

To: Mayor and City Council

From: Hendersonville's Tree Board and Environmental Sustainability Board; Conserving Carolina; and Caregivers of Mother Earth

Re: Protecting Hendersonville's Character and Enhancing the City's Ecological Sustainability

Our city and suburban vegetative landscapes are rapidly changing and, unfortunately, not for the better. As in many parts of North Carolina, we are experiencing rapid population growth with increasing development pressures on our communities, their urban forests and other types of native plant landscapes. Developed landscapes, the streets, houses, subdivisions, commercial buildings, apartments, parking lots, and overly manicured open spaces, are rapidly becoming the face of our community. Our tree centric and integrated natural plant community character is now disappearing rapidly.

Urban forests are taking the brunt of expanding housing and commercial cityscapes. The state is losing an average of 4,500 acres of urban tree canopy to development each year. Henderson County has lost 5.75 square miles of forest between 2001 and 2021. Here in Hendersonville and the surrounding ETJ, our tree canopy is steadily declining. With figures taken from a Tree Canopy Assessment (Oct. 2023) and a review of development site plans, Hendersonville has gone from losing an average of 18 acres of trees each year (2014 to 2022) to now losing an average of 61 acres of trees per year (2023 to 2024). Among the lowest of North Carolina cities, Hendersonville's tree canopy was at 35% in 2022 and we have lost, at least, another 122 acres of trees since then. And this does not take into account the probable loss of thousands of trees to Helene.

This trend is especially troubling as climate change accelerates. Along with their scenic appeal, trees provide shade, soak up rainfall, absorb carbon dioxide, and create a more pleasing environment for residents and visitors alike. What's more, clearing land for new homes, packing buildings into all remaining open spaces, and designing vegetative landscapes that have little or no ecological value eliminates habitat for birds, animals, insects, pollinators, and pollutes our water supply. More succinctly, reducing biodiversity and ecological sustainability degrades the ecosystem that sustains all living things, including us.

Mother Nature is surprisingly resilient, if given half a chance. She needs adequate space, soil health, good water quality, mostly native plants, and protection of vital

habitats. She also needs a human paradigm shift that favors ecological function (think native plants) over landscapes designed only for traditional aesthetics (think non-native plants and turf grass). We need integration of more natural landscapes into our city plans for development, protection of the remaining forested areas through park acquisition and/or conservation easement, and the recognition among more residents that natural landscaping can be practiced everywhere in the city, especially in our own yards.

The march of development with the resultant loss of trees and natural plant landscapes is not likely to decrease without further action. Hendersonville's Tree Board (TB) and the Environmental Sustainability Board (ESB), along with our partners Conserving Carolina and Caregivers of Mother Earth believes we need to implement additional steps to properly manage our urban tree and natural resource integrated landscape. Proper management also requires a culture change from an adversarial relationship with nature to a collaborative one. An approach that has city government, developers, residents, conservationists, and businesses working together for a sustainable, more ecologically sound future.

Hendersonville residents agree with us. Several planning documents (GenH Plan, Parks and Greenspace Plan, Sustainability Strategic Plan), with extensive public input, have shown majority support for protecting, enhancing, and including nature, natural greenspace, and conservation priorities into all aspects of city and suburban life.

No one is campaigning for a halt to reasonable and necessary development. But we are campaigning for ecological sound policies, ordinances, educational programs, land conservation programs, and greater action on (and funding for) ecologically sound natural resource management.

We propose the following:

Further Improvements to the City's Development Tree and Landscape Ordinances, including

- Reducing tree credits for preserving a minimal number of trees
- Increasing parking lot, open space, and housing lot shade trees
- Increasing pay-in-lieu for cutting trees (now very low)
- Reducing turf grass lawns in open space
- Increasing enforcement of construction site protection of preserved trees
- Eliminating steep slope development (no greater than 15%)
- Developing vegetative landscape requirements for stream buffers, especially "transition" areas

- Developing buffer zones for all delineated wetlands.

The Development of an Urban Forest Management Plan, including

- Hiring professional consultant to develop plan
- Conducting a Tree Canopy Assessments every 5 years
- Providing additional funding for the existing NeighborWoods program

Implementation of City's Park and Greenspace Plan, including

- Purchasing and/or obtaining conservation easements for additional parks (before all woodland areas disappear).
- Adding Nature Parks for habitat preservation and development to include only passive recreation
- Utilizing existing public park areas not actively used for recreation for natural habitat development
- Reducing turf grass and unnecessary mowing

Improvement of Water Quality, including

- Increasing enforcement of construction site erosion and sediment control regulations
- Creating city construction site erosion and sediment control regulations for sites of an acre or less (state/county regs do not now apply to these areas)
- Eliminating steep slope development (no greater than 15%)

Reduction of Existing Invasive Plants and Their Use, including

- Prohibit the sale and use of invasive plants (as has been done in Ohio, Missouri, and South Carolina - the trend is expanding!)
- Developing a Cost-Share Program for control and eradication

Develop a Comprehensive Natural Resource Education/Marketing Plan, including

- Developing a marketing, information, and education plan for Hendersonville residents to help promote integration of natural resources into city life
- Hiring a professional to develop marketing plan

Expand City Staff Dedicated to Natural Resource Management, including

- Hiring staff trained in natural resource management (Certified Arborist, Wildlife Biologist, Urban Forester, Public Land Manager, Educator/Marketing Professional, Grant Specialist)

The above list is obviously ambitious, and will require, in some cases, additional funding. But additional steps must be taken now if we are to reverse, and hopefully turn

around, degradation of our urban natural resources. City and residential urban management cannot predominately consist of buildings, other types of hard surfaces, and traditional ornamental plantings and abundant turf grass. Natural landscapes must be integrated into all areas where we live, recreate, work, play, and pray.

We hope you will agree and consider putting together conversations, meetings, subcommittees, or some other type of process to iron out positive steps to be taken now and in the near future. We are here to assist.

Thank you for your consideration,

Natalie Wilcoxon, Chair, Tree Board; Emily Davidson, Chair, Environmental Sustainability Board; Name, Conserving Carolina; Name, Caregivers of Mother Earth