

# NELSON COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

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## INTRODUCTION & CHAPTER 2

JOINT WORKSESSION DRAFT

*January 18, 2023*





# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS







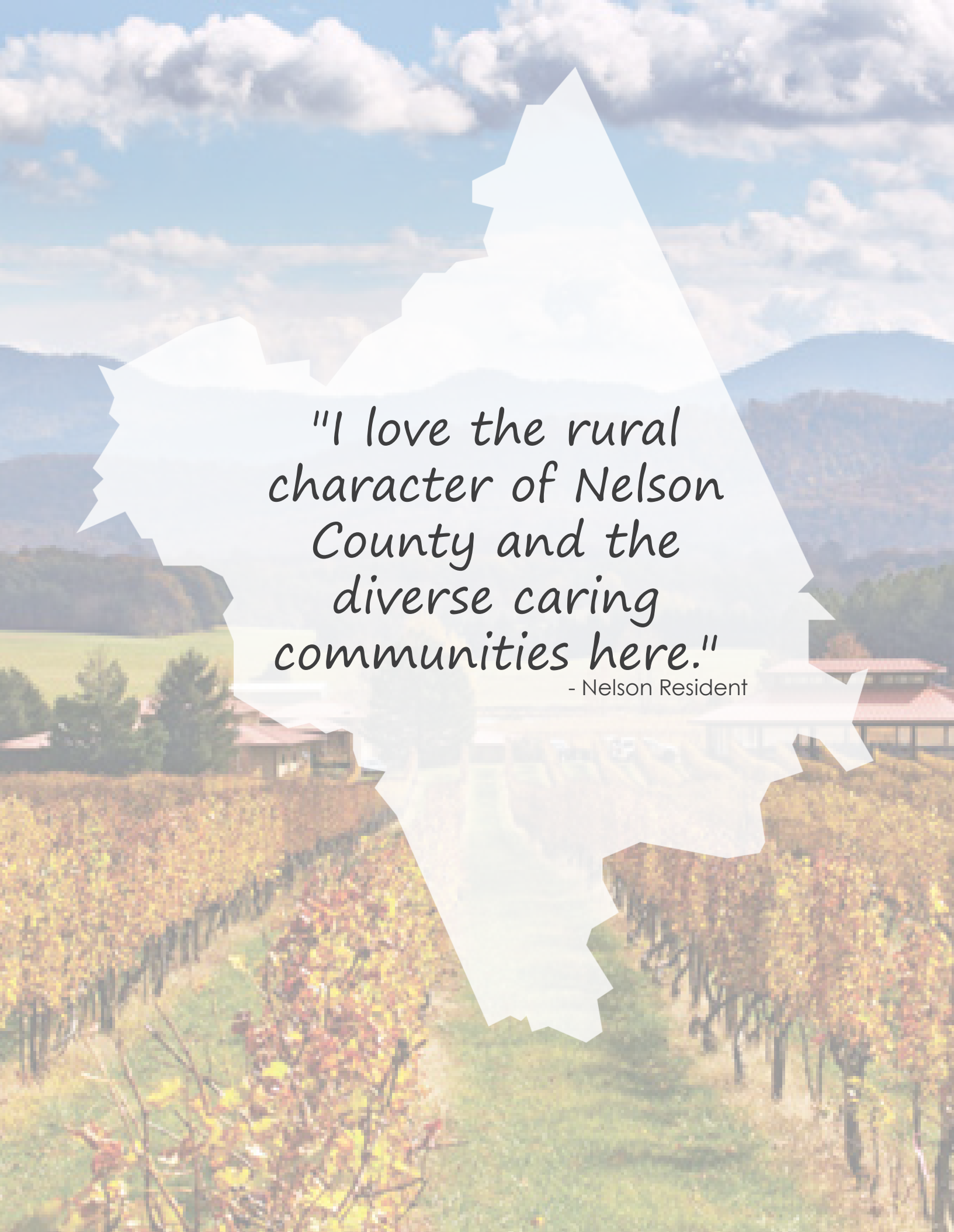


## Our Vision

Nelson is a thriving destination where people come for the natural beauty and stay for the opportunities and quality of life.

Nelson County today is a great place to work, live, and visit. Residents place high value on the rural character of the County and the strong sense of community, but they are concerned about unbalanced growth and limited economic opportunities. The question then, as we blaze a trail to the future, is how do we preserve our rural character as we grow and evolve with changing times? How do we increase housing choices for different types of individuals and families? How do we grow the economy and job opportunities while keeping our community accessible and affordable for everyone? How can we face our more difficult problems, improve the County, and meet our challenges head on?

The distinct benefit of a Comprehensive Plan is that it confronts these big issues in a big-picture way. The Comprehensive Plan fully considers how these big ideas are interrelated and interdependent. In creating this plan, we identified the defining issues that are central to the future success of Nelson County. The challenge before us now in reaching our destination — Nelson 2042 — is to leverage our strengths as we grow, while mitigating the negatives. The Nelson 2042 Comprehensive Plan sets us on a path and provides the directions to reach our destination.



*"I love the rural  
character of Nelson  
County and the  
diverse caring  
communities here."*

- Nelson Resident





## Guide at a Glance

The Nelson 2042 Comprehensive Plan is a policy guide for County officials and a resource for community members. The Plan is our guide to the Nelson of 2042. It articulates Nelson's shared vision for the future and identifies specific directions to reach that vision. These directions, referred to as goals and strategies, are established under a coordinated planning framework of Plan Elements.

### Creating Our Guide ▶

Chapter 1 establishes the legal context for the Comprehensive Plan, describes the Plan's functional relationship to other planning efforts in the County and region, and summarizes the community input process - a key component of drafting the content of this plan.

### Setting the Direction ▶

Chapter 2 describes the Nelson of today and outlines the Nelson of tomorrow. The chapter outlines the plan structure, including: vision, big ideas, plan elements, and supporting goals.

### Plan Elements ▶

Chapters 3 through 8 describe the individual plan elements that contain the policies and strategies to reach our vision for the Nelson of 2042. The following plan elements are discussed in this Plan:

- Shaping Community Character
- Connecting People & Places
- Creating Livable Communities
- Protecting Valuable Resources
- Creating a Resilient Economy
- Serving the Community

### Blazing the Way

Chapter 9 catalogs the specific strategies included in the Comprehensive Plan in an Implementation Work Plan. The Work Plan prioritizes and provides accountability for the strategies from each Plan Element; provides specific guidance for decision-making; and defines the ongoing process that will be used to monitor progress towards the vision for the future.



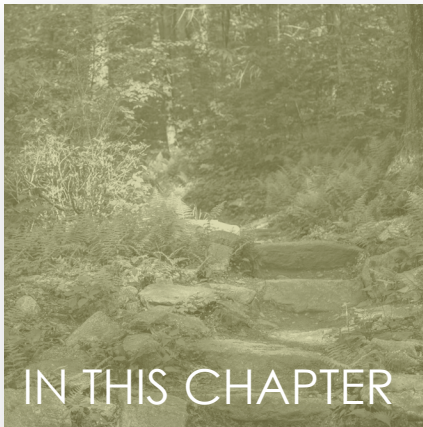
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# 2

## Setting our Direction



### Our Starting Point | Nelson Today

- People & Population
- Housing
- Economy
- Transportation

### Our Destination | Nelson 2042

- Vision
- Big Ideas
- Plan Elements & Goals

To **reach our destination** we must first understand where we are, what tools and assets we have available to us, and what challenges we might face along the way. This chapter establishes a benchmark of information on Nelson's existing conditions and includes identification of socioeconomic trends and forces that affect Nelson today and into the future. The ultimate goal is to develop a strategy for addressing any critical gaps. To that end, this assessment provides the basis for the plan vision, big ideas, and goals and **sets the direction** for reaching the Nelson of 2042.





## Our Starting Point | Nelson Today

As a beautiful and scenic place to live and visit, Nelson County is a popular location that attracts a diverse population from many different socio-economic backgrounds. Located in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Nelson County is part of the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission. Originally home to the peoples of the Monacan Native American tribe, European settlers started arriving to the area that is now Nelson County in the 17th and 18th centuries before Nelson County was officially created in 1807.

In the past, similar to many rural areas across the Commonwealth, agriculture and forestry played an important role for the people of Nelson County. Mining also helped shape the County's economy and community. By railroad and river, many valuable stones and ores were extracted from the mountains of the County and transported across the Commonwealth and the Country.

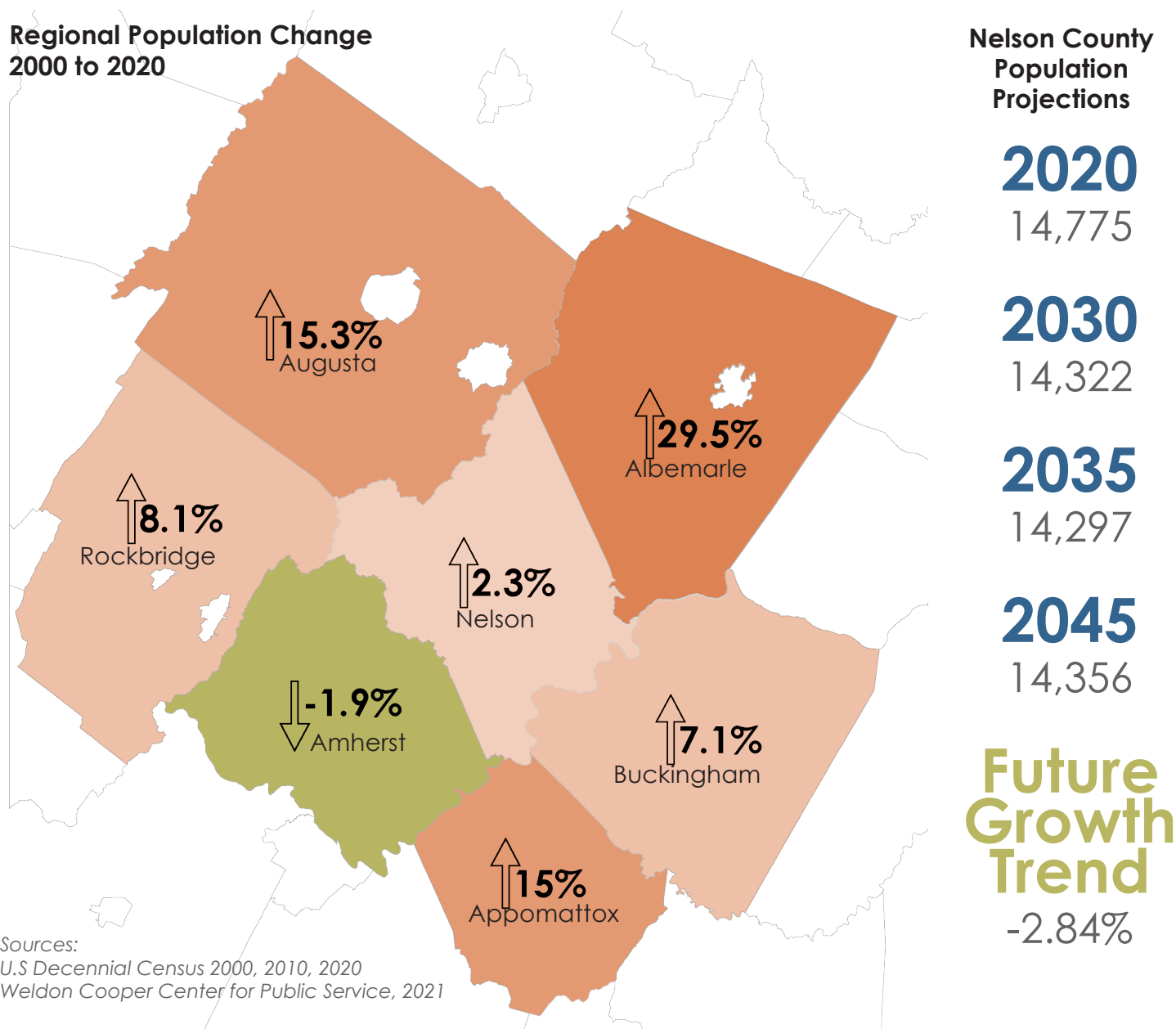
Today, as technology and the global economy has shifted over time, the community's character and makeup has also shifted. The natural beauty of the County has attracted a large cohort of retirees, remote workers, and part-time residents seeking to enjoy the scenic beauty of the mountains. These shifts in community demographics present new opportunities for the County, and with them come additional challenges.

The goals and strategies of this plan aim to manage these opportunities and challenges by preserving the historic values and natural beauty that have shaped Nelson County and by embracing a new future to support all community members.

# People & Population

One of the most important resources in Nelson County is its people. The people who live here are proud to call Nelson home and have a strong sense of community pride. Understanding who lives here, works here, or visits here is a critical component of planning for future growth and County investment in services, infrastructure, and amenities.

Nelson County's population has grown slightly but consistently since the beginning of the 21st century. Despite the upward growth trend, the County lags far behind the statewide (22%) or regional (10.7%) growth rate. Even accounting for the geographic and socio-economic differences between Nelson, Augusta, Rockbridge and Albemarle, Nelson County has failed to keep up with the larger growth rates of the more comparable Appomattox and Buckingham Counties. Furthermore, population projections forecast a negative growth rate for the County over the next 20 years. The reasons for Nelson's declining population numbers are multi-faceted and complex, but reflect the realities of an aging population and a locale which has failed to retain young people and families.





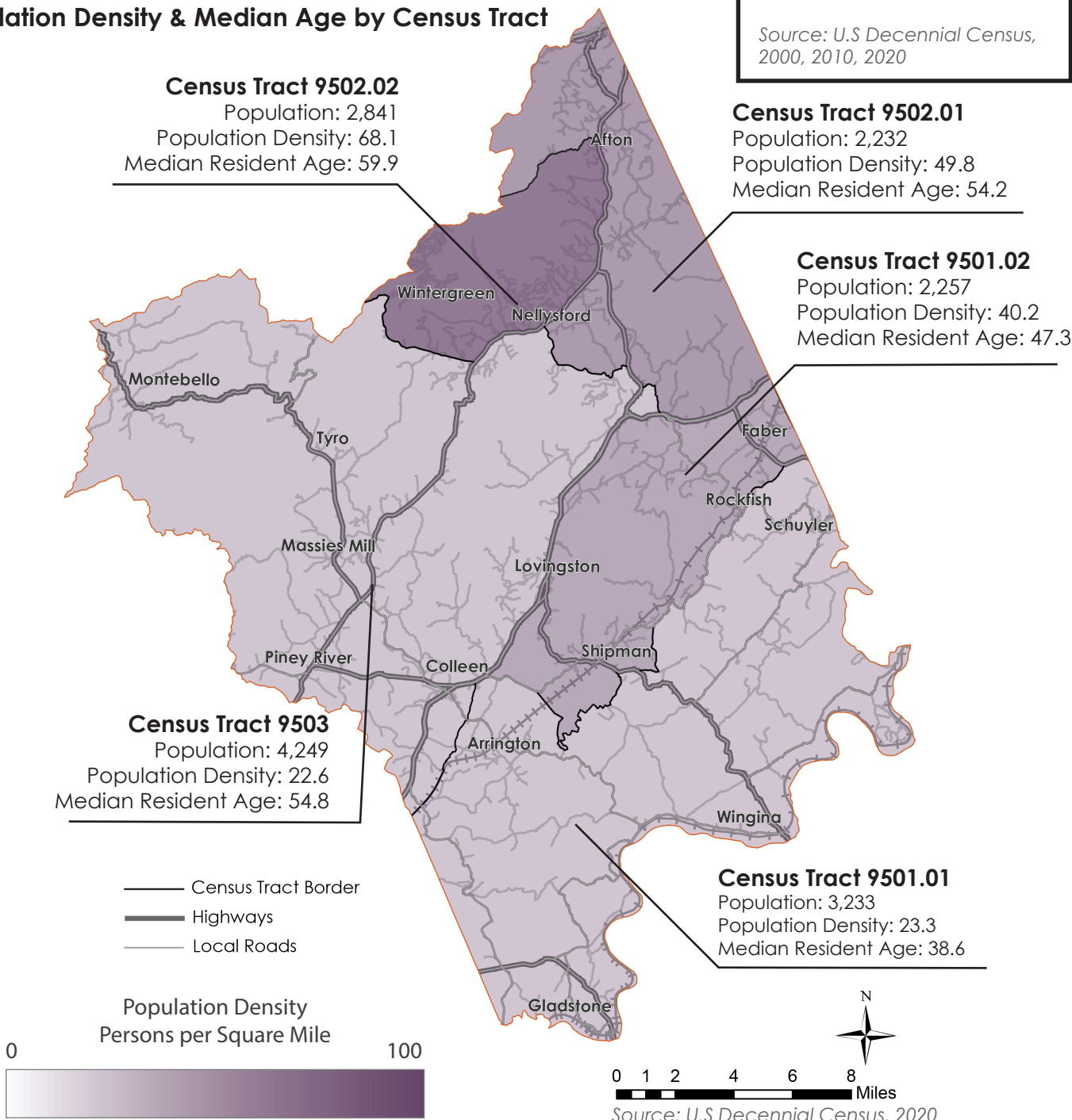
# People & Population

Over half of the population of Nelson County is over the age of 50. The median age of the County has consistently grown higher in the last 20 years. Today, the median age of the County is 51.3 years, significantly higher than the statewide median age of 38.4.

With the Census Tract containing Wintergreen Resort and Nellysford being the most densely populated, it has a significant effect on the aging statistics of the County overall.

**Largest Age Group of Nelson County Residents**  
  
**2000:** 45 - 49 Years  
  
**2010:** 55 - 59 Years  
  
**2020:** 65 - 69 Years  
  
Source: U.S Decennial Census, 2000, 2010, 2020

## Population Density & Median Age by Census Tract



# People & Population

## Race & Ethnicity

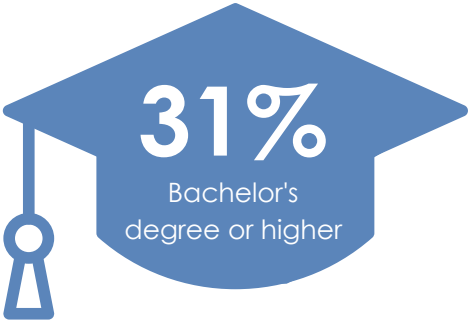
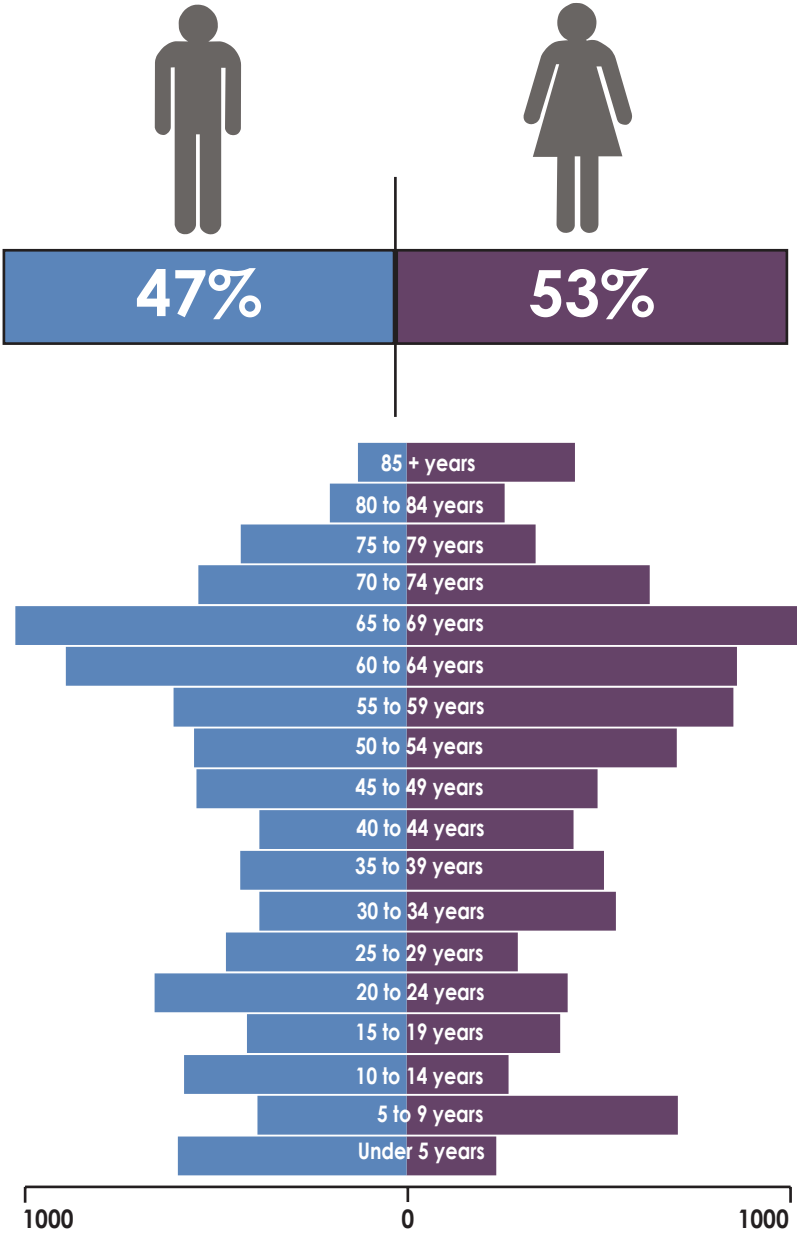
The demographic makeup of Nelson has changed over time. Though demographic data shows a largely white population, it is important to understand that Nelson does have a diverse population and cultural story that is often under represented. Nelson County and the surrounding region is the ancestral homeland of the Monacan people, who still live here. Like the rest of Virginia, enslaved Africans and free black homesteaders arrived with European immigrants. Over the last 20 years, the County's African American population saw a 20% decrease, but the American Indian and populations of multi-races has increased.

## Education

With a higher percentage of residents who have earned a bachelor's degree or greater compared to the Commonwealth (28% of Virginia residents have a bachelor's degree or higher), Nelson County citizens understand the importance of education. Even so, it will be important for the County to support the education and training of the community to help create a balanced and diverse workforce.

## Race & Ethnicity

Nelson		Virginia
85.1%	White	68.8%
11%	African American	20%
0.6%	Native American	0.6%
4.8%	Hispanic	10.2%



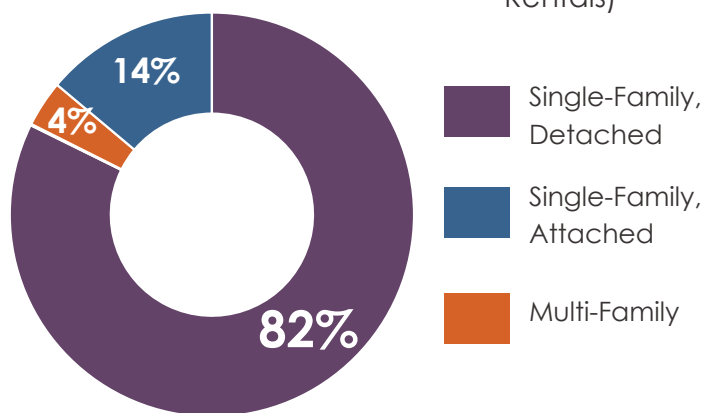


**10,219**

Total Housing  
Units

**2,382**

Housing Units in Seasonal  
Use (Including Short Term  
Rentals)



**Median Home  
Value**

**\$233,400**

Nelson

**Median Gross  
Rent**

**\$834**

Nelson

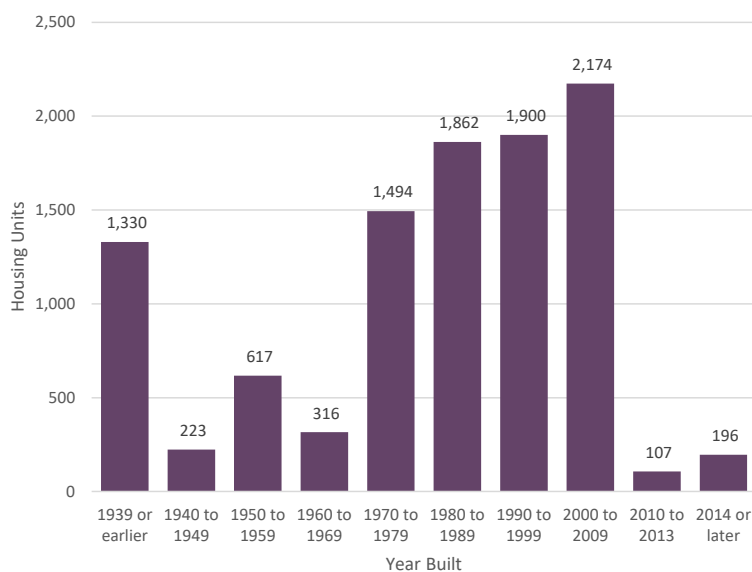
**\$335,198**

Virginia

**\$1,326**

Virginia

### Age of Housing Stock



## Housing

Housing in Nelson County is predominately single-family, detached houses — making up over 80% of the entire housing stock. The remaining 20% of the County's housing stock is primarily composed of manufactured housing with some multi-family dwellings, such as apartments or condominiums.

Nearly 40% of the County's housing stock is 30 years old or older. Production of new homes hit its high point between the years 2000 and 2009, after which construction of new homes drastically decreased in the County.

The combination of lack of dwelling types and new home construction has contributed to a housing shortage in the County and put additional financial strain on residents with housing insecurity. Primary among those are residents who do not own their home. Even though median rents in Nelson are lower than the rest of the state, nearly 40% of all renters in Nelson are cost-burdened (compared to roughly 30% statewide), meaning that the rent they pay makes up over one third of their household income.

Due to the aged housing stock in the County, many houses have fallen into disrepair and are no longer habitable or occupied. Of the over 10,000 housing units in the County, 3,821 of those are considered vacant housing with 2,328 housing units considered vacant and being used for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use. The remaining vacant units are either for rent, for sale, for migrant workers, or otherwise unoccupied. Due to the surge in popularity of tourism to the County, these unoccupied homes have increasingly been utilized as short-term rental homes as lodging for the County's many visitors.

Housing is further discussed in Chapter 5 of this plan where specific strategies are identified to help address the challenges and opportunities of the Nelson County housing market.



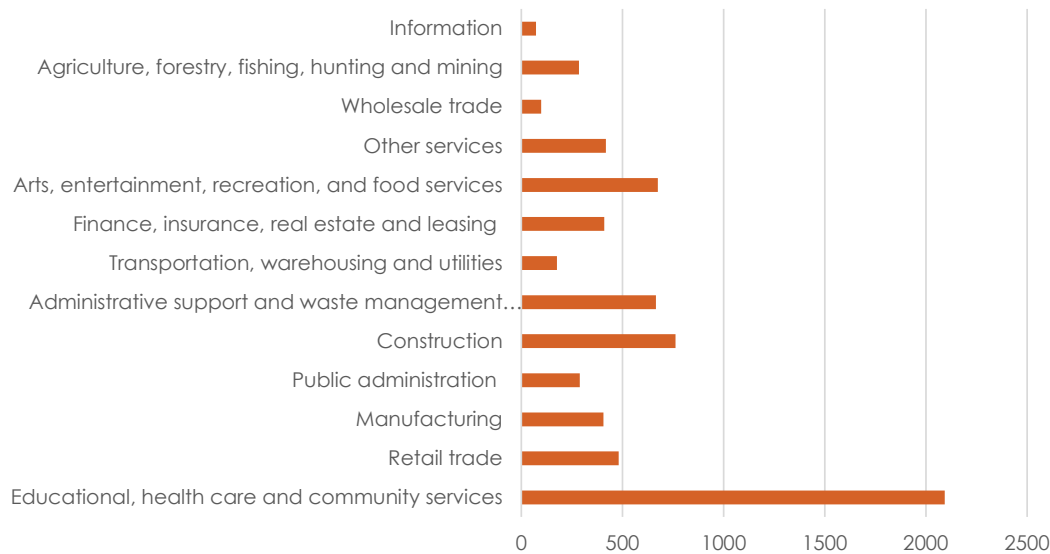
# Economy

Nelson's economy was historically rooted in agricultural and resource-extraction enterprises. The mining and resource extraction industries no longer play a large role in Nelson's economy, and agricultural production in the County is changing. In 2012, nearly 80,000 acres were in productive farmland. In 2017, that figure was down over 12,000 acres. Nonetheless, agricultural operations in the County accounted for nearly \$27,000,000 in agricultural sales in the latest available agricultural census. The value of agricultural production, even with less acreage, could be attributed to the growing agritourism industry. As the historically significant economies of the County shift, new opportunities for economic investment have appeared, and none has been more important to Nelson's economy as the tourism industry. Tourism in Nelson County accounts for \$3.3 million in local taxes and currently employs over 600 residents. Targeted and manageable growth into this sector of the County's economy will be an important goal for the County moving forward.

The vast majority of the Nelson County workforce works in educational, health care, or community services. Many residents commute out of the County for work, with Albemarle County and Charlottesville being the top commuted to locations for Nelson County residents. Employers in Nelson County vary in terms of public and private entities as well as types of industry. According to the Virginia Employment Commission, most new hires found in the accommodation and food services, manufacturing, and retail trade industries.

Additional information and strategies for the economy of Nelson County is further discussed in Chapter 7 of this plan.

## Labor Force by Industry



## Top 3 Employers

1. Wintergreen Pacific, LLC
2. Nelson County School Board
3. Craft USA Holdings, LLC

### Unemployment Rate

**3%**  
Nelson

**3.2%**  
Virginia

### Poverty Rate

**12.4%**  
Nelson

**10.2%**  
Virginia

### Median Household Income

**\$62,203**  
Nelson

**\$76,398**  
Virginia

Sources:  
American Community Survey 5  
Year Estimates, 2020  
U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2017  
Virginia Employment Commission

## Transportation

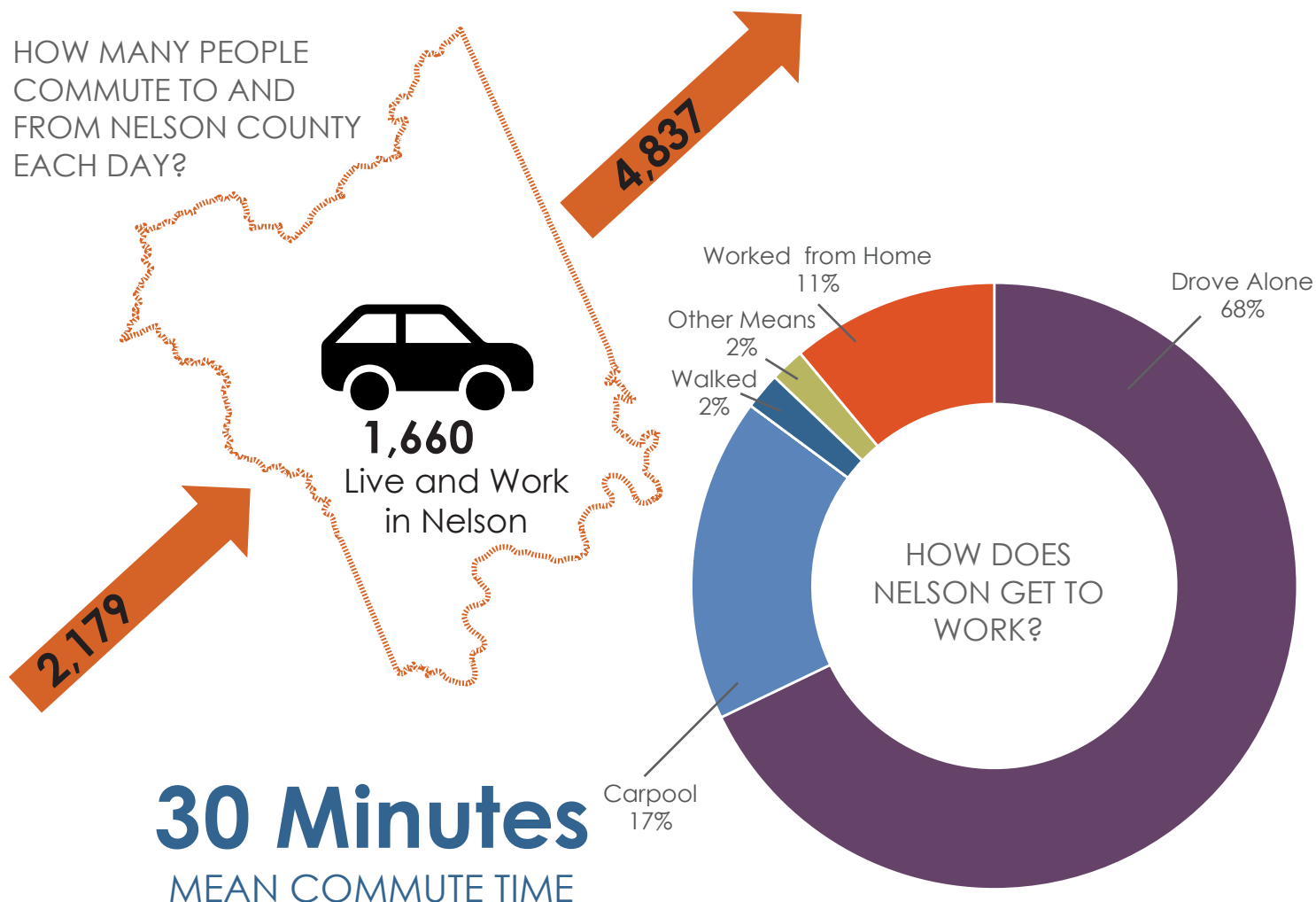
Centrally located between three major metropolitan hubs and with access to several important regional and interstate highways, Nelson County has become a hub for commuters wishing to live in a more rural setting than where they work. Over half of Nelson County's labor force commute out of the County for work. In addition, a significant amount of workers commute into Nelson County for work — a possible side effect of the difficulties of housing attainability.

The primary method of transportation for commuter traffic is through private vehicles. While many residents choose to carpool, the majority of commuters drive alone.

Public transportation in the County is extremely limited, which is common across many rural communities in the Commonwealth. Regional public transportation is available in a limited capacity through private resources such as Jaunt, which provides ridesharing services to residents across the region.

Moving forward, Nelson County will focus to expand upon the existing transportation options in the County as well as identify innovative opportunities to offer additional transportation options to residents and visitors alike.

Further information and strategies regarding transportation can be found in Chapter 4 of this plan.



Source: American Community Survey 5 Year Estimates, 2020



## Our Destination | Nelson 2042

### Vision

A meaningful Comprehensive Plan looks 10 to 20 years into the future toward a vision of what a place can be. This vision is based on the collective input from the community and should be supported by residents, business owners, and other community members. The vision serves as the overarching principle for the Comprehensive Plan, guiding the development of goals and strategies for each planning element. The vision is a broad, aspirational statement headlining the entire Comprehensive Plan — the words are carefully chosen to reflect the most important issues on the minds of community members. How the County achieves this vision is a long-term project, achieved through the goals and strategies identified in this Plan.

### Big Ideas

The Comprehensive Plan vision statement is supported by a series of big ideas or planning principles – those things that Nelson County, as a community, cares the most deeply about. Public engagement throughout the Comprehensive Plan update process elicited active participation, both in person and on-line. The ample hard and soft data collected throughout the process revealed strong themes from which four big ideas emerged. These ideas should serve as a guide for the many decisions community leaders will make over time for the County. With each decision, we must ask: Are we following our guide and creating meaningful change for our community? Are we creating opportunity for people to live, work, and thrive here?

### Elements & Goals

Plan elements are the backbone of the Comprehensive Plan. Every community is comprised of physical elements, economic factors, and social structures that combine to create the distinct places we call home. When we plan for communities, we must consider each of these elements. Nelson 2042 addresses six plan elements. Each plan element chapter contains an analysis of key issues and opportunities, an overarching goal, supporting objectives, and specific strategies to bridge any gaps. Taken together, they create the guide that allows us to blaze a trail to the Nelson of 2042.





## Our Vision

*Nelson is a thriving destination where people come for the natural beauty and stay for the opportunities and quality of life.*





## Big Ideas

To achieve our vision for 2042, Nelson County is committed to planning and providing equitably for the community, diversifying and bolstering the economy, improving and expanding vital community services, and protecting and connecting to the natural environment. These big ideas are recognized and further discussed in each planning element.



### Plan & Provide Equitably for Everyone

Interwoven through all of the planning efforts and decisions Nelson County must make is the need to plan and provide equitably for all of the County's citizens. Housing and recreation are two areas of immediate need for improving choice and access, but equitable access to economic opportunity, a healthy environment, and quality of life are fundamental to great communities.



### Improve & Expand Vital Community Services

Providing services and maintaining infrastructure are among the core responsibilities of a locality. The provision of these services must be done in a way that is fiscally responsible while ensuring the community and environment are healthy, clean, and safe. Improving community infrastructure and services is also instrumental to attracting investments that will help diversify the local economy, protect community health, and provide equitable services for everyone.



### Diversify & Bolster the Local Economy

In recent years, Nelson's local economy has seen a strong shift towards the tourism and agritourism industries — a byproduct of the County's unparalleled natural environment. As we look to the future, we must find ways to build on these thriving industries while diversifying the economy in order to build resiliency and provide opportunities that will draw families and young people back to the County.



### Protect & Connect to Our Rural Environment

Nelson is defined by its natural beauty and rural character. Residents value the County's rural environment above all else. As we plan for future growth, we must do so intentionally and strategically, protecting natural areas and following sustainable development practices so that future generations can enjoy the beauty of Nelson County.

# Elements and Goals



*(Editor's Note: Graphic to be Updated with Goal Statements as Chapters are Drafted)*