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Western North Carolina Growth: Focus on Watauga County

A top priority in our western North Carolina work is Watauga County. With its popular communities of Boone, Blowing Rock and Banner Elk, it is one of the hottest spots for second homes, vacation homes and other development. One gated mountaintop development now being planned will eventually hold a population larger than Boone and Banner Elk combined.

SEL C is pursuing a comprehensive strategy that entails legal, legislative and regulatory approaches to rein in unsustainable growth and discourage steep-slope development. We also are crafting land use ordinances and policies for Watauga County that will provide a model for other mountain counties.

Informing the Public

Our work is focused on the revision of Watauga County's comprehensive growth plan. The planning process gives us a unique opportunity to help shape fundamental decisions about how and where growth will occur in the county. Using our in-house GIS analysis and our expertise on local and state land use policies, we are providing valuable information and alternatives to the county commissioners during this process. Four Good Ideas

Currently, we are crafting four proposals which would:

- Encourage developers to do a thorough analysis of the environmental impacts of any major project;

- Discourage development in ecologically sensitive areas and preserve a network of open community space in the rural areas of the county;

- Encourage major developments to not put undue strain on county infrastructure or require expansion of infrastructure faster than is planned by the county; and

- Constrain development on the county's mountainsides based on landslide hazard data.

Analyzing Facts, Warning Citizens

SEL C is coordinating with geologists at the North Carolina Geological Survey on the preparation and release of landslide hazard maps for Watauga County, only the second county for which such maps will be available. These maps reveal that many areas of the county's rugged terrain are at high risk for landslides and other slope failures.

We are sharing the landslide hazard maps and data with Watauga County planners, other officials, and members of the press and the community. Details include:

- The number of existing homes in landslide hazard areas, and the number of homes rebuilt in the tracks of historic slides;

- The average value of new homes constructed on hazardous sites;

- The number of parcels in landslide hazard areas that have been subdivided but not yet built; and

- The percentage of homes in hazardous areas sold to out-of-state buyers or purchased as second homes.

Watauga County as a Model

SEL C is assisting community groups to gather and analyze a variety of data related to steep-slope hazards, water resources and other issues. This information will help decision makers better understand the consequences of current development patterns and determine the best land use practices to ensure environmentally sustainable growth. The effort in Watauga County will provide an advocacy model for other mountain counties as SEL C works to conserve western North Carolina's natural resources.

SEL C's work in Watauga County is made possible in part by the [Clabough Foundation](#).

Related background information:

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