



Durham Open Space and Trails Commission

ANNUAL REPORT

January to December 2025

1.0 Introduction and Mission

The Durham Open Space and Trails Commission (DOST) is appointed by the Durham City Council and Durham County Board of County Commissioners to advise on matters relating to the preservation of open space and development of trails, in order to provide recreational and environmental benefits for all residents of Durham. The Commission promotes the preservation of valuable open spaces, natural vegetation and stream valleys within the urban and rural environment, and the development of trails and other appropriate recreational and transportation facilities for pedestrians and bicyclists. The Commission fosters the wise use of the City's and County's natural resources and strives to involve all segments of the Durham community.

The definition of “Open Space” covers a wide variety of outdoor areas, including parks, nature preserves, conservation easements, gameland, cemeteries, buffers, and other areas that are mostly not developed (Figure 1.) Many of these spaces are publicly-accessible, although some are privately owned or have limited accessibility. “Trails” includes both natural surface and paved trails, primarily for pedestrians and bicycles, but may also include accommodation for scooters, wheelchairs, strollers and skateboards.

We engage with elected officials, community partners, local nonprofits and local residents to identify the most timely and important areas to pursue. In 2025, we interacted with City of Durham departments such as Parks and Recreation and Durham County departments such as Planning and Transportation, local non-profit groups and residents to support efforts related to the preservation of open space and the development of trails.



Figure 1. Some examples of some of the different types of Open Space and Trails in Durham. Clockwise, from top left: Durham Central park, trails at Hollow Rock park, DC Umstead farm conservation easement, Little River cemetery.

For calendar year 2025, DOST efforts have focused on 4 main areas:

1. Help inform elected officials and residents of Durham county of the history, diversity, successes and challenges of Durham’s open spaces and trails;
2. Make recommendations on Durham open spaces and trails for all Durham residents;
3. Encourage local nonprofits and community groups to develop outdoor open spaces and trails; and
4. Provide guidance to government officials on timely issues related to open spaces and trails.

In the following sections we summarize our accomplishments, and provide more details on our most important activities, summarized by committee.

2.0 Summary of 2025 Accomplishments

DOST was proactive and made their mark on different city initiatives and projects, see below:

- Provided active support for County and City acquisition, development and maintenance of land for public use, environmental conservation and greenways, and advise on issues that affect existing open spaces, including:
 - Examining the new Unified Development Ordinance to help ensure consistency with Comprehensive Plan (see Section 3.5);
 - Completing a resolution asking City Council to maintain the half penny dedicated to park and trail maintenance;
 - Approving and completing the DOST Open Space Report Card in April of 2025 and using these criteria to advise Planning Commission and City Council about the impacts on open space of the, planned developments at Moriah Ridge and Sheffield Farms (Section 3.3);
 - Continuing to monitor Capital Improvement Program (CIP) funding requests for projects related to parks, open space, and trails;
 - Requesting briefings on acquisition and development of County open space, such as the future park at Santee Road and the Orange Factory road farm campus/nature preserve; and
 - Supporting the purchase of conservation easements and donated land to be held by Durham County open space program

- Worked to expand the understanding of the public and elected officials around the variety of beautiful open spaces and trails in Durham - as well as identifying the challenges - when we:
 - Initiated quarterly DOST-sponsored public visits to particular open spaces and trails in Durham (Section 3.3);
 - Conducted a Trails Tour in May 2025 for City and County elected officials, to showcase the successes, highlight the needs and discuss how investment in open spaces and trails can create environmental and recreational opportunities that for all Durham residents (Section 3.1)

- Provided guidance and recommendations to the Matching Grants application review process to prioritize \$100K of grant funding for publicly-accessible open space projects in Durham (Section 3.2)

- Strengthened communication and coordination with other City and County boards and related committees that share some of our goals related to open space and trails, through active participation of commission members (Section 3.6), including:
 - Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission
 - Recreation Advisory Commission
 - Environmental Affairs Board
 - Farmland Protection Advisory Board
 - New Hope Creek Corridor Advisory Council
 - Durham-to-Roxboro Rail Trail Advisory Group
 - County Open Space stewards program

3.0 Description of 2025 Efforts

The following sections give more details on DOST accomplishments in 2025, as spearheaded by each of our committees.

3.1 Trails Committee

As of late 2025, the Trails Committee consists of 5 DOST members and 2 non-voting associate members. The Trails Committee has focused on maintaining momentum and support for new trail creation in the city and county of Durham.

The DOST Trails Committee, with support from DPR staff and the City and County Clerk offices, planned and implemented a 2025 Trails and Open Spaces Tour for City and County elected officials on May 14, 2025 (Figure 2). The tour included stops at: El Futuro (DOST matching grant recipient), Downtown Durham Rail Trail, Durham to Roxboro Rail Trail, Wheels Durham and Merrick Moore Park. The tour's stops highlighted recently completed open spaces in addition to trails currently under design. Multiple attendees took the opportunity to complete the tour by bike, highlighting the opportunities for further connectedness between parks and open spaces.

The DOST Trails Committee continues to advocate for expansion of Durham's trail systems, including those delayed in the design pipeline (e.g. Third Fork Creek extension) and those in the nascent stages of development (e.g. Durham-to-Roxboro trail). Through continued engagement with DPR, General Services, and our elected officials, DOST Trails Committee serves as a trusted citizen advisory board for trails planning and engagement. In 2025, DOST Trails Committee members contributed to multiple letters of support for the Durham-to-Roxboro trail, engaged with fellow Durhamites at community engagement sessions, and organized a bus field trip to the American Tobacco Trail for Durham county residents skeptical of the Durham-to-Roxboro trail (subsequently postponed due to limited interest from residents). Over the past year, the DOST Trails Committee worked to connect Durham citizens, elected officials, civil servants, and subject matter experts to encourage dialogue and support for the expansion of Durham's trail system.

In 2025, we closely followed the design and progress of negotiations for the Durham-to-Roxboro rail trail, with two representatives also serving on the trail planning advisory committee. Members attended community engagement sessions to listen to resident ideas, support and concerns about the trail, and we helped on public outreach events, providing one-on-one opportunities to communicate with residents about the rail trail.

In response to a DPR request, the DOST Trails Committee drafted a Natural Surface Trails (NST) policy. This draft policy includes a definition of NSTs, suggestions for ownership and responsibility, cataloging and mapping, registration of NSTs, and commitments to NST maintenance. The draft policy was approved by the full DOST Commission in August 2025.



Figure 2. Participants in the 2025 DOST trails tour

3.2 Matching Grants Committee

The Durham County Matching Grants Program for Open Space and Real Estate projects is now in its 35th year. The grant program provides matching funding for local nonprofits to pursue projects that protect open space or provide recreational opportunities for residents of Durham County. DOST's Matching Grants Committee reviews the applications and provides funding recommendations to Durham County grant administrators.

The projects must be open to the public. The program is annually funded from the County's operating budget, which for FY25-FY26 totaled \$100,000. The program requires a 50% match from applicants, which can include a cash match as well the value of volunteer labor towards producing the project. Over the life of the program, the Durham County Matching Grants program has supported more than 133 wide ranging community projects with a total value of over \$6 million dollars using \$2.0 million in county matching funds.

This cycle, the Committee received six applications requesting a combined \$212,515 in requested funds. The projects are summarized below. It is anticipated that DOST will recommend the projects for subsequent approval by the Board of County Commissioners, with final awards aligned to available program resources.

ORGANIZATION	PROJECT DESCRIPTION	APPLICANT'S FUNDING REQUEST	APPLICANT'S MATCH	TOTAL PROJECT VALUE
Art Among The Trees	Project upgrades trails, builds two gathering decks, creates a moss labyrinth, and adds a native pollinator meadow on a 7-acre property in Bahama.	\$3,750.00	\$1,250.00	\$5,000.00
Central Park School for Children	Funding builds the first phase of a hillside playscape, connecting play areas to Old North Durham Park.	\$59,220.00	\$64,220.00	\$123,440.00
El Futuro	Funding adds a Latino-inspired sound garden	\$42,500.00	\$42,500.00	\$85,000.00
Historic Stagville Foundation	Project creates a half-mile trail at Historic Stagville, connecting the new visitors center to historic landscapes with surfacing, footbridges, and signage.	\$23,045.00	\$4,000,000.00	\$4,023,045.00
Urban Community AgriNomics (UCAN)	Funding supports construction of UCAN's Welcome Center	\$60,000.00	\$60,000.00	\$120,000.00
Unique Places To Save	Funding supports the nature park's design and planning as well as initial recreation features accessible from the American	\$24,000.00	\$24,000.00	\$48,000.00

	Tobacco Trail			
	TOTAL	\$212,515		

3.3 Open Space Committee



Figure 3. Open space and trails events during 2025 that showcased the beauty and diversity of open spaces to Durham residents. Left: Hollow Rock Nature Preserve, right: Horton Grove.

As of late 2025 the Open Space Committee (OSC) consists of 4 DOST members and 3 non-voting associate members. Staff of the Durham County Open Space Program also attend each meeting. The Open Space committee met each month in FY24. It focused primarily on implementation of three of DOST’s goals for 2025.

1. *Conduct quarterly public visits to particular open spaces and/or trails in Durham to encourage awareness and use.* During the first half of the year OSC made plans for its first set of public visits: where to go, how to organize and publicize. In the second half it led a first public visit to Hollow Rock Nature Preserve, in coordination with the Durham County Open Space Program, and a second public visit to Horton Grove Nature Preserve, in coordination with the Triangle Land Conservancy, with support from the Stagville State Historic Site. In each case attendance was limited to twenty people, and in each case about twenty people attended, including both adults and children, and both long-time Durham residents and recent arrivals. OSC hopes to experiment next with a greenway trail public visit to the Third Fork Creek Trail and its prospective extension route. Once a full round of four quarterly public visits have been held, we will consider whether the program is ready to expand to monthly public visits on all second Saturdays.



2. *Advise the Planning Commission, City/County staff, County Commission, and City Council regarding proposed new or expanded developments that involve rezoning and have strong impacts on open space and critical watershed areas. Develop an Open Space Report Card by mid-2025 as a tool to highlight the projects' impacts in a clear, consistent, and easily understandable way.* With help from the Durham County Open Space Program as our technical consultants, OSC refined and completed its Open Space Report Card in early 2025, and it was approved for use by the full DOST in April. During this period OSC took to DOST for approval and then sent to the Planning Commission and the City Council letters (since the Report Card was not yet approved) about the impacts on open space of the Moriah Ridge and Sheffield Farms proposed developments, both of which the City Council then turned down.

OSC then created a four-member Development Review Team for implementation of the Open Space Report Card, reviewed all in-process cases in the Durham Rezoning Explorer, and selected a first set of active cases to review and apply the Open Space Report Card to. The first of those active cases will come to the Planning Commission in early 2026. In each case the Review Team will prepare an Open Space Report Card and bring it to the full Open Space Committee for review/approval before it is sent to the Planning Commission. Then the Open Space Committee will bring it to full DOST for review/approval before it is sent to the City Council (or in some rare cases the County Commission). In addition to its work on the Open Space Report Card, the OSC has in late 2025 been advising the Planning & Development Department on aspects of its Evaluation and Assessment Report that are related to open space issues and giving input to DOST's UDO Review Committee on open space issues.

3. *Work with the relevant Durham Parks & Recreation staff to support progress on the 2017 Urban Open Space Plan; create an agreed-upon list of the ten most feasible and highest-priority Policy Recommendations to fund and implement.* During the first half of 2025 the OSC met every other month with Durham Parks & Recreation Department (DPR) to review the 2017 Urban Open Space Plan as a whole and then to focus one at a time on its five districts, assessing (based on OSC field trips to each of the relevant sites) which of the policy recommendations were still relevant and feasible, and then prioritizing those recommendations. The OSC had progressed and started working through District 2 and were starting work on District 3. We were unable to continue due to unforeseen circumstances and lack of staff support. DPR had no staff assigned members who could continue this work with OSC and this caused the project to be abandoned. Two of OSC's strong recommendations for District 1 were passed on to the planners for the Durham to Roxboro Rail Trail, as they are important sites adjacent to the trail route. Lastly, the OSC's work on the Urban Open Space Plan will be useful when we work closely with planning staff on creation of the Durham City-County Open Space Plan in 2026.

3.4 Funding Advocacy Committee

In 2025, DOST established an ad-hoc committee to study how to better fund the implementation of Durham's already adopted open space and trails plans. The committee started by meeting with former Mayor Schewel, Sandra Wilbur in the City's Stormwater Division, and Celeste Burns (the County's Open Space and Real Estate Division Manager), but in order for this effort to continue it will require coordination with the Durham Parks and Recreation Department. This ad-hoc committee is currently waiting on 2026 positions within the department to be hired, as requested by the department, so it can continue its work.

3.5 Unified Development Ordinance Review Committee

Following the adoption of the City and County's current Comprehensive Plan in 2023, DOST has sought to provide input on how the plan is implemented through the updated Unified Development Ordinance (UDO). In September 2025, DOST established a committee to examine relevant sections of the UDO relating to open space and trails with an eye towards ensuring implementation of the goals within the Comprehensive Plan. Previous UDO modules (1: zoning districts, a new zoning map, and a draft use table, and 2: development standards) have outlined standards that influence pedestrian and bicycle mobility and transitions along developed properties, but DOST anticipates our greatest influence will be on Module 3, which contains language on environmental standards and infrastructure. With Module 3 expected to be released in the fall of 2026, the UDO review committee was organized to participate in opportunities for community engagement at the end of 2025. This effort will continue on in 2026, and will coordinate closely with the Durham Planning Department, as well as with other Board efforts in related areas (i.e. conservation easements, bike and pedestrian trails, environmental preservation).

3.6 Coordination with City and County Departments, other Boards, and Community Organizations

An important part of our work involves coordination with the County Open Space Department, and we support their efforts for permanent protection of open space, including conservation easements on small farms, land donations, and timely purchases of land that have environmental and ecological importance. The Open Space Program has a commendable track record of adding protected open space to Durham's inventory and will be a key player in achieving the goals of the Comprehensive Plan.

We work closely with Durham Parks and Recreation and support their efforts to develop and maintain trails and parks, and in their planning efforts to protect Open Space in the city.

Our active liaisons with the Farmland Protection Advisory Board, the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission, and the Recreation Advisory Committee are important.

In addition to our formal Durham City and County liaisons, DOST actively engages with representatives from external open space and trails-related organizations to provide insights, understand community perspectives, leverage resources and tap into additional expertise to achieve shared goals. Expanding and nourishing these interactions, and finding synergies, is important for achieving our shared goals. In 2025, we regularly welcomed related community organizations to present and discuss timely issues at our full DOST and our committee meetings. Community organizations we work with include the Ellerbe Creek Watershed Association, Triangle Land Conservancy, East Coast Greenway Alliance, Mountains to Sea Trail, Eno River Association, and others.

4.0 DOST Plans for 2026

DOST enters 2026 on strong footing and with clear priorities. We will continue to monitor developments in the community, and bring up both issues that we identify and those that are brought to us by City Council members, County Commissioners, our external partners, and others in the community.



We will continue to engage with City and County staff on the development of the new Unified Development Ordinance, on those sections related to Open Spaces, recreational opportunities for all residents, conservation overlays, and trails. We anticipate putting together a formal letter detailing our support and concerns in early 2026.

We look forward to assisting with the new City-County Open Space Plan, and will participate in a review of the Plan's recommendations for land acquisition and land protection, providing guidance where requested and appropriate.

We will monitor the progress of in-process greenways and parks, including the Durham Rail Trail, the Third Fork Creek Trail and the R. Kelly Bryant Bridge Trail. We will provide timely support where appropriate and when needed, which we anticipate in mid-2026. Additionally, we will continue work started in 2025, upon request by DPR, to develop a natural surface trails policy and work closely with DPR to determine implementation steps.

Working with the County Open Space program on publicizing, reviewing and vetting applications for the Matching Grants program is an important activity for DOST, as it encourages small nonprofits to contribute to supporting new open space projects. We will continue participating in this activity in 2026 by working with Durham to finalize the grants from 2025 (early 2026) and help with the 2026 grants (summer-to-winter 2026).

In 2026, we will participate in external planning committees including those for the Durham-to-Roxboro greenway, for the Orange Factory Rd. nature preserve (during Phase III), and others as they become available. We will continue to support the acquisition of new Durham-owned open spaces and conservation easements.

We highly value our interactions with Durham City and County officials and look forward to addressing any guidance, questions or tasks posed by elected officials during 2026.

5.0 Requested Resources for 2026

In 2025, the City Clerk's office provided DOST grant funds in the amount of \$1,000 to support the purchase of equipment and support activities such as a retreat or training. This funding allows DOST to work on team building activities and support public outreach efforts. We request the same amount for 2026 to continue our efforts as we integrate newly-appointed members, identify timely goals, and build on our newly-implemented public open space and trail trips.

The Matching Grants program (section 3.2) was an overwhelming success in 2025, with much more interest than available resources. Continued funding for this program, under the County Open Space department, is a high priority for DOST, but it has remained static for many years. We urge you to consider increasing the funding level for this popular and high-return effort.

6.0 DOST Attendance in 2025

The Commission consists of eight members appointed by the City Council, eight by the Board of Commissioners, and one by the City of Durham Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee. Membership in 2025 was 17. The attendance of each member is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Durham Open Space and Trails Commission - Attendance 2025

Name	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	% Present
City Appointees													
Maureen Quinlan (Chair)	P	P	P	P		P		P	P	A	P		89%
Adam Saulters						P		P	P	A	P		80%
Harrison Gilbert	P	P	P	P		P		P	P	P	P		100%
Orlando Watson	P	P	P	P		P		P	A	A	P		78%
Peter Whitehead	A												0%
Jason Page	P	P	A	A		P		P	P	P	P		78%
Joslyn Hartfield						P		P	A	P	P		80%
Forrest Perry	P	A	U										11%
Rann Bar-On	P	P	P	P		P		P	P	P	P		100%
Lindsey Bickers Bock	P	P	P	A		P		P	A	P	P		78%
County Appointees													
Courtney McGuire	P	P	P	P		P		P	P	P	P		100%
Eric Faust	P	P	P	P		P		A	P	P	P		89%
Taylor Shaw	P	P	P	P		P		A	P	A	A		67%
Deborah Luecken (Vice Chair)	A	P	P	P		P		P	P	P	P		89%
Steve Cohn (Secretary)	P	P	A	P		P		P	A	P	P		78%

Fred Myatt	P	P	P	A		P		P	P	P	P		89%
Stephen Artabane	P	P	P	P		P		P	P	P	P		100%
Ramsay Ritchie	P	P	P	P		P		P	P	A	P		89%
Liaisons													
Chelsea Cook (Alternate)													
Dale Mckeel - RAC	P	P	P	A		P		A	A	P	A		
Nate Baker - City Council	P		P	P		P		P	A				

Key Meaning:	
Present	P
Excused Absence	A
Unexcused Absence	U
No Meeting	
Not Part of Term	
Resigned	