

# New Issues and Opportunities Report



Prepared by:  
**Clarion Associates**  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **WHAT IS IMAGINE PENDER 2050?**

In the spring of 2024, Pender County launched an exciting effort to imagine the future of Pender County. Shaped by community feedback, the Imagine Pender 2050 Comprehensive Land Use Plan will build a strong foundation for land use planning to envision and guide decision-making for the next twenty-five years in the County.

The Imagine Pender 2050 Comprehensive Land Use Plan is the planning process to create Pender County's new long-range policy document. The previously adopted plan can be found on the County's website.

### **WHAT IS A COMPREHENSIVE LAND USE PLAN?**

A comprehensive land use plan is a long-term guide that expresses the values and aspirations of a community. It is the broadest public policy document a community can create for its future physical development, considering the input of residents, businesses, and other stakeholders. It includes a vision statement about the future condition of the County; goals and desired policy outcomes for each of the plan topics; performance metrics to measure progress on a goal; and actions to achieve the goal. The plan is a tool to prepare for and manage change. It acts as a guide for decision-makers.

The plan is not a legally binding document, but it can serve as a foundation for budgeting decisions, zoning ordinance updates, infrastructure investments, and more.

## **ABOUT THE NEW ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES REPORT**

This report identifies new issues and opportunities based on vision and policy themes generated from stakeholder interviews, Steering Committee discussions, and inputs received through public engagement. The topics outlined in this document served as the foundation for policy discussions with County Staff, the Steering Committee, the Planning Board, and the Board of County Commissioners and ultimately will guide development of the new comprehensive plan.

### **Public Engagement Activities**

This document synthesizes feedback collected from:

1. Stakeholder interviews conducted during the summer of 2024 (Phase 1: Project Launch), identified in the list below;
2. Public feedback collected during Community Engagement Window #1, which was held in the fall of 2024; and
3. Steering Committee meetings conducted during the summer and fall of 2024 (Phases 1 and 2) of the project.

During the spring and summer of 2024, the Project Team conducted kickoff stakeholder interviews with elected, appointed, and staff representatives of the County along with other community partners.

For a detailed summary report of Community Engagement Window #1 and copies of Steering Committee meeting notes and presentations, please see the Pender County Planning and Community Development Department website.

## SUMMARY OF NEW ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The following list includes the planning themes that were generated from the collective inputs provided during the first three phases of Image Pender 2050. They provide guidance for developing the plan framework (vision themes, goals, performance metrics, policies, and actions).

- **Sustainable and Managed Growth:** Align utility expansion and land use planning to guide growth.
- **Expanded Economic Development:** Increase the acreage of land available for economic development opportunities and to promote a healthy fiscal balance of land uses. Harness the potential of cultural and historic resources found across the County.
- **Community Unity and Civic Engagement:** Continue to engage all members of the community in land use decision-making.
- **Supported Agricultural and Working Lands:** In partnership with landowners, use land use planning tools to support the viability of farming and agricultural businesses and maintain rural character.
- **Environmental Conservation and Preservation:** Protect water resources and reduce stormwater, drainage, and floodplain impacts county-wide.
- **Attainable Housing Choices:** Support the development of housing choices in strategic locations that provide new options for worker households.
- **Enhanced Quality of Life and Community Health:** Promote a high quality of life for Pender County residents and provide access to key amenities and important services.

The planning themes and new issues and opportunities will serve as a foundation for policy guidance and plan development.

## **SUSTAINABLE AND MANAGED GROWTH**

### **Issues**

- High population growth in recent years has spurred concerns about overburdened infrastructure, transportation, and services.
- Concerns that infrastructure (roads, schools, utilities, sewage, etc.) is not keeping pace with the rapid growth. Overcrowded schools are prominent issues as a result of growth.
- Residents in the western part of the county generally prefer rural living and have expressed resistance to growth out of fear that it might alter the rural character of the area or impact the existence of productive farms and farmland. However, some residents in the western part of the county support growth if it means increased amenities and services.
- Engagement from Pender 2.0 noted a need to prioritize reducing traffic congestion and increasing connectivity and managing development in coordination with these efforts. During engagement for Imagine Pender 2050, this was expanded upon to include aligning utility expansion with growth and managing infrastructure and other public services to adequately support growth.

### **Opportunities**

- Identifying appropriate places for balanced and intentional growth, coordinating investments in infrastructure, utilities, and services.
- Growth can increase housing, services, and amenities.
- Growth opportunities can include needed commercial (retail, economic development, and job creation) to keep tax dollars in Pender County.
- Improvements and adequate investment in infrastructure to manage flooding, stormwater, water/sewer, etc.
- Hampstead, Rocky Point, and Burgaw present opportunities for sustainable and balanced growth.

## **EXPANDED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

### **Issues**

- Need more opportunities for local and new businesses, such as commercial and industrial spaces (for example, along the US 421 corridor).
- The eastern part of the county has a higher concentration of grocery stores, restaurants, shopping areas, etc. Residents in western Pender travel to the eastern side or outside of Pender altogether to meet their needs.
- Community preference for supporting small, local businesses and discouraging businesses that are in abundance in the county, such as car washes, storage units, and smoke shops.

### **Opportunities**

- Expand opportunities for industrial and commercial development in areas where transportation networks and utilities already exist to support job growth and assist in balancing the tax base.
- Consider opportunities to provide economic development at key nodes/intersections where access to services exist.
- Encourage expanded opportunities in the sectors that support tourism in rural parts of the county (eastern and western). These include lodging, food & beverage, and recreation in agricultural and/or low-density residential areas where appropriate.
- Improve access to jobs in Pender County to reduce reliance on neighboring areas for employment.
- There are opportunities to continue to support local tourism, such as utilizing farms for farm stays, event spaces, and farm tours. There are also several parks in the area with cultural components, such as the Eleanor Roosevelt site in Penderlea or the Revolutionary War reenactments at Moores Creek National Battlefield.

## COMMUNITY UNITY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

### Issues

- The community would like to participate in land use decision-making and have a better understanding of planning processes.

### Opportunities

- Have regular communication with the community about land use planning implementation efforts.
- Provide a clear and transparent accounting of community engagement.

## SUPPORTED AGRICULTURAL AND WORKING LANDS

### Issues

- New development can threaten the loss of agricultural lands and rural community character.
- Agricultural lands and working lands are valued by the community, but more tools need to be leveraged to protect them.

### Opportunities

- Agritourism, farms, and the outdoor economy are important for tourists and residents alike and can provide economic benefits and support working lands preservation.
- Pender County's Voluntary Agriculture District (VAD) program could be expanded to include Enhanced Voluntary Agriculture District (EVAD).
- Provide incentives through the County's Unified Development Ordinance for development of conservation neighborhoods that trade more density or yield of residential units for the protection of a portion of the site as permanent open space.
- Include a "conservation toolbox" in the new land use plan.
- Explore options to promote the preservation of working farmland through a Farmland Preservation Plan.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AND PRESERVATION**

### **Issues**

- Drainage and flooding issues need to be mitigated, especially for new development. This idea was a priority in Pender 2.0 and was iterated by the community in Imagine Pender 2050 engagement efforts, especially for areas that have seen more development in recent years.
- More can be done to preserve important natural features like wetlands.
- Community members are greatly concerned about stormwater and drainage.

### **Opportunities**

- Protect and conserve green spaces and natural habitats, which the community highly values.
- Prevent development in sensitive areas like wetlands and mitigate development impacts in floodplains.

## **ATTAINABLE HOUSING CHOICES**

### **Issues**

- Community members are concerned about increases in the cost of living.
- Need for attainable housing (housing that meets the needs of a household, including the price point and features of the home and neighborhood) for worker households that struggle to find housing in Pender County and the greater region.

### **Opportunities**

- Continue to support the family-friendly environment of Pender County, which the community highly values, by allowing for a variety of housing choices in strategic locations that support a variety of needs.
- Consider diverse housing strategies that support attainable housing for those families working in service industries, tourism, and manufacturing. This includes opportunities for both home ownership and rentals.

## ENHANCED QUALITY OF LIFE AND COMMUNITY HEALTH

### Issues

- High-quality education is important, and the public education system needs to be prepared to accommodate growth in student population as housing development continues, including land availability and suitability for school facilities.
- Potential for more community and recreation opportunities in western Pender.
- Similar to what was heard during Pender 2.0, community members would like to see safe and expanded options for public transportation, sidewalks, and bike paths, where feasible. This is somewhat challenged by the lack of transportation focus and management by the County as roads are managed by NCDOT.
- Lack of public water access is a concern in terms of current parks and recreation offerings.
- Water quality, especially in western Pender, is a health and quality of life issue that residents would like support to address.
- Community members appreciate the peaceful, slower pace of country living and rural character that western Pender provides (in addition to its relative affordability).
- There is a strong sense of community and being close-knit.

### Opportunities

- Improved coordination between the County and Pender County Schools to appropriately plan for projected school enrollment and corresponding facilities needs.
- Access to amenities and resources for eastern and western Pender (restaurants, shopping, healthcare, parks, and recreation).
- Explore local, state, and federal grant funding or programs that could help with water quality issues, failing wells and septic tanks, or other systems for residents.

- Continue to invest in new and maintenance of existing community amenities near residential areas, such as parks, recreational spaces, and community centers.
- Support health at all stages of life (families with young children, adult services/aging population). While quality of life was mentioned during public engagement for Pender 2.0, the different quality of life needs across all stages of life was more of a focus in Imagine Pender 2050.
- Provide improved access to amenities necessary for health, such as healthcare, mental health services, emergency services, food, active outdoor recreation, and rural community centers.