensure a meaningful impact for any interested youth. This includes a non-partisan youth election guide developed by Orange County teens as a resource for children to grow in their knowledge and understanding of our governmental processes as well as feel

empowered to become engaged citizens. The Orange County youth election guide can be accessed at go.ncsu.edu/kidsvotingorange.

This year, a team of Orange County teens worked diligently to identify key topics of interest for today's youth and posed questions to candidates on local topics that are top of mind for their generation. This year's team members are Kate Conway, Bryielle Foster, Rowan Hlavaty, Cliona McKenna, Gabriela Mebane, Aum Menon, and Nitya Sharma.

Civic engagement, civic education, service, and leadership are several of the pillars in 4-H that the Kids Voting NC program nurtures along with the work of staff and volunteers in the county. On November 5 at the Bonnie B Davis Environment & Agricultural Center

(Orange County Northern Campus) and the Orange County Public Library, youth ages 5 up to 18 are invited to experience a mock voting activity where they can research, learn, and vote for the same candidates that are on the adult voter ballot. The Davis Center activities will be available 9:00am-6:00pm. The Orange County Public Library will offer Kids Voting NC activities 11:00am-6:00pm on the second floor of the library. Activities will include voting in a mock election, making an 'I Voted' button, exploring a civic engagement quote walk, and more! Activities at each site will be the same and there is no cost to participate.

In addition to the public Kids Voting North Carolina events at the Davis Center and the Orange County Public Library, Eno River Academy and Ephesus

Elementary School will host their own Kids Voting NC mock elections on their respective campuses. At the end of Election Day, Kids Voting NC votes are tallied so the public can see how youth vote on this year's county and state races. Results will be shared on the Orange County 4-H Facebook Page as well as the Orange County Cooperative Extension website at orange.ces.ncsu.edu.

The Davis Center and the Orange County Public Library are not voting precincts for adult voters. Adult voters looking for information on their voting locations should visit the Orange County Board of Elections website.

For more information on the Orange County Kids Voting NC events, contact County Extension Director Jonathon Smith at 919-245-2057 or jonathon_smith@ncsu.edu.

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