



Agenda Action Form Overview

The Board is requested to approve the purchase of 32 acres at 3601 Southwest Durham Drive, to use existing open space capital project funds to support 39% of project costs, and to authorize the Manager to execute the purchase agreement and grant contract documents as funding is secured.

Since the early 2000s, Durham County has held a trail easement across the proposed 32-acre acquisition site and has managed a two-mile loop natural surface and boardwalk trail that provides public access through the property and the adjacent New Hope Creek Preserve. County staff have maintained ongoing communication with the landowner throughout this time.

The proposed acquisition will protect significant natural resources, including water quality, rare plant and animal habitats, and an important wildlife corridor. The site contains a bottomland forest designated as a State Natural Heritage Area and supports the critically imperiled, State-listed shellbark hickory (*Carya laciniosa*), highlighting its ecological importance.

Background/Justification

Since the early 1990s, Durham County has protected over 300 acres of ecologically significant land along New Hope Creek and its tributaries. This effort began when the County joined three other local governments in adopting the [New Hope Creek Corridor Open Space Plan](#). Much of the protected area consists of the New Hope Creek Bottomlands, a mature, low-lying hardwood forest considered one of the most biodiverse ecosystems in central North Carolina. This ecosystem plays a critical role in protecting water quality in the Jordan Lake watershed and the Cape Fear River Basin.

Thanks in part to [research](#) supported by Durham County, the New Hope Creek Bottomlands is now one of the most extensively studied ecosystems in the state. These studies have highlighted its importance as a vital wildlife corridor and a habitat for rare species, including several not yet documented elsewhere in North Carolina.

Importantly, this research has also shown that Durham County's decades-long commitment to conservation has been largely successful. Without this sustained effort, the New Hope Creek Corridor would likely not be the vibrant, ecologically rich landscape it is today. However, key portions of the ecosystem remain unprotected and vulnerable — including this 32-acre tract.

This tract lies almost entirely within a State-designated Natural Heritage Area and received the highest possible score on the NC Natural Heritage Program's Biodiversity and Habitat Assessment. The tract is also identified as a Keystone Riparian Parcel in the Durham Critical Area Protection Plan, making it essential for maintaining water quality. It is an essential parcel for protecting habitat connectivity in the New Hope Creek Corridor.

Permanently protecting this tract would:

- Safeguard rare species and sensitive habitats;
- Preserve the ecological integrity of the New Hope Creek Bottomlands;



- Expand opportunities for research, stewardship, and environmental education;
- Establish a critical buffer for nearby conservation lands, including the Jordan Lake Game Lands and other County-owned Open Space parcels.

Durham County has already made significant investments in the boardwalk and natural surface trail within the County-held easement, established in 2002, to provide access to the County's adjacent 60-acre property to the north. Today, the New Hope Creek Preserve includes approximately two miles of walking trails, accessible from the City of Durham's Old Chapel Hill Road Park, adjacent apartments to the west, and Githens Middle School.

Acquisition of this tract would not only protect vital environmental resources but also enhance public access, education, and long-term stewardship of one of Durham's most treasured natural areas.

Policy Impact

The acquisition and protection of land for permanent open space aligns with Strategic Plan Goal 4: Environment – Protect natural resources and support and promote community and economic viability for all residents of Durham County, through the Natural Resource Stewardship and Protection Objective to protect and steward natural resources.

Additionally, Durham's adopted [Comprehensive Plan](#) includes policies to conserve significant natural areas, ecosystems, habitats, and wildlife corridors (Policies 78, 79, 83, 98) and safeguard drinking water sources for Durham and nearby communities (Policy 86). The Comprehensive Plan also includes policies that support the use and management of County-owned open space lands, including County parks and preserve, to improve their function and quality as "green infrastructure" (Policies 100 and 108).

The property's land use is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan's Place Type Map as "Recreation & Open Space" that acknowledges the importance of conservation and recreational lands: Recreation and Open Space land area community spaces that will remain free from development, with the exception of minimal buildings or structures to support recreational and cultural activities where desired and appropriate". This land protection contributes to the Comprehensive Plan's goal to place 30% of Durham County's land area in permanent conservation by the year 2050 (Policy 78).

Procurement (Acquisition) Background

n/a

Fiscal Impact

The County's Open Space Program was recently awarded \$326,525 from the [NC Land & Water Fund](#)—covering 61% of the project cost—to support the acquisition and permanent protection of the land. The County's share is estimated at no more than \$212,150, which is available through the Open Space and Farmland capital project account. No additional funding is required. A final project budget will be presented to the Board for approval prior to closing.



County Manager’s Recommendation: The County Manager recommends that the Board approve the purchase of 32 acres at 3601 Southwest Durham Drive, to use existing open space capital project funds to support 39% of project costs, and to authorize the Manager to execute the purchase agreement and grant contract documents as funding is secured.