

HORIZON PLAN

2045

IREDELL COUNTY

Iredell County Horizon Plan  
**Issues and Opportunities Report**

DECEMBER 7, 2022



# Issues and Opportunities

This document contains a summary of the issues and opportunities that have been revealed as a part of the project kickoff meetings and stakeholder conversations. On September 28 and 29, 2022, the project team held conversations with the following stakeholders representing County departments and task forces as well as partner agencies and service providers:

- Economic Development Taskforce
- Emergency Medical Services
- Environmental Health Department
- Fire Marshall’s Office
- Iredell Statesville Schools
- Iredell Water
- NC State Cooperative Extension
- Parks and Recreation Department
- Planning and Development Department

The project team also toured the county and met with a standing steering committee convened to help guide the Horizon Plan 2045 update. Seeking input is an ongoing process, and the project team anticipates further useful discussions to help guide the update. At this stage there are three primary policy topics identified:

- Preserve Farmlands and Agriculture
- Prepare for Oncoming Growth
- Coordinate Varied Interests Across the County and with Partners

PRIMARY POLICY TOPICS	ISSUES	OPPORTUNITIES
<p><b>Preserve Farmlands and Agriculture</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional demand for other types of development</li> <li>• Slow-down in new VAD and EVAD enrollment</li> <li>• Development on septic and well systems in the County is possible with more ease and with more intensity than many other areas that rely on these systems (issue and opportunity)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong agricultural sector</li> <li>• Long history and heritage of farming</li> <li>• Good access to markets</li> <li>• Additional local food programs, farmers markets, farm to table options</li> <li>• VAD and EVAD preservation programs</li> <li>• Potential for additional agritourism, agri-education, and agri-neighborhoods</li> </ul>
<p><b>Prepare for Oncoming Growth</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools capacity and distribution challenges</li> <li>• Additional services for new residents needed</li> <li>• Pace of growth faster than County has seen in the past</li> <li>• Additional pressures on prime farmland</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growing water capacity</li> <li>• New wastewater/sewer service providers</li> <li>• Additional development demand pressure coming from the south (Charlotte), east (Winston-Salem/Carolina Core), and west (Hickory).</li> <li>• Economic development through quality of life amenities</li> <li>• New (public and private) destinations</li> </ul>
<p><b>Coordinate Varied Interests Across the County and with Partners</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closer coordination of departments and partners needed</li> <li>• Closer coordination of municipalities and County to match new challenges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existing collegial relationships among stakeholders</li> <li>• Informed and active residents across jurisdictions</li> <li>• Alignment of interest on community features that could support tourism</li> </ul>

## Preserve Farmlands and Agriculture

### Iredell as an Agricultural Powerhouse

The Importance of agriculture was clearly expressed by stakeholders and the steering committee. Even with population growth and new commercial and industrial employment, the County remains an agricultural powerhouse, and there is interest in programs and policies to protect that status. It has the most cows in the state, both milking cows for dairy and beef cattle. To feed them the County is also number one in corn silage and grows significant amounts of corn for feed. Though much of the capacity is in the north of the County, there are working farms in rural lands scattered throughout as well.

The sector is shifting. Over time the number of animals has been stable, but they are held on fewer farms continuing a trend since at least the 90's. Stakeholders believe the trend is from a combination of regulatory requirements and market demands.

The community has traditionally valued both preservation and private property rights, with an interest in allowing landowners to sell or develop land where it is feasible and appropriate without heavy regulation.

There are challenges securing the land for newer, younger, or smaller farms that can help be the next generation of farmers for the agricultural industry. There are statewide programs and state and national models for matching land and farmers that can be explored. The agricultural and farming community in Iredell has a tradition of mentoring new farmers.

There are multiple significant farmers markets including Pecan Park and the Rotary Market, and opportunities to expand or to create a larger regional market that could serve to connect both farmers and county residents well.

Much of the agriculture is commodity crops and livestock which is still conducive to some agritourism including event and corporate retreat venues, seasonal corn mazes and festivals, but less so to others like the u-pick facilities associated with gardens and orchards. Agritourism can be additional income to support smaller farms and can help extend the understanding of the importance of an agricultural sector to residents in other parts of the County.

Agricultural land is protected in Iredell through land trust programs as well as Voluntary Agricultural districts and Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural Districts (VAD and EVAD) programs. The project team has heard anecdotally that there were more enrollment in VAD and EVAD when the 2030 Horizon Plan was new. The plan update is an opportunity to investigate ways to rejuvenate the tool in the County or other paths to protecting prime agricultural land, and providing legacy farms with opportunities for growth and development while preserving its farming heritage.



Figure 1: Example of Local Food Resources Listed by the NC Cooperative Extension

## ***Well Water And Septic Systems Are Not a Strong Limit on Development in Agricultural or Rural Land***

In many communities, access to utility service, especially water and sewer, can act as a limitation on rural growth and even sprawl, directing growth to places with infrastructure that can support new development. Where there is no access to sewer systems, development depends on septic systems and similar technologies that require land.

In Iredell, this is less of a barrier to some density or intensity of development. Iredell has some of the highest number of well and septic systems produced in the state. With the exception of pockets of land in the southeast, the County has soil where neighborhood development is achievable on well water and septic systems. This is both an opportunity that can make additional service to County residents and businesses possible and a challenge to some traditional assumptions on what limits growth.

The nonprofit rural water providers serve an expansive territory, even serving some locations adjacent or within municipalities (for example approximately 700 customers receive water from Iredell Water Corporation and sewer from Statesville). Their service areas are always growing. Iredell Water Corporation requires land for new wells when providing service to new developments, expanding the utility's reach. Harmony has also begun providing sewer service, though it remains to be discovered how much that coverage grows in the future.

In some parts of the County water supply watershed restrictions place some limit on density, but this is not the majority of available land. Technological improvements make new neighborhood scale treatment facilities a possibility, and there is more to learn and consider as the technology advances. Though not yet approved, there has been movement at the state legislature in recent years toward privatizing approvals when signed by licensed engineers and soil scientists, so the mechanisms to monitor quality may be limited in the future.

There is still an opportunity to consider whether some of these natural conditions and new technologies could make cluster development more attractive to developers and future residents, allowing greater clustered density while also protecting larger rural or agricultural areas from growth. The planning and development department has identified cluster development as a major opportunity to consider in this planning process.

## Prepare for Oncoming Growth

### ***One County of Many Characters***

Many stakeholders describe the County as multiple unique areas joined together. These comments recognize key differences:

- Development character is different between the agricultural and rural north of the county and the more swiftly growing south.
- Harmony and Love Valley have separate identities from the rural lands that surround them.
- Mooresville, Statesville, and Troutman (and the parts of Davidson within the County) are located at different points along the south to north path of growth from the Charlotte region and experience different planning challenges based on the extent of growth pressure they are receiving at a given time.
- Lake Norman and the Brushy Mountains have separate considerations for natural preservation than developed areas.

Iredell County has true rural, suburban, and urban environments that are impacted by the pull of the Charlotte metropolitan area, the broader connections to other surrounding metropolitan areas (Hickory and Winston-Salem), and the reality of being connected at the crossroads of two major interstates (I-40 and I-77).

The project team heard that the community sees the importance of striking a balance. Some policies and actions need to apply to the County as a whole, while others need to be specific to the unique conditions of an area. Identifying those areas and effects will continue to be an issue to consider throughout the process.

### ***Quality of Life as a New Path to Economic Development***

Trends in economic development and employer recruitment strategies are changing nationwide. Many experts and leaders in the County and municipalities are shifting to adapt to new considerations. Firms looking to grow or relocate now consider more than shovel-ready sites and tax breaks, they also consider community-wide factors necessary to attract and retain their workforce.

School quality has also long been recognized as a consideration, but now more frequently employers also consider quality of life and housing affordability. Can Iredell attract, grow, and keep the workforce businesses are seeking? County parks, regional trails, and access to entertainment in municipal downtowns can become economic assets in the competition for new businesses.

The Iredell Economic Development Corporation (Iredell EDC) coordinates economic development efforts on a County scale and can be a source of expertise on trends in recruitment and retention of businesses. Much of quality of life is also about access to different amenities and destinations, and so efforts in the municipalities can bolster the attractiveness of unincorporated land as well. The different jurisdictions can operate as partners in building the places workers want to live. Variety of opportunities is a strength, especially for larger employers that may hire or train at many levels and functions of their organizational structure. (e.g. Lowes has a corporate campus and logistical center in the County).

The new plans recently adopted by Iredell municipalities recognize changes to economic development trends already, and Iredell's own update can help present a united economic front.

## Parks and Destinations

There are six parks maintained by the County Parks department, in addition to recreation programs managed in conjunction with Iredell Statesville Schools, a large state park, and parks and recreation programs in the municipalities. Future considerations that could add value to the County's parks and destinations as quality of life amenities include:

- Balance of managing athletic programming and providing facilities for outside operators.
- The possibility of filling the regional need for an aquatics center, which could attract tournaments and business while also enhancing offerings to the community.
- Partnering with municipalities to host other regional sports events including tournaments.
- Connecting strands of the Carolina Thread Trail to create a stronger regional attraction.
- Upgrading facilities at the County fairgrounds or securing new event space that can successfully attract indoor events.



*Figure 2: The Carolina Thread Trail can provide a regional focus to new trail efforts*

## Schools and Education

There are two school districts in the County: Mooresville Graded and Iredell Statesville Schools (ISS). Though there are some areas with an option to opt into Mooresville Graded, the territory of the two districts is largely stable. ISS anticipates much of the coming growth in the County will be in the ISS district. ISS maintains a variety of choice programs and specialties such as International Baccalaureate, specialty colleges, and dual language immersion. These programs and overall school quality can be assets toward attracting economic development. Quality and capacity will need to keep up with County growth.

In addition to K through 12 education, Mitchell Community College campuses and technical programs like the NASCAR Technical institute are also key assets for later learning skill building.



*Figure 3: Iredell Statesville School District is the larger of two districts in the County*

## ***Growing Popularity of New Development Types***

New types of development that operate on new or maturing technology or business models were not specifically contemplated in past plans. Stakeholders have helped identify some of them, and their affect can be considered as a part of the update process or future regulatory changes that follow it:

- Short term rentals repurposing personal seasonal and second homes along Lake Norman.
- Tiny home requests for multiple homes on one parcel.
- "Barndominium" residences on rural land with a small dwelling space and a large barn area for storage.
- Solar farms, recently changed in the County to be a legislative decision for approval.
- More frequent requests for self-storage facilities.

Some concerns have been expressed about septic systems near Lake Norman, as second homes and lake houses are converted into short term rentals, which can hold more people and place heavier use on septic systems. So far it appears that the pattern of use – heavy on weekends and lighter during the week – has allowed time for septic capacity to recharge and there has not yet been a pattern of lake side septic failures.

## **Coordinate Varied Interests Across the County and with Partners**

### ***A Clear Plan is an Opportunity for Coordination and Accountability***

The value of any plan depends on how useful it is in the regular planning and decision making of the jurisdiction. Champions of a particular policy or program that have been supported by the community in the plan can continue to push for advancement if the goals and actions are clear. Partners of the County can propose mutually beneficial ventures if there is clear guidance on the County’s future trajectory.

As the 2045 Horizon Plan update refreshes the ideas of the 2030 Plan, it is important the document remain a useful and easily accessible tool.

Stakeholders have additionally raised some more formal possibilities for ensuring the plan’s continuity:

- The drafting of the Horizon Plan update includes a steering committee. A similar continuing committee could help mark implementation of plan actions and recommend next steps as intermediate goals are achieved.
- Many plan actions are likely to require regional coordination. The plan can recommend coordinating on long-range issues at the level of elected officials, managers, or staff directors tasked with long range planning, in either new meetings or as an intentional inclusion to existing programs.

The right means of continuing to follow through with the plan over time and throughout the region can be explored as a part of the Horizon Plan update process.

### ***Make The Most of County Assets***

#### **Asset Mapping**

The project team heard from some stakeholders that there was difficulty identifying appropriate sites for facilities, or identifying funding sources to purchase them. To plan and use resources effectively across departments and programs, some jurisdictions evaluate and maintain a complete list of land owned and similar assets. What land does the County own? Is some of it potentially appropriate for future County needs? Could some of it be sold to generate funds to purchase land or construct capital facilities that are needed?

It may be the case that some land owned by some County departments and entities may not be appropriate for their own needs, but could be appropriate for others. An analysis could help with placement of schools, fire stations, sheriff department facilities, parks, and other County services and facilities through swapping or repurposing land already within County control, or co-locating or subdividing larger sites for multiple purposes. The land may also be appropriate to meet community priorities such as new public facilities, workforce housing, or other creative opportunities.

## Regional Connections

I-40, I-77, US Highway 70, and the Statesville Airport are all key routes in and out of Iredell County. There is a reason the County enjoys a long reputation as at the center of the crossroads. This connectivity to other areas is an asset that can be developed through intentional planning around the airport and at interchanges. The Airport's new operator plans to expand service in the near future.



Figure 4: The Statesville Airport is an additional pathway into the region alongside Interstates 40 and 77

## Tourism as a Unifying Opportunity

There is another significant thread of opportunity running through many of the others already discussed: the potential for tourism. There is currently limited staff specifically focused on developing tourism on the County level, though more are starting to see the importance. Tourists can bring money into the County. They can become future residents and employers. The activities can serve to improve the quality of life that supports local economic development.

In the context of visitors, there are many key assets:

- The many municipalities and their downtowns.
- The natural beauty of the Brushy Mountains and Lake Norman.
- The destination parks (the existing state park, and the ones that could be improved or created by the county or municipalities, such as sports or aquatic facilities).
- Greenways and trails.
- Festivals and conventions at civic centers, fairgrounds, and potentially new facilities
- Local businesses including racing teams and craft foods and beverages.
- Agritourism opportunities including farm to table dining, working farms and event spaces
- Wineries, breweries, and distilleries.
- Regional connections to major metropolitan areas including Charlotte and the Triad as well as natural regions including the Yadkin Valley and the foothills of the Appalachian mountains.

This is not to overstate the importance the capacity for tourism to transform the County, but it does touch on the many of the other opportunities that are also important to consider in their own right.

## Next Steps

- These issues and opportunities will be discussed with the steering committee to verify for accuracy and omissions.
- Highlighting issues and opportunities will be a part of the informational portion of the first community engagement window.
- This report will help the project team ask the right questions and generate the right discussions to help identify the values and top-level goals for the 2045 Horizon Plan update.