

## TODAY'S VIEW - TOMORROW'S VISION

In order to plan effectively, it is essential that Highland County not only learn from past mistakes, but also take inventory of where it is today, versus where it would like to be in the future.

### **Highland County: Where We Are Today**

We see today that we reside in a beautiful, peaceful County that is well known for its natural environment and pastoral setting. We see an area rich in history that has evolved as the region has prospered. We see Highland County as a focal point for many diverse cultural and recreational activities, as well as tourism opportunities. We take pride in our small-town friendliness and our strong sense of community. We are pleased with the overall quality of our local government and the services it provides at relatively low costs.

Like most communities, we also see that we are in need of improvements. We want to ensure the continuation of quality education for our children, and are concerned about maintaining and paying for high quality education. Maintaining a healthy supply of local jobs is important to us so that our young people can remain in Highland if they desire. We are also concerned about the increasing number of families living below the poverty level, particularly single-parent headed households with young children. We see the need for more childcare and elderly care provisions within the County. We see the need to diversify our employment base, while maintaining agriculture/forestry as an important economic sector. We see that unmanaged growth can degrade our natural environment and rural character, but that a lack of growth can mean a loss of economic opportunity and stagnation. It is important that we achieve and maintain balance in our

economic and land use strategies. We see a great deal of energy in our County, and take pride in Highland as it exists today, as well as in what we want it to become.

### **Highland County: Where Tomorrow Will Lead**

According to community discussion and the 1997 "All For Highland" survey, four interrelated themes make up the "key success factors" for Highland's future. For some residents, one issue may stand out above the others. For some, this issue may be employment. For others, the overriding issue is the continued protection of the environment and the rural areas. For some, education is the basic foundation for being able to achieve everything else. It is this diversity of priorities that makes us a vital community. Regardless of our individual priorities, however, we have agreed on four themes. They are:

- Educational quality
- Economic opportunity
- Social well being
- Land use/environmental balance

Our challenge is to integrate and balance these themes so as to maintain a cohesive whole in our County. Although the purpose of this Comprehensive Plan is to focus on our immediate community, we acknowledge the importance of "thinking regionally" when planning for the above. The following provides a more in depth discussion of the four visioning themes.

### **EDUCATIONAL QUALITY**

Quality education has been a strength in our County and we seek to continue that.

We want to maintain overall quality while addressing the needs of different types of students – those going on to college and those going directly to jobs; the pre-schooler, the adult learner and the career changer; those who find learning to be difficult and those who need to be challenged. Keeping our public schools matched with our community's needs, and providing adequate funding for education are challenges now and will be in the future, as well. The majority of our local government budget will continue to go into education, so we must be certain that local educational programs continue to provide the County with significant returns, and are supportive of the economic and social elements of the County.

### **Strategic Questions**

In judging how effectively we are planning for our future, we will ask ourselves the following: Are we . . .

- challenging all learners to their highest potential?
- addressing the needs of both the college-bound and the job-bound student?
- addressing pre-school as well as adult learner needs?
- providing specialized services for those who need them?
- fully utilizing school facilities?
- linking public education at all levels with community needs (parents, employers, community groups)?
- continuing to pursue more educational funding assistance from the State?

### **ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

It is the condition of the overall economy that determines the availability of jobs, the size of the tax base, and the means by which individuals, families, businesses, and public institutions are able to afford the type of community we envision. Diversified economic growth will provide the County with

more stable jobs, better salaries, and more opportunity for our children to stay in the area to work. A diversified economy will contain a significant portion of community based and locally owned businesses, including agriculture and forestry, and arts and crafts. It will also keep the County well positioned for advances in information and other forms of technology.

### **Strategic Questions**

In judging how effectively we are planning for our future, we will ask ourselves the following: Are we . . .

- maintaining steady low unemployment?
- providing a mix of job opportunities for people of various skills/educational levels?
- maintaining a strong tax base?
- retaining and supporting existing businesses?
- encouraging new locally-owned, small business/industries?
- capitalizing on tourism and local involvement with the Virginia Western Highlands Travel Council?
- supporting traditional agricultural and forestal business?
- supporting the economic role of artisans and craftspeople?
- targeting those types of business/industry which can contribute the most to the area?
- participating in regional economic and job development/training approaches?

### **SOCIAL WELL BEING**

Since the residents of Highland County form the foundation of our society, providing them with the best possible quality of life is important. We want to maintain the high quality of social services currently available in Highland, and assist needy individuals in obtaining relief against poverty. We will continue to participate in funding assistance

programs that allow residents access to available, affordable housing. We want to provide our children with suitable daycare opportunities and our elderly residents with appropriate options for living out their lives in Highland County. In addition, we understand the importance of maintaining planned, age-appropriate activities that meet the social and recreational needs of our residents.

### **Strategic Questions**

In judging how effectively we are planning for our future, we will ask ourselves the following: Are we . . .

- increasing the number of households able to rise out of poverty?
- narrowing the gap between the least well off and the most well off households?
- increasing the supply of affordable housing?
- Providing appropriate social/recreational programs for the general public?
- addressing the needs of special populations?
- supporting cultural and recreational opportunities for all?

### **LAND USE/ENVIRONMENTAL BALANCE**

Carefully planned, balanced development is the phrase that may best summarize what we seek in the land use pattern of our community. We visualize strong, centralized cores (Monterey, McDowell, and perhaps other planned potential growth areas) that act as magnets within the County. Future development will evolve gradually from these cores, expanding their peripheries. By centralizing growth, surrounding rural areas can be left to remain predominantly green and open for farming, recreation, and conservation. Centralization will also allow us to retain the "small-town" atmosphere and sense of cohesion we now enjoy. We want any future growth to add to

our existing communities and neighborhoods and to strengthen, rather than degrade or compete with what already exists. Growing within the limits of our resources is a key concept in our attitudes about balancing development with the natural environment. Our valuable water resources, in particular, must be conserved and protected. Air quality, too, is essential to maintaining the health and beauty of our County. Beauty and aesthetics, including preservation of our historic character and natural resources, will be principles we apply in determining land use policies. We want Highland County to remain attractive and distinctive, and by protecting the County's high quality of life, we expect to attract visitors and new residents.

### **Strategic Questions**

In judging how effectively we are planning for our future, we will ask ourselves the following: Are we . . .

- protecting our historical and cultural heritage?
- strengthening our existing core areas?
- building on established areas?
- planning for potential future growth?
- protecting the rural areas and open space?
- maintaining a human scale?
- encouraging new growth to complement existing development?
- protecting our natural resources?
- improving the aesthetics and beauty of our community?
- maintaining those qualities that make us attractive to residents and visitors?
- working within the larger region?