

We've waited long enough on open space plan (Sunday 10/11/26)

I'm a big proponent of the Open Space Preservation Bond to be voted on in the upcoming mid-term election. Please vote 'Yes' when you cast your ballot. You will be investing in our common future, an important step toward protecting our natural and agricultural heritage.

What does the term 'open space' mean? It generally refers to any piece of land that is undeveloped, free of major buildings or structures. The open space wording in this bond says the money will be used to pay the capital costs of acquisition and improvements of land for open space and conservation purposes, including, but not limited to, the protection of natural resources, and the preservation of farmland and scenic landscapes.

The \$25 million dollar Henderson County bond will help us be proactive and make progress toward our community goals. Plus, it can help us leverage other conservation revenue from state and federal sources, like the NC Dept of Agriculture's Farmland Preservation Trust Fund.

If we look back 20+ years, to the last community planning process, the resulting 2020 Comprehensive Plan document stated farmland protection was a top priority. Actions were taken, including the formation of a public/private entity, AgHC, whose mission is to promote the economic development of agriculture and agribusiness in Henderson County. The County's Agricultural Advisory Board created a Farmland Preservation Plan, recommending the creation of a fund. It never happened. In the meantime, we continued to lose precious farms, fields and woodlands to development.

When the most recent Comprehensive Plan was voted into place in March of 2023, Henderson County established a Farmland Preservation Task Force in response to the same top priority of protecting farmland. The Task Force thoroughly researched what tools were available, and took the next step of hiring a dedicated staff person to carry out the tools. One such tool available to local farmers is enrollment in a Voluntary Agricultural District or Enhanced Ag District, which works to help farmland remain productive and in the hands of farmers.

If this bond passes, it would be a welcome addition to a fund recently created by a \$425,000 grant awarded to Henderson County by the NC Agricultural and Consumer Services Division. Shortly afterwards, the award was doubled to \$850,000 by a match from our County Commissioners, and earmarked for protecting farmland.

Farmers and natural landowners can voluntarily apply to the program, and some have already joined the queue. Their projects will go through a review process, where an advisory board will evaluate and recommend them based on established criteria. If they qualify, money from the fund will be available to purchase their development rights, held in perpetuity by the County or the local land trust. All of their other ownership rights will continue with the deed: the right to farm, fish, hunt, do timber management, even sell or inherit the land.

By voting Yes on the Open Space Preservation Bond we have a chance to create a substantial fund. We need to show our leaders that we're willing to pay for land conservation. A general obligation bond is a borrowing process that will require us all to pitch in. At tax time, you will

see a line item on your bill for the bond, somewhere around \$38 a year for a medium valued home. This money will be designated for land conservation, and will not be used for anything else. Please join me in voting Yes; we've waited long enough.

Katie Breckheimer, a long-time resident of Henderson County, had a career with environmental nonprofits, and is currently active with Friends of the Oklawaha Greenway, Support Our Swimmers, and the League of Women Voters - HC