

In 25 years, county's green could disappear Land bonds for greenways?

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Mecklenburg County is on pace to have all of its available land developed within 25 years, according to a new UNC Charlotte study.

The 24-county project on new urban growth, released Tuesday, paints the clearest picture yet of how population increases and commercial development are changing the region.

The study area, which ran from the Blue Ridge Mountains to Rockingham, lost more than 100 acres daily to development

from 1976 through 2006, the study found. That amounts to an area of about 75 football fields each day.

Development during that period increased by 850 percent, and, according to the study, it is not slowing down.

The Open Space Protection Collaborative, which funded the study, is a group of six regional land-preservation organizations. Group officials plan to use the study to target areas where their efforts to save green space will have the greatest effect. The group hopes to also raise awareness about the issue.

"Economic development is good, but what would New York City be like without Central Park," said Dave Cable, executive director of the Catawba Lands Conservancy. "If they hadn't planned for it, that space would have been used."

Previous attempts to mark the region's growth used census information, which tracks population increases but does not depict development as accurately.

The UNCC study used satellite images to map the progression of impervious land, such as roads and buildings.

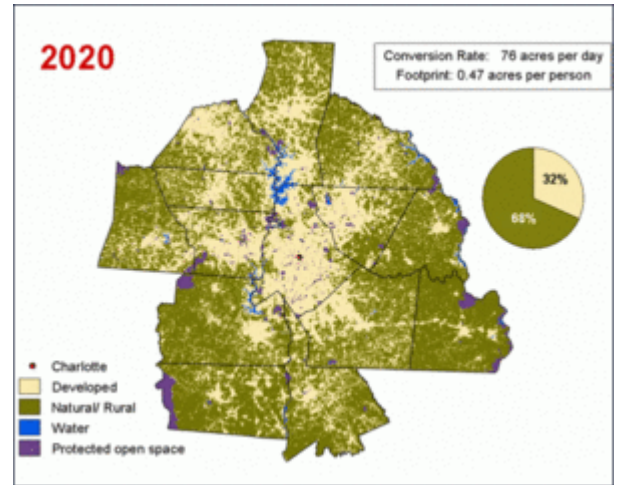
Researchers looked at quarter-acre segments. Parcels with greater than 25 percent of land mass covered by impervious surfaces were considered developed. Specialty areas, such as golf courses, were also considered developed.

Analysts used population-data factors -- such as available roads, proximity to urban centers and other development -- to predict future growth.

"This is one of the reasons I have been pushing for land bonds," said Jennifer Roberts, chairman of the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners. "Most of the land we need, we need to get in the next five years. Otherwise, the large parcels will be gone."

Roberts backed a \$35 million land bond last year. The money from that bond went toward greenways and water quality.

According to census numbers, more than 66,000 people moved to the Charlotte-Gastonia-Concord metro area last year, the sixth-largest increase in the nation. A recent county survey found that adding trails was a top recreational concern for residents.



- [Interactive Map: Goodbye to green](#)
- [Database: Search Census data for U.S. counties](#)

The county has spent about \$45 million to acquire land and build 12 official greenways and more than 23 miles of trail.

Seven more are in the planning stages.

Mecklenburg County does not require developers to set aside green space for typical subdivisions, but offers special zoning for builders who agree to do so.

The UNCC study found that 58 percent of Mecklenburg was developed by 2006, up from just 13 percent in 1976. Analysts said that, at the current pace, the county would be 97 percent developed by 2030.

"And if land is not protected before then, it will all be developed within 25 years," said Douglas Shoemaker, UNCC research analyst and lead author of the study.

Mecklenburg may be the county growing fastest, but many of its neighbors face similar issues.

In 1976 only 2 percent of Cabarrus County was developed, the study found. That number leapt to 28 percent by 2006. It is expected to be 68 percent by 2030.

The same pattern is true for Union County, which was the nation's seventh-fastest-growing large county last year.

Development in Union grew from 1 percent in 1976 to 20 percent in 2006 and should reach 35 percent by 2030.

"Man has inhabited this region for about 15,000 years, and, in a 30-year period of time, we have drastically changed it," said Jason Walser, of Salisbury-based LandTrust for Central North Carolina.

Check it out

The study can be found at www.gis.uncc.edu/ospc.

<http://www.charlotte.com/109/story/552823.html>