Chapter 2:
Summary of Existing Open Space System

In 1976, the Wake County Board of Commissioners established the Wake County Parks and Recreation Department in order to provide park facilities and programs for the growing population that resides outside municipal corporate limits. The goal of the program has been to coordinate and collaborate with existing agencies already providing park and recreation services in the county. During the past 25 years, the Department has been successful in this collaborative process, beginning with the first “school/park” at Apex Elementary School (est. 1981) and continuing today with the development of County and District Parks. To date the Division of Parks, Recreation and Open Space has been involved in the development of 22 additional school/parks. Wake County is regarded as a national leader in the planning and development of school/parks, with at least one located in every municipality, as well as unincorporated areas.

The Department has also been successful in collaborating with other agencies and the Wake County Public School System. The first independent county park, Lake Crabtree, opened in 1988. This park was established in partnership with the Raleigh/Durham Airport Authority and is adjacent to a 520-acre lake and flood control structure. Blue Jay Point County Park has been developed on land owned by the US Army Corps of Engineers. Historic Oak View County Park is one element of a larger County Office Park developed on the outskirts of Raleigh. Crowder District Park is developed on land donated by Mrs. Doris P. Crowder. Cedar Fork District Park is located on land acquired through the Crabtree Creek Flood Control Project, which is administered by the Wake County Soil and Water Conservation District. Harris Lake County Park opened in 1999 and is being developed on land leased from Carolina Power and Light. The Historic Yates Mill County Park was developed through a partnership with North Carolina State University and Yates Mill Associates, a non-profit association.

Wake County has also implemented a Grant-in-Aid Program which allows other agencies involved in the delivery of recreation services to more than double funding for parks through a 50/50 matching grant program. This program is especially helpful to smaller municipalities and non-profit organizations in Wake County who are economically challenged to meet the park and recreation needs of citizens. Monies from this program have gone toward land acquisition, recreation services, and amenities at schools, municipal parks, and non-profit organizations.
Wake County has become serious about the need to protect open space land for reasons that extend beyond the provision of recreation and leisure services. The Division of Parks, Recreation and Open Space leads the County’s institutional effort, and is supported by a citizens committee, the Open Space Advisory Committee. By definition, the County regards open space as protected lands and waters that are owned and managed by the County, its public sector partners, the municipal governments of Wake County, State of North Carolina, the United States government, and the County's private sector partners, including non-profit land trusts. Open space consists of any parcel or area of land and water that is devoted to 1) the preservation of natural resources; 2) the managed production of resources (farmland); 3) outdoor recreation; 4) preservation of historic and cultural property; 5) protection of scenic landscapes; and 6) protection of public health, safety and welfare.

There are numerous other agencies, organizations and land managers that conserve and protect open space in Wake County, including the federal government, State of North Carolina, municipal governments, universities and colleges, private corporations and businesses, non-profit organizations and citizens. Wake County is fortunate to have an estimated 55,719 acres of open space under some form of protection and conservation (see listing below). Some of the land is used, for example, at the municipal level for active recreation pursuits. Most of the land is conserved for other reasons such as water supply protection, floodplain management, habitat conservation or educational purposes. The good news is Wake County is starting with a good base of conserved and protected lands. The bad news is that the County is rapidly losing the opportunity to maintain an equitable balance of conserved lands as development continues at a rapid pace.

**Vital Statistics Wake County:**
- Population: 748,815 (2005 Census)
- Total Open Space: 55,719 acres
- Ratio: People to Protected Open Space: .007 ac/person

**Wake County Parks, Recreation and Open Space Statistics:**
- Acres of County Parkland: 1,795
- Acres in Natural State: 1,535
- Acres non-park Open Space: 2,578
- Miles of Greenway: 5.5

**Protected Open Space in Wake County**

**Federal Landholdings:**
- US Army Corps of Engineers
  - Falls Lake: 18,532 acres (5,035 ac. Falls Lake State Recreation Area and 6,512 ac. of water)
  - Jordan Lake: 1,715 acres

**State Landholdings:**
- Umstead State Park: 5,481 acres
- Mitchell Mill State Natural Area: 93 acres
- Hemlock Bluffs State Natural Area: 92 acres (Cary Nature Preserve)
- Clemmons Educational State Forest: 147 acres
NCDOT Mitigation Lands: 606 acres
Yates Mill Pond: 314 acres
NCSU Schenck Forest: 21 acres

Corporate land leased for Parks/Game Land
Shearon Harris Game Lands: 8,250 acres (Wake County leases from Progress Energy)
Harris Lake County Park: 680 acres (Wake County leases from Progress Energy)
Lake Crabtree County Park: 200 acres (Wake County leases from Airport Authority)
Harris Research Tract: 1,267 acres (NC State University leases from Progress Energy)

Municipal Greenspace
Municipal Parks and Greenways: 10,527 acres
Water Supply Buffer Lands: 1,100 acres

University/College Landholdings
NCSU Agriculture Labs: 2,329 acres
NCSU Leased for Yates Mill Pond: 212 acres
NCSU Schenck Forest: 262 acres

Land Trusts and Other Non-Profits
Triangle Land Conservancy: 188 acres
Nature Conservancy: 12 acres
People for Parks: 19 acres

The following pages define the park and open space lands that Wake County currently manages. A brief description is provided for each park site.

Cedar Fork District Park
This thirty-three acres of land is part of the Crabtree Creek flood control system. The County maintains a dozen fields and the parking areas for them.

Little River Reservoir
This proposed 1700 acre reservoir with another 300 acres of buffer and 300 acres for a regional park comprise a future major park site in north-east Wake County.

Blue Jay Point County Park
Located on the shores of Falls Lake in northwestern Wake County, Blue Jay Point County Park offers residents a variety of recreation and environmental education opportunities. This 236-acre park includes an Environmental Education Center which houses classrooms, exhibit space and offices for park staff. The Park also offers hiking trails, picnic areas, a children’s playground and open play fields for visitors.

An extensive trail system at Blue Jay Point offers county residents an opportunity to enjoy the spectacular beauty of Falls Lake. A 3.1 mile trail meanders along the shoreline of Falls Lake from Lower Barton Creek to Upper Barton Creek on Six Forks Road, part of the Falls Lake Trail and NC Mountains to the Sea Trail. Paved access trails are found closer to the Environmental Education Center and offer access to pedestrians only.
Crowder District County Park
Situated on 33-acres of gently rolling wooded land in southwestern Wake County, Crowder District County Park provides visitors a variety of recreation and environmental opportunities. This park site was donated to Wake County in 1992 by Mrs. Doris P. Crowder, a strong supporter of public parks. The county constructed recreational facilities at the park using funds from a 1993 parks bond referendum. The park provides visitors with paved trails, picnic shelters, a children’s playground, open play fields and a 2.7 acre pond for fishing. The park also provides 0.8 miles of paved trails that encircle the park and allow visitors to enjoy the unique flora and fauna of southwestern Wake County.

Harris Lake County Park
Wake County’s largest park site is Harris Lake County Park. Covering 680 acres of land, this park is located in the southwestern portion of the County. Currently the park is undergoing phased construction and development. With the first phase complete, visitors can now enjoy picnic shelters, public restrooms, a children’s playground, an environmental education center and hiking and mountain bike trails. Future phases call for historical interpretation facilities, an overnight lodge, a park center and more trails. Two primary trails offer different outdoor hiking and biking experiences. The Peninsula Trail is for walking and hiking only and winds along the shoreline of Harris Lake. Four loop trails provide approximately 6 miles of footpaths. The Hog Run trail is for mountain biking and consists of three loop trails that total six miles in length.

Historic Oak View County Park
This historic park offers visitors with an opportunity to visit life on a 19th century farmstead. The park provides a hands-on approach to learning and understanding Wake County’s heritage. The 17-acre park includes a 19th century farmhouse, picnic grounds, a Farm History Center, Cotton Museum, a pecan grove, herb garden and walkways.

Lake Crabtree County Park
Located on a 200-acre site, and adjacent to a 520-acre flood control lake, Lake Crabtree County park offers visitors a variety of outdoor recreation experiences. The park’s main attractions include fishing, boating, hiking, group and individual picnicking, mountain biking and nature study. Visitors can rent boats and fish from piers and platforms built into the lake. Picnic Shelters are also available.

Historic Yates Mill County Park
Located off of Lake Wheeler Road just south of downtown Raleigh, Yates Mill County Park contains the only remaining grist mill in Wake County. In partnership with the Yates Mill Associates and North Carolina State University, the park provides visitors with a variety of historical and environmental education activities. Through phase one construction, the park will offer access to the restored grist mill, research labs, hiking trails, the restored mill pond, boardwalks and outdoor classrooms.
Apex
Apex’s inventory of protected open space consists primarily of active recreation parkland, with its largest park, the 158-acre Apex Community Park, holding the majority of the passive recreation acreage. Most of the neighborhood parks are located in downtown Apex and include Clairmont Park (2 acres), Senior Citizens Park (2 acres), WHOPS Park (1.33 acres), Sue Helton Memorial Park (.25 acres), and West Street Neighborhood Park (2 acres). Larger parks include Apex Jaycee Park (20 acres), and Kelly Road Park (23 acres). Apex also has two undeveloped parks: Holland Crossing property (≥ 40 acres), and the Walden Creek Tract (8 acres). Both of these undeveloped parks are expected to allocate a portion of land for passive recreation to remain predominantly undeveloped, and a portion to meet active recreation needs.

Several greenway segments have been constructed primarily as a result of residential development and required recreation land dedication. Greenways consist of a variety of surface material types and remain fairly dispersed and segmented.

More open space will be protected as the Town’s Unified Development Ordinance evolves in response to rapid growth in Apex. In addition to recreation fees or land dedication requirements, Apex has recently implemented land dedication to Resource Conservation Areas (RCA’s), as a part of the development process. Additionally, Apex has a watershed protection overlay district which defines development requirements and enforces development within buffers along protected tributaries.

Vital Statistics:
Population: 29,277 (November 2004)
Acres of Parkland: 373.25
Miles of Greenway:
9 miles public,
Ratio of People to Protected Open Space:
.001 ac/person
Cary
The Town of Cary was the first municipal government in Wake County to complete an open space plan. As an element of the Town’s comprehensive plan, the “Open Space and Historic Resources Plan” boldly defines the future conservation of approximately 8,000 acres of land. Cary is North Carolina’s 7th largest city with a population of more than 94,500. The town has committed to spend an estimated $12.5 million for open space to preserve land so the town will remain an attractive place to live, raise a family and conduct business. Cary is acting on the belief that preserving open space is one way of ensuring a bright economic future for the community.

Cary envisions protecting and conserving open space in three different ways: through the use of regulatory measures, land preservation techniques and voluntary landowner participation. The town is committed to purchasing lands for open space, however, this is acknowledged to be the most expensive way to preserve land. The town will employ other strategies, including restricting land development activities and using tools such as conservation easements and management agreements with property owners.

Vital Statistics:
Population: 115,854
Acres of Parkland: 750
Miles of Greenway: 20
Ratio of People to Open Space: .006 ac/person