What is the purpose of the Economic Development Policy & Strategic Plan (EDPSP)?

The purpose of the EDPSP is to establish policy, provide direction and set overall expectations for the Economic & Tourism and Agricultural Development Directors and their respective advisory commissions and boards in their development of implementation and action plans for economic development efforts in Polk County.

The EDPSP is NOT Polk County’s economic development plan; those plans will continue to be developed by the Economic & Tourism and Agricultural Development Directors, to be submitted to the Board of Commissioners for annual review, approval, and budgeting.

Why do we need an Economic Development Policy & Strategic Plan?

One of the roles of County Commissioners is to set an overall direction for economic growth and development of Polk County, both short term and long term in the forms of ordinances and policies. In the absence of such direction, the economic development programs are asked to pursue a course of action without a compass. The EDPSP provides them with that direction, a common point of reference, helping them focus their energies for the benefit of Polk County residents and businesses.

The EDPSP links the primary economic entities in Polk County to pursue a common path of collaborative efforts for economic prosperity. These economic entities not only include Economic & Tourism and Agricultural Economic Development offices but also their volunteer commissions and boards, town governments, Polk County Schools, Isothermal Community College, the Chamber of Commerce, and others.

What are the next steps in drafting the Economic Development Policy & Strategic Plan?

The DRAFT Policy was reviewed and improved by the Economic & Tourism Development and Agricultural Economic Development advisory groups in early March 2014. Other economic entities scheduled to review the DRAFT Policy include the elected officials of the three municipalities (Columbus, Saluda, and Tryon), Polk County School and Isothermal Community College officials, and local businesses, through the Carolina Foothills Chamber of Commerce. Comments from these sessions will be incorporated into yet another draft for a public hearing with the County Board of Commissioners.

Following the public hearing a recommendation will be made for approval of the new Economic Development Policy & Strategic Plan.

What are the steps for implementing Economic Development Policy & Strategic Plan?

The Polk County Board of Commissioners will present the approved EDPSP to the Economic & Tourism and Agricultural Development Directors and their advisory groups. The Directors will then use the EDPSP to guide their work in developing an Annual Economic Development Implementation Plan with specific goals, action plans, and budgets for their respective programs.
The EDPSP will be reviewed annually by the Board of Commissioners and revised to reflect any changes in the local and regional economic environment.

**How will this Economic Development Policy & Strategic Plan be used in Polk County?**

The EDPSP is NOT the County’s Economic Development Plan. The Economic & Tourism and Agricultural Development Directors will use this new policy as a guideline for the development of *Annual Economic Development Implementation Plans* for presentation to the Board of Commissioners annually for approval and budgeting.

The EDPSP will be reviewed annually by the Board of Commissioners and revised to reflect any changes in the local and regional economic environment.

**How much will it cost to implement the Economic Development Policy & Strategic Plan? Where will that money come from?**

There are no implementation costs associated with the EDPSP as it is a guideline for the Economic Development Directors. The costs associated with Economic and Agricultural Development will continue to be incorporated into each Director’s *Annual Economic Development Implementation Plan*, to be presented as part of the County’s annual budgeting process.

All costs associated with Economic & Tourism and Agricultural Economic Development will be proposed by their respective Director’s as part of the annual planning and budgeting processes. The proposed budgets will reflect the activities and projects drafted in the *Annual Economic Development Implementation Plan* presented by the Directors to the Board of Commission for review, modification (if needed), and approval.

**Why was the Economic Development Policy & Strategic Plan developed by the Board of Commissioners rather than the Economic & Tourism Development and Agricultural Development Directors?**

The answer to this question delineates the distinction between policy direction and implementation planning. The Board of Commissioners, as elected representatives, is the legal policy-making body of the county. The Economic & Tourism Development and Agricultural Economic Development Directors are responsible for implementation planning and execution. As such, the Board of Commissioners is responsible for establishing overall economic development goals via the EDPSP. In turn, it is the Economic Development Director’s responsibility to establish *Annual Economic Development Implementation Plans*.

The EDPSP defines an approach to economic development in Polk County that goes well beyond the charters of the two current offices of economic development. The new policy will provide a strategic direction for all of Polk County’s economic entities and allow for a common message and branding for economic development throughout the county.

**Who was involved in the development of the Economic Development Policy & Strategic Plan document? Where did the Board of Commissioners get its input for developing this document?**

The EDPSP was developed by the Polk County Board of Commissioners and will be reviewed and revised by them annually. The initial EDPSP was developed with the assistance of Mr. Robert Williamson, of Columbus, who served as a moderator and facilitator of the work sessions.
Initial input into the development of the EDPSP came from multiple sources, including the *Polk County 20/20 Vision Plan*, progress/accomplishments to date by the respective Economic & Tourism and Agricultural Development programs, and public research data on trends affecting Polk County’s economy. Additional input was received from the Economic & Tourism Development Commission and the Agricultural Economic Development/Farmland Preservation Board. Prior to its finalization suggestions will be solicited from other economic entities including the County’s municipalities (Columbus, Saluda, and Tryon), the Carolina Foothills Chamber of Commerce, Polk County Schools, and Isothermal Community College prior to a public hearing.

The County Commission’s collective judgments on the direction they believe Polk County’s economic, tourism and agricultural development should be taking were a contributing factor throughout the development process.

**What role did Robert Williamson play in developing the Economic Development Policy & Strategic Plan and what qualified him to play that role?**

Robert Williamson, of Columbus, served as a consultant to the Board of Commissioners in its development of the EDPSP. His role was to moderate and facilitate the working sessions to prepare various drafts of the plan. As a citizen of Polk County and a professional who has broad national experience in areas such as business performance improvement, business development, workplace education and training, and strategic planning, he is well versed in the experiences of other municipalities who have undertaken this process. His research and experience helped the Board of Commissioners obtain invaluable demographic and economic development data for our geographic area forming the justification for developing an economic development policy and strategic plan specifically for Polk County’s prosperity.

**How does the Economic Development Policy & Strategic Plan compare to the 20/20 Vision Plan that was approved by Commissioners in 2010? Have we abandoned the 20/20 Vision Plan’s goal of maintaining Polk County’s agricultural heritage and rural atmosphere?**

Polk County’s 20/20 Vision Plan was a major source of input for the development of the EDPSP from the outset, starting with its Vision Statement for Polk County. Economic development policy statements and implementation actions contained in the 20/20 Vision Plan formed much of the framework for the new Economic Development Policy & Strategic Plan.

The EDPSP is a statement of policy and direction for Polk County’s economic development, growth, and stability. The cornerstone of this document is to retain the vision outlined in the 20/20 Vision Plan by supporting it with compatible and necessary levels of economic development. The EDPSP reflects the balance of stabilizing current business, attracting new businesses and long range economic growth necessary to support the 20/20 Vision Plan and maintain the rural atmosphere that is so important to current and future Polk County residents. The EDPSP recognizes that the environment outlined in the 20/20 Vision Plan cannot be maintained without an economic engine that exists in harmony with it.

**Is the Economic Development Policy & Strategic Plan focused on bringing businesses into Polk County? What size businesses are we trying to attract?**

Do we have the labor force and resources that would appeal to new businesses or industries?

It is important to understand that the EDPSP is not a one-dimensional strategy. Its goal is to establish a balance of supporting/growing existing business in Polk County while at the same time seeking out new businesses who might be interested in establishing Polk County as home. We anticipate that these new business would be small (5-100 employees), utilize the work skills of
Polk County residents and operate in a footprint that is consistent with our 20/20 Vision Plan. Continued growth of entrepreneurial businesses with fewer than five employees is also anticipated as a building block in our economic future.

It is also important to note that the first step in the direction provided in the EDPSP is for the respective Economic Development Directors to assess Polk County’s current resources: People and facilities, strengths and weaknesses, etc, and to identify the initiatives necessary to prepare Polk County for the types of businesses in their Action Plans. This covers a broad range of current assets and development needs, from skills training and education to facilities and site development necessary to enhance Polk County’s attractiveness.

At the same time, none of this is done without recognizing the importance of successful businesses already in place in Polk County. That’s why the EDPSP also includes initiatives to help and support current businesses. Nothing attracts new businesses better than an environment where current business are thriving; that is as important a part of the EDPSP as the efforts to find new businesses.

**What consideration was given to the county’s current businesses: equine, agriculture, vineyards, outdoor recreation, tourism in preparing the Economic Development Policy & Strategic Plan?**

Few things are more important to economic growth and expansion than the success of current businesses. Supporting, stabilizing, and growing current Polk County businesses are important parts of the EDPSP’s direction.

Economic development in Polk County is akin to a fabric woven of many different threads. While a lot of speculation might exist about new businesses, the EDPSP recognizes that we have a number of burgeoning businesses already operating in Polk County: Healthcare, commercial, retail, financial, manufacturing, equine, farms, vineyards, outdoor recreation and more. The EDPSP recognizes that all of these represent opportunities for Polk County, but stresses that we want to look at them in a balanced approach and not a one-dimensional program. The ultimate goal is to provide an attractive environment where businesses want to operate and grow, appreciating the work skills of our residents, a willingness and ability to pay living wages that allow our residents to work where they live, and supporting the quality of life and rural character outline in the Polk County 20/20 Vision Plan.

**Are we overlooking the needs of existing businesses to attract new businesses? Why don’t we focus on existing businesses and business opportunities first?**

We believe it is important to assess the regional economic landscape to determine what is possible (and affordable) before making any decision to attract specific types of businesses. One of the first priorities in the EDPSP is to assess the needs of our current businesses and to determine the current resources (people, facilities and infrastructure) and the other economic resources necessary to support the stability and continued growth of our current businesses.

Another EDPSP priority also looks into the future impact of businesses on things like job growth (to entice our graduating youth to live and work in Polk County), the ability to expand the number of people receiving living wages (the amount it takes to support a household), and the economic impact to sustain the environment we enjoy in Polk County.
We believe economic development is a balanced and diverse investment in business and job growth that secures our long-term economic prosperity. The EDPSP recognizes that growth is important, and that managed growth by focusing on current businesses as well as attracting new businesses established in harmony with our vision, will continue to ensure that Polk County is an appealing place to live, raise a family, and retire.

**Does the Economic Development Policy & Strategic Plan focus our limited resources on long term growth at the expense of short term opportunities that already exist in Polk County?**

The secret to economic success is planned, balanced, and diverse growth. It is important that we provide the necessary support for our current businesses and jobs while setting the stage for our future needs. To be responsible, we need to find a way to concurrently invest in both. If we don’t, the environment we enjoy today will become one where current businesses retire, new businesses will not have been started, our children are forced to leave the county for employment elsewhere, and we stand still while counties around us thrive. That would not be supporting the Polk County we laid out in the 20/20 Vision Plan.

The answer is “balance” - supporting the Polk County we love today while insuring that those who follow us will love it just as much.

**Does this Plan support the equine industry (and its support businesses) growth opportunity in Polk County? Why don’t we show more support for the equine industry?**

**Why doesn’t the Plan recognize equine as an industry?**

A driving factor in this discussion has been a concern that the EDPSP does not recognize importance of the equine community to Polk County. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Equine is an extremely important part of Polk County’s character, economy and future. It must be appreciated and supported and be developed as part of the “balanced” economic fabric in Polk County. The economic opportunities associated with the equine industry have been well documented, and there are opportunities to make the economic contribution even better. That’s a big reason why our current economic development efforts include the creation of an Equine Studies Program at ICC Polk. But we need to make sure that we see the equine community as a piece of the balanced portfolio of Polk County assets.

There have been some concerns expressed about equine not being recognized as a separate industry in the EDPSP. The discussion about equine as a separate industry is an economic technicality. We recognize the U.S. Government’s categorizing equine jobs as a part of “agriculture” in the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) and work to protect the regulatory and tax advantages of continuing to include it there. We also recognize the far-reaching economic contribution of the equine community to Polk County and regional businesses in listed many different NAICS categories.

**Does the Economic Development & Strategic Plan recognize the current population of Polk County: age demographics, job skills, unemployment rate?**

**Is this Plan designed to find local employment for current Polk County residents or to attract workers from outside the county?**

Our first priority is to provide meaningful and living wage jobs for Polk County residents, providing quality work and living environments where they want to live and raise families. Part of the EDPSP is to determine how well we do that today and to outline what we need to do in order to improve every aspect of living in Polk County, from education and employment to the availability of services like healthcare and other quality of life issues.
First, we want to ensure that we have meaningful jobs for our current residents. We also want to help provide them with the training necessary to develop new skills, which would increase their appeal to both current and new businesses. Lastly, we want to provide an environment where current and prospective employers can rest assured that we are providing a continued stream of new employees, the next generation of Polk County residents, as well as those who relocate to Polk because they want to live and work here.

**Polk County’s population is an attractive area for retirement. Are we abandoning this for the sake of attracting new businesses and young people?**

Continuing the appeal of Polk County as a great place to retire requires two things: a living environment conducive to retirement plus support services for a variety of retirement lifestyles. That support translates to businesses and jobs, beyond jobs that only support retirees, in a vibrant county economy. We need to maintain a balanced business and employment landscape, where people want live, to raise their families, and where people want to retire. The Economic Development & Strategic Plan recognizes such a balance.

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This draft logo represents the overall concept of the new economic development policy for Polk County: “**One Polk – One Economy – A Balanced, Diverse Investment**”