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Big, comprehensive plan in Town of Davidson's future

By Heather Somerville

Sometimes, a town must take a step back before it can move forward.

When the town is Davidson, sometimes the step may be a little off to the side as well.

The quirky, north Mecklenburg college town with a mind of its own is embarking on another of its one-of-a-kind adventures over the next year or so as staff and outside consultants work to draft the town's first comprehensive plan.

The Davidson Comprehensive Plan uses a novel approach to small-town planning by taking a comprehensive view of Davidson and assessing town-wide land use and growth management. Most local planning efforts look at specific areas in town to determine the best land use or development of, say, a neighborhood, or contiguous area. The Davidson plan will produce a portrait of how Davidson wants to look and function as one unit when it reaches build out. Figuring out just what that means will require stepping back a bit to obtain the required, long-range view.

"We haven't taken a step back and looked at where we'll be at the end of the day," says Davidson planning director Kris Krider. "It (the comprehensive plan) will really look at how we are keeping up with growth and maintaining a certain quality of life for the future."

To draft the comprehensive plan, town planners will work with Rhodeside & Harwell, the consultants hired to assist with the project, and address environmental concerns such as sustainable building, open space management, tree canopy preservation and watershed protection. The plan will also address growth management policies such as population density and development boundaries.

All of this planning will, says Krider, enable the town to decide what Davidson's build-out should be. Build-out, says Krider, is not defined by a set population or year, but rather it is the point at which the town has subdivided or preserved all its vacant land, and can still adequately serve its population. By determining what its build-out should be, the town can plan ahead for transportation needs, road infrastructure, police and fire services, parks and recreation needs, libraries, public art and schools that will all be needed to maintain quality of life in Davidson when the town reaches that milestone.

The planning process, which should take about 18 months, will involve three levels of public involvement, including stakeholder groups, business and organization representatives and the general public. Krider says town staff will start public outreach sometime in November. The entire planning process will cost about \$100,000, \$50,000 of which has been set aside in the town's fiscal year 2009 budget.

Krider says town staff has talked about drafting a comprehensive town plan for the last five years. Davidson does have ordinances in place that guide the execution of new development, but Krider says the ordinances do not allow for a town-wide vision the way the comprehensive plan does. And although about 70 percent of the town has

already been planned through small area and site-specific plans, the comprehensive plan will fill in the gaps as well as guide all small area and district plans the town creates in the future.

"If it is done well, the comprehensive plan will be relevant for many years," says Krider.

Davidson is the first of the north Mecklenburg communities to draft a town comprehensive plan. Huntersville has a community plan -- which establishes recommendations for a very broad vision of the town -- which it uses along with a multiple area plans and a zoning map to guide development patterns in town. Cornelius has a number of small area plans for the downtown area and various neighborhoods and private developments. Charlotte does have a city-wide comprehensive plan; however, given the city's size and density, city planners rely more heavily on district plans for guidance, one of which could easily encompass a land area equivalent to the entire town of Davidson.

Krider says town planners have studied Charlotte's comprehensive plan, as well as plans in Salisbury, Gastonia and Rock Hill. Those are the closest cities with similar plans. However, Krider says the comprehensive plans from college communities like Chapel Hill, Blacksburg, Va., and Wellesley, Mass., may serve as better guides for Davidson to follow.

Information and updates about the comprehensive plan will be available on the town's Web site, www.ci.davidson.nc.us.