

2025 Watauga County Comprehensive Plan



Acknowledgments

Watauga County Comprehensive Plan

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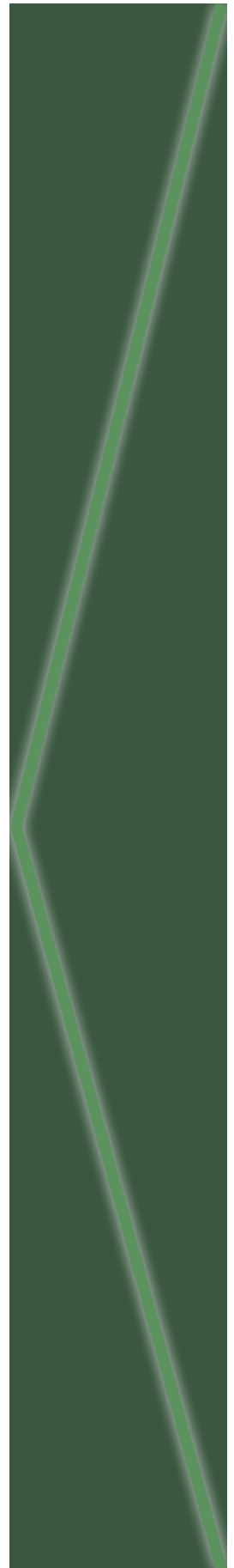
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Preface

PREFACE

Human beings, the land on which we live, and our environment are undeniably interrelated. Sustaining an equitable balance in these relational elements is important for present and future generations.

Our individual and collective decisions and actions affect the quality of human life and the quality of our natural environment. By understanding these principles, we establish a common basis for working toward becoming a “sustainable community.”

This document is a reflection of the Watauga community’s concern for such principles. At the same time, this plan focuses on new issues that have emerged, such as “sustainability” and “green” issues, which are of great importance to the future of the Watauga community.

Sustainability Principles

This emphasis on sustainability and the efficient use of land and other natural resources is particularly relevant given the recent decline in our national and local economies. It is essential that the community acts to protect its vital economic and natural resources. Further, strategic community investments in capital improvements must be carefully weighed against the collective benefits and economic gain derived from such investments. This re-emphasis on sustainability points to the greater need to plan and prioritize to achieve strategic community goals and meet essential needs.



- ▼ A natural resource will only be available for a finite time if the depletion rate exceeds the replacement rate. Thus, unconstrained use of resources affects future generations.
- ▼ Human activity produces harmful substances, which must be mediated to maintain balance in the natural systems.
- ▼ Humans and other living creatures make up ecosystems, which are interdependent. Ecosystems are most stable when they include a diversity of species. Overuse and pollution of the natural environment has implications for maintaining the earth’s biodiversity.
- ▼ Human needs have physical, economic, environmental, cultural, social and spiritual dimensions. They can be met equitably without compromising the physical environment. To achieve social stability and the cooperation required for large-scale changes related to the first three principles, we must work together to achieve greater fairness.

BEGINNING THE PLANNING PROCESS

The Watauga County Comprehensive Plan is an update of the “Citizens’ Plan for Watauga” adopted in 2008. During that process, the Watauga County Board of Commissioners named residents from each commission’s district and the County Planning Board to the Plan Oversight Group (POG).

The 2025 update utilized the sitting Watauga County Planning Board and the Watauga County Planning and Inspections Office. Meetings with area stakeholders were held as well as a stakeholder meeting to obtain information for the plan. A survey to gain citizen input was distributed from September 2024 through January 2025.

In addition to the stakeholder and citizen input, this update includes all current demographic and economic data, updated maps, and reevaluation of all recommendations from the old plan.

During the 2025 update of the plan, the Community has the same issues and concerns as in 2008, with a few shifts in priority.

Prominent Community Issues/Concerns in Watauga:

2008

1. Traffic congestion
2. Water availability
3. Protection of natural resources
4. Farmland/large tract preservation
5. Land use divisions that are appropriate
6. Preservation of unique community identities and mountain heritage
7. Economic development/employment/affordable housing
8. Emergency services keeping pace with growth
9. Educational opportunities
10. Widespread recreational opportunities

2025

1. Traffic congestion
2. Affordable Housing
3. Emergency services keeping pace with growth
4. Water availability
5. Economic development/employment
6. Widespread recreational opportunities
7. Protection of natural resources
8. Farmland/large tract preservation
9. Preservation of unique community identities and mountain heritage
10. Educational Opportunities

WATAUGA COUNTY

Watauga County is located in northwest North Carolina. Ashe, Avery, Caldwell and Wilkes counties in North Carolina and Johnson County in Tennessee bound the County. The County has a complex geology and falls within the Unaka Mountain Range and Blue Ridge Mountain Range. The County is the headwaters for four major river basins: Yadkin, New, Watauga and Catawba; all four flow in different directions.

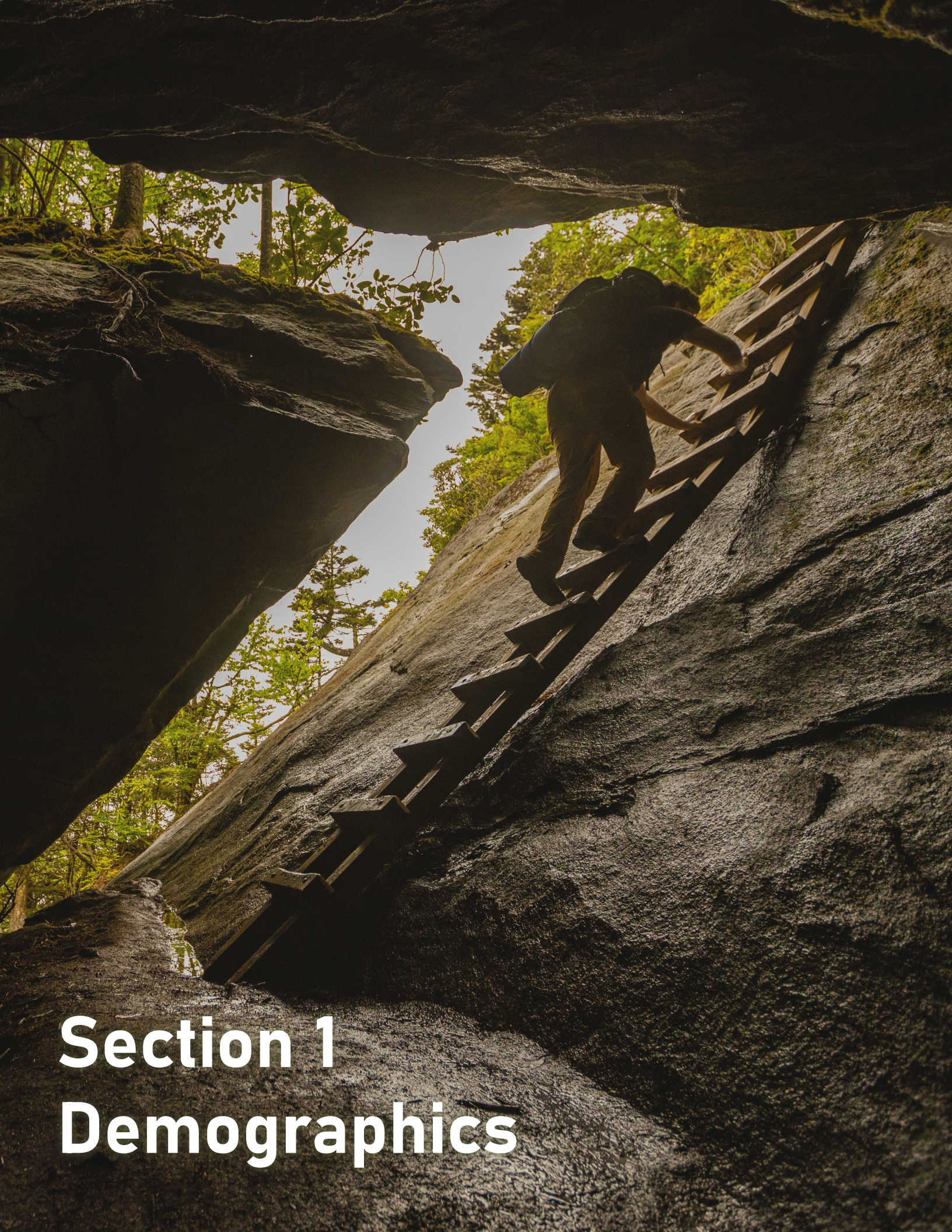
The human history of the area of Watauga County starts with the Native Americans, probably several thousand years B.C. In later eras, the Cherokee, Catawba and perhaps Shawnee hunted, camped and had agricultural villages here. The name Watauga is probably of Cherokee origin.

A few people of European descent were here by 1730. Later, would-be settlers had no easy access from the great wagon road of the Shenandoah Valley. As early as 1760, Daniel Boone was one of the early “long hunters,” who came here from the Yadkin River in the Piedmont.

In many ways, he was the original “tourist,” visiting regularly, staying for a while, and then passing on to what became the states of Tennessee and Kentucky. Watauga County was created in 1849, with most of its territory derived from the large County of Wilkes. The first U.S. census for the County was in 1850, which shows the population to be small in number and dedicated largely to subsistence agriculture. Most of the County’s public records were destroyed by General George Stoneman’s raid through the County near the end of the Civil War in 1865 and again with the burning of the courthouse in 1872.

Today Watauga County is a home to Appalachian State University; it has a thriving tourist economy; and is well known for its expansive outdoor recreation opportunities.





Section 1

Demographics



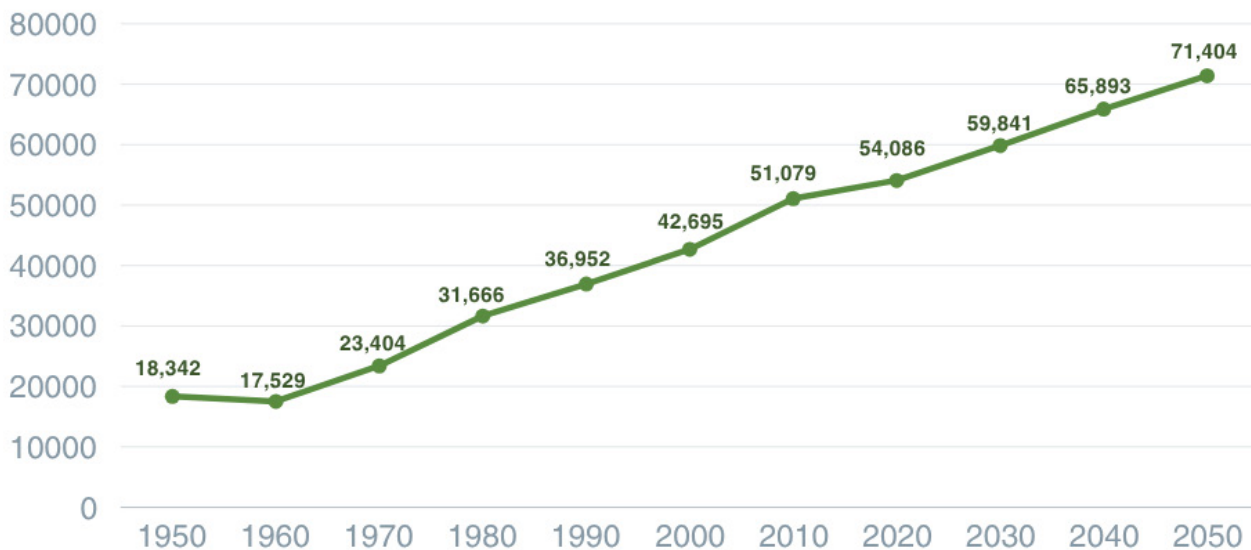
POPULATION TRENDS

Watauga County has experienced growth during every decade since 1960. Between 1970 and 2020, the population more than doubled from 23,404 to 54,086 according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The increase from 2010 to 2020 was 5.9%, equaling 0.8 people moving into Watauga County every day throughout the ten-year period. The N.C. Office of State Budget and Management projects a population increase of more than 17,318 new residents by 2050.

Watauga County remains an increasingly popular location within North Carolina for first and second home buyers. The projections by the N.C. Office of State Budget and Management do not include the people who are second homeowners. Although these people are not counted in the census as residents of Watauga County, they will nonetheless, directly affect the County's capacity to manage growth and deliver essential services.

The projections for future population (Table 1) do not include planned increases in Appalachian State University's student population.

Table 1
Watauga County Population
1950-2050



US Census and NC OSBM



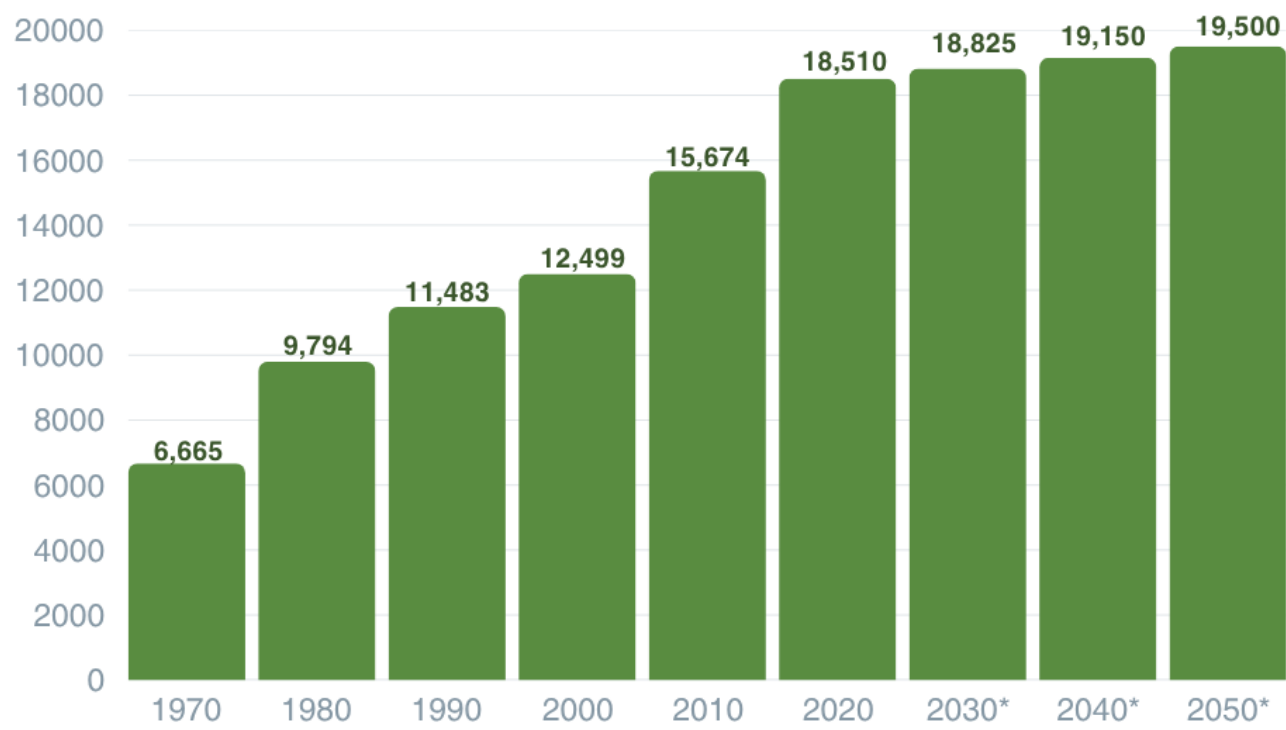


Population Trends – Appalachian State

Appalachian State University (App State) is a major contributor to Watauga County in many ways. Student enrollment at App State is a significant contributor to overall County population. In 1970, student enrollment was 6,665. In 2020 the on-campus student enrollment was up to 18,510 (an increase of over 177%). In 2023, App State expanded and opened a campus in Hickory, North Carolina in nearby Catawba County. All data presented in this plan with regards to App State refers only to the Main Campus in Boone, North Carolina.

Projections for future growth at App State (Table 2) are more modest. The enrollment for Fall of 2004 was 18,601. Projected enrollment* from 2024 to 2030 is expected to increase by only 1.2%, with an estimate of 19,500 by 2050.

Table 2
Appalachian State University
Actual and Projected* Boone Campus Enrollment



Source: Appalachian State University - Department of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Planning



Population Trends – Watauga Municipalities

Watauga County has four municipalities: Beech Mountain, Blowing Rock, Boone and Seven Devils. Of these four towns, Boone is the only municipality that lies totally within the Watauga County boundary. Beech Mountain, Blowing Rock and Seven Devils all straddle a county line. Both Beech Mountain and Seven Devils lay partially within Avery County. Blowing Rock lies partially within Caldwell County.

Table 3 provides the populations of each town and their growth from 2000–2020. Also listed in both Table 3 and Table 4 is the portion of each town’s population (in adjoining counties) that lies outside of Watauga County.

- ▼ Boone is the largest of the municipalities by population. It is the county seat of Watauga County. Appalachian State University is located within its boundaries, which adds significantly to Boone’s population.
- ▼ Blowing Rock is the second largest municipality, with a population of 1,376 in 2020. During the summer, Blowing Rock’s population swells to over 7,300.
- ▼ Beech Mountain is the next largest with 675 Watauga County residents in 2020. Its population increased 128% from 2010 to 2020.
- ▼ Seven Devils is the smallest town in Watauga County, with 313 Watauga County residents in 2020, an impressive increase of 90.9% from 2010. Second only to Beech Mountain’s increase of 128% during the same period.

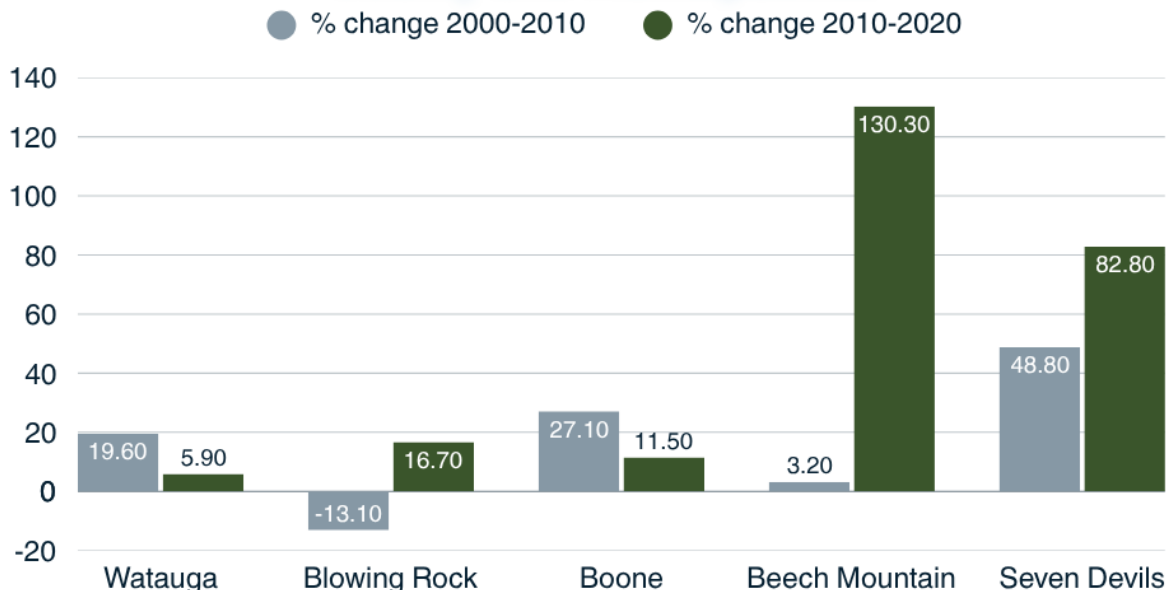
Table 3
Watauga County Municipality Populations and Population Changes 2000–2020

	POPULATION 2000	POPULATION 2010	PERCENT CHANGE 2000-2010	POPULATION 2020	PERCENT CHANGE 2010-2020
WATAUGA COUNTY					
BLOWING ROCK, TOWN (PART)	1,365	1,192	-12.7%	1,376	15.4%
BOONE, TOWN	13,472	17,122	27.1%	19,092	11.5%
BEECH MOUNTAIN, TOWN (PART)	297	296	-0.3%	675	128.0%
SEVEN DEVILS, TOWN (PART)	112	164	46.4%	313	90.9%
AVERY COUNTY					
BEECH MOUNTAIN, TOWN (PART)	13	24	84.6%	62	158.3%
SEVEN DEVILS, TOWN (PART)	17	28	64.7%	38	35.7%
CALDWELL COUNTY					
BLOWING ROCK, TOWN (PART)	35	25	-28.6%	44	76.0%

US CENSUS 2000, 2010, 2020



Table 4
Population Change
County and Municipalities



US Census 2000, 2020, 2020

Population Trends – Watauga Townships

Watauga County is divided into 15 Townships. Table 5 depicts the actual decennial population in each of Watauga County's Townships for the past 100 years (1920 through 2020). A steady growth in the Watauga County population is reflected in each township, some healthier than others. Boone Township and New River show tremendous growth over the past decade, while one township, North Fork, has actually declined.

Table 6 summarizes the average percentage change in population of each township from 1970 to 2020. The Townships of New River and Brushy Fork were not established until the 1940s, first showing up in the 1950 US census. New River Township was split from Boone Township, and parts of Boone, Cove Creek, Laurel Creek, Meat Camp, and Watauga Townships were carved out to make up what is now Brushy Fork Township.

The two townships with the greatest population increase in the past 50 years are Blue Ridge and New River; these two townships had the largest number of new residents moving into the County. As expected, the highest growth rate in the County during the 100-year period occurred in the New River Township which averaged over 65%, Blue Ridge Township came in a close second, with an average of over 48%.

As of 2020, slightly more than 44% of the total population of the County resides in the Boone and New River Townships. This is not surprising due to the proximity of these townships to Appalachian State University, with more than 18,500 students and nearly 4,000 employees.

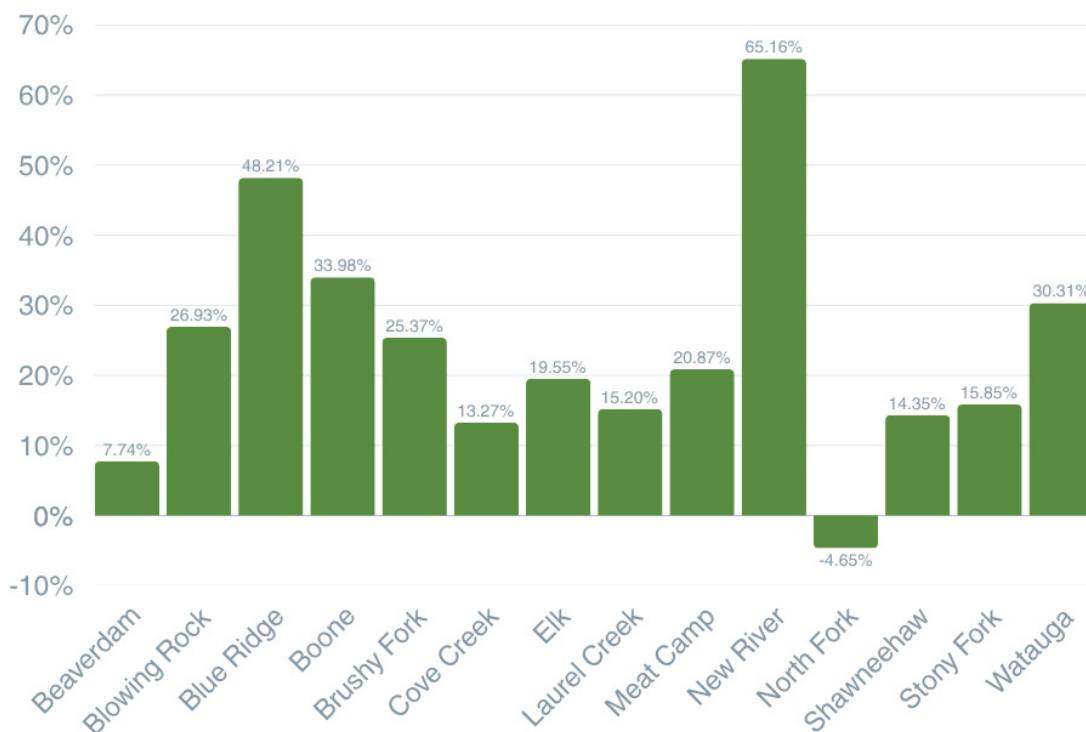


Table 5
Actual County and Township Populations 1920-2020

	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
Bald Mountain	421	432	436	380	361	363	280	334	485	619	687
Beaverdam	1,161	1,156	1,434	1,279	944	847	1,030	1,204	1,283	1,351	1,332
Blowing Rock	734	1,001	1,167	1,042	982	1,321	2,295	2,340	2,858	2,715	2,913
Blue Ridge	738	713	818	665	644	898	1,613	2,125	3,628	4,211	4,357
Boone	2,033	3,332	4,504	2,973	3,686	8,754	10,191	12,915	8,690	9,379	10,697
Brushy Fork				1,272	1,642	2,345	2,656	3,368	3,205	4,935	4,679
Cove Creek	1,483	1,766	1,908	1,921	1,626	1,780	2,141	2,233	2,935	3,118	2,951
Elk	493	443	608	428	366	274	260	281	462	638	749
Laurel Creek	1,124	1,155	1,373	1,212	1,036	1,096	1,332	1,404	1,756	1,947	2,090
Meat Camp	1,133	1,236	1,518	1,468	1,257	1,275	1,805	2,288	2,673	3,191	3,139
New River				1,718	1,952	1,499	3,785	3,367	8,848	11,838	13,137
North Fork	347	339	378	350	261	231	207	223	222	229	202
Shawneehaw	667	630	751	655	450	390	544	574	675	765	835
Stony Fork	1,127	1,243	1,436	1,388	1,199	1,192	1,476	1,876	2,061	2,585	2,420
Watauga Township	2,016	1,719	1,783	1,591	1,123	1,139	2,051	2,420	2,914	3,558	3,898
Watauga County	13,477	15,165	18,114	18,342	17,529	23,404	31,666	36,952	42,695	51,079	54,086

US Census

Table 6
Average Decennial Population Change 1970-2020



US Census



THE CHANGING FACE OF DEMOGRAPHICS IN WATAUGA COUNTY

- ▼ The population of the nation and our state is getting older (Table 7). This is revealed in the census data for 2020 and in the estimates produced by the NC Office of State and Budget Management (NC OSBM). The median age in the United States increased from 37.2 to 38.8 from 2010 to 2020.
- ▼ The average age in North Carolina increased from 37.4 to 39.4. This trend toward an older population is also revealed in the number of people with an age of 65 years or older (Table 8).
- ▼ Watauga County's median age statistic is greatly influenced by the student population at Appalachian State University. In general, the large number of students in the 18- to 24-year-old cohorts skews the data toward a substantially lower median age.
- ▼ The percentage of persons in Watauga County over age 65 is currently less than the state's average (Table 8).
- ▼ The N.C. Office of State Budget and Management projects that the percentage of persons in Watauga County age 65 will continue to increase in 2030 but is expected to decrease by 2040 and 2050.

Watauga County experienced a growth rate of 6.1% from 2010 to 2020. The natural growth during the period declined by 129 (Table 9), indicating a death rate that exceeded the birth rate during the period. This means the growth in Watauga County resulted totally from in-migration. The neighboring mountain counties experienced population declines during this period, with deaths exceeding births and loss of population through out-migration. Ashe County had the least amount of population and out-migration decline (-1.7%), with Avery County experiencing the most with -10.5%. The neighboring foothill counties of Caldwell and Wilkes experienced population declines as well with -2.3% and -4.5% out-migration rates, respectively. In comparison, North Carolina's average in-migration growth rate was 9.3%.

Table 9
County Population Growth and Migration 2010-2020

	2010 POPULATION	2020 POPULATION	POPULATION GROWTH*	PERCENT GROWTH	BIRTHS	DEATHS	NATURAL GROWTH**	NET MIGRATION***	PERCENT NET MIGRATION
WATAUGA	51,079	54,086	3,007	5.9%	293	422	(129)	3,136	6.1%
ASHE	27,281	26,577	(704)	-2.6%	200	427	(227)	(477)	-1.7%
AVERY	19,979	17,806	(2,173)	-10.9%	139	212	(73)	(2,100)	-10.5%
CALDWELL	83,029	80,652	(2,377)	-2.9%	789	1,252	(463)	(1,914)	-2.3%
WILKES	69,340	65,969	(3,371)	-4.9%	693	976	(283)	(3,088)	-4.5%
NORTH CAROLINA	9,535,483	10,439,388	903,905	9.5%	121,577	107,975	13,582	890,323	9.3%

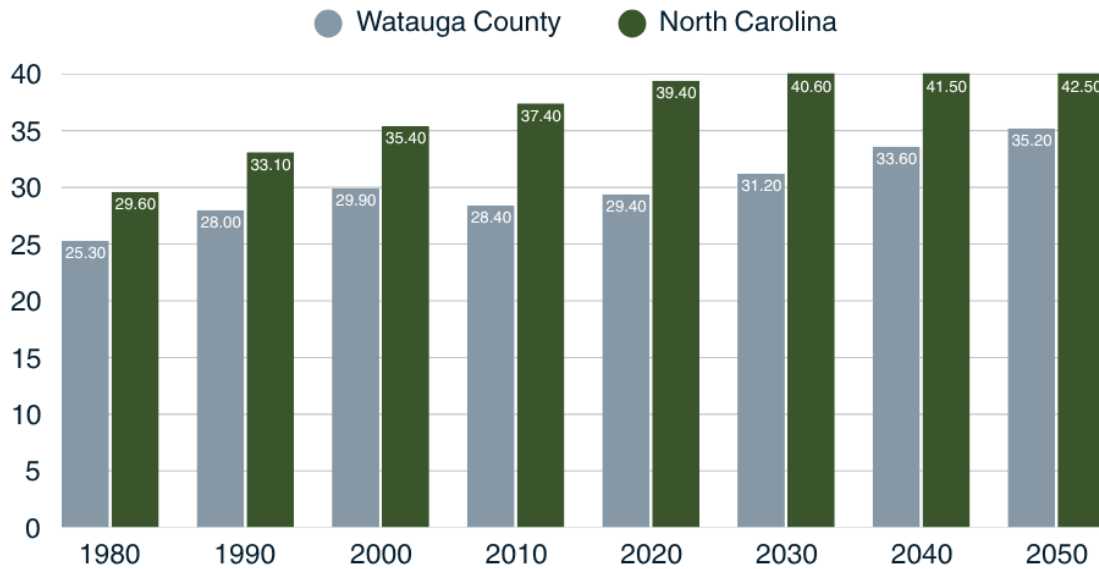
Source: NC Office of State Budget and Management & NC State Demographer

*Growth = 2010 Population minus 2020 Population

**Natural Growth = Difference of Births and Deaths

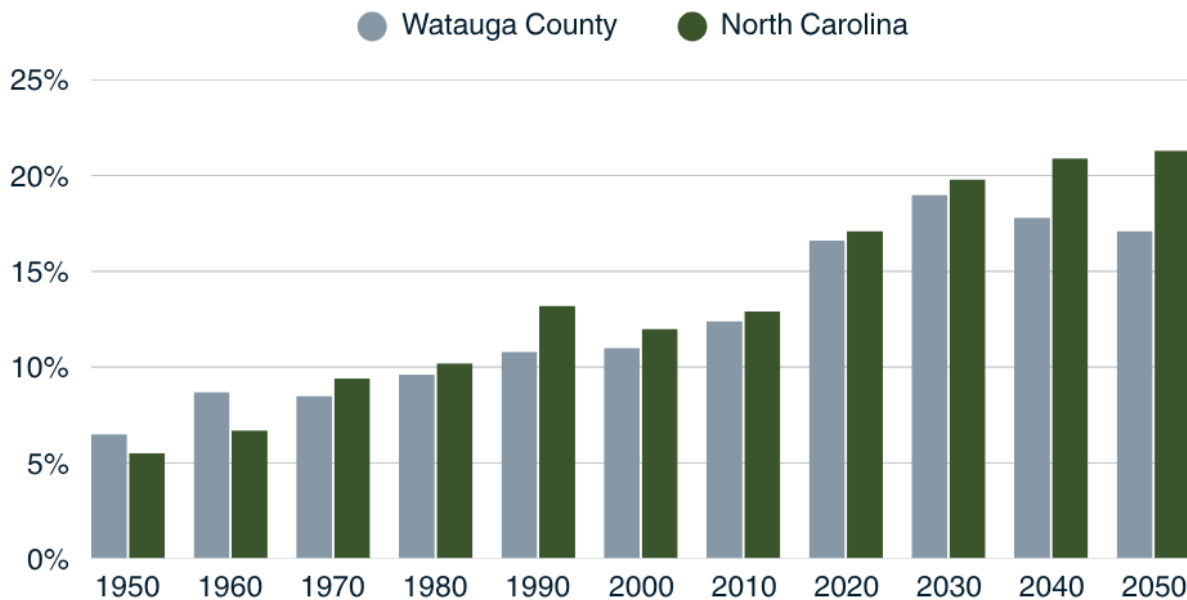


Table 7
Median Age of Population



US Census & NC OSMB

Table 8
Percent of Population 65+



US Census & NC OSMB



WATAUGA COUNTY HOUSING

North Carolina has one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. North Carolina's overall percentage increase in housing units between 2010 and 2020 was 8.8%. Table 10 summarizes the housing growth for counties exhibiting the highest rates of change, Watauga County, and its border counties.

Growth in housing units in Watauga County was well below the state average of 8.8% at 1.6%. Watauga County ranks 49th of North Carolina's 100 counties for growth in housing units, with 500 housing units constructed in the 10-year period between 2010 and 2020. The recession that began in 2007 is still affecting the rate of residential development nearly 13 years later.

Table 10
Change in number of Housing Units
2010-2020 - Ranked

	2010 US Census	2020 US Census	Percent Change	Ranking
North Carolina	4,327,528	4,708,710	8.80%	
Johnston County	67,682	84,340	24.60%	1
Wake County	371,836	462,582	24.40%	2
Onslow County	68,226	84,180	23.40%	3
Cabarrus County	71,937	87,410	21.50%	4
Durham County	120,217	144,559	20.20%	5
Mecklenburg County	398,510	478,966	20.20%	6
Chatham County	28,753	33,947	18.10%	7
Iredell County	69,013	79,372	15.00%	8
Union County	72,870	83,788	15.00%	9
Brunswick County	77,482	88,330	14.00%	10
Watauga County	32,137	32,637	1.60%	49
Cleveland County	43,373	43,630	0.60%	50
Person County	18,193	18,284	0.50%	51
Camden County	4,104	4,119	0.40%	52
Haywood County	34,954	34,889	-0.20%	53
Avery County	13,890	13,827	-0.50%	54
Rockingham County	43,696	43,431	-0.60%	55
Perquimans County	6,986	6,866	-1.70%	62
Caldwell County	37,659	36,931	-1.90%	63
Chowan County	7,289	7,131	-2.20%	64
Yadkin County	17,341	16,946	-2.30%	65
Ashe County	17,342	16,935	-2.30%	66
Beaufort County	24,688	24,090	-2.40%	67
Greene County	8,213	7,846	-4.50%	78
Wilkes County	33,065	31,545	-4.60%	79





SEASONAL AND ABSENTEE OWNER POPULATION

The 2023 American Community Survey recognized 33,028 total housing units in Watauga County (Table 11). Approximately 9,292 housing units are considered seasonal, recreational or for occasional use. Thus, 28.1% of all housing, or 78.5% of all vacant housing in Watauga County is considered seasonal.

Arriving at a definitive estimate of Watauga County's seasonal population is difficult. Data is incomplete and conflicting. The data produced by the 2023 ACS is dated, but it is probably the most realistic indicator available. Based on the number of vacant homes categorized as "seasonal/recreational" (9,292) and the average household size in Watauga County (2.24 people) indicators, it can be estimated that the number of seasonal residents in Watauga County is around 20,000 or 37% of the County's permanent population.

In 2020, the U.S. Census reported 54,086 people living in Watauga County. If the above estimates of seasonal residents is reasonable, then the population of Watauga County may be as high as 74,000 on a seasonal basis. A figure that does not include tourists only here for a few days during the summer and winter months. This increase in population, even if temporary, is certain to place extra demand on essential services including water and sewer, fire and police protection, roads and streets, and emergency services.

Table 11
Housing Occupancy

TOTAL HOUSING UNITS	33,028	
OCCUPIED	21,187	64%
VACANT	11,841	36%
AVERAGE HOUSHOLD SIZE	2.24	
TOTAL OCCUPIED	21,187	
OWNER OCCUPIED	12,966	61%
RENTER OCCUPIED	8,221	39%
TOTAL VACANT UNITS	11,841	
FOR RENT	134	1%
RENTED, NOT OCCUPIED	538	5%
FOR SALE ONLY	286	2%
SOLD, NOT OCCUPIED	59	1%
FOR SEASONAL, RECREATIONAL, OR OCCASIONAL USE	9,292	80%
FOR MIGRANT WORKERS	0	
OTHER VACANT	1,532	13%





DEMOGRAPHIC CONCLUSIONS

Watauga County has transformed from a rural, agrarian county to a robust and growing transition community with a large tourism industry and growing population. Population growth more than doubled from 1970 to 2020. Predictions by the N.C. Office of State Budget and Management reflect continued steady growth through 2050.

Population projections for Watauga County place the population (excluding seasonal residents) in 2050 at approximately 71,000. To fully understand the potential for growth in Watauga County, one must consider two influencing factors, which are student enrollment at App State and seasonal population.

Analysis indicates that the seasonal population may increase the year-round permanent population by as much as 37%. Townships that currently have a very large percentage of seasonal population include Blowing Rock, Laurel Creek and Watauga. Therefore, the effective population could be as high as 97,200 by 2050.

Another noteworthy issue is that these numbers do not include tourists visiting Watauga County. Their numbers are substantial during three seasons of the year and add to the demand for services. The increasing number of seasonal residents and tourists are elements of growth that officials and planners must consider in weighing future growth issues.



ECONOMIC TRENDS

Income Characteristics

Three income characteristics are particularly important in analyzing the economic viability of the Watauga community: Income Per Capita, Median Household Income and Median Family Income. These three income characteristics, when viewed in comparison to one another, help to indicate the strength of the local economy. Table 12 compares these three income indicators for Watauga County, North Carolina and the United States.

NOTE: Income statistics are no longer provided within the decennial census. Since 2010 the information is only available through the American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS is an on-going survey that provides data every year – giving communities the most current information to use in their decision-making processes. Table 12 uses information from both sources ,US Decennial Census and ACS.

- ▼ For each of these three income statistics, Watauga County is lower than the average for North Carolina and the United States in each census year from 1970 – 2000.
- ▼ From 2010 through 2023 similar averages show up with the exception of Family Median Income. In 2020 and 2023 the Watauga Family Median Income was more than the State.
- ▼ The 2010 ACS shows that Watauga County's per capita income is 84.7% of that for North Carolinians and 76.6% of the per capita income for the nation. In the 2023 ACS, these amounts have decreased slightly to 82% of North Carolina and 75% of the nation.
- ▼ For median family income in 2010, Watauga County families earn 99.9% of the income of other North Carolina families and 89.1% of families in the United States. By 2023 Watauga County families earned just over 100% of the North Carolina average but was still lower than the national average at 90%.
- ▼ Median household income in Watauga County lag significantly behind other North Carolina households in 2023 at 73% (down from 83% in 2000), and behind U.S. households at 65% (78% in 2000).
- ▼ Much of the difference in these income areas can be attributed to the high student population.

Table 12
Income Characteristics 1970-2023

		US Decennial Census				American Community Survey		
		1969	1979	1989	1999	2010	2020	2023
Watauga	Per Capita Income	\$1,969	\$5,097	\$10,628	\$17,258	\$20,961	\$27,962	\$32,631
	Median Family Income	\$6,149	\$14,532	\$27,752	\$45,508	\$56,112	\$75,042	\$87,273
	Median Household Income	\$5,323	\$11,039	\$20,252	\$32,611	\$31,967	\$46,453	\$51,367
North Carolina	Per Capita Income	\$2,474	\$6,133	\$12,885	\$20,307	\$24,745	\$31,993	\$39,616
	Median Family Income	\$7,770	\$16,792	\$31,548	\$46,335	\$56,153	\$70,978	\$86,947
	Median Household Income	\$7,025	\$14,481	\$26,647	\$39,184	\$45,570	\$56,642	\$69,904
US	Per Capita Income	\$3,119	\$7,298	\$14,420	\$21,587	\$27,334	\$35,384	\$43,289
	Median Family Income	\$9,586	\$19,917	\$35,225	\$50,046	\$62,982	\$80,069	\$96,922
	Median Household Income	\$8,486	\$16,841	\$30,056	\$41,994	\$51,914	\$64,994	\$78,538

US Decennial Census 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000; American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2010, 2020, 2023



Employment/Wages by Industry

In 2024, the number of employed persons in Watauga County was approximately 30,493, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (Table 13).

- ▼ Private industry employed 24,578 individuals.
- ▼ Federal, state and local governments employed 5,915 people.
- ▼ Specific areas that stand out as employers of a large percentage of workers include state government, educational services, the accommodations and food services sector, and retail trade.
- ▼ State government and educational services numbers are high, mainly due to the large number of employees in administration and teaching at Appalachian State University.
- ▼ Large numbers of workers in the accommodation and food services sector and retail trade are explained by the area's popularity as a tourist destination.
- ▼ The weekly wages for Watauga County workers are lower than the average wages in North Carolina in all categories of industry except one – education services.





Table 13
Employment/Wages by Industry - Watauga County with
State for Comparison (2024)

Governmental Industry	Watauga Average Employment	Watauga Average Weekly Wage	North Carolina Average Weekly Wage
Total Federal Government	106	\$1,314	\$1,724
Total State Government	4,082	\$1,243	\$1,304
Total Local Government	1,727	\$937	\$1,181
Private Industry			
Total Private Industry	24,578	\$999	\$1,732
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, & Hunting	0	\$0	\$931
Mining	0	\$0	\$2,078
Utilities	0	\$0	\$2,088
Construction	1,080	\$1,015	\$1,429
Manufacturing	482	\$680	\$1,436
Wholesale Trade	417	\$1,198	\$1,928
Retail Trade	3,527	\$597	\$752
Transportation and Warehousing	381	\$998	\$1,176
Information	0	\$0	\$2,490
Finance and Insurance	296	\$1,588	\$2,505
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	765	\$894	\$1,335
Professional and Technical Services	908	\$1,598	\$2,132
Management of Companies and Enterprises	311	\$1,470	\$2,769
Administrative and Waste Services	907	\$815	\$1,075
Educational Services	4,828	\$1,186	\$1,170
Health Care and Social Assistance	3,889	\$1,267	\$1,296
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	937	\$557	\$802
Accommodation and Food Service	4,300	\$427	\$487
Other Services, (except Public Admin)	575	\$725	\$941
Public Administration	975	\$971	\$1,269
Unclassified	0	\$0	\$1,088
Total All Industries	30,493	\$1,123	\$1,485

NC Commerce - Quarterly Census of Employment and Wage (2024)

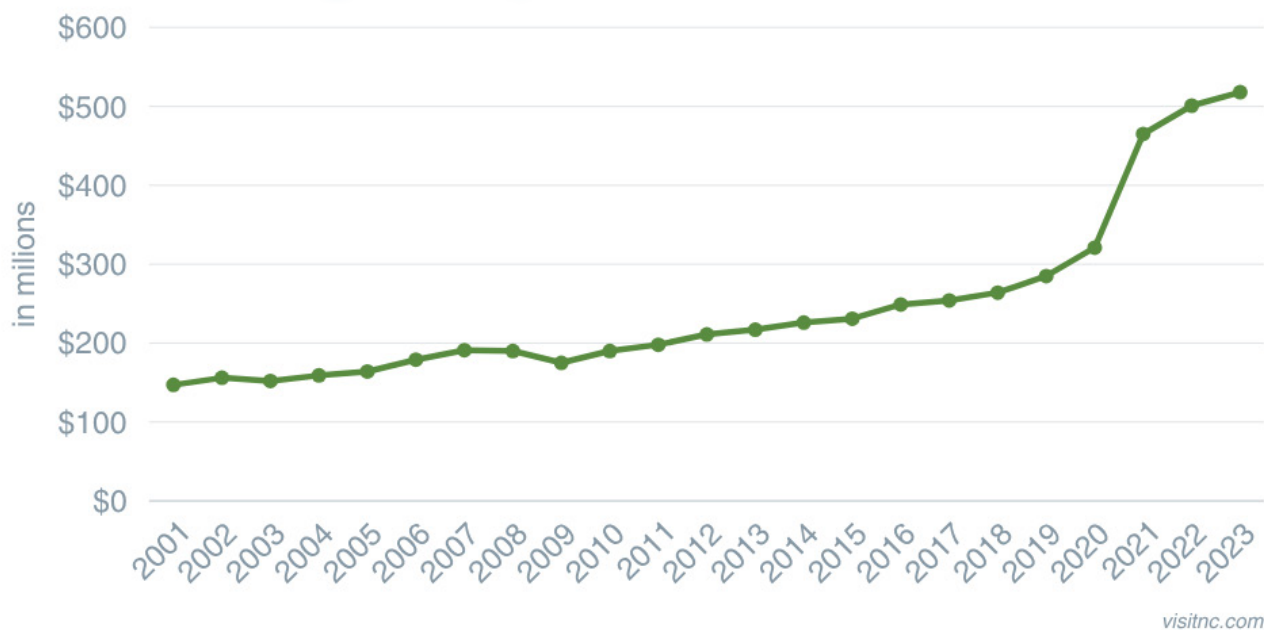


ECONOMIC TRENDS

Tourism Statistics 2023

- Domestic tourism in Watauga County generated an economic impact of \$517.51 million in 2023, a more than 172.6% increase since 2008 (\$189.8 million).
- In 2023, Watauga County ranked 15th in travel impact among North Carolina's 100 counties.
- More than 3,064 jobs in Watauga County were directly attributable to travel and tourism.
- Travel generated a \$127.7 million payroll in 2023.
- State and local tax revenues from travel to Watauga County amounted to \$35.60 million. This represents a \$652.00 tax saving for each County resident.
- Area attractions include the Blue Ridge Parkway, Horn in the West outdoor drama, Mast General Store, Beech Mountain Resort, Mystery Hill, museums devoted to Appalachian culture and heritage, Appalachian Theatre of the High Country, The Blowing Rock, Tweetsie Railroad, Hiking and Biking trails (Elk Knob, Rocky Knob), and Appalachian Ski Mountain.
- There are several attractions in adjoining counties that contribute to Watauga County for basic services, such as restaurants and lodging that also contribute to the county's tourism.
- Watauga County tourism saw a large (nearly 45%) increase in tourism revenue between 2020 and 2021. This growth in spending can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. After months of quarantines, temporary business closures, social distancing, and travel restrictions, people wanted to travel again enjoying outdoor events and activities that Watauga County could offer while still observing mandated safety protocols.

Table 14
Watauga County Tourism Revenue 2000-2023





PRINCIPAL EMPLOYERS

Table 15
25 Largest Employers - Watauga County (2024)

Rank	Company Name	Industry	Employment Range
1	Appalachian State University	Education	1,000+
2	ARHS Attn Human Resources	Health Services	1,000+
3	Samaritans Purse, Inc.	Health Services	1,000+
4	Watuaga County Board of Education	Education	500-999
5	Watauga County	Public Administration	250-499
6	Appalachian Ski Mountain	Arts, Entertainment & Recreation	250-499
7	Beech Mountain Resort, Inc	Arts, Entertainment & Recreation	250-499
8	Wal-Mart Associates, Inc.	Retail	250-499
9	Mast General Store, Ince	Retail	100-249
10	Glenbridge Health & Rehabilitation	Health Services	100-249
11	Advisor Irep, Inc	Administrative & Support	100-249
12	ECR Software Corp.	Professional, Scientific, & Technical Services	100-249
13	Town of Boone	Public Administration	100-249
14	Lowes Home Centers, Inc	Retail	100-249
15	Publix North Carolina	Retail	100-249
16	RHA Health Services	Health Services	100-249
17	Food Lion	Retail	100-249
18	Prospera-CMC	Accommodation & Food Service	100-249
19	Stick Boy Bread Company	Manufacturing	100-249
20	Lost Province Brewing Company	Accommodation & Food Service	100-249
21	High Country Community Health	Health Care & Social Assistance	100-249
22	Harris Teeter	Retail	100-249
23	About Health, LLC	Health Care & Social Assistance	100-249
24	Tweetsie Railroad, Inc	Arts, Entertainment & Recreation	100-249
25	Goodnight Bros. Produce Co., INC	Wholesale Trade	100-249

NC Commerce - Quarterly Census of Employment and Wage (2024)

Watauga County's largest employer is Appalachian State University (App State)

- ▼ In Fall 2024, App State had 3,228 full-time employees.
- ▼ The total employment is nearly 4,000 with part-time and temporary employees.
- ▼ Considering full-time employees, App State employees 11% of the County's entire workforce.
- ▼ The employment of Appalachian Regional Healthcare System was 1,600 in April 2025.
- ▼ The next largest employers are Samaritan's Purse with 1,00+ employees and the Watauga County Board of Education, with more than 500 employees.
- ▼ Other major contributors to the labor force in Watauga County include Watauga County, Town of Boone, Wal-Mart, Mast General Store, Appalachian Ski Mountain, and Beech Mountain Resorts.



EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

The U.S. Census defines labor force as “all people classified in the civilian labor force (i.e., “employed” and “unemployed” people), plus members of the U.S. Armed Forces.” Tables 16 and 17 summarize key employment and economic sector statistics for Watauga County.

Table 16
Watauga County Employment Characteristics 2000-2024

	Labor Force	Employed	Unemployed	Unemployment Rate
2024	27,817	26,849	968	3.50%
2023	29,969	29,070	899	3.00%
2022	29,336	28,374	962	3.30%
2021	28,110	27,041	1,069	3.80%
2020	26,797	25,317	1,662	6.20%
2019	29,249	28,240	1,009	3.40%
2018	28,475	27,464	1,011	3.60%
2017	28,163	27,018	1,145	4.10%
2016	27,861	26,608	1,253	4.50%
2015	27,365	26,056	1,309	4.80%
2014	27,043	25,683	1,360	5.00%
2013	27,019	25,339	1,680	6.20%
2012	27,276	25,213	2,063	7.60%
2011	27,147	25,010	2,137	7.90%
2010	26,990	24,894	2,096	7.80%
2009	23,227	21,299	1,928	8.30%
2008	23,089	21,992	1,097	4.80%
2007	24,800	23,890	910	3.70%
2006	23,909	22,952	957	4.00%
2005	23,318	22,329	989	4.20%
2004	22,834	21,841	993	4.30%
2003	22,873	21,822	1,051	4.60%
2002	22,299	21,251	1,049	4.70%
2001	23,664	22,799	865	3.70%

Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS)



Table 17
Current Industry Structure - Watauga County

	Number of Business Units	Average Employees	Percent of NC Average	Percent of Watauga Average
All Industries	1957	24,778	0.52%	
Construction	257	1,080	0.40%	4.36%
Manufacturing	51	482	0.10%	1.95%
Wholesale Trade	62	517	0.25%	2.09%
Retail Trade	294	3,527	0.66%	14.23%
Transportation and Warehousing	31	381	0.18%	1.54%
Finance and Insurance	58	296	0.13%	1.19%
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	168	765	1.06%	3.09%
Professional and Technical Services	247	908	0.27%	3.66%
Management of Companies and Enterprises	8	311	0.37%	1.26%
Administrative and Waste Services	130	907	0.28%	3.66%
Educational Services	45	4,828	1.23%	19.49%
Health Care and Social Assistance	177	3,889	0.56%	15.70%
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	45	937	1.07%	3.78%
Accommodation and Food Service	205	4,300	0.94%	17.35%
Other Services, (except Public Admin)	156	675	0.51%	2.72%
Public Administration	23	975	0.00%	3.93%

NC Commerce - Quarterly Census of Employment and Wage (2024)



UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

Since 2000, the average annual unemployment rate in Watauga County has been lower than North Carolina's average annual rate and lower than the national average rate. The unemployment rate in Watauga County has also been very favorable compared to adjoining counties. Many individuals commute from other counties in North Carolina and Tennessee to work in Watauga County.

Table 18
Average Annual Unemployment Rate
Counties 2000-2023

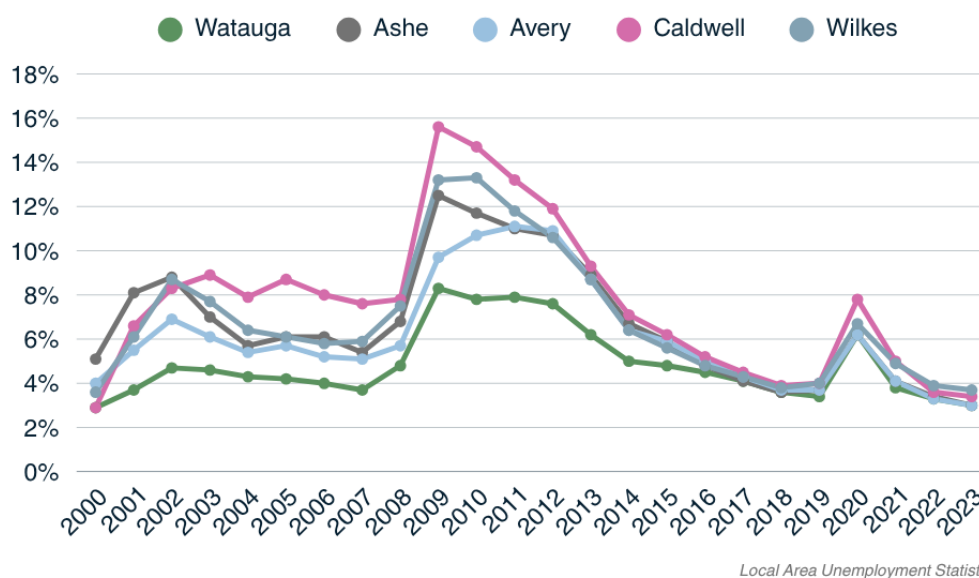
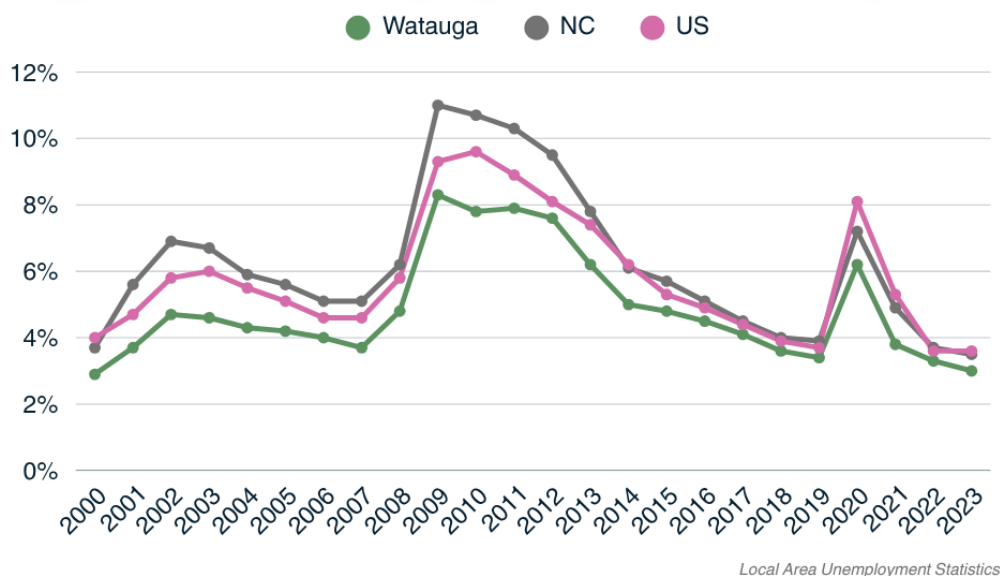


Table 19
Average Annual Unemployment Rate - Comparison





WORKING COMMUTERS

- ▼ In 2022, 12,234 individuals, or 41.7% of the labor force in Watauga County, lived in counties other than Watauga County.
- ▼ Over one third of these people lived in the adjoining counties of Ashe (1,577) Caldwell (934), Avery (717), and Johnson County, TN (611).
- ▼ 3.1% of the workers commuting to Watauga County lived in Tennessee and 65.4% of these came from Johnson County.
- ▼ In 2022, 8,295 individuals living in Watauga County commuted outside of the county to work. Approximately 13.5% of these individuals work in states other than North Carolina.

Table 20

Workers Commuting TO Work in Watauga County, Living In

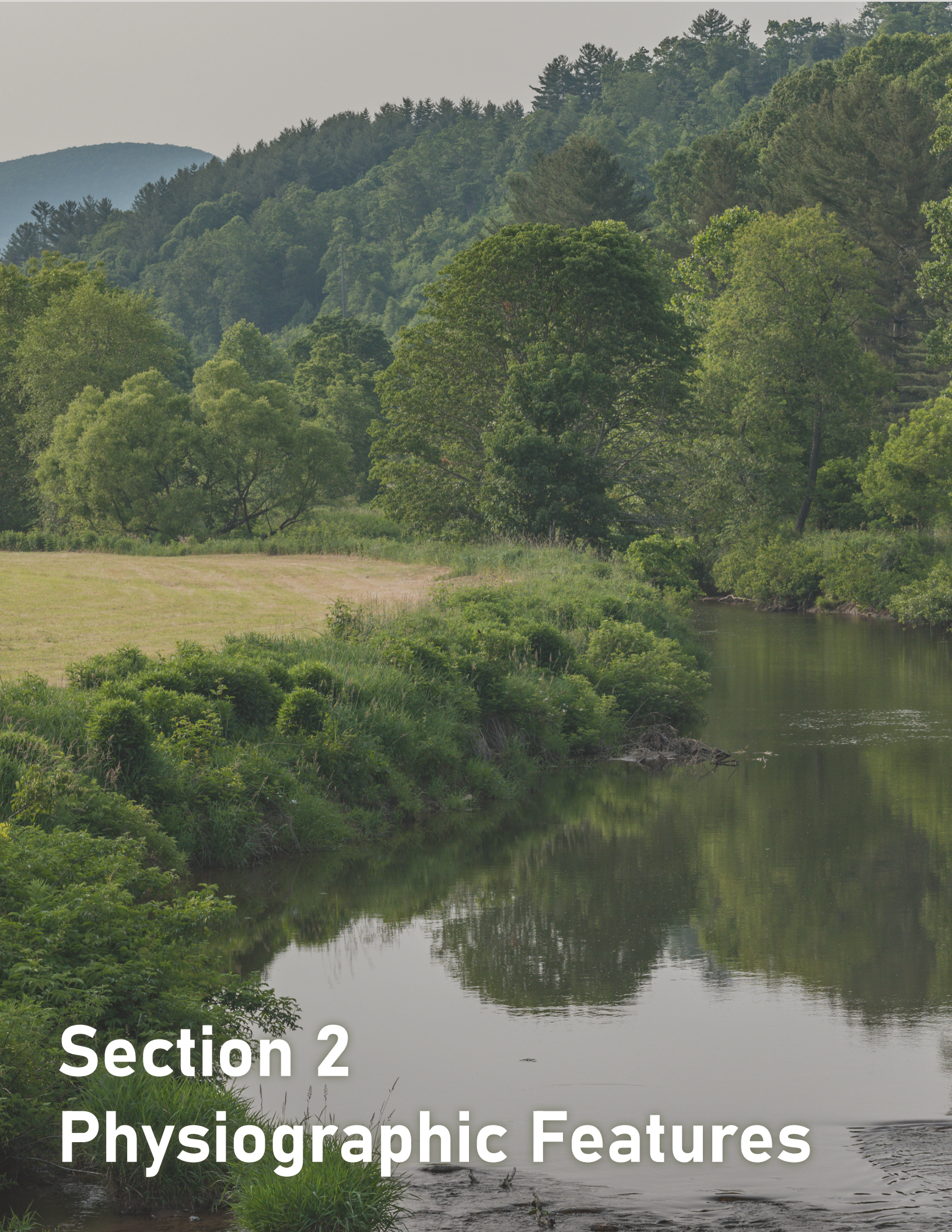
Counties	2012	2022
<i>Ashe, NC</i>	1,324	1,577
<i>Caldwell, NC</i>	857	934
<i>Avery, NC</i>	887	714
<i>Mecklenburg, NC</i>	498	658
<i>Wilkes, NC</i>	509	634
<i>Wake, NC</i>	417	484
<i>Johnson, TN</i>	661	611
<i>Gilford, NC</i>	301	404
<i>Other</i>	5,574	6,218
Total	11,028	12,234
States		
<i>Tennessee</i>	1,009	933
<i>Virginia</i>	345	395
<i>South Carolina</i>	128	212
<i>Other</i>	200	242
Total	1,682	1,782

Table 21

Workers Living IN Watauga County Commuting to Work In:

Counties	2012	2022
<i>Avery</i>	604	935
<i>Mecklenburg</i>	566	722
<i>Buncombe</i>	803	657
<i>Wake</i>	1,379	559
<i>Catawba</i>	537	416
<i>Caldwell</i>	443	394
<i>Wilkes</i>	361	332
<i>Other</i>	5,963	4,280
Total	10,656	8,295
States		
<i>Tennessee</i>	467	484
<i>Virginia</i>	193	191
<i>South Carolina</i>	173	83
<i>Other</i>	473	361
Total	1,306	1,119

US Census, Center for Economic Studies, LODES



Section 2

Physiographic Features

PHYSIOGRAPHIC FEATURES

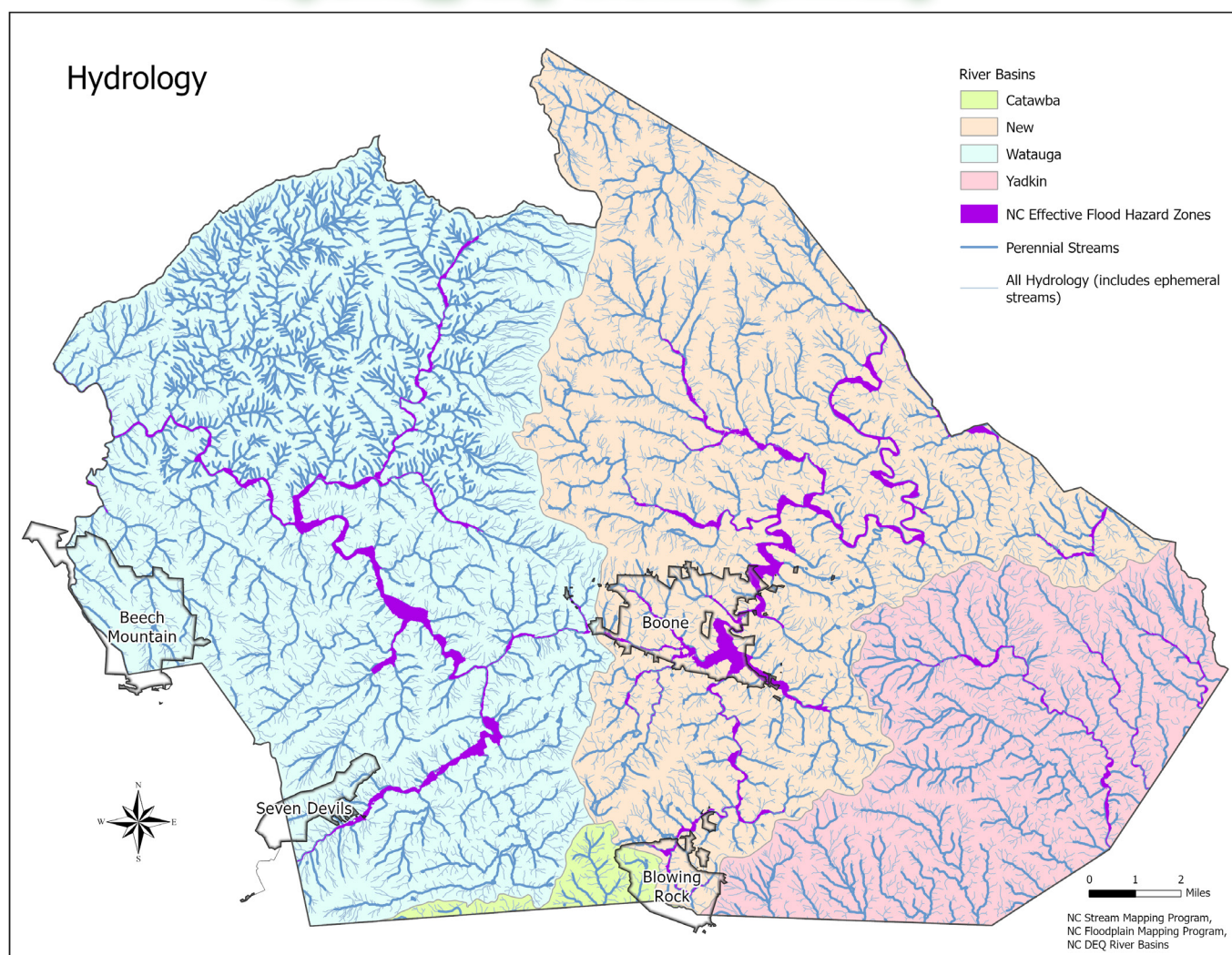
The overall suitability of land to accommodate development is generally viewed as the cumulative constraint imposed by the natural features of slope, hydrology, soils, flooding and other sensitive environmental characteristics of the geographic area under consideration. For the purposes of this assessment, the additional factors of protected mountain ridges and certain publicly-owned lands have been added to this collective categorization. This assessment is made on the basis of natural constraints. Other limitations, such as the availability of water and sewer services and transportation capacities, are not considered.





Watauga County Hydrology and Flood Hazard

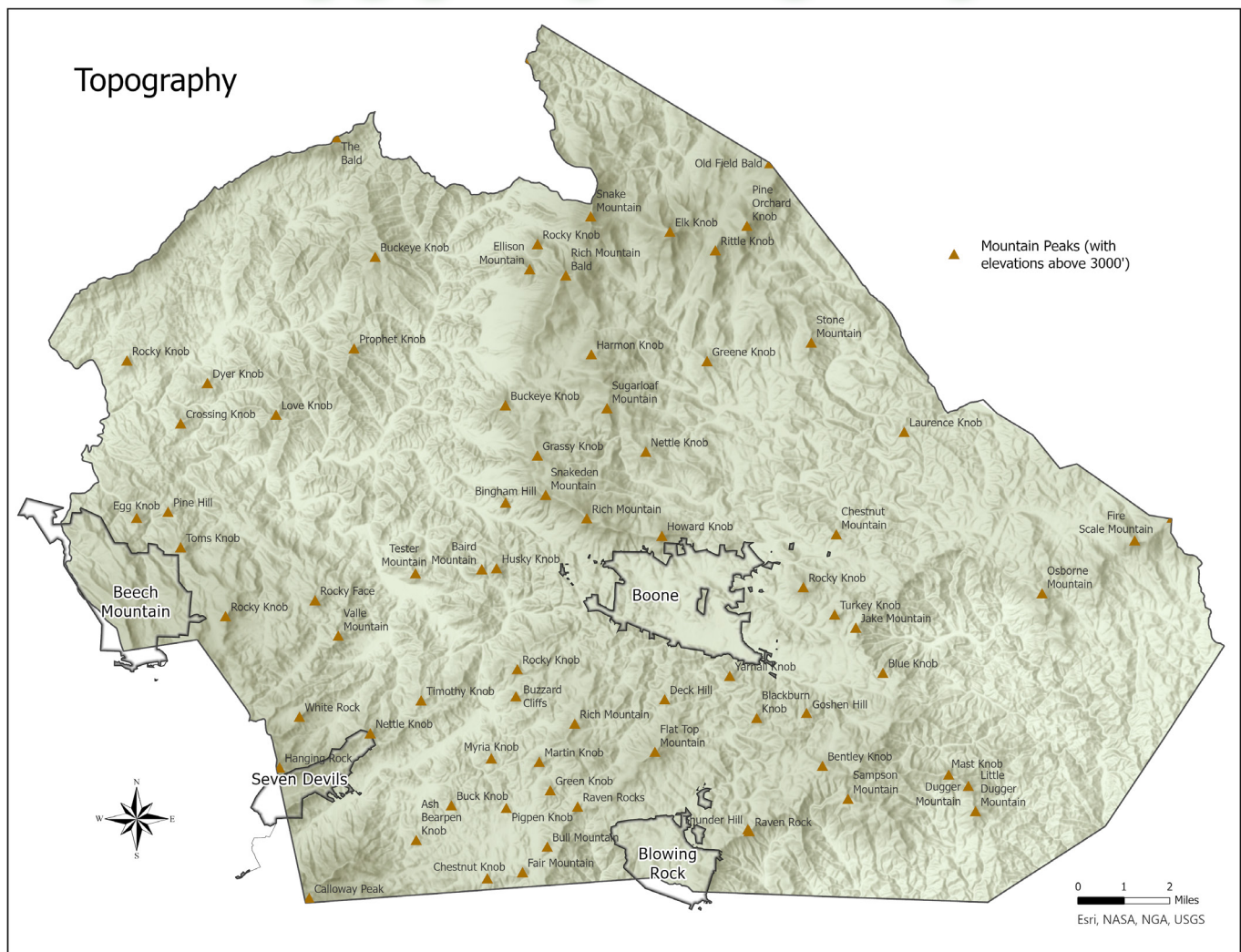
Illustration 1 Hydrology Map of Watauga County



Watauga County is fortunate to have abundant and relatively pure surface water in four major watersheds.

Topographic Characteristics

Illustration 2 Topographic Map of Watauga County

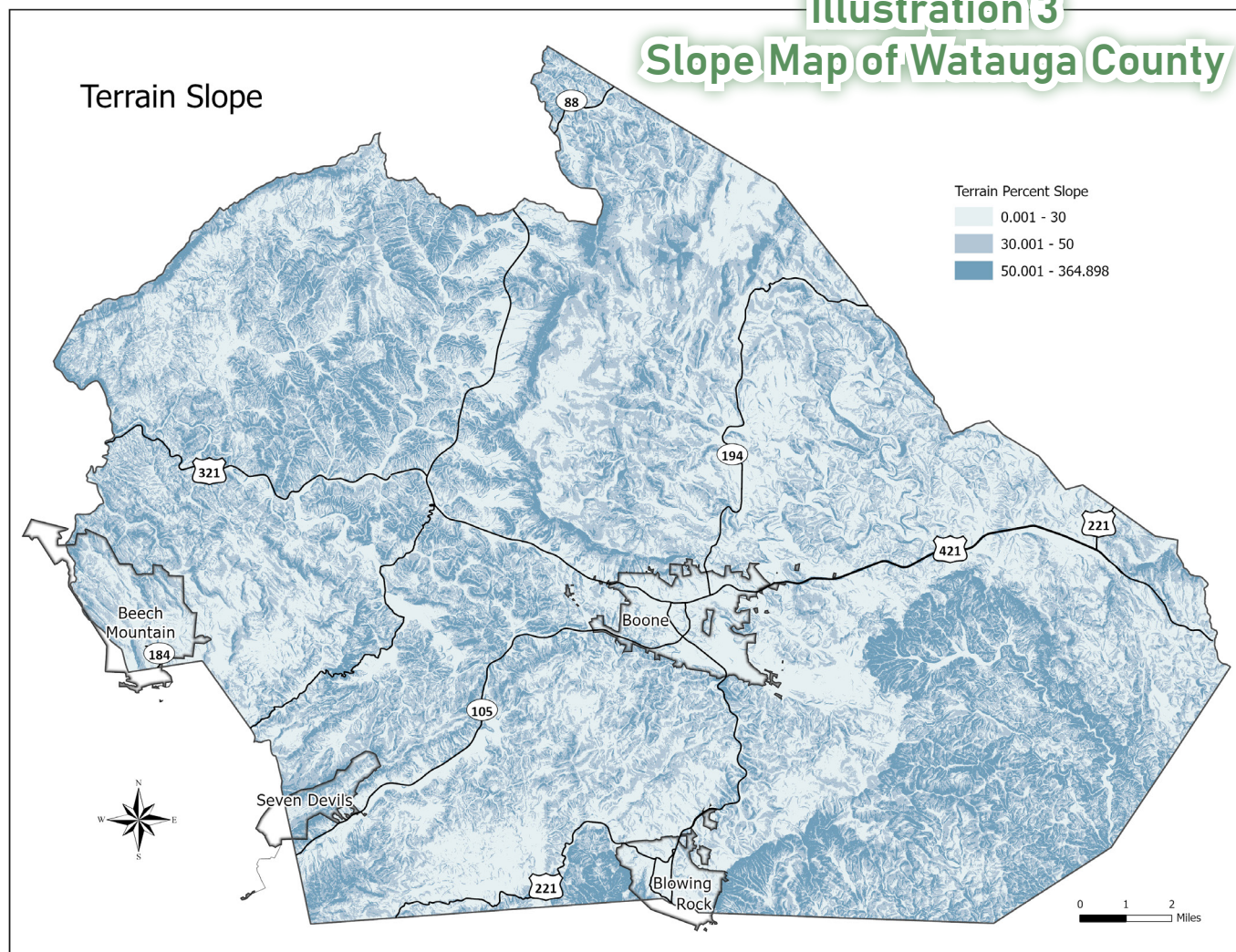


The lowest elevation is 1,350 feet above sea level in the Triplett Community in southeast Watauga County. The highest point is Calloway Peak at 5,964 feet above sea level. It is the highest peak of Grandfather Mountain and is shared with adjacent counties, Avery and Caldwell. The steeper the land, the more difficult it is to utilize and the more sensitive it is to change.



Slope Characteristics

Illustration 3
Slope Map of Watauga County



Watauga County has very diverse topographic features. Elevations range from as low as 1,350 feet above sea level to 5,964 feet above sea level.

The Slope Map (Illustration 3) shows topographic characteristics in three categories.

Light areas are slopes between 0% and 30% and are most amenable to change.

Medium blue areas have very steep slopes of 50% or greater and are most sensitive to change.

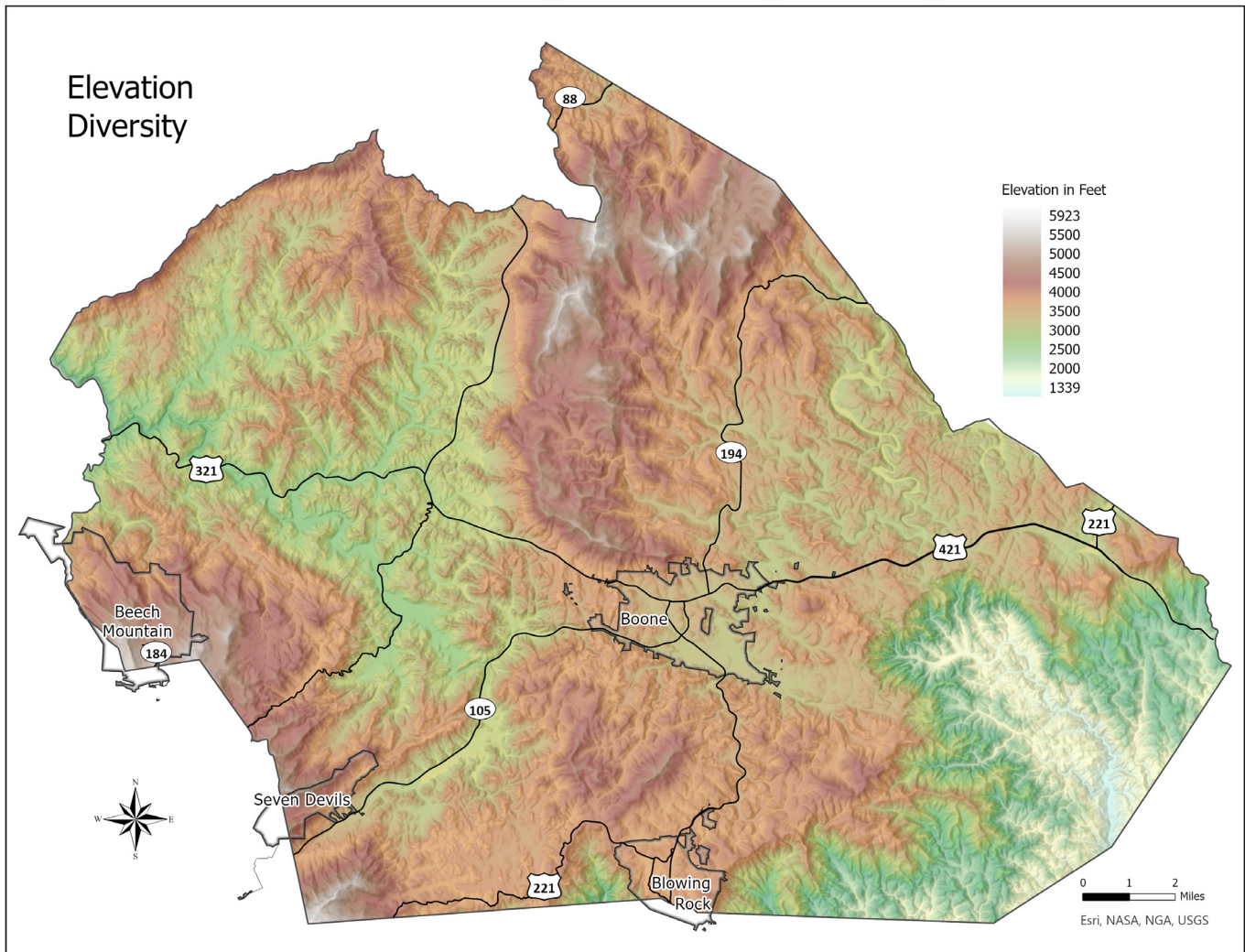
The slope of the land has a direct bearing on land stability and suitability for development. Areas of steep slope are often associated with earth slides, increased fire hazards, increased potential for damage to the natural environment, and greater economic issues.

The Watauga County subdivision ordinance notes that a slope of 50% or greater is generally “considered too steep for subdivision development.”

This does not prevent construction of improvements on steep slopes. It merely restricts subdivision development.

Elevation Diversity

Illustration 4 Elevation Map of Watauga County

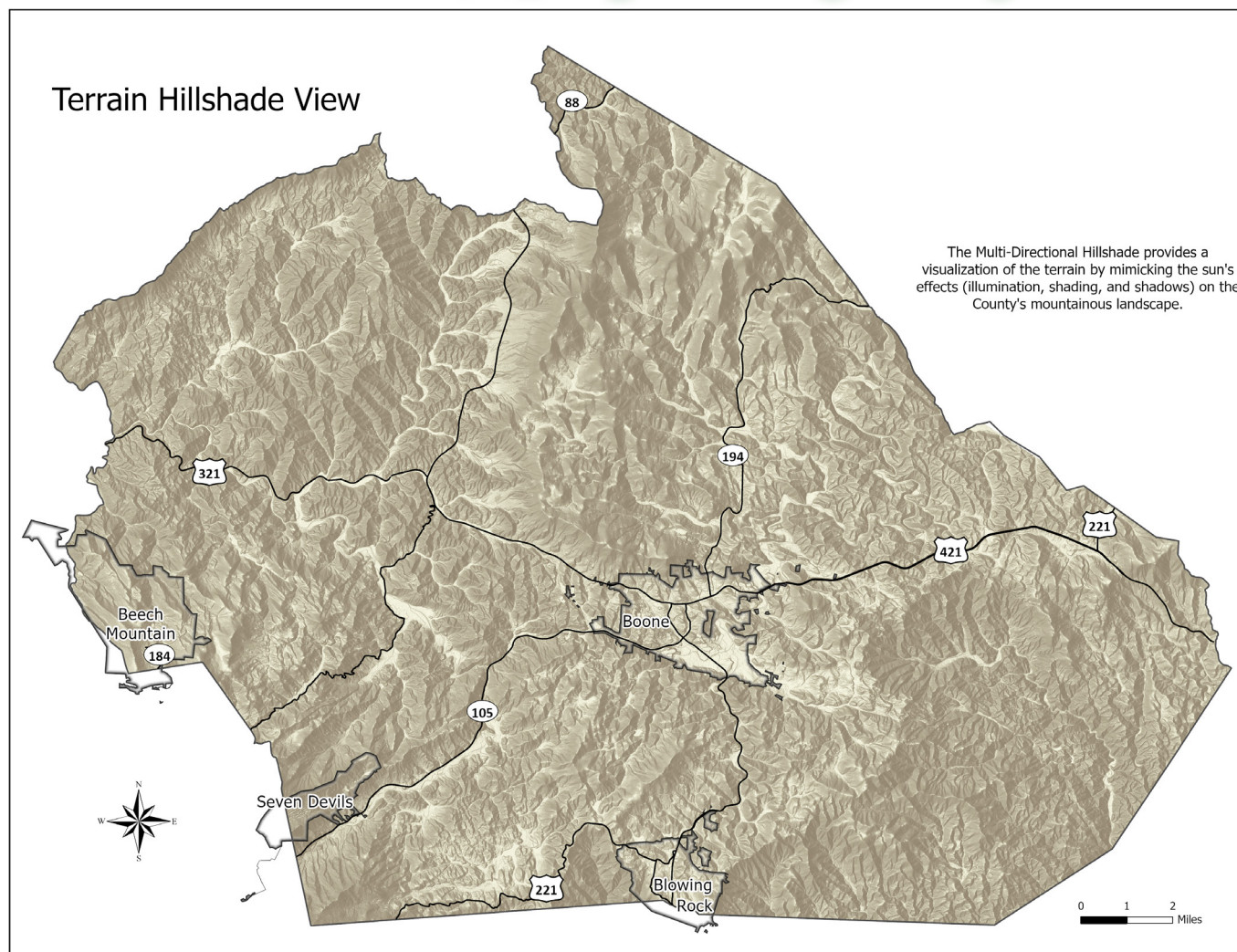


The Elevation Map (Illustration 4) graphically displays the wide variation in elevation in Watauga County. The largest portion of the County falls in the 3,000 to 3,500 feet above sea level category. However, about 25% of the County has elevations above 3,500 feet.



Hill Shade View

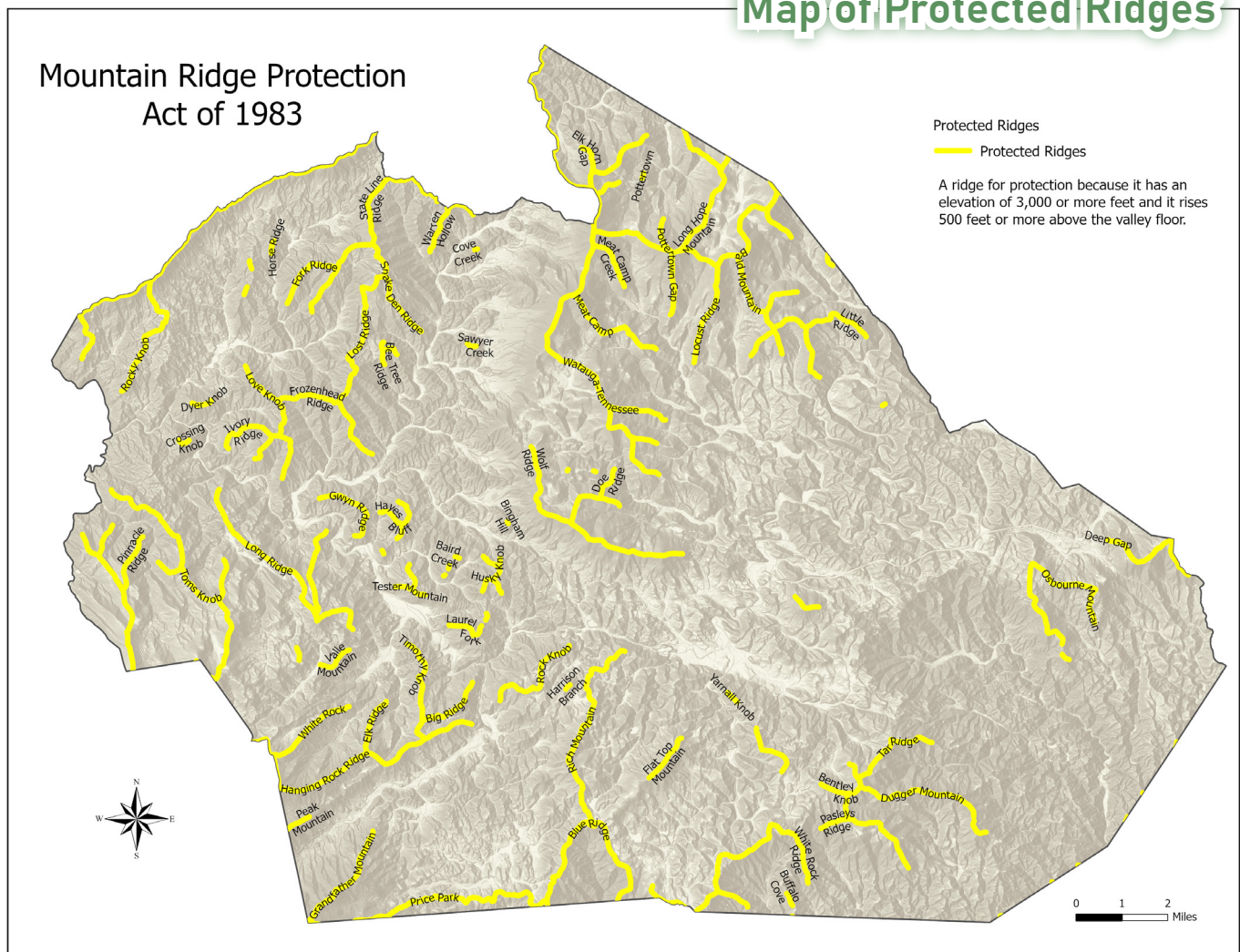
Illustration 5 Hill Shade View Map of Watauga County



The Hill Shade View Map (Illustration 5) provides an alternate view of the topographic features of Watauga County. This map, along with the Topographic, Elevation and Slope Maps, provides a picture of the rugged and diverse landscape of the County. This graphic representation presents the relief of the landscape as viewed from the west quadrant of the map.

Protected Ridges

Illustration 6 Map of Protected Ridges



▼ In 1983, The General Assembly adopted North Carolina General Statute 113A - Article 14, known as the "Mountain Ridge Protection Act." The regulations contained therein apply to mountain ridges with an elevation of 500 feet or more above the valley floor. The regulated portion of the ridge is the area within 100 feet below the elevation of the crest of the mountain.

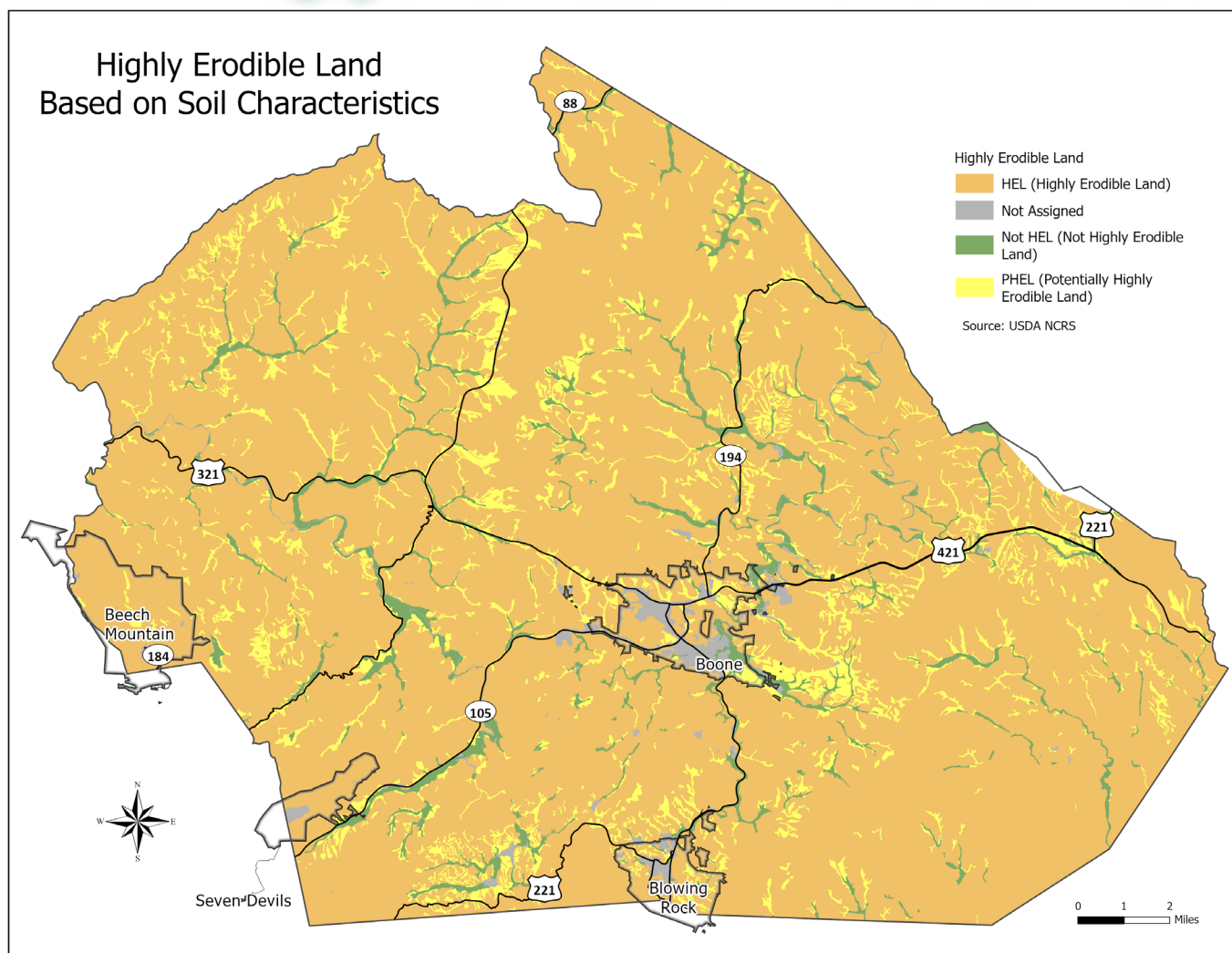
▼ The Act prohibits "tall buildings or structures" on protected mountain ridges.

- ▼ A "tall building or structure" has a vertical height of more than 40 feet measured from the top of the foundation to its highest point.
- ▼ Tall buildings or structures may not protrude above the crest of the ridge by more than 35 feet.
- ▼ Certain structures and building projections are not regulated under the Act, including towers for communications, electricity, telephone, television and radio, structures such as chimneys, spires, steeples, antennas, windmills, etc., and buildings and structures designated as National Historic Sites.



Soil Types

Illustration 7 Highly Erodible Land Based on Soil Characteristics

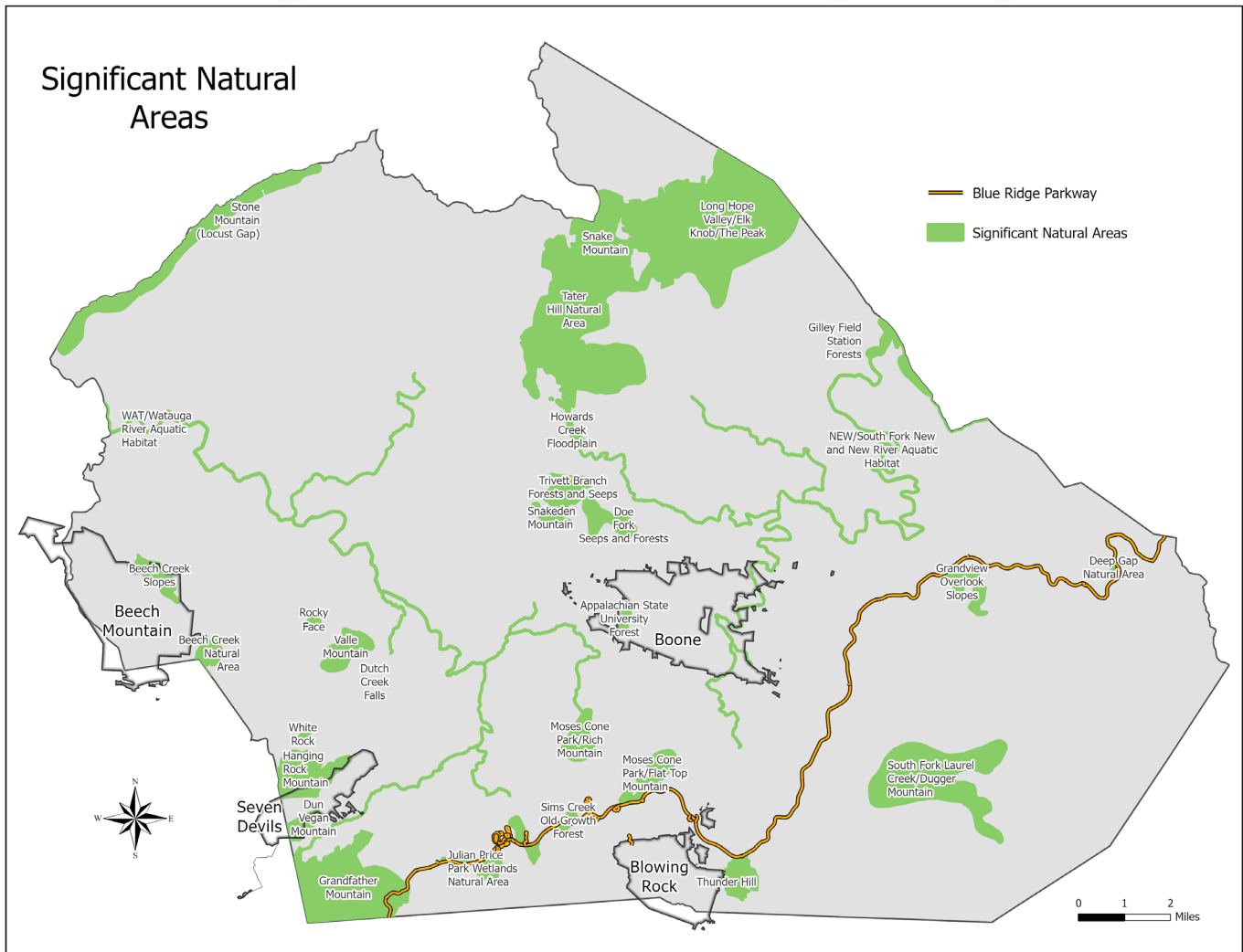


The Map shown in Illustration 7 shows the distribution of Highly Erodible Land Determinations (HEL) based on soil characteristics of Watauga County.

- Highly Erodible Land (HEL) provisions of The Food Security Act of 1985 are designed to protect the Nation's long-term capability to produce food and fiber. HEL is land that can erode at an excessive rate because of soil properties leading to long-term decreased productivity. Highly erodible land is designed on a field basis and based on the proportion of the total field acreage that contains highly erodible soils.
- The HEL Soils list identifies soils having an erodibility index (EI) of eight or more HEL. This index expresses the potential erodibility of a soil in relation to its tolerance for erosion without consideration of applied conservation practices or management. Soil can be classified as highly erodible for either wind or water erosion.
- Watauga County has approximately 171,152 acres (or 85.5% of the county) that is designated as highly erodible.

Significant Natural Areas

Illustration 8 Map of Natural Areas in Watauga County



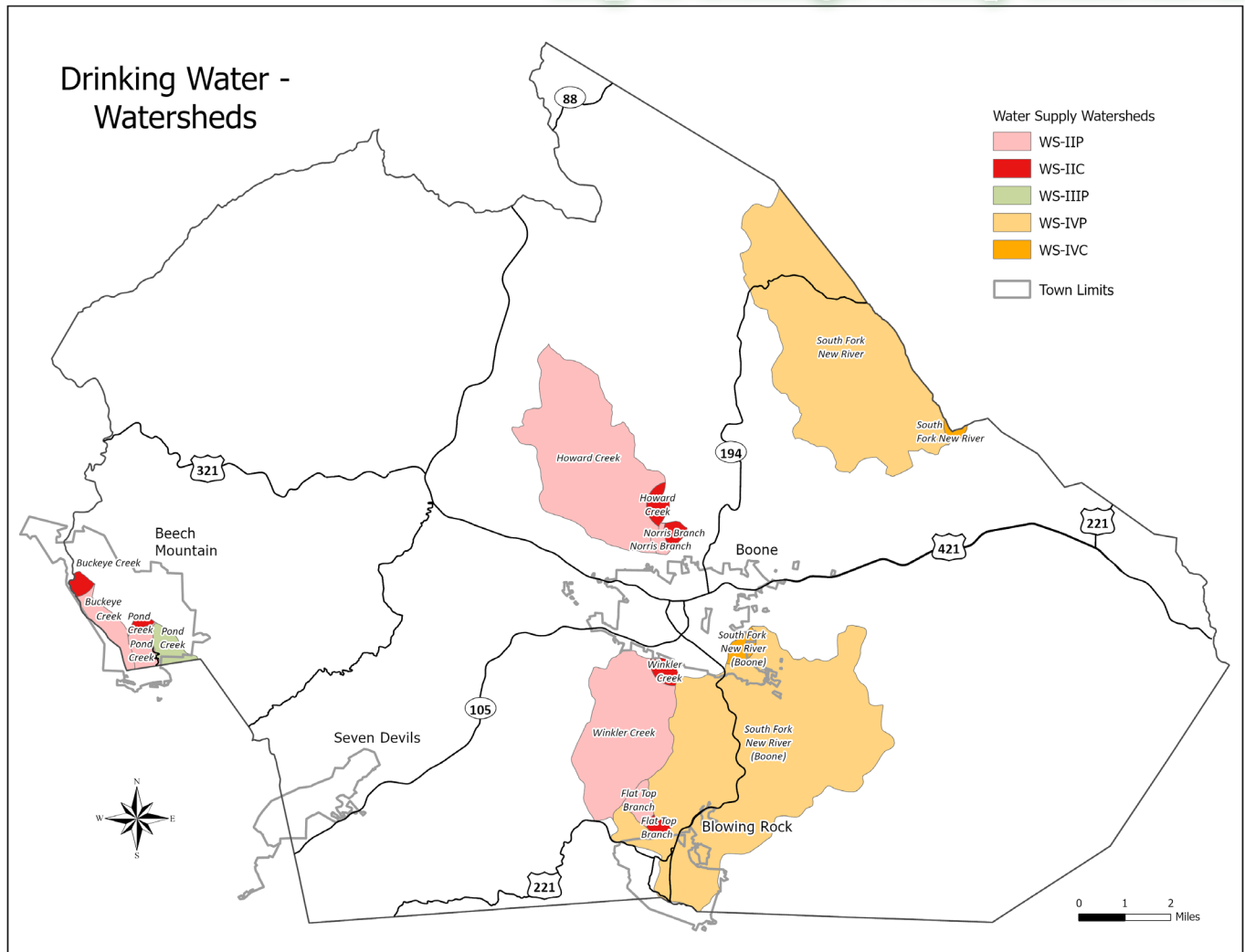
Watauga County has several sites designated by the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program as natural heritage areas or significant natural areas. All have one of the following designations: national, state, regional or county significance. The following is a list of the sites in Watauga County, represented in Illustration 8 - Significant Natural Areas, along with acreages as recorded by the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality, Division of Parks and Recreation, Natural Heritage Program. Some of the sites enjoy protection through ownership by federal or state entities. Others are in private ownership.



NATURAL AREA	LAND OWNER	ACREAGE
APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY FOREST	SITE IS OWNED BY APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY	67.35
BEECH CREEK NATURAL AREA	PORTION OWNED BY NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION AS A STATE NATURAL AREA AND THE REMAINDER IS PRIVATELY OWNED LOCATED NEAR BEECH MOUNTAIN	131.13
BEECH CREEK SLOPES	PORTION OWNED BY NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION AS A STATE NATURAL AREA AND THE REMAINDER IS PRIVATELY OWNED LOCATED NEAR BEECH MOUNTAIN	234.80
DEEP GAP NATURAL AREA	THE SITE IS PARTLY OWNED BY THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY AND IS A REGISTERED HERITAGE AREA AND THE REMAINDER IS PRIVATELY-OWNED LOCATED NEAR DEEP GAP.	11.08
DOE FORK SEEPS AND FORESTS	PRIVATELY-OWNED SITE LOCATED NORTH-NORTHWEST OF BOONE NEAR RICH MOUNTAIN.	252.04
DUN VEGAN MOUNTAIN	PRIVATELY-OWNED SITE NEAR THE TOWN OF SEVEN DEVILS.	144.34
DUTCH CREEK FALLS	PRIVATELY-OWNED SITE LOCATED NEAR THE VALLE CRUCIS COMMUNITY.	2.19
GILLEY FIELD STATION FORESTS	CURRENTLY BEING USED BY THE ANTHROPOLOGY AND BIOLOGY DEPARTMENTS AT APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY FOR FACULTY AND STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECTS AND OWNED BY THE ENDOWMENT FUND OF APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY LOCATED IN THE TODD COMMUNITY	201.68
GRANDFATHER MOUNTAIN	A HIGH, RUGGED MOUNTAIN LOCATED ON THE BLUE RIDGE ESCARPMENT. OWNERSHIP OF GRANDFATHER MOUNTAIN IS BY THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE, THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY, THE NATURE CONSERVANCY, AND PRIVATE OWNERSHIP. IN SEPTEMBER 2008, A LARGE PORTION OF GRANDFATHER MOUNTAIN WAS PURCHASED BY THE STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA TO BECOME THE STATE'S 34TH STATE PARK.	1,845.50
GRANDVIEW OVERLOOK SLOPES	LOCATED ON THE BLUE RIDGE ESCARPMENT BETWEEN BOONE AND DEEP GAP, NEAR THE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY AND PRIVATELY OWNED.	224.06
HANGING ROCK MOUNTAIN	A RUGGED MOUNTAIN LOCATED NEAR THE TOWN OF SEVEN DEVILS UNDER PRIVATE OWNERSHIP.	635.52
HOWARDS CREEK FLOODPLAIN	THE PRIVATELY-OWNED SITE IS LOCATED NEAR THE HEADWATERS OF HOWARDS CREEK AND TATER HILL.	51.02
JULIAN PRICE PARK WETLANDS NATURAL AREA	LOCATED IN THE JULIAN PRICE MEMORIAL PARK ON THE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY AND OWNED BY THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY.	300.46
LONG HOPE KNOB/ELK KNOB/THE PEAK	AN AMPHIBOLITE MOUNTAIN OWNED IN PART BY THE NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION AND THE NATURE CONSERVANCY WITH THE REMAINING PORTION UNDER PRIVATE OWNERSHIP.	4,403.77
MOSES CONE PARK/FLAT TOP MOUNTAIN	THIS SITE IS OWNED BY THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY.	298.17
MOSES CONE PARK/RICH MOUNTAIN	SITE OWNERSHIP IS BY THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE.	290.78
ROCKY FACE	PRIVATELY-OWNED MOUNTAIN LOCATED IN THE VALLE CRUCIS COMMUNITY.	18.07
SIMS CREEK OLD GROWTH FOREST	THIS SITE IS OWNED BY THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY.	47.32
SNAKE MOUNTAIN	A HIGH MOUNTAIN TOP RIDGE LOCATED IN NORTHERN WATAUGA COUNTY AND UNDER PRIVATE OWNERSHIP.	1,043.65
SNAKEDEN MOUNTAIN	THIS SITE IS PART OF THE RICH MOUNTAIN RIDGE AND PRIVATELY-OWNED.	97.42
SOUTH FORK LAUREL CREEK/DUGGER MOUNTAIN	LOCATED ON THE EASTERN ESCARPMENT OF THE BLUE RIDGE AND PRIVATELY OWNED.	1,854.68
STONE MOUNTAIN (LOCUST GAP)	AN ELEVATED RIDGE ON THE NORTH CAROLINA-TENNESSEE STATE LINE UNDER PRIVATE OWNERSHIP.	1,100.88
TATER HILL NATURAL AREA	THIS SITE IS OWNED IN PART BY THE NORTH CAROLINA PLANT CONSERVATION PROGRAM, WITH THE REMAINDER UNDER PRIVATE OWNERSHIP.	3,229.58
THUNDER HILL	THIS SITE IS INCLUDED IN THE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY BOUNDARY AND OWNED BY THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE	270.25
TRIVETTE BRANCH FORESTS AND SEEPS	PRIVATELY-OWNED SITE.	282.96
VALLE MOUNTAIN	THE SITE IS A SMALL MOUNTAIN WITH STEEP SLOPES LOCATED IN THE VALLE CRUCIS COMMUNITY AND PRIVATELY-OWNED BY THE VALLE CRUCIS MISSION SCHOOL.	308.09
WHITE ROCK	THE SITE IS A SMALL PRIVATELY-OWNED MOUNTAIN NORTHWEST OF THE TOWN OF SEVEN DEVILS.	24.80
SOUTH FORK AND NEW RIVER AQUATIC HABITAT	AQUATIC HABITAT	257
WATAUGA RIVER AQUATIC HABITAT	AQUATIC HABITAT	229.38

Drinking Water - Watersheds

Illustration 9 Map of Watauga County Watersheds



Protected watersheds include:

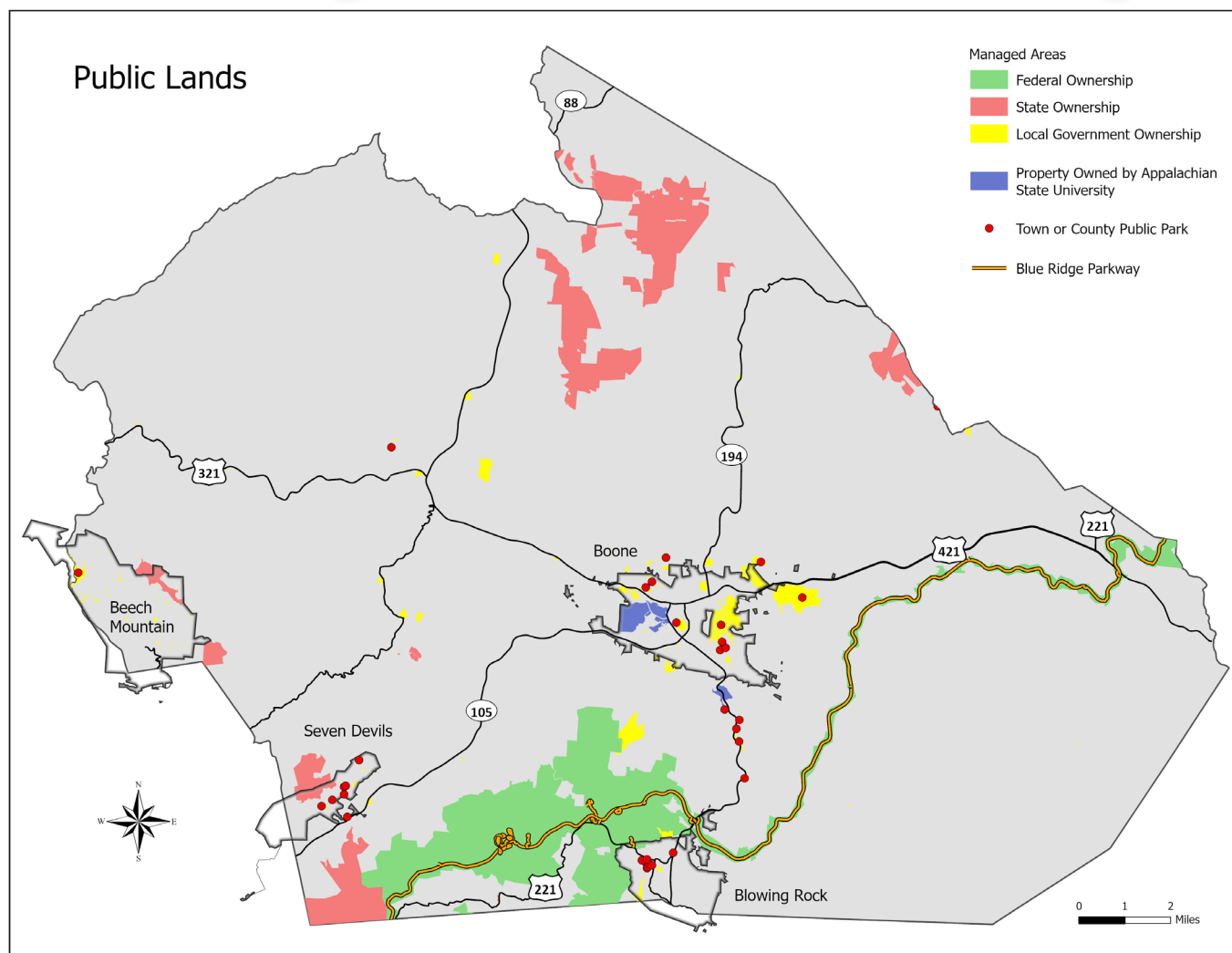
The Legislature of the state of North Carolina delegates the responsibility to Watauga County to adopt regulations that provide protection for watersheds. New development is subject to the restrictions of the watershed ordinance.

Buckeye Creek
Pond Creek
Flat Top Branch
Winkler Creek
Norris Branch
Howards Creek
South Fork New River
South Fork New River (Boone)



Public Lands

Illustration 10 Map of Public Lands and Conservation Properties



Watauga County enjoys a large amount of public land owned by the federal government. It is mostly located in the southern portion of Watauga County and is part of the Blue Ridge Parkway and properties accessed from the Parkway.

Properties owned by the state of North Carolina include Elk Knob State Park in northern Watauga County, which has the second highest peak in Watauga County, and the property around Grandfather Mountain. The state of North Carolina also owns much property in and around Boone occupied by Appalachian State University.



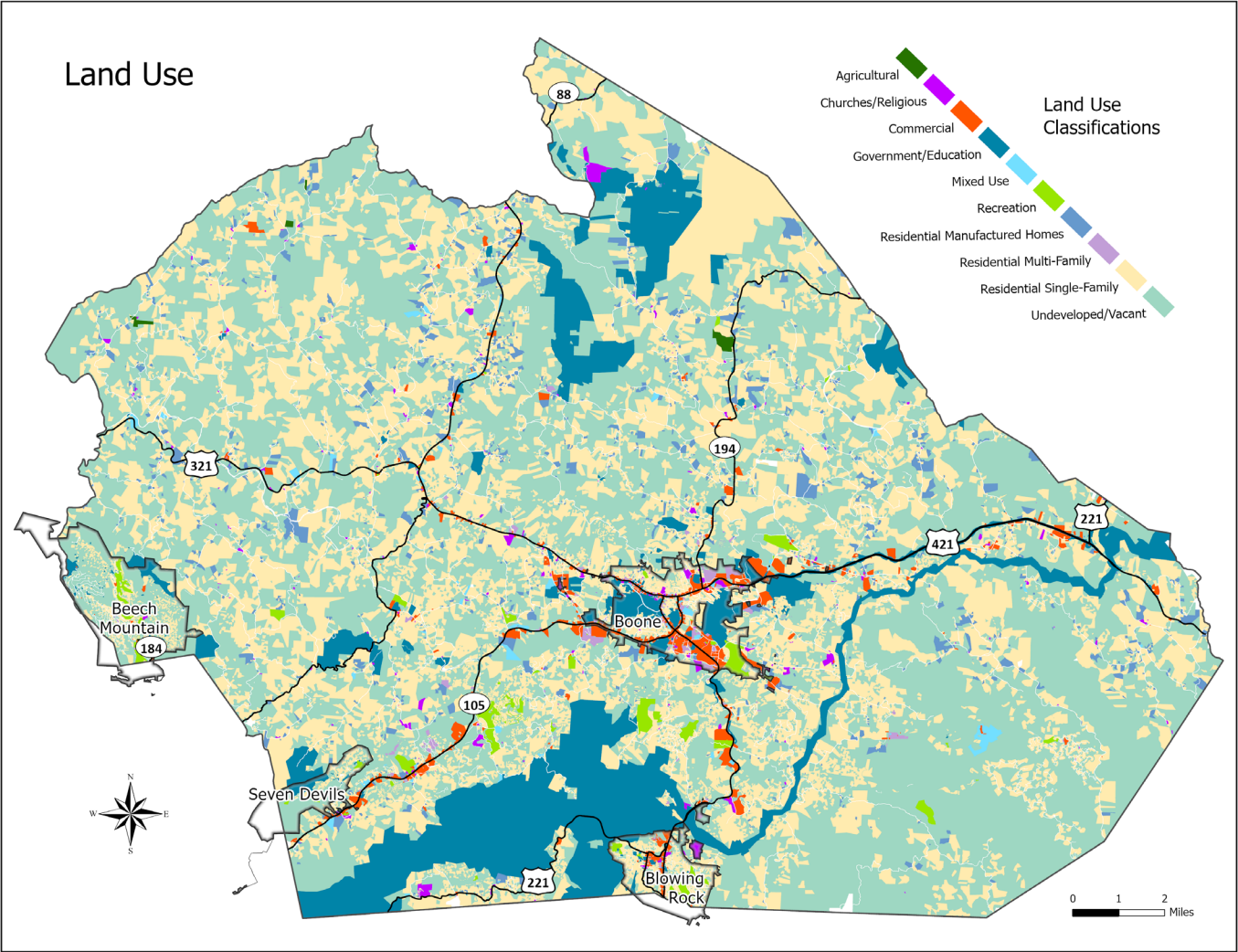
Watauga County owns properties that include government buildings, schools, recreation fields, gyms, swimming pools and others. A partial list of the principal County operated and/or owned properties follows:

- Watauga County Government Buildings
- Watauga County Schools
- Brookshire Park
- Howards Knob County Park
- Watauga County Recreation Center
- Cove Creek Park
- Rocky Knob Bike Park
- Sterling Creek Park (Middle Fork Greenway)
- Payne Branch Park (Middle Fork Greenway)
- Goldmine Branch Park (Middle Fork Greenway)
- 312 Trailhead (Middle Fork Greenway)
- Complex Ball Fields
- Watauga County Tot Lot
- New River Access
- Watauga River Accesses



Land Use Classification

Illustration 11
Land Use Map of Watauga County





Section 3

Transportation



TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

Preface

Watauga County's goal is to achieve an efficient and balanced transportation system that combines motorized and non-motorized modes of transportation. Specific objectives include:

- ▼ An efficient and integrated multi-modal transportation system
- ▼ A transportation system that is affordable and accessible to all users.
- ▼ A multi-modal transportation system that supports future development and preserves community character.
- ▼ A regionally integrated transportation planning process.

The principal highways in Watauga County are U.S. 321, U.S. 221, U.S. 421, N.C. 105, N.C. 194, and N.C. 88. These roads form the backbone of the County's transportation network (Illustration 12). In Watauga County, current transportation modes are limited to surface transportation, including vehicles, bicycles, and pedestrians. The County does not have a public airport or any navigable waters

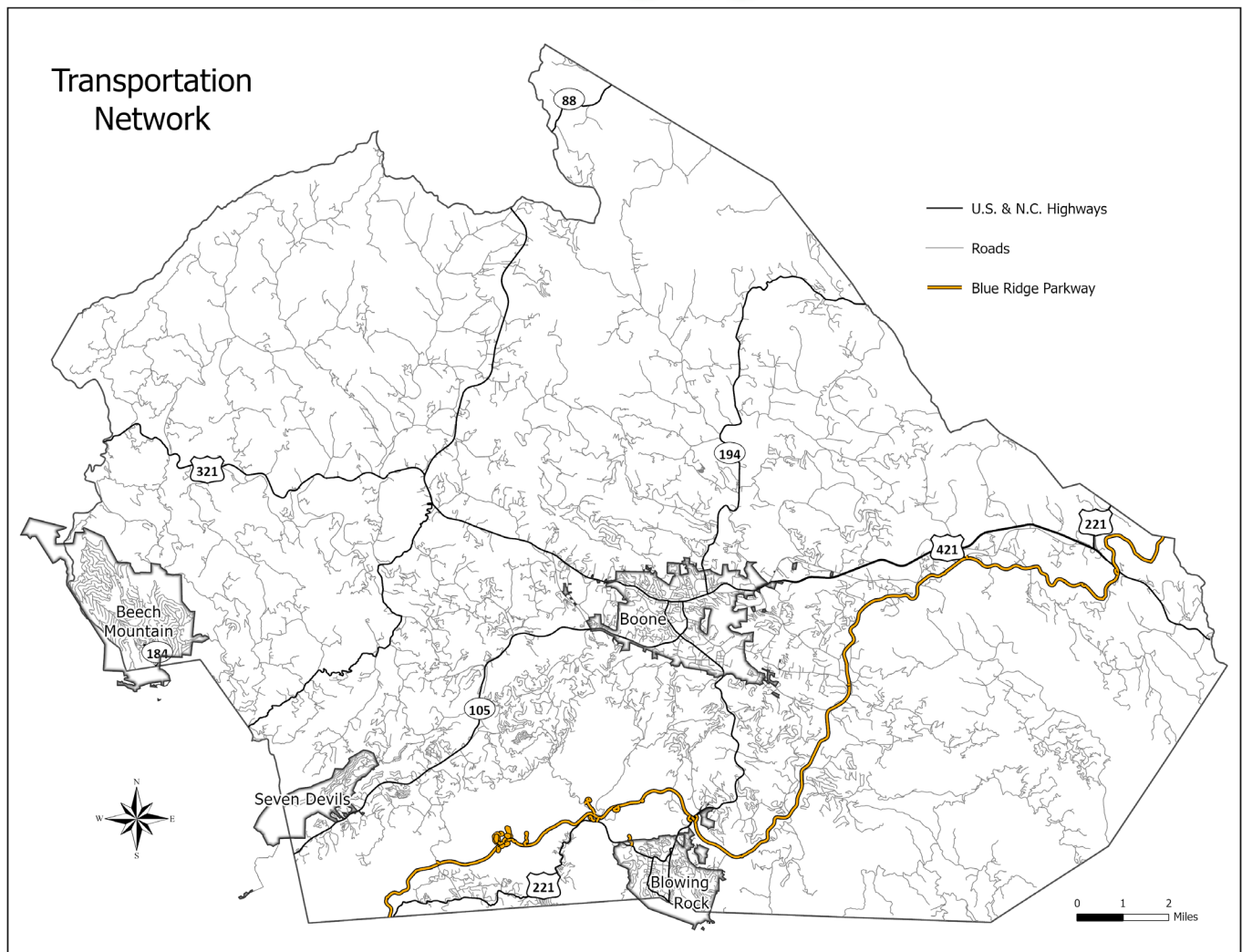
Public perceptions about transportation are summarized as follows:

- ▼ In a survey conducted in conjunction with the 2013 "Watauga County Comprehensive Transportation Plan", there was a desire for more non-traditional transportation options. More on-road bike lanes, greenways/off-road paths, and the expansion of sidewalks were high on the list of solutions to the County's traffic problems, with improvement of intersection design coming in a close second.
- ▼ A survey conducted for the update of this plan in 2024 found that a majority of the respondents (89%) were dissatisfied with traffic congestion in the County.
- ▼ Solutions to traffic congestion in both surveys tended to favor non-traditional transportation options (more bike lanes and pedestrian friendly paths). In addition, respondents in both surveys suggested Intersection design (more turn lanes) and widening existing roads would also improve traffic flow in problem areas.



Transportation Network

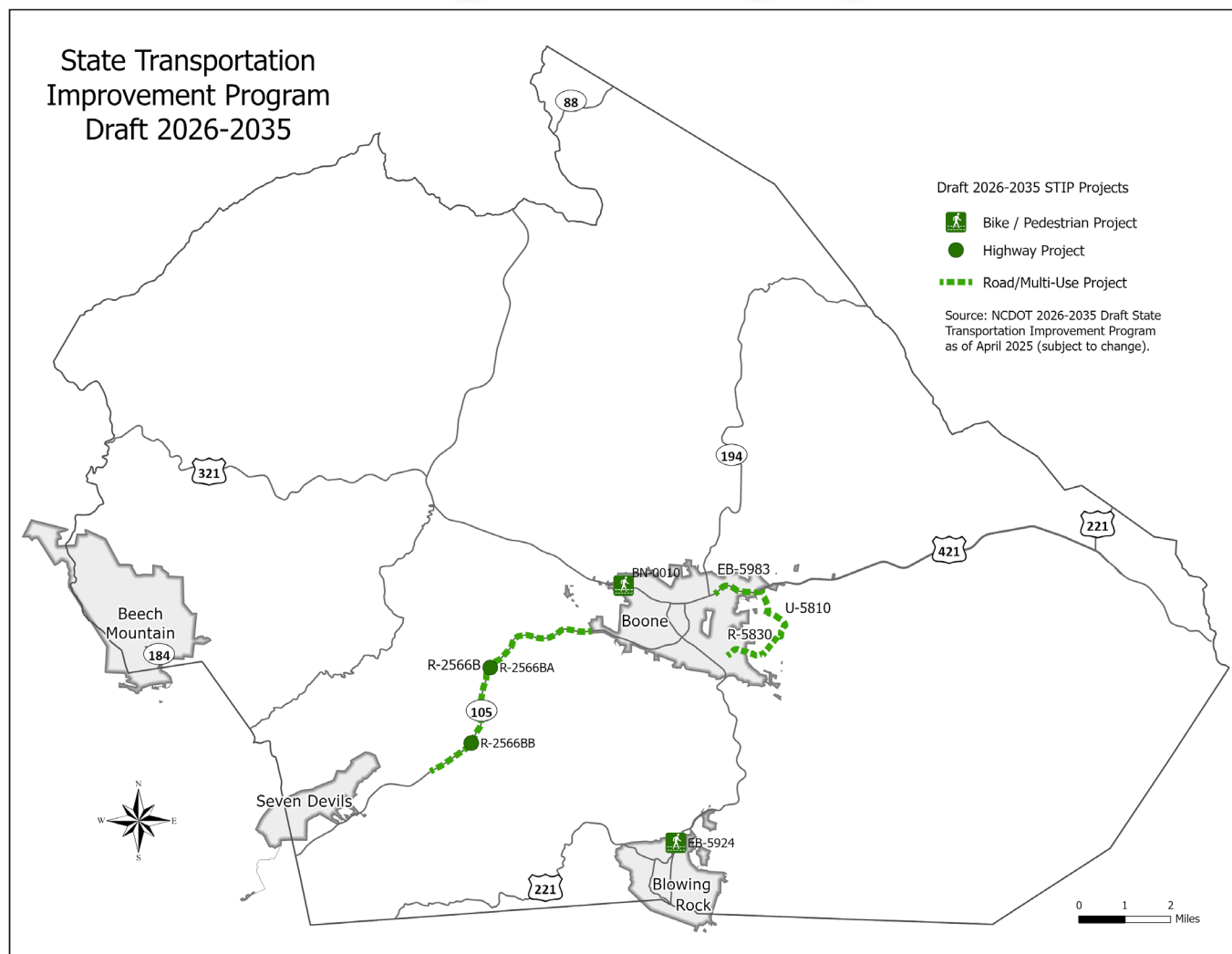
Illustration 12 Road and Highway Network





Widening Projects

Illustration 13 Proposed Widening Projects



TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

In March 2010, the Transportation Planning Branch of the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) and Watauga County initiated a study to cooperatively develop the Watauga County Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP). This is a long range multi-modal transportation plan that covers transportation needs through 2040. Modes of transportation evaluated as part of this plan include highway, public transportation and rail, bicycle, and pedestrian. The current plan is scheduled to be reevaluated and updated in 2026.

Findings of the CTP study were based on an analysis of the transportation system, environmental screening, and public input. The report documents the following recommendations for improvement:

Highway

- ▼ US 221 – Widening US 221 from US 421 in Deep Gap to NC 88 in Ashe County to a four-lane boulevard. (COMPLETED)
- ▼ US 321/421 – Improving US 321/421 from the NC 105 Bypass to US 321 at Vilas to a four-lane divided, partially controlled access facility.
- ▼ US 421 Bypass (“The Boone Bypass”)– The CTP proposes a bypass south of Boone to relieve congestion on US 421, US 321, and NC 105 in Boone. This project would work in conjunction with other projects to reduce the mixed traffic on King Street, to improve linkage to major facilities, to improve traffic flow along major facilities, and to improve safety.
- ▼ NC 105 – Widening NC 105 from the NC 105 Bypass (SR1107) to Avery County to a four-lane facility with a median. (In Progress)

- ▼ NC 105 Bypass – Widening the NC 105 Bypass (SR 1107) from NC 105 to US 321/421 to a three-lane facility.
- ▼ NC 194 – Widening NC 194 from US 221/421 to Howards Creek Road (SR 13056) to a four-lane boulevard.

Public Transportation & Rail

- ▼ US 321 –A new bus route between Boone and Blowing Rock utilizing US 321.
- ▼ Park-and-Ride – The CTP proposes seven new park-and-ride locations along major routes.

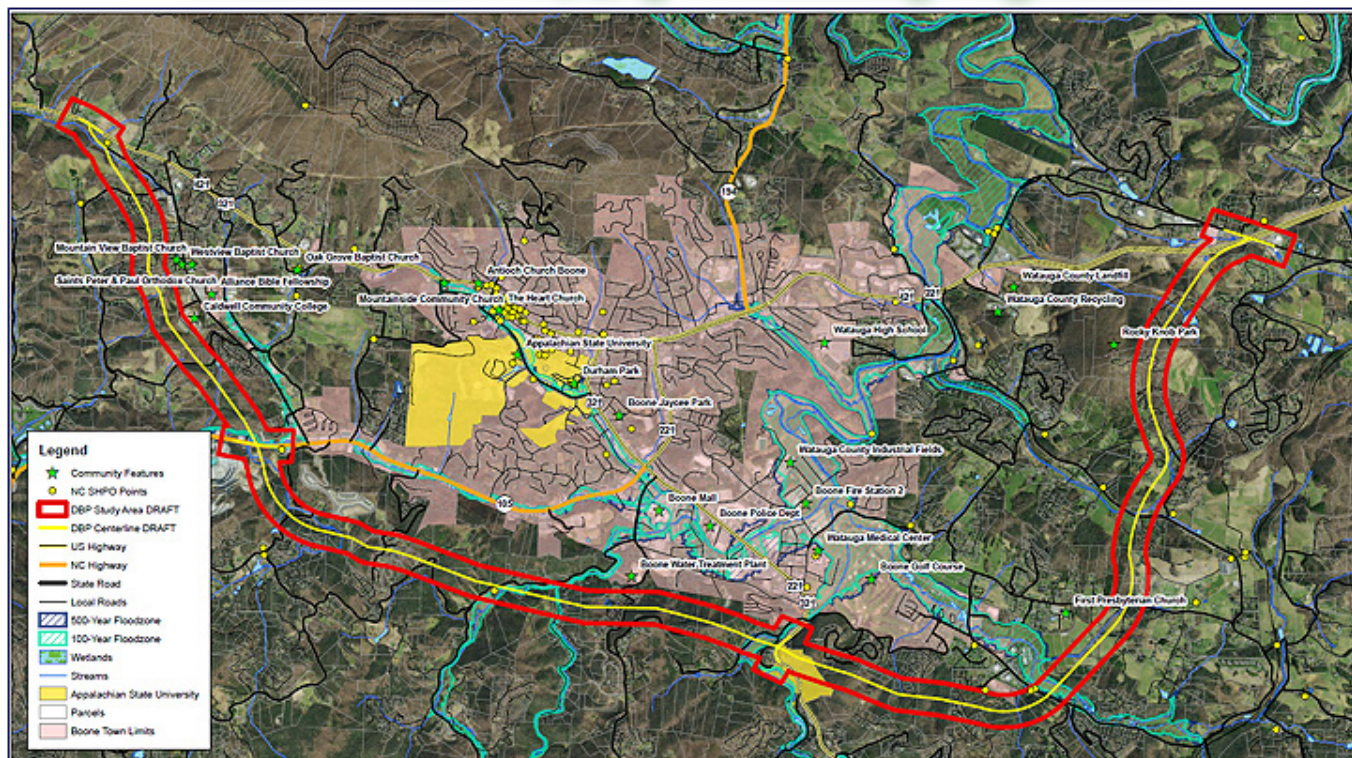
Bicycle/Pedestrian

- ▼ Middle Fork Greenway – A new multi-use path between Boone and Blowing Rock parallel to US 321. (Construction on the first section of the trail began in 2012. To date, 1.75 miles of the 6.5 mile trail are complete, with another 2.3 miles currently under construction)





Illustration 14 Daniel Boone Parkway Preliminary Alignment



The Daniel Boone Parkway (AKA the Boone Bypass)

- ▼ Many of the issues related to transportation planning in Watauga County deal with traffic congestion, and particularly traffic congestion in Boone. Many believe a bypass around Boone is the answer to the problem. An alternate route around Boone will need to provide easy access points for those whose end destination is Boone.
- ▼ Boone also has a Thoroughfare Plan. The first plan was completed in 1964, the second in 1976, and the most recent in 1992. A major element in each of the plans was the construction of a route to bypass Boone. The NCDOT outlined possible routes in the 1992 plan.
- ▼ In 2008, a study, a “Pre-TIP Study Report US 421 Improvements TIP Project U-2703” was released. The study considered fifteen alternate routes for the Boone Bypass and narrowed it down to four low-build alternatives.
- ▼ The 2013 Watauga County Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP) evaluated the four Pre-Tip recommendations, and three additional alternatives were proposed.
- ▼ The CTP recommended a route that extends from US 421/321 west of the NC 105 Bypass to a new location on NC 105 further west of the existing interchange. It continues west (south of the existing US 105) intersecting with Hwy 321/221 near Fairway Drive and loops west of the headwaters of the Rocky Branch Stream.
- ▼ The CTP recommended route for the bypass was presented to the public in 2012 as part of the CTP draft. Numerous comments were made opposing the project and questioned its need according to the CTP.
- ▼ As of 2024 the project is still on the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), but only section B has been funded for preliminary engineering. **Illustration 14** shows the current proposed alignment of the roadway.

TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

- ▼ Watauga County's public transportation authority is the AppalCART. It serves all of Watauga County and operates as a coordinated effort between local, state, and federal governments, human service agencies and Appalachian State University. AppalCART provides numerous Boone routes free of charge and provides rural routes via van to destinations such as Zionville, Foscoe, Matney, Meat Camp, Blowing Rock, Deep Gap, and Cove Creek for a route fee. All routes are open to the public. Out-of-county routes to Winston-Salem, Hickory and Charlotte are available for residents to attend medical appointments.
- ▼ The County does not have a public airport, but there is a short, private airstrip in the Kellwood/ Bamboo area. The nearest airports providing commercial passenger service are in Charlotte, Greensboro, Asheville, North Carolina, and Blountville, Tennessee. General aviation airports with runways over 5,500 feet are located in North Wilkesboro, Morganton/Lenoir, and Hickory.
- ▼ Sunway charter provides two round trip routes from Boone daily, one to Greensboro and one to Charlotte with service to certain towns and hospitals in between.
- ▼ The Hickory "Hop" currently provides a shuttle service between Watauga County and the Charlotte airport at four scheduled times daily, seven days each week.





Recommendations

Highways

- Watauga County, Town of Boone, High Country Rural Planning Organization (RPO), NCDOT, App State and citizens groups should continue to work together to evaluate the Daniel Boone Parkway project. Further evaluation of the Daniel Boone Parkway will happen through a Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP) steering committee during its next update in 2026.
- Watauga County should continue to work with NCDOT officials through the High Country RPO to prioritize and advance projects identified in the Watauga County Comprehensive Transportation Plan.
- NCDOT, in conjunction with Watauga County and the High Country RPO, has prioritized the following transportation projects, scheduled for delivery in the Draft 2026-2035 State Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP):
 - ▼ Widen NC 105 to four lanes between NC 105 Bypass and Clarks Creek Road (SR 1136) (Right-of-way in progress) (R-2566B)
 - ▼ At NC 105 and Broadstone Road intersection, construct new bridge over the Watauga River and left-turn lane. (Construction in progress) (R-2566BA)
 - ▼ Realign intersection of NC 105 and Old Shulls Mill Road (SR 1658). (Construction in progress) (R-2566BB)
 - ▼ Upgrade Deerfield Road (SR 1522) from State Farm Road to Wilson Ridge Road (SR 1523). (Right-of-way to begin in 2025) (R-5830)
 - ▼ Modernize Bamboo Rd (SR 1514) and Wilson Ridge Road (SR 1523) from US 421/US 221 to Deerfield Road (SR 1522). (Right-of-way in progress) (U-5810)
 - ▼ Poplar Grove Connector Rd (SR1180) to Westwood Apartments. Sidewalk &

- ▼ Grove Street to Brookshire Rd. Construction of multi-use path. (EB-5983)

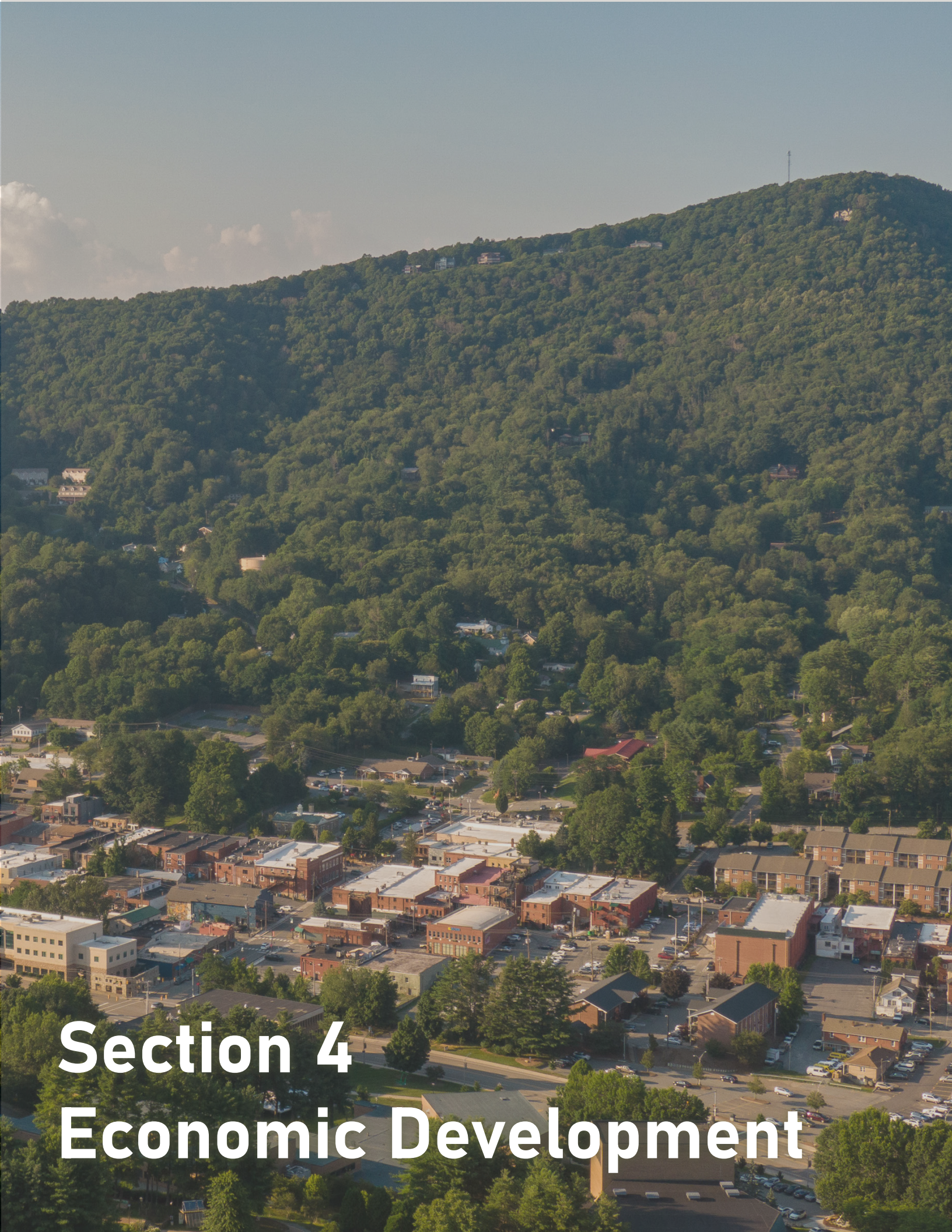
Multimodal

- Town, County, High Country Council of Governments, and NCDOT officials should place strong emphasis on creating roadways that are safe for all modes of transportation, including bicycles and pedestrians.
- Expand AppalCART rural routes and decrease the service intervals between existing stops so that more people have the opportunity to ride and waiting times are shorter.
- Expand AppalCART service to affordable housing projects as feasible.
- Create Park-n-Ride lots outside of Boone and provide AppalCART service to these lots in order to capitalize on the use of mass-transit and reduce downtown congestion.
- Boone and App State should work together to: Promote and provide more environmentally friendly, greener, safer, and sustainable transportation modes, especially for pedestrians and bicycles.
- Provide more parking areas for bicycles.

Transportation Planning

Watauga County should:

- Continue to work closely with NCDOT, The Towns of Boone, Blowing Rock, Beech Mountain, Seven Devils, App State, and the High Country RPO to identify needed transportation improvements in the County.
- Continue to develop minimum standards for new and redesigned roads that specify the creation of bicycle lanes and sidewalks that promote safe alternatives.



Section 4 Economic Development



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Preface

The economy of Watauga County is diverse. The principal economic segments that drive the County's economy include education, tourism, healthcare, finance, construction, services and agriculture. In 2024, Policom Corporation ranked Boone 47th among 543 micropolitan areas in the U.S. for economic strength.

Findings

- ▼ **Quality of Life** - The concern for preserving and improving "quality of life" is a theme that permeates all aspects of Watauga County's future. All efforts to promote economic development should focus on "better rather than bigger" and enhancing "quality of life."
- ▼ **Gateways** - Watauga County's principal transportation corridors are also its major economic corridors. They are "economic gateways" into the community. These corridors offer visitors their first perception of Watauga and they are therefore an essential element of planning for the future. The primary corridors include US 421, US 321 and NC Hwy 105. The Deep Gap area is of particular importance since it contains much of the most desirable land for development and has good transportation accessibility.

Economic Development Infrastructure

- ▼ The economic development related organizations are charged with various aspects of economic promotion and support in Watauga County. While each is important, there is a growing need to achieve a higher degree of cooperation and ensure that the array of activities collectively promote established core objectives.
- ▼ **Critical Economic Sectors** - Watauga County's key economic sectors are education and research, tourism and recreation, the medical services field, construction, retail, and tourism.

Education/Research

- ▼ Appalachian State University (App State) is the largest employer in Watauga County. In July 2024, it had just under 4,000 total full-time, part-time and temporary employees.

Medical/Research

- ▼ The second largest employer in the County is UNC Health - Appalachian (formerly known as Appalachian Regional Healthcare System). In 2025, it had 1,600 employees.
- ▼ UNC Health- Appalachian is the predominant regional medical center, comprised of three hospitals and thirteen medical practices.

Tourism and Recreation

- ▼ Tourism has a profound effect on the economy in Watauga County. According to “The Economic Impact of Travel on NC Counties,” a study prepared for Visit NC by Tourism Economics, Watauga tourism generated \$517.5 million in expenditures in 2023 and a tourism payroll of \$127.7 million for 3,064 jobholders.
- ▼ Ample recreational opportunities, including fishing, hiking, biking, skiing, rafting, canoeing, kayaking, rock climbing and App State athletic events, also add to the appeal of the County and contribute to the economy.
- ▼ Watauga County is a hub for many tourism activities that take place throughout the region. Visitors to adjoining counties make Boone the base of their activities for lodging, dining, medical services and other services.
- ▼ Watauga County’s recreational opportunities are enhanced by its unique and diverse environment, which includes assets such as the Blue Ridge Parkway, Mountain to Sea Trail, Elk Knob State Park, a portion of Grandfather Mountain State Park, New River, Watauga River and many pristine streams.
- ▼ App State athletics has had a significant impact on the Watauga County Economy. A 2024 study, “Annual Economic Impact of Appalachian Athletics” by the Center for Economic Research and Policy Analysis reports that App State athletics program provides an injection of money into the regional economy in the neighborhood of \$96 million annually. This increase in economic activity translates to 643 additional jobs and \$32.7 million in additional income as well as \$3.3 million in indirect tax revenue for local governments. In 2023, more than 208,000 spectators watched six home games and spent over \$34.9 million on hotels, restaurants, and grocery stores.
- ▼ Agritourism has become a thriving industry in recent years. Picking berries and fresh flowers in the summer; apple picking, pumpkin patch/corn mazes in the fall; and choose-and-cut Christmas tree farms in the winter, lure visitors to Watauga County all year long.





Industry and Business

- Retaining and enhancing existing industry and business are fundamental to the County's economic future. Local officials actively sought to promote economic development in the County with the creation of the Watauga County Industrial Park. The Park, now filled to capacity, provides many jobs to County residents.
- Over the years manufacturing and industry have had less of an impact on Watauga County's economy. Presently there are a handful of industrial firms conducting business in the County. Most are small "home grown" businesses. The two largest are ECR Software, developing software and point of sale equipment and Goodnight Brothers, specializing in the art of dry curing hams.
- A major factor in attracting industry and business is the provision of the services they need to thrive. Services such as the provision of water, sewer, electricity and communications are very important to almost any kind of business.



Agriculture

- Watauga County residents have considerable interest in local farming practices and the availability of local foods.
- Approximately 30 growers produce Fraser Firs in Watauga County.
- Local vegetables and other crops represent an important economic segment
- The County currently has three Farmer's Markets. Two operating in the summer months and one wintertime market, and one Food Hub; all featuring food from local growers.



Recommendations

Strengthening Organization

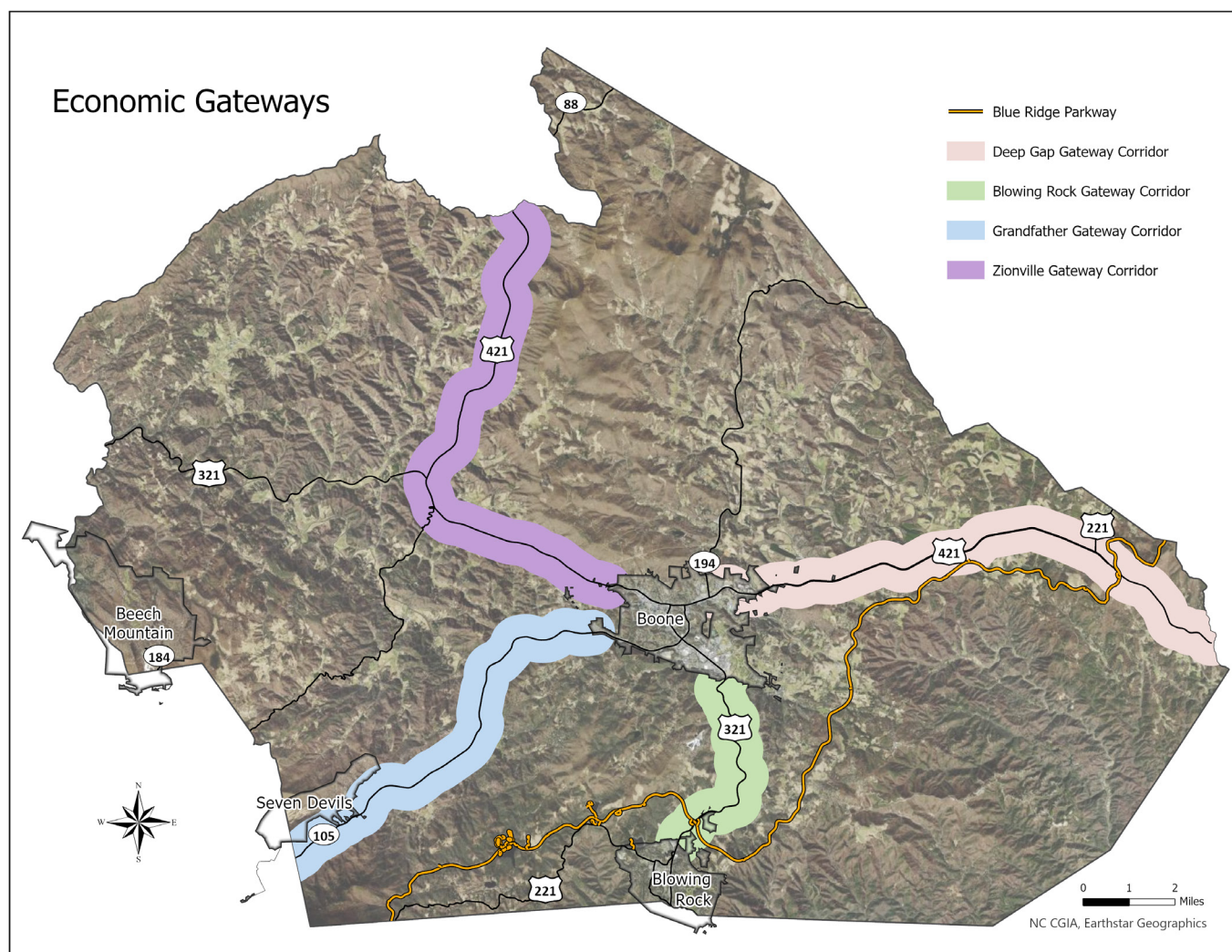
- Strengthen the focus of Economic Development continuing to make the Watauga Economic Commission the core agency for economic planning, policy interpretation and coordination. By continuing to support this ongoing program would enable the County to have a key role in economic development. This program fosters communication, “sustainability” and innovation among existing economic programs and facilitate new initiatives that either strengthen existing programs or create new initiatives designed to generate new economic investments and employment.
- Invest in the creation of a dynamic and comprehensive economic development strategy to better explore and capitalize on potential economic opportunities.
- Encourage and facilitate the provision of essential infrastructure, such as transportation, water, sewer and natural gas, to provide an attractive business climate for potential economic development.
- Work with and coordinate the wide range of economic development resources available to the County, including Appalachian Regional Commission, App State Center for Entrepreneurship, Boone Business Exchange, High Country Young Professionals, Startup High Country, Service Corps of Retired Executives, Tourism Development Authority, Watauga County Economic Development Commission, and others to explore innovative and fresh concepts. Organize annual or semi- annual workshops with these entities to create a spirit of cooperation and focus resources.
- Where appropriate, promote regional economic development strategies beyond Watauga County that provide employment opportunities for Watauga County residents.
- Promote the development of renewable energy concepts and participation in renewable energy initiatives.

Economic Gateways

- Watauga transportation corridors are also economic “Gateways” (Illustration 15) into the County and are critical to the County’s economic future. Watauga County should guide development and protect the integrity and potential of these key strategic economic corridors.
- “Gateways” are defined as the entrances or means of access to Watauga County and are identified as the primary arterial highways (US 321, US 421, and NC Hwy 105). Providing attractive as well as functional “Gateways” into Watauga County facilitates both the positive image and economy of the community.
- The economic growth of the community is linked to the vitality and appearance of these “Gateways.”



Illustration 15 Economic Gateways Map



- ▮ The quality of life enjoyed by Watauga County citizens and visitors is directly related to the natural environment. The “Gateways” are inextricably linked to the perception of this unique environment and the rich quality of life.
- ▮ The aesthetic quality of the “Gateways” concept is vitally important to the economic future of the community. Incentives for property owners and the community should be developed to maintain attractive and compatible development that will enhance the total economic value of the “Gateways” to the community.
- ▮ Formulate an individual “Gateway Corridor” strategy for each of the four (4) designated “Gateways.”



KEY ECONOMIC SECTORS

Education/Research

- ▼ Work with App State to capitalize on University research opportunities.
- ▼ Strengthen the alliance with Appalachian State University and Caldwell Community College & Technical Institute to understand and attain education and skill levels needed by Watauga residents.

Medical/Research

- ▼ Watauga County should collaborate with medical professionals and UNC Health - Appalachian to facilitate a "medical cluster" concept to further develop the groundwork that has been laid in making Watauga County a regional medical center.
- ▼ Encourage Appalachian State University and Caldwell Community College & Technical Institute to explore new healthcare ventures related to the nursing programs at each institution.
- ▼ Focus on and promote activities and businesses that are involved in technology, research, education and medicine.

Tourism and Recreation

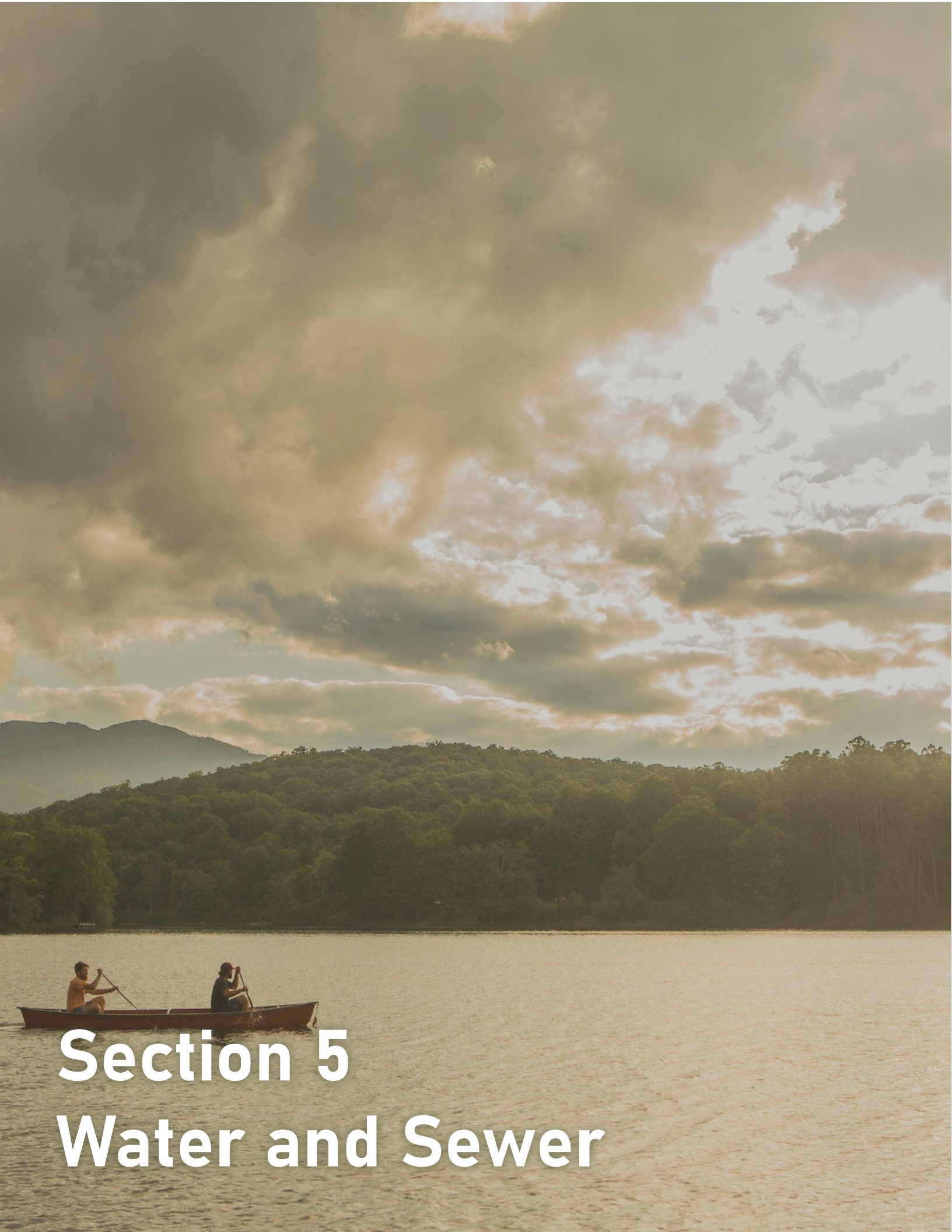
- ▼ Capitalize on existing tourism by encouraging the Tourism Development Authorities to enhance and increase strategic marketing of Watauga County.
- ▼ Fully develop and promote the greenways concept such as the greenway connector near the high school, trails, parks and other eco-tourism assets. These assets are especially important in promoting a healthy lifestyle and quality of life themes.
- ▼ Promote eco-tourism, defined as "environmentally responsible travel and visitation to natural areas," in order to
- ▼ Enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features).

Industry and Business

- ▼ Expand and strengthen support between the community and existing businesses and industry to reassure businesses that their presence is appreciated and their needs are considered.

Agriculture

- ▼ Promote the production of agricultural products to capitalize on the growing demand for local food products. Conduct relevant market research to support a marketing strategy for such products.
- ▼ Find effective ways to facilitate the local farmers markets, and related efforts of the Watauga County Cooperative Extension. The Farmer's Market has grown beyond the capacity of the initial site and a new location is warranted to enable the market to re-consolidate and continue to grow. A strategy is proposed that addresses a new location with expanded hours of operation and greater diversity of products.
- ▼ Promote and explore opportunities in niche markets of food production, such as herbs and spices, grapes (vineyards), strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, and local vegetables, and promote as local foods.
- ▼ Work with local agricultural interests to create an interest group committee to promote Agritourism and sponsor demonstration projects, such as organic gardening with a living historic farm.



Section 5

Water and Sewer

WATER AND SEWER

Preface

Water is a valuable and precious resource. Stress caused by increasing population and dwindling resources due to drought, pollution and misuse should cause us to look closer at how we use and protect our water resources.

- ▼ Within the County, four municipalities provide water services and three municipalities provide sewer services. Appalachian State University provides its own water supply.
- ▼ The adequacy of water and sewer is essential for commercial or residential growth. The provision of water and wastewater to areas outside of municipalities is of strategic interest to the County.

Findings – Water

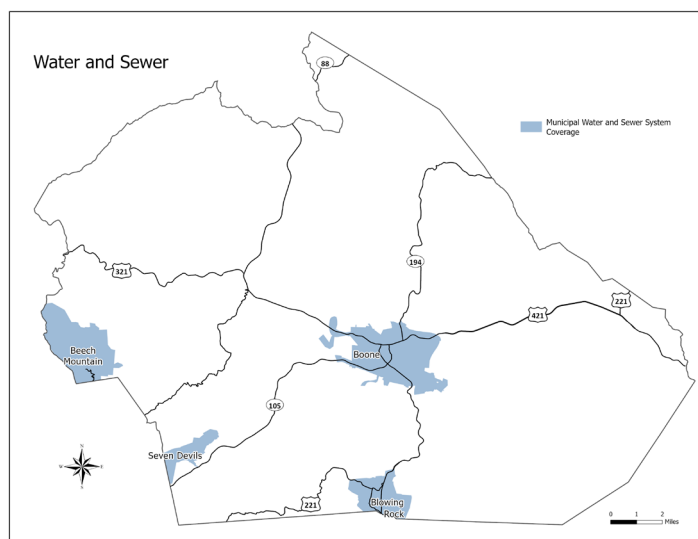
- ▼ The National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) has assigned Watauga County a drought rating of D-1 meaning the County is currently in a moderate drought . The County has been designated D1, D0 (Abnormally Dry), or “none” since 2016 when the county was briefly a D2 (Severe Drought).
- ▼ As part of a USDA Raw Water Project, the town of Boone constructed the Greg Young raw water intake facility on the New River. The project, completed in 2020, along with upgrades to the existing Ricky L. Miller Water Treatment Plant, expanded the Town’s water capacity from 3.0 million gallons per day (MGD) to 4.5 (MGD).
- ▼ The Greg Young New River Intake is now Boone’s primary water source providing 99.4% of their water in 2023 per the Division of Water Resources 2023 Local Water Supply Plan. The Town has two other intakes, Southfork Intake, providing 0.4% of the Town’s water supply in 2023 and Winkler Creek Intake, used only for emergencies.
- ▼ Water and sewer lines have been installed in recent years along the NC 105 corridor to the top of Rock Crusher Hill.
- ▼ Boone and Watauga County are presently considering the development of water supply lines along the U.S. 321 and 421 corridors.
- ▼ The water supply for Beech Mountain comes from Buckeye Lake which is located within the Town limits and some 2,000 feet below and five miles away from the Town Center.
- ▼ The water supply for Seven Devils is provided by wells with storage tanks owned by the Town.
- ▼ Several large developments provide water to their residents, including Hound Ears, Echota, Mill Ridge, Blue Ridge Mountain Club, and the Ponds.
- ▼ Watauga County is currently not a purveyor of water services.



Findings – Sewer

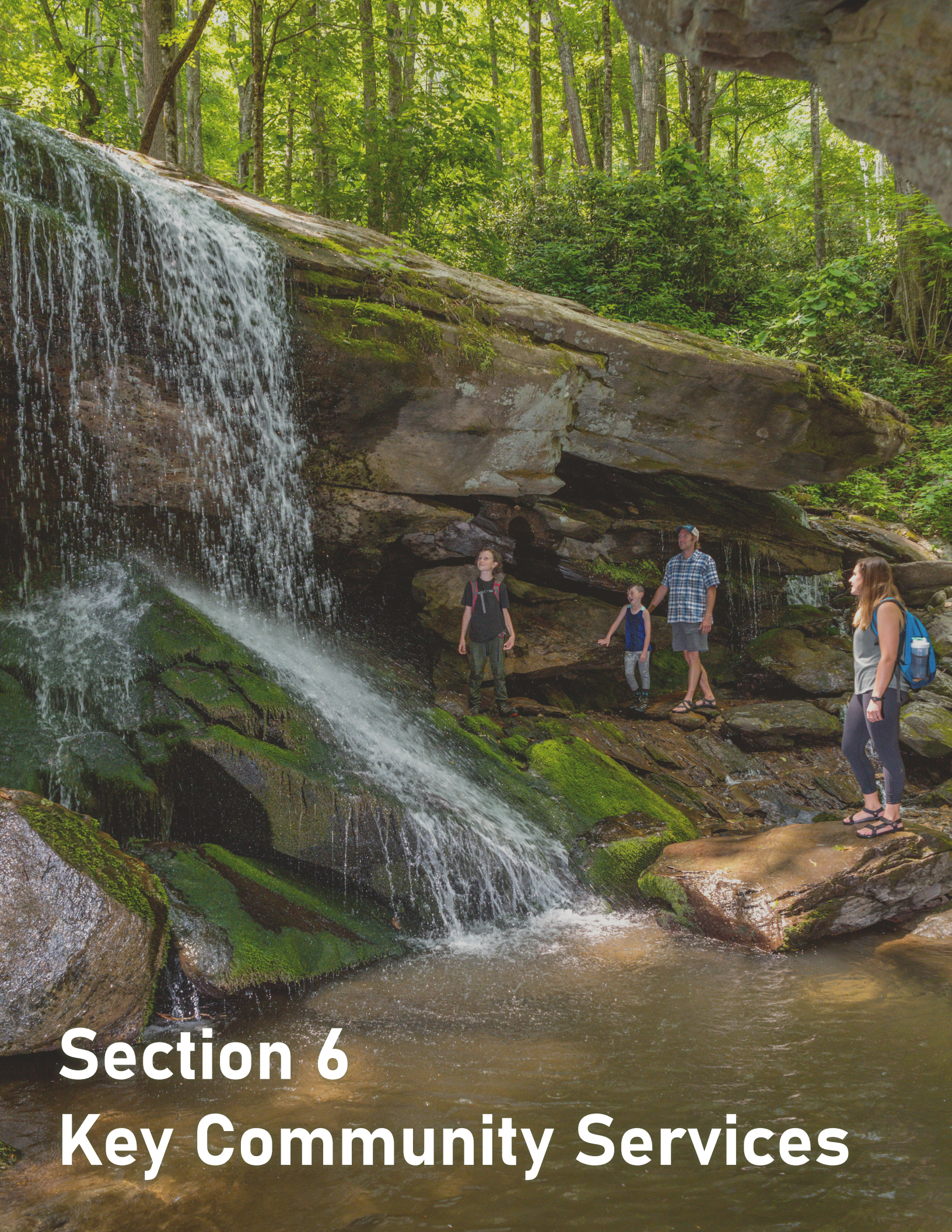
- ▼ The Town of Boone provides wastewater treatment to residents and businesses within the Town's limits.
- ▼ Appalachian State University relies upon the Town of Boone for provision of sewer service.
- ▼ The Town of Blowing Rock provides sewer services to most residents within the Town's limits, but none outside of the Town.
- ▼ Beech Mountain provides sewer services to most properties in the Town.
- ▼ Seven Devils does not provide sewer services. However, there are two private sewer systems serving certain parcels.
- ▼ Wastewater treatment systems and service are not available to most residents and businesses outside the municipalities. Private communities providing wastewater treatment include Hound Ears, Echota, Mill Ridge, Blue Ridge Mountain Club and the Ponds.

Illustration 16 Water and Sewer



Recommendations

- ➔ The County should continue in an undefined role regarding water and/or sewer projects.
- ➔ The County should promote sound water and sewer intergovernmental cooperation, facilitating needed and feasible development of infrastructure and services in areas not currently served.
- ➔ Watauga County should expect and plan for future strategic investments in the planning and the development of water and sewer infrastructure and services for areas of the County not presently served (where feasibility can be demonstrated).
- ➔ The ownership or resulting infrastructure should be assumed by existing service providers.
- ➔ Watauga County should work with municipalities to help guide water and sewer to areas targeted for economic development and affordable housing.
- ➔ Watauga County should make conservation and protection of water resources a principal goal.
- ➔ Watauga County should provide for the proper disposal of chemicals and substances likely to end up in the water supply by making disposal of such items easier and more convenient, and by increasing the frequency with which toxic substances can be disposed of at the landfill and convenience sites.
- ➔ Watauga County should encourage the use of indigenous vegetation for landscaping. Planting vegetation that is not indigenous to the area may require more water.
- ➔ Watauga County should seek grants and other funding to help with the expansion of municipal service to unserved areas.
- ➔ Watauga County should encourage an intergovernmental endeavor to develop a 10 year Capital Improvement Plan in the interest of economic development and public health.



Section 6

Key Community Services



KEY COMMUNITY SERVICES

Preface

Key community services provided by Watauga County include schools, law enforcement (Sheriff's Office), emergency services and community centers.

KEY COMMUNITY SERVICES - SCHOOLS

- Watauga County elementary schools have 3,057 students in grades kindergarten through eight. The high school enrollment includes 1,245 students in grades 9 -12 (2024 - 2025 school year) with an additional 15 enrolled in Watauga Virtual Academy, and 272 in Watauga Innovation Academy, a partnership with CCC&TI. Pre-kindergarten students also attend the elementary schools.
- A new state-of-the art building is under construction to replace Valle Crucis Elementary School with occupancy planned during the 2025-26 school year.
- Enrollment in Watauga County schools is projected to be relatively stable over the next few years, indicating no need for additional schools in the short-term.
- The eight elementary schools are located throughout the County (Illustration 17) and conveniently serve most communities. In addition, Watauga County Virtual Academy is available for grades K-8 and is intended as an opportunity to serve families who need more flexibility in delivery.
- The Watauga County School system has a Facilities Improvement Plan outlining capital improvement needs for facilities.
- Based on 2024 "End-of-Course" test results for grades 3-8, Watauga County students had a higher percentage of students in Level 4 (Through understanding of grade-level content) and Level 5 (Comprehensive understanding) than the state average in math, reading, and science. Watauga students in grades 8-12 scored higher in Biology, English, and Math than the average of students in all North Carolina schools.
- In 2024, High school students scored an average of 1,210 on SAT exams, which combine math and critical reading. This is compared to SAT scores averaging 1,166 for all North Carolina students.
- In 2024, Watauga County high school students scored an average of 19.8 on the ACT exam, compared to the state of North Carolina average of 18.1. The ACT assesses English, math, reading, and science proficiencies.
- The Watauga County graduation rate was 90.3% in 2024 compared to 87.0% for North Carolina.



Photo By: Element5 Digital

Recommendations - Schools

- ➔ Implement the following capital improvement projects listed in the Watauga County School Facilities Improvement Plan:
 - ➔ Construct an addition to Parkway Elementary School
 - ➔ Repair the roof at Green Valley Elementary School
 - ➔ Repairs to existing facilities for more utility efficiency
 - ➔ Install air conditioning at the following schools
 - ▮ Green Valley Elementary School (2025/2026)
 - ▮ Bethel Elementary School (2025/2026)
 - ▮ Blowing Rock Elementary School (2026/2027)
 - ▮ Cove Creek Elementary School (2026/2027)
 - ▮ Mabel Elementary School (2026/2027)

Illustration 17 Schools in Watauga County

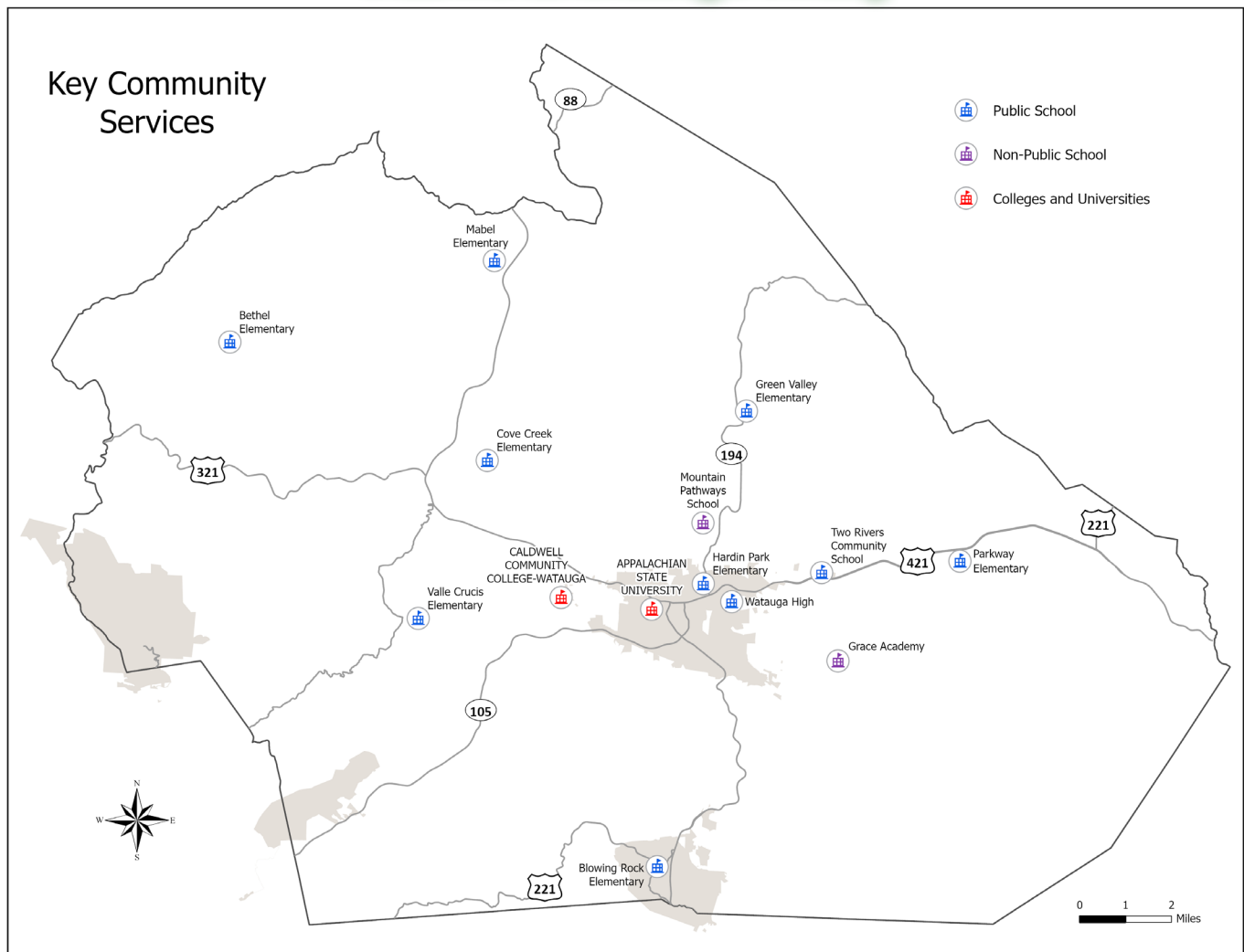




Table 22
List of County Schools with Enrollment

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS			ENROLLMENT SPRING 2025
BETHEL ELEMENTARY	SUGAR GROVE	K-8	127
BLOWING ROCK ELEMENTARY	BLOWING ROCK	K-8	402
COVE CREEK ELEMENTARY	VILAS	K-8	287
GREEN VALLEY ELEMENTARY	BOONE	K-8	294
HARDIN PARK ELEMENTARY	BOONE	K-8	861
MABEL ELEMENTARY	ZIONVILLE	K-8	137
PARKWAY ELEMENTARY	BOONE	K-8	618
VALLE CRUCIS ELEMENTARY	SUGAR GROVE	K-8	331
HIGH SCHOOL			
WATAUGA COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL	BOONE	9-12	1,245
OTHER			
WATAUGA VIRTUAL ACADEMY	ONLINE	K-8	15
WATAUGA INNOVATION ACADEMY	PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN WHS & CCC&TI	9-12+ ASSOCIATE DEGREE	272
TOTAL ENROLLMENT			4,589



KEY COMMUNITY SERVICES - LAW ENFORCEMENT

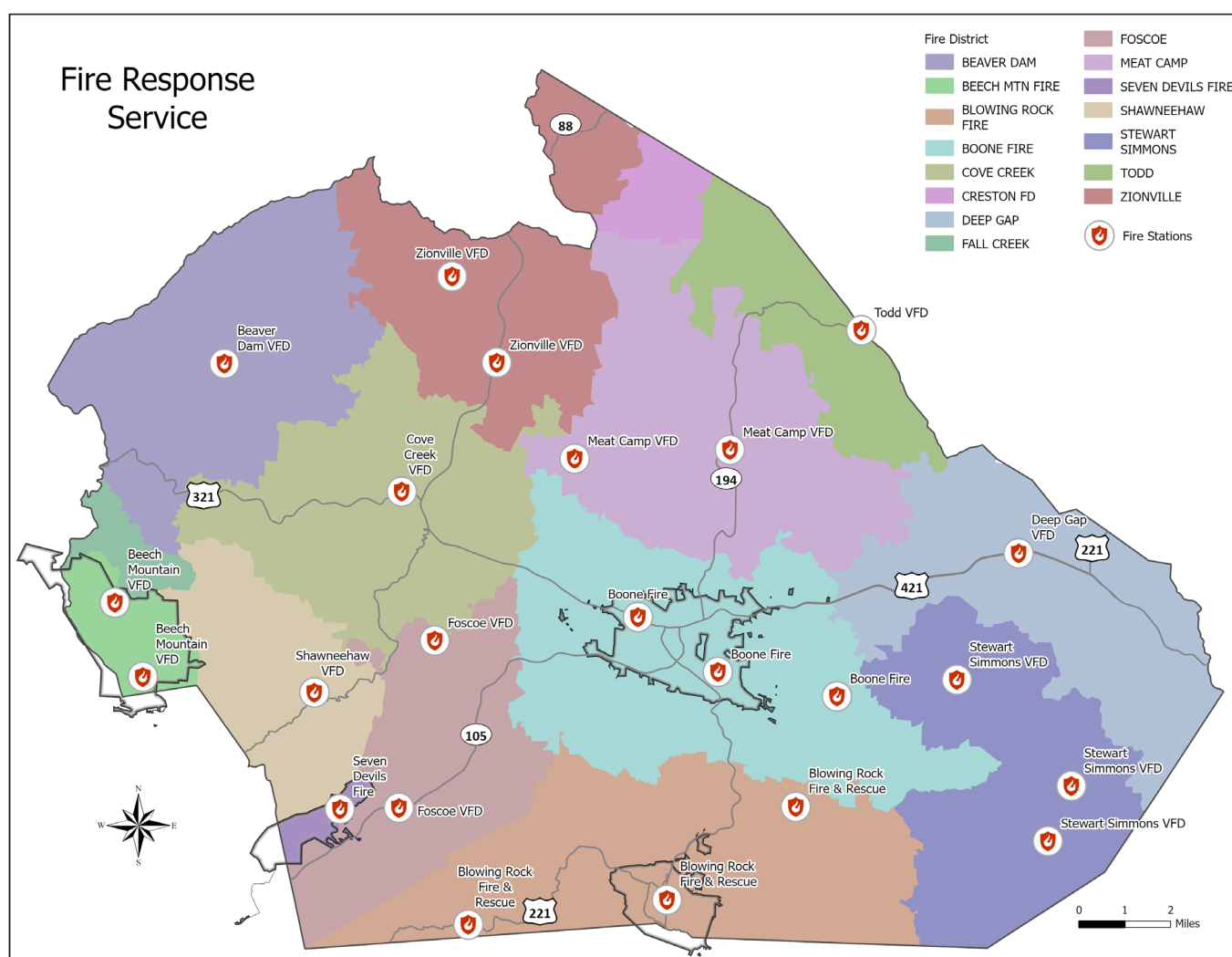
- ▼ In 2025, the Watauga County Sheriff's office had 55 sworn officers, including one sheriff, 3 captains, 15 detectives and civil officers, 22 shift deputies, and 9 school resource officers.
- ▼ In the Sheriffs' Offices 2020 report produced by the U.S. Department of Justice, the average number of sworn officers for counties with a population between 50,000 – 99,999 is 1.6 per 1,000 residents.
- ▼ Watauga County has a population of 54,784. With 55 sworn officers they are below the average of 86 expected for a county their size. The population figure does not include Watauga County's large number of seasonal residents and tourists, which should be considered in determining the adequacy of services.
- ▼ Additional Deputies have been requested in the 2025-2026 budget. The Department also applies for grants to help obtain equipment and tools used by law enforcement agencies.
- ▼ The Watauga County Detention Center has a maximum capacity of 106 and employs 28 jailers.
- ▼ A study is currently underway to plan for a medical/mental health wing at the Detention Center.
- ▼ Workspace for deputies and other staff is marginally adequate, indicating a probable need for expansion of the existing building/facility in the future. Watauga County deputies regularly respond to a wide range of calls. These include domestic disputes and family disturbances, theft, burglary, and other property crimes, as well as drug-related incidents. Deputies are often called for welfare checks and mental health crises, serving warrants, subpoenas, and other civil papers, and assisting other agencies like Boone Police or State Troopers. They also handle missing person reports in the county's rural and mountainous areas and respond to school-related incidents, whether through school resource officer duties or threats made toward educational facilities. Deputies are often assigned to special community events such as (Emergency Fest, Pill Turn In, and National Night Out) and engage in a lot of under reported community care-taking activities.
- ▼ There is now a dedicated transport officer that oversees most out of county transportation of mental commitments, prisoner transports, and pick-ups.
- ▼ The Narcotics division is dealing with narcotics entering Watauga County from a multitude of locations some from transnational organizations. Fentanyl is of great concern.
- ▼ All municipalities in Watauga County have police forces.



- ➔ Continue to advocate for additional deputies to meet the law enforcement needs and demands of Watauga County
- ➔ Continue to pursue the construction of a new medical/mental wing at Detention Center

Illustration 18

Watauga Fire Districts and Station Map



KEY COMMUNITY SERVICES - EMERGENCY SERVICES

Recommendations - Emergency Services

- ▼ Watauga County has a total of 15 fire districts, five of those, Beech Mountain, Creston, Fall Creek, Seven Devils, and Todd are shared with adjacent counties.
- ▼ There are a total of 23 fire stations, 17 of which are in the rural areas of Beaver Dam, Beech Mountain, Cove Creek, Deep Gap, Foscoe, Meat Camp, Seven Devils, Shawneehaw, Stewart Simmons, Todd and Zionville. (Illustration 18)
- ▼ The Beech Mountain, Blowing Rock, Boone, Depp Gap, Stewart Simmons, and Foscoe Fire Departments have at least one paid staff who work with volunteer firefighters. All of the other districts are strictly volunteer.
- ▼ All fire districts outside of municipalities in Watauga County are fire tax supported districts.
- ▼ The large amount of training required to become a volunteer firefighter, the time required away from primary jobs to fight fires, and the expense of travel to and from emergency calls often hurts retention of volunteer firefighters.
- ▼ For many years Watauga County's ambulance and rescue service has been a paid, contracted service with the Watauga County Emergency & Rescue squad acting as a backup.
- ▼ In June 2025, Watauga County Board of Commissioners voted to purchase the private service with their fleet of nine ambulances and station. The transition from private to public ambulance service will occur in late 2025 and early 2026.
- ▼ Meat Camp has a new station that just opened in early 2025.
- ▼ Deep Gap has a new station planned that should be operational by the end of 2025

- ➔ Continue to evaluate the ratio of population to emergency services
- ➔ Continue cooperation and coordination between the County and Emergency Services.
- ➔ Create an Emergency Services Master Plan for the County to address current and future needs including:
 - ▼ Evaluate the need for paid personnel in fire stations.
 - ▼ Evaluate methods to improve cooperation between the County and Emergency Services
 - ▼ Establish additional water points for retrieving water to fight rural fires.





KEY COMMUNITY SERVICES - COMMUNITY CENTERS

- ❖ Community centers help to promote community identity.
- ❖ Community centers may provide certain benefits such as, but not limited to, a library, meeting space, media center, childcare, senior programs, urgent care and recreation.
- ❖ The Western Watauga Center, operated by Watauga County, serves citizens in the Cove Creek Community.
- ❖ There are two other community centers in Watauga County. One, located at the old Seven Devils Town Hall, is only accessible to Seven Devils property owners. The other center, Foscoe-Grandfather Park and Community Center is a multi-use facility run by a non-profit and open to the public and located off NC Hwy 105 in Foscoe.
- ❖ Community centers play a vital role in the development of shared community identity, community pride, community preservation and community growth.
- ❖ In community surveys citizens expressed a desire to have a community center in eastern Watauga County.
- ❖ Schools are the main focal point and center for social activities in most Watauga communities.

Recommendations - Community Centers

- ➔ Assess the need and financial viability for a community center in eastern Watauga County similar to the Western Watauga Center.
- ➔ Establish a plan for greater cooperation between schools and communities for use of County school facilities.
- ➔ Facilitate community centers that are attractive, functional, visible, safe and accessible to their communities and reflective of each community's unique identity.

Other Human Services

- ❖ Although beyond the scope of the Plan, maintaining the “quality of life” in Watauga County must consider other human social needs, such as care for children and the elderly, health care and other fundamental human needs.
- ❖ An in-depth assessment of such needs and a plan for addressing the most pressing humanistic issues should be undertaken in the future.



A photograph of a pumpkin patch on a sunny day. In the foreground, a child's hands are visible holding a large orange pumpkin. To the right, another large pumpkin is partially shown. The middle ground features a man in a grey jacket and khaki pants pushing a red wagon filled with pumpkins. A woman in a dark jacket and a child in a red jacket are also visible. The background consists of a green field and a dense line of trees under a clear blue sky.

Section 7 Affordable Housing/ Workforce Housing



AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Preface

The rich heritage of Watauga County coupled with its physical beauty, easy lifestyle and vast number of cultural and recreational opportunities make it an inviting place to live. As the popularity of mountain properties grow, and student and seasonal populations increase, so do the prices for purchasing or renting housing. A common complaint in the County is that affordable (or workforce) housing is difficult or impossible to find.

Findings

- ▼ Making affordable housing a priority in Watauga County is not an easy task. It involves many governmental entities, regulations, competing land uses, and the developers who seek the highest return for their investments.
- ▼ Planning for affordable housing for future residents will require a proactive approach.
- ▼ Recent survey responses for the Watauga County Comprehensive Plan confirm that Watauga County citizens agree that the County needs affordable-housing, and that it is one of the top concerns for the future.
- ▼ Housing is the greatest single expense for most residents in Watauga County and is often a major consideration among people who want to relocate to the area.
- ▼ In 2022 the volunteer led Watauga Housing Forum led to the establishment of a non-profit, the Watauga Housing Council. The Watauga Housing Council meets monthly with a mission to increase the housing supply for residents who are cost burdened, through partnerships and systematic change.

- ▼ Ideal sites for affordable housing would be near towns to eliminate travel time to and from employment, merchants and services.
- ▼ Rural areas may provide the most potential for affordable housing ventures.
- ▼ Emphasis should be given to both renters and owners of affordable housing.
- ▼ Comments from County stakeholders favor more single-family and multi-family developments with a focus on workforce housing and discouraged apartment complexes and short-term rentals.





Recommendations

- ➔ Ensure that subdivision regulations and other land use ordinances do not serve as barriers to the construction of affordable-housing. Rather, craft regulations and ordinances to favor affordable-housing.
- ➔ Promote mixed-land uses that incorporate housing with other uses that can be blended without sacrificing safety, health and welfare of citizens.
- ➔ Allow a broad range of housing choices in Watauga County ordinances. Encourage duplex, triplex and quadraplex development. Encourage higher density multi-family housing to reduce the cost of land per unit.
- ➔ Ensure that current and future regulations provide sufficient opportunities for nursing homes and other similar care facilities.
- ➔ Develop a county wide affordable housing plan in cooperation with municipalities.
- ➔ Investigate state and federally funded programs that assist in housing rehabilitation.
- ➔ Lead in establishing an affordable housing trust fund in cooperation with municipalities and the County and seek external funding from other sources.
- ➔ Preserve existing housing stock and address substandard housing wherever possible.



Section 8 Preservation of Community



PRESERVATION OF UNIQUE COMMUNITY IDENTITIES AND HERITAGE

Preface

Community identity is defined as the collection of attributes that makes a community unique and separates it from other places. In Phase 1 of the original “Citizens’ Plan for Watauga,” citizens expressed their interest in preserving the unique community identities and heritage of the County. Phase 1 community meetings revealed that citizens take great pride in their communities and believe, regardless of which neighborhood they live in, that theirs is the best part of Watauga County.

Citizen participants in a recent survey continued to express a desire to preserve rural areas, to be a destination remembered for its culture and history, to retain its natural beauty, and to preserve its Appalachian roots. It is important that communities preserve their culture and history for future generations.

Findings – Community Identities

- ▼ According to the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, the National Register is an official listing of “buildings, structures, objects, sites and districts worthy of preservation for their significance in American history, architecture, archaeology, and culture.
- ▼ The Valle Crucis community took steps toward preservation by creating the Valle Crucis Historic District – the first rural historic district in North Carolina. The entire community is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- ▼ Valle Crucis adopted a “Historic District Ordinance” on September 1, 1990, which provides for preservation and protection of the heritage of the community, protection of properties, conservation of the district for education, pleasure and enrichment, fostering civic beauty, and improvement of the general health and welfare of the residents.
- ▼ The Todd community is on the National Register of Historic Places and has been has also been designated a Historic District.
- ▼ Watauga County has “Community Planning Guidelines” for developing a system of community planning. These guidelines were adopted in 1986.
- ▼ Several unincorporated communities in Watauga County have cultural, historical or architectural significance and contribute to the quality of life for residents and tourists. Such communities include Beaver Dam-Bethel, Cove Creek, Deep Gap, Elk, Foscoe-Grandfather, Mabel, Matney, Rutherwood, Stony Fork, Sugar Grove, Todd, Triplett, Valle Crucis, Vilas, Zionville and others.
- ▼ In many communities, schools are the main focal point and center for social activities.
- ▼ Residents feel strongly that newcomers to the area would benefit from education about mountain traditions and attitudes.
- ▼ Community planning districts (Illustration 19) have been established in Foscoe, Cove Creek and Valle Crucis.
- ▼ The Watauga County Tourism Development Authority (TDA) installed a series of “wayfinding” signage along the corridors into Watauga County identifying cultural and recreational opportunities in the area.



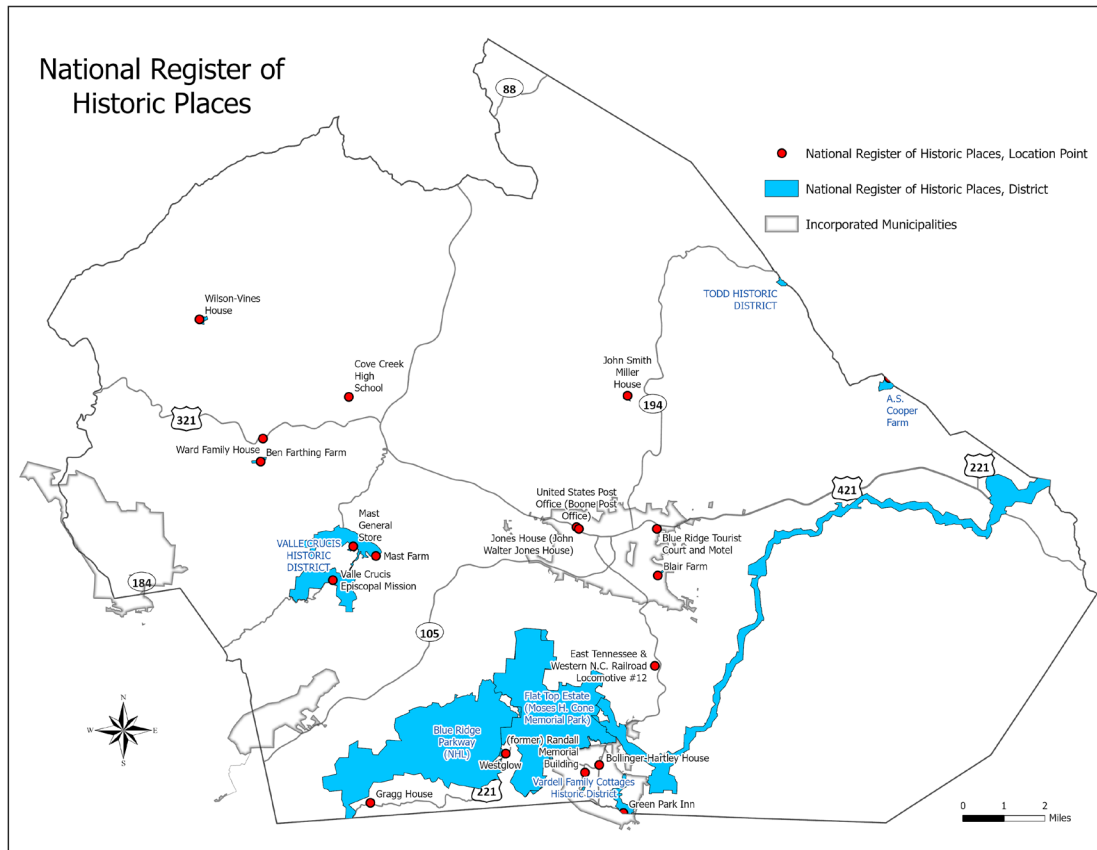
Recommendations

- Create a strategy for preservation of unique communities that identifies and promotes preservation of significant historic, scenic and cultural features. Encourage restoration and use of historic sites and community landmarks to foster community identity.
- Review the Community Planning Guidelines to determine if the guidelines are still appropriate for current needs in the County.
- Develop Small Area Planning guidelines and initiatives to guide land use, open space, transportation improvements, capital improvements and identify opportunities for preservation and revitalization.
- Enhance community-gathering points at convenient locations.
- Explore whether some school sites could be utilized to accommodate facilities necessary for other community programs, such as community center facilities, park/ school combinations, libraries and daycare.
- Design and locate public spaces and buildings to reinforce and express Appalachian Heritage/Culture.
- Implement programs for removing unattractive elements, such as illegal signs, graffiti, litter, utility poles and billboards, as feasible.
- Promote art and cultural opportunities at appropriate public and private locations in unique communities.



Illustration 19

Historical Sites and Districts



BETHEL

Wilson - Vines House (Roby Vines House)

SUGAR GROVE

Cove Creek High School
Ben Farthing Farm
Ward Family House

BOONE

The John Smith Miller House
U.S. Post Office
Jones House
Blue Ridge Tourist Court

TODD

Todd Historic District
A.S. Cooper Farm (partial)

VALLE CRUCIS

Valle Crucis Historic District
Mast Farm
Mast General Store
Valle Crucis Episcopal Mission
Blair Farm

BLOWING ROCK

Randall Memorial Building (Village Cafe)
Bollinger-Hartley House
Green Park Historic District
Green Park Inn
Gragg House
Vardell Family Cottages District
East Tennessee and Western North Carolina
Railroad Locomotive #12
Westglow
Flat Top Estate (Moses H. Cone Memorial Park)



PRESERVATION OF FARMLAND

Preface

Preserving community identity and the County's unique heritage is a worthy endeavor.

Findings

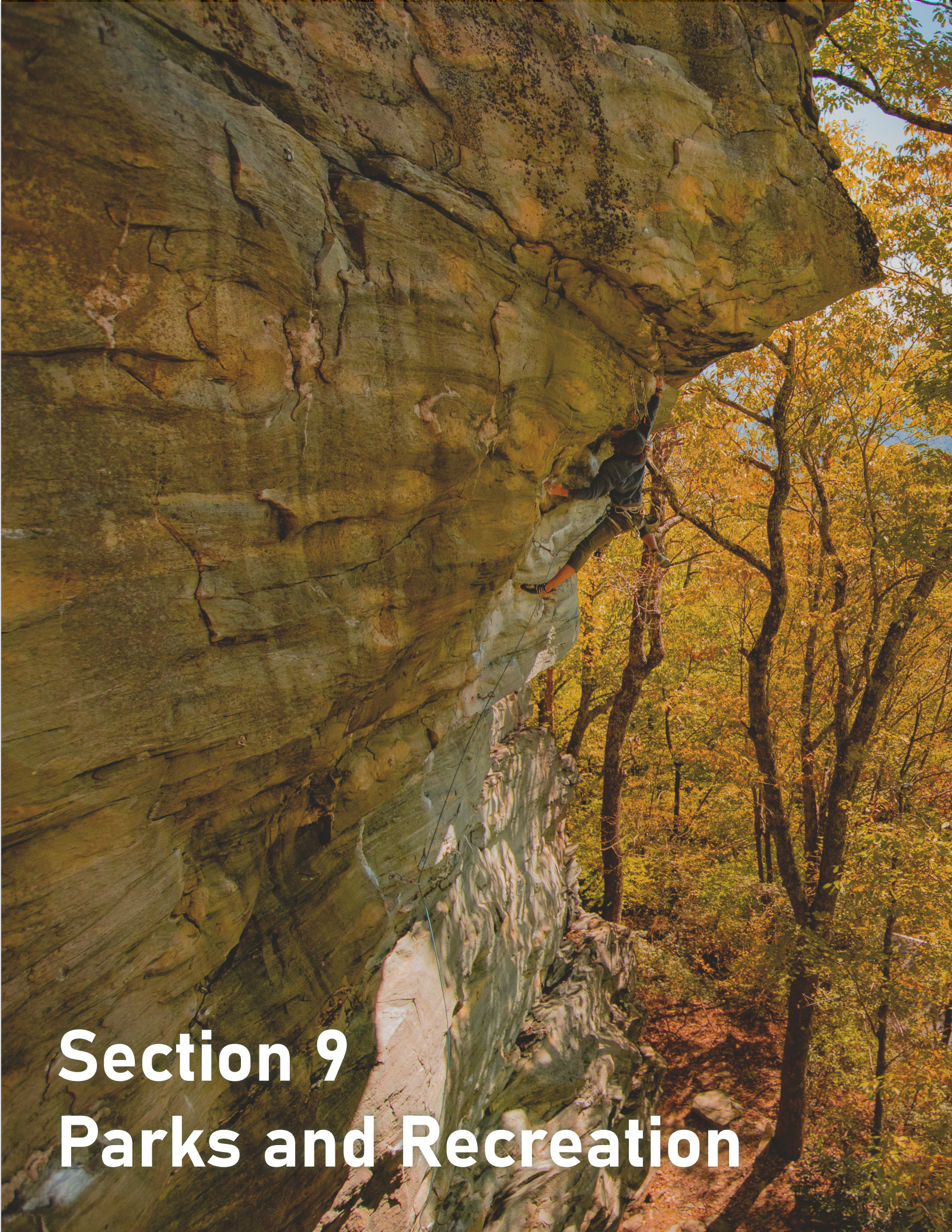
- ▼ The Voluntary Farmland Preservation Program is an instrument designed "to encourage the voluntary preservation and protection of farmland from non-farm development."
- ▼ The Watauga County Board of Commissioners adopted the Farmland Preservation Program in October 2000.
- ▼ Participants in the Voluntary Farmland Preservation Program must also be participants in the Present Use-Value taxation program.
- ▼ An Agricultural Advisory Board reviews and approves applications for qualifying farmland and the establishment of voluntary agricultural districts, which consist of at least 25 acres of qualifying farmland located within one mile of each other.
- ▼ Participating landowners sign agreements to sustain, encourage and promote agriculture.
- ▼ The land must be certified by the Natural Resources Conservation Service as appropriate for the Voluntary Farmland Preservation Program.
- ▼ The Voluntary Farmland Preservation Program members are subject to a conservation agreement between the County and the landowner that prohibits non-farm use or development of that land for a period of at least 10 years.
- ▼ As of July 2025, 131 farms with a total of 8,057 acres are enrolled in the Voluntary Farmland Preservation Program.

Recommendations

- ➔ Promote the Watauga County Voluntary Farmland Preservation Program and work to ensure the Soil and Water Conservation office continues to provide education and opportunities for individuals interested in the program.
- ➔ Support the Soil and Water Conservation office in its efforts to provide information about the Agriculture Cost Share Program (ACSP). This program is voluntary and is designed to protect water quality by installing best management practices on agricultural lands.
- ➔ Promote and educate citizens on the benefits of establishing conservation easements by involving local land conservancies and Soil and Water Conservation personnel.
- ➔ Promote the use of the Present-Use-Value taxation program.



Photo By: Ellia Oakes



Section 9

Parks and Recreation



PARKS AND RECREATION

Preface

Watauga County is a wonderful place for those seeking outdoor recreational activities. Preservation and promotion of recreational endeavors is of great importance to sustaining the quality of life theme. Recreational activities are also vital to the economic well-being of Watauga County. Most of these activities relate to the natural environment. They include opportunities such as hiking, biking, fishing, rock climbing, canoeing, rafting, kayaking, hunting, skiing, sledding, snowboarding and others.

Findings

- ▼ The Parks and Recreation Department, which was formed in 1973, is advised by an 18-member Recreation Commission, and appointed by the Watauga County Board of Commissioners.
- ▼ The commission's role is to guide and advise the Parks and Recreation Department in its mission to provide for adequate recreational opportunities for all citizens of the County.
- ▼ Table 24 provides a summary of the recreation facilities that are presently operated by the County and other public organizations.
- ▼ Several of the facilities in Watauga County offer specific recreational opportunities:
 - ➔ Rocky Knob Park is a 100+ acre mountain bike park with more than 10 miles of single-track mountain bike trails.
 - ➔ The Ted Mackorell Soccer Complex offers three soccer fields and is not only used for tournament play, but also by Appalachian State University and Lees-McRae College. (*HC Soccer Association*)

- ➔ The Middle Fork Greenway – a multi-use trail under development. It will eventually connect Boone and Blowing Rock.
- ➔ Tot Lot – Playground for 2-12 year olds.
- ➔ New River & Watauga River Accesses – Four public access points to the rivers for tubing and kayakers.

Watauga County Parks and Recreation Department

- ▼ The Parks and Recreation staff offers both adult and youth team sports and programs and special events.
- ▼ The athletic opportunities for adults include softball, basketball, soccer, co-ed volleyball, pickleball, and dodgeball.
- ▼ Youth athletics include tball, softball, baseball, coed, girls, & boys basketball, flag football, and co-ed, girls, & boys soccer.
- ▼ In 2021 Watauga County opened the new, state-of-the-art Watauga County Recreation Center. The Center features four indoor basketball courts, two swimming pools, weight room, and workout facilities. Outside there is outdoor basketball, tennis, pickleball, playgrounds, five baseball/softball fields, picnic shelters, and access to the Boone Greenway.
- ▼ The Parks and Recreation Department offers a variety of summer camps each year such as Adventure Camp, Fun in the Sun Camp, Teen Extreme Camp, and Extreme Dance Camp.
- ▼ In the Watauga County Comprehensive Plan survey popular changes/upgrades to current recreational opportunities/facilities include:
 - More Greenways
 - Repair and/or upgrade to existing facilities



More hiking trails
 More safe bike lanes on the roads
 More public river access points (New River & Watauga River)

The mission statement of Watauga County Parks and Recreation is:

“The Watauga County Parks and Recreation Department strives to provide a wide variety of quality recreational programming opportunities in the areas of arts, youth and adult athletics, special programs, special events, special populations including Special Olympics, aquatics, and summer youth camps. The department’s mission is for these programs to be enjoyable, fun, fulfilling, safe and rewarding for all Watauga County citizens.”



Council of Governments, Watauga County adopted a Comprehensive Systemwide Parks and Recreation Plan. Based on the citizens’ survey, community meetings, staff observations, recreation commission comments, facilities inventory, demographic trends, and stakeholder comments, the following recommendations were suggested:

Recommendations

- Construct outdoor restrooms at Complex 2 & 3 fields
- Update/revamp Old Cove Creek School outdoor amenities
- Construct an indoor practice/playing field for baseball, softball, football, soccer, etc.
- Add/replace fitness equipment in the recreation center
- Restore/preserve streambanks near the armory, Brookshire Park, and Old Cove Creek School fields.
- Upgrade Tot Lot playground with inclusive features
- Hire additional full-time staff for the recreation center
- Hire additional full-time staff for the parks and recreation department, specifically a camps/special events coordinator.
- Establish a disc golf course
- Construct outdoor bocce courts
- Integrate Middle Fork Greenway, Howards Knob Park, and outdoor recreation areas into Watauga Parks and Recreation programming.
- Construct a stand-alone building for camps, meetings, and special events.
- Construct an outdoor sand volleyball court
- Enhance the landscaping at the Watauga County Community Recreation Center
- Construct an additional multipurpose room onto the Recreation Center
- Continue to support the construction of the Middle Fork Greenway
- Continue to implement recommendations in the Howard's Knob Park Master Plan
- Support efforts to establish the Deep Gap Community Recreation Area



Table 23
Recreational Facilities Owned and/or Operated by Watauga County

Facility	Restrooms	Playground	Hiking/ Walking Trails	Mountain Bike Trails	Picnic Shelters	Picnic Tables (no shelter)	Baseball/ Softball Fields	Athletic/ Soccer Fields	Multipurpose Field	Tennis Court	Basketball Court	Pickleball Court	Fishing	River Access	Walking Track	Gym	Swimming Pool
Watauga Community Recreation Center												4					2
Recreation Complex					3					4		2					
Industrial Fields							2										
Anne-Marie Fields						4	2										
Brookshire Park																	
Ted Mackorell Soccer Complex																	
Rocky Knob Mountain Bike Park																	
Middle Fork Greenway																	
Watauga River Access at Guy Ford Rd																	
Watauga River Access at Watauga River Rd.																	
New River Access at Pine Run Rd																	
Watauga River Access at Valle Crucis																	
Howards Knob Park																	
Old Cove Creek School Park						4				2							
Health Department Field																	
Green Valley Elementary School Park																	
Hardin Park Elementary School Park																	
Parkway Elementary School Park		2															
Cove Creek Elementary School Park																	
Watauga High School						13	2			6							
Bethel Elementary School Park		2															
Mabel Elementary School Park									3								
Blowing Rock Elementary School Park																	
Valle Crucis Elementary School Park																	



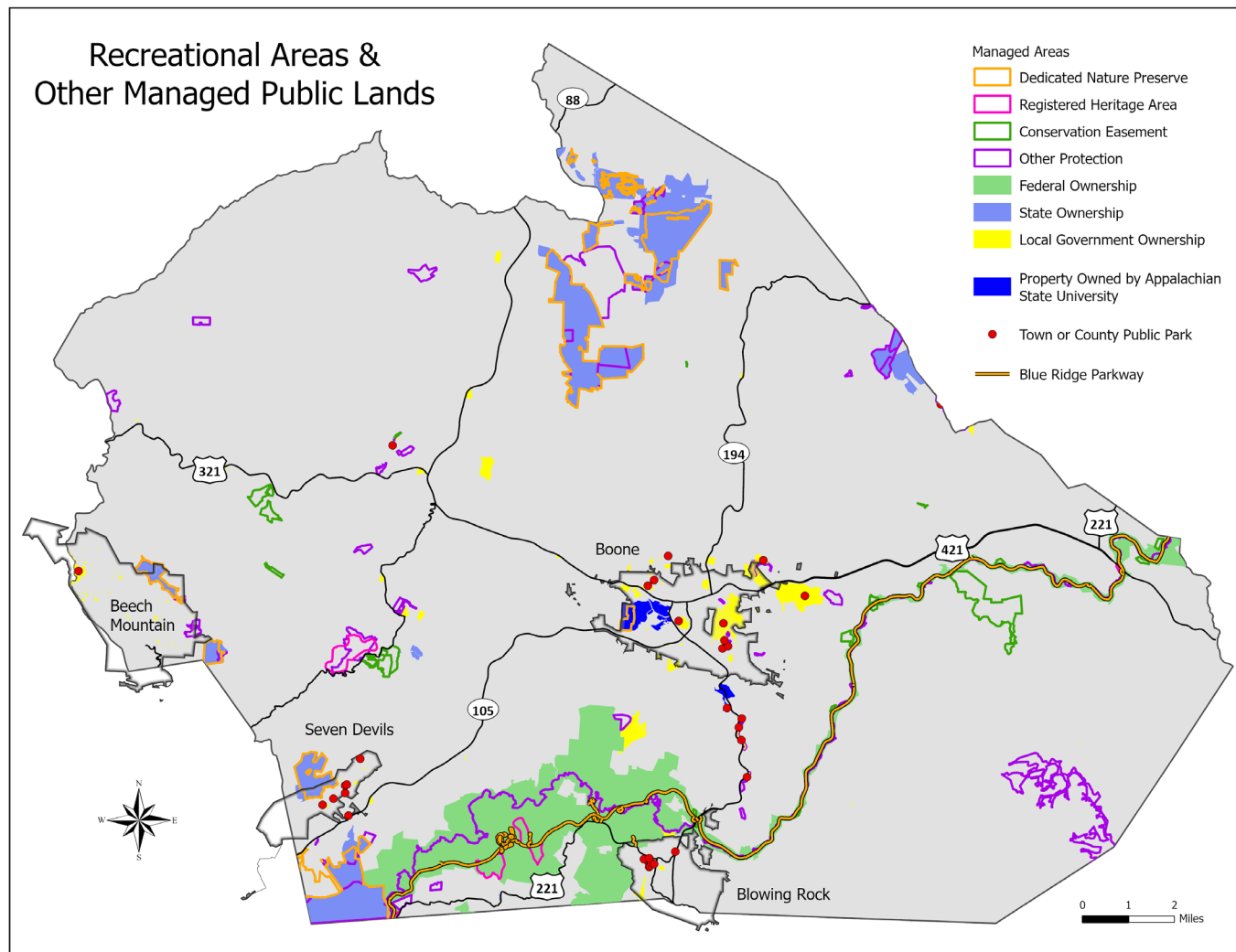
Table 24
Other Recreational Facilities Located in Watauga County

Facility	Restrooms	Playground	Hiking/ Walking Trails	Mountain Bike Trails	Picnic Shelters	Picnic Tables (no shelter)	Baseball /Softball Fields	Athletic/ Soccer Fields	Multipurpose Field	Tennis Court	Basketball Court	Pickleball Court	Fishing	River Access	Walking Track	Gym	Swimming Pool
Boone Greenway Trail																	
Jaycess Park																	
Strawberry Hill Arboretum																	
Junaluska Park																	
Clawson Burnley Park					2	24											
North Street Park																	
Jones House & Grounds																	
Rivers House Park																	
Memorial Park										2	2						
Broyhill Park																	
Davant Field																	
Robbin's Pool																	
Annie L. Cannon Memorial Garden																	
Glen Burney Trail																	
Koerschner Memorial Garden																	
American Legion Building																	
Blowing Rock Clubhouse																	
Blowing Rock Recreation Center																	
Buckeye Recreation Center																	
Lake Coffey																	
Hayden's Park																	
Beech Mountain Hiking Trails																	
Beech Mountain Sledding Hill																	
Otter Falls Trail																	
Seven Devils Old Town Hall																	
Black Bear Family Park										2		2					
Alpine Meadows Mini Park																	
Valle Crucis Community Park		2			2	9											
Mountaineer Ruritan Club Field																	
Green Valley Community Park																	
Foscoe/Grandfather Community Center & Park																	
Elk Knob State Park																	
Grandfather Mountain State Park																	
Blue Ridge Parkway (within Watauga County)																	
Cone Park Carriage Trails																	
Price Park Picnic Area						100											
Price Park Trails																	
Tanawha Trail																	
NC Mountain-to-Sea Trail																	



Parks and Recreation

Illustration 20 Parks and Recreation



The map shows the distribution of parks and recreation sites in Watauga County that are owned and managed by federal, state and conservation organizations.



Section 10 Managing Change in Watauga County



PREPARING FOR CHANGE

Natural Limitations

Understanding the interrelationship among the various natural or physiographic and other factors that influence future growth and change is an essential step in the process of preparing for managing change. The initial step in this process is to view these physiographic influences in terms of their collective capability to withstand change created by various levels of land use or future development:

- ▼ Using Geographic Information System (GIS) technology, one is able to layer the various maps showing the components.
- ▼ The series of natural limitations are interrelated.
- ▼ They build on one another to present a composite view of the overall capacity of land within Watauga County to withstand or support changes.
- ▼ Understanding these relationships is fundamental to managing such change in the future

MANAGING CHANGE IN WATAUGA COUNTY

Preface

Change is inevitable in Watauga County; however, future change can be influenced by many factors, which may be altered or utilized to direct or mitigate such change. This fundamental assumption is the basis for managing change. The principal factors that influence change include:

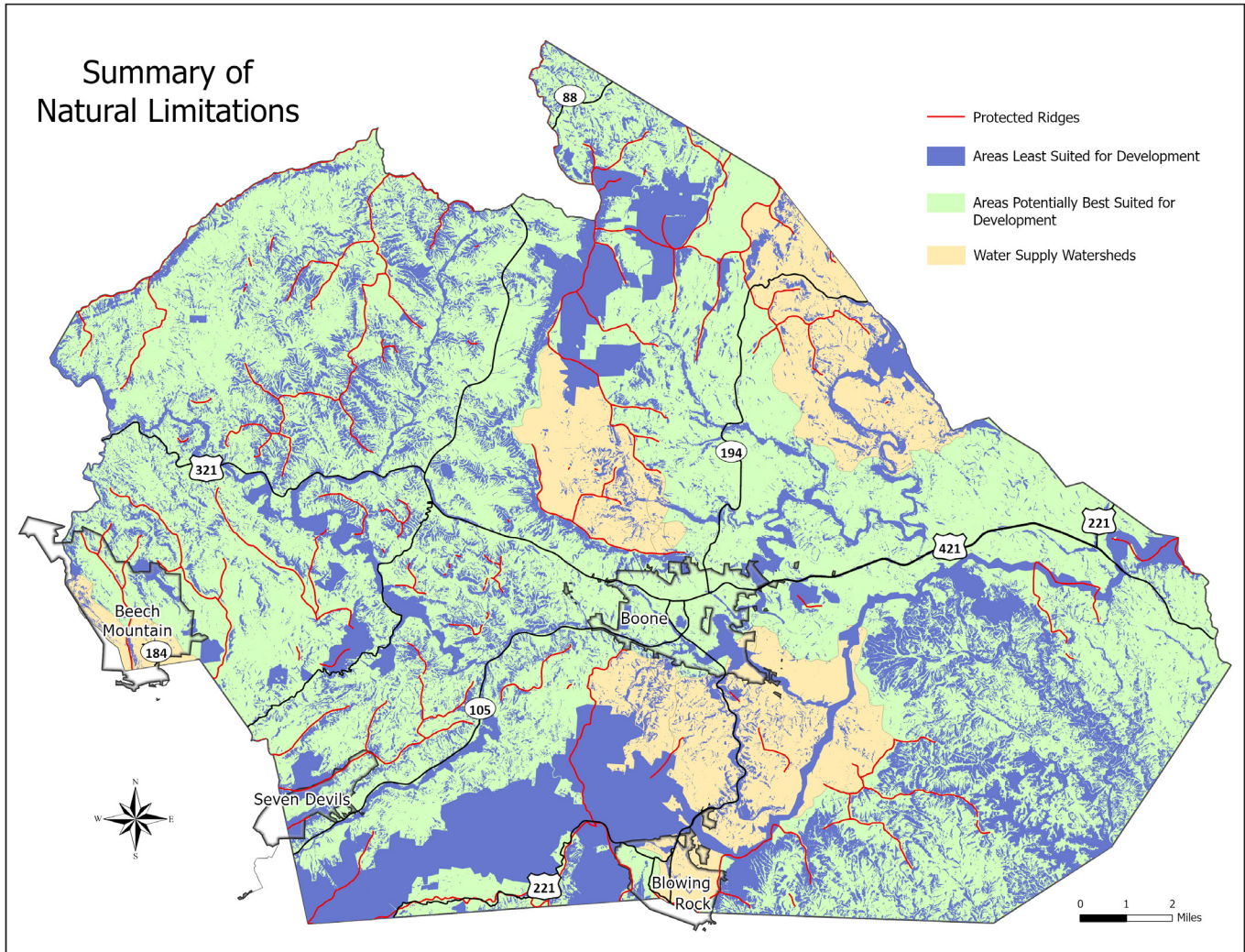
- ▼ Transportation Routes
- ▼ Physiographic Constraints
- ▼ Public Policy
- ▼ Water and Wastewater Infrastructure
- ▼ Centers of Employment
- ▼ Proximity to Urban Centers
- ▼ Community Facilities (including schools)
- ▼ Land Use Regulations
- ▼ Public Health Regulations



The planning, placement, modification or enforcement of such influences become primary tools that are available to the community in managing change. It is therefore incumbent upon Watauga County to recognize the importance of acknowledging and managing these factors of change and deliberately planning for their impacts.

Illustration 21

Areas for Development and Unsited Areas



The categories of suitability of land for development for Watauga County may be explained as follows:

Areas Best Suited for Development

Land areas that have few constraints for development activity. With appropriate services, such land could best accommodate future change (Illustration 21).

Areas Least Suited for Development

Land that has limited or no development potential because of severe physiographic challenges or other impeding limitations, such as land under public ownership. These areas also encompass protected ridge tops and flood zones.



Growth Objectives for the Community

Achieving balance between fostering change and protecting community values and important economic, environmental and cultural resources is the foundation of change management. The following objectives are intended to guide the County:

- ▼ Population growth should be concentrated in areas of Watauga County where essential services and infrastructure are adequate to meet the needs of future populations. Population and development densities should vary in accordance with the availability of such services and infrastructure, with more dense concentrations of development being directed to locations where essential services and infrastructure may be provided most efficiently.
- ▼ Extension of essential services and infrastructure should be planned to support future growth within these designated concentrations of development, with such extensions being guided by deliberate policies that acknowledge efficiency and change management strategies.
- ▼ Growth in rural areas of the community, outside of planned concentrations of development, should be managed to occur at densities that do not require inefficient investments in essential services and infrastructure.
- ▼ Growth outside of planned concentrations of development should not infringe on prevailing agricultural or rural land use patterns in such rural areas.
- ▼ Growth management in both urban and rural areas of the community should be sensitive to valuable environmental, cultural, or historic resources and assets.

Acknowledging Municipal Planning Jurisdictions

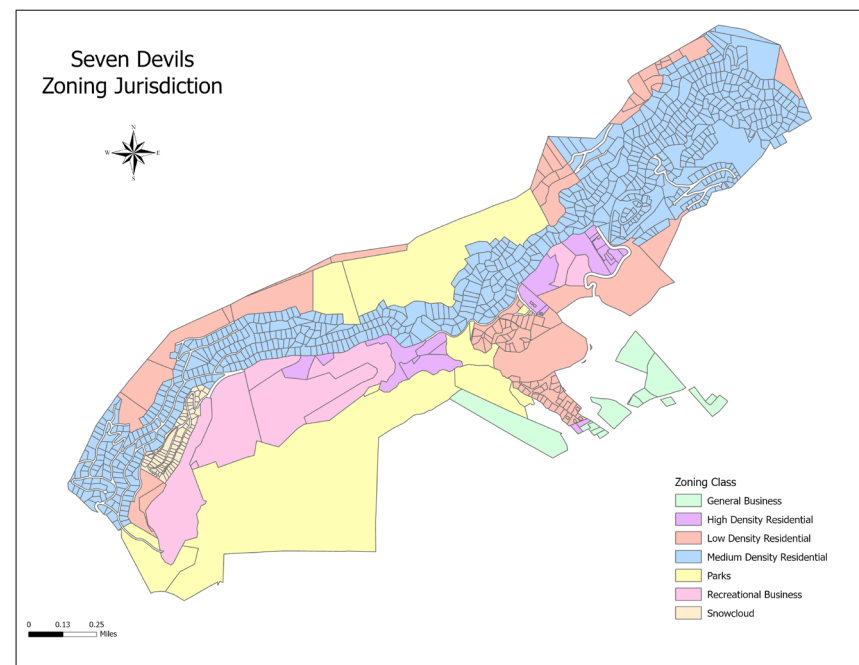
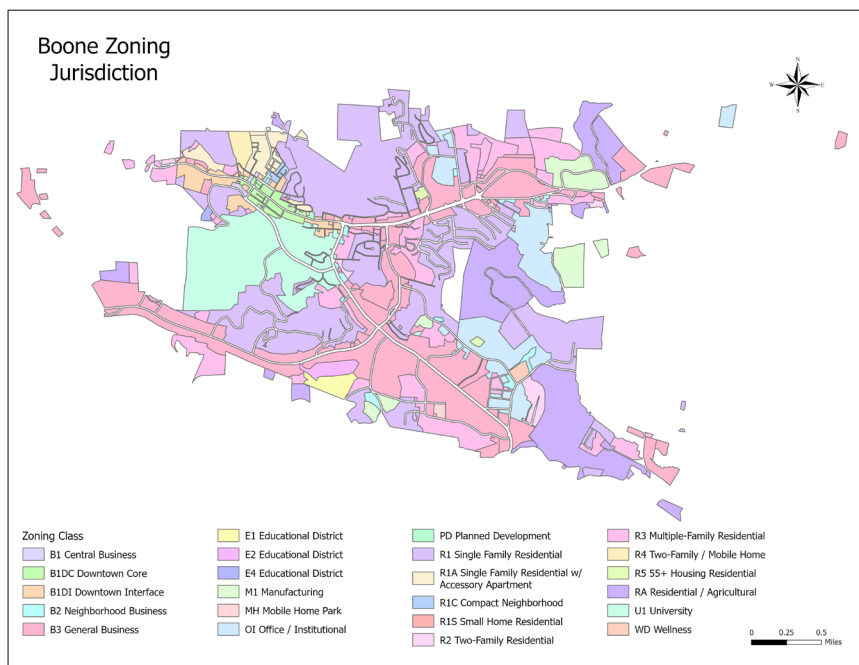
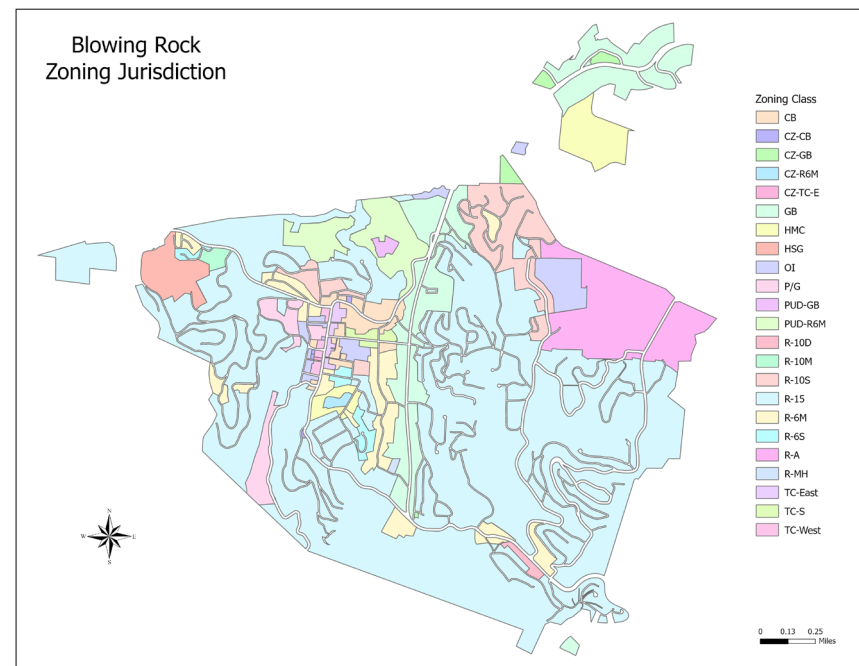
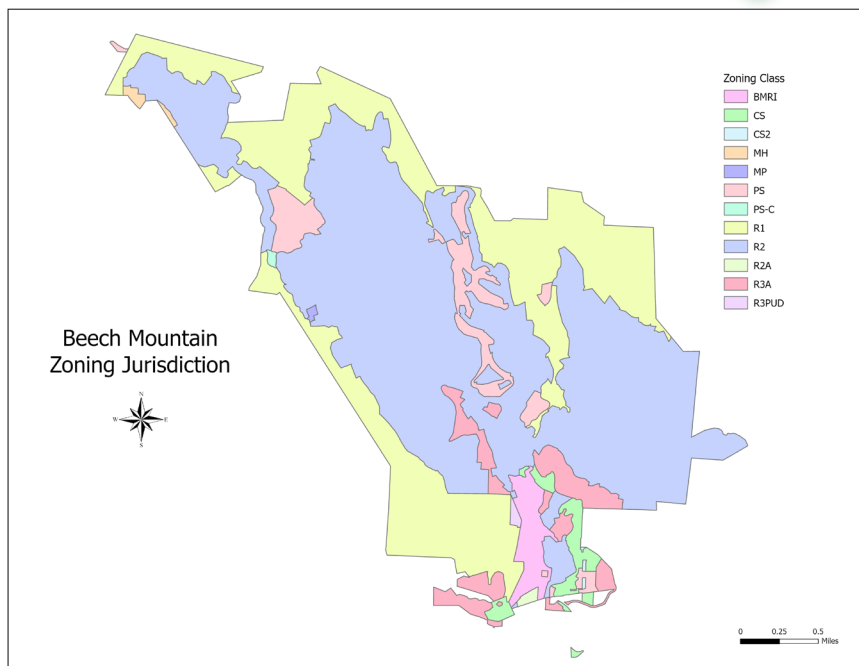
Managing change should reflect a regional strategy. Therefore, planning for Watauga County's growth should consider similar endeavors across governmental jurisdictions. It is incumbent upon County government to consult with its political neighbors as it plans for its future growth. Its plans and policies should efficiently and effectively mesh with those of the municipalities within Watauga County.

At present, the four municipalities of Boone, Blowing Rock, Beech Mountain and Seven Devils each have land use plans, land use regulations and various other ongoing planning activities that are in place and reflect their individual objectives and policies regarding managing growth and influencing change (Illustration 22). Further, Blowing Rock and Seven Devils have extraterritorial jurisdictions within which they plan and administer land use regulations.



Illustration 22

Municipal Planning Jurisdictions





The County's Growth Management Policy should:

- ▼ Acknowledge these individual municipal planning jurisdictions.
- ▼ Reflect the current plans that have been adopted for each municipal jurisdiction.
- ▼ Strive to ensure that County plans and recommendations for those areas of Watauga County that are adjacent to municipal jurisdictions are consistent with municipal planning.
- ▼ Coordinate plans and recommendations for essential services and infrastructure with corresponding plans for the municipal jurisdictions.
- ▼ Strive for regional or countywide solutions to planning and urban services.
- ▼ In the absence of municipal plans for essential services and infrastructure, the County should coordinate its planning with the affected municipality.

MANAGING FUTURE CHANGE IN WATAUGA COUNTY

The County's strategy for managing change is developed to reflect the diversity of the community and to provide for a logical approach to addressing this diversity of needs and the wide range of factors that influence and direct growth under these unique conditions.

Watauga County is a community in transition. It has evolved from a principally rural environment into a community that is typically urban along its principal highway corridors and progressively more rural and agricultural as distances increase away from those transportation corridors. This urban / rural setting, coupled with its complex physiographic limitations, provides a great challenge.

Growth management issues in the community are complex. A single planning model for the County is probably not adequate to comprehensively address the requirements of this transitional planning environment. Therefore, multiple planning paths may better provide for the flexibility to address the range of factors and issues that are presented to the community.

Emphasis should be directed toward achieving change that reflects sustainability in future development and ensures a minimal disruption to the natural environment and maximize use of energy, land resources and other natural and community assets.

The Change Management Strategy for Watauga County divides the County into three Growth Paths, acknowledging the range of planning objectives and developmental environments throughout the community:

- ▼ The Watauga "Gateway Corridors"
- ▼ Unique Community Areas
- ▼ Rural / Agriculture Regions

Illustration 23 Community Planning Districts

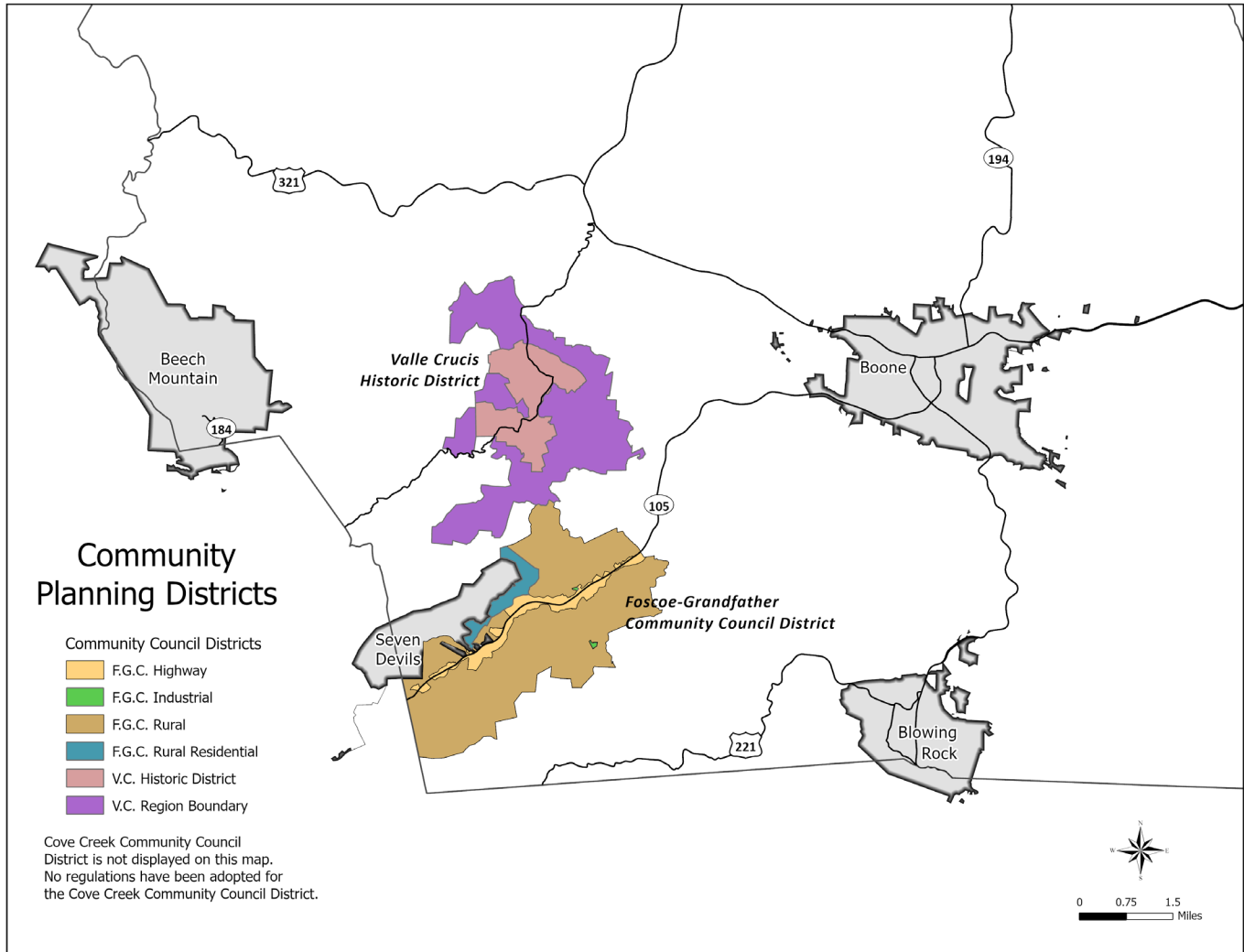


Illustration 23 presents the locations and extent of two of the three community planning districts in Watauga:

- ▼ No regulations have been adopted for the Cove Creek Community Council District.
- ▼ The Valle Crucis Community Council District is primarily dedicated to historic preservation. It contains a designated historic district zone.
- ▼ The Foscoe-Grandfather Community Council District is divided into four zones, as shown on Illustration 23.



WATAUGA GATEWAY CORRIDORS

Watauga County is characterized by distinct and constantly changing primary transportation corridors, which include key segments of highways 421, 321 and 105. These corridors are considered the strategic or key Gateways to the community and managing change within these so called "Gateway Corridors" should be guided by the following principles:

Population

- ▼ The average population densities achieved in these "Gateway Corridors" are, or will in the future, be substantially higher than other regions of the County and generally fall into a range of 500 to 900 persons per square mile.

Land Use Patterns

- ▼ Land use patterns will be generally more complex with wide ranges of residential densities, substantial commercial concentrations, as well as industrial and institutional complexes.
- ▼ Within these "Gateway Corridors," the County and its municipalities should aggressively avoid conflicting land uses and maintain minimum standards of quality for development.

Economic Development

- ▼ The County's economic development activities should be aggressively pursued within the Watauga "Gateway Corridors."
- ▼ Care should be taken to protect areas identified as prime industrial land or key economic assets.
- ▼ Appropriate infrastructure should be developed to sustain this ongoing and planned economic development program. However, investments in public infrastructure should be cost-effective,

with economic benefits to the Community outweighing the costs of new investments in infrastructure.

- ▼ A formula should be developed to assess this cost/benefit ratio, and the County should utilize a concise policy to guide in its future capital investments in economic development related services and infrastructure.

Essential Services

- ▼ Development within these "Gateway Corridors" would be accessible by highways and streets, which are developed to urban standards, having capacities to accommodate increasingly complex volumes of traffic.
- ▼ Development within this growth path should be served by water and sewer infrastructure, except for areas that are deemed infeasible to receive such services due to excessive cost, incompatible slopes, or factors, which serve to isolate certain areas from essential services.
- ▼ Transportation, water and sewer planning should be conducted within a regional framework, with active participation by all units of local government. The County should assume a leadership role in such planning activities.

Environmental Considerations

- ▼ Managing change initiatives should acknowledge the presence of sensitive natural areas, such as floodplains, wetlands, unique natural assets and areas exhibiting excessively steep topography, and strive to protect these areas from development, which would damage such resources or diminish their integrity.
- ▼ Planning initiatives should attempt to

incorporate natural assets into future preservation projects, such as greenways, parks, conservation easements and other ventures, which would serve to protect such areas from serious damage or destruction.

- ▼ The County's growth management policies and regulations should be reviewed and revised as required to ensure that new growth is both sustainable and minimizes the consumption of valuable resources and energy.
- ▼ The "quality of life" theme should be reflected in all aspects of planning.

Planning and Organizational Structure

- ▼ Much of this "Gateway Corridors" growth path would fall within municipal planning jurisdictions and be managed within the provisions of urban scale guidelines and regulations, including zoning, subdivision regulations, stormwater ordinances, floodplain regulations, local erosion control ordinances, and other such municipal land use standards and guidelines.
- ▼ Planning for areas that fall outside of such municipal planning jurisdictions should be coordinated with municipal programs.
- ▼ Tools used for managing change for areas falling within the County's jurisdiction should be comparable and compatible in approach and intensity to planning conducted within the various municipal jurisdictions, except where the County determines that its requirements should vary from those of adjacent municipalities.
- ▼ A permanent mechanism for ensuring coordination and consistency in planning in this "Gateway Corridor" setting should be implemented to ensure that planning, growth management activities, transportation, water, sewer, schools, housing and other

essential services are conducted within a regional framework. Such a vehicle might be viewed as a Cooperative Planning Council. It would be assigned a formal agenda, by way of an interlocal agreement, for intergovernmental coordination among the local governments that have a direct interest in the "Gateway Corridors".





UNIQUE COMMUNITY AREAS

Beyond the designated “Gateway Corridors” there are other significant areas of Watauga County that are recognized as established rural communities which exhibit unique characteristics worthy of preservation. Although these areas may be isolated from the more developed “Gateway Corridors,” their service needs are not typical of the most rural regions of the County, primarily due to the density of development or other unique circumstances. At present, these unique Rural Communities include Deep Gap, Todd, Valle Crucis, Cove Creek, Foscoe, Matney, Bethel, Zionville and Mabel.

Some of these unique places are located within the designated “Gateway Corridors,” including Deep Gap, Foscoe-Grandfather, and portions of Cove Creek and Zionville. Change in these unique communities would be managed within the parameters established for the “Gateway Corridors.”

Managing change within these Unique Community Areas shall be guided by the following principles:

Population

- ▼ The average development density may be higher than other typically rural regions of the County but would be substantially lower than urban concentrations of population within “Gateway Corridors.”

Land Use Patterns

- ▼ Land use patterns should be managed with conscious efforts to prevent incompatible land uses, maintain low population densities, and preserve the integrity of the Unique Community Areas.
- ▼ The nature of such communities tends to encourage the mixing of land uses, with

limited commercial and service activities inter-disbursed among residential land uses. Unique Community Areas should be more tolerant of mixed land uses, as might be seen in more densely developed areas of the County.

- ▼ As growth continues in these unique communities, commercial development should be encouraged to concentrate in nodes, becoming more isolated from residential concentrations.
- ▼ However, incompatible industrial or other land uses should be avoided in favor of the predominant residential character of these communities.

Economic Development

- ▼ New economic development activities should not be encouraged within the boundaries of Unique Community Areas, which would demand levels of urban services that are not currently present in the community.
- ▼ The natural evolution of commercial activities in Unique Community Areas should not be prohibited, except where such development is incompatible with the character of the community and would tend to damage property values and disrupt the community.

Essential Services and Infrastructure

- ▼ The extent of development in these existing unique communities may dictate certain essential services, including water and sewer, where such services are economically feasible.
- ▼ Such infrastructure should be developed as self-sustaining enterprise funds, which can be supported without subsidy by the larger community.

Environmental Considerations

- County regulations should acknowledge the presence of sensitive natural areas, such as floodplains, wetlands, unique natural assets and areas exhibiting excessively steep topography, and strive to protect these areas from development.
- Planning initiatives should attempt to incorporate such natural assets into future preservation projects, such as greenways, parks, conservation easements and other ventures, that would serve to protect such areas from serious damage or destruction.



Planning and Organizational Structure

- The County should endeavor to establish some level of ongoing community planning within these individual areas, which would reflect a degree of self-determination in decisions relating to planning and services. Such planning structure should be incorporated into the structure of the County's planning program. This level of autonomy might help to avoid future unnecessary incorporation of new municipal governments.
- The development of new Unique Community Areas should be discouraged by the utilization of planning services and regulations. New Unique Community Areas should be developed only with the provision of essential services and infrastructure by the forces which are responsible for their planning and development.
- The County should review its present community planning guidelines to ensure that the present ordinance is adequate to meet future needs related to establishing valuable and unique rural communities.





RURAL/AGRICULTURAL REGIONS

All areas that fall outside of the Watauga Gateway Corridors and designated Unique Community Areas would be contained within the designated Rural / Agriculture Regions (Illustration 24).

These areas are predominantly rural and are characterized by low-density residential development with substantial land areas devoted to agriculture and undeveloped forest lands. Growth management within Rural/Agriculture regions is characterized by the following principles:

Population

- ▼ The average population densities within these areas would be less than the Gateway Corridors and Rural Communities growth paths.

Land Use Patterns

- ▼ Development densities should be substantially lower than those for the Watauga Gateways Corridors, so as to avoid future pressures for extending urban services and infrastructure.
- ▼ Development that tends to increase pressure on County government for the provision of essential urban services should be discouraged by policy and by the absence of such urban services and infrastructure.
- ▼ Some mixing of residential and non-residential land uses should be encouraged and provided for in future planning and management of growth. Rural service centers providing limited shopping and services should be encouraged within prescribed guidelines.

Economic Development

- ▼ Except for agricultural business activity, no new large-scale economic development activities, such as industrial parks or shopping centers, should be encouraged within the boundaries of such regions of the County.
- ▼ The natural evolution of economic activity in Rural/Agriculture Regions should not be prohibited, except where such development is incompatible with the character of the area and would tend to damage property values or be incompatible with the predominant agricultural or residential land uses.

Essential Services and Infrastructure

- ▼ No water and sewer services would be promoted or provided by local government within these areas, due to the inefficiencies of providing such services and their ultimate impacts on rural areas. However, this does not preclude the provision of water and sewer services by private providers for specific areas of development that are self-sustaining.
- ▼ Highway transportation would be accomplished principally by two-lane roads that are typically not consistent with urban design standards, except for state highways, which traverse certain areas of the community.

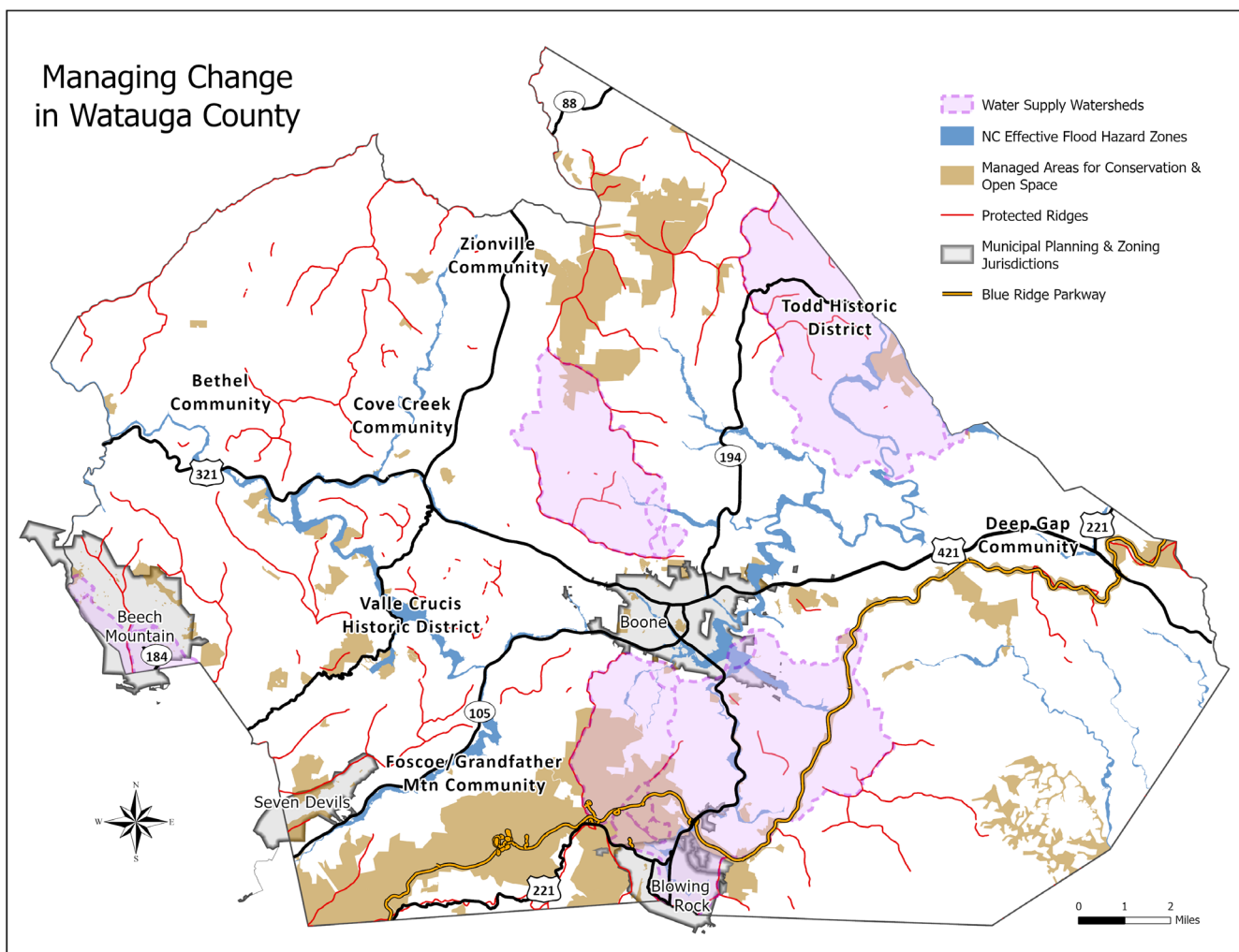
Environmental Considerations

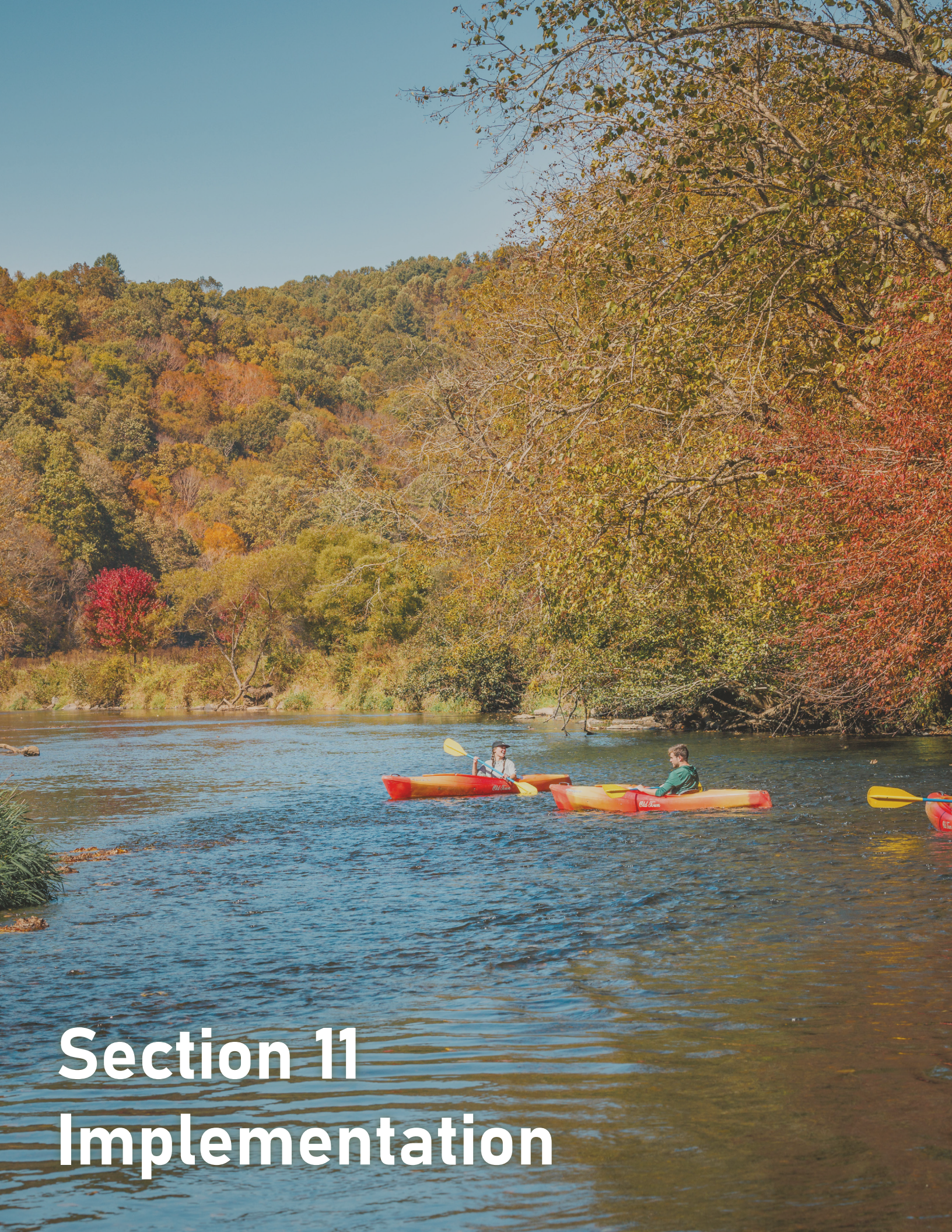
- Extraordinary care should be taken in these areas to preserve their rural character and to protect valuable farmlands, as well as environmental and cultural resources.
- The suitability of land within these regions of the County should be a principal consideration in determining appropriate developmental densities and segregation of incompatible land uses.

Planning and Organizational Structure

- Planning for these regions of the community should be managed within the structure of the Watauga County Planning Board and the County Board of Commissioners.

Illustration 24 Change in Watauga County





Section 11 Implementation



IMPLEMENTATION OF THE WATAUGA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The “Watauga County Comprehensive Plan” should be the beginning point in a process that carries the community forward into a continuum of deliberate strategies and actions designed to understand, anticipate and manage changes that will occur in the future and to ensure that such change is consistent with the will of the Watauga citizenry and compatible with the fragile natural environment that is the essence of Watauga County.

Public Involvement

The public must be involved in this essential process. This element of awareness and participation is fundamental to the successful implementation of this strategy for managing change.

This Comprehensive plan must be followed by many subsequent initiatives that are necessary to deal with the multitude of details and actions that are intended to carry out the vision. The public must understand that this process is continual and that its role in this process is the most essential ingredient for its success.

Intergovernmental Coordination

- ▼ A key consideration in achieving a successful process for plan implementation is meaningful and deliberate cooperation among the local governments, and their management and planning staffs, within Watauga County. Mistrust and competition must not be permitted to delay the creation of a productive and innovative solution to achieving a desirable level of information sharing and collaboration among the County, the four municipalities and

Appalachian State University. Suggestions for continuing this important involvement process include:

- ▼ Establish a “Comprehensive Plan” newsletter that would be published quarterly on the County’s website and further distributed in the community. The newsletter would post news related to important planning and change management initiatives and summarize information and events that relate to this theme.
- ▼ Create a “Watauga County Comprehensive Plan” Forum composed of a cross-section of community leaders and citizens in Watauga County, including elected officials, businesspeople, institutional representatives, retirees, youth and others who have stake in managing change in Watauga County. Cultivate an environment in which participation in this forum is both prestigious and meaningful. Meet periodically with this group and present the progress of the preceding year and formulate at least five (5) concrete objectives for the subsequent year.
- ▼ Take planning and information about managing change in Watauga County into the schools. The future of Watauga County rests with our children. They must understand and accept this immense responsibility.



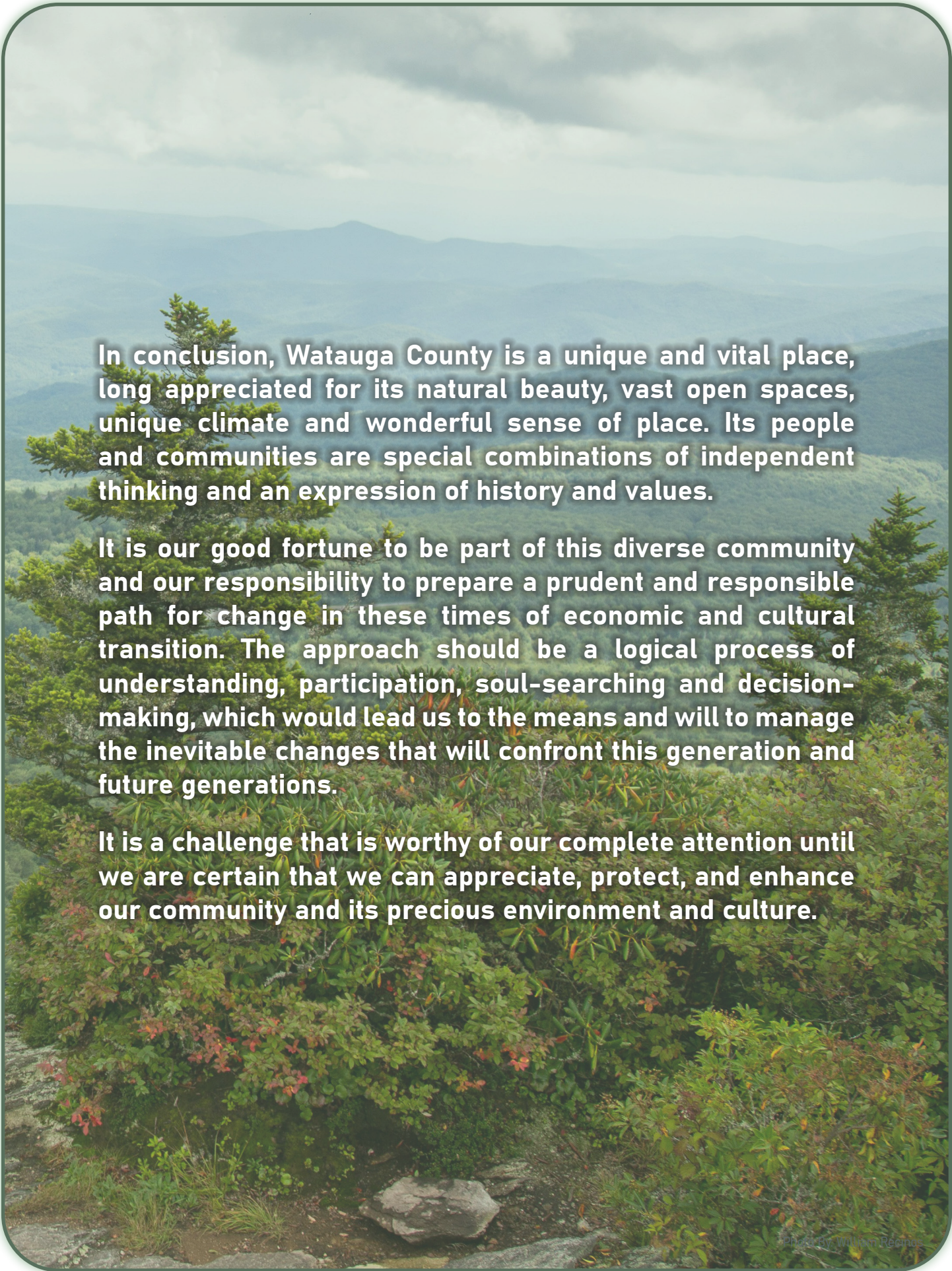
ORGANIZATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

- ▼ Formalize and enhance the planning consortium among the local governments and App State to foster intergovernmental collaboration on key planning issues that are both current and prominent to the community.
- ▼ Establish quarterly status retreats of the consortium that are managed by a facilitator that rotates annually among the five governments.
- ▼ Formulate specific annual objectives related to plan implementation and sponsor joint participation in work tasks that are of mutual interest to the participants.
- ▼ Assign responsibilities among the participants for staffing and participation in the annual "Watauga County Comprehensive Plan" Forum.
- ▼ Facilitate coordinated involvement in strategic public participation events and processes.

An impression derived during the course of preparing the "Watauga County Comprehensive Plan" is that the County's planning program has accomplished many objectives and achieved a great deal of success despite limited funding and little notoriety during its brief history. However, there are many recommendations and issues raised within this plan that will bring new pressures and demands to bear on this very streamlined program, which presently assumes responsibility for many aspects of Watauga County government.

This raises the question of how this efficient program will evolve and expand to meet these new stresses and demands. Attention should be given to:

- ➔ Assessing the overall programmatic needs associated with the ongoing planning program and the new initiatives that are associated with this plan.
- ➔ Evaluating alternative organizational options that could address the increased workload demands, to ensure that the program continues to be a viable and creative mechanism for managing change in Watauga County.
- ➔ Establishing an organizational model that would be implemented in phases in the coming years, as the need for growth and change is evident.



In conclusion, Watauga County is a unique and vital place, long appreciated for its natural beauty, vast open spaces, unique climate and wonderful sense of place. Its people and communities are special combinations of independent thinking and an expression of history and values.

It is our good fortune to be part of this diverse community and our responsibility to prepare a prudent and responsible path for change in these times of economic and cultural transition. The approach should be a logical process of understanding, participation, soul-searching and decision-making, which would lead us to the means and will to manage the inevitable changes that will confront this generation and future generations.

It is a challenge that is worthy of our complete attention until we are certain that we can appreciate, protect, and enhance our community and its precious environment and culture.

Photo by William Reinos