

State of the Environment

2000

Mecklenburg County
North Carolina



For Your Information

Since 1987 purpose of the State of the Environment Report has been and remains:

- (1) to describe Mecklenburg County's current environmental status for the public and the Board of County Commissioners;
- (2) to give the County objective measures to evaluate progress toward a clean, healthy environment;
- (3) to highlight the major issues facing the County; and
- (4) to recommend direction concerning those issues.

As we enter a new century, these concepts are even more important as our community and region continue to grow at a rapid pace.

Charlotte - Mecklenburg Annual Survey

Results from Environmental Questions: Importance of Environment in Mecklenburg County

Category and Percent Responding	1991	1993	1995	1997	1999
1. Importance of protecting the environment in Mecklenburg					
Very important	86.3	82.0	84.0	81.8	86.7
Some importance	12.7	16.7	14.7	17.6	12.4
Not important	1.0	1.3	1.3	0.6	0.9
2. Believe the environment receives correct amount of attention					
Too much attention	1.7	5.5	3.6	3.6	4.5
Right amount of attention	23.8	31.5	35.1	34.3	33.9
Not enough attention	74.4	63.0	61.3	62.1	61.6
3. Would pay higher taxes to protect the environment					
Yes	73.0	62.7	64.9	59.1	61.1
No	27.0	37.3	35.1	32.5	38.9
4. Level of government best for environmental regulations					
Local	41.2	55.2	43.3	46.9	17.8
State	16.4	21.5	30.2	26.7	8.5
Federal	18.4	18.5	23.5	17.5	4.4
Combination	22.7	4.9	3.1	8.9	69.4
Other	1.2	-	-	-	-
5. Rank of environment vs. education, economics, crime, health					
Very high priority	12.6	12.2	-	-	-
High Priority	35.1	30.5	25.8	25.1	24.4
Medium Priority	41.5	42.4	55.7	59.1	59.3
Low Priority	10.7	14.9	14.3	12.8	13.3
Very low priority	-	-	-	3.0	3.0

*Source: UNCC Urban Institute Annual Surveys, October 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999
Sample size 850. With 98% certainty, responses are within +/- 4% of the responses one would receive from a survey of the entire adult population of Mecklenburg County.*

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2000 State of the Environment Report

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Design Solutions	United States Census Bureau
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Growth – But Will It Be Smart?

H. Parks Helms
Chairman, Board of County Commissioners

Surrounded by gloom of the Great Depression, my grandfather William G. Parks worked the red clay soil of Long Creek Township, just west of Huntersville, growing corn, cotton, and a tiny bit of wheat, oats, soybeans and sweet potatoes. Much has changed from the 1930s, when farms outnumbered office buildings in Mecklenburg County; when bankruptcies were as common as stock splits are today; when \$45 bought seed and fertilizer for 37-acres of land.

Now it seems you cannot go anywhere in Mecklenburg County without seeing signs of phenomenal growth. The rolling hills and peaceful pastures of Long Creek are being converted into residential neighborhoods with cul-de-sacs and comfortable homes. As a native Charlottean, I have seen and I understand the positive and negative impacts of growth. As Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners, I believe that growth-related issues are among the greatest challenges facing our community. This growth is enhancing — yet at the same time threatening — the livability of our community. I believe that we are all responsible for assuring that our economic growth is “smart growth,” benefitting all of our community and not adversely affecting our quality of life and environment. It has become a balancing act to encourage wise growth and economic vitality that improves — yet does not overwhelm — our community’s quality of life.

In the last half of the 20th Century, the number of people living in Charlotte increased by more than 400%, to over 440,000 people. For a moment, envision with me what Charlotte and Mecklenburg County might look like 25 years from now. Our county’s population is expected to increase by another third-of-a-million people by then. Another third of a million people with us on our roads and in our office complexes, schools, shopping centers, apartment complexes and subdivisions. This will certainly be growth — but will it be smart growth? For example, if we increase the number of homes or residential units built on each acre of land, how would that affect school crowding, water pressure, traffic congestion, mass transit use, housing availability, housing availability, property values, air and water pollution, the property tax rate, and again, our overall quality of life?

Take for example the southern part of Mecklenburg County. This is one of our most populated areas, with the highest population density and the least amount of open space. According to staff monitoring results, this conglomeration of single family and multifamily homes, industry and commercial development contaminates our streams with fecal coliform bacteria. As development density increases, pollutants from yards and paved surfaces increase. In turn, our stream water quality decreases. The northern and northwestern portions of the County, which drain into Mt. Island Lake and upper Lake Wylie, have the overall best stream water quality — not unexpected since this is the least developed part of our County.

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Look also at the state of our air quality. Our decades of growth have outpaced improvements to our infrastructure such as roads and adequate mass transit, Mecklenburg County's air quality – as did that of the surrounding region – declined to a state where we are frequently out of compliance with federal ozone and carbon monoxide requirements. Why? Partially because we have an average of over 20,000,000 vehicles miles driven each and every day in Mecklenburg County alone. Partially because we have a great need for regional smarter growth policies including provisions for mass transit. Partially because our industries continue to emit pollutants that go into the formation of ground level ozone. But most importantly because we need to change our commuter culture.

However, there are environmental bright spots on the horizon. Realizing the importance of our surface water quality to our health and quality of life, we have adopted and are implementing our Surface Water Improvements and Management plan. It is designed to maintain the good quality of some of our streams and improve the quality in others. This along with improvements in stormwater management and realizations that we need to protect buffers along streams and lakes, often through conversion of creekside areas into greenways, will help to improve the quality of water in our creeks – and thus improve one of the basic amenities of a good quality of life for the region.

This past year, we also began a new "Smart Growth Initiative" through which we hope to begin developing the community's vision of what it means to "grow smart." This Smart Growth Roundtable will help public officials and the community as a whole grapple with growth.

Our Smart Growth Initiative must consider both the forest and the trees. It must look at growth issues from an overall perspective; in other words, "How will a decision, or lack of a decision, affect the entire community?" For example, if we increase the number of homes or residential units built on each acre of land, how would that affect school crowding, water pressure, traffic congestion, mass transit use, housing availability, property values, air and water pollution, the property tax rate, or quality of life?

We turn to the Smart Growth Roundtable to help us set priorities and seek solutions. It will build on existing policies and plans to sharpen our focus. Existing blueprints for growth will undergo scrutiny. The Roundtable will guide us as leaders, businesspeople and citizens to encourage wise growth and economic vitality that improves – yet does not overwhelm – our community's outstanding quality of life. Activities such as this and others will help us envision the future, plan for the future, prepare for the future and see new avenues for protecting the state of Mecklenburg County's environment.

My grandfather understood that he and his land were partners. He planted, cultivated, nurtured and harvested his crops, knowing that his family's health and well being depended on wise use of his land and God-given resources. In the same way, Mecklenburg County residents are partners with our land. Few of us work the soil to feed our families and pay our bills. But we realize that wise use of our land and natural resources, in other words "Smart Growth," is essential for our personal and our community's quality of life and economic security.



H. Parks Helms
Chairman, Board of County Commissioners

Local Regionalism

Steve Weber
Chairman, Mecklenburg County
Environmental Protection Commission

When I was appointed chairman of the Mecklenburg County Environmental Protection Commission ("EPC") by the Board of County Commissioners ("BOCC") in 1999, I took a look back at the charter that created the EPC, and that governs the EPC today. The 1988 charter lists seven basic functions of the EPC: (1) to continually study and review the County environmental protection program and to recommend County policies and changes whenever and wherever appropriate; (2) to continually study methods to protect the community from elements that could adversely affect the environment; (3) to continually evaluate methods of waste disposal and make recommendations relating to new advances in the technology of disposal and reclamation of wastes; (4) to participate in the appeals review process; (5) to review and make recommendations on the annual budget; (6) to provide cooperation and coordination with state, federal, and local municipalities in Mecklenburg County; and (7) to generally interpret the environmental protection program and encourage the understanding and attainment of the program's objectives.

The EPC's seven functions raise two important points for the year 2000 and beyond. First, each function requires activity. In seven paragraphs, the charter empowers the EPC to "continually study," to "continually evaluate," to "review and make recommendations," to "participate," to "provide cooperation and coordination," to "interpret", and to "encourage." This is a tall order. The EPC is not limited to acting only when the BOCC seeks the EPC's advice. Rather, the EPC was created to have a proactive role in the community as the environmental eyes and ears of the County. We have an independent duty to stay abreast of important issues that affect the County environmentally and economically (these two are inextricably linked).

Second, the EPC's sixth function charter touches on a "hot-button" issue in Mecklenburg and other parts of the country, that of regionalism. The EPC is specifically charged with providing cooperation and coordination with state and federal agencies as well as the municipalities in Mecklenburg. This is a good first step, but it does not go far enough.

Environmental issues affecting the Carolinas point to the need for a regional environmental focus. Many of the most pressing environmental concerns are not governed by political boundaries. For example Mecklenburg County's ozone problems result, in part, from pollutants moving into Mecklenburg from other jurisdictions by wind and other weather patterns. Similarly, citizens of upstate South Carolina are directly affected by what Mecklenburg residents discharge into our creeks and lakes.

The EPC is, in my opinion, uniquely poised to assist in this movement toward regionalism. What "regionalism" is depends on your perspective. The Voice & Choices group implicitly defines regionalism as a fourteen county region of the North and South Carolina Piedmont. While this is certainly true, my view of regionalism is much more narrow. Regionalism begins inside the borders of Mecklenburg County. We cannot cooperate and coordinate on a broad regional level until we cooperate and coordinate locally. Mecklenburg County, for example, includes Charlotte and six smaller municipalities. We cannot begin to look beyond Mecklenburg until we coordinate among jurisdictions in the County.

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I offer two possible suggestions for beginning the pursuit of regionalism locally. First, I would suggest offering the local jurisdictions a greater voice on the EPC and other environmental boards. While the EPC has residents in various parts of Mecklenburg, all of its members except one have a Charlotte address. I would guess this to be true for the other County advisory boards as well. Expanding the voice of citizens of the local towns on the fringes of Mecklenburg can only have a positive affect on the environment and on the goal of true regionalism.

Second, it may be helpful consider if any of the scattered citizen advisory boards in Mecklenburg should bundle their efforts toward common goals. The EPC studies environmental issues generally while other boards such as the Waste Management Advisory Board grapple with very specific environmental concerns. Other boards such as the Storm Water Advisory Committee, the Park and Recreation Commission, the lake marine commissions, and others also consider environmental issues. The problems and issues these boards study overlap considerably. If our goal is to begin to approach the environment consistently at the local level and ultimately on a regional basis, our advisory boards should coordinate with one another on common issues.

In bringing these various boards to the table, we must, of course, strike a balance between the two competing adages, "two heads are better than one" and "too many cooks spoil the soup." If a balance is struck, however, and the various boards are able to forge a common path, Mecklenburg then may be better prepared to tackle a broader area that is generally considered to be the "region."

There is no denying that Mecklenburg is the hub in the regional wheel. In this stead, Mecklenburg has the exciting opportunity to incite the region into action environmentally. Environmental efforts are taking place across the region. We in Mecklenburg need to act locally and think regionally. We need to act locally by maintaining our obligations to our local environment and marshaling our forces to expand to a broader area. We need to think regionally by looking to tap into the similar efforts taking place throughout the region. Our efforts here, in conjunction with the work taking place by our neighbors, can become a regional environmental collaborative that brings consistency and true change in the region.

The EPC intends diligently examine the local environmental issues in Mecklenburg in the year 2000 and beyond. I am hopeful that we, as a commission, can examine these local issues through regional spectacles.