

# VIEWPOINTS

## TREES AND CHATHAM PARK: THE DEBATE CONTINUES

### Why more trees need to be saved in Chatham Park

Why do people love trees? Because we understand their many benefits. Trees are nature's stormwater engineers — holding soil in place, filtering out water pollution, preventing flooding and recharging groundwater. Trees are home to birds and wildlife, and very important in reducing climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide and reducing heat. We love trees for their beauty and refuge in a noisy world. We often take for granted the summer shade, spring blossoms and autumn foliage of our native Piedmont forests. Imagine our world without them.

People have been speaking out to protest the very large percentage of mature trees that Chatham Park will cut down as they build their planned development on over 7,000 acres. The proposed "Chatham Park Tree Protection Additional Element" submitted to the Town of Pittsboro is woefully inadequate. These Chatham Park rules would require saving as little as 10 percent of the existing tree coverage for much of Chatham Park development, with 0-3 percent in some of the densest areas, only 20 percent in residential areas (only 25 percent if all replanted trees). Small, widely spaced saplings planted to replace bulldozed forest will take many decades to mature, before providing the shade and benefits of a tree canopy.

Concerns have been raised about how many of the existing trees will survive development construction. The size of the proposed root protection zone for trees during grading, is much smaller than most experts recommend, and could result in poor tree survival. The trees in open spaces and in stream buffers are in danger of being razed for utility crossings, greenways and recreational uses.

We recognize that trees will be cut, and forest lost, as Chatham Park is developed. But Chatham Park will be built near important, already threatened resources — the Haw River and Jordan Lake. What the Town of Pittsboro decides on tree coverage in Chatham Park could be felt by hundreds of thousands of people in our greater region, because of impacts to drinking water, air quality and climate change.

How does Chatham Park's tree ordinance compare to other places? Chapel Hill's ordinance requires 30-40 percent tree coverage (20 percent in light industrial) in a city with about the same population (60,000) that Chatham Park envisions. Chatham Park says their rules are based on the City of Durham's tree protection ordinance for their urban/suburban tier. Is that the best model for this land near the Haw River and Jordan Lake? Durham's mayor does not believe their tree ordinance

is protective enough, and work is under way to improve it.

Other cities are also trying to find ways to increase their "tree canopies", the amount of overhead coverage the branches and leaves of the urban forest provide. The Charlotte City Council has adopted a "50 percent tree canopy by 2050" initiative. The Town of Cary has 46 percent tree canopy coverage. Even New York City has 22-24 percent tree canopy, credited with removing thousands of tons of water and air pollution, and they are planting one million new trees.

Pittsboro could adopt, an excellent model, "Recommendations for Implementing a Tree Protection Ordinance in the Town of Pittsboro," funded by the N.C. Forest Service Urban & Community Forestry Program in 2015. It would require 15 percent (most urban) to 60 percent (largest residential lots) tree coverage in new development. It includes many excellent tree protection strategies, with the highest priority being the preservation of existing trees. We urge the Town of Pittsboro to use these recommendations for both Chatham Park and the town's new Unified Development Ordinance.

Pittsboro has already backed away from the 2,000-foot Haw River buffer in their 2012 Land Use Plan, and the greater protections for the Haw River promised in their 2010 NPDES permit application. Chatham Park should be held to its commitment to be "exceptional." We cannot keep building as usual without considering the needs of future generations, who will live in a world where climate change is a reality. We cannot keep destroying the forests that provide clean air and protect streams, unraveling the defenses that our natural world provides, including flood control for the increasing number of major rain events. Chatham Park should commit to preserving much more of the existing forest before the bulldozers arrive.

We speak for the trees, since they cannot. Chatham County is known for its beautiful forests and waters, a reason many new people make this their home. The Town of Pittsboro should make sure that what is treasured most, is not lost, as Chatham Park is built.

*Editor's note: The News + Record asked Elaine Chiosso to write a 750-word opinion piece on the subject of the tree issue in Chatham Park. Chiosso is Executive Director of the Haw River Assembly, a nonprofit organization working to protect the Haw River since 1982. She has lived in Chatham County for 45 years and has served on the N.C. Sedimentation Control Commission, the Chatham County Planning Board and Environmental Review Board, and currently serves on the Environmental Review Advisory Committee. Links to information and documents in this article can be found at [www.hawriver.org](http://www.hawriver.org)*

### Chatham Park's tree protection is exemplary

For the past few years Chatham Park has been developing and implementing regulations for its development. Public comment has quickly jumped to conclusions that, at best, are incorrect assumptions and, at worst, blatant misrepresentation of truth. With respect to Chatham Park's tree coverage, this has been especially true.

Below are examples of the Haw River Assembly's talking points repeatedly used to decry Chatham Park's proposed tree coverage percentages:

- "This proposal will mean less tree coverage than New York City."
- "Charlotte is proposing 50 percent tree coverage. Chatham Park only 10 percent."
- Pittsboro's canopy coverage in its Town Limits is 50 percent. Chatham Park will have fewer trees than any city in North Carolina."
- Chapel Hill's Tree Coverage ordinance requires 30-40 percent for almost all new development and should be the model for tree requirements."

Every example confuses Chatham Park's tree "coverage" measurement with tree "canopy."

#### Tree canopy vs. tree coverage

What is tree canopy and how does it differ from tree coverage? Tree canopy is the area the tree's branches and leaves cover when viewed from above. Tree coverage is the land area where the tree grows. Trees in parking lots, single family lots and planted in street rights of way do not receive credit for tree coverage in Chatham Park. Tree canopy is typically three times the tree coverage area.

**LET'S BE CLEAR: WITH REQUIREMENTS PROPOSED OR ALREADY IN PLACE, CHATHAM PARK WILL NEVER FALL BELOW 50 PERCENT TREE CANOPY!**

Let's break down these frequently stated misconceptions:

#### 1. This proposal means less tree coverage than New York City.

A provocative sound bite but not factually accurate. A number of studies have measured tree canopy (not coverage) in New York with results ranging from 24 percent in 2006 to 13.5 percent in 2017 by MIT.

**CHATHAM PARK WILL HAVE AT LEAST 50 PERCENT CANOPY VS. NEW YORK CITY'S 13.5-24 PERCENT.**

#### 2. Charlotte is proposing 50 percent tree coverage. Chatham Park is only 10 percent.

TreesCharlotte estimates Charlotte has 47 percent tree canopy with a goal of 50 percent by 2050. The tree coverage requirements in their ordinances range from 10-15 percent (except in the urban center with 0 percent required.) With their "low" coverage requirements, Charlotte has maintained 45-50 percent tree canopy over the city.

**CHATHAM PARK'S TREE CANOPY WILL EQUAL OR EXCEED CHARLOTTE'S GOAL OF 50 PERCENT.**

#### 3. Pittsboro's canopy coverage in its Town Limits is 50 percent. Chatham Park will have fewer trees than any

#### other city in North Carolina.

In 2013, The Conservation Ordinance Review Committee (CORC) drafted recommendations for a Tree Protection Ordinance in Pittsboro. This report estimated there is 53 percent "canopy coverage" in the Town Limits. Most of this canopy is located in residential lots, again area not counted in Chatham Park's coverage regulations. Powell Place, the most comparable example of a Chatham Park type development in Pittsboro has 34 percent tree canopy with 12 percent tree coverage. In spite of what you've heard, very few municipalities in the state have tree ordinances and Chatham Park compares very favorably to those that do. While using different coverage (not canopy) metrics, Charlotte (10-15 percent), Raleigh (10 percent), Durham (10-20 percent), Greensboro (10 percent) and Winston-Salem (10 percent) are generally the same as Chatham Park's 10-20 percent.

**CHATHAM PARK WILL HAVE MORE TREES THAN MOST CITIES IN NORTH CAROLINA.**

#### 4. Chapel Hill's tree coverage ordinance requires 30-40 percent for all development and should be the model for tree requirements.

CORC recommendations suggest that Pittsboro use Chapel Hill as its model. Chapel Hill requires 30-40 percent tree canopy coverage but Chatham Park's standards will provide at least 50 percent canopy. Chapel Hill has no canopy requirements for the Town Center or UNC's campus while Chatham Park's tree coverage requirements for its Village Centers result in more canopy.

**AS A UNIVERSITY TOWN AND THE LEAST AFFORDABLE TOWN IN NORTH CAROLINA, CHAPEL HILL SHOULD NOT BE USED AS A MODEL FOR ANY TYPE OF DEVELOPMENT.**

The combination of the tree protection, open space, parks, public facilities, water quality and water conservation requirements placed on Chatham Park will provide more environmental protections than any other property along the Haw River. An important part of these protections are tree requirements resulting in tree canopy never falling below 50 percent. Chatham Park's core value of thoughtful, environmental stewardship is one of the many reasons this will be an exemplary community in which to live, work and play.

*Editor's note: The News + Record asked Chuck Smith to write a 750-word opinion piece on the subject of the tree issue in Chatham Park. Smith is the Vice President of Planning and Development for Preston Development Company overseeing the development of Chatham Park. He has more than 35 years experience as a licensed landscape architect specializing in land use planning, retail and mixed use design, golf course design, and recreational and open space planning. Prior to joining Preston Development Company, Smith was Director of Planning and Landscape Architecture for Withers & Ravenel, a multi-disciplinary design firm in Cary. He is a current member of the North Carolina Board of Landscape Architects and serves on the Board of Directors of the Council of Landscape Architecture Registration Boards serving the US and Canada. Smith is also a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects and has been a licensed real estate broker in North Carolina for more than 30 years.*



**POINT**  
Elaine Chiosso



**COUNTER-POINT**  
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