

To Keep and Preserve:
The Farmland Preservation Efforts of the
Bethel Rural Community Organization

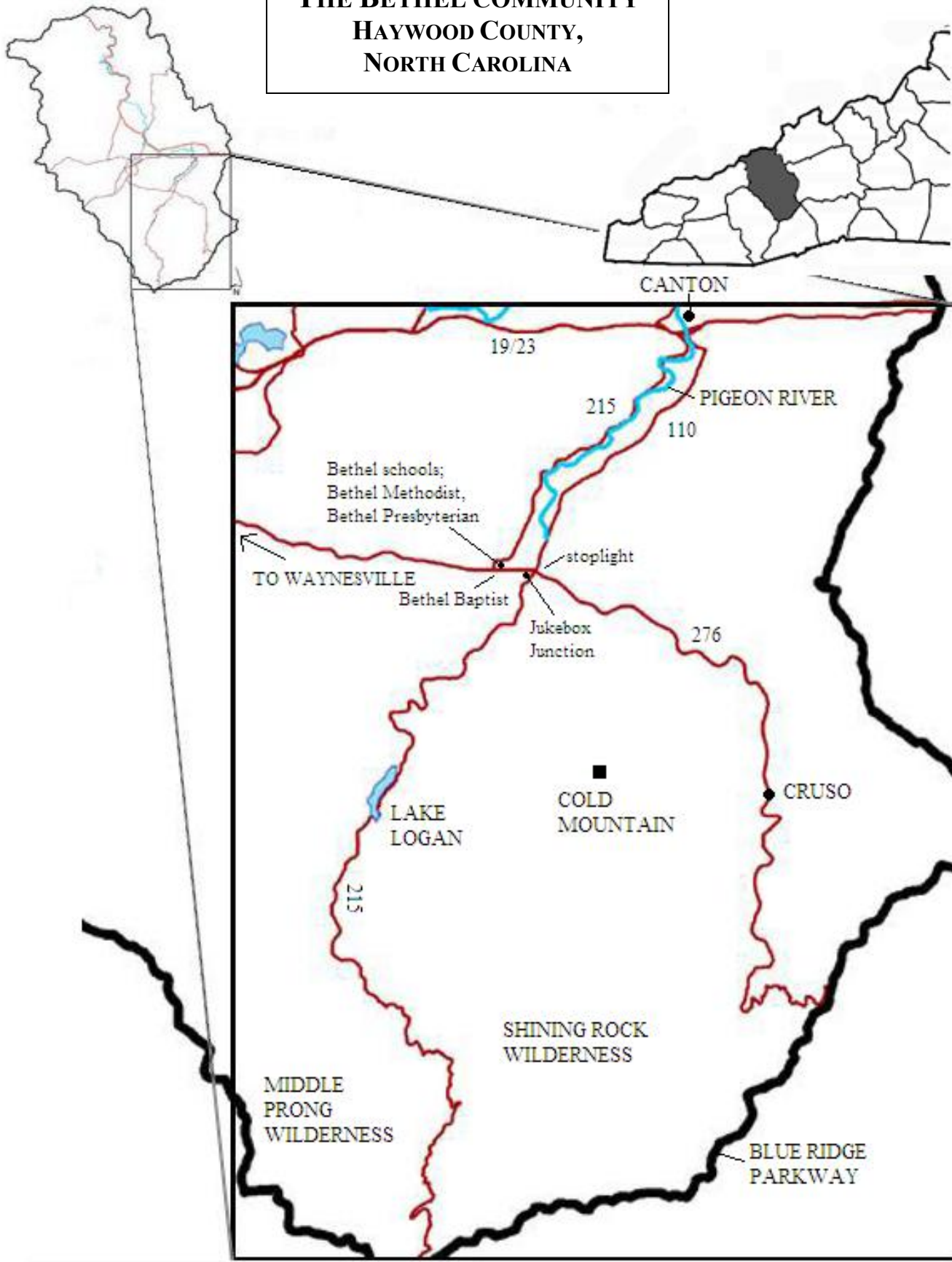
An ethnography written by

Ginger Kowal

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University of North Carolina – Asheville
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Ginger Kowal
(828) 691-6472
vakowal@unca.edu

**THE BETHEL COMMUNITY
HAYWOOD COUNTY,
NORTH CAROLINA**



I am traveling tonight to an event at the center of the rural community of Bethel. Driving in my mom's car, I am leaving my home in the city of Asheville to travel west to Haywood County on our region's main highway, I-40. I am attending a quarterly meeting of the Bethel Rural Community Organization, a small group of rural residents that I have been working with for six months now. The trip out to Bethel is familiar and comfortable after many times visiting the community to interview BRCO members.

The first time that I ever saw Bethel, I stumbled onto the area while driving lost in Western North Carolina. I knew nothing about the community. I happened upon the stoplight at the center of Bethel and decided to have lunch at the Jukebox Junction, which appeared to be the only place to get a sandwich in town. Before I ate, I stood in the



parking lot of the Jukebox Junction and looked westward, along a vast open field of tomatoes that lay directly behind the restaurant, to the center of Bethel. I noted the small but proud churches and schools that were clustered there. As I drove from the center of Bethel towards home, I marveled at the beauty of the green and wide valley with gentle mountain slopes that were always visible on all sides.

Tonight, after countless trips on the roads of Bethel to talk with its residents about how they feel about their community, the place looks radically different to me. It is still beautiful; if anything it is even more so. But the community that I see has become the community that emerges through the descriptions of its residents. As I look at the open green fields, the steep pastures that climb the knees of the mountains, the tiny Bethel grocery and gas station, dozens of stories come to mind. I understand that although the Jukebox Junction, the stoplight at the intersection of highway 276 and highway 110, and the cluster of the three Bethel churches and the two Bethel schools represent the heart and center of the Bethel community, in actuality Bethel stretches over a much larger area. Within that area of indistinct boundaries are steep mountain coves and wide river valleys, the county's earliest settlement and its highest peak. And I understand that while Bethel has reached some widespread recognition as the inspiration for Charles Frazier's novel *Cold Mountain*, the real story of the community lies not on the peak of Cold Mountain but in its shadow, in the wide green valley of the Pigeon River below. My view of Bethel has been created by the words of the residents that I have talked to; my description of Bethel is a composite of the stories and descriptions that I have heard from those residents.

Tonight at the head of that valley, in the center of Bethel, in the small common room of a century-old church, a quarterly meeting of the Bethel Rural Community Organization will be called to order. Twenty neighbors will gather, greet each other warmly and chat noisily in the doorway of the church for a few minutes, and then sit down on the church pews to discuss ways of maintaining farmland in the valley that they share. They will also talk of pressing issues facing the community such as the impending

replacement of a historic bridge by the Department of Transportation, recreational activities sponsored by the organization such as a 5K race, and practical matters such as fundraising and technicalities of the BRCO bylaws. Underlying these topics, however, is a strong and growing drive, which has begun to distinguish this group from the self-organized community organizations in Haywood County, to preserve rural lands and agriculture in the Bethel valley.

Though all of these people call themselves residents of the Bethel community, they have traveled from a wide area to be at the meeting tonight. They each bring to the meeting unique backgrounds and widely divergent political views; there are as many visions for the future of the Bethel valley as there are individuals in the room. And though some of them are farmers, for whom agricultural preservation represents a direct benefit, the majority are not. But just as they can easily agree that the church where they have gathered tonight sits squarely at the center of their rural community, their visions for Bethel and their ideas about what it should be converge on farmland preservation, an idea that they officially support, together. The cause of farmland preservation sits at the center of this group of diverse citizens, like a small plot of land where many roads and streams meet. Like the one-stoplight center of Bethel, which itself is small but provides a gathering point for residents of an area spanning nearly 90,000 acres, the work of the BRCO to protect farmland touches on many larger values.

My work in the Bethel community, and my reason for making the drive to the meeting tonight, has been to speak with nine of these people in an attempt to understand why they have chosen to become members of this group. What is it that they value about their community enough to become actively involved in protecting it? What is it that has

brought them into this group, and why have they remained active with it? Interviews with five Bethel residents outside the BRCO have provided additional perspective on the community and what is valuable about it, as well as on the BRCO and its activities in rural preservation. Information from historical maps, deeds of property transfer, and other published data on the Bethel community, as well as observations from making my own journeys over the landscape, has helped me to gain a more complete understanding of how Bethel residents see their community, what they value about it, and why some of those residents have chosen to act on those values by giving their time and talents to a grassroots community organization.

After crossing into Haywood County and heading west from its border with Buncombe, I turn south and approach Bethel by passing first through the city of Canton. Although they may make trips to Canton several times a week, most Bethel residents have chosen to live where they do because they would rather stay away from the noise, traffic, stress and hurry of the city. The streets of Canton wind sharply over the city hills with little regard for the shape of the land, forming awkward angles and difficult climbs for city walkers. The curving streets are bordered on each side by dense rows of houses and commercial buildings. The stores that crowd together in downtown Canton edge up to the road, forming narrow passages of concrete through which traffic is funneled. Managed areas of green space are small and squeezed between the densely clustered buildings. Though Canton is a small city of 4,000 people, the streets carry an air of hurry, pressure to travel quickly. Commuters into the city center follow the “rat race” that some Bethel residents have moved to Bethel to escape.

Highway 110, which runs south from Canton to Bethel, is the main conduit that provides a connection for Bethel residents to the shopping and employment that are provided by the city. I turn onto 110 and head south, towards Bethel, where the road meets the Pigeon River. After a few painful turns on 110 through the confining walls of the city buildings, I pass through one final stoplight that marks the city limits of Canton. The neon signs of two gas stations light up the dividing line between city and country like floodlights on the city gates. A few meters past this last stoplight of Canton, the speed limit increases from 25 to 55. The closeness of the city buildings gives way suddenly and my eye is drawn to the west, to a long view over an open green field that extends from the road to the river. Unconsciously, my hands relax on the steering wheel and my breathing deepens. This is the view that lets me know that I have crossed into Bethel.



This dividing line between Canton and Bethel is one of the few unambiguous borders of the community. Because it is unincorporated, Bethel has no official center or boundary and is instead an unofficially recognized region of Haywood County. It is like an amalgamation of smaller communities that over time have become lumped together through consolidation and gradual development between them. It is also the negative space that is not occupied by other communities with more official recognition, like Canton to the north, Waynesville to the west, and Cruso to the southeast.

Topographically, Bethel covers the area of the watershed of the Pigeon River above the city of Canton; the watershed is bordered by steep mountains on its southern, western and eastern sides. The central corridor of Bethel is the wide and fertile valley of the Pigeon, which runs from south to north and is flanked on the east and west by 110 and state highway 215, respectively. The Pisgah range rises at the southern end of that wide valley and frames the distant edge of the watershed, and Bethel, at the Blue Ridge Parkway along the southern boundary of Haywood County [see map of Haywood County, Appendix A]. Within this widest of possible areas for Bethel are 9,000 people and several smaller subcommunities, clustered mostly in the coves and valleys at the southern end of the region.

Like the river, most roads in the Bethel area flow primarily to the North. Although highway 276 provides a major East-West conduit to Waynesville, over a dividing ridge of mountains, the shape of the Bethel valley follows the Pigeon to the North, towards Canton. Population in the Bethel area grows in density towards Canton, and residents of the entire region frequently interact with the city through shopping or employment. The dividing line between Canton and Bethel is a line, then, that Bethel

residents cross often and they are aware of nearly every day. Although Canton is not visible from most of Bethel, its proximity, its situation in the corridor between Bethel and other cities, and its economic importance give it a weighty presence in the mind of Bethel residents. It provides both necessary amenities to Bethel residents and a constant reminder of an alternative, and generally undesirable, landscape and way of life.

To some, the closeness of the city and the cultural opportunities that it represents are benefits. Daniel¹, for example, is a retiree to the Bethel area and a longtime member of the BRCO. He has been active in protecting the rural region from development and states adamantly that he came to Bethel to leave the “rat race” of the city, and yet when deciding on an area to retire to, Daniel chose Bethel partly because it was within five miles of a city. He knew that he and his wife would be in need of health care and didn’t want to be far away from a hospital. Pamela, another active member of the BRCO and also a retiree to Bethel, told me that one of the valuable parts of living in Bethel was being able to take advantage of educational opportunities at the community college in the nearby city.

Though they may take advantage of services offered by the closeness of the city, Bethel residents have chosen very deliberately to live outside of it. While they coexist and depend on each other for natural and economic resources, relations between the city and its rural neighbor are maintained with tension. This tension reached a climax in the year of 2000, and again in 2004, when the commissioners of Haywood County drafted a plan to extend sewer and water service from Canton up into the Bethel valley. Over the span of four years, Bethel residents, led by current and future BRCO members, mounted a unified rejection of what they perceived as a dangerous threat to the quality of life in

¹ All names have been changed to protect the privacy of interview participants.

Bethel. Those who fought against the sewer and water saw increased development as a sure consequence of water and sewer extension, and it was this growth that they mounted their opposition against. The conflict over the two identical proposals, eventually retracted, was defining in the land preservation work of the BRCO and is still often mentioned by BRCO members.

Daniel, who was already active in local politics at that time and who had been active with the BRCO already, describes the reaction of Bethel residents to the proposed extension. There is a conspiratorial, hushed excitement to his voice as he depicts the scene of the initial proposal by county officials:

The assistant county manager and two people from the engineering firm came, and rolled out a draft plan, and said, ‘Look what we’re going to do for you.’

About forty-five minutes later they curled up their plan and ran out of here. When they called several of us to set up the meeting, several of us were members of the Bethel Community Organization and several of us knew each other quite well, and we all knew that we were interested in maintaining the rural atmosphere. So when we came we were not eight totally separate individuals. We were – a posse.

Other community members that were present at the original meeting with the engineering associates describe the meeting as being charged already with animosity. According to Bruce, another BRCO member who was included in the original meeting with the county, by the end of the meeting the assistant county manager “knew he’d stepped in the wrong bee’s nest.” The “posse” of current BRCO members, and some that would join later, decided to hold a meeting at the Bethel school to let members of the community speak about whether they would prefer to have public sewer and water or not.

Today, meeting organizers explain with intentioned emphasis that the meeting was formed in order for Bethel residents to voice their opinions about sewer and water, and not to foment opposition. But the descriptions by current BRCO members of the meeting at the school imply an unspoken division between Canton and Bethel and a solidarity among Bethel residents that they could count on in organizing the meetings. Bruce explains that the organization was not set necessarily on organizing opposition to the county's proposal, but that their primary motive was to give Bethel residents a chance to state their wishes for the future of their community. "Our main goal was to inform the community. And let the community decide. Just put the information out there, we felt like if they had the information, they'd make the right decision."

Daniel describes the excitement that was generated by the meetings, which were well attended by members of the community.

And, once the word got out we were going to have a big crowd of people come to the school for a public meeting about sewer and water, the county had no choice but to appear there and bring their engineering associates. There were about a hundred and fifty people there, and one person spoke about the value and benefit of sewer and water, and the other – well everyone, lined up to – raise hell! Some of it was pretty rough.

It was a heady time of direct conflict between the narrowly separated communities of Bethel and Canton, and a great deal of momentum was created that continued to fuel the work of the BRCO over the next four years. Many current BRCO members cite the fight to keep sewer and water out of Bethel as the initial reason that they became members of the organization. A unity among Bethel residents was

generated in the face of the threat of expansion of Canton's city services into Bethel that persists in the current form of the BRCO. From the initial meeting in 2000 and a subsequent reaction organized by the BRCO in response to the second attempt by the County to extend sewer and water to Bethel in 2004, BRCO members drew what they consider to be substantial evidence that the majority of Bethel residents feel strongly that water and sewer service would adversely affect the quality of life in Bethel.

The threat posed by sewer and water, which provided such a rallying cause in Bethel, was primarily in the building development that it would bring. Natural limits on housing density and land-use that were in place because of septic tanks and the soil area that they require would be gone, and nothing would keep dense buildings from being built on the open land. There is a deep understanding shared among members of the BRCO that a thick mixture of attendant changes in the landscape would accompany the extension of water and sewer. Those changes would include more traffic, overcrowding in the schools, pollution in the river from lawns and roads, more noise, and more crime. In other words, it would make Bethel more like the nearby city that Bethel residents had chosen so deliberately to live outside of.

This understanding of how water and sewer would affect the community came in many individual cases from direct past experience in other communities. Elizabeth watched as water and sewer was brought into a rural valley outside of Knoxville, Tennessee, and describes houses being built "just feet apart" in less than a year, replacing acres of forest that had been there before. She paints a disturbing picture of a desolate landscape where "every tree and stick in sight ... was completely cut down." Daniel witnessed a similar crowding in of a California community which encouraged him and

his wife to consider moving to the more rural area of Bethel. Bruce watched as his family farm outside Asheville came closer and closer to being annexed by the city after water and sewer service was extended. He directly links these two things together, saying that “the very key to that [development towards his family farm] is sewer and water.” Bruce also points out that the experiences of people who had moved to Bethel from other communities were helpful in mobilizing against sewer and water: “A lot of them came in here and they gave us some valuable information when we fought the sewer, by coming from places that’d had that. And seen what it did. And don’t let it happen to you. And they really helped us.” These outside perspectives were instrumental in forming the BRCO’s understanding of the implications of water and sewer extension, and in motivating them to fight so vigorously against the services offered by the county.

Why was it so important to those who spoke against sewer and water to guard against it? What were they attempting to promote or preserve by keeping public sewer and water services out of their community? It was obviously not a simple reaction of a small and closely-knit community to reject the influence of outsiders; the importance of outside perspectives to the fight itself shows that. The easy answer to these questions, of what those who fought against sewer and water were trying to preserve, is open space and low density of development. Sewer and water would have made it more difficult to maintain both of these. With the extension of public sewer and water, Elizabeth’s nightmarish picture of a landscape shorn of “every tree and stick in sight” would come to cover the open fields of the Bethel valley. The wish to keep this development from happening specifically is central to the activity of the BRCO.

But beneath this simply stated aim is a deep well of value and perspective that gives open space its meaning. These values and perspectives, unique to every individual, provide the reason that open space is worth protecting, and the reason that the rural Bethel valley is worth maintaining as it is today. These deeply conceived reasons for maintaining and preserving Bethel as a rural community are the motivating factors behind BRCO members' choice to become active in land preservation. It is the complex undercurrent of values in each individual perspective that interests me in my conversations with them.

The proposed extension of sewer and water from Canton would have run the length of the Bethel valley, following the course of the Pigeon River. Tonight, as I travel south on 110 towards the center of Bethel, I follow that same path down the valley towards the high mountains. I am following the Pigeon towards its tributaries at the high southern end of the watershed, but at this point along its journey it is wide and smooth. From this highway, and from highway 215, the other north-south artery into Bethel, the river is always in sight. Although I expect that at the meeting tonight we will talk about many things, seeing the river across the open bottomland reminds me that in many ways, the river is always present in the work of the BRCO. It is the Pigeon, after all, that dictates the shape of this community. Years ago, railways were built along its path; today, highways hug those same grades. The tumbling streams that are its tributaries flow along the bottoms of the coves, each with their own community and identity, and into Bethel. The presence of the river is both a blessing in many ways to Bethel

residents, and a threat. In fact, the threat of the river is central to the land preservation work of the BRCO – but this will be detailed later.

The river is without a doubt the lifeline of the Bethel valley. The farmers that line its course in the wide valley draw water from it to irrigate their fields, and so the river is of direct importance to agriculture. It is also an indirect source of pride for other members of the community that travel along its length every day. When I ask Bethel residents what they value about Bethel, many mention the river explicitly. BRCO members who reminisce about the backlash against sewer and water are very proud to mention that a professional from the Haywood Waterways Association spoke at the community meeting that was held with the commissioners, and attested that the water in the Pigeon as it flows through Bethel is of the highest quality in the county. Farmers take pride in the quality of the water that flows past their fields, uncontaminated by silt or chemical runoff. To them it is a sign of their stewardship of the land, their skill in working the fields and their respectful care for the community.

The fields that line the river are Bethel's bottomland, where a great percentage of Haywood County's working agricultural lands lie in full sight of the highway (see map of Bethel 2001 Land Cover, Appendix A). The soil in these fields, which is richly visible in the spring when cover crops have been turned over and the ground is ready to be planted, is dark and fertile. Bruce, a full-time farmer whose fields fall like patchwork across the bottomland, describes his first encounter with the soil of the Pigeon River valley. After farming for years on the hillsides of Bethel, he walked with the owner of the bottomland, "and walked into that bottom, and when I reached down and got that dirt – I was used to working in clay, rocks – when I got that dirt, we made a deal."

Like the river, the fertile fields of the floodplain are a source of pride to farmers in the area. Several people that I talked with mentioned that the farms of Bethel are some of the “most productive in Haywood County.” Larry, who farms on a part-time basis on land both inside and outside the floodplain, speaks of the soil with an almost reverent tone: “that land along the river, all of the river wherever whether it’s above Canton or below Canton, that is unique soil, it will grow anything anytime ... It’s very fertile soil, and it being unique, it’s very important that it has to be protected.”

Scott, whose father still farms the family land that lies in the Pigeon floodplain, points out that much of the soil of Bethel is classified as



“prime farmland,” and states that as a reason that they ought to be maintained and utilized. According to Scott, “the agronomists tell me that these soils are so unique there’s nothing like them in North Carolina, and probably very little like it in United States.” To those who work it, the soil along the Pigeon is something that is worth preserving simply for its own sake as a fertile resource.

But the nature of bottomland, and part of the reason that it is so fertile, is that it must periodically be flooded. In September of 2004, Hurricanes Frances and Ivan dropped nearly thirty inches of rain on Western North Carolina in the space of just over a

week. It was the worst flooding that the county had ever seen. The fields of the Bethel valley were devastated. Bruce had holes in his fields “that you could put this house in.” Scott sustained a loss of \$200,000 to his nursery business. It was a major catastrophe that affected the entire community. But the financial damage to the bottomland fields of Bethel were slight compared to the damage to property in Canton, where buildings of the town are built close to the river’s banks. Because there is very little development in the floodplain of Bethel, much less damage was sustained to homes and buildings. Bethel residents also asserted that the limited amount of impervious surface in the Bethel valley served to better absorb the hurricanes’ rain and thus to lessen the effect of the flooding in Bethel. If there had been more development and more hard surfaces in Bethel, more water would have washed into the river and into the streets of Canton. And so with the floods, even more attention was focused on land covering and development along the course of the Pigeon.

When flood recovery funds were given to the town of Canton to rebuild, they went into restoring the buildings of downtown. But the funds given to Bethel, which were co-managed by the county and by the BRCO, were put instead into what was seen as the best defense that the community had against future flooding: farmland preservation. With attention newly focused on the Pigeon, the quality of its water and the management of its floodplain, members of the BRCO decided to use the monies that they received to mobilize active support for the open space that the fights against sewer and water had recently brought attention to. Gary, a BRCO member who was later hired by the organization to manage grant funding and to seek out more grants for land preservation and other work, explains that with these first grants, the BRCO “tied it all

together in farmland preservation, which helps keep the area impervious, which helps reduce the potential for more flooding: more frequent flooding, more severe flooding. And that way also supports the farmers, as they try to recover.”

The timing of availability of the flood recovery funds was especially fortuitous because it followed the second attempt by the county to extend sewer and water service to the Bethel valley. Once again, meetings were held and the community spoke powerfully of their wishes not to receive the public services. Although the second proposed extension was successfully rejected, the flood recovery funds that resulted from the disastrous hurricane season allowed the BRCO to go one step further in protecting the community against the type of development that would follow sewer and water. As Gary says, it was that initial funding of farmland preservation planning that allowed the BRCO to go “from reactive to proactive” in their work to protect the community. Grant-funded initiatives were able to begin actively to protect the same valuable open space and impervious surface that the rejection of sewer and water was meant to conserve, rather than simply reacting to a direct and impending threat.

Part of the grant funding was used to commission a telephone survey of Bethel residents on land-use in their community, where residents were asked about what they appreciated about Bethel and what direction they would like to see the community take as far as development and growth. The survey, which is included in Appendix B to this report, showed strong support for rural lands and agriculture. When asked, “Would you like to see Bethel continue to be a rural agricultural community?,” 93.8% of respondents answered yes. In response to the open-ended question, “What do you enjoy about a community like Bethel?,” many specifically mentioned the rural nature of the area. From

the survey results, BRCO members could conclude that they were not alone in wanting to protect Bethel as a rural community. The survey, which included responses from 273 residents out of approximately 2,500 in the Bethel area, lent a new weight to the rural preservation activity of the approximately 13 active members of the BRCO.

The motive and reasoning of BRCO members who decided to use the monies from the flood to fund land preservation followed directly from the fight against sewer and water. Although becoming active in protecting undeveloped lands of Bethel represented a significant shift in tactics from the rejection of the county's proposals, the reasons for protecting the land were the same. The preservation of farmland made possible the preservation of open space in Bethel, and limited the amount of development. So much of what was mentioned in the survey as desirable characteristics of Bethel was related to the amount of open space or, inversely, the lack of development. These sentiments were echoed and reinforced by interview participants when I asked them what was most valuable to them about living in Bethel. Becoming active in protecting farmland, then, represented only a more proactive extension of the work that the BRCO had already been doing in discouraging the development that sewer and water extension would bring.

In my interviews with BRCO members and other Bethel residents, only two brought up farmland when I asked them directly what was valuable about their community. Instead, it was common to hear that the "quality of life" in Bethel was appreciated; characteristics of that quality of life that were cited by nearly all interview participants included a slow pace, low traffic, quiet, peacefulness, space for wildlife, low

crime, and a small, closely-knit community. And yet it is farmland that many of those who I interviewed are actively working to protect – was this an oversight in their estimation of what to focus on in their activism? If farmland was so valuable as to be worth fighting to preserve, why wasn't it so much as listed among Bethel's best attributes?

After further discussions, it became clear to me that instead of appearing alongside these valuable characteristics of Bethel in an enumerated list, farmland for many Bethel residents underlies and contributes to the other attributes, either directly or indirectly. Gary, who is employed on a contract basis by the BRCO and thus makes part of his living protecting farmland, listed low traffic, good roads for recreational cycling, low crime, wildlife, and peace and quiet as things that make Bethel valuable to him. When I asked where farmland would fit on that list, he explained that “It's kind of tied to a lot of those, because when there's a lot of farmland there's low traffic, there's low crime, there's a lot of wildlife, there's dark skies at night.” To Bruce, the “atmosphere” of rural life is what is important to him, along with the safety to let his grandchildren play in the woods and fields away from the house, the beauty of the mountains, and the slower pace of life. While he never mentions farmland explicitly, it seems to go without saying that it is the open spaces of farms, and the limited density of population that the farms indirectly enforce, that make these qualities of Bethel possible.

To Brian, who built his home on a forested slope in the Bethel area, it is the beauty of the natural environment that is most valuable. While he prefers the forests, with the wildlife that they sustain and the feeling of untouched nature that they create, he has come to see farmland preservation as a means of protecting the natural areas that he

loves. Through his involvement with the BRCO, he has come to believe that preserving farmland will prevent the development of roads and dense housing and the replacement of beautiful forests with what he sees as an ugly and crowded landscape:

I hadn't thought of it that way until, until this group [the BRCO] actually. You know when they said that, then the lightbulb went off, I said ah! – if you've got a farmer here and he's got his pasture here, and his pasture is the way it is right now, his pasture is kind of like a buffer. Between all that ugly development, and then what could be. Here's the city over here and here's the farmer right there. And I was thinking, well if we've got that farm, maybe the city won't get past them. Maybe we won't have all that ugliness. And it'll be nice and beautiful, the way it is.

Just as the sewer and water fight pointed out that open space in Bethel was a key element in keeping it from becoming more like the negative alternative of the city, survey results and my interviews show that maintaining open space is also a means to the end of preserving what are cited as the most valuable attributes of life in Bethel. As Scott explains, the course of the BRCO's work over the past several years leads naturally to farmland preservation – from rejection of sewer and water, to flood recovery studies, to open public acknowledgement of the importance of open spaces, it is easy to see why actively protecting farmland fits into the past work of the BRCO:

I can understand how a person that's new to the organization, doesn't have all the background that the people's been in it for fifteen or twenty years you know, doesn't understand how the thing evolved to it [farmland preservation]. But once

you explain to them, ‘This is how we got to this point’ – then they understand, you know, it’s perfectly logical.

When I reach the center of Bethel from my journey south on 110, I turn right at the Jukebox Junction onto 276 to make my way to the heart of the community. With a

few minutes to spare before the BRCO meeting starts, I park behind the Bethel Methodist Church and right next to Bethel Elementary. I climb the hill directly behind the church, Graveyard Hill, to walk among the gravestones of the common cemetery of Bethel. The stones cover the top of the grassy hill that rises in the very center of the community, bordered by Bethel Methodist, Bethel Elementary,



and Bethel Baptist across 276. Confederate flags placed by many of the graves by the Sons of the Confederacy flutter in the gentle breeze; these are the many Civil War soldiers buried on Graveyard Hill, including Inman of *Cold Mountain* fame. Noticing that most of the stones, even those on the western slope of the hill, are turned to face the Southeast, I stand and look with them in that direction. I see Cold Mountain rising in the

distance, its hulking shoulders sloping to lesser ranges that lie between it and Bethel. Below, occasional vehicles stop at the stoplight at 110 and 276 and at the Jukebox Junction and Cold Mountain Café. From the height and quiet stillness of the grassy cemetery, Bethel has a feeling of bustling peace. Again, the voices of interview participants echo in my mind; the scene that I see is overlaid with the thoughts and words of Bethel residents.



Walking down to the nearby intersection of 215 with 276, I pass Bethel Presbyterian Church and walk onto the grounds of Bethel Middle School. This, the center of Bethel, with its three churches and two schools, children throwing footballs in the ballfield, parents chatting in the bleachers, neighbors greeting each other warmly at the Bethel grocery, and strangers like me receiving friendly waves from passing cars,

is striking in its friendly and content feeling. The populated core of the community, where the greatest density of people can be found surrounded by farms and forest, has a humming air of peaceful business. With the voices of its residents ringing in my mind, Bethel nearly shines with wholesomeness.

Just as it makes factors of the quality of life possible like low traffic, quieter neighborhoods, and more space for wildlife, farmland also has a hidden role, as it were, in creating these more abstract attributes of Bethel that are appreciated by those who live there. Although it is easier to draw the direct connection that so obviously exists with agriculture from characteristics like low traffic, open space, and quietness, farmland is also implicated in creating a particular fabric of community life in Bethel that is alluded to by many interview participants. Many participants remarked that Bethel is a “wonderful place to grow children.” An equal number praised the friendliness of people in Bethel; the blessings of good neighbors; and the closeness of the community.

Some interview participants make a direct link between this peaceful social climate and the working farms of Bethel. Others simply imply that there is a connection. Whether the relationship is made clear or remains murky, to these individuals the social structure of Bethel is another very valuable aspect of the community that is made possible or maintained by farmland. This provides, then, another reason that farmland is worth protecting. Each of these individuals express the idea that this valuable social and moral environment will be upheld if farmland is preserved.

While it is a complex subject not easily broached in conversation, interview participants use specific examples to allude to the wholesomeness and moral uprightness that they appreciate about Bethel. Elizabeth, who grew up in Bethel and spent some time teaching at Bethel middle school, cites the schools as an example of the general peacefulness that she finds in Bethel. She explains,

When I was a teacher at Bethel, other teachers would come in from other places and they would say the kids at Bethel are different. They just don't seem to have

the problems, they didn't seem to have the difficulty in dealing with them, as a rule, that they did other places. They had a – they seemed to be better trained, more well mannered, that kind of thing. I think a part of that comes from our rural upbringing, and the fact that we were smaller.

Pamela, a retiree to the Bethel area, told me almost immediately when I asked her what she appreciated about Bethel that “It’s kind of like moving back into the fifties when you’re here.” Pamela’s choice of the decade of the fifties, rather than any arbitrary time in the past, evokes a feeling of peace, prosperity and moral uprightness that echoes in her other comments about Bethel. “Friendly people” and “helpful neighbors” are other qualities of life in Bethel that top her list of valuable aspects of the area. She iterates several times that people should be taught to take care of themselves, and to manage their lives with industrious work and pragmatic thought. She explains that she learned these qualities partly through the hard work that she experienced in agriculture, on the working farm of her childhood: “And I don’t know how people ever feel like they’re in control of their lives, if they don’t have some kind of a schedule on what their needs are, and then some follow-up to compare how they’re doing it. That’s one thing we learned on the farm.”

Pamela’s words about work and industry resonate with the comments of other interview participants. Bruce comments on the rewards of diligent work, saying that “a man thrives on accomplishment. And there’s accomplishment there when you see you’ve growed that crop, and been successful in it.” Scott, another farmer, mentions hard work many times in the course of our interview together, saying that farming in his business is “doing well for those who work hard”; he praises his son and his employees for their

extraordinary abilities to work long hours at demanding physical work. Like Pamela, he believes that young people should learn to make their own way through honest work, and remembers his own youth spent contributing to the family farm with fondness. He speaks with pride when describing the hours that he keeps with his current farming business, and the hours that he chose to work when he was younger:

I remember one time, when my dad and I were growing vegetables together, we were growing vegetables and I was teaching in the county community college, and I had worked on a farm after I'd taught. Went to the packinghouse and you were at the packinghouse all night, and when I walked in the door from the packinghouse I heard the alarm clock go off for me to get up and go to my next job.

For Scott, this kind of work schedule is not mere torture; it exemplifies an ethic of commitment and integrity that he learned on the farm in his childhood, doing work that went to supporting his family and the families of his neighbors.

Other interview participants speak about the moral and social environment that is fostered by rural lands without mentioning hard work. Bruce explains that rural communities are more conservative than cities and contrasts the two by saying, "An urban area tends to want to – 'It's okay, do your thing it's okay, do what you want to do.' Well in a rural area it's, it's not that way. There's – the Lord meant for certain restrictions to be upon man." Bruce includes this moral strength and stricture with the desirable characteristics of Bethel for him, and for people who come from the cities to live in rural areas like Bethel. To him, a rural community is one where there are "certain

restrictions” on conduct. Rural people drink less alcohol, and are less likely to do things that are “really not okay,” that will “eventually come up and bite you.”

Bruce is a BRCO member with a long family history in the Bethel area; Susan, another interview participant, shows with her description of the Bethel social community that it’s not necessary to have this family history in the area to appreciate the culture of the area. Susan has lived in Bethel for six years, and the people that she has found there are clearly one of the most valuable things about Bethel for her. She says that she finds it easier to feel a connection with the rural residents of Bethel, that they are more aware of the time and place where they are and more in touch with people around them. It is this connection that forms a rural community, and which in turn is made possible by a rural surrounding. Bethel residents, because they live in a rural atmosphere, “have that sense of time and place. Of the here and now. Of being real. Of being connected.” Although she has lived in dense cities, she finds that she is also more aware of being connected to the community in a rural environment: “There’s a connection with folks that live out in the country that have a little bit of elbow room, that breathe fresh air, that aren’t rushed, that don’t have all that noise around – it’s easier to get that human connection with them than it is with city folks.” In the country, this awareness and connection between individuals combines to form a feeling of “soul-felt” being a part of the community.

Susan reiterates that this sense of time and place that creates strong connections between people in a rural environment comes from the “elbow room” among them. The fresh air, the lack of the rushing pace of the city, the lack of city noise, are what give rural people the room and the quiet to become aware and considerate of their neighbors. But it

is not just open green spaces or the distance between houses in a rural community that creates this “soul-felt” community. She points to agricultural cycles as part of the rural environment that creates this unique awareness of community: “Time, beauty, watching the seasons, growing things – all that’s part of it. The cycle of the seasons, the growing, the very awareness of that.” It is participating in the cycles of growing, investing work into the changing shapes and colors of the fields, that imparts the peaceful awareness that Sally appreciates so much. But as a non-farmer rural resident, it is also her proximity to those participating in agricultural cycles, her neighbors, that allows her to benefit from the social effects of farms as well.

Elizabeth, in her explanation of why Bethel schoolchildren may be different from their non-rural peers, points again to the farm: “In the rural setting I think families – especially with a farm background – they tend to work together, they have chores, they eat together, they just tend to have better upbringing, I’d say.” Larry is thankful for his own farm upbringing and for the childhood that living on a farm was able to afford his children – the responsibility and dependability that has made them successful in their current, off-farm jobs, he says, came from doing chores on the farm and taking care of animals as children. As Larry says, “Living on a farm teaches people about life, cause there’s life, there’s death, and everything in between.” And in saying that farming teaches about *life*, Larry is explaining that farming taught his children about how to handle and do well in life, too.

The skills and the approach to life that are gleaned from doing farm work are obviously of value to those who grow up doing that work, living on a working farm. But beyond that, the social contributions of agriculture to Bethel are felt by residents who

don't have that experience of working on a farm, who simply live in proximity to farmland or who are aware of its presence in their community. This is an important extension, because Bethel residents who don't work on farms themselves still speak of the value of social and moral structure that they associate with agriculture. And many of the friendly neighbors of Bethel, the people who make up the peaceful and wholesome community, are not farmers at all. They may be retired from California, like Daniel, or employed by a business in the nearby city of Waynesville, like Susan. Still, there is a perceived social effect of agriculture on the community that goes beyond the presence in Bethel of people who make their living from farming.

In fact, only a small portion of Bethel residents today live on working farms or gain income from farming; in the survey commissioned by the BRCO, only 10.5% of respondents stated that they earn any income from forestry or agriculture. The survey also showed, however, that there is strong support from Bethel residents for working agriculture. Of those same respondents, 87.5% of whom earn no income from farming or forestry, 92.6% indicated that they would strongly support increased farming in the Bethel valley. This contrasts to increased industrial development, which only 21.3% stated that they would support, and increased residential development, which 30% stated that they would support.

These results corroborate what many interview participants who are farmers themselves reported, which is that Bethel is a community that is very supportive of its farmers. Larry believes that this is because many Bethel residents still remember their own families on the farm: "Most of the people that are there are just one generation left from the farm, so they don't have a big problem with the farmers doing what they do."

Bruce mentioned to me that he receives compliments from people stopping by on the road next to his fields, telling him that his crops are looking good and sometimes asking if they can buy a few of the tomatoes and peppers that he has growing in the fields.

Again, Bruce points out that many of the people who appreciate his farming are those who have their own personal connection to a farm: “I get a lot of compliments.

Especially from older people. That have been on a farm, or retired, stuff like that.”

Scott, as a grower with fields scattered throughout Bethel, told me of many ways that his non-farming neighbors showed their support for and involvement in his farming operation. Several times, community members alerted him to land that was for sale, in hopes that he would be able to buy it and include it in his nursery business. He cites another example of property owners, not farmers themselves, who sold their land to him at a lower price than a housing developer would have paid – simply because they wanted the land to be farmed. As he explains,

I actually bought land from people, who told me that they wanted to sell it to me, because they saw what I was doing. And they didn’t want it to be developed.

And these weren’t farmers. These were people that had inherited land and had it, and were ready to retire, and they didn’t need it. But they didn’t want it

developed either.

On the other end of the relationship, Scott makes an effort to include neighbors and community members in his farming operation. He hires high school students on summer vacation, mothers who can only work during the school day, and retired neighbors who enjoy mowing the grass between Scott’s growing trees. There is a close relationship between the farm and the community wrought on many levels of landowners,

part-time workers, neighbors and customers that are each integrated into the farming operation. This is meaningful to Scott because he hopes that neighbors of his farm “will become part of what we do.” He appreciates the encouragement that he receives from non-farming neighbors who help him to buy land and who work for him on a part-time basis, and sees his farm as contributing beauty, open space, work opportunities, and a sense of pride to the community.

The many ways that Scott involves community members in his farming business provide examples of how the social effects of agriculture can reach deeper into a community than just through its citizens that are professional farmers. There remains, however, an asymmetry between the actual, physical importance of farmland to the Bethel community, and its reported or perceived importance in the minds of interview participants. The number of Bethel residents that are involved in agricultural production, and the number of acres of Bethel that are in working farmland, don't strictly correspond to the weight and importance that farmland assumes in their discourse about Bethel. Is it possible that interview participants imagine farmland to be more present in the community than it actually is? I think this is indicative, to the contrary, of the far-reaching values that Bethel residents associate with the agriculture that is present in their community. Although it is most easily expressed by using the example of lessons learned by working on the farm, there is a larger contribution made by farmland that is felt also by the non-farming majority of Bethel. There is an idea perceived by many that the rural environment creates good citizens and good neighbors, even when those neighbors may not be farmers, or have even come to live in the countryside from a city where they were raised.

Here is another example of how farmland brings to a community more values than are immediately apparent. Here also is another reason that it makes sense to BRCO members to invest in preserving farmland in Bethel – it is a way of preserving the friendly and peaceful way of life that they enjoy in their community.



After walking through the center of “downtown” Bethel, I climb back over Graveyard Hill to reach Bethel Presbyterian Church, where the BRCO meeting will be held tonight. This church is one of the oldest buildings in Bethel. Built in 1885, it is the last remaining of the three churches at the center of Bethel that dates to the nineteenth century, when the three denominations transitioned from meeting in a common log structure to

meeting in their own buildings. It’s also unique because it sits directly between the two Bethel schools, as if on a common campus. The interior of the fellowship hall is warm; smells of coffee and pies drift from the small kitchen at the back of the room. I quietly take a seat at one of the smooth dark pews that line the fellowship hall and watch as BRCO members arrive and greet each other. Some may not have seen each other in months; others see each other all the time, in town or at other meetings. There is a lot of

friendly reunion before everyone gets settled down at the church tables and the meeting is called to order by the president.

First among meeting business is for each of the subcommittees of the organization to give a report on their work and upcoming efforts. Though only about 12 or 13 members regularly attend meetings, the BRCO has divided itself into six committees that reflect the areas of community service where its members are active. The committee presidents each give a small report on the status of their focus area: education advancement and benevolence, MANNA food distribution, half marathon and 5K race, sponsorship, Pigeon River Valley rural preservation, and historic and heritage preservation.

These divisions in the official structure of the BRCO reflect an internal understanding of diverse responsibility to the community. Although there is some tension between these seemingly separate interests among the organization's members, especially when deciding on funding, there is also a strong feeling of interdependence and cooperation among them. Many of the participants that I spoke with about farmland preservation are also involved with other committees and passionate about these other causes. Again, their seemingly divided activism belies an interconnected set of values; Brian, for example, is president of the race committee but supports the rural preservation committee in its work partly because of the beautiful environment for recreational running that rural roads provide. Pamela, active in the education advancement committee, connects rural preservation with her work in education by presenting agriculture as one way of providing stable and fulfilling employment for the young people of Bethel. The breadth of characteristics of life in Bethel that are protected, under

the umbrella term of “rural preservation,” include and can appeal to many different values.

Perhaps no two committees of the BRCO, and no two aims of the organization, are more explicitly linked than those dedicated to rural preservation and historic preservation. Pamela’s comment that being in Bethel is “like moving back into the fifties” is apt for its reference to the importance of history, as well as its implied reference to morality and social structure. Many of those that I interviewed who are active in farmland preservation, whether lifetime residents of the area or recent arrivals, are passionate about the history of Bethel. Farmland provides a reminder for them of the farming history of the area and of the idealized picture of rural life that is possible to place in the past.

The history of Bethel is important to some because it links them to their own family. Todd, who lives and farms on the same land that his grandfather owned decades ago, brightened with excitement when the subject of local history came up in our conversation. He told me proudly of a cabin, built by his grandfather, that still stands in the forests near Lake Logan. The cabin is made of chestnut wood dredged from the depths of Lake Logan itself – wood that remained from the logging heyday of the 1910’s and 20’s, before the logging community of Sunburst was covered by the creation of the lake. Todd takes quiet delight in telling the interconnected stories of the logging company and community that flourished at the head of the cove at the beginning of the 20th century (“They had their own little phone system up there and everything”), the preserved remnants of the once-grand chestnut forests, and the standing testament to his grandfather’s work in the forest near his home.

Susan, with no family history of her own in the Bethel area, also loves the historical remains of the landscape. She describes a place called Ward Cove, far above the road and away from modern buildings, that is meaningful to her both because of its natural beauty and its resonance with stories of the past: “There were railroad spurs that went back in there and of course it’s all abandoned now, and it’s all wild now, and borders the park property. But there’s still a feeling, you can tell that people used to live there.” Susan’s use of the word “abandoned,” which she repeats several times in positive ways



during our conversation, carries with it a personal and intimate sense of spaces inhabited in the past, but claimed by nature now. She clearly identifies with the past communities of the Bethel area and with the places, specifically, that they left behind.

Elizabeth, president of the BRCO’s historic and heritage preservation committee, has made almost a second career out of preserving the history of Bethel. She leads the organization of the Cold Mountain Heritage Tour, a yearly tour of historic homes and sites in the Bethel area where hundreds of volunteers guide visitors and residents through some of the county’s most outstanding historic sites. Elizabeth initiated the tour as a fundraiser for the BRCO, but she makes it clear that the idea came from strong personal

feelings about protecting and promoting the historic nature of the Bethel community. She speaks with respect and researched familiarity of the buildings and gathering grounds that she chose to place on the tour, telling me proudly that on the tour, “we had someone outside telling about the history and the architecture of the building, then each room you went in you would learn about the architecture, the families that lived there, the unique stories that emanated from those houses.”

Elizabeth’s reference to the stories that “emanate” from historic buildings reveals a common thread amongst the accounts of Bethel residents that speak about the history of their community: that history is expressed, exemplified and signified by the landscape. For those who are passionate about local history, the landscape of Bethel provides a physical and visual reminder of the past that means so much to them. Descriptions of special places, like Susan’s of Ward Cove, are melded with descriptions of the stories that are associated with those places. The landscape, as far as its appearance remains the same, provides a repository and a visual reminder of common history. The rural lands of Bethel are, in this sense, a physical platform where stories can be affixed, and where, for those who know them, stories emanate forth. In this respect, the significance of Bethel’s rural lands, and one reason for these participants that they should be preserved as they are, lies in the role they play in preserving knowledge and awareness of history, in their ability to evoke stories that are important in themselves.

As I say goodnight to the meeting participants and return to my car in the parking lot of the nearby Methodist church, my mind is full of thoughts about the meeting that I have just listened to, as well as other BRCO meetings that I have seen or heard about

during my time in Bethel. As they grow in their grant-receiving power and in their degree of self-definition, the organization is faced with significant challenges. One of these is maintaining an active membership: how long can a group of 12 or 13 people, though they may be extremely capable, continue to represent a community of thousands? As I've talked with BRCO members, I have seen some common characteristics which are key to their involvement and engagement with the organization. These may provide some strategic points of recruitment of future members.

The values that they associate with their home, which I have explored in my interviews, are but one important part of what has led them to becoming active in protecting it. Each of the BRCO members feels strongly about the desirability of Bethel the way it is now, for the many and complex reasons that have been detailed in this report. Beyond that, each of them has the benefit of some outside perspective, some awareness of the alternatives that exist to living in a place like Bethel. Like the past experiences in other communities that were so helpful in motivating the fight against sewer and water, each BRCO member that is active in protecting farmland has become aware at some point that their community is unique and not something that can be taken for granted. Larry tells me that after growing up in Bethel, he didn't want to live there until he left, and talked with other people who wished that they could: "I guess the big thing that brought me back to the area, was that anybody I talked to would move here in a heartbeat if they could." Many other active members who grew up in Bethel also left the area and then made the choice to return; others chose to come to Bethel from other areas that had become too urban for their liking.

Pursuant to the awareness that Bethel is unique is some awareness of a threat, which also serves to motivate the involvement of BRCO members. While water and sewer provided an extreme example, and also served to motivate a commensurately large number of Bethel residents, the active members of the BRCO are somewhat unusual among their neighbors in their continued awareness that the valuable and unique environment of Bethel could be changed and needs to be protected. This may be a sticking point in the organization's recruitment efforts, as indicated by one question on the commissioned survey of 2006. When asked what they thought about the amount of recent growth in the Bethel area, 44.3% of respondents answered that it had been "about right." Coupled with the strong support for rural and agricultural landscapes that emerges from the survey results and from my conversations with non-BRCO members, this suggests that Bethel residents are happy with their home the way it is, but may not feel that it is in danger of changing, or that it is already changing too much. In contrast, the BRCO members that are active in land preservation have an acute sense of change in the area. For example, Elizabeth describes her primary reason for getting involved with the BRCO: "having lived here all my life, and seeing the almost rapid changes that are occurring, I also became interested in trying to preserve the past." Elizabeth's awareness of "rapid changes" echoes the alarmed sentiments of other BRCO members, but perhaps is not a common thought amongst the larger community.

Another common thread among BRCO members is that they tend to be active in other community service groups. Daniel, for example, has run for local political office and is a longtime member of the Lions club; Bruce is an active participant in the Haywood County Farm Bureau; Pamela is deeply involved with the Volunteer Fire

Department, the Haywood County asthma action team, committees at her church, and a local political party; Elizabeth helped to organize the Haywood County Humane Association; and Gary is professionally active in land preservation across the region. These are but a few examples of the varied outlets where BRCO members choose to pour their energy. There is an activist spirit among all of them, a willingness to be involved and a shared belief that community members should contribute to their home.

Several of the Bethel residents that I talked to who are not members of the BRCO share this desire to be helpful and engaged in their community, but comment very directly that they just don't have time. Todd made an interesting comment when I asked him why he wasn't a member of the BRCO, saying that although he doesn't begrudge them the ability of caring for the community, he has noticed that it is the older, retired generation that has the time for things like community service, and therefore carries the weight of making decisions for the community. He uses the example of the Farm Bureau to illustrate his point: "They're the ones that's able to go down there and help make the decisions and everything, because the younger generation, the one that's really working, is on the farm a-working." Although the active members of the BRCO are not all of an older generation, Todd's point bears out to some extent. Though not by any means necessary for involvement in the community, it helps to have time available.

Not least among the factors that has continued to motivate active BRCO members is social appreciation of the group. Several active members became involved with the organization simply because they were invited by a friend or neighbor to attend a meeting, and liked the people that were there and so kept going. Pamela was a newcomer to the area when she was invited to attend a BRCO meeting. When I asked her what it

was that kept her attending meetings, she told me, “I liked the people. They were all pretty down to earth, straightforward people, people that said what they meant. It wasn’t a lot of double talk. Well, you know, we had a lot of farmers in there!” Many BRCO members were invited to join the organization by friends or neighbors; the organization is partly built on standing social networks.

These loosely shared characteristics of BRCO members, though they are common enough to be evident to me, do not necessarily place limitations on who may become an active and contributing member of the BRCO in the future. Characteristics of the organization will doubtlessly shift through time as the membership changes; these components of the current membership that I have identified have served to make it possible for the group in its current form to exist, but those components may also change as the group tackles new challenges and assumes new responsibilities. I can envision these characteristics – time to spend volunteering, an activist spirit, an awareness of impending threats, and conscious valuation of Bethel in its present state – as points of attraction by which the BRCO could draw new members. But, as already illustrated by some members of the organization who do not share these characteristics, they do not at all represent requirements for membership. Indeed, my interviews have shown that it is the diversity of the organization and the breadth of perspective that its members bring to their common causes that lends it its strength.

The beauty of Bethel always encourages me to spend a little more time there than is absolutely necessary. After the BRCO meeting at the Presbyterian church, I decide to take a very roundabout way home, up the winding track of highway 215 to the Blue

Ridge Parkway. There is just enough of the evening sun left to cast a soft glow upon the open fields that I pass on my way south from the stoplight. I drive by Scott's father's land, rich and dark in the river's flooding path, and the cattle on the neighboring hillside that Scott looks after. I pass the road that leads to Ward Cove, the abandoned settlement that Susan so loves to visit in the autumn. I catch a fleeting view of the windows of Pamela's house, and the light of Brian's cabin, both high on a hillside in the wilder, forested coves of Bethel. I come to Lake Logan and drive by the patch of forest where the cabin that Todd's grandfather built, named Chestnut for the wood that it is framed by, stands alone and untouched. Climbing higher on the road that has become steep and winding, I glimpse Cold Mountain away to the east. I remember that it was somewhere, on one of these pitched slopes, that Inman was killed during the Civil War.

By speaking with the people who travel this road every day, who live with these mountain slopes outside of their windows or who work in the open valley below, I have been able to take on the stories that flow through each of these scenes. For me, and for those who have given to me their stories, the experience of seeing and being in Bethel has become charged with memory and value; the landscape of Bethel has become a library of stored meaning. The meaning of history, of family ties, of community structure, and of the style of living that is characteristic of Bethel, are signified by the appearance of the landscape. Those meanings spill forth from the fields and forests, the barns and school buildings, triggered by a single glimpse but made up of deep layers of accumulated thought and reflection.

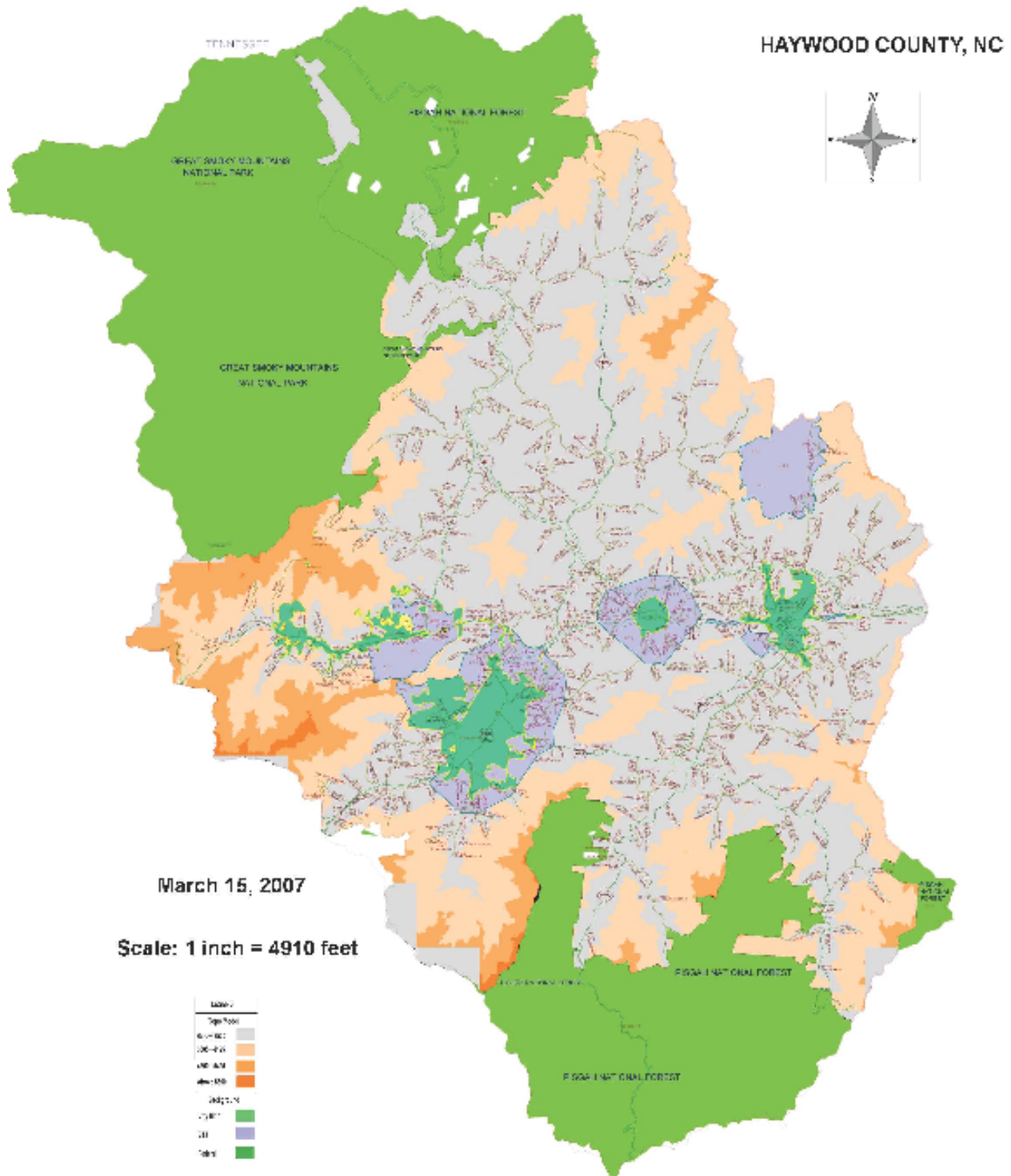
Through taking on these stories, and gaining a secondhand glimpse of the landscape's meaning, I have come to understand that the work of the BRCO to protect the

appearance of this landscape, as it is today, is tied inextricably to the associated values that it represents. Because these values are deeply personal and unique to each individual's life and point of view, they range widely. But like the waters of the Pigeon, funneled and shaped by the surrounding mountains, the values that each resident of Bethel associates with their home come together in place and in application. They are shaped by the landscape that provides their physical manifestation; when directed, they are directed towards its protection. The gathering characteristic of the stories and values that are held in the mountains and fields of Bethel is that they depend on the landscape as it is today, for what it signifies today. This is what I have learned to see when I look at Bethel, and it is ultimately what the Bethel Rural Community Organization seeks to keep and preserve.

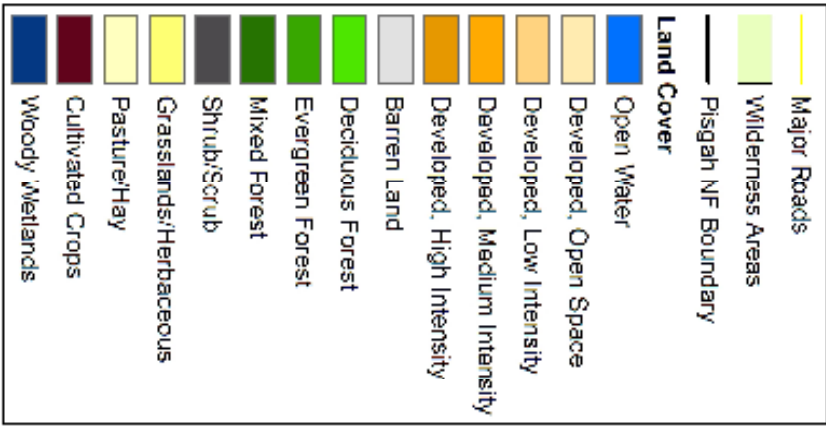
Acknowledgements

It has been a pleasure and a wonderful learning opportunity to work closely with the Bethel Rural Community Organization; I am thankful to their members for their kind welcome and especially to George Ivey, who lent a great deal of enthusiasm and guidance to this project. I am thankful to Dr. John Wood for his assistance and perspective on the analysis and writing of ethnography; Dr. Karin Peterson for her help with the interview design; Dr. Leah Mathews of the Farmland Values Project for the initial inspiration and design of this project and for interview contacts; to Carolyn Fryberger for the creation of the maps that accompany the project; and to Carolyn Fryberger, Frank Teneralli, and Margery Kowal for their careful readings of this paper. I am most grateful to all interview participants for sharing their stories with me.

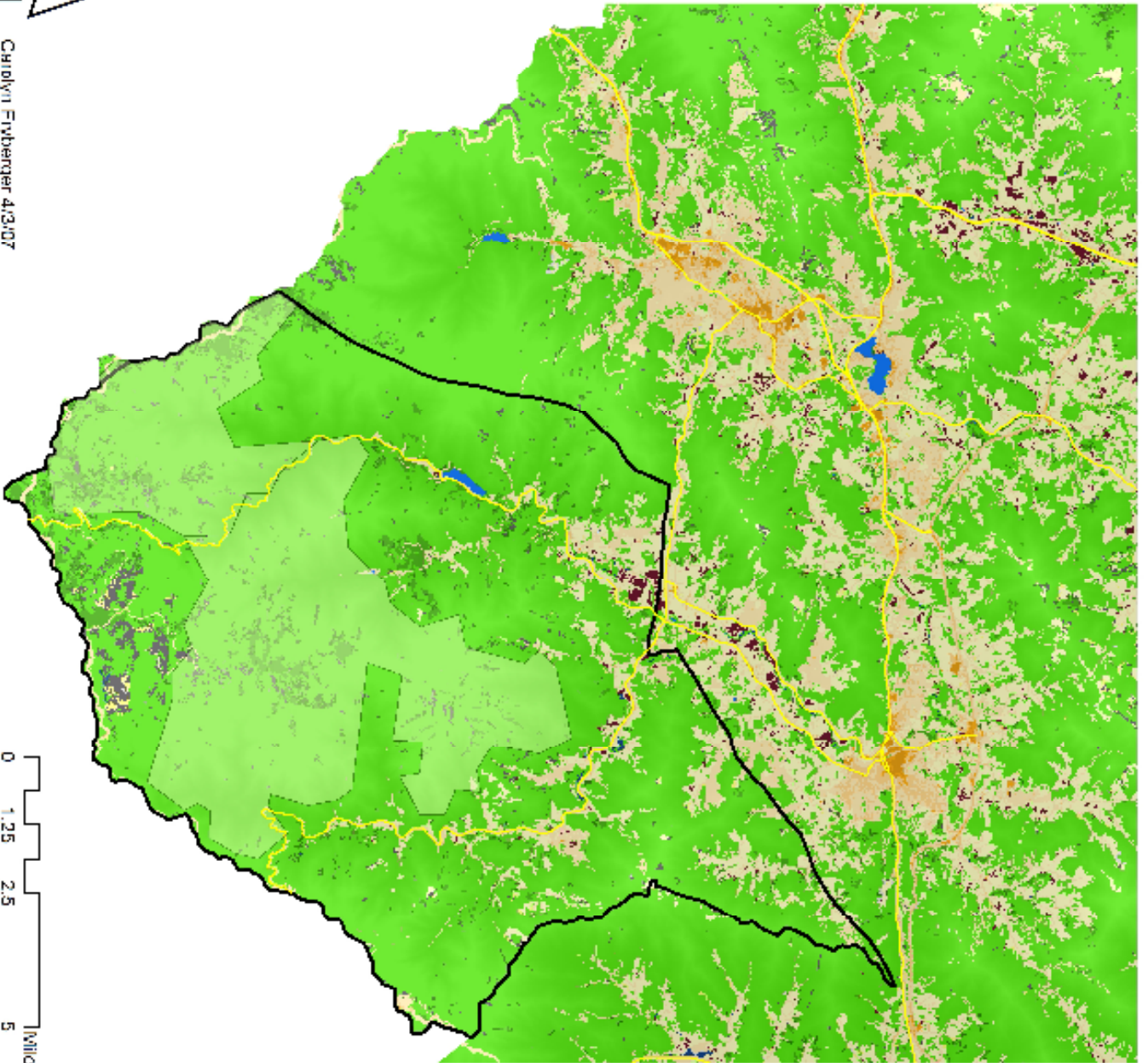
Appendix A: Maps



Bethel 2001 Land Cover



Carlynn Fryberger 4/3/07



Appendix B: Survey results

Bethel Telephone Survey on Land Use – Report and Analysis Executive Summary

In the spring of 2006, the Richard L. Hoffman Center for Assessment and Research Alliances (CARA) at Mars Hill College was contracted by the Haywood County Board of Commissioners to conduct a telephone survey of residents and landowners in the Upper Pigeon River Valley area, generally defined as the Bethel community. Funding was made possible by a grant from the North Carolina Rural Center. CARA was instructed to complete surveys of up to 300 residents and/or landowners, 18 years old and older. Using contact information supplied from voter registration files, teams of students from Mars Hill College and Duke University successfully completed 273 surveys.

The callers were trained in confidentiality and telephone-survey methods. On February 21st, CARA director Smithson Mills and Gerry Cohn, director of the Southeastern Office of the American Farmland Trust, attended a planning session with project director George Ivey and members of the Bethel Rural Community Organization to discuss survey formatting and the logistics of gathering names and phone numbers of potential survey respondents. Telephone calls were conducted over a two-week period in March and April 2006.

CARA was provided with a database from Haywood County with approximately 2,500 individuals on voter registration files from precincts in the target survey area; non-resident landowners thus were not interviewed, though consideration should be given to interviewing them in the future to assess their views.

In order to obtain a random sample set, CARA staff selected call lists for surveyors using a random numbering selection system. In the end, 1,788 phone numbers, or 71% of the total number supplied, were called.

Given a population base of 2,500 unique households, responses from the 273 completed surveys have a margin of error of 5.6%, with a confidence level of 95%. Cross-tabulations and responses from small sub-groups, such as those deriving income from farming or forestry, have much higher margins of error. Due to the small sample size of these sub-groups, consideration should be given to conducting focus groups as a means of gathering greater depth of information.

The results of calls made were as follows:

Attempted and completed calls	
Surveys Completed	273
Wrong or disconnected numbers	651
Not available	567
Refused to respond	297
Total	1,788

Survey results clearly indicate that the community of the Upper Pigeon River Valley is very firmly supportive of the rural character of the area in general and of farmers in particular. Certainly, a number of residents recognize that some growth is inevitable, and not necessarily undesirable. But the vast majority of respondents stated their desire to maintain those qualities that have encouraged them to call the community home – “scenic,” “relaxed,” “peaceful,” “close-knit,” to name but a few of those qualities expressed in the interviews.

In response to the question, “Would you like to see Bethel continue to be a rural agricultural community?,” 93.8% said yes. When asked, “Do you think it is important for the issue of development and rural character to be addressed?,” 93.7% agreed that it is. To the question, “Do you think it is important to help farmers protect their land from development if they wish to do so?,” 98.5% responded that they do indeed.

And when asked, “Would you support some type of public funding to help Bethel remain a rural community?,” nearly two out of three said yes.

Respondents were also given the opportunity to further elaborate on their views on life in the community and on the potential paths to its future.

When asked, “What do you enjoy about a community like Bethel?,” one respondent declared that it’s “God’s country.”

“Primarily, it’s not Asheville,” said another.

And to the question, “Is there anything else you’d like to say about the future of rural communities in Haywood County?,” quite a number reiterated a “stay rural” theme. “That’s what makes Haywood County Haywood County,” said one resident, “and it’s such a nice place to live.”

Precautionary notes were sounded” “I used to like it because it was a good country community, but it’s growing fast; the more people, the less I like it.”

And: “They’re tearing down our mountains. There should be a law against building on mountains. Destroying our forest, destroying our beauty ...”

But others spoke of a need for balance: “There is a need to keep parts of the community rural; but people need businesses and homes. So that means there is going to be a need for development, and growth is inevitable. Farmers have the right to their land, but don’t be opposed to other development; we should find a happy medium.”

Almost without exception, though, those who responded to the survey underscored in some manner the rural character of the area as a defining feature of a distinguished community.

Bethel Telephone Survey on Land Use – Report and Analysis

Introduction

In the spring of 2006, the Haywood County Board of Commissioners contracted the Richard L. Hoffman Center for Assessment and Research Alliances (CARA) at Mars Hill College to conduct a telephone survey of residents and landowners in the Upper Pigeon River Valley area, generally defined as the Bethel community but also including a small group of respondents from the Cruso community. Funding was made possible by a grant from the North Carolina Rural Center. CARA's task was to complete surveys of up to 300 residents and/or landowners, 18 years old and older. Under its auspices, and using contact information supplied from voter registration files, a team of students at Mars Hill College and another of graduate students at Duke University completed 273 surveys.

The callers were trained in confidentiality and telephone-survey methods. On February 21st, CARA director Smithson Mills and Gerry Cohn, director of the Southeastern Office of the American Farmland Trust, attended a planning session with project director George Ivey and members of the Bethel Rural Community Organization to discuss survey formatting and logistics of gathering names and phone numbers of potential survey respondents. Telephone calls were conducted over a two-week period in March and April 2006. A team of seven Mars Hill students completed 200 calls on March 24th and 27th and April 2nd and April 9th, with 16 follow-up daytime calls completed by students in the same period, while a team of four Duke students completed 57 surveys over the same time span.

Survey Methods and Samples

CARA was provided with a database from Haywood County with approximately 2,500 individuals on voter registration files from precincts in the target survey area; non-resident landowners thus were not interviewed, though consideration should be given to interviewing them in the future to assess their views.

In order to obtain a random sample set, CARA staff selected call lists for surveyors using a random numbering selection system. In the end, 1,788 phone numbers, or 71% of the total number supplied, were called.

Given a population base of 2,500 registered voters, responses from the 273 completed surveys have a margin of error of 5.6%, with a confidence level of 95%. Cross-tabulations and responses from small sub-groups, such as those deriving income from farming or forestry, have much higher margins of error. Due to the small sample size of these sub-groups, consideration should be given to conducting focus groups as a means of gathering greater depth of information on certain sub-groups – particularly with regard to non-resident landowners and those deriving income from farming and forestry.

Call Breakdown by Category

A coding system was designed to indicate if the phone number was incorrect or if the phone had been disconnected, if the person was unavailable or there was no answer, if the person refused to complete the survey or if the survey was completed.

Table 1 shows that with 1,788 calls attempted, 273 surveys, or 15.3%, were completed.

Table 1: Attempted and completed calls	
Surveys Completed	273
Wrong or disconnected numbers	651
Not available	567
Refused to respond	297
Total	1,788

Research Questions

The results described in this report were analyzed in the context of the following questions:

- How do Bethel area landowners and residents feel about various types of development in their community?
- Is there a significant difference in opinions toward development among different demographic groups? For example, does one’s age affect one’s opinion? Do those who own a considerable amount of acreage hold different opinions from those who own relatively little? Do opinions differ among those who derive income from farming or forestry from those who don’t? What about those who’ve lived in the community for most or all of their lives versus those who’ve more recently arrived?
- What do area residents particularly like about their community?
- Among those engaged in farming or forestry activities on their own land, what are their future plans for the land, and to what land-management resources, if any, would they like to have access?

Forty questions – including two open-ended questions – were asked in the course of the surveys. What follows is a breakdown of some general demographics regarding those interviewed; their histories and present status in the Pigeon River Valley; their perspectives on recent developments in the area; and their views on their own futures and those of their families, and on what local government might provide in helping facilitate a productive future for all concerned.

General Demographics

Of the 273 respondents, 58.5% were female, 41.4% male.

Table 2: Gender		
	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Female	159	58.5%
Male	113	41.5%
Missing system	1	

All age groups, 18 years and older, were well represented, with 37.0% being 44 years old or younger; 41.7%, between the ages of 45 and 64; and 20.5%, 65 years or older.

Table 3: Age		
	Frequency	Valid Percentage
18-24	15	5.5%
25-34	29	10.6%
35-44	57	20.9%
45-54	58	21.2%
55-64	56	20.5%
65 or older	58	21.2%

Relationships with the Pigeon River Valley

The vast majority of those interviewed are currently residents of the Pigeon River Valley.

Table 4: Do you currently live in the Pigeon River Valley?		
	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Yes	262	96.3%
No	10	3.7%
No answer	1	

Some respondents were uncertain of how to respond to the question regarding their residency, questioning what exactly constitutes the valley – that is, does living in a cove or on a hill qualify. Project surveyors generally guided respondents to answer “yes” if they lived near the Bethel community or if they were living upriver from Canton. Several of the 10 respondents who answered “no” considered themselves to be residents of Canton.

Over 80% of those interviewed have lived in the valley for five years or more, with 48.1% responding that they’ve resided there either 20 years or more or their entire lives. However, with 5.3% having been in the area a year or less, there is indication of a significant amount of movement into the area.

Table 5: How many years have you lived there?		
	Frequency	Valid Percentage
1 year or less	14	5.3%
1 to 5 years	35	13.2%
5 to 20 years	86	32.3%
More than 20 years	74	27.8%
Your entire life	54	20.3%
No answer	3	1.1%
Missing system	7	

Roots clearly run deep through the Pigeon River Valley: Nearly 60% reported that they or their families first came to the valley 25 years ago or more.

Table 6: When did you or your family first come to the Pigeon River Valley?		
	Frequency	Valid Percentage
3 years or less	22	8.7%
3 to 25 years	81	31.9%
More than 25 years	150	59.1%
I don't know	1	0.4%
Missing system	19	

The bonds these roots have nurtured are borne out by the fact that so many of those interviewed are landowners: 84.9%.

Table 7: Do you own land in the Pigeon River Valley?		
	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Yes	230	84.9%
No	41	15.1%
Missing system	2	

The distribution of acreage among these landowners reflects substantial representations of a wide variety of plot sizes – small, medium and large. Those with one acre or less constitute 20.1%; those who own more than one acre but less than five, 34.1%; owners of five to ten acres, 12.1%; and those with ten acres or more, 18.0%.

Table 8: How many acres do you own?		
Acreage	Frequency	Valid Percent
1 acre or less	55	20.1%
More than 1 but less than 5 acres	93	34.1%
5 to 10 acres	33	12.1%
More than 10 acres to 25 acres	21	7.7%
More than 25 acres to 100 acres	17	6.2%
More than 100 acres	4	1.5%
I don't know	7	2.6%
None	43	15.7%

The surveys, however, substantiated what a drive through the backroads of the Pigeon River Valley reveals: Few people in the area are today earning their livelihoods from the land. Although those who are today gathering income from either farming or forestry on their land constituted only 10 percent of those surveyed, it should be noted that they own an average of 35.4 acres apiece, higher than the area average.

Table 9: Do you earn any income from farming or forestry on your land in Pigeon River Valley?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	26	10.5%
No	217	87.5%
No answer	5	2.0%
Missing system	25	

Nonetheless, residents of the valley continue to find employment reasonably close to home: The primary employment of only 21% of respondents is outside Haywood County – reflecting a desire (as will be revealed later in this report) on the part of the majority of those interviewed to live and work in what more than a few described as a “close-knit” community.

Table 10: Is your primary employment outside of Haywood County?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	56	21.0%
No	186	69.7%
No answer	25	9.4%
Missing system	6	

Views on Development

The survey revealed that there is no consensus view on development in Haywood County in general and the Pigeon River Valley in particular. Rather, while most residents do very much want to preserve the rural character of the community, they hold a variety of views on how best to do so.

First, to the question, “Would you like to see Bethel continue to be a rural agricultural community?” an overwhelming majority, nearly 94%, responded in the affirmative.

Table 11: Would you like to see Bethel continue to be a rural agricultural community?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	256	93.8%
No	9	3.3%
I don’t know	8	2.9%

When asked, though, their views, in light of recent development trends in Haywood County, on the amount of recent growth in Bethel, responses were quite mixed, with slightly more respondents viewing this growth as being “about right” than those who felt it was “too much,” with less than 2% saying it was “too little.”

Table 12: In the past few years, Haywood County has experienced increased development. Given these recent development trends around you, what do you think of the amount of growth in the Bethel area?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Too much	117	43.2%
Too little	5	1.8%
About right	120	44.3%
I don’t know	29	10.7%
Missing system	2	

The question then arises of the importance of publicly addressing the issue of maintaining a rural character, and the vast majority, nearly 94%, agreed this was important.

Table 13: Do you think it is important for the issue of development and rural character to be addressed?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	254	93.7%
No	6	2.2%
I don't know	11	4.1%
Missing system	2	

Should, then, farmers be assisted in protecting their land from development if they wish to do so? Almost all respondents said “yes”: 269 of 273 did so, with three expressing uncertainty and only one responding “no.”

Table 14: Do you think it is important to help farmers protect their land from development if they wish to do so?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	269	98.5%
No	1	0.4%
I don't know	3	1.1%

Given this overwhelming support for helping farmers protect their land, are residents prepared to invest in public funding to help Bethel remain rural? Almost two-thirds (65.7%) responded that they were prepared to do so, with 18.5% responding “no” and 15.9% saying they were uncertain.

Table 15: Would you support some type of public funding to help Bethel remain a rural community?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	178	65.7%
No	50	18.5%
I don't know	43	15.9%
Missing system	2	

Projecting the Future

A subset of questions was asked only of those who indicated they earned income from farming or forestry on their own land in the Pigeon River Valley. These questions were specific to their plans for the future use of their land and their receptiveness to certain tools that might be employed to help them achieve their goals.

The first question was, “What are your plans for your farming or forestry activities in the next 10 years?” A list of potential options was then provided, with respondents being asked to choose any option that they could foresee as a possibility for their future.

The most frequently chosen of these options, with 87% responding “yes” and 8.7% “no,” was “Continue current activities and pass along to my family.” “Protect the land from development” was the second-most frequently chosen option: 77.3% saying “yes,” 18.2% responding “no.”

An uncertainty on the part of many of those surveyed was reflected in the fact that over half (52.9%) selected as a possible option “Depends on what happens around me.”

Table 16: What are your plans for your farming or forestry activities in the next 10 years? Please indicate all options that may apply.		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Continue current activities and pass along to my family		
Yes	20	87.0%
No	2	8.7%
Unsure	1	4.3%
Develop a new agricultural enterprise		
Yes	1	4.5%
No	17	77.3%
Unsure	4	18.2%
Protect the land from development		
Yes	17	77.3%
No	4	18.2%
Unsure	1	4.5%
Sell the land to the highest bidder		
Yes	4	19.0%
No	15	71.4%
Unsure	2	9.5%
Depends on what happens around me		
Yes	9	52.9%
No	7	41.2%
Unsure	1	5.9%
Other		
Livestock	1	
Renting to farmers	1	
Yes	1	

Those who are earning income from farming or forestry were then asked if they were familiar with conservation easement programs, with 52.4% indicating that they were, 38.1% that they were not.

Table 17: Are you familiar with conservation easement programs?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	11	52.4%
No	8	38.1%
I don't know	2	9.5%

They were then provided with the following definition of conservation easement programs:

“A conservation easement is a deed restriction landowners can voluntarily place on their property to protect resources such as agricultural land, water quality, wildlife habitat, historic sites or scenic views. The landowner could still farm the land, sell it, or pass it along to his or her children, but this land could not be developed with subdivisions or for industrial uses. The land would remain private property and not be open to the public. Conservation easements can be

donated for state and federal tax advantages, or in some cases, sold for cash.”

Given this information, this same subset of respondents was asked if any of a selection of tools might help them achieve their farming or forestry objectives. Conservation easements were deemed as potentially beneficial by 45.5% of those surveyed, while 36.4% thought not and 18.2% were uncertain. Marketing and promotion and estate planning were also selected by 45.5%. A more popular option was farmers markets: 63.6% responded in the affirmative to these; 31.8%, “no”; and 4.5%, “I don’t know.”

Table 18: Given this information, would any of the following tools help you achieve your goals with your farming or forestry activities?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Conservation easements		
Yes	10	45.5%
No	8	36.4%
I don’t know	4	18.2%
Business planning and technical assistance		
Yes	7	31.8%
No	14	63.6%
I don’t know	1	4.5%
Cost-share funding for conservation practices		
Yes	7	31.8%
No	13	59.1%
I don’t know	2	9.1%
Local farmers market		
Yes	14	63.6%
No	7	31.8%
I don’t know	1	4.5%
Marketing and promotion		
Yes	10	45.5%
No	11	50.0%
I don’t know	1	4.5%
Estate planning		
Yes	10	45.5%
No	11	50.0%
I don’t know	1	4.5%
Other		
Yes	1	
No	4	
I don’t know	1	

Respondents were then asked if they were interested in learning more about agritourism, to which only 22.7% responded in the affirmative.

Table 19: Are you interested in learning more about opportunities in agritourism, in which you bring visitors to your land for products and entertainment? Examples include hayrides, choose-and-cut Christmas trees and farm tours.		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	5	22.7%
No	16	72.7%
I don't know	1	4.5%

Floodplain Land Use

Given extensive flood damage in 2004 related to hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne, several questions were asked specific to floodplains in the Pigeon River Valley. Just under 19% of those interviewed own land in a floodplain, and over one in four suffered flood damage in 2004.

Table 20: Do you own any land in a floodplain of the Pigeon River Valley?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	51	18.9%
No	212	78.5%
I don't know	7	2.6%
Missing system	3	

Table 21: Did your land or buildings experience flood damage in 2004?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	66	26.0%
No	186	73.2%
I don't know	2	0.8%
Missing system	19	

Seventy-one percent of respondents said they felt farming was an appropriate use of land in a floodplain and nearly 65% felt forestry was appropriate, while only 17.2% felt residential was appropriate and 12.1% felt the same about industrial.

Table 22: What type of land-use do you feel is appropriate in the floodplain? Please indicate all that apply.		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Farming	194	71.1%
Forestry	176	64.5%
No development	93	34.1%
Residential	47	17.2%
Retail	42	15.4%
Industrial	33	12.1%
Other		
Agritourism	1	0.4%
Anything	1	0.4%
Do whatever	1	0.4%
Land preservation, easement	1	0.4%
Parks	3	1.1%
Recreation, picnic	1	0.4%
Unsure	1	0.4%

General Views on Types of Development in Bethel

How do residents of the Pigeon River Valley feel about potential growth in their community? The survey found that views varied considerably depending on the manner of growth suggested. For example, 63.6% were opposed to industrial development, while only 8.5% were opposed to forestry development and 1.1% were opposed to farming development. The question of potential residential development elicited the most mixed response: 42.7% said they were opposed, 30.0% that they were in favor and 27.3% that they were neutral.

Table 23: Please let us know how you would feel about increases in the following types of development in Bethel. Would you oppose support or be neutral to increases in:		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Industrial development		
Opposed	173	63.6%
Neutral	41	15.1%
Support	58	21.3%
Missing system	1	
Small businesses		
Opposed	53	19.6%
Neutral	51	18.8%
Support	167	61.6%
Missing system	2	
Residential development		
Opposed	114	42.7%
Neutral	73	27.3%
Support	80	30.0%
Missing system	6	
Farming		
Opposed	3	1.1%
Neutral	17	6.3%
Support	252	92.6%
Missing system	1	
Forestry		
Opposed	23	8.5%
Neutral	25	9.3%
Support	222	82.2%
Missing system	3	
Agritourism		
Opposed	21	7.7%
Neutral	38	14.0%
Support	212	78.2%
Missing system	2	

Longevity as a Factor in Landownership, Income and Employment

Doing cross-tabulations of how long those surveyed have lived in the Pigeon River Valley and their responses to several other questions reveals some interesting findings.

First, not surprisingly, duration of time in the area is a factor in landownership: 96.3% of those who have lived in the valley their entire lives are landowners, 91.8% of those who

have lived there more than 20 years own land, but only 57.1% of those who have lived there a year or less own land.

Table 24: How many years have you lived in the Pigeon River Valley?	Do you own land there?	
	Yes	No
1 year or less	57.1%	42.9%
1 to 5 years	85.7%	14.3%
5 to 20 years	83.7%	16.3%
More than 20 years	91.8%	8.2%
Your entire life	96.3%	3.7%

Likewise, the number of years a person has lived in the valley is a factor in how much land one owns. Thirty-seven percent of those who have lived there their entire lives own at least five acres of land, while just 7.1% of those who have lived there a year or less own five or more.

Table 25: How many years have you lived in the Pigeon River Valley?	How many acres do you own?					
	1 or less	More than 1 but less than 5	5 to 10	10-plus to 25	25-plus to 100	More than 100
1 year or less	57.1%	28.6%	7.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
1 to 5 years	28.6%	54.3%	2.9%	5.7%	5.7%	0.0%
5 to 20 years	38.4%	30.2%	15.1%	5.8%	8.1%	1.2%
More than 20 years	27.0%	29.7%	14.9%	10.8%	5.4%	1.4%
Your entire life	18.5%	40.7%	14.8%	11.1%	7.4%	3.7%

Of those interviewed who have lived in the Pigeon River Valley more than 20 years, 8.8% earn income from farming or forestry on their land, while no one who's lived there for a year or less earns income from either of those enterprises.

Table 26: How many years have you lived in the Pigeon River Valley?	Do you earn any income from farming or forestry on your land?		
	Yes	No	No answer
1 year or less	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%
1 to 5 years	8.8%	85.3%	5.9%
5 to 20 years	11.5%	85.9%	2.6%
More than 20 years	8.8%	91.2%	0.0%
Your entire life	15.1%	84.9%	0.0%

However, responses to the question of whether one's primary employment was outside of Haywood County indicated that there is no significant difference in those who have lived in the valley a long time and those who are more recent arrivals. The percentage of those who said that their primary employment was not earned outside the county ranged from

73.5% for those who have lived there one to five years, to 61.5% for those who have lived there a year or less.

Table 27: How many years have you lived in the Pigeon River Valley?	Is your primary employment outside of Haywood County?		
	Yes	No	No answer
1 year or less	23.1%	61.5%	15.4%
1 to 5 years	17.6%	73.5%	8.8%
5 to 20 years	22.4%	70.6%	7.1%
More than 20 years	16.4%	69.9%	13.7%
Your entire life	23.1%	73.1%	3.8%

Longevity as a Factor in Views on Development

Respondents’ views on the amount of development the Bethel area has recently experienced were somewhat differentiated by how long they’ve lived in the Pigeon River Valley. For example, of those who’ve lived there their entire lives 58.5% said there had been too much development, while only 28.6% of those who’ve lived there a year or less felt the same way. Among those who’ve lived in the valley one to five years, 8.6% said there had been too little development, while virtually no one in either of the other categories of longevity felt likewise.

Table 28: How many years have you lived in the Pigeon River Valley?	In the past few years, Haywood County has experienced increased development. Given these recent trends around you, what do you think about the amount of growth in the Bethel area?			
	Too much	Too little	About right	I don’t know
1 year or less	28.6%	0.0%	35.7%	35.7%
1 to 5 years	31.4%	8.6%	51.4%	8.6%
5 to 20 years	43.5%	1.2%	50.6%	4.7%
More than 20 years	44.6%	1.4%	41.9%	12.2%
Your entire life	58.5%	0.0%	34.0%	7.5%

A cross-tabulation of longevity in the Pigeon River Valley and views on different types of potential development revealed no considerable differences, with some few exceptions, relative to how long one has lived there. Almost two out of three (64.8%) respondents who have lived in the valley their entire lives said they were opposed to increases in industrial development, with 27.8% saying they were supportive and 7.4% declaring themselves neutral on the subject. Of those who have lived in the valley a year or less, 78.6% said they were opposed to increased industrial development, with only 7.1% saying they were supportive, while 14.3% were neutral.

Table 29: How many years have you lived in the Pigeon River Valley?	How would you feel about increases in industrial development in Bethel?		
	Opposed	Neutral	Support
1 year or less	78.6%	14.3%	7.1%
1 to 5 years	71.4%	14.3%	14.3%
5 to 20 years	60.0%	20.0%	20.0%
More than 20 years	59.5%	14.9%	25.7%
Your entire life	64.8%	7.4%	27.8%

As for residential development, longevity did appear to play a role in one’s views. Of those who have lived in the valley their entire lives, 55.6% indicated they were opposed, 18.5% supportive and 25.9% neutral. Of those who have lived there a year or less, 23.1% were opposed, 30.8% supportive and 46.2% neutral.

Table 30: How many years have you lived in the Pigeon River Valley?	How would you feel about increases in residential development in Bethel?		
	Opposed	Neutral	Support
1 year or less	23.1%	46.2%	30.8%
1 to 5 years	34.3%	34.3%	31.4%
5 to 20 years	42.7%	24.4%	32.9%
More than 20 years	42.5%	23.3%	34.2%
Your entire life	55.6%	25.9%	18.5%

Interestingly, respondents expressed more support for increases in small business development than for residential development. In regards to the former, responses were pretty much uniform, with a majority in each longevity category being supportive of such development.

Table 31: How many years have you lived in the Pigeon River Valley?	How would you feel about increases in small business development in Bethel?		
	Opposed	Neutral	Support
1 year or less	23.1%	23.1%	53.8%
1 to 5 years	17.1%	17.1%	65.7%
5 to 20 years	16.5%	16.5%	67.1%
More than 20 years	21.6%	27.0%	51.4%
Your entire life	24.1%	9.3%	66.7%

It is, however, on the subject of future farming development that the community speaks in the most singular voice – most all are in favor. In fact, only in the category of those who have lived in the Pigeon River Valley for more than 20 years did anyone at all express opposition to an increase in farming development.

Table 32: How many years have you lived in the Pigeon River Valley?	How would you feel about increases in farming development in Bethel?		
	Opposed	Neutral	Support
1 year or less	0.0%	14.3%	85.7%
1 to 5 years	0.0%	5.7%	94.3%
5 to 20 years	0.0%	1.2%	98.8%
More than 20 years	4.1%	10.8%	85.1%
Your entire life	0.0%	3.7%	96.3%

Given this overwhelming support for farming in the community, do residents think it's important to help farmers protect their land from other development? In very large measure, they do: Responses in each category of longevity were at or near 100% in favor.

Table 33: How many years have you lived in the Pigeon River Valley?	Do you think it is important to help farmers protect their land from development if they wish to do so?		
	Yes	No	I don't know
1 year or less	100%	0.0%	0.0%
1 to 5 years	100%	0.0%	0.0%
5 to 20 years	97.7%	1.2%	1.2%
More than 20 years	98.6%	0.0%	1.4%
Your entire life	100%	0.0%	0.0%

Landownership as a Factor in Views on Development

Land ownership seemed to be a factor in respondents' views on recent development in the Bethel area. Nearly half (47.2%) of those who own land said they felt there had been too much growth, while only 22.5% of those who don't own land said the same.

Table 34: Do you own land in the Pigeon River Valley?	In the past few years, Haywood County has experienced increased development. Given these recent trends around you, what do you think about the amount of growth in the Bethel area?		
	Too much	Too little	About right
Yes	47.2%	2.2%	42.4%
No	22.5%	0.0%	52.5%

But there was very little difference between those who own land and those who don't in response to how they would feel about a variety of types of potential growth.

Table 35: Do you own land in the Pigeon River Valley?	How would you feel about increases in industrial development in Bethel?		
	Opposed	Neutral	Support
Yes	63.3%	15.3%	21.4%
No	65.9%	14.6%	19.5%

Table 36: Do you own land in the Pigeon River Valley?	How would you feel about increases in residential development in Bethel?		
	Opposed	Neutral	Support
Yes	43.4%	26.1%	30.5%
No	38.5%	33.3%	28.2%

As with the cross-tabulation of length of time in the Pigeon River Valley and support for residential and small business development, here again support was greater for small business than for residential, with more than half of both those who own land and those who don't expressing support for more small business development.

Table 37: Do you own land in the Pigeon River Valley?	How would you feel about increases in small business development in Bethel?		
	Opposed	Neutral	Support
Yes	20.0%	17.0%	63.0%
No	17.9%	28.2%	53.8%

And again, those who own land and those who don't were overwhelmingly in support of increases in farming development.

Table 38: Do you own land in the Pigeon River Valley?	How would you feel about increases in farming development in Bethel?		
	Opposed	Neutral	Support
Yes	1.3%	5.7%	93.0%
No	0.0%	9.8%	90.2%

Not surprisingly, then, most all were in favor of helping farmers protect their land from development if they wish to do so.

Table 39: Do you own land in the Pigeon River Valley?	Do you think it is important to help farmers protect their land from development if they wish to do so?		
	Opposed	Neutral	Support
Yes	0.4%	0.4%	99.1%
No	4.9%	0.0%	95.1%

A related cross-tabulation indicated that the sizes of the plots of land owned by those who earn income from farming or forestry on that land were fairly evenly dispersed.

Table 40: Do you earn any income from farming or forestry on your land?	How many acres do you own?					
	1 or less	More than 1 but less than 5	5 to 10	10-plus to 25	25-plus to 100	More than 100
Yes	7.7%	15.4%	15.4%	26.9%	26.9%	7.7%

And among those who earn that income from their land and those who don't, there was no considerable difference of opinion regarding the amount of growth that has recently occurred in the Bethel area.

Table 41: Do you earn any income from farming or forestry on your land?	In the past few years, Haywood County has experienced increased development. Given these recent trends around you, what do you think about the amount of growth in the Bethel area?			
	Too much	Too little	About right	I don't know
Yes	57.7%	3.8%	34.6%	3.8%
No	44.4%	1.9%	44.4%	9.3%

Elaborated Comments on Life in the Pigeon River Valley

Two questions were asked that allowed respondents to elaborate on how they feel about their community. These questions were, “What do you enjoy about a community like Bethel?” and “Is there anything else you’d like to say about the future of rural communities in Haywood County?”

While the responses provided to these two questions were quite varied, a common thematic thread ran through them both, which might best be summarized as a true appreciation for the rural character of the county and for the physical, social, cultural and, as expressed by several, spiritual qualities that are often associated with life in a rural environment.

“What do you enjoy about a community like Bethel?”

When asked this question, 244 responses were provided (bearing in mind that each person could give as many responses to these open-ended questions as they wished) that related to rural themes, referring to the community’s setting (a “rural setting; cows and animals, wild turkeys, bobcats, little grocery store ...”), its beauty (“a beautiful place that God put [here] for our enjoyment”) and the opportunities afforded by relatively untouched nature (“the outdoors, fishing and hunting, camping” and “being able to go to a river whenever”).

Eighty-five responses specifically referred to this “rural” character – to less traffic, no billboards, to a place where a person “can ride to work and see goats and horses”; to being able to raise horses and tend cows; to being out in the woods where dogs can run. We’re “not in a city, but still close enough if the need arises,” said one resident, while another spoke proprietarily of “our space.” “No city, no devil,” said another.

Respondents spoke of their appreciation of nature itself, and what it provides, as a reason they enjoy living where they do – of fresh air and spring-fed water. Seventeen percent of respondents referred to the “quiet”; “peaceful” was another word often used. “Best area in the country,” said one – “secluded” but proximate to the amenities of the outside world – Asheville and the Parkway, for example.

“Community” was an important consideration for many – close-knit and child- and family-oriented were frequently cited as incentives for living in the Pigeon River Valley. “Five of my children have land around me,” said one resident. “Friendly” was the word quite a few chose, while over 10 percent simply expressed their appreciation for “the people.”

“Generally speaking,” said another, “it has better family values than others in North Carolina.”

Many folks spoke of how nice it was to know everyone in the community, though some said this was no longer possible. “In the past,” said one respondent, “everybody helped each other because everybody knew each other, and I never even had to lock my door.”

Another echoed this sentiment, saying: “I used to like it because it was a good country community, but it’s growing fast; the more people, the less I like it.”

Churches, youth organizations and a community center were other contributing incentives. Good schools were also mentioned, as was the community college and the hospital.

Safety (“low crime”), roads being “laid out well” and “no big companies in your front yard” were other attributes noted.

“God’s country,” was one respondent’s view of the valley. “Primarily, it’s not Asheville,” another declared.

“Is there anything else you’d like to say about the future of rural communities in Haywood County?”

When asked this question, a clear theme emerged, as expressed in the following phrases, each of which was repeated multiple times: “stay rural,” “less development,” “keep off the mountains,” “I like it as it is.”

Elaborations on “stay rural” included: “That’s what makes Haywood County Haywood County, and it’s such a nice place to live.”

And: “Rural communities are precious. Progress is bound to destroy the natural beauty, but I hope it won’t.”

Less development was further expressed as: “No subdivisions. I moved out here because of the way it is and I don’t like all the development in surrounding areas.”

And: “I’m all for the farmers. Residential development, I have mixed emotions. It’s a shame to see properties getting sold off.”

And: “I would hate for it to turn into Asheville.”

As for staying off the mountains: “They’re tearing down our mountains. There should be a law against building on mountains. Destroying our forest, destroying our beauty ...”

And: “Nothing wrong with growth, but not on the side of mountains.”

As for liking it as it is: “It’s one of the prettiest counties. I’d do anything to help it. I don’t want big subdivisions at all.”

And: “Don’t tell anybody about us.... I don’t want the traffic or potential crime. Most people have chosen it for what they have; people say thank you at the grocery store.”

It must be noted, however, that not everyone agreed with the gist of these sentiments. Some spoke of the need for “balance”: “There is a need to keep parts of the community rural; but people need businesses and homes. So that means there is going to be a need for development, and growth is inevitable. Farmers have the right to their land, but don’t be opposed to other development; we should find a happy medium.”

And: “It should be preserved within reason. Welcome industry, residential development and retail, but do it with caution and planning.”

Some expressed their desire for more development: “Haywood County needs more jobs and businesses, agricultural or industrial.”

And: “More friendly, small businesses and tourism with the county’s help.”

In speaking of tourists, though, it was plain that they’re quite often viewed as a mixed blessing at best. Several of those surveyed said they’d like to see tourists taxed more heavily.

People who are from the northeast, then retire to Florida, then realize it’s too hot down there and move half-way back – that is, to the mountains of Western North Carolina – are called, by some locals, “half-backs.”

“Tourists with summer homes make it tough for kids growing up to buy houses,” said one respondent.

“Taxes get raised 48% because of them,” said another, “but they don’t pay taxes – we do. Most of them don’t even live here year round.”

As for businesses, one person said: “Big businesses come in and buy land so that we can no longer afford to pay our taxes.”

In regards to zoning, one person suggested the need for “strong zoning rules that are enforceable. Haywood County has been discovered. Citizens need an [environmental] plan.”

A couple of respondents did express caution in overly romanticizing the area: “Don’t get caught up in the ‘farmer is holier than God’ issue,” one said.

Another added: “Unfortunately, rural character and farming get lumped together. Farming is as degrading as industrialization....”

Conclusion

Earlier in this report, it was pointed out that the overwhelming majority of respondents to the survey were in favor of Bethel continuing to be a rural agricultural community – 256 responding in the affirmative, only 9 saying no and 8 expressing uncertainty. This solidarity of support is consistently reflected across a number of demographic cross-tabulations.

One hundred percent of those who’ve lived in the Pigeon River Valley their entire lives would like to see Bethel continue to be a rural agricultural community, with all other categories of longevity very largely in agreement.

Table 40: How many years have you lived in the Pigeon River Valley?	Would you like to see Bethel continue to be a rural agricultural community?		
	Yes	No	I don’t know
1 year or less	92.9%	0.0%	7.1%
1 to 5 years	94.3%	5.7%	0.0%
5 to 20 years	94.2%	2.3%	3.5%
More than 20 years	89.2%	6.8%	4.1%
Your entire life	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Landowner or otherwise, over 90% are in favor.

Table 41: Do you own land in the Pigeon River Valley?	Would you like to see Bethel continue to be a rural agricultural community?		
	Yes	No	I don’t know
Yes	93.5%	3.9%	2.6%
No	95.1%	0.0%	4.9%

Whether income from farming or forestry is derived from one’s land, opinions are overwhelmingly in the affirmative.

Table 42: Do you earn any income from farming or forestry on your land?	Would you like to see Bethel continue to be a rural agricultural community?		
	Yes	No	I don’t know
Yes	92.3%	3.8%	3.8%
No	94.0%	3.2%	2.8%

Gender analysis reveals a small disparity in opinion. While 7.1% of men surveyed said they would not like to see Bethel continue to be a rural agricultural community, only 0.6% of women felt the same.

Table 43: Gender	Would you like to see Bethel continue to be a rural agricultural community?		
	Yes	No	I don’t know
Female	96.9%	0.6%	2.5%
Male	89.4%	7.1%	3.5%

Age seems to make little difference in one’s support of maintaining a rural character.

Table 44: Which of the following age category are you in?	Would you like to see Bethel continue to be a rural agricultural community?		
	Yes	No	I don’t know
18-24	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
25-34	93.1%	3.4%	3.4%
35-44	96.5%	1.8%	1.8%
45-54	89.7%	6.9%	3.4%
55-64	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
65 or older	87.9%	5.2%	6.9%

To the question, “Do you think it is important for the issue of development and rural character to be addressed?,” responses were consistently in favor, regardless of how long the respondent had lived in the Pigeon River Valley – over 90% in each category.

Table 45: How many years have you lived in the Pigeon River Valley?	Do you think it is important for the issue of development and rural character to be discussed?		
	Yes	No	I don’t know
1 year or less	92.9%	0.0%	7.1%
1 to 5 years	94.3%	5.7%	0.0%
5 to 20 years	95.3%	2.3%	2.3%
More than 20 years	93.2%	1.4%	5.4%
Your entire life	94.2%	0.0%	5.8%

Likewise with those who own land and those who don’t.

Table 46: Do you own land in the Pigeon River Valley?	Do you think it is important for the issue of development and rural character to be discussed?		
	Yes	No	I don’t know
Yes	93.9%	2.2%	3.9%
No	92.5%	2.5%	5.0%

Whether or not those surveyed earn income from farming or forestry on their land, the results came in almost unanimously in the affirmative.

Table 47: Do you earn any income from farming or forestry on your land?	Do you think it is important for the issue of development and rural character to be discussed?		
	Yes	No	I don’t know
Yes	96.2%	3.8%	0.0%
No	93.5%	1.9%	4.6%

The same was true regardless of age.

Table 48: Which of the following age category are you in?	Do you think it is important for the issue of development and rural character to be addressed?		
	Yes	No	I don't know
18-24	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
25-34	96.6%	0.0%	3.4%
35-44	94.7%	5.3%	0.0%
45-54	93.1%	3.4%	3.4%
55-64	98.2%	0.0%	1.8%
65 or older	85.7%	1.8%	12.5%

To reiterate, when asked the question, “Would you support some type of public funding to help Bethel remain a rural community?,” 65.7% responded “yes,” 18.5% said “no” and 15.9% were uncertain. These percentages hold generally true across demographics.

When cross-tabulated against length of residency in the Pigeon River Valley, it was found that the highest level of support for such public funding was found among those who’ve lived in the valley their entire lives, at 74.1%, with the least support, though still a majority, among those who’ve lived there for a year or less, at 57.1%.

Table 49: How many years have you lived in the Pigeon River Valley?	Would you support some type of public funding to help Bethel remain a rural community?		
	Yes	No	I don't know
1 year or less	57.1%	28.6%	14.3%
1 to 5 years	68.6%	17.1%	14.3%
5 to 20 years	71.8%	11.8%	16.5%
More than 20 years	57.5%	26.0%	16.4%
Your entire life	74.1%	11.1%	14.8%

Support for public funding was comparable, and solid, among those who own land and those who don’t.

Table 50: Do you own land in the Pigeon River Valley?	Would you support some type of public funding to help Bethel remain a rural community?		
	Yes	No	I don't know
Yes	66.2%	17.1%	16.7%
No	61.0%	26.8%	12.2%

Among those who earn income from farming or forestry on their own land, support for funding was particularly strong, with 80.8% saying “yes” and only 3.8% responding “no.”

Table 51: Do you earn any income from farming or forestry on your land?	Would you support some type of public funding to help Bethel remain a rural community?		
	Yes	No	I don't know
Yes	80.8%	3.8%	15.4%
No	64.4%	20.4%	15.3%

And in regards to different age groups, the strongest support for funding was found among those 18 to 24 years of age, at 86.7%, with the lowest percentage in favor being among those 65 and older, at 49.1%, with 31.6% expressing uncertainty.

Table 52: Which of the following age category are you in?	Would you support some type of public funding to help Bethel remain a rural community?		
	Yes	No	I don't know
18-24	86.7%	6.7%	6.7%
25-34	69.0%	17.2%	13.8%
35-44	71.9%	21.1%	7.0%
45-54	68.4%	17.5%	14.0%
55-64	66.1%	19.6%	14.3%
65 or older	49.1%	19.3%	31.6%

And among both men and women, right at two out of three were supportive of public funding.

Table 53: Gender	Would you support some type of public funding to help Bethel remain a rural community?		
	Yes	No	I don't know
Female	66.5%	13.9%	19.6%
Male	65.2%	24.1%	10.7%

It seems clear from the results of this survey that – while many residents of the Pigeon River Valley recognize that some development is inevitable – the rural character of the valley is something that a great majority wish to preserve, and a clear majority are in favor of backing their support for farmers with public funding.