

## **Conservation Questionnaire for Wake Forest Municipal Election 2025**

**Pam James**

### **1. Do you believe the Unified Development Ordinance (“UDO”) adequately addresses key measures such as connecting and preserving green spaces, reducing pollution, protecting water resources, and initiatives like 'dark skies'?**

Response: There’s always room for improvement. The UDO we currently have only partially addresses environmental concerns. It leans more toward development efficiency than environmental performance. It sets minimum protections, but it falls short of achieving the broader sustainability goals that matter to Wake Forest residents. Goals like dark-sky protection, climate resilience, and net-zero design. The new UDO offers a real opportunity to change that. Its proposed point system begins to incentivize developers to take sustainability seriously. To address the very issues our community consistently says are important. That’s progress, but we can, and should, go further. Take Chapter 7, for example. The updates to tree preservation represent a major step forward. A real improvement from what we have now. But we missed the mark when it comes to encouraging or requiring native plantings. Native species are not only more resilient, but they also support local wildlife, conserve water, and help maintain the natural character of our town. Other cities are already leading the way. Greensboro, for instance, passed an ordinance requiring that at least 50% of street plantings be native to North Carolina. That’s the kind of leadership and foresight I’d like to be for Wake Forest. Chapter 10, which covers lighting standards, is another area that deserves a closer look. As written, it still allows lighting that shifts from white to blue tones. However, research and dark-sky best practices consistently recommend warmer-colored lighting. Blue and white light disrupts the sleep cycles of wildlife and even our own circadian rhythms, while warm light is gentler, more effective for nighttime visibility, and far less intrusive to our shared environment. To better align with these principles, I recommend lowering the maximum color temperature from 4000K to 3000K. It’s a simple change that would make a meaningful difference for both people and wildlife. Another concern is that the current draft grants exceptions for Planned Unit Developments (PUDs). While flexibility has its benefits, it can also open the door to increased lighting intensity, which harms nocturnal wildlife, affects nearby parks and greenways, and adds unnecessary long-term maintenance costs. These exceptions risk undermining the very goals our community values: environmental protection, aesthetic consistency, and the preservation of our night skies. Before adopting the new UDO, I would be in favor of tightening these provisions to strike a balance between design flexibility and environmental responsibility. Planned Unit Developments can still have creative lighting designs, but within clear limits that protect both the natural environment and the quality of life for Wake Forest residents. The new UDO represents a real step forward, but if we make these refinements now, stronger dark-sky standards, clear boundaries for PUDs, and a firm commitment to native plantings, Wake Forest can become a leader in sustainable, thoughtful growth. I want to see us get this right!

### **2. What steps can the Town take to encourage developers to avoid clear-cutting and to prioritize tree and wildlife habitat preservation?**

Response: As a town, we have a real opportunity to do better in protecting our forests and wildlife. We can avoid clear-cutting and make habitat preservation a priority if we’re intentional about how we grow. For example, we can encourage developers to use conservation designs, and plan around what’s already there: trees, streams, and habitat corridors. We can also promote the Wildlife Conservation Land Program, which gives property tax breaks to landowners who preserve important wildlife habitats. Maybe the town could even offer small grants or other incentives for landowners who join.

Ecological studies for larger projects and partnerships with land trusts like the Triangle Land Conservancy can be helpful. Reward developers that preserve trees and minimize site impacts by reducing permit fees or fast-tracking them. We can also educate developers about selective clearing, use of native plants, and the value our residents place on forested areas.

**3. Given the importance of the Neuse River basin for many reasons, including protection of drinking water, how can the Town better protect lands that buffer streams of all categories, most especially those connected to, or a part of, the Smith Creek area around the Reservoir?**

Response: To protect Smith Creek and the 600 acres near Traditions Grande Drive and Oak Grove Church Road, my first step would be to try to work with the property owners. The owner has a stake in this community and may share our desire to see this land preserved for future generations, especially if we could establish a permanent conservation easement. In addition, the Triangle Land Conservancy may be interested in this area, given its ecological and community importance.

The North Carolina Supreme Court has long recognized that governing boards have the authority to make legislative decisions that protect the community's general welfare—so long as those decisions are based on sound public policy, not personal preference. Protecting Smith Creek clearly meets that test. Smith Creek is more than a body of water— it's a lifeline. It provides clean water to several wells, supports wildlife, and offers recreational and educational opportunities for our residents. Once this land is developed, we can't get it back. No amount of mitigation or landscaping can replace the natural filtration, beauty, and sense of place that this area provides. Protecting Smith Creek is both good policy and good stewardship. Natural areas like this don't just protect our health and environment—they also strengthen our local economy, helping to attract and retain businesses and residents who value a high quality of life. Communities that protect their natural resources are communities that thrive. In the end, this isn't just an environmental decision—it's a statement about who we are and what kind of future we want. Preserving Smith Creek honors our responsibility to this land and to one another. It's a lasting investment in our community's well-being, our shared values, and the generations who will come after us.

**4. How can Wake Forest effectively and efficiently work with Raleigh, Rolesville, and Franklin County to protect watersheds and green corridors that do not stop at municipal borders?**

Response: Wake Forest has an opportunity to take a leadership role in regional watershed protection by working collaboratively with neighboring municipalities and counties. Water doesn't stop at county lines, and neither should our commitment to protecting it. We could begin by developing an interlocal agreement to coordinate development standards along shared creeks and reservoir watersheds. This kind of partnership would ensure that what happens upstream doesn't harm the communities and ecosystems downstream. Forming a joint watershed or environmental advisory board would also be a powerful step forward. Such a board could review new developments for watershed impacts, recommend stronger protection policies, guide restoration projects, and apply for grants collaboratively — strengthening both our resources and our impact. Together, we could also establish a shared watershed monitoring database to track water quality indicators like sediment, nutrients, and bacteria, as well as monitor flooding, erosion, tree canopy health, and impervious surface growth. Data like this would help all participating communities make better, more informed decisions. Finally, public awareness is key. By coordinating joint outreach and education efforts, we can help residents understand how their everyday actions affect communities both upstream and downstream. Revitalizing and

promoting programs like “Adopt-a-Stream” — which Wake Forest already has but many residents don’t know about — would help turn that awareness into local action. Through collaboration, data-sharing, and public engagement, Wake Forest can help lead the way in protecting the waterways that connect and sustain us all.

**5. Can rezoning and other land use approvals be conditioned on developers using stormwater management practices beyond pipes and ponds, such as rain gardens, bioswales, and permeable pavement?**

Response: Developers have the option to include site-specific conditions as part of their rezoning requests. These conditions can enhance both the project and the surrounding environment—for example, by incorporating rain gardens in parking areas, adding bioswales along driveways, or using native landscaping to improve stormwater management. While the law prohibits a governing board from requiring a developer to add such conditions, it does not prevent commissioners from encouraging developers to consider them. In fact, open dialogue and thoughtful suggestions from commissioners can often lead to voluntary design improvements that benefit both the community and the project itself.

**6. How can we grow in a way that adds affordable housing choices while still protecting green space?**

Response: We can achieve a balance between affordable housing and environmental preservation through thoughtful design and collaboration. One effective approach is using conservation or cluster subdivisions, which concentrate development in certain areas while protecting surrounding green spaces. Additionally, public-private partnerships for example, working with organizations like Habitat for Humanity or DHIC can make a meaningful impact. By building affordable homes on already disturbed sites or infill parcels, we can provide much-needed housing while placing adjacent lands under conservation easements to safeguard natural areas for future generations.

**7. Would you support policies that make it easier to redevelop underused sites in already developed areas instead of clearing forests on the edge of town?**

Response: Yes, I would absolutely support this under the right circumstances. I’ve been in conversations with several local property owners who care deeply about preserving the history and character of their neighborhoods. They’re not looking to erase what’s there, but to repurpose existing buildings and land in thoughtful ways that truly serve the community. Their vision includes creating genuinely affordable housing not just in name, but in practice alongside spaces that meet local needs and honor the area’s heritage. This kind of approach balances preservation with progress, allowing us to protect what makes Wake Forest unique while addressing the urgent need for affordable housing and community- focused redevelopment.