

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



Pender County is a rapidly growing county in southeastern North Carolina that is shaped by its unique natural resources, agricultural lands, and economic opportunities. It is home to pristine beaches, game lands, and environmentally important water bodies, such as the Black River, Northeast Cape Fear River, Intracoastal Waterway, and Atlantic Ocean. Apart from these environmental assets, popular attractions include the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center and the Moores Creek National Battlefield. Community businesses and partnerships with cross-jurisdictional organizations like the Greater Topsail Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism and Wilmington Business Development advance economic development efforts in the area while ensuring conservation of important agricultural lands.

The County has experienced significant growth since the last Comprehensive Land Use Plan was adopted in 2018. Development in Pender County is representative of what is happening throughout much of coastal North Carolina, where traditionally rural, agrarian communities are experiencing growth pressure and rapid land use change. This growth has resulted in increased demands on the school system and transportation network as well as the need for more public infrastructure and recreational opportunities to serve new families and households. Over the coming decades, Pender County leaders will be continuously confronted with land use decisions that impact community members and business owners alike. This plan provides a framework for guiding County elected officials, citizens, administrators, and staff through those decisions.



WHAT IS A COMPREHENSIVE LAND USE PLAN?

A comprehensive land use plan is a long-term policy 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, created from the input of community members, businesses, the Plan Steering Committee, the Planning Board, and the Board of County Commissioners. It includes a set of **Vision Themes** about the community's aspirations for the future; **Goals** to express desired outcomes for each of the plan topics; **Policies** to guide decision-making; and implementation **Actions** to achieve the Goals. The Plan is a tool to help prepare for and manage change while engaging and analyzing the impacts on existing residents and businesses.

The Plan should be used by County leaders, staff, community members, private landowners, and developers as the basis for evaluating land development decisions and capital investment opportunities in alignment with the long-term community vision. Overall, the Plan seeks to convey community-based values that set the framework for guiding land

use and development decisions.

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. The Future Land Use Map, its associated land use categories, and the related policy guidance provide a roadmap for change in Pender County (see [Chapter 3 for the Future Land Use Map](#) and [Chapter 4 for the Goals and Policies](#)). Imagine Pender 2050 serves to meet the requirements of the Coastal Area Management Act (CAMA) and the state's requirements to administer zoning (NCGS 160D). For more information on these regulations, please see [Chapter 5: Implementation](#).

Assuming responsibility for the future is the first step in encouraging quality development that will help to ensure Pender County's long-term value as a place that fosters a safe, healthy, and vibrant community. Having a plan improves the County's ability to create more livable communities with significant environmental, ecological, social, recreational, and economic benefits. To that end, this Plan's Goals and Policies seek to provide a balance of private and public interests in a coordinated, cooperative, and fair manner.



ABOUT THE IMAGINE PENDER 2050 PROCESS

Set out in five phases, the process for developing the Plan first identified the new issues and opportunities that are different from the last comprehensive plan (Pender 2.0); evaluated existing conditions, trends, and future planning influences; drafted the Plan for community review; and finally, secured CAMA Plan certification and formal adoption by the Board of County Commissioners. This Plan was developed over a 20-month period that included several opportunities for community members to engage in the planning process. Eight Steering Committee meetings were held to guide development of the Plan. Ten community meetings were held throughout the county during Community Engagement Window #1 and five community meetings were held during Community Engagement Window #2. The Planning Board and the Board of County Commissioners were updated throughout the project.

Development of the Imagine Pender 2050 Comprehensive Land Use Plan required a detailed understanding of community aspirations, existing conditions, and current policy and planning influences. The Imagine Pender 2050 project team developed the following resources during this process. To make this document more easily navigable, these resources are available for download as standalone documents on the Pender County Planning & Community Development website. These documents are:

- Community Policy Profile:** This report, developed in Phase 2, summarizes land use policy guidance from Pender County plans and other policy documents. The report contains brief descriptions and highlights the key policy topics addressed in each plan or policy document.
- Fact Book:** Developed in Phase 3, the Fact Book provides a snapshot of existing conditions and projects future trends that provide a technical baseline for developing the Plan.



- **Planning Influences Report:** This report summarizes a locational analysis, sociodemographic dynamics, real estate market information, and economic opportunities.
- **Community Engagement Window #1 Summary Report:** This document provides a summary of the activities, objectives, and outcomes of Community Engagement Window #1, held during the fall of 2024.
- **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 during public engagement.
- **Land Use Alternative Report:** This document shares information about the baseline and alternative land use and development scenarios prepared as part of Phase 4. It included an assessment of potential growth outcomes and was utilized in the preparation of the Future Land Use Map.
- **Community Engagement Window #2 Summary Report:** This document provides a summary of the activities, objectives, and outcomes of Community Engagement Window #2, held during the spring of 2025 to review the draft Plan.

HOW TO READ THIS PLAN

The Imagine Pender 2050 Comprehensive Land Use Plan sets out policy guidance for land use decisions related to development proposals, conservation and preservation efforts, and other Pender County land use initiatives and programs. The policy guidance for the Imagine Pender 2050 Plan is organized through four components. These four components are described below:

- **Vision Themes** are the highest level of plan framework intended to express the ideal aspirations of the Plan.
- **Goals** express the desired outcomes related to each **planning topic**.



See a word in the body of the plan identified in **orange, bold text**? Check out the [Glossary in Appendix B](#) for a definition of the word.

- **Policies** are statements of commitment and direction toward achieving the Goals and describe positions to inform decision-making by the County.
- **Actions** identify specific implementation tasks that the County and its partners will take in the future to realize the Vision Themes, Goals, and Policies.

