Save trees and affordability in South Slope

We ask Asheville's leaders and planners to hear and act on our mounting concerns about the two proposed Tribute developments in the South Slope that are now undergoing the cIty's review process. The developer's current plans pit our city's affordability goals against its sustainability goals, to the severe detriment of both.

Asheville is confronting two interlocked crises: climate change and income inequality. Decades of short-sighted development practices and patterns have turned many parts of our city into urban heat islands, areas devoid of trees and replete with surfaces that are impervious and have a high heat capacity, exposing their mostly low-to-moderate-income residents and locally owned businesses to potentially disastrous risk from extreme heat and flooding.

This dual crisis is not some abstract potential threat but a very real and present one, as the accompanying maps from Asheville's new Comprehensive Plan demonstrate. As the Plan points out, by far the most effective way for Asheville to achieve climate resilience is to increase our urban tree canopy, which cools homes and pavements, intercepts stormwater, prevents erosion, absorbs carbon, improves air quality, reduces noise pollution, and significantly reduces the stress of urban life.

Yet, over the past decade alone, unchecked development practices have cost the city up to 8% of that tree canopy. In Asheville as in most U.S. cities, the areas of worst urban desertification and consequent heat and flooding risk disproportionately coincide with the highest concentrations of low-income residents, as these Comp Plan maps make clear. Our city government continues to allow – even encourage – these practices to go on unabated, even while city leaders tout Asheville as a "climate city", and research has demonstrated not only the value of trees in general in sequestering carbon and mitigating climate change, but also the importance of natural urban greenspace in managing storm water, moderating heat, and generally contributing to the well-being of residents and visitors alike.

It is of the utmost urgency that we act immediately to prevent further net tree-canopy loss. Proven, easily adopted sustainable building practices preserve existing trees even in dense infill developments. The potentially deadly fallacy that affordability requires the sacrifice of sustainability endangers the very residents low-cost housing is intended to help – as the city of Houston tragically learned when it opened its surrounding old-growth prairies to unrestricted development in the name of reducing housing costs by increasing supply, and then suffered the costliest flood in U.S. history, in large part because there was too little permeable prairie soil left to absorb the stormwater surge from Hurricane Harvey.

That's why we, a resolute coalition of South Slope residents and city-wide concerned citizens, urge City Council to use its Conditional Zoning power as leverage to withhold approval from the Coxe/Asheland development unless the developer agrees to the following recommendations for altering his plans to be more in line with the city's Comprehensive Plan, to be more environmentally responsible, and to ameliorate the historic economic segregation of this area. Our recommendations are that the developer:

A) drop the plan to develop the wooded area on Collier Ave. while we pursue preservation options, including acquisition as a public park or privately conserved area, land swap, historic-tree designation, or

tree-preservation property-tax credits as currently being considered by the city's Tree Commission;

B) agree to work with the city's Tree Commission to ensure that the developer's plans for Coxe/Asheland minimize and mitigate tree removal, to achieve net tree-canopy stasis or increase for the South Slope area;

C) transfer the 70-plus-unit affordable-housing component planned for Collier Ave. wholly into the Coxe/Asheland mixed-use project; and

D) agree to allow the city's Stormwater Department to verify independently that the developer's plans for Coxe/Asheland will result in substantial net stormwater *reduction* (not merely equivalence to pre-development stormwater volume) before they are submitted for approval to the Planning & Zoning Commission and City Council, and that the Department's analysis be made available for timely public review before such submissions.

We see these as the most pressing problems with the developer's current plans:

1) The developer plans to remove approximately one acre of mature trees from the South Slope, including its last remaining patch of old-growth forest, the centuries-old historic Ravenscroft School oaks at 11 Collier Ave. These two dozen mature trees alone prevent some 55,000 gallons of stormwater per year from flooding the South Slope's streets and basements. The South Slope cannot afford this major removal of tree canopy at the very time when our mounting climate crisis calls for us to stop net tree loss. These trees are eminently qualified to be designated as historic and protected, and at the Aug. 13 meeting of the South Slope Neighborhood Association, the nearly unanimous agreement among the record numbers of South Slope residents and business owners who attended was that the Collier Wood is very important to the neighborhood and must be saved intact.

2) We are concerned that the developer is using a bait-and-switch tactic to mislead affordability advocates into supporting his main project, an approximately 500-unit, mixed-use, Level III development between Coxe and Asheland Avenues. Although the developer is publicly promising at least 50 units of affordable housing at 80% AMI, in neighborhood and design-review meetings he is making clear that all of these promised units will in fact be isolated well away from the primary Coxe/Asheland development in a separate, architecturally inferior apartment block he is proposing for the site currently occupied by the aforementioned Collier Ave. Woods. Because this smaller project is being submitted separately for approval at Level II, Council will not be able to review and vote on it. If built, the Collier Avenue apartments building would undercut the city's equity goals: The forest removal would result in de facto segregation of teachers, firefighters, and other working residents who fit the 80% AMI demographic from wealthier residents in the proposed new main Coxe/Asheland development, and thus serve to accelerate the gentrification of Asheville's Southside – a part of our city that is still bears the scars of the racist "urban renewal" projects of the 1960s and 1970s.

3) Coxe Ave. is notorious among residents for flooding frequently, "like a river", and city planners note that the South Slope is effectively the stormwater drain for all of central Downtown. The Coxe/Asheland portion of the development will not only remove another significant stand of mature trees alongside

Asheland, but also extensively alter a steep bank just below these trees. These changes to the site's topography raise serious concerns about erosion and flooding, both immediate and long-term. The developer's landscape architect does promise to address these concerns by adding permeable surfaces and other natural as well as manmade stormwater retention and absorption mechanisms. However, these are not currently reflected in the developer's proposal as reviewed by the Technical Review Committee.

We remind our City Council members that they were elected to represent Asheville's residents, and that they accepted that mandate to act on all of the voters' major concerns. Voters have made clear that *both* environmental sustainability and lower-cost housing are at the top of that list, and *both* are top priorities in Asheville's Comprehensive Plan, not either or neither. As the data mapped and described in the Plan plainly show, economic and environmental injustice have long been inseparably linked in Asheville, and attempts to cure the former at the expense of the latter have inevitably worsened both. We do need more affordable homes – *and* we need more trees to shelter and protect the people who live in them.

(Please see the petition at http://chng.it/HgP2YCsF8B, titled "Save trees and affordability in South Slope".)

Sincerely,

Citizens for South Slope Tree Preservation

Steven C. Rasmussen, principal author

stevencrasmussen@gmail.com, (828) 251-0343

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The following three maps, excerpted from the 2018 Asheville Comprehensive Plan, show the areas of the city most vulnerable to climate change in the form of dangerous (1) flooding and (2) heat, as well as (3) areas with the lowest household median income. I've superimposed on each map the outline of the South Slope neighborhood as defined by the city Planning Department's South Slope Study Area. – SCR

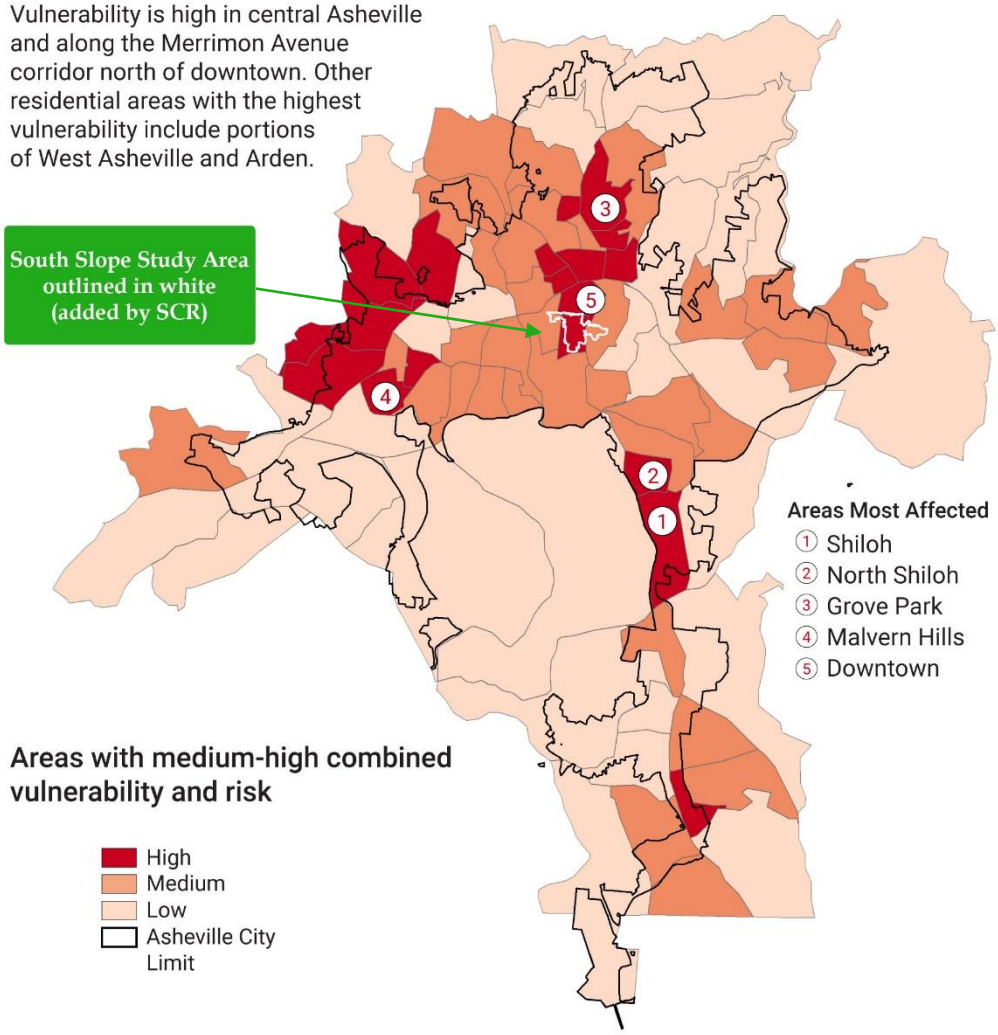
Source: *City of Asheville Comprehensive Plan: Climate Assessment Final Report, April 2018*, p. 78

Residents / Nuisance Flooding, Runoff, Erosion

Vulnerability & Risk Assessment

All residential areas are exposed to nuisance flooding, runoff, and erosion. Areas with highest population density and the most impervious surfaces were determined to have the highest potential impact. The existing amount and condition of stormwater infrastructure was evaluated by determining a particular area's capacity to cope with runoff from heavy precipitation events. Areas with the highest vulnerability and risk are areas with high population density, high impervious surface area, and that have either a relatively low amount of stormwater infrastructure or where there is a relatively high amount of infrastructure with a high likelihood of failure that is also in proximity to densely populated areas.

Vulnerability is high in central Asheville and along the Merrimon Avenue corridor north of downtown. Other residential areas with the highest vulnerability include portions of West Asheville and Arden.



Source: *City of Asheville Comprehensive Plan: Climate Assessment Final Report, April 2018*, p. 80

Residents / Extreme Heat

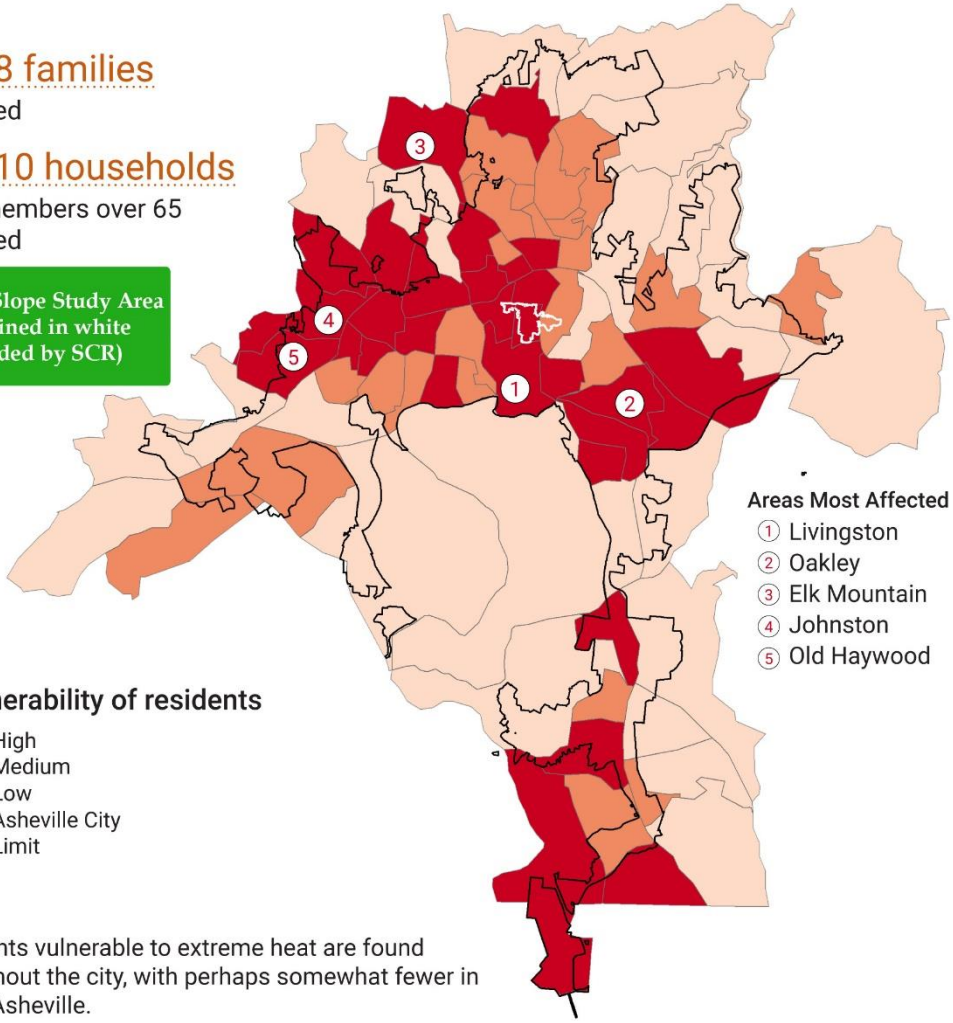
Vulnerability Assessment

The vulnerability of residents to extreme heat considers sensitive populations, including families living below the poverty line and households with members 65 years of age and older that live in proximity to developed land cover, as being exposed to a potential extreme heat event. The amount of tree canopy was used as a measure of adaptive capacity to an extreme heat event. Therefore, sensitive populations in areas with a high percentage of developed land cover and low tree canopy are most vulnerable to negative health effects from heat stress due to the urban heat island effect.

3,308 families
exposed

14,510 households
with members over 65
exposed

South Slope Study Area outlined in white (added by SCR)



Residents vulnerable to extreme heat are found throughout the city, with perhaps somewhat fewer in North Asheville.

Source: ***City of Asheville Comprehensive Plan: Market, Housing, & Economic Strategies Report, March 2018, p. 69***

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

Of the MSA's four counties, Henderson County has the highest median household income, at $47,000. Buncombe County has the second-highest median income, at $44,000. Within the city of Asheville, median household income is slightly lower at $41,600.

The map below shows the distribution of high, middle, and low income areas throughout the region. Notable concentrations of high median income households are located to the south and east of the city of Asheville, to the west of Hendersonville, and Lake Junaluska. Concentrations of lower-income households can be found in the mountainous areas at the periphery of the region, as well as within central Asheville, Hendersonville, and Waynesville. Overall, the pattern is one of lower income within central cities and very rural areas, and higher income in suburban areas.

Median Household Income
Asheville MSA, 2016

City of Asheville	**$41,600**
Buncombe County*	$44,400
Henderson County	$47,000
Madison County	$40,500
Haywood County	$42,100
Asheville MSA	$44,500

Source: ESRI **includes City of Asheville*

