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**Press Release**  
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## Survey of Watauga Co. voters reveals strong support for conservation land-use planning

### Residents also support policies to avoid landslides

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*Representing:*

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#### Boone, NC –

The results of an opinion survey of Watauga County voters released today shows strong support across the board for adopting local development policies to conserve natural areas and minimize landslide hazards.

A strong majority of survey respondents are concerned about the impact development is having on the county's natural resources, with 70% to 80% expressing concern over impacts to water quality, groundwater, hiking and fishing access, open space, forest land, the county's rural character, and scenic views. Sixty-four percent of respondents are concerned about impacts to agricultural land.

The phone survey of 402 randomly selected Watauga County registered voters was conducted in March by Smithson Mills, Director of the Center for Assessment and Research Alliances at Mars Hill College, and funded by the Watauga-based [Helen M. Clabough Charitable Foundation](#). "We took great pains to ensure that our poll results reflected the demographics of Watauga County," Mills said. "The registered voters who answered our questions reflect the county as a whole in terms of political party and county commissioner voting district."

Watauga voters aren't just concerned about development impacts, however, they are willing to support policies to address those impacts:

- \* 90% agree with policies which preserve buffer areas adjacent to mountain streams to protect water quality;
- \* At least 80% agreed with need to protect wildlife habitat and corridors, promote voluntary conservation easements, and preserve scenic views;
- \* 70% support policies to maintain access to trails and rivers; and
- \* 60% support efforts to create connections between existing parcels of open space.

In particular, 80% of respondents support requiring large subdivisions to set aside natural areas for homeowner recreation and including in those natural areas stream banks, wildlife habitat, and any areas on a county greenway or open space plan.

Watauga residents also agree with policies to address landslide hazards and minimize the risks to homeowners. Not less than 80% agree that builders in landslide hazard areas should be required to consult an engineer, get special approval from the county for construction in those areas, site houses out of the path of potential landslides, and maintain or replant trees in landslide hazard areas to stabilize slopes. And more than 95% believe prospective property buyers should be forewarned about landslide hazard areas.

Mills noted the consistency of the results across the Watauga population. "I think our most surprising result is that we didn't see much of a divide among different demographics in the county. The policies we asked about received agreement from a strong majority of respondents without regard to political party or voting district. We even found stable levels of support for most policies between long-time county residents and newcomers, which is something a lot of people might not expect."

"Growth and land development are clearly at the forefront of issues in the county, so we wanted to know more specifically how Watauga citizens felt about various pieces of the puzzle. The results show strong support for being stewards of our natural resources - water quality, wildlife, beautiful scenery, and recreation," said DJ Gerken, Senior Attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center. "We hope this is timely and useful information as Watauga County revises its comprehensive plan and considers what steps it can take to make that vision for the county a reality."

Nancy Reigel, Board Chair of the MountainKeepers, a Watauga-based organization committed to safekeeping the special character of the region, agrees. "The results of the survey give us new and powerful insights into how the citizens of Watauga County view development and how its impacts need to be managed," Reigel said. "The results certainly validate what MountainKeepers has observed over the past years. The residents of Watauga County care deeply and seriously about their community and want to protect its character and the things that make Watauga special. We are truly pleased with the breadth of the community resolve for assuring any future development accommodate and protect our precious resources."

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