



Draft

# Land Use Plan

03

June 09

Adopted on

Bessemer City is a small town with a unique character. A consistent grid of residential streets surrounds a downtown core, located at the base of the low but scenic Whetstone Mountain. A busy rail line divides downtown, but it serves as a reminder of the city's industrial base, which significantly contributes to the city's revenue.

Historically, these industrial uses were textile mills located along the rail but in the center of town where local residents could walk to work. More recently, industrial users have located primarily to the south of the city, between the downtown core and Highway I-85 reflecting the increased importance of truck traffic over rail. This location also limits the number of trucks coming into Bessemer City's core and the majority of its residential neighborhoods.

With industrial development to the south, and agricultural areas to the north, the town contains a diverse mix of land uses all within a walkable/bikable distance. Consequently, Bessemer City already has in place a sustainable model for future development.

The purpose of this Land Use Plan (LUP) is to provide a framework in which new growth contributes to that model, and compliments the small town character that the city's citizens admire. The LUP is the third step in a six-phase community planning process begun in Bessemer City in 2008. It is based on the goals and values cited in the Strategic Vision Plan and developed through an extensive public participation campaign that included a local steering committee, public meetings and through Wikiplanning™, an online tool used to increase civic engagement in the community planning process.

**Set aside Open Space and Maintain Watershed Protections**

**Require Conservation Development**

**Connect Community Assets with Trails**

**Build upon Catalyst Road Projects**

**Expand Industrial/Business Development Area**

**Focus Retail/Office Development in the Downtown Core**

**Plan for a Mixed-Use Redevelopment Area**

**Create a Historic District**

**Support Infill Housing**

**Create an Urban Growth Boundary**

This process has resulted in the city's first Future Land Use Plan, designed to protect significant environmental resources while supporting the City's continued economic vitality.

## Evolution of Existing Land Use Patterns in Bessemer City

Bessemer City grew into a small but self-sufficient textile town where local residents could walk from their homes to shop, school, church, recreation and work by way of the city's well-developed street grid. Mills were located in the center of town along the railroad tracks to allow for both the delivery of cotton and other raw materials, and then the export of the textiles the workers produced.

Over time, many industries became serviced more by trucks than rail, and understandably, many operations located to the edge of town where truck traffic was less disruptive. With the affordability of cars and inexpensive gas, people began to walk less and drive more. Like most American cities, Bessemer City began to grow at its edges. As the work places located further from the city center, so did housing, churches, schools and recreation centers.

However, in Bessemer City, that peripheral growth has been somewhat contained by I-85 to the south and agricultural fields to the north. A strong downtown core remains as do a variety of housing types served by three neighborhood schools and at least a dozen churches. Schools have been located outside the center, but they are still within walking distance for many residents.

To date, the Bessemer City Zoning Map and Ordinance (based on the Gaston County Unified Development Ordinance or UDO) have proven to be an excellent guide for development as they have helped to maintain a good mix of uses within the city, maintaining Bessemer City as a model for sustainable growth. There are however, new growth pressures that could potentially threaten the character of Bessemer City.

The Market Study cites the proposed Garden Parkway and its intersection with I-85 near Bessemer City as a major catalyst for future development. Prior to the economic recession of 2009, that new road was scheduled to be completed by 2015. Consequently, the timing of the project is in question, but its potential impact is not. The crossroads of these two major highways will be a highly attractive place for business and industry to locate.

In fact, the potential of the Garden Parkway project has already begun to be realized. Southridge Business Park has benefited with the development of the Hunter

Douglass and Dole properties. Further, plans are underway by the Gaston County Economic Development office to extend the road on which both these operations are located to open up additional land for future industrial development. This land will be needed sooner than later. The Market Study cites a need for 50 acres of land per year in Bessemer City to accommodate industrial/business growth. Once the Garden Parkway is completed, the number rises to 75 acres per year. As a frame of reference, the cleared area around the Dole plant is about 60 acres.

Another catalyst for growth is new housing starts. From 2000-2008, Bessemer saw less than 20 units of new housing per year. Given this limited number, the city should be very strategic as to where these new homes are allowed to be located. To address the city's value of having well-maintained properties, it would be preferable then, to locate the majority of these new homes within the city's grid, rather than on its outskirts. Rebuilding on the site of a dilapidated house or vacant mill would help rid the community of failing properties.

Retail and/or office use can also be catalysts for growth. The Market Study projects the need for 6,500 sq. ft. retail/office per year in the downtown area. That is the equivalent of three downtown shops/offices as most range from 2,000 – 4,500 on the first floor. It is important that any new retail/office growth is encouraged to locate in the downtown core. While doing relatively well now, the area could be devastated by a new development on the periphery of the city. One need look no further than Gastonia to see the negative impact of the development of outlying retail on the center of town.

Most Land Use Plans are intended to guide development over a ten-year period. This plan is proposed to accommodate growth in Bessemer City through 2020 based on the projections contained in the preceding Market Study. If economic conditions change substantially, then the Land Use Plan should be amended to address them. If not, then strategic decisions should be made, based on existing conditions. The downtown core still has a number of vacancies, and the area surrounding it contains some dilapidated homes and mostly vacant mill buildings. Until those properties are addressed, new development should be primarily focused on improving those sites.

## The Relationship between the Strategic Vision Plan, Market Study and the Land Use Plan

The purpose of the Bessemer City Land Use Plan is to guide future development in Bessemer City so that it reflects the values and goals in the Strategic Vision Plan.

The Community Vision from that Plan speaks to the importance of retaining Bessemer City's family-oriented small town character. To achieve that, it is important to recognize and promote the following:

- Local residents can live, work, learn, play and worship all within a reasonable walking distance;
- Local residents should be able to see and speak to people they know over and over again within the course of their daily living;
- There are clear limits to the city; and,
- There are abundant open spaces/natural areas.

The Bessemer City Land Use Plan also addresses the eight Core Values of the Strategic Plan by considering the Land Use ramifications of each.

### Core Value: Small Town Character

Open Space should be set aside and Conservation or Cluster Development should be required in areas zoned for residential development.

### Core Value: Family-Oriented

The city's abundant family-oriented recreational assets and memorable natural resources should be connected by the Whetstone Mountain Scenic Trail. The natural assets in the region should be linked to Bessemer City by the Carolina Thread Trail.

### Core Value: Broad Business Base

Catalyst Road Projects should be supported if they make additional land available for Industrial/Business Development. Additional land should be set aside for the expansion of the Industrial/Business area.

### Core Value: Thriving Central Business District

Until the central business district has no vacancies, retail development should be limited to the downtown core.

Mixed-Use Redevelopment Area  
Encourage Redevelopment w/Infill Housing

### Core Value: Well-Maintained Properties

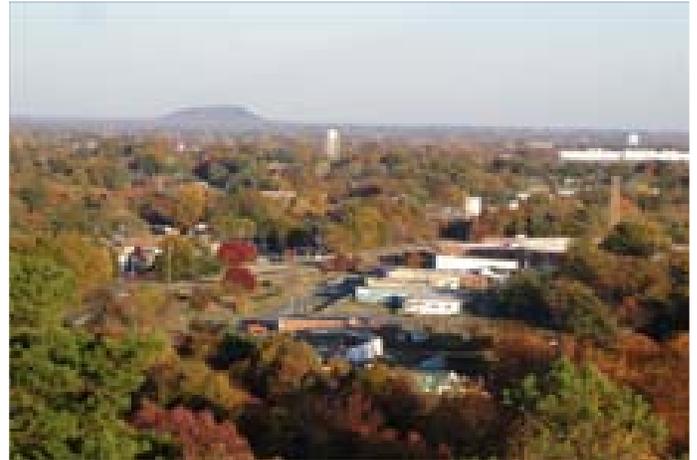
Gastonia Highway (NC 274), the area to the north of the Southridge Business Park Road should be reconceived as a mixed-use center. It is where some of the most unsightly properties in town are located.

### Core Values: Excellence in Education, Effective Public Safety and Adequate Public Utilities

All of these values would be improved if only limited new residential growth was allowed. They are all addressed in this Plan through the use of a Growth Boundary.

## LAND USE PLAN COMPONENTS

### 1. Set aside Open Space and Maintain Watershed Protections.



View of Bessemer City from Whetstone Mountain

Bessemer City is a very green city, due in large part to the area's rolling topography and the streams that wander through it. Areas that are wet, low or steep, in use for schools, recreation and cemeteries are set aside as open space on the Land Use Plan. Streams were drawn with 50-foot buffers, on each side, and these were also included within the Open Space designation.

Because of existing environmental regulations or simply the cost of development, very little of the area depicted as open space on the Bessemer City Land Use Plan would ever be developed. But by demarcating these areas on the Plan, local residents will be better able to recognize the natural and recreational assets of their city.

Watershed protection areas are also included on the Land Use Plan. Development in these areas is already limited by County regulations in an effort to protect the city's water supply.

## 2. Require Conservation Development.



Image of farmland threatened by development.

The area to the north and east of downtown but within the city's Extra-Territorial Jurisdiction (ETJ) is predominantly farms and forests, dotted with a few single-family homes. It is a particularly scenic area, acting as a green buffer to the city and contributing to Bessemer City's small town character. However, much of this area is currently zoned to allow for large lot subdivisions, and potentially the permanent loss of valuable open space.

This zoning is particularly troubling, from both a scenic and economic perspective. The farms and forests that surround Bessemer City retain the town's self-sustainability and help keep it from becoming yet another bedroom community. Further, these farms and forests have the potential to generate significant economic returns in terms of both their production and attraction. Whether they are the site of organic farms, dairies, pick-your-own fruit operations, stables, arenas or tree farms, these areas contribute to the economic diversity and vitality of Bessemer City and should be protected.

However, in protecting the land for ongoing and future farming activities, it is also important to protect the value of the land for the current landowners and to preserve their investment. Consequently, the Land Use Plan incorporates a Conservation Development (CD) Overlay District where Cluster Development would be required. The CD overlay is density neutral. Landowners would be allowed to develop their property as it is currently zoned. But to preserve the land's scenic and agriculture potential, at least half of the land would have to be retained as contiguous open space.

Further language will need to be developed to assure that the goals are achieved through the existing Zoning Plan and Ordinance.

## 3. Connect Community Assets with Trails.

Bessemer City has notable recreational assets for a community its size. When these are paired with the scenic and recreational attractions of Gaston County, there is much to be celebrated. However, few of these sites are linked either conceptually or physically, and the chance to experience them as an integrated system has yet to be realized.

The Whetstone Mountain Scenic Trail (WMST) will provide a physical link between the city's recreational attractions and through the city's extensive areas of open space. The inspiration for the WMST came from the Freedom Trail in Boston, where residents and visitors alike are led along a red line to the city's various historic sites. As the images included in this plan suggest, the Trail could be a very inexpensive way of promoting the city's assets and making them more visible to the residents they serve.



Freedom Trail, Boston, MA

The Carolina Thread Trail is a 500 mile, 15 county trail planned to link the communities surrounding Charlotte. City Council has already approved the location of the Trail through Bessemer City. The Land Use Plan slightly shifts that previously adopted location to reflect the Pedscape Plan being developed by the Centralina COG and to better integrate it with the WMST.

Both these trails will need a coordinated signage program to increase their visibility, safety and use.

#### 4. Build upon Catalyst Road Projects.



Image of what the Entranceway into the Industrial/Business Development Area could look like.

The Garden Parkway will bring significant development opportunities to the south side of Bessemer City as will the extension of the Southridge Parkway to both the east and west of the existing Southridge Business Park. City leaders should be as politically active as possible in encouraging the development of both roads in and near the City's borders. However, in doing so, the most important message to convey is the need for Edgewood Road to remain open to service industrial properties and as a gateway into Bessemer City.

In terms of the Southridge Parkway extension, Design Guidelines should be written by the city to assure that the design of the new street is as pedestrian/bike friendly as possible. Towards that end, language should also be included assuring an appropriate level of planting along the corridor, a build-to line for the location of buildings along the sites that front it, and for the protection of forested and wet areas through the designation of grade-to/no-build lines.

#### 5. Expand the Industrial/Business Development Area.



Illustration of an Office/Industrial Building within a wooded setting.

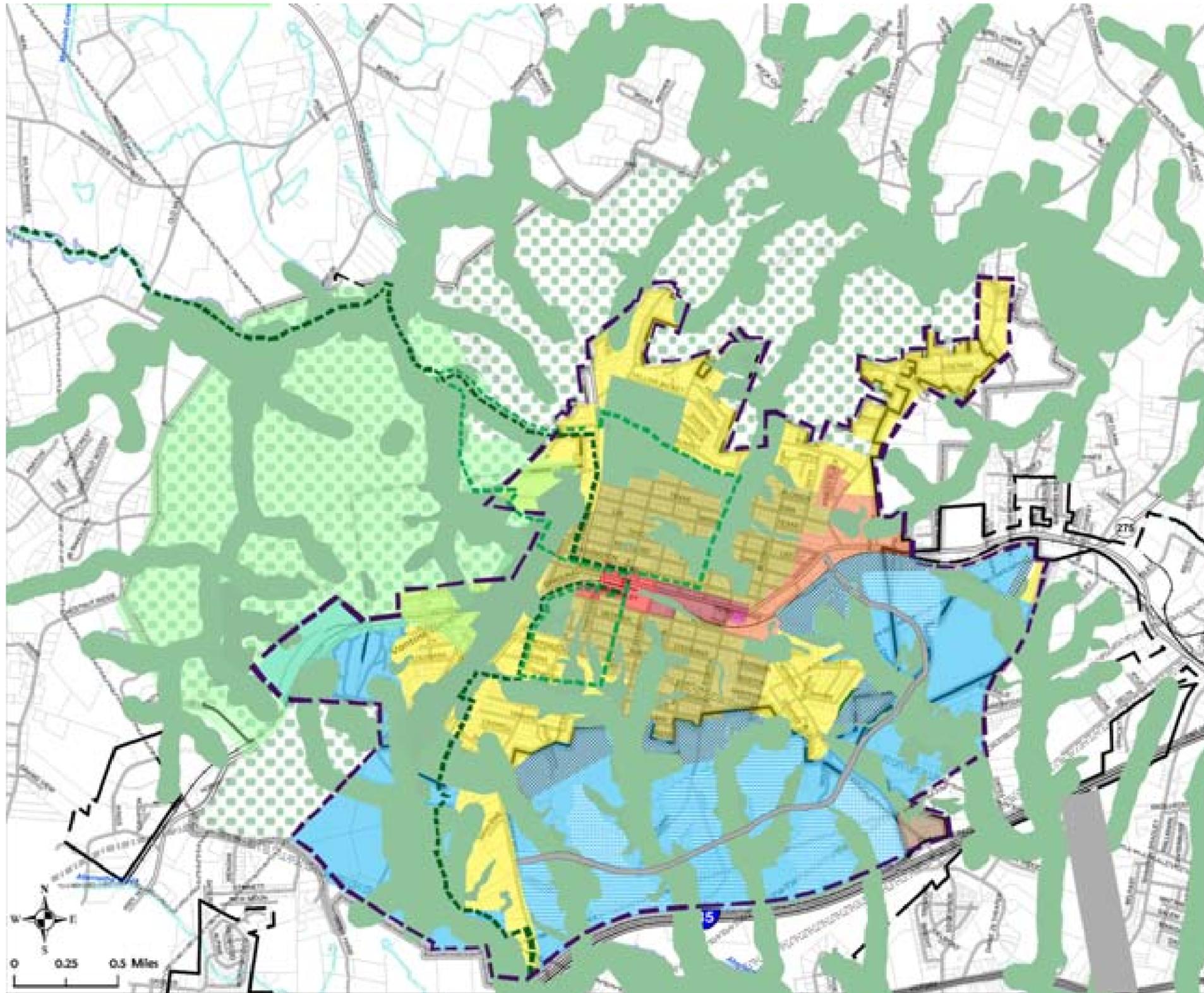
To the south, between I-85 and downtown, is a business development area. Currently, this area is predominantly in farms and woods, with the exception of a few single-family homes and mobile homes. The Land Use Plan recommends that this area be preserved for industrial uses per the City's Core Value of supporting a Broad Business Base. The hatched areas on the Plan represent probable building sites and each is separated from the existing residential neighborhood by a sizable buffer. Some of these building sites extend over a handful of existing homes. But in doing so, it is important to note that all of these landowners would retain the choice of retaining or selling their property. The Land Use Plan merely seeks to establish a vision for the future development of the city.

The expansion of the Industrial/ Business development Area of the city is important for its self-sustainability and economic well-being. The Market Study projected a need for 50 acres of land per year to meet demand and take advantage of the region's potential for industrial growth. Per the existing Zoning Map, there would only be land available for about 3-4 years of growth. Since this Land Use Plan is intended to accommodate growth until 2020, more land needs to be set aside for that potential growth. The land closest to I-85 and the Garden Parkway is ideal for this type of use, as it provides ready access to the Charlotte Douglas Airport and the interstate highway system while also keeping truck traffic away from the majority of Bessemer City's residential neighborhoods. Further, by limiting any future residential development in the Industrial/Business Development Area, the Land Use Plan seeks to limit conflicting land uses along the extended Southridge Parkway.

Bessemer City enjoys an enviable balance between the taxes and revenues paid by business/industry and local residents. Still, the city needs more jobs. Each day there is an outflow of workers. Consequently, industrial/business development should be emphasized over residential development.

The current balance of industry/business to the city's number of houses has kept taxes in check. But to significantly increase the number of homes, without increasing the number of industries, could create a need to raise taxes on existing residents. Unless carefully considered, new residential growth could end up costing existing residents more money. The Land Use Plan attempts to avoid that possibility by expanding the industrial/business area in advance of any significant residential growth proposed south of the city. Within the Industrial/Business Development Area, buildable areas have been delineated on the Land Use Map. These are areas with direct access to the Southridge Parkway extension that are generally 50+ acres in size and with

Land Use Plan Map



-  Open Space
-  Watershed Area
-  Conservation Development
-  Carolina Thread Trail
-  Whetstone Mountain Scenic Trail
-  New Roads
-  Industrial/Business Development Area
-  Industrial Buildable Area
-  Residential/Industrial Buffer
-  Downtown Retail/Office
-  East Downtown Office/Retail
-  Highway Retail
-  Mixed-Use Traditional Neighborhood Development
-  Historic District
-  Urban Residential
-  Medium Density Residential
-  Growth Boundary

Legend

soils and slopes suitable for industrial development. When located adjacent to existing residential neighborhoods, these buildable areas would be separated by a significant vegetated buffer.

### 6. Focus Retail/Office Development in the Downtown Core.



Angel's, Downtown Bessemer City, NC

A Core Value of the Strategic Vision plan was to maintain and promote “A Thriving Central Business District”. Currently, center city contains an enviable mix of markets, bars and restaurants, a gym, beauty salons, a drug store, shops, professional offices and city hall. All of these businesses are home grown and give the city a unique and authentic feel.

But there are still a number of vacancies in downtown and limited demand for future retail growth. The abandoned sites of a former and demolished mill and gas station further challenge the city, as do two underused mills located immediately adjacent to the city’s downtown core. Consequently, the Land Use Plan seeks to focus retail development towards the center of town in an area labeled Downtown Retail/Office rather than dispersed throughout or along the city’s periphery. It is hard to maintain relationships with neighbors when they are only seen driving down the highway on their way to a strip shopping center. In a small town, neighbors see and speak to each other when walking and shopping along the city’s streets. This Plan seeks to retain that opportunity in Bessemer City.

There is however, still need for some more automobile oriented retail/office uses. These would be accommodated in an area adjacent to the downtown core designated as

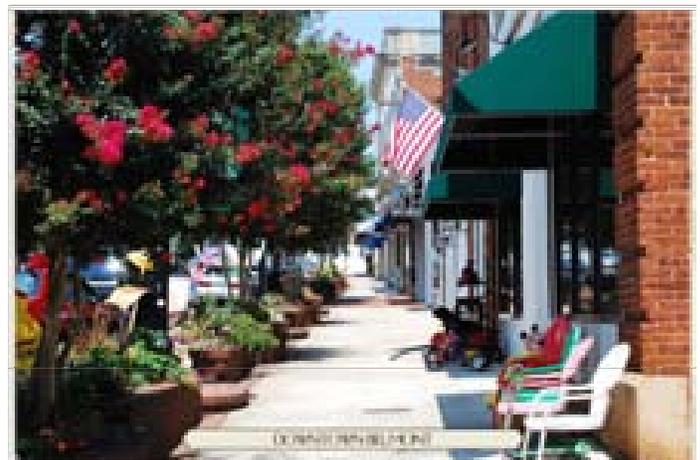
East Downtown Office/Retail . Many of these businesses were built away from the street and are separated from it with large parking lots. As it would be economically unfeasible for these businesses to rebuild new buildings in a more urban form so that they looked more like the downtown core, the alternative would be to build a streetscape that visually links to downtown and along the length of the corridor.

In all likelihood, the businesses attracted to this area would tend to be more service and office related than retail. Certainly, the vacant land on which the mill formerly was located is an ideal site for future office/retail development and is designated as such on the Land Use Plan.

The Garden Parkway will bring pressure for retail development to the south of Bessemer City. If allowed, it could have a detrimental effect on the downtown cores of both Bessemer City and Gastonia. Until both those cores are thriving, retail development should be discouraged in other areas of the city. Highway Retail Development should be limited to the only the area shown on the Land Use Map until the downtown and east downtown area are more fully developed.

In developing a Land Use Plan for Bessemer City, it is important to seek cooperation in its implementation from surrounding jurisdictions. Limiting retail on the Bessemer City side of the Garden Parkway will have little impact if it is allowed on the other side of the highway. But its limitation is imperative to the economic vitality of Bessemer City’s downtown.

### 7. Plan for a Mixed-Use Traditional Neighborhood Redevelopment Area.



Main Street, Downtown Belmont, NC

When the Southridge Parkway is extended from the Dole Plant and by the Advanced Drainage Systems Plant, it will

create a strong connection between Edgewood Road across Gastonia/274 Hwy. to East Maine Avenue. As such, the parkway will serve as a catalyst for redevelopment of the area surrounding this intersection. The Land Use Plan encourages a dramatic redevelopment of this area into a mixed-use neighborhood, creating a new growth center for the city.

This redistricting would potentially catalyze redevelopment of the large surface parking lots and strip shopping centers that now characterize the area. In their place, a more pedestrian friendly use of the land could arise that capitalized on the now adjacent and easily accessible Southridge Business Park with its expanding employment base.

To accomplish these changes, the area would need to be rezoned and Design Guidelines written to allow for increased density, while also requiring more urban building patterns and a mix of uses.

The area targeted for this redevelopment is labeled Mixed-Use Traditional Neighborhood Development on the Land Use Map.

### 8. Create a Historic District.



Sears & Roebuck Kit Houses, Bessemer City, NC

Along East Virginia Avenue, there are what are believed to be ten former Sears & Roebuck Kit Houses. Though not all of the houses are in the best condition, together, they are historically significant and should be protected. Placing them within a historic district could allow owners incentives for their rehabilitation.

Their history is part of a larger story. Sears Catalog Homes (sold as Sears Modern Homes) were ready-to-assemble houses sold through mail order by Sears Roebuck and Company. Over 70,000 of these were sold in North America between 1908 and 1940. Shipped via railroad boxcars, these kits included all the materials needed to build a house.

Today, some communities across the United States feature clusters of the houses as historical sites, although the vast majority is still used as private residences. Sears Homes can be found in Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina and a few have been found as far south as Florida and as far west as California. Clusters can be found in Arlington, Virginia, and the surrounding area with 100, Hopewell, Virginia, with 42 in the Crescent Hills neighborhood, and Downers Grove, Illinois, with 27. Aurora, Illinois has 136 documented Sears catalog homes giving it one of the largest concentrations in the country.

From a standpoint of economic development, it is important to note that Sears homes have become increasingly popular among history enthusiasts because of their sturdy structure, unusual architectural design concepts. A culture of Sears Modern Home seekers has even emerged in recent years, as individual buildings have been identified.

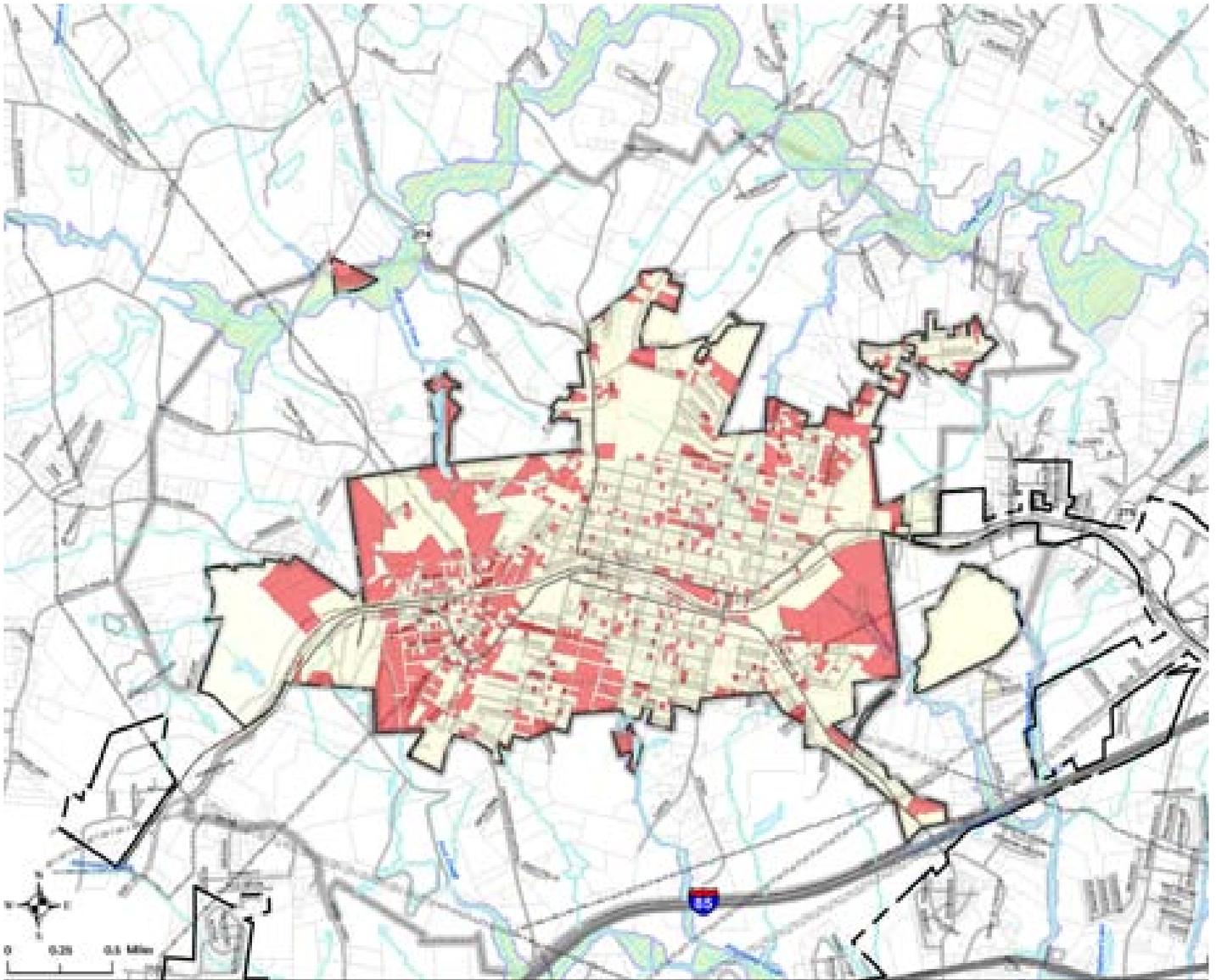
### 9. Support Infill Housing.



Saussy Burbank Neighborhood in McAdenville, NC

There is a significant amount of vacant land in Bessemer City either within the city limits or the ETJ. In addition, there are also a noticeable number of homes that are dilapidated to the point that it would be more economically feasible to demolish rather than rebuild them. These realities argue for more new infill development especially close to the downtown core where retail, services and offices would benefit from their adjacency and probable frequent use.

Density limits due to current zoning could limit future redevelopment. But rather than set a higher upper limit for the number of allowable units, the city should set qualitative limits through Design Guidelines. After determining the architectural DNA of the city to determine what the most important components are that make



Vacant Property Map. Vacant Properties shown in red.

buildings in Bessemer City distinct, the city should develop a code that is qualitatively distinct but density neutral. More often, what matters more than density is what a home looks like, how it faces the street, where the parking is located, what it is made of, the size and number of the windows and/or the presence of a front porch. Those are all components addressed in Design Guidelines. For the purposes of this Land Use Plan, there are two designations for infill development.

The first area is referred to on the Land Use Map as Urban Residential. In this area, some increased density to that now allowed by current zoning should be considered in exchange for meeting more qualitative standards of design.

The second area is labeled Medium Residential Area. These areas are outside the historic grid of the city and are usually characterized by larger lots. Since they are generally outside the distance people would walk to the downtown core, the current zoning designations seem appropriate.

### 10. Create an Urban Growth Boundary.

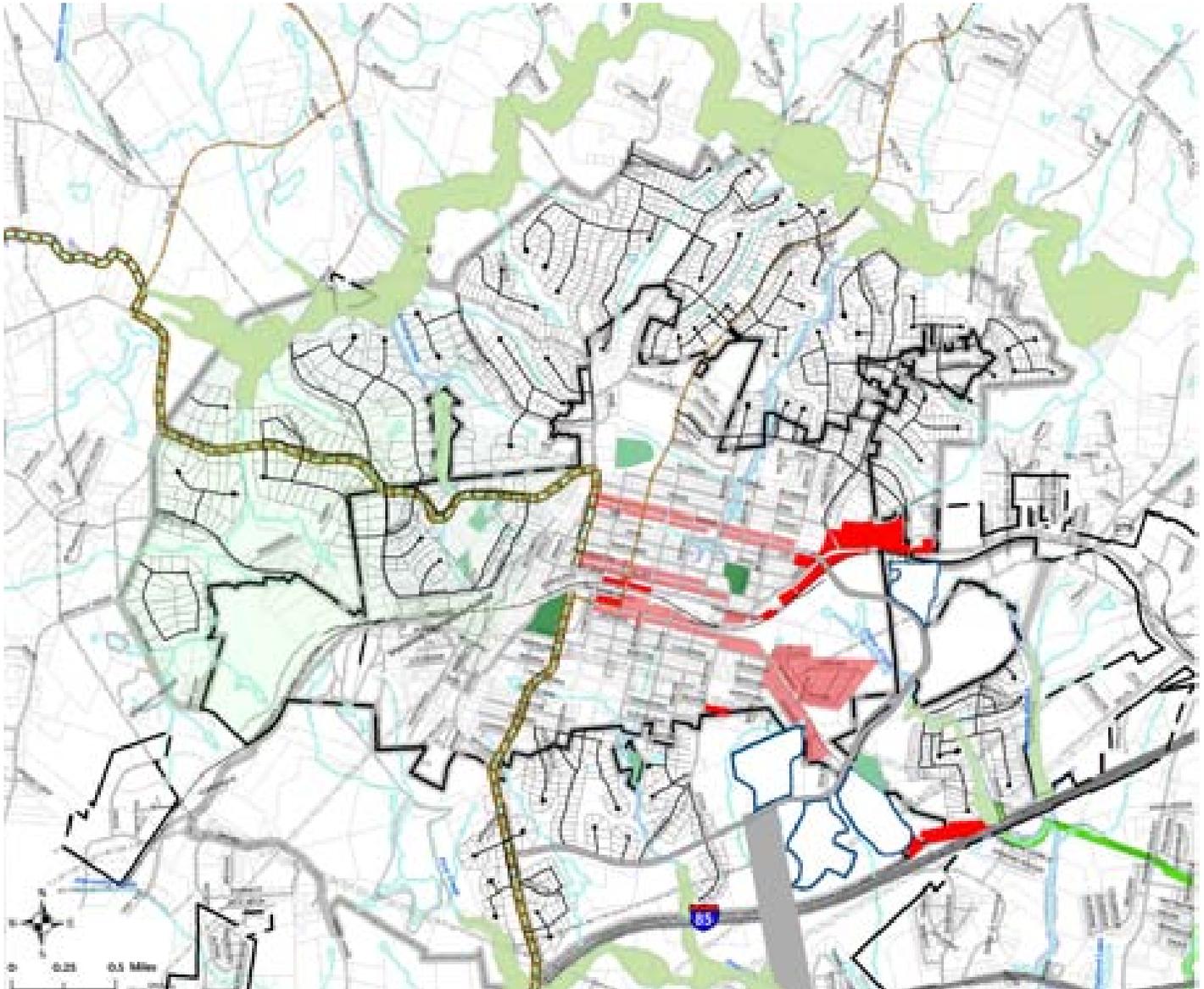
The Land Use Plan includes an Urban Growth Boundary (UGB). Its purpose is not to inhibit growth, but rather to control and direct it. The UGB would promote cost-effective provision of public services and infrastructure and form the basis for an Infrastructure Policy. It would encourage infill and more compact development, support neighborhood stability, and preserve green spaces and farmland.

## Land Use Planning Process

The Land Use Planning process used a scenario approach to help guide discussion on issues. After reviewing the regulatory framework and environmental conditions of the study area, a preliminary “Likely Future Land Use” scenario was illustrated to show how the city could be developed in today’s market, following current zoning and other regulations. The “Likely” scenario was NOT intended to depict specific development plans, but to illustrate the amount and type of development that is possible given

the existing Zoning Ordinance/Map and the environmental characteristics of the area. The preliminary scenario was critiqued by the Steering Committee, in a Public Meeting and online via Wikiplanning™, and was used as a guide for the Future Land Use Plan.

The “Likely Future Land Use” scenario depicts large areas of currently agricultural and forested land within the city limits and Extra Territorial Jurisdiction (ETJ) being converted to industrial and residential development. This development is limited as to specific locations by



### Legend

	Park		Carolina Thread Trail		Industry
	Cemetery/Sewer		Retail		New Residential Lots
	100 Year Flood Plain		New Roads		
	Watershed Area				

“Likely Land Use” Plan

the presence of wetlands and other natural constraints, so that the absolute amount of dwelling units or building floor area is not as great as existing zoning might permit. Nevertheless, this scenario illustrates that the City's zoning regulations would permit the city to be radically transformed by new residential growth.

The "Likely Future Land Use" was evaluated relative to the Community Vision and the eight Core Values identified in the Bessemer City Strategic Vision Plan. That critique revealed several significant areas of conflict:

**Core Value: Small Town Character**

Large lot residential development to the north of the city center could sprawl across the fields and forests that help define Bessemer City's character and result in the permanent loss of open space. City limits would no longer be discernable as Bessemer City and Gastonia would grow further together.

**Core Value: Family-Oriented**

Recreational assets would be strained to meet the demand of a growing population.

**Core Value: Broad Business Base**

Low-density residential development to the south of the city could cause conflicts in areas better suited for industrial growth.

**Core Value: Thriving Central Business District**

Retail development outside the city core could diminish the vitality of downtown and cause increased vacancies.

**Core Value: Well-Maintained Properties**

By allowing development on the periphery of the city, in-town neighborhoods would continue to be neglected in favor of easier development elsewhere.

**Core Values: Excellence in Education, Effective Public Safety and Adequate Public Utilities** would all be strained as new housing might not generate enough revenue for new schools, water, sewer & police to meet demand.

### Implementation

The Land Use Plan is a guide for future development. The Zoning Map and Ordinance are the tools used to implement this plan. Consequently, on adoption of this plan, the Zoning Map and Ordinance should be updated for consistency. Further, Design Guidelines for some specific areas outside the existing planning process should be considered especially for the Southridge Parkway and Industrial/Business Development Area and the proposed Mixed-Use Traditional Neighborhood Redevelopment Area.

## Bessemer City Community Planning 2008-2009:

### 01 Strategic Vision Plan

Where does Bessemer City want to go?

### 02 Market Study

Can we get there?

### 03 Land Use Plan

Where should different land uses go?

### 04 Gateways & Downtown Plans

How can we improve downtown and the roads leading to it?

### 05 Design Guidelines

What should growth look like?

### 06 Implementation Plan

How to get started...