

Semester Paper: Analysis of a Land Use Issue

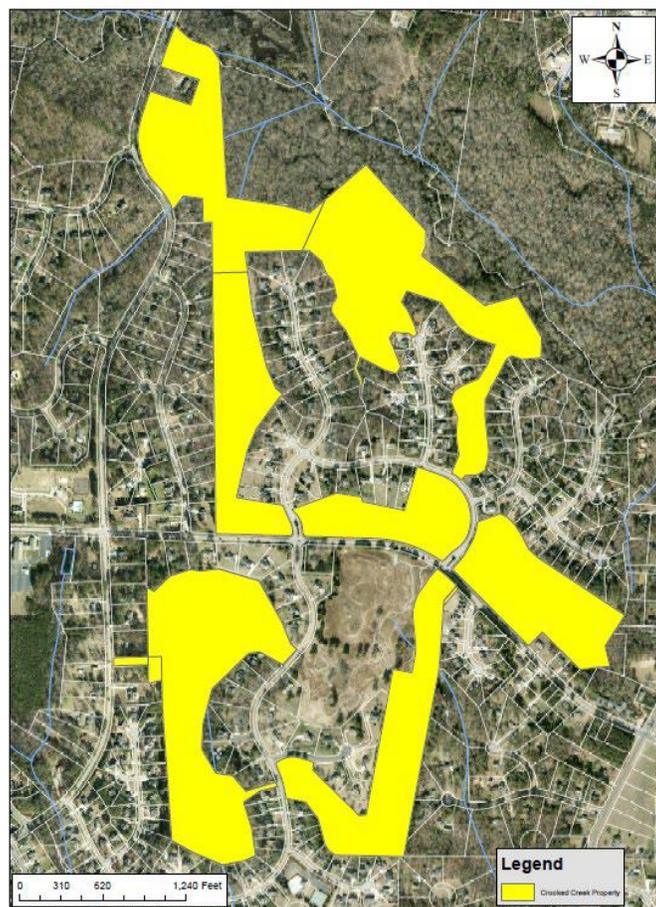
City Planning and Design, LAR 545

The Future of Crooked Creek Golf Club

April 16th, 2020

Golf course communities around the nation are floundering and club owners are scrambling for solutions. The Crooked Creek Golf Club Course, located at 4621 Shady Greens Drive in Fuquay-Varina, suffered from diminishing interest in the sport, skyrocketing maintenance costs, and an increase in local competition (Plumley, 2018). For several years the club floundered, sinking deeper into debt. Eventually, Tony Withers and his four partners determined that they must close the club and sell the property (Bracken, 2014). The Crooked Creek Golf Club closed its doors in July of 2015 (Walson, 2019).

**Crooked Creek Property
Fuquay Varina, NC**

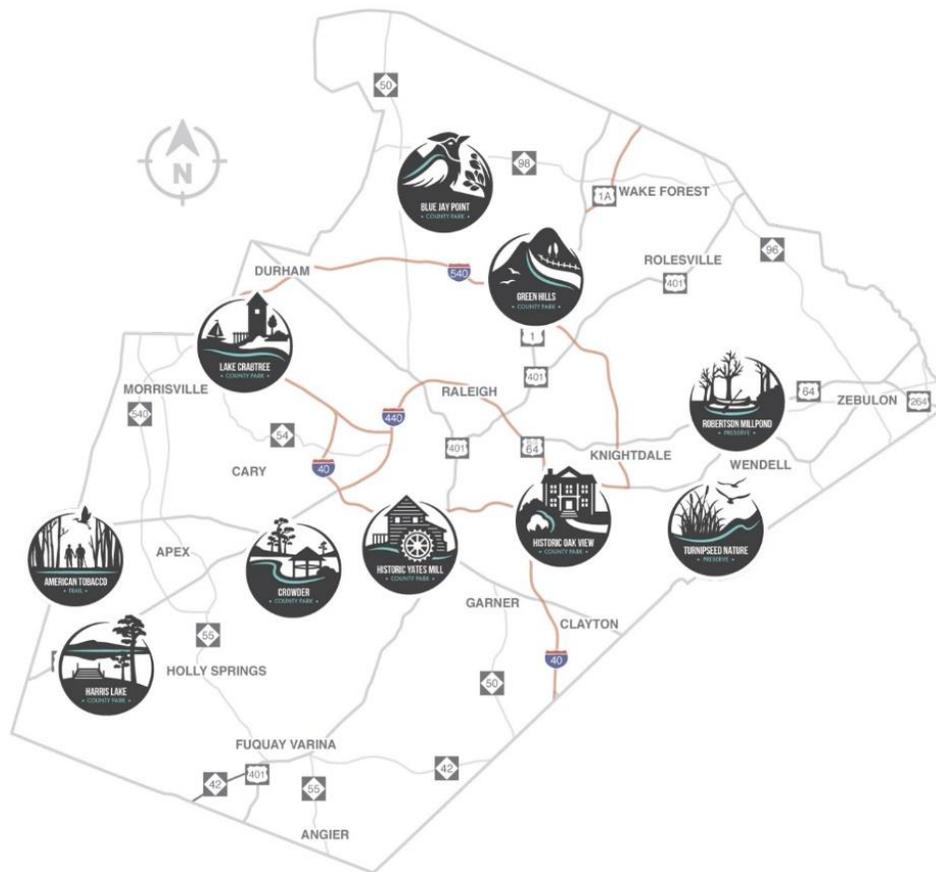


(Holmes, 2019, p. 7)

Their situation was further complicated by the fact that the Crooked Creek Golf Club was surrounded by a housing development, where homeowners had been drawn by the privilege of

living at the edges of the beautiful course. Unfortunately for the homeowners, over the past 20 years the golf course housing development model has proved unsustainable, relying on a significant percentage of the homeowners maintaining active membership and participation in the golf club, but many consistently fail to sustain the numbers needed (Plumley, 2018). Add in aging greens requiring massive updates and few young people taking interest in the sport and you have a recipe for disaster. For Crooked Creek Golf Club, selling to developers seemed the best way out. Unhappy with the prospect of new residential structures being built on the golf course site, the surrounding neighborhood's homeowners association filed a motion for a temporary injunction to delay the closure, but they were unsuccessful and could not prevent it (Wral, 2015).

The South Wake Park Project was then formed, led by Ron Nawojczyk, in an effort to persuade someone to purchase the land with the end goal of creating a park. A door knocking campaign led the group to David Carter, former director of Parks, Recreation, and Open Space for Wake County. Carter was instrumental in the founding of all of Wake County's current county parks and volunteered to help the group. He introduced the members of the South Wake Park Project to David Proper, Urban Program Director of the Conservation Fund. Their combined years of experience in parks and recreation were invaluable to the South Wake Park Project. They analyzed the site and determined that it was an excellent prospect for a regional park: pre-existing amenities and utilities, connectivity to a planned greenway, and located in the Southeast part of Wake County, which was lacking a county park.



(Avery, 2020)

Supported by a large group of people, Nawojczyk, Carter, and Proper led the efforts. Community involvement was key in their strategy. Rallies were organized, t-shirts were sold, letters were written, social media campaigns were initiated, all with the goal to build and demonstrate a community-wide support, not simply support from the neighborhood directly adjacent to the golf course. According to Carter and Proper, the town of Fuquay-Varina was approached first, but the mayor, John Byrne, insisted that the town was not interested in purchasing the property. The next attempt was to convince Wake County to purchase the property. The Board of Commissioners were invited to tour the property and, according to Nawojczyk, everyone except Commissioner Jessica Holmes accepted the offer (2018).

The Conservation Fund stepped in and purchased the 166 acres of land, to keep it from being sold to developers before Wake County could thoroughly consider the purchase. The Wake County Board of Commissioners voted to begin acquiring the Crooked Creek Golf Club property in June 2018, with stipulations that had to be addressed before the purchase could be completed. One of these stipulations stated that the homeowners association must relinquish their restrictive covenants (Goldsmith, 2017). The Board of Commissioners voted 4-3 and officially completed the acquisition from the Conservation Fund in September 2018 (Walston, 2019). Controversy abounded and the decision to purchase Crooked Creek Golf Club was hotly debated on both sides. Commissioners Jessica Holmes, Greg Ford, and James West opposed the decision on many fronts, even alleging that the supporting commissioners, Matt Calabria, Sig Hutchinson, Erv Portman, and John Burns, appeared to have a possible conflict of interest, which the supporting commissioners denied (Billman, 2018).

In the elections soon after, Burns and Portman lost their seats and Vickie Adamson and Susan Evans took their places (Johnson, 2019). Adamson and Evans both received significant financial support from Ann Campbell, a well-known Democratic donor in Raleigh politics and a big supporter of public education (Billman, 2018). Campbell had been emailing the four supporting commissioners (whose campaigns she had previously supported financially) essentially insisting that they reconsider spending so much on a park when the public education system's funding request had been only partially granted. When they didn't acquiesce, she responded by vociferously supporting their replacements (Billman, 2018). Portman wrote "Seventy-six percent of all property tax goes to education, tax increases four years in a row—unprecedented, but not enough for these affluent mega-donors. ... This is important and way out of bounds" (Billman, 2018). An *Indy Weekly* article paraphrases the supporting commissioners, stating "it might look bad to say that commissioners only gave the school board half of what it asked for in new funding, but that's misleading. The new funding only accounts for a small portion of the school system's total request; factor in the whole thing, and they actually gave the school board 97 percent of what it asked for" (Billman, 2018). In my interviews with David Carter and David Proper, both asserted that had the school's requested increase in their budget been funded entirely, the purchase of the Crooked Creek property would not have been a controversial issue.

The freshly updated Board of Commissioners suggested selling the land and was then subjected to hours of pleading citizens demanding their park (Tauss, 2019). The Board of Commissioners voted 4-3 to list the property as surplus on January 7th, 2019, thus beginning the process of selling it (Walston, 2019). They also voted to move the development of the Southeast Regional County Park (now known as the Beech Bluff park) to priority #1 of the parks department, in order to address the lack of a county park in that area. The South Wake Park Project members felt betrayed, they had met all the stipulations, the county had bought the land, and now the board of commissioners was going back on their previous decision. They left the meeting with the fate of their park once again uncertain. The four commissioners who voted for the measure released a statement on January 15th to defend their decision. Below I will list a few of the points in their statement, adding perspectives gained through my interviews with David Carter and David Proper.

- “The Parks, Open Space and Greenways Master Plan...has long-established project priorities throughout the County. Many Wake County citizens have waited patiently for long-planned projects to be moved forward. Crooked Creek was never part of these plans, nor was it included in the projects covered in the Parks Bond that citizens overwhelmingly supported in the recent election.” (Holmes, 2019, p.2).
 - When speaking with me, Proper countered that few of the existing Wake County parks were ever on the master plan before the process was started, they almost all came about as matters of opportunity.
- The county paid only slightly below the appraised value of the property, which was not a good deal (Holmes, 2019).
 - Proper stated that the land for parks is normally purchased at or close to the appraisal price.
- There are millions of dollars of maintenance and updates required (Holmes, 2019).
 - Carter said that the \$24 million estimate was a misrepresentation. The South Wake Park concept plan that was designed by Susan Hatchell was intended to show the many possibilities of the park, not to mean that they should all be implemented.



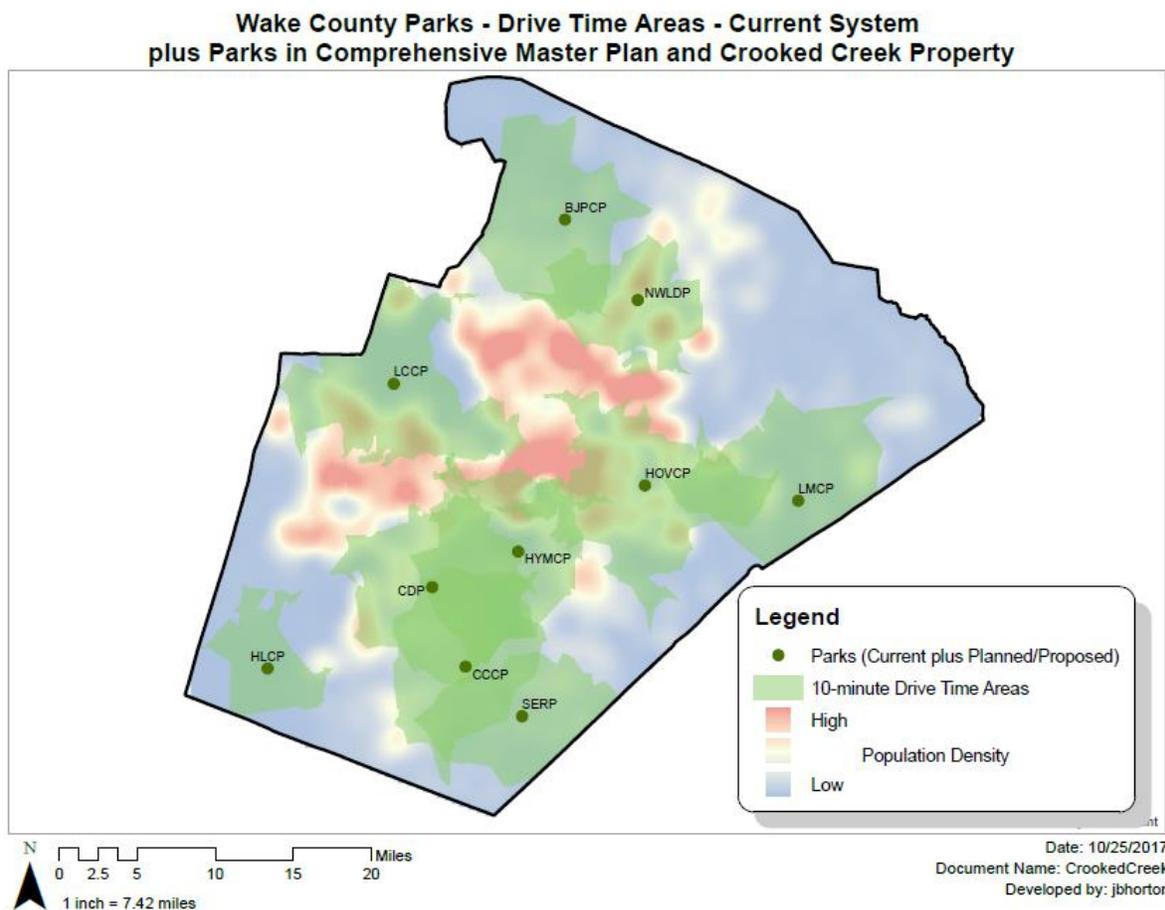
South Wake Park
Concept

(Fowle, 2017)

- Reference is made several times to county staff not approving of the purchase of the Crooked Creek land (Holmes, 2019).
 - Carter believes that personal conflict between himself and the Director of Community Services, Frank Cope, may have impacted their decisions.
- Turning the Crooked Creek property into a county park would not result in a large enough increase in convenient access to a county park. The Southeast Regional County

Park, (recently renamed Beech Bluff County Park) provides convenient access to a much larger number of people who did not previously have it (Holmes, 2019).

- o Proper mentioned that while Beech Bluff County Park would indeed be a benefit to the area and improve park access, it would be a long process and it served an area with a lower population density, while the Crooked Creek property was closer to Raleigh and thus more accessible to a larger number of people, especially as the population continues to grow in the area. As the population grows, it will be more difficult to preserve open greenspace in the area, so it is prudent to purchase greenspace now. In addition, it's connectivity to the proposed greenway and the watershed of Terrible Creek add to its value.

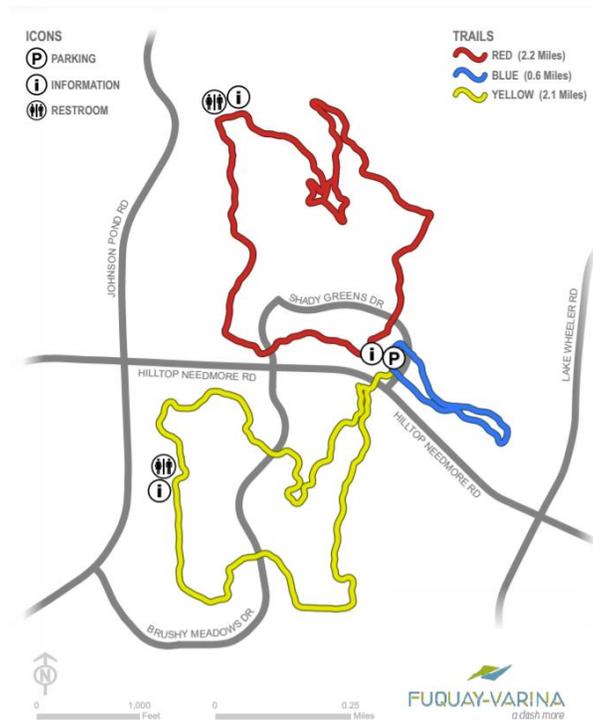


(Holmes, 2019, p. 13)

On March 18, 2019 the Wake County Board of Commissioners washed their hands of the issue by voting unanimously to give the land, free of charge, to the town of Fuquay-Varina

(Walston, 2019). They viewed it as the best solution: Wake County wouldn't have to pay millions to update and maintain the park, and they also wouldn't incur anyone's wrath for selling it to developers (Holmes, 2019).

In June 2019 the Fuquay-Varina Town Board voted to change the property's name to Hilltop-Needmore Town Park and Preserve (Fuquay-Varina, 2019). When I interviewed Jason Cox, Fuquay-Varina's Director of Parks and Recreation, he estimated that the town of Fuquay-Varina invested about \$500,000 into initial improvements that included purchasing mowing equipment and stabilizing the former clubhouse building with a new roof and HVAC system. Benches and a map kiosk were purchased with approximately \$20,000 that had been raised by the South Wake Park Project and donated to the town for that purpose. On February 8, 2020, Fuquay-Varina officially opened the park (Fuquay-Varina, 2020). 143 acres of the land is currently being used as a passive park with walking and biking trails. 23 acres of the land will be the future site of a new Wake County Elementary School. Additional plans for development will be discussed in the 2022-2023 Comprehensive Master Park Plan (Fuquay-Varina, 2019), but according to Cox, the first update being considered is a combined community and senior center.



HILLTOP NEEDMORE TOWN PARK & PRESERVE

(Fuquay-Varina, 2020)

I am new to the field of Landscape Architecture. Although this is technically a land use change issue, at its core this is a political issue. During my research for this paper, I oscillated back and forth in my opinion about who was correct in the problems surrounding the creation of this park. There is no simple answer.

- Is the Crooked Creek property a great place for a park? Yes! Is it the best place? Probably not.
- Would the community still be valuable if there were some apartment buildings or townhomes? Yes! Not all the land was suitable for development, so why not sell the useable portion for beautiful, affordable housing? The profits could be used to update the rest of the land into an attractive common area or lower maintenance nature preserve and the children would benefit from having a little socio-economic diversity at their new school.
- Are there more creative ways that the community could have dealt with their problem? Certainly! Did anyone contact a local vineyard and inquire if they'd be interested in the land? What about a micro-farm run by the nearby Wake Technical Community College students? Possibly an apple orchard? Thinking way outside the box could have come up with some creative ideas for the land that may have benefited the community even more than a park.
- Is this an excellent example of how Americans attempt to control their built environment, viewing their home as an investment--an "object of trade rather than an object of our sentiments" (Hirt, 2014, p. 184), elevate the ideal of single-family homes above other housing, and focus on "preserving the status quo" (Hirt, 2014, p. 184)? Yes.

The constraining factor in the Crooked Creek case was time. Aid from the Conservation Fund gave them enough time to push the park through with the Wake County Board of Commissioners, but only with the aid of two experts who literally knew the system inside and out. In my research, I consulted the Wake County Consolidated Open Space Plan and the Wake County Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan both of which are excellent resources and contain a wealth of information, but they can also be overwhelming. If any resident of Wake County wanted to propose a new park and follow the "correct" process, the task would seem formidable.

Overall, I'm impressed with the passion and tenacity of the volunteers involved in the South Wake Park Project. Motivating a large group of unconnected people to be involved in a project like this for years is an incredible feat, and it's refreshing to see a community unite for a cause that benefits everyone. The group has now renamed themselves the Hilltop Needmore Town Park and Preserve Advocacy Group and runs a Facebook page under that name.

There will always be someone who lives closest to a park and benefits the most from its location. Parks and greenspace are noble things to fight for, even if they're situated at the edge of an affluent neighborhood.

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