

IN THE SHADOW OF HOGAN’S MOUNTAIN

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Thoughts about the Esplanade at Lake Hickory Development

By WARREN HOLLAR

The impact of the Esplanade at Lake Hickory Development creates major concerns for many residents. The scope of the project has the makings of exceptionally difficult circumstances for developing infrastructure to meet basic needs for the existing population and the influx of primarily senior citizens housed in a development with nearly 500 homes.

Addressing these issues as unified citizens will require civic involvement to clearly state community needs. By working cooperatively, citizens can best identify issues, causes, and effects of this largest development ever in Alexander County. We once had a very active community development association in Bethlehem with representatives from churches, clubs, business, government, education, and people living in various areas of the community. Now it does not exist. Both civic clubs and churches must work diligently to find membership to both identify needs and plan functions to foster agreed upon community goals.

Personally, I am saddened by the loss of green space, the lack of transportation infrastructure, and a plan to address the medical needs of older citizens in a system already overburdened. Personal safety in overtaxed areas is a major concern, whether it is hitting a deer escaping from changed landscapes or traffic accidents along overgrossed roads. This is a systemic issue beyond the county lines of Alexander County as in-migration can easily overwhelm previous lifestyles.

Knowing that companies or corporations have a primary goal to have net positive revenues, residents should be concerned that these companies pay their fair share to keep current residents from facing challenges not of their making. County government and elected officials must understand that the Bethlehem area is paying a significant portion of county taxes and should receive just returns for those payments by carefully monitoring and enforcing long range plans.

So, what is to be done? The first step is for the population to understand what the agreement with the builders entails. Complaining and blaming on social media is often not productive in addressing any real or perceived community issues. As a long-time community activist and university leadership professor, I believe in first fleshing out the major facts related to organizational issues.

My first suggestion is for residents is to become informed with the legal structures and carefully read the information from the public hearing of the county commissioners in October 2024. Read the county release at <https://alexandercountync.gov/public-hearing-held-to-consider-rezoning-request-for-housing-development-in-bethlehem/> and the minutes from the public hearing and board action at <https://alexandercountync.gov/minutes-agendas/2024-docs/20241007m.pdf>. (You may need to hit Open Hyperlink to read the links.)

The second step is to have an unbiased view of the whole issue. The June 2026 *Business North Carolina* article by David Mildenberg provides a succinct overview. (You may need to hit Open Hyperlink to access the complete article.) <https://businessnc.com/nc-trend-a-top-wall-street-investor-finds-joy-in-north-carolina-wine/>.

Significant issues in outline form, identified by Mildenberg

- It's the biggest residen-

tial development ever in the county, and most likely the most impactful economic development trigger, reflecting the impact of new residents entering a formerly rural area. It also reflects the increasing popularity of the Hickory metro area as population growth spreads statewide. One should note the increase in building projects in surrounding areas as national home builders have started projects in our area. Personal note: Catawba County and points north are now dealing with issues of schools as witnessed by the consolidation of schools, dealing with lower school age population, and not providing affordable housing conducive to younger families.

- In April, Bruce Alexander, an Asheville developer and the site's primary landowner since 2007, sold the land to Taylor Morrison in a deal facilitated by Dan Owens, owner and principal of Charlotte's Senior Housing Services. The project will be part of its Esplanade brand, which caters to early retirees and active adults looking for resort living. It has more than a dozen Esplanade communities in California, Florida, North Carolina and Texas. The sole [existing] N.C. project is in Indian Trail in Union County.

- While the developer is a giant company, two NC residents are key forces in the project. Bruce Alexander began age-restricted housing development in 1996 and now includes projects around the Asheville area and one in Hickory, for a total of about 1,200 homes. Alexander was aided by support from his lender, Newton-based Peoples Bank. Over the past 25 years, Owens has brokered dozens of independent living, assisted living, skilled nursing facilities and other projects related to senior housing in several states.

- Taylor Morrison hasn't set pricing for the project, but the goal is to have the first homes in 2027. But assuming the homes average \$500,000, including higher-priced ones with lakefront views, the project could add about \$250 million to the tax base of Alexander County. At a \$600,000 average price point, it's a \$300 million impact.

- In 2024, county leaders said the development would result in \$1.6 million in annual property tax revenues, plus another \$340,000 for fire district and water and sewer needs. Note: That's big news for a county that has a population of about 37,000, but the brunt of the changes is in southwestern area of the county and doesn't involve a strategic economic plan and affordable housing for younger citizenry. Old people die sooner than young people, often after consuming the health and other resources. Without economic development and affordable housing, our area becomes just a citizenry of older people who tend to be consumers instead of producers of sustainable resources.

- The Bethlehem-area development hasn't come without a fight. Concerns over the density of housing, increased traffic and environmental impacts has spurred opposition to growth plans for years. Roadside signs and a Facebook group have opposed "high-density" housing plans. The 215-acre property is slated as a "resort-living" community with a clubhouse, docks, and other amenities. Note: As a school administrator, I remember working diligently to integrate new residents of Lakemont Park at the end of 20th Century. Today, we have affluent residents along Lake Hickory who have a definite

Hickory orientation who often do not understand the needs of the Bethlehem Community.

- Realizing that growth was coming, Alexander County officials changed rules in May 2024 to eliminate minimum lot sizes in favor of "density-based zoning." That also reduced front, side, and rear setback requirements for most areas.

- Taylor Morrison's plans call for 2.3 houses per acre, which is less than the four per acre permitted by the county. About 75 acres of the hilly area will be open space.

- Some residents have pushed for an incorporation of Bethlehem as a way to provide stricter control over zoning and add law enforcement and street maintenance services. The state Local Government Commission voted 6-2 in December for a proposal suggesting that Bethlehem's incorporation could be financially viable.
- However, the county's five county commissioners promptly said they opposed the incorporation plan. According to local media reports, the majority of 7,800 Bethlehem-area residents don't favor incorporation. The two most often reasons included that funds distributed to an incorporated town would require additional county taxes to offset tax funds designated for town use. The proposed northern boundary of the town would have little benefit to that area.

- County officials have approved the Taylor Morrison residential project and site development started in May. The company still has to submit and receive approval for proposed amenities, according to the county planner.

- Lake Hickory has long been an under-the-radar destination for Charlotte-area buyers because few homes were available, Owens says. With nearly a mile of waterfront, it's one of the largest undeveloped tracts on the Catawba River chain of lakes, he adds. "This Esplanade development will change everything."

Esplanade Homes and Traffic Concerns

Source: <https://www.homes.com/new-homes/community/esplanade-at-lake-hickory/vkgz4r5xq2f-gx/>

The Esplanade development is expected to add 495 homes along 1.25 miles of Rink Dam Road in 2027–2028. Residents fear this growth will worsen congestion between NC 16 and NC 127, especially on Rink Dam Road and NC 127.

Specific Transportation Impacts

- Longer Wait Times: Peak-time backups already reach about a mile past Cloninger Mill Road, and added traffic will likely increase delays at NC 127 intersections.

- Traffic Concentration: Commuters and new residents will share limited connector-road capacity between NC 16 and NC 127.

Planned and Proposed Road Improvements

Local leaders are weighing improvements to manage added traffic.

- Road Modernization: Rink Dam Road and nearby connectors, including Teague Town Road, have been identified for upgrades. Needed options may include signals, three-lane sections, roundabouts, or other safety improvements. Note: Unfortunately, I have heard little about specific upgrades and completion dates.
- NC 127 Upgrades: Planned 4-foot paved shoulders from Richey Road to US 64 should improve safety but may do little for Bethlehem connector traffic.

Source: <https://alexandercountync.gov/pdf/bethle>



AERIAL VIEW OF DEVELOPMENT — This aerial photo of the Esplanade at Lake Hickory development from the Taylor Morrison website shows the extent of recent earth moving and land clearing operation on the 213 acre property. It is located off Rink Dam Road near Bowman Court.

lehem-community-plan.pdf This is the 2019 dated community plan.

Highway 127 Project

- NCDOT has delayed the Highway 127 widening project in Bethlehem. Right-of-way acquisition is now scheduled for 2030, with construction projected for 2034. (Source: NCDOT)
- Project R-3603 runs from the Catawba River through Bethlehem into Alexander County. Its delay reflects funding changes in the draft 10-year STIP; some areas are also considering impact fees to help fund infrastructure. Personal note: Additional legislative action may be a route to funding infrastructure through impact fees.

How Can Citizens Be Heard about Transportation Needs?

Residents can attend the NCDOT public input session on July 27, 2026, from 4:00–6:00 p.m. at the Division 12 Office, 1710 E. Marion St., Shelby, NC. The session allows citizens to comment on 2028–2037 STIP projects and share ideas with NCDOT staff. Contact Bryan Sowell at (980) 552-4221 or bksowell@ncdot.gov for details.

The Central Question

This leads to the central question: How much of Bethlehem's increased tax revenue should Alexander County use for infrastructure, and how strongly will it seek builder contributions? Note: Current tax information suggests Bethlehem provides a significant share of county revenue. More specific figures are available from the county manager's office. The *Business North Carolina* article provides that:

- A \$400,000 home generates about \$2,400 in annual county property tax. At 495 homes, that equals about \$1.188 million per year when fully built.

- Fire District Taxes: Bethlehem residents also pay an added fire district tax of \$0.0430 per \$100.

- Each \$400,000 household may also generate about \$562.50 annually in county sales tax revenue through local spending.

Citizen involvement is essential to mitigate the impending migration to Bethlehem. Residents should join civic, church, community, and government groups to voice concerns, set goals, and suggest practical improvements.

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Final Thoughts

I have witnessed two efforts to incorporate Bethlehem and heard talk of Hickory annexation for more than 25 years. At 77, I am most concerned about traffic gridlock and having enough doctors and medical staff for current and future residents, including those moving to Esplanade. To secure Alexander County's future, we need to attract young families through economic development and affordable housing.

Rather than pursuing incorporation, we should work together within our current government structure to create and implement a practical growth plan. I **OPPOSE** incorporation but support gathering broad community input. A new town could take years to become operational, increase taxes, and primarily benefit only parts of Bethlehem. **And we should also be aware that there is a new 90-home development with more affordable homes planned on land cleared off Rink Dam Road.**



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ACE Hardware

ACE Hardware in Bethlehem, located at 9433 NC-127, feels much more like a hometown hardware store than a large chain store. Manager Amie Conner said that her workers are local residents themselves and truly care about their community. They take the time to get to know their customers and their needs.

Of course, this hardware store has most hardware needs, including lawn and garden essentials and a complete paint center, but they also have a variety of unique gifts and toys for sale that attract customers who might be shopping for someone special or to treat themselves.

Conner said that if they don't carry what you need, they will point you to another local shop that can help you. She also said that her staff is well trained to answer questions about lawn care, gardening, and hardware needs for those who are starting projects or who simply need advice in the middle of a project.

ACE Hardware is basically a "one stop shop" for hardware and outdoor needs and they change their merchandise based on the seasons. Conner said that when the Fall season comes, they will have beautiful mums and pansies for sale. They also partner with a company to offer greenery for the Christmas holidays. Customers can enjoy popcorn and ice cream while shopping as well in this friendly store.

The operating hours for ACE Hardware in Bethlehem are Sunday 10:00 a.m.-7:00 p.m., Monday-Friday 7:30 a.m.-8:00 p.m., and Saturday 8:00 a.m.-8:00 p.m. For more information about this hometown hardware store, call 828-495-8351.



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The Bethlehem Business Association is dedicated to promoting businesses in the Bethlehem Community, and to achieve goals to help the community thrive.

Please Join Us ...

Next Meeting:
Thursday, September 17
6:00 PM
Bethlehem Baptist Church

Guest Speaker: Ashli Elder,
Exeutive Director, Alexander
Co. Partnership for Children

Current and potential
Bethlehem Business Association
members are welcome to attend.