

# **Durham County Open Space Program**

## **Update Report**

### **Background and Mission of the Open Space Program**

The Durham County Open Space Program works on behalf of the County to enhance the quality of life and sustainability of current and future generations by protecting natural, scenic and historic landscapes; conserving significant habitats, working lands, and cultural and natural resources; and by providing natural areas for public enjoyment.

The Open Space Program helps to achieve County Strategic Plan Goal 4” Environmental Stewardship and Community Prosperity”, as well as Goal 2 “Health and Well-being for all”, and Goal 5: “Accountable, Efficient and Visionary Government.” The program focuses on the protection of key open space properties, including properties purchased in fee simple, and protection of significant properties using permanent conservation easements. Program Priorities are based on the County’s adopted open space plans as further outlined below as well as the Durham County Farmland Protection Plan, the City-County Comprehensive Plan, and the County’s Strategic Plan.

The Durham County Open Space Program is housed in the Durham County Engineering and Environmental Services Department in the Open Space and Real Estate Division and consists of approximately 2.5 staff FTE’s. Program staff work with several advisory committees, including the Durham Open Space and Trails Commission (DOST), the Farmland Protection Advisory Board, and the New Hope Creek Advisory Committee.

This report briefly summarizes the Durham County open space progress to date and outlines continuing staff priorities as well as some new initiatives for the next two years. The overall program is summarized below, followed by individual overviews of the five open space related plans that the staff are working to implement: the New Hope Creek Corridor Open Space Plan (1991), the Little River Corridor Open Space Plan (2001), the East Durham Open Space Plan (2007), the Farmland Protection Plan (2009) and the recently adopted Urban Open Space Plan (2017). Links to these adopted plans are provided at the end of this memo. The DOST has provided a letter of support for these program priorities, which attached to this report.

### **Open Space Protection to Date**

**Summary of Overall Program** – To date, Durham County has protected 3462 acres of significant open space and farmlands in Durham County by purchasing the land for permanent open space, recreation and for farmland protection. These lands are an investment in Durham’s quality of life and environmental health for generations to come. Protected open space provides water quality protection for drinking water reservoirs, opportunities for low impact recreation, biodiversity and habitat protection, and lands for local foods.

Open space properties have been protected as a direct implementation of the open space plans that have been adopted by the City and County. These properties include 323 acres in New Hope Creek in 17 properties, 790 acres preserved in the Little River watershed in 12 properties, and 366 acres

in eastern Durham in two properties adjacent to Falls Lake. The adopted open space plans were prepared by the Durham City-County Planning Department and have implementation recommendations for both the City and County. This report includes overview maps, implementation summaries, and program priorities within each of these five planning areas on pages 4-13.

Durham County funds for open space protection projects have been provided annually through the CIP process using county contribution dollars (“pay as you go”) from the general fund, most recently at a rate of \$500,000 per year. The County’s open space program also relies heavily on grant funds, partnerships with non-profits and other local governments, and landowner donations to stretch Durham County’s investment. To date, the County has spent a little more than \$5,068,290 toward the total open space acreage protected, while leveraging \$13,809,870 in grants, partner contributions and donations. This means that Durham County funds represent 27 cents for each dollar of project value. This also means that for the overall program, Durham County funds have protected 3462 permanent acres of open space for an average of \$1,464 per acre of Durham funds.

**Recreation** - The County has two partnership parks jointly operated with Orange County available for citizens to enjoy – Little River Regional Park in northern Durham with 391 acres, and Hollow Rock Nature Park off of Erwin Road in southwest Durham with 75 acres. Little River Regional Park has seven miles of hiking trails, eight miles of mountain biking trails, an accessible paved walking loop, two popular picnic shelters, and occasional recreational and environmental programming provided by park staff. Hollow Rock Park on Erwin Road is still in partial development but is currently open to the public with 1.8 miles of nature trails, an open play field, and trail access to Duke Forest. The Open Space staff manage two other Durham County owned nature preserves with trails open to the public – the 1.5-mile New Hope Bottomlands Trail, and the 2.5-mile Matthews Road trail on the Little River.

Future recreational opportunities include two properties in eastern Durham - the 263-acre Santee Road property purchased by the County in 2013 provides a significant opportunity for low-impact recreation adjacent to Falls Lake. Similarly, the 133-acre Southview Road park off on NC 98 was purchased in 2016 jointly by the City and County as a key water quality and recreation property which is also adjacent to land owned by the Army Corps for Falls Lake. The city owns 30 acres in the center of the overall site where it plans to build a community park sometime in the future, while the County owns 103 acres that wrap around the city property where future natural trails can be located.

**Farmland Protection** - The County has had an active program of farmland protection since 2001, with the Durham County Farmland Protection Advisory Board providing oversight and guidance. Preserving farmland has benefits for water and air quality, for local food production, and for scenic rural character, and for community education and rural experience. The County presently has permanently protected 2130 acres of farmland with conservation easements on fourteen farms, as shown on the map on page 12. There are also six additional farms totaling 282 acres that have been approved by the Board of County Commissioners for easement funding and have also been awarded federal matching funds. With a conservation easement, the land stays privately owned and on the tax roll as a working land but cannot be developed in the future.

**Partnership Projects** - Durham County has a long and successful track record of successful partnership projects. The first major partnership was for the acquisition of Little River Regional Park, which involved the Triangle Land Conservancy, the Eno River Association and Orange County with Durham County. This partnership leveraged four different grants to assist with the initial acquisition and site development of the park. Hollow Rock Nature Park is another major partnership, involving the Triangle Land Conservancy, a neighborhood group (EANG), the City of Durham, Town of Chapel Hill, and Orange County. Orange and Durham Counties jointly oversee the site development and management of the park. The County has had several smaller partnerships on other open space acquisitions that have helped to stretch Durham's dollars as outlined above.

Presently, the City of Raleigh helps to fund open space protection efforts in the upper Neuse River basin, primarily by supporting the efforts of several local open space non-profits through the Upper Neuse Clean Water Initiative (UNCWI). Durham County can be particularly cost-effective in its open space protection efforts by utilizing these partnerships in the Falls Lake watershed. Non-profits such as Triangle Land Conservancy (TLC) can help write grant applications, assist with landowner outreach, and request UNCWI funds for water quality related land protection purchases. In addition, the City of Durham has recently begun to also provide a modest amount of annual funding towards water quality land protection projects upstream from Lake Michie and the Little River Reservoir (\$100,000 per year). County staff believe these partnerships are particularly cost effective for Durham County on high scoring, critical properties for which the County would want to pursue protection.

Staff will continue to work on the general open space program priorities as bulleted below, as well as work to implement County open space project priorities within the five open space plans as summarized on the following pages.

### **Overall Program Emphasis**

- The program will continue to have an emphasis on project partnerships and leveraging grants to help stretch county funds and staff efforts.
- The program will continue to administer the Durham County Matching Grants program for open space and recreational projects. (This role began in fall 2017).
- The program will continue to manage and steward the existing county nature trails, namely New Hope Bottomland Nature Trail, trails on the Durham portion of Hollow Rock Nature Park, and the Matthews Road trail in northern Durham on the Little River.
- The program will continue to engage the community through volunteer trail building and stewardship efforts in Durham as a way to involve and educate the local community about open space efforts.
- The program will continue to monitor the 2130 acres of existing farmland conservation easements on fourteen farms, working closely with the landowners.
- Staff will continue to represent Durham County while working with multiple advisory committees and citizen groups, including the Farmland Protection Advisory Board, the Durham Open Space and Trails Commission, and the New Hope Creek Advisory Committee, and other regional open space protection efforts.

## **Attachments**

Plan Summaries  
DOST Commission Support letter

## **Links to Adopted Open Space Plans:**

[New Hope Corridor Open Space Master Plan 1991](#)

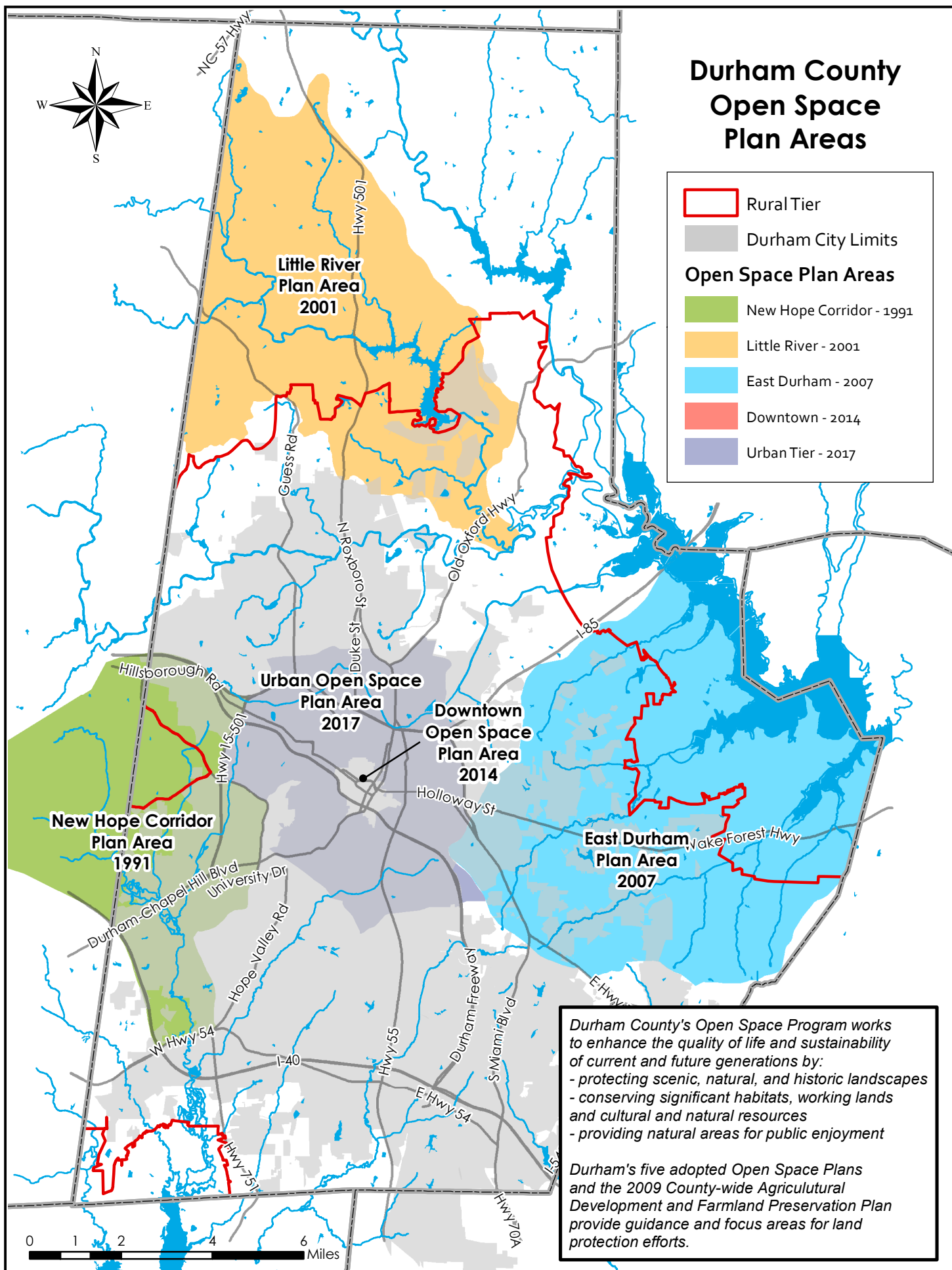
[Little River Corridor Open Space Plan 2001](#)

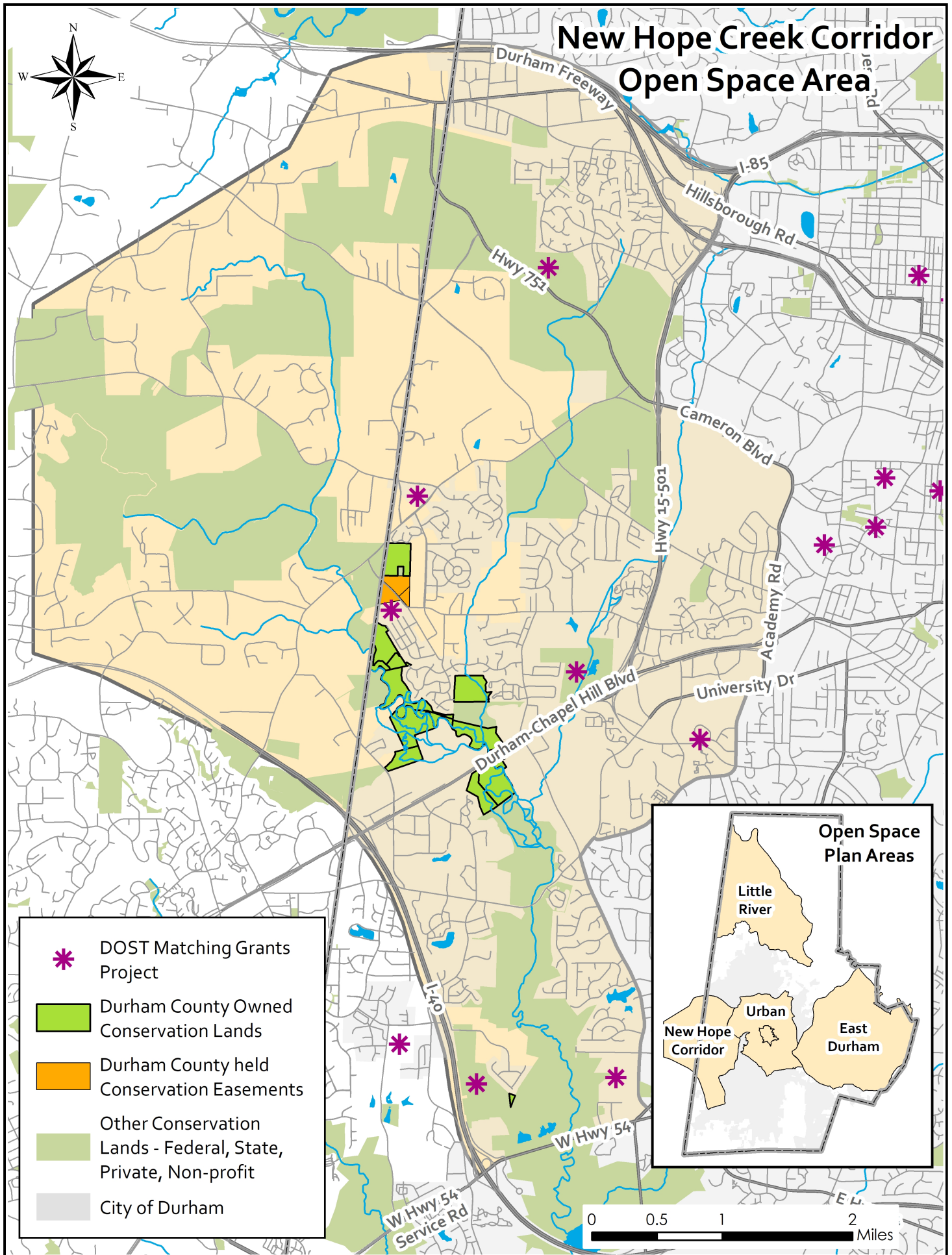
[Eastern Durham Open Space Plan 2007](#)

[Urban Open Space Plan 2017](#)

[Durham County Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Plan 2009](#)







## **New Hope Creek Corridor Open Space Plan – Adopted by Durham County in 1991**

[New Hope Corridor Open Space Master Plan 1991](#)

**Why is it important?** The New Hope Creek Corridor is recognized by the State of North Carolina as one of the most significant natural heritage corridors in the triangle region and state. The New Hope Creek Corridor Open Space Plan was a joint planning effort of the City of Durham, Durham County, Town of Chapel Hill and Orange County

### **County Implementation:**

**Land Protection** - The County has acquired 295 acres over the past 20 years for the “New Hope Preserve” - the broad floodplain area between the Army Corps of Engineers land near Old Chapel Hill Road, northward to the Orange-Durham county line.

### **Recreation:**

**New Hope Bottomlands Trail** – the County built and maintains the New Hope Bottomlands trail, which is accessed off the Old Chapel Hill Road city park. This 3.2 mile trail traverses the New Hope bottomland hardwood forest along New Hope Creek.

**Hollow Rock Nature Park** – This was a joint project with involving Durham County, Orange County, Town of Chapel Hill, Triangle Land Conservancy, and the Erwin Area Neighborhood Group. A Master Plan for site development was approved by the jurisdictions in 2009. Orange and Durham counties took the lead to jointly build the initial phase of Hollow Rock Park, including the parking lot, restrooms and trails, and each County manages their side of the line.

**Development Review** – Staff has assisted the New Hope Creek Advisory Committee in several large development review cases that could impact the investment the county has been making in the protecting the New Hope Corridor from the off-site impacts of new development.

### **Community Input**

- County staff works closely with the New Hope Creek Advisory Committee and also gets input from the Durham Open Space and Trails Commission.
- A multi-jurisdictional research group, the “Eno New Hope Collaborative” has worked over the past three years to identify and update the ecological natural heritage values of this important corridor. They are expected to release their report in late 2019.

### **Partnership and Funding Opportunities:**

Orange County, City of Durham, Chapel Hill as well as Triangle Land Conservancy.

Grants include NC Clean Water Mgt Trust Fund, NC Parks and Recreation Trust Fund

### **Priority Efforts:**

#### **Land Protection-**

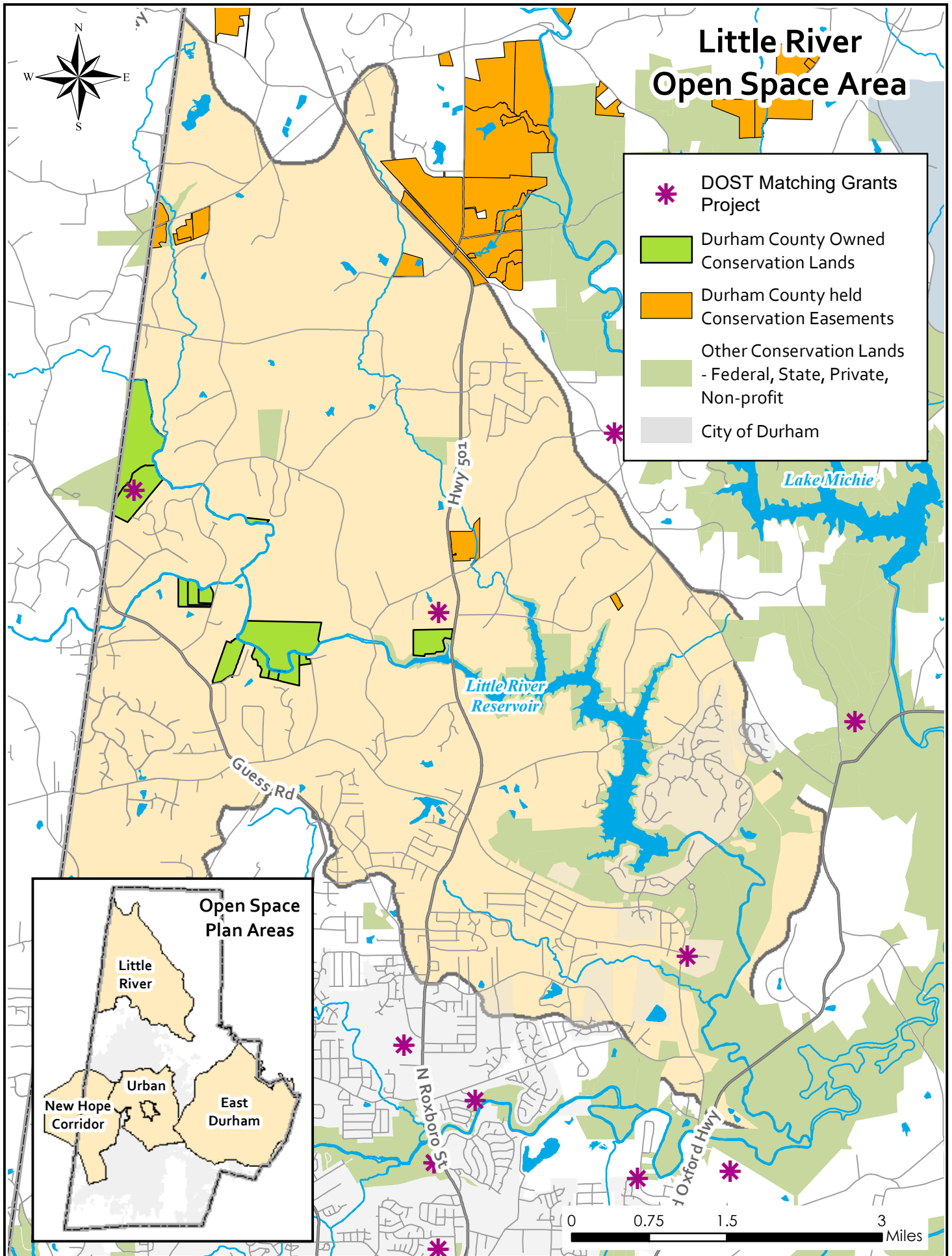
The County will continue to pursue acquisition and preservation around the New Hope Preserve lands, particularly between the Army Corps lands and the Orange-Durham County line. This will include purchases of opportunity as well as potential donations or conservation easements.

#### **Recreation -**

**Hollow Rock Phase II** – The County will continue to work with our Orange County Partner to continue with Hollow Rock site development, phase II. This will include an accessible walking trail, interpretative signage at the Hollow Rock Store and trails, and renovations to an environmental education shelter.

**Trail connections-** Staff will be working with two adjacent private developments to ensure coordinated public connections. These include new apartments which connect into the New Hope Creek Bottomlands Trail, (Solis at Patterson Place), and a new subdivision with planned trail connections into the eastern side of Hollow Rock park (Kendrick Estates).





## **Little River Corridor Open Space Plan – Adopted by Durham County in 2001**

[Little River Corridor Open Space Plan 2001](#)

**Why is it important?** The vast majority of the Little River Corridor is in the watershed for the Little River Reservoir, a drinking water supply for the majority of Durham residents. The State has identified the corridor as a significant natural heritage corridor, stretching into Orange County. The watershed will face increasing development pressures as Durham continues to grow.

### **County Implementation:**

**Land Protection-** The County has protected 790 acres of permanent open space over the past 19 years as shown on the attached Little River map (618 acres acquired, 172 acres protected with easements). The County has previously adopted acquisition priorities for the Little River corridor that focused on protection of the primary Little River corridor, plus significant tributaries.

### **Recreation -**

**Little River Regional Park** – This 391 acre park and natural area has been a joint project between Durham and Orange Counties, with funding assistance from the Triangle Land Conservancy, Eno River Association, NC CWMTF, federal LWCF funding and NC PARTF grants.

**Matthew Road Trail** - The County completed this 2.2-mile nature trail in 2011. This trail loops through a variety of habitats on the south side of the Little River with access and limited parking off of Matthews Road. Improved parking can be provided in the future when the property connects to the Cain Creek Natural Area, a county owned property to the west with a site identified for a parking lot and trail head

### **Community Input**

Input would be provided from the Durham Open Space and Trails Commission.

For Little River Park, the park staff collect user survey and input from visitors on a regular basis, and additional input is provided by Orange County.

### **Partnership and Funding Opportunities:**

Triangle Land Conservancy, Eno River Association, N.C. Clean Water Mgt Trust Fund, City of Raleigh's Upper Neuse Clean Water Initiative, the City of Durham's Water Supply Watershed Protection program, Orange County

Triangle Land Conservancy is actively working on protection projects within the Little River watershed, as well as the Eno River Association. The County can facilitate more land protection in a cost effective and time efficient manner within this area by supporting partnership projects with TLC or ERA for high ranking protection opportunities.

### **Priority Efforts:**

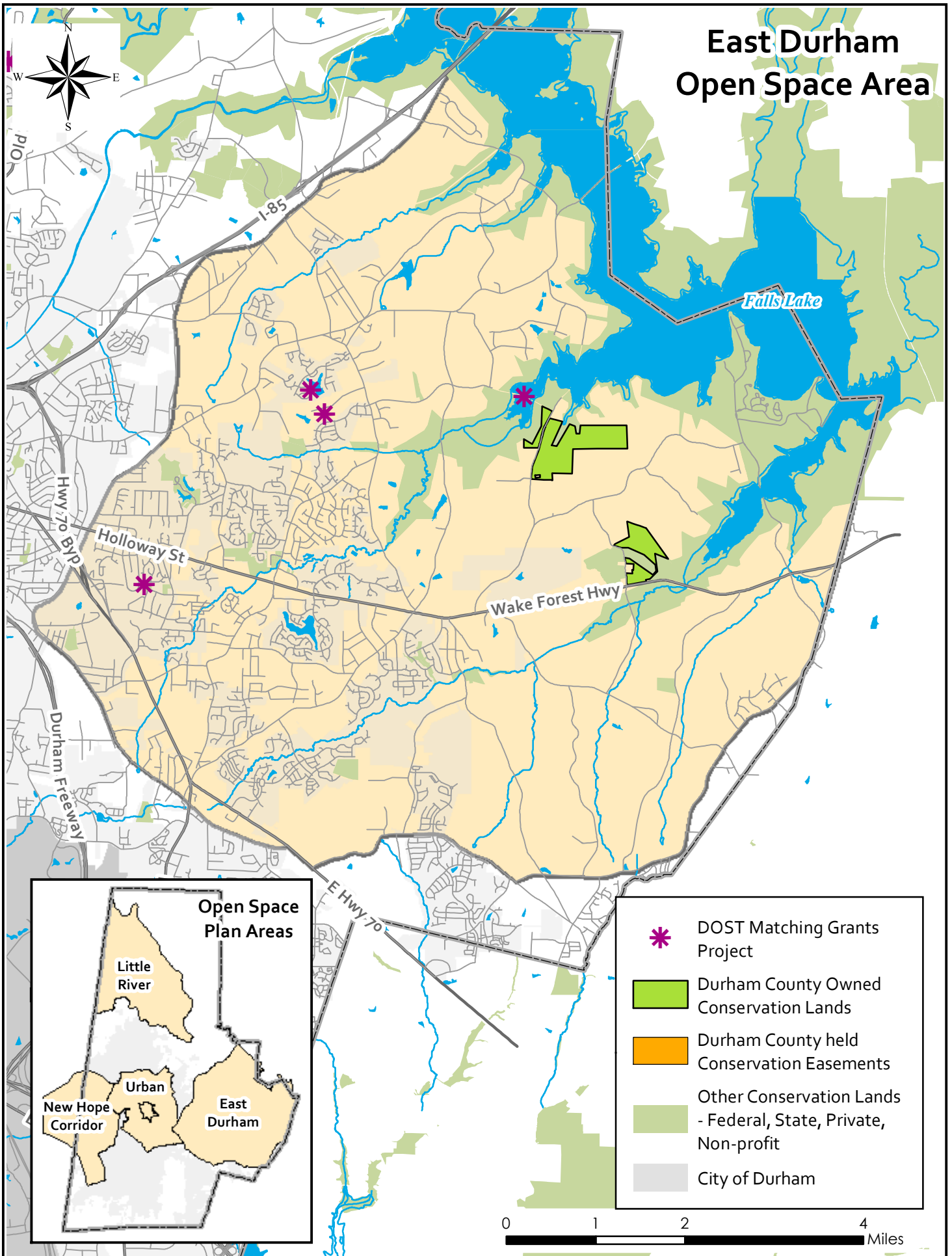
**Land Protection-** The County will continue to pursue acquisition and preservation of this critical open space corridor. This will include purchases of opportunity, as well as potential donations and easements.

In December, staff will be bringing to the BOCC a partnership project with Triangle Land Conservancy (TLC) for a conservation easement on the O'Neal tract, a 33- acre high scoring open space tract adjacent to existing county owned lands. This protection project is upstream from the Little River Reservoir and would be jointly funded by the City of Durham, City of Raleigh, and Durham County. TLC has already received preliminary funding from the City of Raleigh and City of Durham for their costs towards this easement.

### **Recreation -**

**Little River Regional Park (LRRP)** – Staff are working with Orange County to complete the Master and Management Plans for the park, which are required under the Interlocal Agreement for the joint park management. These plans will be brought to the DOST for review and BOCC for adoption in the spring of 2020.

# East Durham Open Space Area



## **Eastern Durham Open Space Plan – Adopted by Durham County in 2007**

[Eastern Durham Open Space Plan 2007](#)

**Why is it important:** The Eastern Durham Open Space Plan includes many major tributaries to Falls Lake, a drinking water supply for the City of Raleigh. The State has identified much of the planning area as having natural heritage significance. This area is also a fast growing portion of the county, so protection of important open space and recreation areas is crucial before they are developed.

### **County Implementation:**

#### **Land Protection** –

**Santee Rd property** – The county purchased the 263-acre Santee Road property in 2013. This significant open space site is adjacent to Falls Lake lands and the Mountains to the Sea trail. It was purchased for less than market value with grant assistance from the City of Raleigh UNCWI program.

**Southview Road Park** - This 103-acre partnership park was acquired with funding from the City of Durham, UNCWI, and CWMTF funds in 2016. The City has plans to develop the 30-acre central portion in their ownership for a community park, and the county would build trails in the 103 acres of open space surrounding the city park. The park will be developed when the City is ready, and at this time it is not programmed.

**Recreation** – No county projects have been developed at this time. Both the Santee Road and Southview properties have recreation potential.

#### **Community Input**

Input would be provided from the Durham Open Space and Trails Commission.

In addition, community meetings would be held to gather citizen input before planned recreational development of either the Santee Rd or Southview properties.

### **Partnership and Funding Opportunities:**

City of Durham, Triangle Land Conservancy, N.C. Clean Water Mgt Trust Fund, City of Raleigh's Upper Neuse Clean Water Initiative. Also, for recreational improvements – NC Parks & Recreation Trust Fund grants

**W.C. Smith Donation** - The Durham Parks Foundation, on behalf of the County, received a \$205,000 donation from WC Smith in 2017 in order to build a county park. This significant donation will help to pay for improvements to the Santee Road park or other parks in eastern Durham County.

### **Priority Efforts:**

#### **Land Protection**

**Panther Creek open space corridor** – this corridor was identified in the East Durham plan as a high priority, both for its natural habitat and water quality values, and also includes the former railroad corridor that links central Durham with Falls Lake. This corridor has been identified by the DOST as a high priority corridor, and it is both within and outside city limits. The County OS program should begin acquisition of protecting the OS corridor. Because the rail bed is within this area, protection of the OS corridor will protect portions of the rail corridor, making it available for later trail efforts.

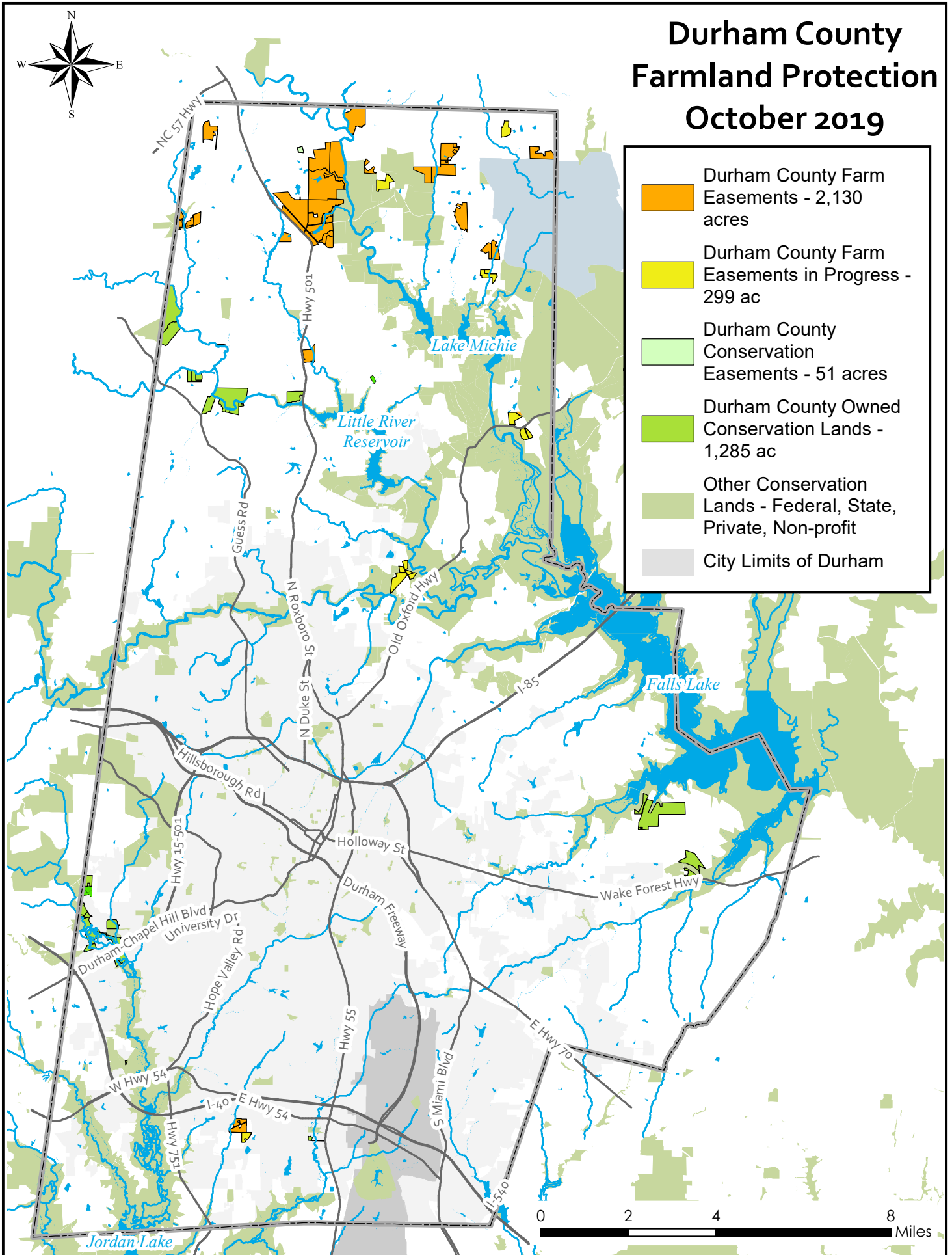
In addition, the County will continue to pursue acquisition and preservation of particularly key open spaces within the east Durham OS Plan area.

#### **Recreation**

**Santee Rd** – Staff is working with the City of Durham on initial concepts for shared park development for this key site, with the City developing the bulk of the building improvements and maintaining the improvements, with the partnership parameters brought to a future BOCC work session.



# Durham County Farmland Protection October 2019





**Durham County Farmland Protection Plan – Adopted by Durham County in 2009**  
[Durham County Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Plan 2009](#)

**Why is it important:** Protection of key farmland helps to ensure that Durham has a variety of land uses, including locations for local food production. Farmland often has important natural heritage values and easements keep the property in private ownership as working lands, while preventing future development.

**County Implementation:**

**Land Protection** – The county has protected 2,131 acres of permanent farm and forestland land on 15 farms in Durham. The properties remain privately owned, managed and on the tax rolls, while providing open space benefits for the community. Seven more farms are funded and in progress, totaling another 299 acres.

**Recreation:** n/a

**Community Input**

Advisory input is provided from the County's Farmland Protection Advisory Board

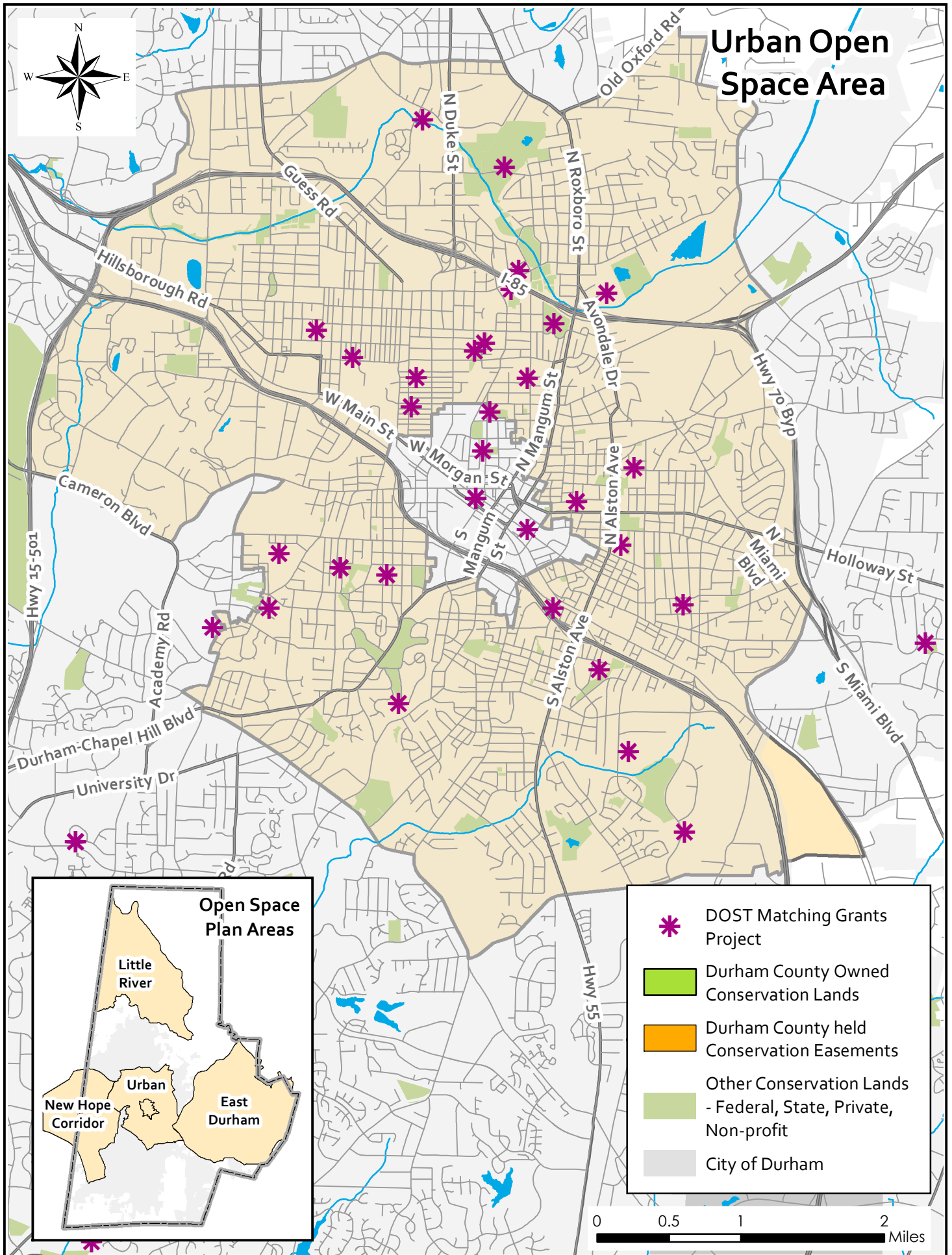
**Partnership and Funding Opportunities:**

Federal ALE Grants (Agricultural Lands Easements) State of NC ADFPTF grants

Staff has been working with representatives from Camp Butner regarding some limited federal funds for protection of lands surrounding Camp Butner to limit future residential use that could conflict with its functions. These funds could be used to pay for ½ of the cost of farmland conservation easements that are within a 1-mile priority area around Camp Butner. A Cooperative Agreement will be brought to the Board in the near future to spell out the partnership terms.

**Priority Efforts:**

- County staff will continue to work to close out the 6 federal projects for which grant agreements are in place.
- Staff will continue to pursue acquisition and preservation of particularly key farmland conservation properties and pursue grant funds for easements on the farms
- Staff will review an ACUB Cooperative agreement for funding of land protection in the 1- mile area surrounding Camp Butner, which will be brought to the BOCC in early 2020.
- Staff will be bringing to the BOCC a donated conservation easement on a 22-acre addition to the Herndon Farm conservation easement in December 2019.
- Staff will continue to participate with the Farm Board's farm campus working group.



## Urban Open Space Plan – Adopted by Durham County in 2017

[Urban Open Space Plan 2017](#)

**Why is it important:** Protection of open space within the urban portion of the City is important for the long-term quality of life in this more densely developed part of the County. Additional open space can help to support additional tree canopy which reduces urban heat island impacts and improves air quality.

### County Implementation:

**Land Protection** – County staff have been working with the DOST’s open space committee to develop recommended projects for the County to pursue in this planning area.

**Recreation** - The City is responsible for parks, greenway trails, and recreational efforts within this planning area. Over the past 25 years, the County has supported multiple Matching Grants projects within the Urban Open Space Planning area as shown on the map.

### Community Input

Advisory Input would be provided from the Durham Open Space and Trails Commission. Additional input would be gathered from the City’s community engagement process underway for several trail projects that occur within the planning area.

The matching grants program supports community-initiated projects, with many happening within the Urban OS planning area.

### Partnership and Funding Opportunities:

City of Durham, non-profits including the Ellerbe Creek Watershed Association, the City of Raleigh’s Upper Neuse Clean Water Initiative (UNCWI)

The Matching Grants program works in partnership with non-profits to provide open space and recreation projects on a 50/50 matching basis (including volunteer time). These nonprofit community efforts often bring substantial partnership matches from other grants and fund-raising efforts.

### Priority Efforts

- Staff is working with the DOST Open Space Committee to develop their Urban Open Space Scoring criteria, to be used to review potential projects
- Staff is working with the DOST’s Open Space committee to develop recommended projects within the urban open space area. These would be brought to the DOST and BOCC when they are ready. Priority will be placed on properties that can meet multiple policy objectives (water quality, healthy neighborhoods, public support, etc.)
- Continued support for the Durham County Matching Grants program, which can help finance community-initiated projects.
- The Durham to Timberlake rail trail corridor begins within the urban open space planning area. It is not currently for sale but would be a high priority for acquisition should it become available in the future.