THE COST OF COMMUNITY SERVICES IN ALAMANCE COUNTY

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Introduction

In rural counties located near fast-growing urban areas, there is considerable debate over the desirable mix of land uses, and the role that local government can and should play in affecting the rate at which new land uses supplant traditional ones. Alamance County is typical of such counties. The continuing economic growth of the adjoining counties of the Research Triangle and the Triad have created unprecedented demands for residential and industrial development in Alamance County. On the one hand, this situation has been welcomed by many because it has created significant economic development opportunities for the county's citizens and a significant increase in the county's revenue base. On the other hand, many of the county's citizens worry that the rapid pace of these changes will alter the rural character of Alamance County in ways that are undesirable. Moreover, there is concern that the increased local government expenditures on community services needed to accommodate accelerated residential and industrial development may exceed the contribution of that development to the county's revenue base.

One important element of public debate over appropriate land use policies is whether or not increased local government expenditures on community services needed to accommodate residential and commercial development exceed the contribution of that development to the local revenue base. This report presents the findings of a research project aimed at addressing this specific issue. The research quantifies the contribution to local government revenues of various types of land uses (residential, commercial/industrial, and agricultural), and the demands on local government financial resources of those same land uses. This "snapshot" of current revenues and expenditures allows an assessment of the costs and benefits of different land uses from the perspective of local government finance.

The analysis presented here employs a methodology established by the American Farmland Trust, one that has been used in numerous Cost of Community Services (COCS) studies throughout the U.S. Like those studies, the current research was motivated by two

¹ For simplicity, the term "commercial" will denote both commercial and industrial land uses for the remainder of this report. Likewise, "agricultural" will refer to farm and forest land.

questions: (1) Do the property taxes and other revenues generated by residential land uses exceed the amount of publicly-provided services supplied to them? (2) Do farm and forest lands receive an unfair tax advantage when they are assessed at their actual use value – as is the case in Alamance County – instead of their potential value in residential or commercial uses?

As has been found in other COCS studies, the answers to these questions are "no" for Alamance County. The residential sector contributes only 68¢ to the county's coffers for each dollar's worth of services that it receives. Commercial and industrial land uses are the largest net contributors to the public purse, contributing \$4.29 in revenues for each dollar of publicly provided services that they receive. Despite being taxed on the basis of current land uses, property in agricultural land uses is found to be a net contributor to the local budget, generating \$1.69 in revenues for every dollar of public services that it receives.

At the outset, it is important to recognize two important limitations of analyses such as the one presented here. First, COCS studies highlight the relative demands of various land uses on local fiscal resources *given the current pattern of development*. As such, one should be cautious in extrapolating from the results of studies such as this in order to gauge the impact of future patterns of development on local public finance. Nonetheless, the results of studies such as this are useful in informing debates over such issues as whether or not alternative types of land uses are likely to contribute more in tax dollars than they demand in the way of services.

Second, the current study in no way deals with the *social* value of each of these forms of development – i.e., their contribution (positive or negative) to the well-being of the county's citizens. Rather it focuses on the more narrow issue of whether or not these land uses "pay their own way." It is important to bear in mind that there is nothing sacred about an exact balance between revenues and expenditures associated with a particular land use, even when balancing the local budget is an overriding priority. Indeed, one of the primary functions of a local government is to redistribute local financial resources such that services desired by citizens are supplied, *even when those services cannot pay for themselves*. Determining the optimal distribution of those resources is a public policy issue to be resolved in the political arena. A study such as this fits into the process wherein such issues are resolved by shedding light on the

relative costs and benefits of the specific distribution of financial resources implicit in the existing pattern of development.

Methodology

The basic approach used in this research was quite simple. Working from the most recent available county financial data, revenues and expenditures were allocated among three specific land use categories: (a) residential; (b) commercial; and (c) agricultural. This process was carried out in conjunction with a series of telephone interviews with a variety of local officials knowledgeable about the workings of specific departments.

Once revenues and expenditures were allocated to specific land use categories, the ratio of revenues to expenditures was computed for each. A revenue-expenditure ratio greater than one (1) indicates that that sector's contribution to the public purse exceeds its demands for public funds. Conversely, a revenue-expenditure ratio less than one indicates that the sector's demand for publicly financed services exceeds its contribution to local public finance.

The basis for the current analysis was Alamance County's Annual Operating Budget for the 2005-2006 fiscal year. As noted above, the allocation of these data to specific sectors was done in consultation with a variety of local officials (listed in the Acknowledgements). These individuals were best equipped to assess the extent to which the various types of land uses partake of the services provided by their departments. Where feasible, expenditures were allocated to land use categories using available data on staff salaries and/or activities records.

Often, existing records were not amenable to being broken out into various land use categories. In many of these cases, we relied on a local official's best guess of how their department's efforts were allocated. Where the relevant officials were unable to make such a guess, one of two allocation schemes was used. For services that exclusively benefit households (as opposed to commercial establishments) – for example, public schools and library services – 100% of expenditures were allocated to the residential sector. For departments whose activities

² Alamance County separates the farm business from the farm residence, assessing the property value of farm residences in the same manner as any other residences. For this reason, farm residences were included in the residential land use category throughout the analysis.

benefited both residences and businesses (including agricultural businesses), expenditures were allocated based on the proportion of total property value accounted for by each land use category. This "default" breakdown of assessed property valuation for 2005 was 72.85% residential, 22.44% commercial, and 4.71% agricultural. The expenditures of most of the county's general administration departments were allocated in this manner.

Revenues were handled in a manner similar to expenditures. Property tax revenues were allocated to specific land use categories based on the 2005 property tax assessments. Taxes and other revenue sources that are linked directly to commercial activities – for example, sales taxes – were allocated to the commercial sector. Revenues from sources associated exclusively with households (such as pet license fees) were allocated to the residential sector, as were revenues from impact fees levied on new housing construction. Revenues raised by specific county government departments from fees charged for services or from inter-governmental transfers were allocated in direct proportion to the allocation of expenditures by those departments. For example, revenues originating in building inspection fees charged by the Planning Department were allocated to land use sectors in the same proportions as that department's building inspection expenditures were allocated. Any remaining revenues that could not be directly allocated in these ways were allocated according to the proportion of total property value accounted for by each land use category.

Results

A detailed breakdown of revenues sources is found in Appendix Table 1. Total county general fund revenues budgeted for 2005-2006 were \$109 million. Just over one-half of this money came from property taxes, while another 21% came from sales taxes. The share of revenues from sales taxes is substantially greater than in other nearby counties³ – most likely due to the large concentration of outlet malls and other large shopping centers along the I85-I40 corridor.

Table 1 summarizes the overall breakdown of county expenditures budgeted for the 2005-2006 fiscal year. More detailed information is found in Appendix Table 2. Two

³ By comparison, the share of total revenues accounted for by sales taxes range from 14 to 16 percent for Wake, Chatham, and Orange Counties.

departments – education and human services – accounted for 62% of the total budget. Because all school expenditures, and nearly all of the activities of the Human Services department are exclusive to the residential sector, the large "footprint" of these two departments in county government has a dominant impact on the results of this study.

Table 2 summarizes revenues and expenditures by land use category. Expenditures exceeded revenues for the residential land use category, while revenues exceeded expenditures for the commercial and agricultural land use categories. The computed revenue/expenditure ratios quantify the extent to which each of the three land use categories is either a net contributor or a net drain on Alamance County's financial resources. For comparative purposes, the bottom of the table provides the results from some 103 other Cost of Community Services studies that have been conducted throughout the U.S., as well as three studies that were conducted in Chatham, Wake, and Orange Counties in the past decade.

The revenue/expenditure ratio for the residential land use category is 0.68; this implies that for each dollar in property tax and other revenues generated by residential land uses, the county spends \$1.46 to provide services supporting those land uses. In other words, the residential sector is on balance a net user of local public finances. On the other hand, the other two land use categories are net contributors to local fiscal resources. The revenue/expenditure ratio of 1.69 for the agricultural category implies that for every dollar in revenues attributable to these land uses, the county spends only \$0.59 in services benefiting them. The commercial land use category stands out as having the highest revenue/expenditure ratio (4.29). This result indicates that the county spends only \$0.23 in services benefiting commercial and industrial establishments for every public dollar generated by those establishments.

These revenue/expenditure ratios provide a portrait of the direct net fiscal impacts of the various land use categories. However, one might reasonably assert that because local residents form an important share of the customer base for those enterprises, a substantial fraction of sales tax revenues contributed by commercial enterprises are in fact associated with Alamance County residents. The fraction of local retail sales attributable to local residents is a difficult number to pin down precisely, although it is invariably less than 100% in any county (and especially in Alamance County, given that the outlet malls on I85-I40 draw large numbers of customers from

outside the county). Nevertheless, even attributing <u>all</u> sales tax revenues to the residential land use category (and none to the commercial land use category) yields revenue/expenditure ratios of 0.92 and 1.74 for the residential and commercial land use categories, respectively.

Discussion

The results presented above provide answers to the two questions posed at the beginning of this report. As regards the public services provided by Alamance County, commercial and industrial land uses emerge as being the largest net contributor to local financial resources. In contrast, the value of public services provided to residential land uses exceed the property taxes and other revenues that they contribute to the county budget. This finding contrasts with claims that are sometimes made that residential development is a boon to county finances due to its expansion of the property tax base. It would appear that the very large footprint of the education and human services expenditures in the overall county budget plays a dominant role in explaining this phenomenon. Finally, agricultural lands more than pay their own way. This is true despite these properties being taxed on the basis of their current use (as opposed to their potential use were they to be transformed into commercial or residential uses).

These findings for Alamance County are consistent with the findings of nearly every Cost of Community Services study that has been carried out in other communities throughout the U.S. The degree of cross-subsidization of the residential sector – in particular, the extent to which the Alamance County's commercial sector pays for services provided to its residential sector – is somewhat higher than the median in other studies that have been conducted nationally. Closer to home, the relative balance of revenues and expenditures across land use categories is similar to that which was found in comparable studies conducted in Wake and Orange Counties.

As was stressed at the outset, some degree of subsidization of certain land uses by other land uses is to be expected in virtually every community. The distribution of revenues and expenditures among various land uses in Alamance County that has been computed here is based on current land patterns in the county. Determining whether or not this distribution is appropriate – either now or in the future – is an issue that can only be resolved in the local political arena.

Table 1. Alamance County Budgeted Expenditures for 2005-2006

<u>Item</u>	Expenditure	%
Education ^a	\$ 34,706,756	31.80
Human Services	33,472,117	30.67
Public Safety	21,836,556	20.01
General Government	10,605,462	9.72
Culture and Recreation	3,975,270	3.64
Economic and Physical Development	1,044,856	0.96
Transportation Services Grant	73,732	0.07
Environmental Protection	47,520	0.04
Other Appropriations ^b	3,386,039	3.10
Total	\$109,148,308	100

a. Includes debt service on school bonds.

Source: Alamance County Annual Operating Budget 2005-2006

b. Includes non-school debt service, transfers to other funds, and contingency funds.

Table 2. Revenues vs. Expenditures in Alamance County

	Residential	Commercial	Agricultural	
Expenditures	\$98,264,651 (90.0%)	\$9,077,631 (8.3%)	\$1,806,026 (1.7%)	
Revenues	\$67,185,583 (61.6%)	\$38,908,449 (35.6%)	\$3,054,276 (2.8%)	
Revenues/Expenditures ratio ^a	0.68	4.29	1.69	
	Revenue/Expe	nditure ratios from na	ational studies ^b	
Minimum	0.47	0.96	1.01	
Median	0.87	3.57	2.78	
Maximum	0.99	20.00	50.00	
	Revenue/Expenditure ratios from local studies ^c			
Chatham County	0.90	2.13	1.09	
Wake County	0.65	5.63	2.12	
Orange County	0.76	4.21	1.38	

a. This ratio measures the amount of county revenue contributed by a given land use sector for each dollar in public services used by that sector.

b. These figures are derived from 103 Cost of Community Services summarized on the American Farmland Trust website (http://farmlandinfo.org/documents/27757/FS_COCS_8-04.pdf).

c. These studies were conducted by the author in 1998, 2001, and 2005, respectively.

Appendix Table 1. Alamance County Budgeted Revenues by Land Use Category for 2005-2006

Item	Total	Residential	Commercial	Agricultural	Breakdown ^a
Property Taxes	\$55,890,097	\$40,715,936	\$12,541,738	\$2,632,424	
Current Year	55,360,097	40,329,831	12,422,806	2,607,461	default
Prior Years	530,000	386,105	118,932	24,963	default
Sales Taxes	\$23,105,843	\$0	\$23,105,843	\$0	0-100-0
Other Taxes & Licenses	\$1,151,378	\$529,875	\$601,378	\$20,125	
Real Estate Transfer Tax	402,500	301,875	80,500	20,125	75-20-5
Rental Vehicle Tax	35,000	-	35,000	-	0-100-0
Privilege Licenses	9,100	-	9,100	-	0-100-0
Local Occupancy Tax	451,778	-	451,778	-	0-100-0
ABC Bottle Tax	25,000	-	25,000	-	0-100-0
Cable Television Franchise Fees	158,000	158,000	-	-	100-0-0
Landfill Franchise Fees	70,000	70,000	-	-	100-0-0
Unrestricted Intergovernmental	\$220,200	\$0	\$220,200	\$0	
Beer & Wine Tax	220,000	- -	220,000	- -	0-100-0
Tax Refunds - Sales and Gasoline	200	-	200	-	0-100-0
Restricted Intergovernmental	\$15,466,732	\$15,033,664	\$371,202	\$61,867	97.2-2.4-0.4
Sales & Services	\$7,271,833	\$6,319,223	\$850,804	\$101,806	86.9-11.7-1.4
Licenses & Permits	\$1,490,750	\$1,246,267	\$211,687	\$32,797	83.6-14.2-2.2
Investment Earnings	\$400,000	\$291,400	\$89,760	\$18,840	default

Appendix Table 1. Alamance County Budgeted Revenues by Land Use Category for 2005-2006 (continued)

Item	Total	Residential	Commercial	Agricultural	Breakdown ^a
Miscellaneous	\$198,535	\$186,424	\$10,522	\$1,588	93.9-5.3-0.8
Other Financing Sources	\$3,952,940	\$2,862,794	\$905,316	\$184,830	
Transfers In	115,671	67,344	44,233	4,095	58.2-38.2-3.5
Sale of Assets	10,000	7,285	2,244	471	default
Installment Loan Proceeds	697,000	507,765	156,407	32,829	default
Appropriated Fund Balance	3,130,269	2,280,401	702,432	147,436	default
Total Revenues	\$109,148,308	\$67,185,583	\$38,908,449	\$3,054,276	
	(100%)	(61.6%)	(35.6%)	(2.8%)	

a. Percentage breakdown by land use category (residential-commercial-agricultural). Default percentages were based on the 2005 assessed property valuation (residential - 72.85%; commercial - 22.44%; agricultural - 4.71%).

Appendix Table 2. Alamance County Budgeted Expenditures by Land Use Category for 2005-2006

Item	Total	Residential	Commercial	Agricultural	Breakdown ^a
General Government	\$10,605,462	\$7,855,490	\$2,270,167	\$479,805	
Governing Body	258,352	188,209	57,974	12,168	default
County Manager	1,637,416	1,192,858	367,436	77,122	default
Planning	181,108	165,895	13,583	1,630	91.6-7.5-0.9
Human Resources	364,116	265,259	81,708	17,150	default
Finance	872,515	635,627	195,792	41,095	default
Tax Administration	1,602,771	1,167,619	359,662	75,491	default
Legal	411,602	299,852	92,363	19,386	default
Facility Fees	340,668	248,177	76,446	16,045	default
Elections	501,004	364,981	112,425	23,597	default
Register of Deeds	848,473	713,566	107,756	27,151	84.1-12.7-3.2
Management Information Systems	2,347,793	1,710,367	526,845	110,581	default
Printing Services	36,212	26,380	8,126	1,706	default
Central Garage	37,589	27,384	8,435	1,770	default
Public Buildings	1,165,843	849,317	261,615	54,911	default
Transportation Services Grant	\$73,732	\$73,732	\$0	\$0	
Environmental Protection	\$47,520	\$0	\$0	\$47,520	
Economic and Physical Development	\$1,044,856	\$144,075	\$464,536	\$436,245	
Economic & Physical Development - Other	514,152	60,670	449,369	4,113	11.8-87.4-0.8
NC Cooperative Extension Service	303,343	60,669	15,167	227,507	20-5-75
Soil Conservation	227,361	22,736	-	204,625	10-0-90
Education	\$29,691,238	\$29,691,238	\$0	\$0	
Alamance-Burlington School System	27,466,238	27,466,238	-	-	100-0-0
Alamance Community College	2,225,000	2,225,000	-	-	100-0-0

Appendix Table 2. Alamance County Budgeted Expenditures by Land Use Category for 2005-2006 (continued)

Item	Total	Residential	Commercial	Agricultural	Breakdown ^a
Public Safety	\$21,836,556	\$16,109,027	\$5,036,604	\$690,926	
Other Public Safety	107,100	78,022	24,033	5,044	default
Judicial Services	467,090	340,275	104,815	22,000	default
Sheriff's Department	7,762,400	5,123,184	2,328,720	310,496	66-30-4
School Resource Officers	304,657	304,657	-	-	100-0-0
Jail	5,689,121	4,144,525	1,276,639	267,958	default
Emergency Management	11,712	8,532	2,628	552	default
Fire Marshal	256,858	25,686	231,172	-	10-90-0
Fire Service	67,380	6,738	60,642	-	10-90-0
SARA Management	112,297	-	112,297	-	0-100-0
Inspections	670,017	552,094	117,923		82.4-17.6-0
Emergency Medical Service	4,917,674	4,376,730	491,767	49,177	89-10-1
Animal Shelter	205,000	205,000			100-0-0
Central Communications	1,265,250	943,584	285,967	35,699	64.8-22.6-12.6
Human Services	\$33,472,117	\$32,917,337	\$554,780	\$0	
Health	5,492,873	4,938,093	554,780	-	89.9-10.1-0
WIC Program	411,582	411,582	-	-	100-0-0
Dental Clinic	678,858	678,858	-	_	100-0-0
Social Services	23,826,289	23,826,289	-	_	100-0-0
Veteran's Services	129,192	129,192	-	_	100-0-0
Office of Juvenile Justice	340,311	340,311	-	_	100-0-0
Home & Community Care Block Grant	926,009	926,009	-	-	100-0-0
Other Human Services	1,667,003	1,667,003	-	-	100-0-0

Appendix Table 2. Alamance County Budgeted Expenditures by Land Use Category for 2005-2006 (continued)

Item	Total	Residential	Commercial	Agricultural	Breakdown ^a
Culture and Recreation	\$3,975,270	\$3,975,270	\$0	\$0	
Library	2,364,607	2,364,607	-	-	100-0-0
Library - Chatham County	234,186	234,186	-	-	100-0-0
Library - North Park	10,000	10,000	-	-	100-0-0
Library - Alston Fund	4,000	4,000	-	-	100-0-0
Recreation	1,247,277	1,247,277	-	-	100-0-0
Historic Properties Commission	1,700	1,700	-	-	100-0-0
Culture & Recreation - Other	113,500	113,500	-	-	100-0-0
Other Appropriations	\$8,401,557	\$7,498,483	\$751,545	\$151,530	
Debt Service	7,851,557	7,097,808	628,125	125,625	90.4-8.0-1.6
Transfer to Other Funds	300,000	218,550	67,320	14,130	default
Contingency	250,000	182,125	56,100	11,775	default
Total Expenditures	\$109,148,308	\$98,264,651	\$9,077,631	\$1,806,026	
	(100%)	(90.0%)	(8.3%)	(1.7%)	

a. Percentage breakdown by land use category (residential-commercial-agricultural). Default percentages were based on the 2005 assessed property valuation (residential - 72.85%; commercial - 22.44%; agricultural - 4.71%).