

AC44

ALBEMARLE COUNTY 2044

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

ADOPTED MM.DD 2025

PART 2: Growth Mangement Policy



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PART II: GROWTH MANAGEMENT POLICY

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WHAT IS THE GROWTH MANAGEMENT POLICY?

AC44 is grounded in the same overarching idea as the current Comprehensive Plan — that focusing growth within the Development Areas is the best way to preserve land for watershed protection, agriculture, forestry, and the natural environment in the Rural Area, and to foster a vibrant mix of uses and activities with services and amenities in the Development Areas, leveraging existing infrastructure and opportunities for redevelopment, discouraging sprawl, and providing services and infrastructure in a fiscally responsible manner.

The purpose of the Growth Management Policy is to provide efficient and cost-effective public service delivery and encourage compact, connected, and dense development patterns and uses within the Development Areas to protect the ecosystems and natural, scenic, historic, and cultural resources in the Rural Area. The expectations for infrastructure and service delivery are different for the Development Areas and Rural Area. For example, the Albemarle County Service Authority (ACSA) Jurisdictional Area for the provision of public water and sewer primarily follows the Development Area boundaries. The Growth Management Policy guides land use decisions, capital projects, and public service provision.

The County can most efficiently provide fire/rescue and police protection, roads, utilities, school bus service, transit, and other governmental functions to smaller and more concentrated areas than to a large and dispersed rural population. Increased densities and intensities of uses in the Development Areas augment such efficiencies. Rural Area uses are generally widely dispersed housing and agricultural and forestry uses, and therefore, result in public safety services provided at reduced service levels than those in the Development Areas.

Investing in the Development Areas is essential to creating thriving neighborhoods with a high quality of life to entice current and future community members to live in the Development Areas instead of the Rural Area. It is also important to recognize that over 40 percent of County residents currently live in the Rural Area. Therefore, while the levels of service provision are different in the Rural Area, there are still essential services provided as needed, including fire/rescue and police.







The Growth Management Policy directs density in the Development Areas to protect the character of the Rural Area.

GROWTH MANAGEMENT POLICY (AC44)

Albemarle County is a welcoming community that will grow equitably and sustainably, supporting the needs of current and future community members for housing, jobs, and a healthy environment. This Growth Management Policy is the basis for the Goals, Objectives, and Actions of this Comprehensive Plan and is the primary means to achieve the County's vision for the future.

The County will use designated Development Areas (the growth area) and the Rural Area designation to manage land use, capital projects, and public services. New development and public infrastructure investment will target Development Areas. Limited new development will occur in the Rural Area. The Development Areas will have a variety of housing types, a mix of land uses, high-quality public infrastructure, and services to support most residential and business growth in the County. Density and connectivity, high quality sustainable design, and reinvestment, redevelopment, and infill will be emphasized. The Rural Area will provide land for agriculture, forestry, the protection of the public water supply, conservation of ecosystems, the natural environment, and historic and cultural resources, and climate resiliency. Small-scale businesses and limited public services and infrastructure supporting existing communities will be supported while minimizing additional residential development in the Rural Area. The Development Areas and the Rural Area will have distinct boundaries, without low-density transition areas.

UPDATES TO THE GROWTH MANAGEMENT POLICY

The Growth Management Policy (Policy) has remained relatively consistent since 1971. From its start and still today, the policy directs development into the County's Development Areas, while the remainder of the county's land is dedicated to preservation of Rural Area uses – farms, forests, open space, and natural, historic, and scenic resources. While the overarching Growth Management Policy has remained consistent, the distribution and character of the County's Development Areas has changed substantially, starting with about 48,000 acres of land in the Development Areas in 1971 to about 23,800 acres today.

Some of the reduction of Development Areas' acreage is due to early overestimates of population growth in the 1970's (possibly due to concerns about annexation), as well as a previously abundant supply of commercial and industrial land relative to past demand, and concerns about water quality in the South Fork Reservoir water supply watershed. Preservation of the Rural Area was further strengthened through the County's 1980 zoning ordinance update, which down-zoned (reduced the number of housing units and commercial/industrial uses allowed) within most of the County's Rural Area. Past decisions to not significantly expand the Development Areas, even while the County's population continued to grow, can also be attributed to a changing approach towards more urban and mixed-use forms of development with the adoption of the Neighborhood Model in 2001.

With this Comprehensive Plan update (AC44), the text of the Growth Management Policy has been updated. The Development Area boundaries remain unchanged. In Phase 1 of AC44, staff asked the community about the current Growth Management Policy (per the 2015 Comprehensive Plan), including what aspects of the Policy should be prioritized with the AC44 Comprehensive Plan update.

Staff also used the County's Equity and Climate Action Lens to review the 2015 Policy language. The text of the Growth Management Policy has been updated to reflect community input and incorporate equity and climate action, while keeping the core purpose of the Policy.

To summarize updates to the Policy text:

- Clear language that Albemarle County is planning for both current and future community members, consistent with State Code requirements for Comprehensive Plans.
- Specifically listing out the major areas the Policy guides: land use, capital projects, and public service provision.
- Adding language for small-scale businesses and limited public services in the Rural Area to support existing communities.
- Including language within the Policy about distinct boundaries between the Development Areas and Rural Area (was previously only included in other Plan chapters).

The Policy text alone does not capture the many ways that the Growth Management Policy is connected to how we live, work, and move through the county. The Policy also informs the goals, objectives, and actions throughout the Comprehensive Plan.

For example, based on community input to date, staff has heard the need for clearer recommendations in the Rural Area related to small-scale community-serving land uses. Community input has emphasized the importance of identifying options for health care (including mobile), food access/ community gardens, emergency preparedness/response, and places for community gathering. Identifying ways to more equitably allow and provide access to services is also a key aspect of this Plan update, consistent with the Board's priority to incorporate equity and climate action throughout the Plan.

DEVELOPMENT AREAS UTILIZATION REVIEW

Based on the estimated Development Areas capacity in the most recent 2022 land use buildout analysis, see Appendix, there appears to be sufficient capacity to accommodate projected growth (both residential and business) in the next 10 to 20 years. However, the constraining factors identified in the analysis, when left unchecked, will limit the actual buildout of the Development Areas. The buildout analysis also identified very few locations close to being site ready for the County's economic development target industries.

As part of the AC44 Comprehensive Plan update, the Board of Supervisors elects not to make any changes to the Development Areas boundaries. While boundary changes may not be needed in the near future, there may come a point in time where the current Development Areas no longer have sufficient capacity to accommodate future housing and employment needs.

There are a variety of tools the County can use to affect capacity prior to changing the Development Areas boundaries in the future. Those tools include:

- Revising the current Future Land Use Map through Area Plan updates to address the need for more housing or commercial or industrial property. (e.g. changing a property from Neighborhood Residential to Office/Flex/LI/RD).
- Public infrastructure and amenity investment hold the potential to catalyze and support development in Activity Centers.
- Revising the Zoning Ordinance to permit a mixture of uses, denser developments and a wider variety of housing types.



Darden Towe athletic field, Pantops area

The Virginia State Code requires that Comprehensive Plans require planning for the needs of both current and future community members based on anticipated population growth. As part of long-range planning in the context of uncertain changing economic and environmental conditions, tracking the utilization of Development Areas through a set of factors on a routine basis is intended to provide data to the Board of Supervisors for consideration.

The following factors and trends should be used to monitor the utilization of Development Areas and can be used as a basis for making sound land use decisions.

1. How well development in the Development Areas is meeting the objectives of the Comprehensive Plan.

This includes assessing the extent to which the current Development Areas are meeting the Comprehensive Plan objectives for the Development Areas and the Plan's four Guiding Principles. These variables might include walkability and bikeability scores tracked over time, miles of sidewalks, greenways and shared use paths built, and an inventory of public amenities added and preserved like parks and open space.





HIgher density is necessary in the Development Areas to accommodate growth.

2. A comparison of the estimated demand for residential and non-residential land uses with the estimated capacity.

Estimated demand begins with a market demand forecast which estimates the number of residential units and square footage of retail, office, and industrial square feet expected to be built in Albemarle County over the next 20 years. The forecast is based on projected population growth and historic growth and development trends from the past 10 years. (Potential growth limitations like the availability of land, the cost of development, or environmental constraints are not considered).

The purpose of this forecast is to provide a high-level estimate of the need for housing and non-residential development to support the projected population growth over a 20-year horizon.

The estimated demand can be compared with the estimated capacity of the Development Areas for both future land use (per the Comprehensive Plan) and for existing zoning (by-right development).

3. The intensity/density of development approvals through rezonings and special use permits as compared with the recommended density per future land use categories.

It is important to understand how the estimated capacity of the Development Areas compares to actual buildout patterns and trends. This can provide a 'reality check' and help us understand if the County is achieving the densities and land uses recommended by the Comprehensive Plan.

For example, the 2022 land use buildout analysis found that between 2016-2021, the total number of dwelling units approved through rezonings and special use permits was approximately 58% of the maximum number of units recommended per future land use categories in the Comprehensive Plan.

4. The remaining percentage of the Development Areas are estimated to have capacity for additional development or redevelopment.

Based on the 2022 land use buildout analysis, approximately 7% of land in the Development Areas (0.3% of total county land area) had capacity for new development or redevelopment. The remaining Development Area consists of currently developed land or is undevelopable, due to various constraints such as land allocated as road right-of-way, located in floodplain, has steep slopes.

Initially, properties with the capacity for redevelopment are identified as those where the land value of a parcel is greater than the value of improvements/structures on the parcel. Then, additional assumptions were used to further refine each type of land use. For example, a property with a $100,000 land value and $20,000 structure value would be included in this initial review.

The following assumptions were used for further refine properties with potential capacity for each type of land use.

5. The ratio of dwelling units being built in the Rural Area compared with the Development Areas.

In 1971, when the first Growth Management Policy was adopted, approximately 60 percent of new houses constructed were in the Rural Area. But that percentage has changed drastically over the decades, in large part due to the effectiveness of the policy. From the early 2000s through the start of the Great Recession, the County saw single-family construction occurring in a roughly 50-50 balance between the Development Areas and the Rural Area. Since 2009 most new single-family construction has occurred within the Development Areas. It is important to continue to monitor these trends and to leverage land use and conservation tools in support of the Growth Management Policy.





More residential units are built per year in the Development Areas.





Current land prices support the market conditions that support higher density.

6. Cost and vacancy trends for residential and non-residential land uses.

Not realizing the full buildout of the Development Areas and limiting the supply of available housing can drive up costs locally and push new residential growth into surrounding localities, potentially increasing commute times and placing the greatest burden on lower-income households. This factor should also consider the available affordable housing against the goals identified in Housing Albemarle.

Additionally, increasing demand for non-residential space could lead to costs rising and influence businesses to look for space in other localities if there are not sufficient readily available land and sites for these types of uses.

The current trend of increasing land prices supports the market conditions that support higher density, as proposed in the Activity Centers concept. This cost and vacancy factor needs to be balanced with using Development Areas land efficiently and not changing boundaries earlier than necessary when there are still redevelopment and infill opportunities still available. Leveraging site readiness opportunities will be key for industrial/employment land uses. Industrial land uses are the most likely to be directly impacted by land cost, with developers seeking larger tracts and lower values. High land costs could influence new industrial uses to seek space in more affordable counties.

These metrics should be reported to the Board of Supervisors for their review and consideration every two years or as requested, beginning in FY26. Many of these are included as part of the land use capacity analysis, which was most recently completed in 2022, which will be reanalyzed every two years after this Comprehensive Plan is adopted.

When the Board determines changes to the Development Area boundaries should be considered, an in-depth analysis of these and other factors will help determine where changes may occur.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT AREAS BOUNDARIES

When considering potential future changes to the Development Areas boundaries, it is important to note that there is no policy that the Development Areas boundaries should remain unchanged. However, premature boundary revisions could undermine the Growth Management Policy. Revisions should therefore be carefully considered while keeping in mind the goals of the County's Comprehensive Plan.

Since their establishment the Development Areas boundaries have been adjusted to better protect the natural environment and encourage connected, dense, and mixed-use development. Our Growth Management Policy prioritizes building efficiently in Development Areas over expanding the current boundary. However, the current Development Areas may be unable to accommodate housing and employment needs, an issue already reflected in rising land costs and declining housing affordability. While the Comprehensive Plan emphasizes maximizing efficient land use within the current boundaries and does not recommend boundary revisions, it is still essential to plan for potential future revisions. even if none are currently anticipated. This policy and the potential need for revision should be evaluated at a minimum with each required 5-year Comprehensive Plan update. Potential future revision should be considered through the Small Area planning effort well in advance of the act of expanding the Development Area boundaries.

A process for considering future revision of the Development Areas boundaries is established in the next section.

Process

Ideally the need for a Development Area boundary revision is identified through a future area planning effort. The Board of Supervisors could pursue a boundary revision independently of a future area planning effort and should request the County Executive to direct staff to develop a Development Area report. This report will evaluate a variety of factors, provide information through maps, order of magnitude level cost estimates, and other resources as necessary. See the criteria outlined below, not as an exhaustive list as much as a starting point for the consideration of revisions.



Building efficiently in the Development Areas can prevent premature boundary expansion.





Maintaining our Rural Area helps protect our natural resources.

Criteria for Removing Under-Performing Areas from the Development Areas

The following are draft criteria for evaluating potential locations to remove from the designated Development Areas:

- Locations that do not meet the goals and policies of the Comprehensive Plan. This includes locations that are not meeting the recommended density per future land use designations and areas that are not meeting the Community Design Guidelines (e.g. walkable, mixed-use).
- Locations that have significant topographic or other environmental constraints. These constraints reduce an area's potential to meet recommended densities and intensities of uses and the ability to develop an interconnected street network. There may also be important environmental features or habitats that should be protected (e.g. high value forest blocks identified in the Biodiversity Action Plan).
- Locations with limited public infrastructure capacity and access. This could include existing road conditions and capacity, where development would be contrary to VDOT goals and recommendations, and where connections to existing public roads, water/sewer, and other infrastructure are challenging.

If locations in the Development Areas are designated as Rural Area, the total acreage that is swapped to the Development Areas should be based in part on the developable acreage of the now-Rural Area land.

Criteria for Adding Land to the Development Areas

Factors	Impacts and Standards to Assess
Transportation	• Current level of service (LOS) for road network that new development would access compared to anticipated change in LOS. • Current safety issues for road network that new development would access compared to anticipated safety improvements. • Integration of planned transportation projects with potential development. • Ensure potential new development provides road, sidewalk, shared-use path, and trail connections to the existing road and bike/pedestrian network.
Public Schools	• Current and projected schools' capacity for the school districts for potential new development and how potential new development would impact and address school capacity. • Possible locations within potential new Development Areas for future school sites that meet ACPS' needs and are walkable for as many nearby neighborhoods as feasible.
Public Water and Sewer	• Ability to be served by public water and sewer, either currently or feasible in the future. • Coordinate with RWSA and ACSA to plan for future infrastructure needs and develop an estimated timeframe for when public water and sewer could feasibly be provided to new development in potential new Development Areas, in collaboration with the private sector.
Community Facilities and Services	• Assessment of adequacy of service provision for community facilities, services, and infrastructure, including Fire/Rescue and Police. • Assessment of proximity to existing community centers, libraries, schools, and other facilities, and what additional facilities/services/infrastructure may be needed in potential new Development Areas. • Coordinate with service providers and partner agencies to plan for future community facilities and services needs and possible timeframes and siting considerations.

Factors	Impacts and Standards to Assess
Environmental Stewardship	• Natural boundaries should be used to guide the boundaries for potential new Development Areas and for identifying areas to protect and avoid, such as significant areas in steep slopes, protected stream buffers, and floodplain. These environmental features should be identified and mapped. • Assessment of the presence of areas identified in County policies and plans for enhanced protection and avoidance, such as important forest blocks and conservation areas identified in the County's Biodiversity Action Plan and the mountain protection areas.
Form, Density, and Redevelopment	• Prior to potential Development Areas revision (beyond minor adjustments), assess the extent to which the current Development Areas are meeting the Comprehensive Plan recommendations for a mix of uses, percentage of affordable housing, density toward the higher ranges of land use designations, walkable Activity Centers, multimodal transportation options, redevelopment and infill, and access to parks and trails.
If a potential area is in a water supply watershed	• Evaluation of whether the area is undeveloped/vacant or already has existing development. • Areas with no or very limited existing development or without underlying by-right zoning that would allow development (beyond typical Rural Area uses) should be avoided. • Areas with existing development that are inconsistent with Rural Area chapter recommendations may be considered, as these areas have already been impacted by development. Assessment of whether connections to public water/sewer and some additional development would have potential beneficial effects, especially to replace older or failing well and septic and to comply with updated stormwater management and other regulations.
Land use and expected form of development	• New development in expanded areas is expected to meet the Community Design Guidelines and other chapter recommendations for the Development Areas, including having a mix of land uses, a variety of housing types, parks, trails, multimodal transportation options, and employment and business opportunities. • Single-use areas may be appropriate with relatively minor boundary changes or for possible new Employment Districts, such as an employment center. • Expanded Development Areas should be adjacent to existing Development Areas, prioritizing the 'urban ring' (the Development Areas that are adjacent to the City of Charlottesville).

Factors	Impacts and Standards to Assess
Access to public recreation, parks, and trails	• Assessment of potential access to existing public parks, recreation opportunities, open space, and trails. • Coordination with ACPR to evaluate parks and recreation needs generated by potential new development in potential new Development Areas and to develop an estimated timeframe for when new public parks and trails could feasibly be provided, in collaboration with the private sector.
Potential impacts to and opportunities for nearby and adjacent areas	• Assessment of potential impacts to and opportunities for nearby and adjacent development. • For any new Development Areas/Rural Area boundary, the relevant recommendations from the Development Areas Land Use and Transportation and Rural Area Land Use and Transportation chapters should be followed, including having a 'hard edge' between the two areas. • Evaluate opportunities to connect existing neighborhoods in the existing Development Areas with new Activity Centers, neighborhoods, parks/trails, employment opportunities, and other amenities. • Plan for land use and transportation in a coordinated manner between existing and new Development Areas, including evaluating compatible land uses and multimodal transportation connections.







It's important to evaluate current infrastructure and services prior to any boundary revisions.

Along with an evaluation of the factors above the following should be presented to the Board of Supervisors as part of the Development Areas Report.

1. A generalized map of broad potential locations for future Development Areas boundary revision. Consider factors related to location such as:
   - whether the area is in a water supply watershed,
   - proximity to existing and planned infrastructure and services

   Priority should be given to protection of the natural environment and public water supply watersheds, ability to create multimodal connections with the adjacent existing Development Area, and cost and feasibility of needed infrastructure connections and improvements.
2. In collaboration with relevant service providers, County departments, and partner agencies, identify infrastructure that would need to be built or upgraded based on new development,
3. Potential timeframes for future revision by considering:
   - The current Development Areas meet the Comprehensive Plan recommendations for a mix of uses and density toward the higher ranges of land use designations.
   - The current services and infrastructure capacity to support future development in the proposed area.
   - Available funding to provide anticipated infrastructure needs.
4. Land use, transportation network, community facility, park, and preservation of natural areas and environmental feature recommendations for the proposed revision area. These recommendations should be established prior to the boundary revision and consistent with all appropriate county long range plans.





Protection of our water supply and the provision of recreational opportunities should be considered prior to boundary expansion.