



## Time for Reflection – A Look Back, and a Look Ahead



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Like most people, I try to take a moment around New Year's to reflect – some on the events of the past year, and some with anticipation for what is to come in the new year. This is especially so for our City-County Planning Board and staff, now in our 60th anniversary year as the first joint planning effort in North Carolina.

### ***A Brief Look Back...***

The year 2007 was a very active and eventful year for planning here in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County. The fifth year report of the Legacy Citizens Oversight Committee cited the steps already taken to implement the plan for the community, and while noting that progress in some areas had been slow, a number of indicators were showing that we are beginning to change our attitudes about where and how we live.

A visit by Ed McMahon of the Urban Land Institute this past year highlighted the importance and benefits of *Legacy's*

goals of planning thoughtfully for our future. His message confirmed the economic benefits and appropriateness of growing in a more compact form, preserving our natural and historic resources, developing with more of an emphasis on integrated mixed-use centers, and paying attention to the appearance of our streets and developments.

Planning accomplishments of 2007 include adoption of the updated *Downtown Plan*, the *North Central Plan*, the *Walkertown Area Plan*, a *Sidewalk and Pedestrian Facilities Plan*, and the *City-County Parks and Open Space Master Plan*. Studies included some new National Register Historic District proposals for the Waughtown/Belview area, the Reynoldstown area, the Sunnyside/Central Terrace/Center-view area, an update of the county's historic resources inventory, and a new *Historic Resources in Forsyth County Sourcebook*.

Economic development planning included an update and expansion of the City-County Industrial Sites Inventory that was done over 15 years ago, rezoning of a 100-acre site adjacent to the Dell computer manufacturing facility for another 1,000,000 square feet of additional industrial building space, and an overhaul of the Central Industrial zoning district to accommodate the development and expansion of the Piedmont Triad Research Park. Our RUCAs study identifying a strategy for revitalizing central city commercial areas has been funded and is being implemented. Additionally, a Voluntary Agricultural District ordinance and a related UDO amendment to encourage Agricultural Tourism has been developed for consideration.

Ordinance changes included County adoption of new pedestrian-friendly subdivision street standards, City adoption of new on-premise sign regulations that will make our streets more attractive while still providing for good business identification, an overhaul of our cluster home subdivision standards (PRD regulations) to provide better quality and more visible open space, and the creation of Special Use-Limited Zoning that can, in some situations, eliminate the need for an up-front site plan as part of the rezoning. A number of development projects have been approved or started in the downtown area, central city and suburban areas that incorporate many of the principles of *Legacy*. In total, the Planning Board in 2007 handled 73 rezonings or special use permits, 34 site plans, 18 preliminary subdivision plans and 14 UDO amendments!

We have continued to improve our efforts to engage the community in planning efforts. The *Legacy Toolkit* series of brief one-page summaries of important planning topics expanded over the last year, as well as the information available on our planning web site. We have made extensive use of stakeholder committees and focus groups representing broad community interests as we prepare and consider area plans, ordinance amendments, and even studies. Our "Friday morning meetings" for informal interdepartmental review and comment on development proposals in the conceptual stage have proven to be very helpful and popular among customers in the development community. We are also part of a statewide benchmarking study that is looking nationally to identify better models of fast, thorough and fair development review

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processes across many departments. And we are continuing to use the resource of WSTV 13, the Government Channel, to regularly highlight planning initiatives and issues in the community.

### ***A Look Ahead to 2008...***

The new year will also be a very busy one. Our area has certainly experienced the national and statewide downturn in the economy; however, as that situation improves, Winston-Salem and Forsyth County are poised for new growth that can be accommodated very well within the context of our plans. Although reports indicate that building permit activity across the state has declined by almost half between spring of 2006 and fall of 2007, and the Triad area has been particularly hard hit because of the amount of transition it has had to make from its traditional manufacturing base to the "new economy," Winston-Salem and Forsyth County have several bright spots that show it is well positioned for the future, including:

- Growth in the local tax base over the last three years being significantly higher than during a period of many years before that;
- The City and County being ranked highly by nationally-based organizations or publications concerning site selection, being one of the most livable communities and being among the most "wired" cities;
- According to state-released figures for the last year, Winston-Salem having the highest rate of growth in sales/use tax revenues of any major city in the state;
- The areas of the economy projected to grow most in the state and the nation over the next decade being the same areas of the economy that our community has worked successfully to develop a "niche," such as the biotechnology, professional and business services, trade/transportation and utilities, food industries, and leisure and hospitality sectors.

These indicators suggest we will enjoy a greater share of growth as the overall economy improves. With the plans that have already been put in place, plus attention to some of the remaining initiatives that have been identified in

*Legacy*, our community can continue to rank highly in its quality of life, one of the key factors that lead people, companies and institutions to want to locate in a community.

How do we continue to attract growth over the long run but have it well managed so that we maintain a good quality of life for present and future residents? If we wish to continue to grow significantly in our downtown and central city area (which benefits everyone regardless of where they live), we need to become serious about investing in a good, modern transit system linking central city job centers, cultural and entertainment attractions, college and university campuses and tourist attractions. A growing number of cities are finding that modern streetcar systems are an attractive people-mover and more importantly, help to attract and shape higher density, mixed-use development in the very places they will be best located. A feasibility study has shown that this is a workable concept for Winston-Salem, and we are now awaiting financing options to consider.

The Downtown Partnership is also very interested in having new downtown development be designed in a way that contributes to livability and a vibrant street life, and so the next year will focus on the development of a possible "form-based code" for future development in the downtown core as proposed in the *Downtown Plan*. Infill development elsewhere in the central city areas is very desirable, and having reasonable infill development regulations in place that will be workable for developers and yet assure that new development is sensitive to the character of existing neighborhoods will be very important.

We will also need to help carefully manage the development that is sure to come around the interchanges of the planned beltway, and the next few years will be critical to put in place plans to define the appropriate levels and type of development that will best fit the environment of each interchange. One such plan is underway now.

Much attention has been rightly focused toward the environmental issues inherent in more growth, and efforts have been underway to define how

stormwater and flooding impacts can be better managed and how tree preservation and/or tree planting factors into new development. Some of these issues are being debated and resolved this year outside the purview of the Planning Board, but some will factor into UDO amendments that the Planning Board and staff will have to work on during 2008.

Area plans will continue to be a focus of attention in order to achieve the goal stated in *Legacy* to cover the entire county with more specific land use and community development planning guidance than is possible from a plan covering a countywide scale. The *Northeast Central* and the *Southwest Suburban Area Plans* will be completed in 2008 and work will also begin on two additional area plans.

The next year appears to be one with a busy agenda in the planning arena, and as always, the need is critical to balance all the interests for the long term good of the community. With everyone's help, it will be a year that prepares a great community for an even greater future!

Best wishes for a happy new year!  
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### ***Want more information?***

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