



Nathan Ramsey, Chairman  
David Gantt, Vice Chairman

Carol Weir Peterson, Commissioner  
Bill Stanley, Commissioner  
David Young, Commissioner

### **State of the County Report – March 2008**

It is a pleasure to report that the state of Buncombe County is strong, our financial position is solid, and our future bright. It is the mission of Buncombe County to promote a healthy, safe, well-educated, and thriving community with a sustainable quality of life; to provide efficient and effective government our citizens can trust; and to deliver needed services through a responsive work force committed to excellence, integrity and teamwork.

The County exists to enhance the lives of our citizens. We are actively and successfully delivering services and meeting the responsibilities of County government. The County provides a wide array of services and programs made possible by the hard work and dedication of our Buncombe County employees. Over the last three years we have faced many challenges and celebrated many achievements. We hope you share our sense of pride in the accomplishments of county government which exemplify our commitment to public service. In this report we will provide general information about the state of the county, highlight some of our accomplishments, and outline some of the challenges we will face in the future.

#### **County Financial Position:**

Fiscal accountability is a long-standing practice in our county. The past few years have been a period of solid financial performance and wise investment in the community with a long-term perspective. The results have shown that our underlying fiscal policies are sound and we are careful in the stewardship of public funds.

Many positive indicators show that the county's financial position remains strong and can be stable into the future.

- In *FY07* the Commissioners were able to approve a decrease in the county tax rate for a second consecutive year
- The County posted its highest tax collection rate to date, 99.15%, which places Buncombe County 1<sup>st</sup> among North Carolina counties with a population greater than 100,000. This outstanding collection rate helps ensure the county treats citizens equitably and helps keep the tax rate as low as possible
- On Oct. 1, 2007, North Carolina enacted a state plan to phase out the county share of Medicaid. Specifically, counties relinquish a half-cent of sales tax revenue in exchange for the state assuming the entire nonfederal Medicaid share. The county projects its average annual savings for FY2008-FY2011 to be near \$2.8 million



- The County maintained elite bond ratings of Aa2 and AA with Moody's and Standard & Poor's, respectively.
- Of the \$199.7 million of debt outstanding, 72 percent is related to education.
- Local policy requires the County's unreserved fund balance for the General Fund to equal or exceed 15 percent of the total general fund expenditures and transfers. At June 30, 2007, this ratio was 19.8 percent compared to the average for like-sized Counties in NC of 18.09 percent.

## **Our Environment**

Our Commissioner's commitment to the environment runs deep. The health of our environment is essential, and we can proudly tell you that we are working hard to preserve our natural landscape, resources and quality of life. In that regard, since 2004, the Commissioners have put into action a number of ordinances that will impact our environment by helping to maintain orderly and responsible growth. Recent ordinances include stormwater, hillside development and county-wide zoning.

### **Stormwater Ordinance**

A post-construction stormwater ordinance was adopted by the Commissioners in September of 2006 to address increased stormwater runoff created by new development, requiring developers to determine if their activities will result in an increase in stormwater runoff. If an increase is anticipated, measures must be installed to diminish increases to pre-development conditions.

### **Hillside Development Regulations (slope development)**

The Hillside Development Regulations are a subsection of the Buncombe County Land Development and Subdivision Ordinance, and take effect when the overall tract to be subdivided is at or above 25% natural slope. The goal of these regulations was to ensure that responsible development occurred on steeper areas, setting forth standards to counter the possible adverse visual and erosion effects of such development. A civil penalty was also added to aid in enforcement of the Hillside Development Standards. These changes have improved the County's ability to regulate the effect of development on hillside areas.

### **County-Wide Zoning**

The goal of the Buncombe County Zoning Ordinance is to create compatible development throughout the County by more closely guiding development within the Metropolitan Sewerage District (MSD) service area. For property located outside the MSD district, use of property for limited, certain purposes must go through a public hearing process and is considered a conditional use of the property. Knowledge of zoning classifications allows homeowners, homebuyers, and developers alike to more easily ascertain the nature of development that might take place in their community.



## **Conservation Easements: *Protecting Buncombe County's Natural Beauty***

The *Buncombe County Land Conservation Advisory Board* was created by the County Commissioners in 2004. Together with the *Farmland Advisory Board*, which was created in 1989, they have worked diligently to promote the use of voluntary land conservation easements to preserve the beauty and ecology of Buncombe County.

Conservation easements are voluntary and permanent deed restrictions placed on an owner's property prohibiting or limiting future development on the property. Since the easements are voluntary, there is considerable flexibility afforded an owner in tailoring the easement to the owner's needs. The owner can continue to own, use, and live on the land and is generally given federal and state income tax incentives for their land donation.

Buncombe County selected ten high priority focus areas for preservation using conservation easements. Focus areas are in the beautiful mountain ranges throughout the County; the French Broad and Swannanoa rivers; and lands adjacent to the Blue Ridge Parkway. Since 2004 the County has invested \$3 million and preserved 2,000 acres.

## **Water Agreement Cancellation/Parks and Recreation**

The County formerly had a long-standing water agreement with the City of Asheville which was cancelled by the city in 2005. As a result of the cancellation of this agreement the County had several recreation assets that were returned to the city. These assets included the Municipal Golf Course, Recreation Park and Pool, Aston Park, The Nature Center and McCormick Field. After this shifting of assets, the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board undertook development of a comprehensive parks, recreations and greenways plan that will be presented to the County Commissioners in 2008.

## **Growth and Demographics**

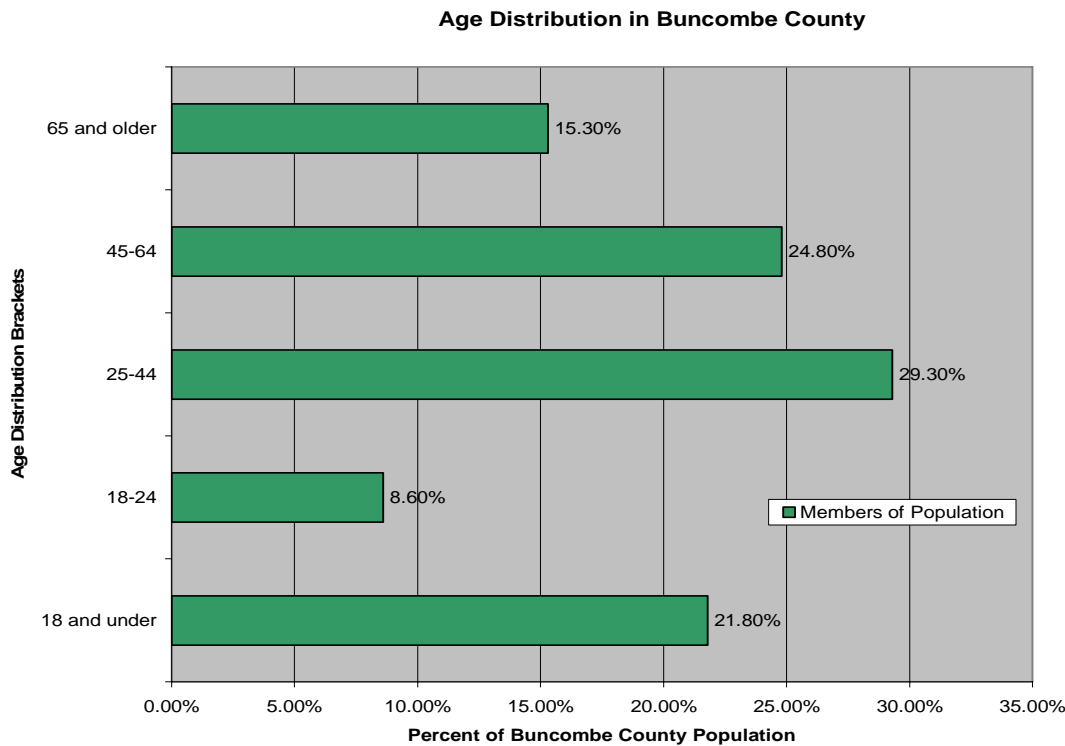
The County recognizes the critical importance of tracking demographic changes in the population to design and implement appropriate programs and services for our citizens.

Between 2000 and 2007, the population of Buncombe County grew from 206,330 to an estimated 221,776, an approximate 7% increase. Estimates indicate continued growth of approximately 1.3% per year. The addition of new residents over the last six years has been somewhat balanced between local births (43% of the total) and internal migration (49%), with an additional 8% of the growth coming from international migration. Census projections estimate that this reasonably moderate growth rate is expected to continue.



In terms of composition, Buncombe County’s population is approximately 48% male and 52% female. The racial make up of the county is approximately 88% non-Hispanic white, 7.3% Black/African American, 4% Hispanic/Latino (up from 2.8% in 2000), and less than 1% Native American, Asian and Pacific Islander. Trends also show a growth in the County’s Ukrainian population, .4%, up from .2% in 2000.

The age of the County’s population has been slowly increasing throughout the last several years, though there are possible dramatic changes in the foreseeable future. In real numbers, each of the age groupings have increased from 2000 to 2007. However, as a result of the “baby boom” generation reaching their 60’s and internal migration, the number of individuals 65 or older is estimated to increase by more than 30,000 by the year 2020, more than any other age group.



## Capital Accomplishments and Initiatives

It is a County goal to balance the need for additional economic and population growth opportunities with environmental stewardship through well-planned infrastructure expansion. Since 2004, Buncombe County has continued to make substantial investments in a number of important community projects.



*Detention Facility Expansion* - The current detention facility will expand to add a total of 248 new beds. Construction will add approximately 90,000 square feet of space, and renovate the existing booking and holding area along with the security systems of the existing facility. The addition to the Detention Facility is anticipated to be complete in the summer of 2008, and will increase the facility capacity to house 604 inmates. The jail population includes an average of 85 percent pretrial detainees (incarcerated but not yet adjudicated).

*Animal Shelter* - Buncombe County worked with the Asheville Humane Society to co-locate facilities for a new Animal Services Center and Adoption Center. Private land was donated for the construction of these facilities. Construction will include creation of a 14,000 square foot animal shelter located adjacent to a proposed Humane Society's Adoption Center. Construction is anticipated to begin in spring of 2008.

*Emergency Operations Center* – To house the administrative and communications functions of the Buncombe County Emergency Management Department, additions and alterations to an existing 15,000 square foot building in Leicester for the Emergency Operations Center began in 2006. This building will house the consolidated dispatch center for Buncombe County Emergency Management and Sheriff, plus Asheville Police Department and Asheville Fire Department. The Center is anticipated to be complete in spring of 2008.

*Parking Deck* – The County began construction of a parking deck in 2007. The deck is located at 35 Woodfin Street, and construction will consist of a 261,000 square feet, seven-tier parking deck accommodating 600-630 parking spaces. It is anticipated that the deck will be completed in late fall of 2008. The County also intends to construct a parking deck near the Human Services Building located at 40 Coxe Avenue. City regulations require we front Coxe Avenue with an office building; therefore, we will also add a 40,000 square foot HS building between the parking deck and Coxe Avenue. Architectural, engineering, and programming work is underway and initial meetings with the City of Asheville for design approval are being held.

*Consolidation of Permits and Inspections* – Environmental Health Inspection will co-locate with Building Permits and Inspections in spring of 2008 at 30 Valley Street. This move will facilitate location of both permitting divisions in one building, offering customer convenience and improved communications.

*ABTCC* – The County committed \$10.9 million for improvements to Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College facilities, including re-roofing all buildings on the Enka campus, renovations to the Fernhurst, Birch, and Maple buildings, the addition of a One-Stop Center to the Azalea building, and several paving projects.

*Library Construction and Renovation* – The County invested \$1.5 million toward completion of the new North Asheville Branch Library on Merrimon Avenue in May 2005. In addition, \$3 million was invested in the renovation and expansion of Pack Memorial Library for 2008-2009 as well as \$250,000 for renovation of the Black Mountain Branch Library for 2008-2009.



*Criminal Justice System Expansion* – The County has invested in the expansion of the automated criminal justice system, a partnership with the City of Asheville. This expansion will allow the 5 smaller municipalities in the county faster and more efficient access to law enforcement data.

*Paperless Government* – We are continuing to implement Document Management among the County's Departments, moving Buncombe County into a paperless environment, reducing both space requirements for document storage and personnel time required to retrieve records. Imaged documents also enhance our ability to provide more timely response to customer inquiries. It also provides greater opportunity to grow our E-Gov services and better citizen access to information about county services via our website [www.buncombecounty.org](http://www.buncombecounty.org).

## Challenges

As a County we are not immune to the many challenges faced by local governments across the state and the nation. As your government, it is our responsibility to have a firm understanding of these challenges and the expectations of our citizens.

One of the challenges we face is our *infrastructure*. With the anticipated growth in population, the County must continue to invest in the physical facilities necessary to provide important programs and services to our citizens. A few of the infrastructure challenges we face are: renovations and upgrades to the County Courthouse and Health Center, expansion of our Human Services Building on Coxe Avenue, and the need for additional parking facilities downtown. The initial phase of the Parks and Recreation Master Plan was received by the Board of Commissioners, calling for an aquatics center and an 8-field softball complex.

Looking forward, another challenge facing the County is our *changing demographics*. Buncombe County's population, like that in the rest of the country, is both aging and more ethnically diverse than at any other time in history. Estimates indicate we will continue to see a significant increase in the Hispanic and Ukrainian populations as well as adults over the age of 65. Responding to these demographic changes, through appropriate policy decisions and provision of services, will be important steps in assuring the continued success of our community.

Buncombe County is in the business of serving its citizens. However, it has traditionally been the responsibility of our citizens to come to us when seeking our programs and services. We are working diligently to face the challenge of bringing more of our programs and services to our citizens, and we will continue to seek out more efficient and innovative ways to take our services to the community.

Buncombe County's Commissioners are facing a softening in the economy as we move into the final year of this term. While certainly not as severe as many major metropolitan areas, we will proceed with caution as we move forward and develop budgets in this period of economic uncertainty. County services tend to be used more during challenging economic periods, so departments will find ways to continue providing quality services within the existing resources.



Our County has a long history of overcoming challenges and seizing opportunity. We will be boldly innovative in our problem solving while continuing to build our future plans within the strong financial foundation we have worked so hard to develop. We will continue to be one of the best-managed governments in the state. We have a strong Board of Commissioners along with excellent managers, technical staff, and employees who have given Buncombe County citizens a track record of which they can be extremely proud. We will continue to improve, invest, inspire and build a lasting legacy. We will continue to look ahead, move forward, and pro-actively meet the challenges before us.



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Nathan Ramsey, Chairman



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Wanda Greene, County Manager

