

REQUEST FOR BOARD ACTION

HENDERSON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

MEETING DATE: March 18, 2026

SUBJECT: Public Hearing on Draft Hickory Nut Gorge (HNG) Recovery Plan

PRESENTER: Autumn Radcliff, Planning Director
Janna Bianculli, Assistant. Planning Director

ATTACHMENTS: 1. HNG Plan Executive Summary
2. PowerPoint Slides

SUMMARY OF REQUEST:

On May 5th, 2025, the Board selected Equinox to assist staff in creating a recovery plan within six months for the Hickory Nut Gorge (HNG) area, which included Gerton, Bat Cave, and a portion of Edneyville along US 64. The Board also selected an advisory group to work with the consultant and staff on the draft plan.

A community survey was conducted, and two community meetings were held at the Bat Cave Baptist Church. The survey and first community meeting gathered input to guide the plan formation. Residents provided over 200 input points on activity maps, which helped develop the plan themes and create draft recommendations. At the second community meeting, residents were updated about the plan process, and were asked to review and prioritize the draft recommendations. The recommendations represented the communities' desires, and the plan identified funding sources, estimated cost ranges for projects, and named key partners for each project.

The plan looks 5 to 10 years (and beyond) into the future and represents the community's wishes, understanding that not all recommendations may be implemented due to grant funding and other constraints. The Board has been provided a copy of the HNG Recovery Plan. An Executive Summary of the draft plan is provided as an attachment, and the entire plan can be viewed at www.HNGPlan.org.

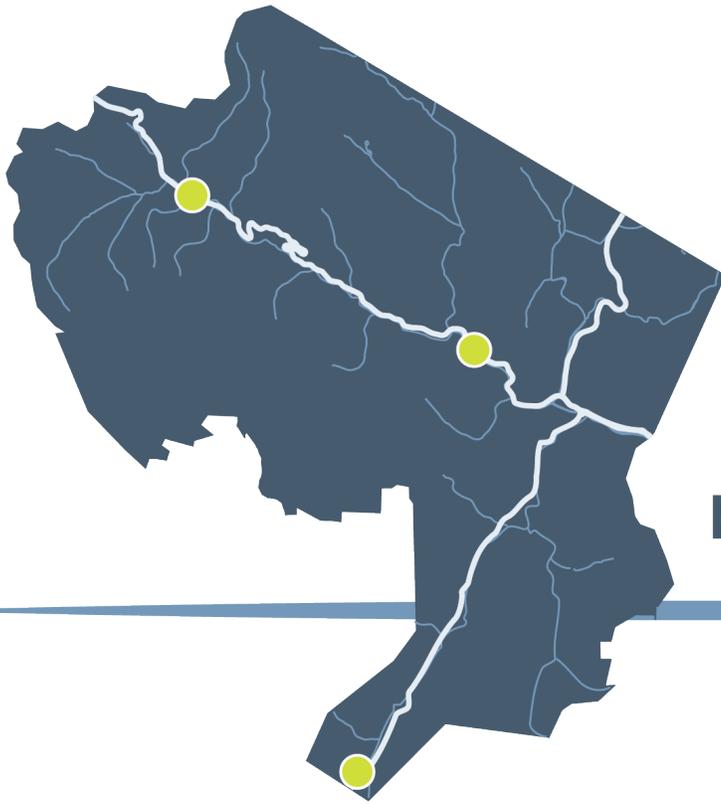
On December 8th, 2025, the selected advisory group (HNG Community Group) voted unanimously to recommend the plan approval, and on February 19th, 2026, the Planning Board voted unanimously to send forward a favorable recommendation on the adoption of the draft plan.

BOARD ACTION REQUESTED:

Staff request that the Board hold a public hearing and consider the adoption of the Draft Hickory Nut Gorge Recovery Plan. A suggested motion is provided.

Suggested Motion:

I move that the Board adopt the Draft Hickory Nut Gorge (HNG) Recovery Plan as discussed.



Hickory
Nut Gorge 
RECOVERY PLAN

Executive
Summary



Executive Summary

Background

The Hickory Nut Gorge Recovery Plan is a pathway to long-term recovery, looking 5 - 10 years into the future. Recovery includes restoring what can be restored, planning for future natural disasters, and envisioning an improved built environment based on public input.

The Hickory Nut Gorge in Henderson County encompasses a rich ecological and cultural tapestry that shaped a distinct way of life and people who are deeply connected to the land. In late September 2024, that relationship took on a new form following the devastating impacts of Tropical Storm Helene. One positive thing we learn from natural disasters is that they muster up an innate power in people to help each other. Neighbors go out of their way to help neighbors, and the community comes together to support one another. Resourceful skills are unleashed that support the collective good and help people return to safety. Local heroism was displayed by numerous people in the Gorge following the storm and continues to this day. Some of those people helped shape the recommendations in this Recovery Plan that Henderson County established to build a blueprint for long-term recovery and resilience.

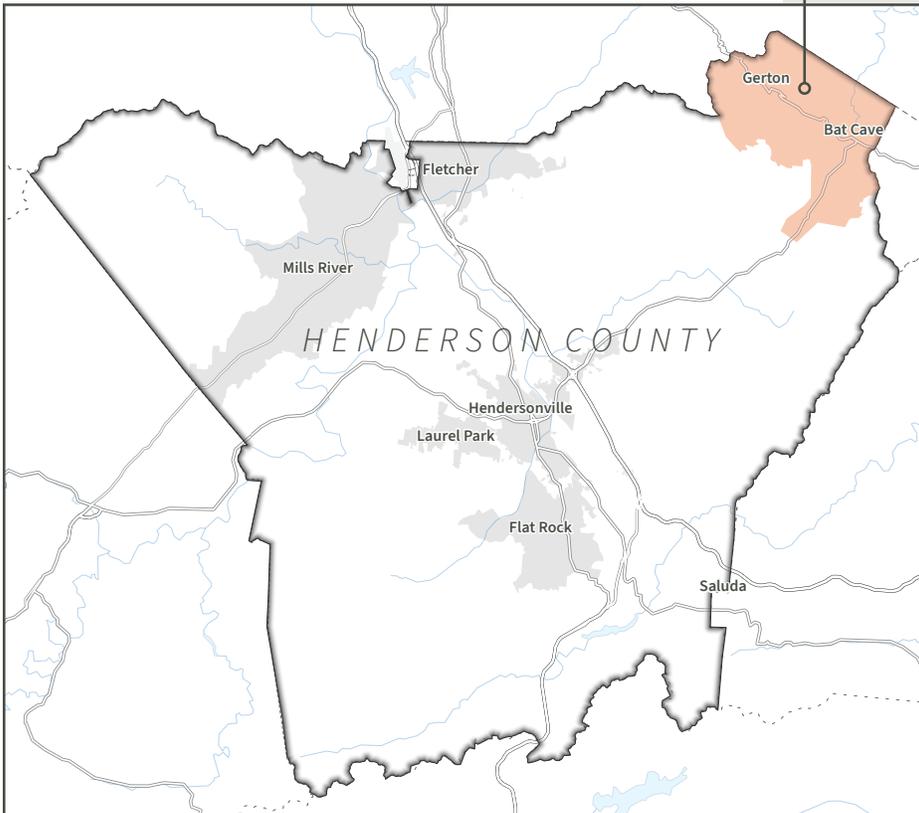
In May 2025, Henderson County contracted with Equinox, a local environmental planning and design firm, to lead a consultant team and a community-driven planning process and produce a long-term recovery plan. The County also formed a Community Partners Group (Hickory Nut Gorge Group, “HNG Group”) consisting of residents, business owners, and property owners that served in an advisory role to the project team, ensuring that community engagement strategies and recommendations were grounded in local knowledge. The project team included NCDOT, local fire departments, emergency management staff, and Conserving Carolina. This planning effort built on the Henderson County “Recovery Taskforce,” launched in November 2024 to focus on immediate and short-term recovery needs, which served as the County’s connection to the state’s ReBUILD NC Recovery Taskforce.

During the robust community engagement process, the project team received 180 survey responses and hundreds of comments, ideas, and specific recovery locations that helped shape and prioritize project recommendations. Based on this feedback, project recommendations were divided into eight recovery themes, shown on p. 37 of the plan.

As a result of the community-driven process, over 46 recommended recovery projects were identified. Of these projects, the community and the HNG Group identified 17 high-priority projects.

These efforts have produced a clear and actionable blueprint for long-term recovery and community resilience in the Hickory Nut Gorge. By fostering consistent communication and collaboration, the County, along with support from the HNG Group and key stakeholders, can strategically align funding mechanisms and implement priority projects. Planning for recovery ensures that the community does not simply react to a disaster but rebuilds with intention, coordination, and long-term vision.

Hickory Nut Gorge



“Anything is possible so we should dream big and include everything because this plan will guide the Gorge’s future over the next 10 years and beyond.”

— John Anderson, HNG Group Member

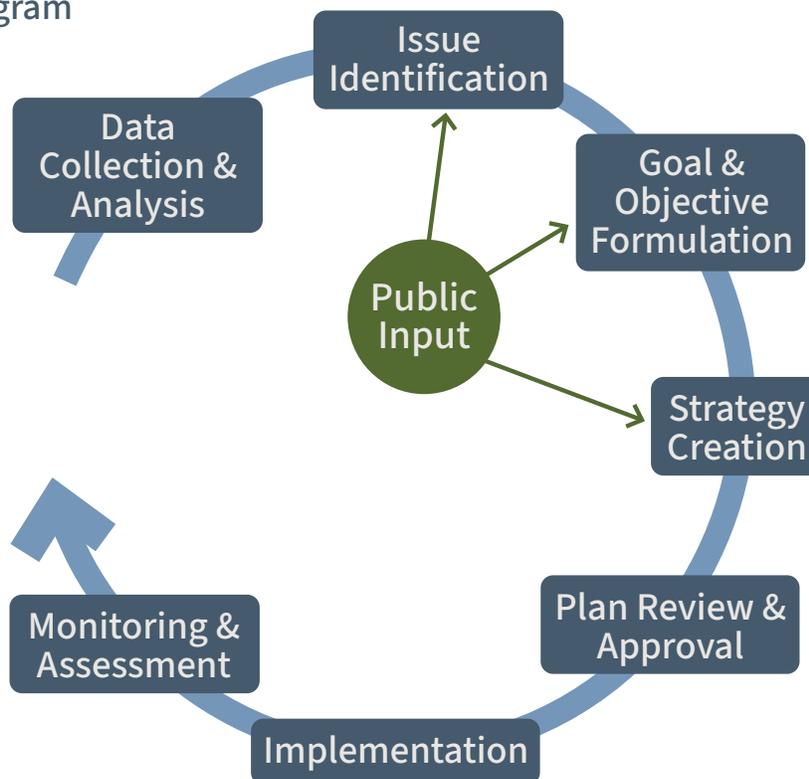
Community Engagement Summary

HNG Group - Community Partners

The County Board of Commissioners invited residents from both Bat Cave and Gerton to apply to serve as an advisory committee representing the Gorge and to advocate for the needs of the community over the course of the planning process. The Board appointed a nine-member group that comprised residents, business owners, and community leaders. The group also had liaison members,

including fire chiefs, emergency management staff, and NCDOT representatives. Throughout each step, this group provided guidance and feedback, supported outreach in the communities that make up the study area, and helped prioritize recommendations. The HNG Group unanimously voted to approve this Recovery Plan on December 8, 2025.

Planning Process Diagram



Community Engagement Results

Survey

180 people responded to the survey. The survey results showed the vast majority of respondents live in the study area full-time and are from either Bat Cave or Gerton.

Public Meeting 1

The first public input session was held in the study area in late August 2025 and had over 100 attendees. The purpose of this meeting was to listen and learn from residents through five interactive stations. The results were compiled into heat maps documenting the location of key concerns, color-coded by recovery theme. The maps start on p. 28 of the Plan.

Public Meeting 2

The second public meeting was held in November. This meeting built on information learned during the first meeting and asked participants to rank their top-priority projects within each recovery theme (see p. 37 of the Plan). Projects were developed based on survey feedback and the first meeting.

How to Use This Plan

Recommendation Components

Project Priority

Starts on p. 36 of the plan

Ranking determined by community input

These are the high priority items identified by the community that can be achieved through the projects listed in the green recommendation tables that follow.

Tier 1 Priority Projects

Ranking	Project	Theme
Tier 1 Priority Projects rank 1 - 7. Tier 2 Priority Projects rank 8 - 17. This determines High, Med., or Low priority in the Recommended Projects table (see below).	The description here represents a GROUP of projects and could encompass several projects described in the green recommendation tables on the following pages. This assigns priority to all projects that fit within this group, i.e. Bridge, Culvert, & Erosion Control Improvements, and the projects could be spread across different themes.	An icon here will show which themes the projects best align with.

Recommended Projects

Starts on p. 38 of the plan

Recommendations are organized into 8 themes. A table for each theme summarizes projects to achieve recommendations

Both the Ranking and the Project Type inform the table below, which lists the individual projects that achieve the overall recommendations

Potential costs are high-level estimates. A feasibility study is required to evaluate exact costs.

Project Name	Brief Description of Project	Priority	Potential Key Stakeholders	Potential Partners	Potential Cost
<i>Projects Sub-Group by Type (i.e. Roads & Bridges)</i>					
Individual project recommendations within the theme, grouped by project type.	There is a table for each of the 8 themes. A more detailed description of each project will follow the tables.	High, medium, or low, determined by community input.	These are the people / agencies responsible for implementing the project.	These are the people / agencies who are good resources.	Cost estimate to implement the project. Implementation will depend on funding availability.

Plan Recommendations

The recommendations were developed through a combination of community feedback and the project team's professional planning, design, and ecological expertise. Project recommendations were divided into eight recovery themes, shown at the bottom of this page.

There are over 46 recommended projects in this plan, divided into 8 themes and organized within each theme from highest to lowest priority. The Top Priorities identified on p. 36 of the Plan, and also to the right, represent what was most important to community members and summarize multiple projects. They are divided into Tier One and Tier Two priority projects. Projects are labeled as Tier One priorities if both the HNG Group and community members voted them as top priorities, whereas Tier Two projects were voted top priority by only one of the two. Look at p. 4 of this Executive Summary to see how to review the individual projects that make up a recommendation.

All *Potential Costs* listed for projects throughout the plan are estimates only. To determine actual cost, a feasibility study will need to be undertaken for many of the recommended projects prior to implementation. Grant funding will need to be identified and secured for many of these projects. If the Board of Commissioners adopts the plan, it does not mean that all recommendations will be implemented. Many recommendations will require further study and consideration at the Board's discretion.

Recommendation Themes



Recreation



Environment



Community



Infrastructure



Land Use



Housing



Tourism & Economy



Emergency Preparedness

Top Priority Recover Projects

- » **Strengthen Support For Volunteer Fire Departments**
- » **Integrated Forest Recovery & Hazard Fuel Reduction**
- » **Bat Cave Recreation Corridor**
- » **Restore Stream Channel & Floodplain Along The Rocky Broad River**
- » **Convenience & Recycling Center**
- » **Hickory Nut Gorge Regional Recreation Plan**
- » **Bearwallow Mountain Road Paving & Drainage Project**
- » **Siren Alert System & Public Education Campaign**
- » **Strategic Buyout Parcel Reuse Plan**
- » **Rocky Broad River Park**
- » **Bridge, Culvert, & Erosion Control Improvements**
- » **Signage Package**
- » **Reestablish Upper Hickory Nut Gorge Community Center As A Community Hub (To Include Community Park & Memorial Garden)**
- » **Reedy Patch Creek Enhancements**
- » **Restore Stream Channel & Floodplain Along Hickory Creek**
- » **Middle Fork Road Reconstruction**
- » **Explore a Landslide Early Response & Monitoring System**

Next Steps

The Planning Board will meet on February 19th to vote on whether to recommend approval or denial of this recovery plan to the Board of Commissioners. The Board will then hold a public hearing, in accordance with North Carolina's public notice requirements.

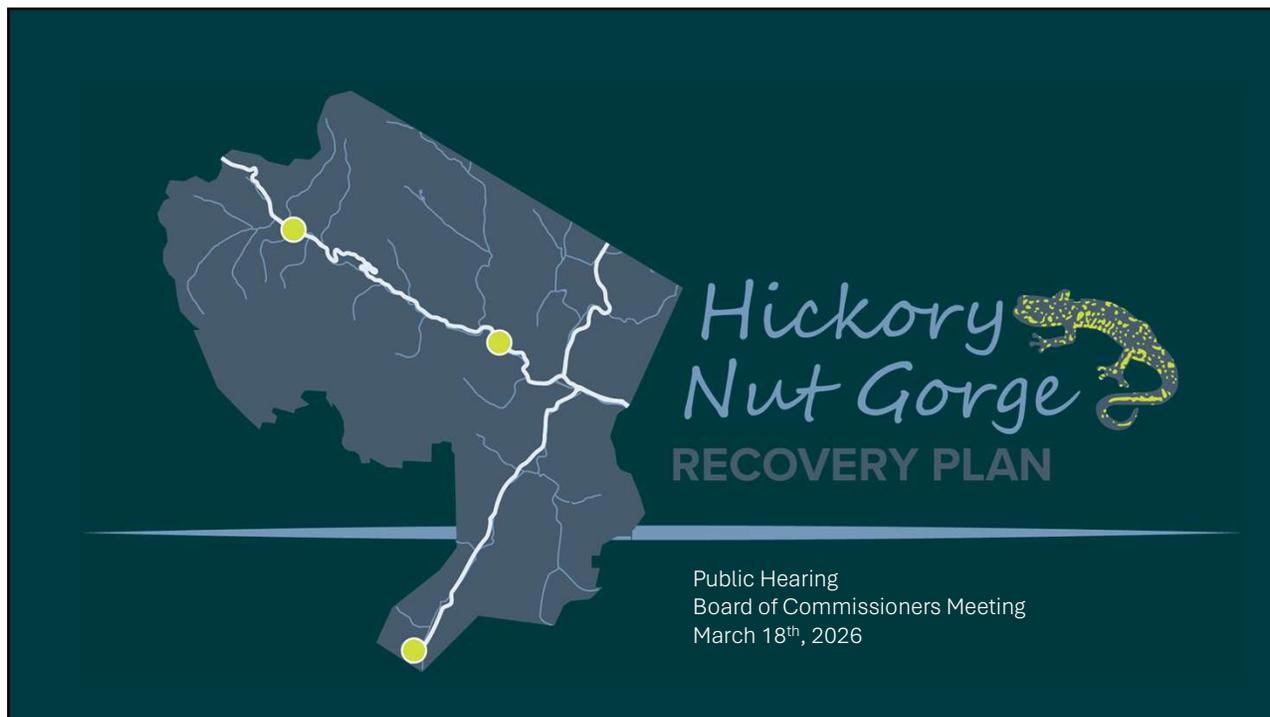
If the Board votes to adopt the plan, not all the recommendations will necessarily be implemented. It will be at the Board's discretion which recommendations will be further studied and pursued. This decision will also be influenced by available funding for projects, priority, and feasibility.

The HNG Group and community members will continue to serve as advocates and partners of the plan as County Staff work towards implementation at the Board's direction. Identifying and securing grant funding for projects will be a key step towards implementation once priority and feasibility have been determined.

While the County is still actively involved in immediate recovery efforts, this plan focuses on long-term recovery, and the recommended projects will be implemented over the next 5 to 10 years for a more resilient Hickory Nut Gorge.

This is not the full plan, only a summary of the key points. To see the full plan, please visit HNGPlan.org or scan the QR code below.





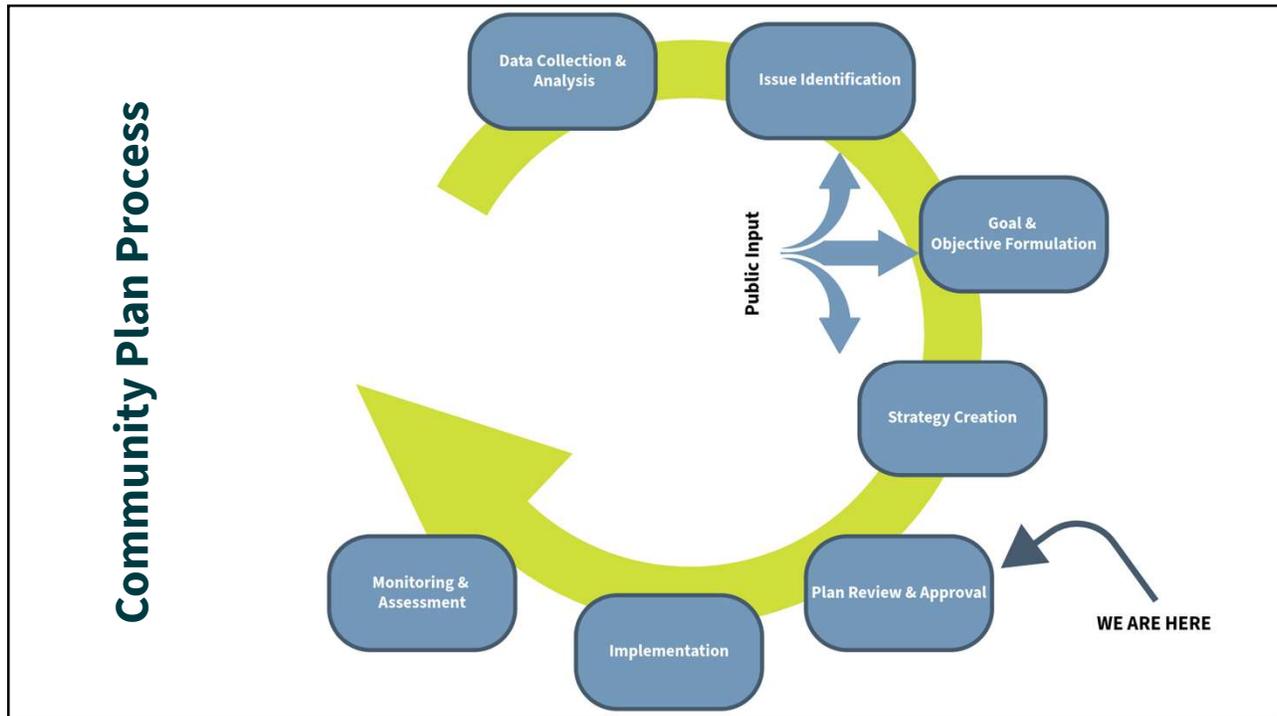
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**PLAN
OVERVIEW**

- The Hickory Nut Gorge Recovery Plan is a plan looking 5 – 10 years (and beyond) into the future
- Recovery includes restoring what can be restored, planning for future flooding events, and envisioning an improved built environment based on public input
- This plan was drafted using public input from HNG Community Group, the two community meetings, and the survey.
- The plan’s steering committee voted unanimously to recommend approval by the Planning Board

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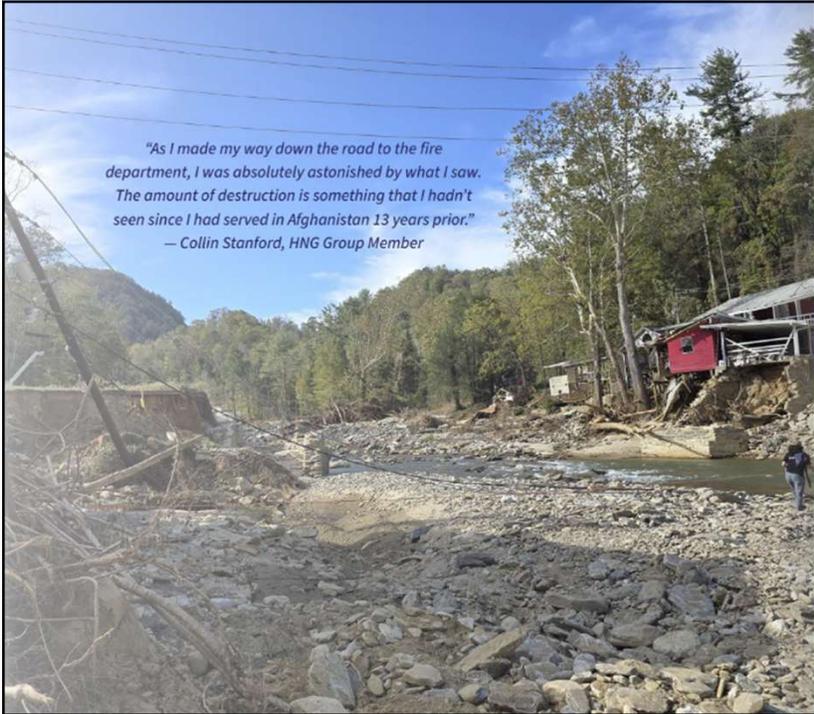
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BACKGROUND

- May 5, 2025 – BOC selected Equinox for the project
- June 2, 2025 – BOC appointed nine members of the public to an advisory committee for the plan (met six times)
- July 30, 2025 – Survey was opened for community input; received 180 responses, with 70% of respondents identifying as full-time residents
- August 19, 2025 – Staff held a community input meeting - there were over 100 attendees

A photograph of a wooden trail sign for 'BEARWALLOW MOUNTAIN TRAIL' set against a backdrop of dense green trees. The sign is mounted on two wooden posts. Below the main sign, there is a smaller wooden sign that says 'PLEASE REGISTER'.

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BACKGROUND

- September 2, 2025 – Staff gave an update to the BOC regarding plan progress
- November 6, 2025 – Staff held another community input meeting for folks to give feedback on draft plan recommendations
- December 8, 2025 – HNG Community Group voted unanimously to recommend plan approval
- January 15, 2026-Planning Board had its first review of the draft plan
- February 19, 2026 – Planning Board voted unanimously to recommend the draft plan

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180 Responses	
70% Full-time residents	16% Part-time residents
10% Business owners	49% Property owners
14% work or volunteer locally	

% Responses by Community Association

Community Association	Percentage
Bat Cave	61%
Gerton	35%
Edneyville	4%
Outside of Study Area	5%

Most respondents identified as living in Bat Cave, with Gerton being the second most identified group.

SURVEY SUMMARY

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PUBLIC INPUT MEETING #1

- Meeting was held in late August
- Over 100 attendees
- Received over 200 input points on activity maps
- Comments focused on:
 - Rebuilding infrastructure to be more resilient
 - Finishing the trail connections in Florence Preserve
 - Creating river access in Bat Cave
 - Implementing new, safe recreation opportunities in the low-lying areas

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PUBLIC INPUT MEETING #2

- Meeting was held in November
- Over 50 attendees
- Participants prioritized recommendations they previously submitted. The top five are:
 - Strengthen Support For Volunteer Fire Department
 - Integrated Forest Recovery & Hazard Fuel Reduction
 - Bat Cave Recreation Corridor
 - Restore Stream Channel & Floodplain Along The Rocky Broad
 - Convenience & Recycling Center

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PLAN ORGANIZATION

- Plan is organized into four chapters:
 - Introduction – answers why we should plan and has plan timeline
 - Assessment & Analysis – includes detailed maps of the gorge before and after the storm
 - Community Input – two public meetings and survey results
 - Recommendations – specific, actionable items to work toward recovery

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PLAN ORGANIZATION

- Recommendations are organized into 8 themes. A table for each theme summarizes the projects needed to achieve the recommendations.
- Potential costs are high-level estimates. A feasibility study is required to evaluate exact costs.

Project Name	Brief Description of Project	Priority	Potential Key Stakeholders	Potential Partners	Potential Cost
<i>Projects Sub-Group by Type (i.e. Roads & Bridges)</i>					
<i>Individual project recommendations within the theme, grouped by project type.</i>	<i>There is a table for each of the 8 themes. A more detailed description of each project will follow the tables.</i>	<i>High, medium, or low, determined by community input.</i>	<i>These are the people / agencies responsible for implementing the project.</i>	<i>These are the people / agencies who are good resources.</i>	<i>Cost estimate to implement the project. Implementation will depend on funding availability.</i>

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PLAN THEMES



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RECOMMENDATIONS

- There were over 46 recommended projects based on input from the first public meeting and survey results, as well as following discussions with the HNG Community Group, Henderson County staff (EM, Planning, etc.), and the project consultants.
- The recommendations are organized by the 8 recovery themes and arranged from highest priority to lowest priority within each theme.
- The prioritized recommendations are listed as high-level summarizations of multiple projects that make up each individual recommendation.

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PRIORITY PROJECTS

- Tier One Priority Projects are the top priority projects that both the HNG Group and the public voted as most important
- Tier Two Priority Projects are those that were identified independently as most important by the HNG Group or by the public

Tier One Priority Projects		
Ranking	Project	Theme
1	Strengthen Support For Volunteer Fire Department	 Emergency Preparedness
2	Integrated Forest Recovery & Hazard Fuel Reduction	 Emergency Preparedness
3	Bat Cave Recreation Corridor	 Recreation
4	Restore Stream Channel & Floodplain Along The Rocky Broad	 Environment
5	Convenience & Recycling Center	 Infrastructure
6	Hickory Nut Gorge Regional Recreation Plan	 Recreation
7	Bearwallow Mountain Road Paving & Drainage Project	 Infrastructure

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RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

PROJECT NAME	BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT	PRIORITY (High, Medium, Low)	POTENTIAL KEY STAKEHOLDER	POTENTIAL PARTNERS	POTENTIAL COST
RIVER CORRIDOR REPAIR					
Restore stream channel and floodplain along Hickory Creek	The restoration of the stream corridor to remove deposition, increasing channel stability, re-vegetate the floodplain, and increase recreation and emergency access.	High	Henderson County & USACE	MountainTrue & USFWS	\$\$\$\$\$
Restore stream channel and floodplain along the Rocky Broad River	The restoration of the stream corridor to remove deposition, increasing channel stability, re-vegetate the floodplain, and increase recreation and emergency access.	High	Henderson County & USACE	MountainTrue & USFWS	\$\$\$\$\$

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NEXT STEPS

- On February 19th, the Planning Board unanimously voted to recommend that the Commissioners adopt the draft plan.
- The Board of Commissioners must hold a public hearing before adopting the draft plan.
- Adoption of the plan by the Commissioners does not mean that all recommendations will be implemented. Many recommendations will require further study and consideration at the Board's discretion.

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QUESTIONS

To view the entire plan, please visit
www.HNGPlan.org

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