



# MEMORANDUM

## Community Development Division

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To: Northampton County Board of Supervisors  
From: Kate Jones, PLA, Deputy Director of Community Development  
Anna Cherry, CFM, Planner II, Community Development  
Date: September 17, 2025  
Subject: Cluster Development – Open Space Considerations

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### INTRODUCTION

As the Board considers the text amendment allowing gradual density increases through changes to the Town Edge zoning districts, it is important to recognize that this effort should work towards implementing the goals of strategic growth outlined in the Comprehensive plan. This amendments should strike a balance between the need for development and the preservation of the County's rural character by focusing growth in designated areas while protecting valuable open space. Preserving at least 40% of the tract should remain a core requirement of the proposed Cluster Development, as preservation acts as a key incentive for permitting reduced lot sizes, potentially allowing lots at half the conventional size. The highlighted elements below are representative of the effort to balance both density and the preservation of rural character:

#### **Town Edge Pattern Area (Planning Elements / Land Use / Development Areas/ Page 40):**

The design principles below from the comprehensive plan, could be incorporated into the Town Edge (TE-1) district standards:

- Compact development patterns, including cluster and traditional neighborhood development are encouraged.
- Development should complement the scale, size, proportion, and character of adjacent Towns.
- Preservation, renovation, reuse, and adaptive use of existing structures is encouraged.
- Open space should be integrated and provide community spaces well-defined by streets and adjacent buildings.

#### **Strategies to Preserve Community Resources (Planning Elements/ Land Use /Environmental Constraints & Resources /Page 20):**

1. Preserve the County's rural character by directing development to areas within and adjacent to existing towns with existing or planned public utilities.
7. Evaluate residential rezoning requests for consistency with the Comprehensive Plan and fiscal impact on the community.\*

**\*Strategy 7 will allow the PC/BOS to determine if the rezoning request is consistent with the density guidelines for Town Edge Pattern areas identified in the Future Land Use Plan.**

**Strategies to Guide Growth (Planning Elements/ Land Use /Development & Growth /Page 21):**

9. Work cooperatively with the Towns to attract compatible and creative development and infill that contributes to their economic and community vitality.
  
14. Promote compact, mixed-use development within identified development areas and encourage innovative, inclusionary, pedestrian-oriented livable communities.

**Strategies to Align and Streamline Regulations (Planning Elements/ Land Use /Existing Regulations /Page 23):**

20. Review existing zoning ordinances and procedures and recommend changes necessary to align County ordinances with the Plan's concepts and goals.
  
21. Update land use regulations to provide clear and simplified requirements that promote economic development, enable creative housing choices, and protect sensitive resources.

**CLUSTER DEVELOPMENT**

As defined in the comprehensive plan, Cluster Development is a design concept that attempts to achieve balance between growth and preservation by grouping residential and/or commercial uses together in a suburban setting and preserving other rural settings. Note that cluster development is specifically identified as a strategy to guide growth<sup>1</sup> "Promote cluster development along Route 13 located in existing towns and town edges, implementing vehicular and pedestrian strategies that ensure safety and flow during peak seasons."

When considering cluster development, it is important to note the difference between the terms "lot size" and "density". Density refers to the total number of lots on a tract divided by the total area of the tract, which yields a measure of average "lots per acre". The size of individual lots on that tract may vary from the average density because some lots could be smaller than average, and others could be larger than average.

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<sup>1</sup> Your Northampton Comprehensive Plan, 2040

Also note the difference between "regular" or conventional lots and "cluster" lots. Regular lots are formed when a tract is divided into roughly uniform-sized lots of the minimum permitted lot size. Cluster lots are formed when the same number of lots are created, but each has a smaller area, so that they can be "clustered" onto a portion of the tract, leaving the remainder of the tract in open space or in lots that are larger than the average size. The following illustrations compare a conventional subdivision of "regular" lots and stormwater retention is the only breaks, with a clustered subdivision incorporating clustered lots with open space being preserved.

**Conventional Site Plan**



**Cluster Site Plan**



*Graphic courtesy of Sympoetica*

*Density is equal in both examples (this is customary with most cluster development designs)*

The following table compares the amount of open space benchmark communities are requiring to be preserved when incorporating clustered lots into their development options.

Community	Open space considerations
Accomack	A maximum of 60 percent of the total initial tract area may be established as cluster lots, as defined herein, including all internal roads, streets and alleys. The minimum lot area for each cluster lot is 6,000 square feet. The maximum lot area for each cluster lot is 30,000 square feet.
Spotsylvania	Residential (R-2 District: Cluster subdivision: 30% Open Space required

Community	Open space considerations
Prince William	<p>The portion of the gross acreage of a rural <i>cluster</i> development that is not developed as residential lots and as internal street(s) shall be provided as open space. The open space shall not be less than 50% of the gross acreage of the rural <i>cluster</i> development.</p> <p>Open space in rural <i>cluster</i> developments shall be laid out so as to provide adequate setbacks and other appropriate transitions to and from surrounding land uses.</p>
Hanover County	<p>Mandatory rural cluster to obtain maximum permitted density. Sixteen clustered lots are permitted per each 100 acres with a minimum of 70% open space required (slightly more than six acres per lot on average). If cluster is not used, minimum lot size/density is 10 acres per dwelling in the agricultural zone.</p>
Isle of Wight County	<p>Voluntary rural cluster with density incentives. In order to get a higher density than the restrictive agricultural zone allows (about 40 acres per lot), the owner may cluster the subdivision lots and achieve a density of 1 per 10 acres if 50% of the tract is preserved in open space, 1 per 8 acres if 60% is preserved, and 1 per 5 acres if 70% is preserved.</p>
Northampton	<p>§ 154.2.103 STANDARDS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN THE AGRICULTURAL DISTRICTS.</p> <p>(A) In order to promote the county's Comprehensive Plan goals of preserving prime or unique agricultural and woodland areas and limiting the scale of residential development in agricultural areas, and in recognition of the fact that the groundwater supply is limited and vulnerable to both depletion and contamination, the following standards are established in the Agricultural Districts.</p> <p>(2) Open space density bonus option. A density bonus will apply when residential development is clustered on small lots with at least 85% open space reserved in the development, as follows:</p> <p>(a) The maximum residential density of development in the A District under the open space density bonus option shall be one dwelling unit per ten acres of buildable area if the minimum open space preserved from the base parcel is at least 85% (e.g. for a 100-acre base parcel, 85 acres would have to remain in open space). Lots no less than 30,000 square feet may be divided from the base parcel under this option. Individual lots created still also must meet maximum lot coverage requirements.</p> <p>(b) Before an open space density bonus option development lawfully may be approved in the A District, it must be established to the satisfaction of the county's Health Department that each and all of its lots in the proposed development can adequately be served by onsite water and sewage disposal systems.</p>

## **CONCLUSION**

This amendments should strike a balance between the need for development and the preservation of the County's rural character by focusing growth in designated areas while protecting valuable open space. To ensure this balance, it is recommended that development be guided by a 40/60 land preservation-to-development ratio. If the amount of land designated for development exceeds these thresholds, the County should consider guiding the applicant to a non-cluster option that as proposed in the TE amendments, reduces the minimum lot size options. Preserving at least 40% of the tract should remain a core requirement of Cluster Development , as preservation acts as a key incentive for permitting reduced lot sizes, potentially allowing lots at half the conventional size. The cluster development options will be achieving the County's long-term vision for land conservation and sustainable growth.

**Attachment: ADDENDUM 1, and the proposed Appendix B Densities, Lot Sizes and Dimensions amendments can be found in ADDENDUM 2.**