

CHAPTER 2

COMMUNITY VISION

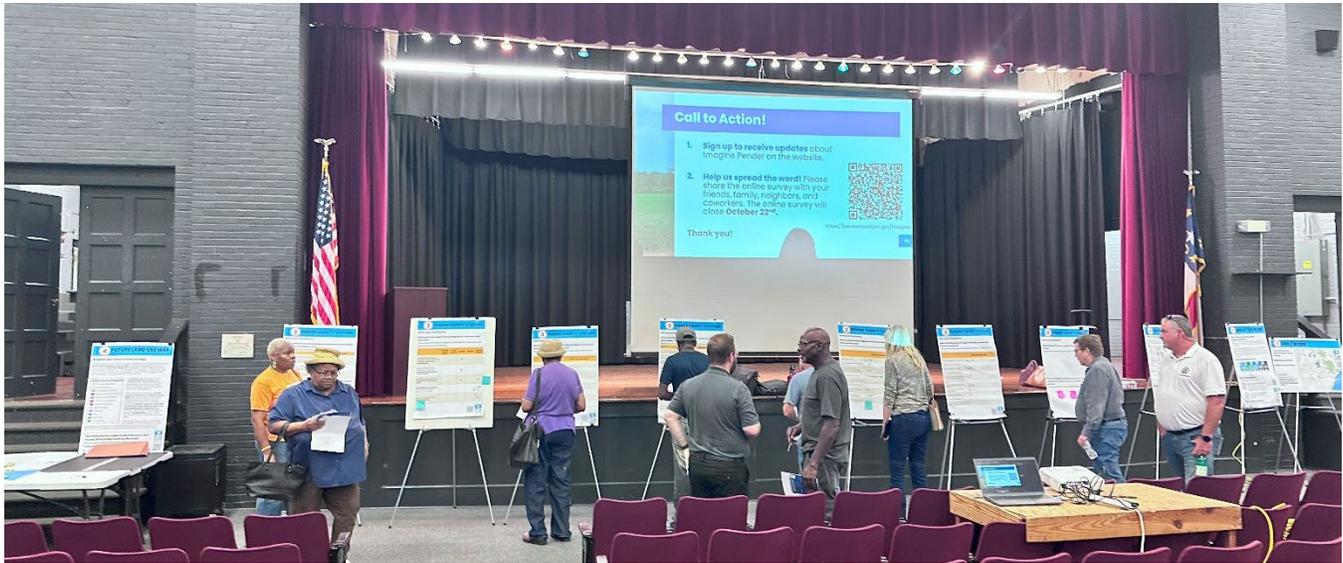


This chapter provides an overview of the community engagement efforts undertaken during the Imagine Pender 2050 comprehensive planning process and presents the first component of the plan framework, the Vision Themes. These Vision Themes serve as the guiding principles of the Plan.

Pender County is a unique place with diverse interests, ideas, and communities. Ensuring the new Comprehensive Land Use Plan reflects county-wide and area-specific priorities required extensive community input. This is why the planning process for Imagine Pender 2050 was shaped by community feedback; to build a strong foundation for land use planning to envision the next twenty-five years. Through the entire community engagement process, a broad representation of the County’s residents provided their feedback to help shape the future of Pender County. Beginning in June 2024 at the North Carolina Blueberry Festival in Burgaw, the project team spent a year publicizing the Plan and collecting information, thoughts, comments, visions, and feedback from over 1,600 residents of the County.

Building a thorough and unified community vision through the engagement process was accomplished by working with community members from all walks of life. By inviting open dialogue and encouraging honest conversation, the Imagine Pender 2050 project team gained a sense of how community members felt regarding the current state of the County and what the most important issues are when imagining Pender County in 2050.





COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Each member of the Pender County community is impacted in some way by land use decisions. The Imagine Pender 2050 comprehensive planning process provided a critical opportunity to shape the community's future and drive real action. The process focused on gathering the opinions of community members, elected officials, appointed officials, and various stakeholders by engaging with them on land use planning trends and influences so that they can make informed decisions about the County's future.

Community input is the foundation for the Plan's policy direction, and public feedback was documented throughout the project. The Imagine Pender 2050 planning process provided several key opportunities for public engagement.

Stakeholder Interviews

In Phase 1 of the project, community stakeholders were interviewed to learn more about long-range issues and opportunities that the Plan should address. This included Pender County staff, partner agencies, appointed officials, and elected officials. Information gathered at these meetings was then explored further to guide the direction of the Plan's development.

Imagine Pender 2050 Steering Committee

The Pender County Board of Commissioners appointed a resident-based steering committee to work with the project team and serve in an advisory role for development of the Plan. Comprised of 13 members, this Committee met throughout the project to

review work products and advise the project team on community engagement efforts. The Steering Committee was instrumental in helping to prepare a balanced plan that addresses the challenges and aspirations of the community.

Community Engagement Window #1

The first Community Engagement Window (CEW#1) was held in the fall of 2024. Pender County Planning & Community Development staff facilitated ten community meetings, conducted outreach at 15 different events, spoke with community groups and partners, and hosted an online survey over the course of seven weeks. This phase of engagement asked community members to identify aspirations for Pender County to be realized by the year 2050, which led to the vision and goals for the Plan. A total of 1,410 surveys were received and 177 people attended the in-person community meetings. Key takeaways from CEW#1 included the following:

- Participants want to see a more balanced approach to development that takes into consideration infrastructure, utilities, and services needed to serve existing and future development.
- Participants value the rural character, agricultural lands, and environmental assets of Pender County



- Participants frequently identified challenges with stormwater, flooding, and traffic.
- Participants want to see investments in accessible health services, **public transportation** (such as buses), environmental protection, and public amenities.

The Imagine Pender 2050 planning process included three engagement objectives: engagement satisfaction, representative engagement, and increased engagement. For increased engagement, the goals were to exceed the engagement totals from Pender 2.0, including the survey responses received at that time (1,374) and in person attendance (155). Both goals were achieved in CEW#1.

Community Engagement Window #2

The second Community Engagement Window (CEW#2) was held in the spring of 2025. Pender County Planning & Community Development staff facilitated five community meetings seeking feedback from the community regarding the draft Imagine Pender 2050 Comprehensive Land Use Plan. An online survey was also available from April 28 through June 6, 2025. This phase of engagement involved sharing the draft Plan with the public and asking community members to confirm the policy guidance included in the Plan. A total of 271 surveys were received and

approximately 128 people attended the in-person community meetings. Key takeaways from CEW#2 included the following:

- Participants strongly supported the Vision Themes as drafted.
- When asked to rank all nine Goals, the following were among the most highly ranked:
 - Sustainable and Managed Growth
 - Support Agricultural and Working Lands
 - Expanded Economic Opportunities
 - Environmental Conservation and Resilience
- Participants were either neutral about or supported the planning guidance shown in the Future Land Use Map and categories.
- Similar to CEW#1, participants wanted to see a more balanced approach to development that takes into consideration adequate infrastructure, utilities, and services.
- Similar to CEW#1, participants emphasized how they value the rural character, agricultural lands, and environmental assets of Pender County.
- Similar to CEW#1, participants emphasized challenges with stormwater, flooding, and traffic.

For more detailed information on the public participation process and the engagement objectives, please see the CEW#1 Summary Report and the CEW#2

Summary Report, available on the Pender County Planning & Community Development website.



COMMUNITY VISION THEMES

Built upon community feedback, the Vision Themes provide aspirational and guiding direction for the future of Pender County. Through the Imagine Pender 2050 community Vision Themes, land use planning and decision-making in the county will:

Coordinate Growth, Preservation, Conservation, and Infrastructure

Coordinate and support a balance of new residential and non-residential development in strategic growth areas, protect rural character and agricultural businesses outside of **growth areas**, and conserve sensitive and important natural areas. Support the provision of public **infrastructure** (roads, schools, parks, water, and wastewater) to adequately serve development in identified growth areas, while also addressing community needs related to health services, emergency services, and law enforcement.

Support Pender County's Fiscal Health

Secure a more fiscally sustainable future that reduces the tax burden of homeowners by leveraging the County's geographic position in the region to create new opportunities for the development and expansion of businesses and jobs in Pender County.

Maintain a High Quality of Life

Provide a high quality of life for residents and workers by proactively planning for **public services** and facilities (green space, parks, and historical, cultural, and recreational assets) that keep pace with the community's growth and development and efficiently leverage existing infrastructure and public resources.