

Development pace quickens in Asheville and Western North Carolina

Study: Construction outstrips population growth

By Mark Barrett • August 12, 2010

ASHEVILLE — The amount of developed land in Western North Carolina is increasing faster than the region's population, and that trend is likely to continue, according to a new study.

More and bigger houses, stores, workplaces and roads connecting them all are changing the character of the region, suggests the study from the Renaissance Computing Institute at UNC Charlotte.

The study says the amount of developed land in 19 WNC counties grew 570 percent from 1976 to 2006 — although the precision of that figure is open to debate — while the region's population grew by only 42 percent over the same period.

The study's methodology suggests that its land-use figures should be used only as a rough guide and an indication of trends rather than a precise measurement of changes.

Spot checks indicate the study's measurement of developed land was only about 75 percent accurate in 1976, said lead researcher John Vogler. Figures for later years are more precise, he said.

But the study's projection that another 145,374 acres in the region will be developed between now and 2030 suggests WNC residents need to face questions about how growth should be managed going forward, said Vicki Bott, associate director for public policy research at UNC Charlotte's Urban Institute.

"How much open space is enough to protect the tourism economy and the sense of place that we cherish about the mountains, and how much is too much?" she said.

The study predicts the amount of developed land in the region will grow by 63 percent by 2030 while population rises 25 percent.

New development would cover an area that's about six times the size of the city of Asheville.

A little less than a third of that development will occur in Buncombe and Henderson counties, the study says.

The study does not consider, however, possible changes in land-use patterns related to higher gas prices or increased commuting times. It also assumes no change in the amount of land in the region that is protected from development, even though such acreage rose substantially from 1976 to 2006.

That growth, in fact, is one of the bright spots in the report, said James Fox, head of the National Environmental Modeling and Analysis Center at UNC Asheville and UNCA's unit of the Renaissance Computing Institute.

"Protected" acreage — land in a national park or forest, state park, conservation easement or with other restrictions — rose from 25.8 percent of the region in 1976 to 30.7 percent in 2006, the study found.

The study suggests the amount of developed land in the region per resident has grown dramatically. That would mirror some national trends.

For example, the median square footage — the point

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at which half is higher, half lower — of a new home built in the U.S. rose 41.3 percent from 1976 to 2006, according to the Census Bureau. Of homes built in 2006, 39 percent had four or more bedrooms.

Larger houses on larger lots are “part of the sense we have as Americans of unlimited land and the American dream,” Bott said.

“People tend to think of compact development as something they don't want,” even though it reduces pressure to use more land, she said.

Researchers hope government officials and others will use the study and the data that underlie it to identify areas under development pressure and make decisions about issues like infrastructure and protecting land.

Study researchers used satellite imagery to measure impervious surfaces like roads and rooftops, then extrapolated the amount of developed land.

At least some of the 1976 data appear to miss what most people would consider developed land. For example, the amount of developed land the study says was in Buncombe County in 1976 was only about half the acreage that was within the Asheville city limits alone that year.

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