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City planners turn their focus to Catawba area

By Andrew Batten

As more homes go up and more moving vans stream into the Mountain Island area, Charlotte-Mecklenburg planners are developing a plan to control future growth. Planners are in the beginning the early stages of developing the Catawba Area Plan that will focus on a 4,800-acre area in western Mecklenburg County

The area of the plan is bounded by Interstate 85 to the south, Interstate 485 to the east, Mt. Holly-Huntersville Road to the north and the Catawba River to the west.

While the area might be one of the lesser-developed places in the county, it won't stay like that for long. Charlotte-based Crosland Development is already at work on Whitewater, a massive, 778-acre residential/retail development just off Belmeade Road in the northern part of the planning area. Additionally, a group of developers and local officials are proposing that a portion the land around the Catawba River, that includes the Catawba Area Plan location be turned into a official "river district," an area where the focus will be on environmentally friendly developments, ensuring the river's future health and providing unique recreational opportunities. They also hope, of course, it will bring more people.

With growth on the horizon, Wendy Martz of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Planning Department says the time is ripe for developing a plan for the area.

"We have some growth and development pressures out there," Martz says. "We have the new whitewater center and coming up with a comprehensive look seemed to make sense for doing a new plan."

Area plans allow a framework for growth and development for 20 to 50 years into the future. Area plans don't dictate the kind of development that will wind in a particular area or on a particular parcel, but they do serve as policy guides for city officials when they're asked to make land use and zoning decisions. One criteria that the Charlotte City Council can legally use to turn down a proposed rezoning or site plan is that it doesn't conform to existing area plans.

Area plans typically address land use and zoning, transportation, environment, infrastructure, economic development and community appearance.

The department is currently in the process of introducing what exactly an area plan is and distinguishing between what a plan can and cannot do.

"I think in the public's mind they might think that an area plan is legally binding and it's not," Martz says. "A zone is legally binding. The plan might recommend zone changes but that is only a recommendation."

The first stage of producing a plan is figuring out what kind of development area residents want when it comes knocking on their door. The department has sent a survey to 1,800 property owners in the area asking them what kind of land uses they would like to see in the future, what they do or do not like about the area and what

transportation issues concern them most.

City staff has also completed two public meetings at which planning staff showed slides illustrating different land uses from neighborhood centers and stand-alone retail stores, shopping malls, parks, schools and hospitals. Attendees were asked to indicate on a survey how desirable those different types of land uses were.

Area residents are also able to complete an online survey by visiting www.charmeck.org/Departments/Planning/Area+Planning/Plans/home.htm and clicking on Catawba Area Plan on the left side of the screen.

Martz says input from the public is the most important part of the planning process.

"We want to this plan to reflect as much as possible the preferences of the community and that's the whole purpose of the survey."

After going through the public comments the department will begin meeting with a citizen advisory group over the next six to eight months to hammer down the specifics of the plan. Martz says a draft of the plan will be ready by the spring of 2009.