

**HABERSHAM COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
TOWN HALL MEETING MINUTES
6:00 P.M., MONDAY, APRIL 13, 2026
HABERSHAM COUNTY COURTHOUSE
RUBY C. FULBRIGHT AQUATIC CENTER
120 PAUL FRANKLIN RD, CLARKESVILLE, GA 30523**

The Habersham County Board of Commissioners held a town hall meeting for the purpose of soliciting citizen feedback on the proposed Unified Development Ordinance on Monday, April 13, 2026 at 6:00 p.m. in Meeting Room A&B of the Ruby C. Fulbright Aquatic Center located at 120 Paul Franklin Rd, Clarkesville, GA 30523.

Present was Chairman Bruce Harkness, Vice Chairman Dustin Meador, Commissioner Kelly Woodall, County Manager Tim Sims, Planning Director Mike Beecham, County Clerk Brandalin Carnes, staff, members of the media, and members of the public.

Absent was Commissioner Ty Akins.

Chairman Harkness called the meeting to order at 6:04 p.m.

Commissioner Woodall led the Invocation.

Commissioner Meador led the Pledge of Allegiance.

PRESENTATION

a. Unified Development Ordinance

Planning and Development Director Mike Beecham presented a comprehensive overview of the proposed Unified Development Ordinance (UDO). He explained that the county's existing zoning ordinance, adopted in 1992, no longer adequately reflects current growth patterns or development pressures.

Mr. Beecham outlined the multi-year development process, which included collaboration with consultants, stakeholder interviews, public surveys, and multiple Planning Commission meetings. He acknowledged that public awareness had increased significantly in recent weeks.

He summarized key elements of the ordinance, including:

- Expansion from four to nine zoning districts
- Introduction of Conservation (5-acre minimum) and Rural Residential (2-acre minimum) districts
- Revised subdivision regulations distinguishing major and minor subdivisions
- Provisions for family land divisions and accessory dwelling units
- Environmental protections, including tree preservation requirements
- Regulation of data centers through a special use permit process

Mr. Beecham emphasized that the zoning map remains under review and subject to corrections based on public feedback.

PUBLIC DISCUSSION

a. Unified Development Ordinance

County Clerk Brandalin Carnes provided an overview of the meeting format and expectations. She explained that the town hall was intended as an informational session and that no formal votes would be taken.

Speakers were asked to approach the podium, state their name for the record, and limit their comments to three minutes to allow all attendees an opportunity to be heard.

Chairman Harkness reiterated the importance of respectful engagement and encouraged participants to focus their comments on the UDO. Chairman Harkness opened the floor for public comment. Approximately 30 individuals addressed the Board, offering a wide range of perspectives. The following narratives provide a detailed summary of each speaker's remarks.

1. Christan Tanner stated that she had conducted a thorough and methodical review of both the UDO document and the accompanying zoning maps, including prior written correspondence submitted to the Board. While she acknowledged the considerable effort invested by staff, she expressed significant concern regarding what she described as widespread inconsistencies in zoning classifications. Tanner reported identifying approximately 300 parcels with questionable designations, including instances where agricultural and commercial properties were reclassified as residential, and residential properties were shifted toward commercial or industrial use. She emphasized that such inconsistencies could have serious financial implications, including reducing the commercial tax base and increasing the tax burden on homeowners. Drawing on her professional experience in real estate, Tanner questioned the methodology used to verify zoning assignments and whether affected property owners had been adequately notified. She concluded that the scale of discrepancies raised concerns about the overall reliability and defensibility of the zoning map.
2. Patricia Bower expressed appreciation for the work completed to date but emphasized that, from her perspective, many residents were only now gaining a clear understanding of the ordinance's scope and potential impacts. She stated that the process had not provided sufficient opportunity for public awareness earlier and urged the Board to delay any vote to allow for additional review and education. Bower raised concerns about the creation of non-conforming properties and questioned whether both officials and residents fully understood the implications of the proposed changes. She recommended breaking the ordinance into smaller, topic-specific discussions to allow for more focused and meaningful public engagement.
3. Bill Dover commended the Board for undertaking what he described as a complex and challenging responsibility. Drawing on his experience as a former state representative, he expressed support for the effort to modernize the county's zoning framework while emphasizing the importance of ensuring consistency with existing conservation protections. Dover encouraged the Board to proceed carefully and thoughtfully, recognizing the long-term implications of such policy decisions.
4. Jodie Bochat raised concerns regarding the public outreach process, stating that she had not been aware of earlier surveys or opportunities to provide input. She questioned how significant discrepancies remained in the zoning map after nearly two years of development. Bochat described how the proposed conservation zoning would impact her ability to divide her 14-acre property among her children, thereby affecting long-term family planning. She emphasized that such restrictions could limit opportunities for younger generations to remain in the county and urged the Board to consider the broader implications for generational land use.
5. Teresa Lewallen spoke passionately about preserving the rural character and cultural identity of Habersham County. She expressed concern about the pace of growth, increased traffic, and changing community dynamics, particularly with the influx of new residents. Lewallen also raised concerns about infrastructure limitations, including water availability and drought conditions, questioning whether the county could sustain additional population growth. She referenced regional developments that could further increase traffic and development pressure and emphasized the importance of maintaining the county's traditional way of life.

6. Courtney Chalkantrel acknowledged the necessity of managing growth but expressed concern that certain provisions within the ordinance could unintentionally alter the county's rural character. She highlighted cluster developments as an example, noting that while they may preserve open space in theory, they could still result in increased density and changes to the visual landscape. Chalkantrel also raised concerns about the allowance of data centers through special use permits and emphasized the importance of protecting property rights and maintaining the county's identity.
7. Rebecca Williams expressed strong support for the ordinance's stricter growth controls, arguing that larger lot sizes and development limitations are necessary to preserve the county's quality of life. She referenced experiences in other communities where rapid development led to loss of rural character and increased congestion. Williams also voiced support for environmental protections, including tree preservation measures, and expressed opposition to data centers, stating that such developments are incompatible with the county's values.
8. Chad Holcomb provided a technical perspective based on his experience in land surveying. He raised concerns about how the ordinance would affect family land divisions, particularly in cases involving multiple heirs. Holcomb noted that many existing parcels would not meet new minimum lot size requirements, potentially preventing families from dividing property among children. He also highlighted complications related to estate settlements and emphasized the need for flexibility to accommodate real-world scenarios. Holcomb suggested maintaining the current subdivision moratorium while these issues are further evaluated.
9. Jeffrey Gunter spoke from both a farming and construction perspective, emphasizing the economic realities faced by landowners and builders. He expressed concern that increased minimum lot sizes would drive up land costs and reduce housing affordability. Gunter also questioned how environmental requirements, such as tree preservation, would be enforced given limited county resources. He emphasized the need to balance regulation with economic feasibility and ensure that policies do not disproportionately impact working families.
10. Bruce E. Palmer, who clarified that he is not former County Commissioner Christopher Bruce Palmer, emphasized that development pressures are largely driven by landowners choosing to sell property. He suggested that retaining land within families could help slow growth and preserve rural character. While acknowledging that such decisions are personal and economic in nature, Palmer encouraged continued public dialogue and suggested that major development decisions could benefit from broader citizen input.
11. Cheryl Kowalsky, a farmer, described the increasing pressure from developers seeking to acquire agricultural land. She expressed concern that portions of her property were misclassified on the zoning map and emphasized the need for accurate designation of actively farmed land. Kowalsky also highlighted the importance of protecting farming operations from conflicts with residential development, noting that new residents may not fully understand the realities of agricultural activity. She urged the Board to strengthen protections for all types of farming, not just poultry operations.
12. Calvin Wilbanks presented a strong argument centered on property rights, asserting that the county should not impose minimum lot size requirements on landowners who are not actively seeking to develop their property. He described such provisions as an overreach of government authority and argued that they limit individual freedom. Wilbanks also warned that restricting housing development could negatively impact economic growth by limiting the availability of housing for workers and discouraging industry from locating in the county.
13. An unidentified speaker criticized the complexity and length of the ordinance, describing it as difficult for the average resident to fully understand. She questioned the assumption that growth is

necessary and advocated for a slow-growth approach. Drawing from experiences in more heavily regulated areas, she warned that increased restrictions could erode property rights and alter the character of the community.

14. Tim Stamey expressed strong support for the ordinance, describing it as a necessary step toward achieving smart growth. He acknowledged that the proposed changes may not satisfy everyone but argued that they are essential to prevent overdevelopment. Stamey advocated for maintaining or increasing minimum lot sizes in rural areas and emphasized the importance of preserving the county's character for future generations.
15. Alice Venter proposed the formation of citizen advisory committees composed of representatives from various stakeholder groups, including farmers, real estate professionals, and younger residents. She suggested that these committees could provide more detailed analysis of the ordinance and identify unintended consequences before adoption. Venter emphasized that the high level of public interest demonstrated at the meeting could be leveraged to create a more collaborative and informed review process.
16. Brenton Ellis raised concerns about the ordinance's prescriptive nature, particularly with respect to subdivision regulations and minimum home size requirements. He argued that such decisions should be driven by market demand rather than government mandates. Ellis also questioned the practicality of enforcing certain provisions, including tree preservation requirements, and encouraged the Board to adopt a more flexible approach.
17. Janette Byrom expressed concern about the potential impact of increased density on her quality of life, including noise, light pollution, and traffic. She emphasized that she chose to live in the county for its rural character and peaceful environment and expressed concern that zoning changes could undermine those qualities.
18. Jennifer Ingrassia, a local realtor, spoke extensively about housing affordability and market accessibility. She explained that rising construction costs and interest rates have already made homeownership difficult for many buyers, particularly first-time purchasers. Ingrassia expressed concern that the ordinance's requirements—especially larger lot sizes and minimum home square footage—would further increase housing costs, potentially pushing entry-level homes beyond the reach of many residents. She emphasized that this could limit opportunities for younger generations to remain in or return to the county.
19. Chase Thomas expressed support for the ordinance, citing increased strain on infrastructure, emergency services, and public resources. He noted rising call volumes and traffic congestion as indicators of growth-related challenges and argued that proactive measures are necessary to manage development and protect quality of life.
20. Keith Canup raised concerns about potential loopholes in subdivision regulations, noting that developers could potentially circumvent requirements by creating multiple smaller subdivisions over time. He recommended maintaining the subdivision moratorium during the review process to prevent exploitation and ensure the ordinance is implemented effectively.
21. Gary York reflected on his long-term residency in the county and emphasized the importance of preserving its heritage and community character. He urged the Board to consider the cumulative impact of policy decisions and expressed a desire to ensure that future generations experience the same quality of life.

22. Richard Gay raised questions about the zoning map and the process for correcting inaccuracies. He emphasized the importance of ensuring that property classifications accurately reflect current use and asked for clarification on how corrections would be handled prior to adoption.
23. Dennis Haynes expressed concern about minimum home size requirements and whether they would limit his ability to build a smaller residence. He emphasized the need for flexibility for individual property owners and suggested that certain developments, such as data centers, could be better managed through infrastructure requirements rather than outright restrictions.
24. Rena Thompson expressed opposition to data centers and suggested that major development decisions should be subject to a public vote. She also emphasized the importance of continued public engagement and requested additional opportunities for community input.
25. Alan Densmore shared observations from living in a rapidly developing county and warned that similar patterns of overdevelopment could occur locally if growth is not carefully managed. He emphasized that once development reaches a certain level, it is difficult to reverse its effects.
26. Christopher Bruce Palmer, former County Commissioner, provided a policy-focused perspective, expressing concern that restrictive zoning measures could significantly increase housing costs and limit affordability. He suggested alternative approaches, such as impact fees on developers, to address infrastructure needs without broadly restricting land use. Palmer also noted that land sales often serve as a key component of retirement planning for property owners.
27. Eddie Davidson, a surveyor, discussed the practical implications of the ordinance for family land divisions and estate settlements. He explained that many families rely on the ability to divide property among multiple heirs and expressed concern that restrictions could complicate this process. Davidson emphasized the need for flexibility to address real-world scenarios.
28. David Cook offered a detailed critique of the ordinance's regulatory structure, arguing that it applies uniform standards to developments of all sizes. He expressed concern that this approach could create unnecessary administrative burdens and reduce housing supply, ultimately increasing costs.
29. Elena Saville raised concerns about the concentration of authority within the Planning Director role, particularly regarding interpretation and enforcement of the ordinance. She questioned the transparency of the decision-making process and expressed concern about the availability of meaningful appeal mechanisms for property owners.

CLOSING REMARKS

Following the conclusion of public comment, Chairman Bruce Harkness acknowledged the large turnout and thanked those in attendance for their participation and input. He noted that the level of engagement reflected the importance of the Unified Development Ordinance to the community.

Chairman Harkness emphasized that the ordinance remains under review and has not been finalized. He stated that the Board would continue evaluating the draft UDO and the zoning map, including concerns raised during the meeting.

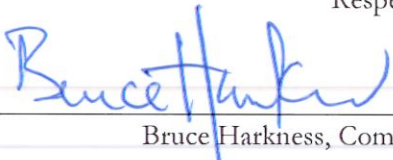
He further stated that no vote would take place until all commission seats are filled, ensuring full representation in the decision-making process.

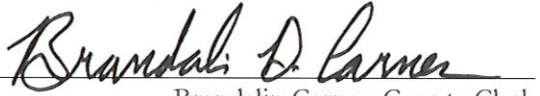
Chairman Harkness encouraged continued public involvement and noted that additional opportunities for input would be available as the process moves forward.

ADJOURN

Motion by Commissioner Meador, seconded by Commissioner Woodall, and voted unanimously (3-0) to adjourn the townhall meeting at 8:15 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

By: 
Bruce Harkness, Commission Chairman

Attest: 
Brandalin Carnes, County Clerk