

Did We CONNECT Our Future?



How Development Trends, Pressures, Changing Preferences and Community Reactions to Change Are Impacting Our Future

Part II in the CONNECT Our Future Retrospective Series

Centralina Regional Council started an initiative in February 2021 to inventory and evaluate accomplishments in the region that tie back to CONNECT Our Future and highlight specific data and stories that may inform new actions or priorities for Centralina staff as they continue to support local initiatives that implement the region's priorities. Articles shared with the region in the Centralina newsletter summarize information collected to evaluate general topics for three focus areas: land use, transportation and community health. Some of the information collected demonstrates a direct connection to the regional effort, while other information determines if the actions of local governments, advocacy groups or private businesses positively influenced one or more broad goal from CONNECT Our Future.

Articles published in March and April focus on growth and development patterns in the region. Specifically, where did growth occur in the region? what forms did it take? how quick did change occur? and what has been the reaction to change in local communities? Conditions were evaluated based on empirical data collected from secondary sources and stakeholder interviews with local planning officials held throughout the region. Part one of the growth and development assessment (published in March) looked back at metrics and changing conditions for the period between 2010 and 2019. Part two (published in April) looks forward to opportunities and challenges facing the region either now or in the future, especially as communities struggle with hard choices around growth, density, land use mix, community character and available infrastructure capacity.



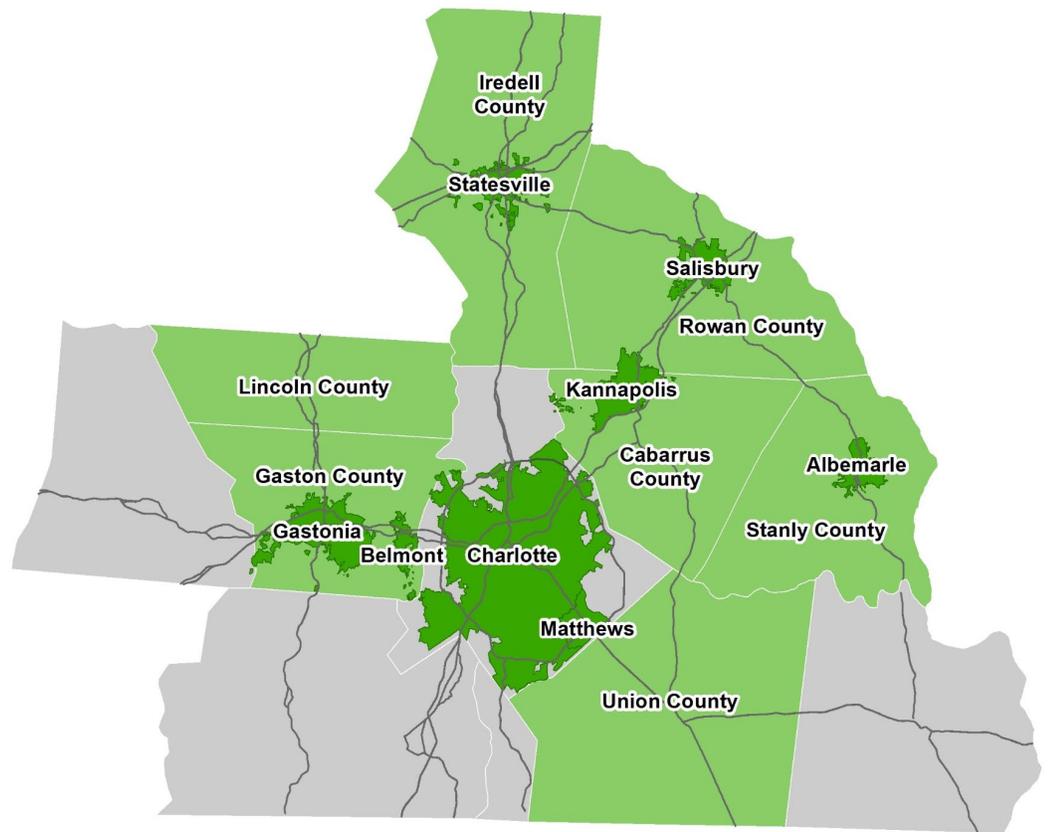
Vibrant Communities—Robust Region

This article is organized under seven general topics: voices heard around the region, market trends and development pressures, changing development preferences, big issues facing the region in the future, community reactions to change, ties back to CONNECT Our Future and key takeaways from the process.

VOICES HEARD AROUND THE REGION

Stories and observations from around the region were collected from fifteen planning official interviews completed via conference call between February and March 2021.

Participants were asked to comment on the type, location, pattern and intensity of development currently favored in their communities; changing market trends or development preferences being noticed; emerging issues in the region that may require multi-jurisdictional partnerships to solve; community reactions to change occurring in their areas; or the impact of CONNECT Our Future and its project deliverables on their communities.



This map shows the communities represented by planning officials interviewed for this article.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Generally speaking, planning officials' individual comments were combined and summarized to represent overall themes or trends identified for the region. The only exception to this format was the description of market trends and development pressures observed in the region in 2020-21, which benefited from some location specifications to describe current conditions.

A few planning officials, who interviewed in the region, arrived after CONNECT Our Future was completed in 2014.

MARKET TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENT PRESSURE

The growth and development trends summarized in the March article were confirmed by the interviews with local planning officials. In some cases, the data for the last decade (2010-2019) seems to be under-representing the most recent development boom hitting parts of the Metrolina Region. Cities, towns and counties in several areas reported record levels for building permits issued in 2020 and the type and intensity of new development or rezoning applications filed in 2021 point to strong growth potential for many areas. The planning officials interviewed for the article did not feel that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted development interests in their community and more often, we heard about an uptick in development interests and activity during the pandemic period.

Some officials also reported anecdotal information from conversations with developers, real estate agents or new residents in their communities that confirm national interests in moving to the region, including several people coming from Texas, Florida, New York, New Jersey and California. Many were attracted to new industries and jobs available, but several others reported personal reasons — family, retirement, weather or higher quality of life — as the primary reasons for coming to the area.

Planning officials' stories and observations about specific development categories confirmed the data and trends reported in the March article.

RESIDENTIAL

Regionally, planning officials confirmed rapid and wide-spread residential development throughout the area. The preferences, however, for single-family detached homes, townhomes, apartments or condominiums varies by location. The City of Charlotte and the largest surrounding cities in its sphere of influence — Gastonia, Concord and Kannapolis — reported tremendous growth pressures for new apartments and condominiums. In some cases, the number of recent multifamily permits filed in the jurisdictions exceeded the number of single-family permits filed for the same period. Interests in apartments or condominiums also increased for locations like Matthews and Belmont because of their proximity to the proposed CATS Silver (Light Rail) Line or renewed interests in their walkable downtowns and other emerging activity centers. The City of Albemarle is also seeing interest in building new duplexes, townhomes and low-rise apartments after revising its policies and ordinances to encourage more “missing middle” home choices.

Other cities and towns in the region — Statesville, Harrisburg, Salisbury, Granite Quarry, Rockwell and China Grove — are seeing significant interest in building new single-family detached neighborhoods. Rural and suburbanizing areas of the region's unincorporated counties are also receiving interest in building new single-family detached neighborhoods. However, rising land costs and

limited sewer treatment capacity in several of the interviewed counties are pushing growth back to nearby cities and towns, because others can provide the services needed, especially sewer treatment capacity, to support increased densities that are needed to justify project proformas including higher land costs.

INDUSTRIAL

The industrial market is currently experiencing “red hot” interest according to recent publications and planning official interviews. The Charlotte Business Journal celebrated new industrial announcements regularly in 2020 and 2021. The Charlotte Regional Business Alliance identified six important target sectors and industries for the region: advanced manufacturing, automotive, financial services, international business, company headquarters and logistics/distribution.

A distribution framework, focused on the Charlotte Douglas International Airport, the Charlotte Inland Port, Interstates 77 and 85, networks of railroads and US/NC/SC highways and numerous warehouse and distribution centers across the region, connect and improve conditions for business recruitment and economic development. Areas around Charlotte Douglas Airport and Westinghouse Boulevard in Mecklenburg County are still “hots spots” for industrial development. However, decreasing land inventory in Mecklenburg County as-a-whole is also quickly opening new markets and

opportunities in Gaston, Cabarrus and Stanly Counties. Amazon is building a new 1.1-million square foot distribution center in Kannapolis. North Point Development is building between 3.0- and 4.0-million square feet for new industrial uses at Gateway 85 in Gaston County. A new lithium mine is also being considered in Gaston County. Charlotte Pipe Foundry is relocating 400 jobs from Mecklenburg to Stanly County.

Areas adjacent to Interstates 77 and 85 extending throughout the region — especially in Cabarrus, Rowan and Iredell Counties — reported increasing interest for industrial development. However, some of these areas are now under-served by transportation, water and sewer systems and will need expensive improvements before wide-spread industrial development might occur.

COMMERCIAL

Recently reported experiences for commercial development in the region varied by location: bright futures for downtowns in Kannapolis, Gastonia, Albemarle, Belmont and Statesville; small booms for large and small commercial centers in the suburban areas of Rowan, Gaston and Union Counties; neglected and aging commercial centers in other suburban areas throughout the region and stagnating markets in some rural areas of unincorporated counties, especially those that do not provide sanitary sewer service.

OFFICE

Recent reports for office development in the region reflect a slowing investment period for most communities, which is likely driven by short-term and long-term considerations associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Several developers are simply in a “holding phase” with their plans and portfolios as they wait and see where the market heads next.



Ballantyne Corporate Place, Charlotte, NC

CHANGING DEVELOPMENT PREFERENCES

Limited and undeveloped land, rising land costs, increased traffic congestion levels, new focus on infill development and redevelopment and limited infrastructure capacity in some areas of the region are driving changing development preferences for certain communities. Planning officials interviewed for the article were asked to comment on new development ideas, concepts, or trends being discussed in their communities. New preferences being discussed were proposed by national builders working outside the region, existing residents or business owners wanting change or elected officials reacting to existing development intensities and trends. Ten trends summarize the observed changes in development preferences, as follows:

MANAGING THE MULTIFAMILY BOOM YEARS

Multifamily development interests are accelerating for many cities and towns in the region, and pressures are growing to manage the type, location and timing of new apartment or condominium projects in some of the communities, especially those that are more suburban in character. In some cases, planning officials are being asked to eliminate, or at least restrict, new multifamily development in the community altogether as a response to growing concerns from residents or elected officials over traffic congestion and crowded schools. In other cases, policies and ordinances are being reviewed and revised to make apartments or condominiums a “conditional use” in the local zoning ordinance, which means they may be permitted in specific areas of the community if certain conditions are met (e.g., project size, site design, amenities, vehicle access or building height).



Multifamily Development with On-Street Parking, Location and Photographer Unknown

NEW RENT-BY-CHOICE RESIDENTS

Some segments of the population — young professionals, families and retirees — are choosing to rent instead of purchasing a home at this time. They cite high student loan debt, transient work opportunities,

flexible lease options, access to complex amenities, on-site property maintenance and options to retire to live in multiple cities during the year as reasons to choose renting over home ownership. The types of homes available for rent in the region are also increasing, including apartments, condominiums, townhomes, single-family homes, live-work units and accessory dwelling units.

Some rent-by-choice trends are being tested, especially by Millennials that delayed home purchases during the COVID-19 pandemic, while interest rates for home purchase are historically low and rents are high (and rising) in some areas of the region.

“39 of people contacted in the Freddie Mac 2019 Housing Survey reported that they are likely to never own a home.”

www.freddiemac.com, 2021

REIMAGINED DOWNTOWNS

Communities throughout the region are reimagining their downtowns as new (and improved) economic, civic and entertainment activity centers with full-time residents living near popular destinations and



Franklin Urban Sports & Entertainment (FUSE) District – Gastonia

amenities. New baseball stadiums, satellite university buildings and redeveloped mill areas anchor other investments being made on walkable streets, public spaces, restaurants and residential living options that are transforming small to medium downtowns in the region. Some communities are changing their policies and ordinances to support unique and creative development concepts, while others are investing millions of dollars in their downtowns alongside millions more being invested in private development projects.

EMPHASIS ON WALKABLE ACTIVITY CENTERS

Reinvestments in downtowns, their nearby activity centers and suburban development nodes throughout the region are increasingly adopting mixed-use, walkable design principles that emphasize a discernable activity center with popular destinations, public space and multiple residential home choices integrated together. The mix of land uses, development intensity, building scale, block and street connectivity or parking strategy applied to one or more new (or

renewed) activity centers in a community (or when comparing communities) does seem to change based on project size, general location, rural-suburban-urban development context or access to premium transit service.

AFFORDABLE HOME OPTIONS

Some planning officials in the region report home purchase and home rent price increases reaching levels that put significant pressure on local residents looking for affordable housing options. Limited land to develop in some areas and new residents arriving daily are increasing demands for more and different home choices. Outside investors purchasing multiple low-cost homes in some communities (compared to where they live) are driving up prices for local residents. Within the region, residents moving from more-urban to more-rural communities also drive-up home costs for local residents.



CONNECT Our Future Place Type Summary Document, 2014, Small-Lot Residential Place Type Category (Baxter Village, Fort Mill, SC)

New developments in some communities that are now targeting affordable housing solutions are facing challenges associated with the balance between design expectations and intended price points.

TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

Transformation of the CATS Blue (Light Rail) Line corridor in South End Charlotte and its renewed energy and economic vibrancy is fueling excitement about the possibilities for the proposed CATS Silver (Light Rail) Line connecting Belmont, Charlotte and Matthews (and potentially Stallings, Indian Trail and Gastonia in the future). Station area planning is now underway in anticipation of the new service, and communities along the line are considering the right mix of land uses, densities, building heights, public spaces and parking requirements to create livable communities and complement future investments in premium transit service.



CONNECT Our Future Place Type Summary Document, 2014, Transit-Oriented Development, LRT Place Type Category (CATS Blue Line, Charlotte, NC)

MORE DENSITY, MORE DESIGN

New development densities proposed for some cities and towns in the region are significantly increasing, especially as land available for development decreases and the costs of land acquisition or land preparation increases. The number of locations proposed for increased density in communities is also increasing beyond downtown to include proposed light rail transit corridors, new suburban activity centers or teardown and infill development projects in existing neighborhoods that provide different home choices. Some communities are responding to increased density pressures by enacting new



*CONNECT Our Future Place Type Summary
Document, 2014, Mixed-Use Neighborhood Place
Type Category (Charlotte, NC)*

policies, ordinances or rules that lower maximum allowable density for a project or sometimes, by trying to outright prohibit specific land uses associated with higher densities as a by-right action under the zoning ordinance (moving it to a conditional use category). Other communities are embracing increased densities in the area and using it as an opportunity to implement certain design or development performance criteria that ensures new development is high-quality and compatible with surrounding areas.

GROWING PATIENCE FOR THE “RIGHT DEVELOPMENT”

Historically speaking, some communities in the Region would accept new development at all costs to grow in population or employment and to increase or balance their local tax base. More recently, several communities have become more discerning about the types, locations, patterns and intensities of development they prefer for their area. They are becoming more vocal with development applications and are willing to wait for the right development project in a specific location. One planning official who was interviewed for the article noted their land resources are decreasing quickly and pressures from the public and elected officials are growing to get each development application exactly right to safeguard (and really improve) the community's future.

COORDINATED DECISION-MAKING

Some fast-growing communities in the region are recognizing the problems associated with their rules and procedures that approve development applications in isolation — namely that the individual parts do not add up to a well-coordinated whole. High-level concepts for building a comprehensive and coordinated transportation system, drinking water system, sanitary sewer collection system, storm water collection strategy or internet network are being interrupted by

individual development applications that do not always respect the value of connected infrastructure.

More recent regional planning efforts for transportation, water and sewer systems are actively coordinating local land use plans with regional service area plans and investment strategies. A few county-level comprehensive plans are also coordinating future growth management policies and investment strategies with the cities and towns in their jurisdiction

COVID-19 ACCELERATORS

Opinions are mixed about the short-term and long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, and whether social distancing, online shopping, work-from-home policies or increased personal time for some people in the community will generate long-lasting behavior changes or if people will simply return to normal experiences before the pandemic over some period.

The Charlotte Business Journal recently reported the experience of realtors in the region, who are seeing record interest from Millennials in home buying (See Millennial Market Madness, April 2021). They cite work-from-home policies associated with the pandemic, need for more space in the residence, high rent and low interest rates as motivators to purchase (vs. rent) from their interactions with some young homebuyers.

Planning officials in the region agree, more clarity on the different topics is needed, and it will come over the next few years as personal

and business decisions are made and more data becomes available. Some communities may need to act quickly to reassess their vision for growth and development in the future, by revising their plans, policies or ordinances accordingly, once long-term impacts from the pandemic are known and accepted.

BIG ISSUES FACING THE REGION IN THE FUTURE

Planning officials were asked to identify big issues facing the region that might ultimately endanger the area's recent successes, if not addressed. Two items were identified: regional transportation coordination and sanitary sewer system capacity and service areas.

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION COORDINATION

Research for the CONNECT Our Future Regional Scan Document confirmed over half of the region's workforce lived in one county and worked in another, which reinforces the need for more coordinated decision-making processes in transportation that are focused on a shared, equitable and sustainable future. Planning officials agreed traffic congestion is a major "growth inhibitor" for realizing the region's full growth potential, unless addressed soon. One official said it bluntly: "our economic development strategy is all about efficiency, but how do we sell businesses on our region if we are all clogged up like Atlanta." Some planning officials talked about the need for a

regional transportation authority or a similar construct, which might partner with the four metropolitan planning organizations and their transit partners to coordinate major investments in a multi-jurisdictional regional highway network and a multi-jurisdictional regional transit network. The authority would help organize efforts in the region and identify local, state and federal funds available for planning, design, permitting and construction. A governing board would legitimize the regional transportation authority and organize its efforts in the area.

SANITARY SEWER SYSTEM CAPACITY AND SERVICE AREAS

Planning officials identified sanitary sewer system capacity and service areas as one of the most important factors for influencing preferred development types, patterns and intensities in the region. It was also identified as a significant tool for managing the timing and location of development throughout the region. Cities, towns and some counties in the area that provide sanitary sewer service are assumed to have bright futures. Other counties in the area that do not provide sanitary sewer service have less certain futures.

Recent system consolidation, expensive plant upgrades and extended pipe networks in under-served areas will continue to influence when, where and how development occurs in the future. Certain service areas are expected to effectively pause development from time-to-time as utility providers make costly investments in their systems. Rising costs to

expand, operate, maintain and rebuild sewer systems may overwhelm some service providers in the future. It is critical that plans, policies and ordinances for local governments are well-coordinated with the system plans and construction schedules for utility providers. New customers in locations where capacity is available are needed to address large debt service requirements for the utility providers.

COMMUNITY REACTIONS TO CHANGE

Planning officials were asked to comment on recent experiences with residents, developers, advocacy groups, or nearby jurisdictions in the context of growth and development topics facing their communities. Elected officials in one county reported regular criticism from local cities and towns in their area that think their plans and ordinances are too aggressive, especially when targeting growth in new activity centers located near municipal boundaries. Some cities and towns are seeing new groups being formed to oppose all types of growth and development in their community. They focus on negative impacts to existing infrastructure or a general loss of community character associated with infill development or redevelopment projects that change land uses or increase densities compared to surrounding areas. Some of the new groups are becoming very political. Split votes for most development applications at the planning board and governing board levels are presently normal.

TIES BACK TO CONNECT OUR FUTURE

CONNECT Our Future was an initiative that united residents, businesses, educators, elected officials, non-profit organizations and other interest groups around a common desire for more cooperation in the region and the need to work together to fulfill shared goals. A general framework for future growth and development was created under the initiative, which was unanimously endorsed by the CONNECT Consortium Program and Policy Forums in 2014. Many assumed the wave of optimism from this event would build strong momentum to fulfill various CONNECT goals and recommendations and to use the data and tools shared with state, regional and local governments for their implementation.

Planning officials were asked to comment on the impact of the partnerships and project deliverables created for CONNECT Our Future and highlight local initiatives that may tie back to the regional effort. Some officials were in the region between 2012 and 2014 and participated directly in the project, while others arrived after its completion and only know of it to varying levels.

What did our community partners have to say?

“I think CONNECT did a good job capturing sound planning principles and putting them into a concise document with the data needed to prove their value.”

“I really appreciate the time the Centralina Regional Council and its partners put into CONNECT Our Future and the activities that have followed. The data created for these efforts is invaluable. We use it all the time.”

“Being new to the region, I do not know enough about CONNECT Our Future. I really need to learn more about it.”

“CONNECT Our Future and its legacy did not become engrained in the day-to-day thinking or activities of our community. I think this is true of other local governments too.”

“There was great hope right after CONNECT, but the frequency and quality of cross-jurisdiction coordination for some topic areas is fading over time.”

“The data created for CONNECT Our Future is great, and we use it often to justify needs (now and in the future) for schools, roads, water service and sewer service.”

“The benefits of CONNECT Our Future lie in the new data it provided for having growth-related conversations in the region. It provided a common reference point to have discussions about how much growth (and what kind) was coming and provided common ground to start deliberations about the future. The data was everything for us when considering the success of CONNECT Our Future.”

Those that fully-embraced the data and principles in the recommended framework for CONNECT Our Future implemented its ideas and concepts in their local plans, policies and ordinances. The preferred growth framework presented in the CONNECT Magazine and the concept of place types used to describe intended character and land uses for the region in the Place Type Summary Document for CONNECT Our Future were refined and implemented in several local comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances throughout the region. One official called their comprehensive plan “a cousin” to the region’s general framework that was endorsed in 2014.

Others used the tool kit to implement recommendations from CONNECT Our Future. It influenced their different plans, processes and thinking about important qualities to emphasize in their communities. Analytical models and multi-jurisdictional data sets first developed in 2012 have been updated in 2016 and 2020 and used widely in the region to study and evaluate the needs for various transportation, water and sewer infrastructure projects. The data is also being used by communities for various funding requests and grant applications. One local official said the models, data and processes instilled during CONNECT Our Future to measure and evaluate different growth and development alternatives — where, how much and when — has helped leaders in various communities and agencies across the region work together to identify the right projects or solutions to meet future demands. Centralina Regional Council supported

CONNECT Our Future implementation by incorporating place types into local comprehensive plans, spearheading capacity building and training for the CONNECT Our Future toolkit and leading multiple projects to advance CONNECT Our Future priorities, especially related to creating healthy communities, strong downtowns, community engagement and advancing regional transportation collaboration. Centralina created regional parcel-based maps to track current development status and future land use policy in 2013, 2016, and 2020 and led placemaking projects across the region, integrating land use, transportation, and health. Centralina also led several regional planning projects directly attributable to the recommendations and outcomes from CONNECT Our Future, including: the Metrolina Regional CommunityViz Initiatives (2016 and 2020) aimed at updating CONNECT Our Future land use and transportation data sets for use in regional transportation planning, the Greater Charlotte Regional Freight Mobility Study (2016), the Regional Transit Engagement Series (2019) and the CONNECT Beyond Regional Mobility Initiative (2021). Each of these transportation projects included land use elements, such as the placement of employment centers that depend on freight logistics or the creation of transit supportive walkable centers.

In all these ways, the preferred development principles and patterns from CONNECT Our Future are taking root in some parts of the region seven years later.

Some planning officials felt the legacy of CONNECT Our Future did not become fully engrained in the local thinking or planning activities of enough communities in the region to support widespread land use or development change. They observed several communities that simply went right back to thinking locally and sometimes, but usually not, coordinating-regionally once the CONNECT Our Future project ended. Some officials interviewed for the article reported that the CONNECT Our Future project is not mentioned at all in their communities in 2020-21.

Several planning officials think it would be great to create a new working group to rekindle the momentum from CONNECT Our Future. Transit, environment and land use coordination were identified as three targets to improve cross-jurisdiction coordination. It could re-energize interests and actions for new residents, local planning officials or elected officials that arrived in the region after CONNECT Our Future was finished in 2014. Officials advocating for a new working group expressed interests in a formal structure and regular meeting schedule to collaborate across jurisdictions as essential elements to ensure the initiative's continued success.

KEY TAKEAWAYS WHILE LOOKING FORWARD ON GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN THE REGION

The growth and development trends summarized in the March article were confirmed by the interviews with local planning officials. In some cases, the data for the last decade (2010-2019) seems to be under-representing the most recent development boom hitting parts of the Metrolina Region. Speaking regionally, planning officials confirmed rapid and wide-spread residential development throughout the area; however, the preferences for single-family detached homes, townhomes, apartments or condominiums varies by location. The industrial market is also experiencing "red hot" interest at this time. Local officials' experiences reported for commercial development in the region varied by location but nearly all reported a slowing investment period for office development, which is likely driven by short-term and long-term considerations associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limited undeveloped land, rising land costs, increased traffic congestion levels, new focus on infill development and redevelopment and limited infrastructure capacity in some areas of the region are driving changing development preferences for certain communities. New preferences being discussed were proposed by national builders working outside the region, existing residents or business owners wanting change or elected officials reacting to existing development intensities and trends. The top ten trends observed by planning officials include:

1. Multifamily development interests are accelerating for many cities and towns in the region, and pressures are growing to manage the type, location and timing of new apartment or condominium projects in some of the communities, especially those that are more suburban in character.
2. Growing segments of the population, young professionals, families, and retirees, are currently choosing to rent versus purchase a home.
3. Communities throughout the region are reimagining their downtowns as new (and improved) economic, civic and entertainment activity centers with full-time residents living near popular destinations and amenities.
4. Reinvestments in downtowns, their nearby activity centers and suburban development nodes throughout the region are increasingly adopting mixed-use, walkable design principles that emphasize a discernable activity center with popular destinations, public space and multiple residential home choices integrated together.
5. Limited land to develop in some areas and new residents arriving daily are increasing demands for more and different home choices. Outside investors purchasing multiple low-cost homes in some communities (compared to where they live) are driving up prices for local residents.
6. Transformation of the CATS Blue (Light Rail) Line corridor in South End Charlotte and its renewed energy and economic vibrancy is fueling excitement about the possibilities for the proposed CATS Silver (Light Rail) Line connecting Belmont, Charlotte and Matthews (and potentially Stallings, Indian Trail and Gastonia in the future).
7. The number of locations proposed for increased density in communities is increasing beyond downtown to include proposed light rail transit corridors, new suburban activity centers or teardown and infill development projects in existing neighborhoods that provide different home choices.
8. Several communities have become more discerning about the types, locations, patterns and intensities of development they prefer for their area. They are becoming more vocal with development applications and are willing to wait for the right development project in a specific location.
9. Some fast-growing communities in the region are recognizing the problems associated with their rules and procedures that approve development applications in isolation, namely that the individual parts do not add up to a well-coordinated whole.
10. Some communities may need to act quickly to reassess their vision for growth and development in the future, by revising their plans, policies or ordinances accordingly, once long-term impacts from the pandemic are known and accepted.

Thinking more “regionally” about the area’s future, some planning officials talked about the need for a regional transportation authority or a similar construct, which might partner with the four metropolitan planning organizations and their transit partners to coordinate major investments in a multi-jurisdictional regional highway network and a multi-jurisdictional regional transit network. Others identified recent system consolidation, expensive plant upgrades and extended pipe networks in under-served areas for various sanitary sewer systems operating in the region as a significant factor for if, when, where and how development occurs in the future.

In reference to the CONNECT Our Future initiative, the communities that fully-embraced the data and principles in the recommended framework implemented its ideas and concepts in their local plans, policies and ordinances. Others used the tool kit to implement recommendations from CONNECT Our Future, and it influenced their different plans, processes and thinking about important qualities to emphasize in their communities. Analytical models and multi-jurisdictional data sets first developed in 2012 have been updated in 2016 and 2020, and used widely in the region to study and evaluate the needs for various transportation, water, and sewer infrastructure projects. The data is also being used by communities for various funding requests and grant applications.

The Centralina Regional Council also supported CONNECT Our Future by incorporating the concept of “place types” into local comprehensive plans, spearheading

capacity building and training for the CONNECT Our Future toolkit and leading multiple projects to advance CONNECT Our Future priorities. Centralina created regional parcel-based maps to track current development status and future land use policy in 2013, 2016, and 2020 and led placemaking projects across the region, integrating land use, transportation, and health. The Council also led several regional planning projects directly attributable to the recommendations and outcomes from CONNECT Our Future, including: the Metrolina Regional CommunityViz Initiatives (2016 and 2020), the Greater Charlotte Regional Freight Mobility Study (2016), the Regional Transit Engagement Series (2019) and the CONNECT Beyond Regional Mobility Initiative (2021). Each of these transportation projects included land use elements, such as the placement of employment centers that depend on freight logistics or the creation of transit supportive walkable centers.

In all these ways, the preferred development principles and patterns from CONNECT Our Future are taking root in some parts of the region seven years later.

Some planning officials felt the legacy of CONNECT Our Future did not become fully engrained in the local thinking of enough communities to support wide-spread land use change. They observed several communities that simply went right back to thinking locally and sometimes, but usually not, coordinating regionally. These planning officials think it would be great to create a new working group to rekindle the momentum.

MORE ARTICLES TO COME

We will continue to inventory and evaluate accomplishments in the region that tie back to CONNECT Our Future and highlight specific data and stories that may inform new actions or priorities for Centralina staff as they continue to support local initiatives that implement the region's priorities.

Our efforts for the article in May will focus on transportation, including changing attitudes toward travel behavior and how state, regional and local transportation organizations are working together to meet future transportation system needs. This information will be combined with future articles to compile a comprehensive report at the end of the project and a dashboard with benchmarks identified to measure and track regional progress towards CONNECT Our Future goals.

Stay tuned...we look forward to our time reflecting on the CONNECT Our Future initiative, the influences it had on the region and sharing those stories with you to reinforce the benefits of thinking regionally and acting locally.

This article focused on existing conditions, emerging trends and new development opportunities being presented in the region and some of the growing concerns being voiced in local communities about growth, density, land use mix and available infrastructure capacity.

In May, we will turn our attention to the region's transportation system.



Vibrant Communities – Robust Region