

# **Governing a Boomburb Guiding Cary's Growth Into The Future**

**Prepared for The Town of Cary**

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## I. Executive Summary

What lessons can Cary draw on from Boomburbs around the country to best navigate the governance challenges associated with this form of municipality?

Boomburbs are municipalities which have a population of more than 100,000 people and which have grown at a double-digit rate for multiple decades yet remain only the second-largest community in their metropolitan area. This report explores the above policy question by highlighting common demographic and governance characteristics of Boomburbs and identifying how Cary aligns with these descriptors. It then utilizes a qualitative research methodology informed by interviews with Boomburb council members and city managers to gather insights on Cary and four other comparable Boomburbs from across the country.

This research revealed several common themes between Cary and its peer Boomburbs. Decisions from state legislatures altered political influences in elections within all communities. Several municipalities had well-tenured council bodies guiding their growth and success. Strategic planning and mechanisms to increase citizen engagement in government were common across Boomburbs. Cary stood apart from its fellow Boomburbs, however, by maintaining its identity as a “town” despite its leading growth rate. Cary included more partisan identifiers for current council members in online town materials than other case study locations. The town had the most tenured yet lowest paid town or city council of all five Boomburbs.

Promoting pathways to leadership spanning from Cary’s citizen academy to the town council would increase the likelihood that new leaders are prepared to continue on Cary’s current level of excellence and foster greater and more diverse community engagement at higher levels of local government. Combining these pathways with strategies to expand professional development opportunities for government staff and utilize strategic management to establish a unified vision across the town would further fuel Cary’s future success as a Boomburb.

## **II. Policy Background**

### **Boomburbs: What Are They And Why Are They Booming?**

The term “Boomburb” was first developed by Robert Lang and Patrick Simmons in 2001 as a new way to describe rapidly growing suburban cities in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Lang and Simmons began to craft their novel concept by compiling a list of places in the U.S. with a population over 100,000 people. They then narrowed their list to municipalities which had maintained double-digit population growth for multiple decades in a row. These communities were not the biggest in their metropolitan area but instead were closely tied to a nearby larger city.

Fifty-three municipalities emerged as Lang and Simmons’s original Boomburbs. These areas accounted for approximately twenty-five percent of the population of all municipalities containing over 100,000 people in the United States. Yet they amounted to over fifty percent of the population growth of these same communities. Boomburbs such as Anaheim, California and Mesa, Arizona had current populations larger than traditional, more well-known cities such as Cincinnati and St. Louis.<sup>2</sup>

These Boomburbs were not organized in the traditional urban form of older cities with a dense commercial core. They instead had more loosely configured spatial structures. High rise office buildings and residential towers were nearly absent from their skylines. Most Boomburbs were less pedestrian friendly than traditional cities containing tight knit urban cores.<sup>3</sup>

Many Boomburbs were built up around large interstates, giving rise to descriptions of an emerging “exit ramp economy” within them.<sup>4</sup> This configuration meant that Boomburbs were far more focused around automobiles and driving than their traditional city counterparts. Public transit use was usually lower in Boomburbs than in traditional urban areas.

Boomburbs share similar demographic characteristics despite varying in location. White residents occupy the largest population subgroup across almost all Boomburbs. The racial and ethnic diversity of Boomburbs has increased steadily since the 1970s, however, with the largest increases being among Hispanic individuals.<sup>5</sup>

Knowledge based employment is high in Boomburbs. A greater percentage of residents in Boomburbs possess bachelor's and master's degrees than in the national population. The median Boomburb income was over \$7000 greater than the national median income of \$41,994 according to the 2000 census.<sup>6</sup> The average commute time of Boomburb residents to work was greater than the national average of twenty-three minutes.

A number of Boomburbs have become nationally recognized as hot, hip, and up-and-coming places to live. In the mid-2000s, *Money Magazine* released its hottest town's list after looking at 271 small to midsize cities. The hottest town above 100,000 people in each of the three regions used by the magazine was a Boomburb.<sup>7</sup> In 2006, the same magazine published a feature on "America's Best Small Cities." Seventeen of the twenty-five cities on the list were Boomburbs.

### **Cary: The Boomburb of the Triangle**

In their 2007 book on Boomburbs, Lang and LeFurgy characterized Cary as a "Baby Boomburb." These were communities on the threshold of becoming a Boomburb which had either not yet seen double-digit population growth for at least two consecutive decades or had not yet passed the 100,000 population mark. While it had witnessed multiple decades of double-digit growth, Cary had a total population of just under 100,000 at the time of the authors' research.

Cary has now grown into a complete Boomburb. The town had a population of over 176,000 people as of July, 2021. It has experienced at least a twenty-five percent growth rate in its population in each of the last two decades.<sup>8</sup> Cary is not the primary municipality in the central

North Carolina region, however. The state capital of Raleigh, located just down the road from Cary along I-40, boasted a population of over 469,000 people in 2021.

Cary matches up well with the social and demographic characteristics found in other Boomburbs. The town’s income per capita was approximately \$17,000 above the U.S. national average of \$35,384 in 2021. The percentage of its population with at least a bachelor’s degree, 68.6 percent, is above the national average of 32.9 percent. Cary is sixty-one percent White non-Hispanic but has seen rising population diversity since 2000 (See Appendix A).

Cary has received numerous awards signaling its “hot, hip, and up-and-coming” status. In the Money Magazine study referenced by Lang and LeFurgy, Cary was the highest ranked municipality of over 100,000 people in the East region of the country.<sup>9</sup> The Town has since received similar superlatives from 24/7 Wall Street, Forbes, and Movato.<sup>10</sup>



**Cary was recognized as the #1 Best Place to Work in Local Government in the United States by Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL) in 2022.**

### **Governance in Boomburbs**

Boomburbs defy the norms of big city governance. While traditional cities such as Pittsburgh, Chicago, and Philadelphia have adopted strong mayor systems of government, almost all Boomburbs maintain a council-manager form of government. Most mayors and council members within these bodies are nonpartisan, part-time or volunteer civil servants. Lang and LeFurgy documented little desire among Boomburb officials to move away from such a system.<sup>11</sup>

Boomburbs face several governance challenges as they continue to grow. Certain portions of the community may be left out of policy discussions due to a lack of political representation for entire areas within Boomburbs. These difficulties may be worsened in municipalities which elect council members in at large elections as opposed to elections for specific wards or districts. The ability of some individuals to participate in government may be further hindered if council or mayoral positions remain part-time and/or offer little compensation in return.

Boomburbs face growing partisan pressures from state and national political races. Most Boomburb mayors interviewed by Lang and LeFurgy publicly present themselves as unaffiliated despite privately identifying with a specific party.<sup>12</sup> State politics can have direct impacts on governance in Boomburbs by mandating when local elections in Boomburbs and other areas across the state should be conducted.

### **Boomburb Governance in the Town of Cary**

Governance in Cary reflects patterns in other Boomburbs. The town utilizes a council-manager form of government with a seven member large council body. Four of the seven council members are elected from districts representing distinct geographic areas of the town.<sup>13</sup> The remaining three seats are filled by the mayor and two members elected at-large. All of Cary's current council members are white.<sup>14</sup>

Council elections in Cary have grown more partisan. At least two council members have changed their party registration to unaffiliated since their last election cycle. This trend comes despite the fact that local elections in Cary remain formally nonpartisan and party affiliation is not shown on election ballots in the town. Cary's current council includes two Democrat members, one Republican member, and four unaffiliated members.

### Research Insights: State Mandates Translate Into Local Politics

Legislation signed by the North Carolina General Assembly in response to census delays moved Cary's most recent election from the Fall of 2021 to the Spring of 2022 in concert with national midterm primary races. This change infused significant new political pressures into the town's local elections.<sup>15</sup>



**Cary was one of many NC communities which had to postpone recent elections.**

### III. Methodology

This report utilizes a qualitative research approach. Its main investigative method is the use of comparative case studies to illuminate trends in Boomburb governments. Selected case studies are all municipalities which Lang and LeFurgy characterized as either Boomburbs or Baby Boomburbs in their 2007 book. The selected community will be confirmed to now qualify as a full Boomburb if originally classified as a Baby Boomburb. All case study municipalities thus have a population of over 100,000 people, possess double digit population growth over the past two decades, and are not the biggest city in their metropolitan area. All cases utilize a council-manager form of government.

Boomburbs were selected from across the United States. Two of the selected case studies are larger in population than Cary to incorporate perspectives from more matured Boomburbs. Two more are roughly even in population with Cary to incorporate perspectives from places in the same portion of their Boomburb journey as the Town.

The four case study selections examined in this report are Henderson, Nevada, Chesapeake, Virginia, Olathe, Kansas, and Bellevue, Washington. These Boomburbs are briefly described in



Table One below and the complete demographic characteristics of all case study municipalities described in the report are summarized in Appendix A.

**Table One: Case Study Boomburbs**

	Cary, North Carolina	Henderson, Nevada	Chesapeake, Virginia	Olathe, Kansas	Bellevue, Washington
Total Population (July 2021)	176,987	322,178	251,269	143,014	149,440
Growth Rate over Last Decade (2010-2020)	29%	23%	12%	12%	21%
Main City in Region	Raleigh, North Carolina	Las Vegas, Nevada	Virginia Beach, Virginia	Kansas City, Kansas	Seattle, Washington

Interviews were conducted with leaders from each of the five Boomburbs and academic subject matter experts on Boomburbs. Interviews with Boomburb leaders included meetings with elected members of the town or city council as well as with appointed managers in the town or city manager’s office. A summary of all interviews conducted as a part of the research process for this report are summarized on the following page in Table Two.

Interviews focused on four main governance topics which emerged as potential commonalities across Boomburbs based on the policy background research. Each topic area encapsulated one or more key metrics explored through follow-up questions in each interview. The four governance topics discussed in research conversations were division of government responsibilities, ensuring representation of all in government, politics and increasing polarization, and strategic planning and strategic management.

**Table Two: Stakeholder Interviews**

<b>Boomburb Leaders Interviews</b>	
<b>Interviewee Name</b>	<b>Interviewee Title and Organization</b>
Harold Weinbrecht	Mayor, Town of Cary
Jack Smith	Council Member District C, Town of Cary
Michael Wilkes and Susan Sherman	City Manager and Assistant City Manager, City of Olathe
Debra March	Former Mayor, City of Henderson
Nathan McCommon	Deputy City Manager, City of Bellevue
Christopher M. Price	City Manager, City of Chesapeake
<b>Subject Matter Experts Interviews</b>	
Jennifer LeFurgy	Co-Author, <i>Boomburbs: The Rise of America's Accidental Cities</i>

A summary of all case study Boomburbs along key metrics in each of the four main topic areas is included in Appendix B. A complete sample interview guide used during interview conversations is contained within Appendix C. This interview template was edited based on the specific Boomburb, title and position of the interviewee, as well as any unique information discovered on the Boomburb during the background policy research phase of the project.



**Mayor Harold Weinbrecht and Council Member Jack Smith were the two members of Cary's current town council who participated in Boomburb leader interviews conducted during this study.**

## **IV. Project Findings: Common Themes Across Boomburbs**

Cary and the four case study municipalities aligned on numerous demographic factors as expected based on the background literature on Boomburbs. White residents constitute the greatest proportion of each location's population. Yet all Boomburbs had at least one other racial/ethnic group which comprised a double-digit percentage of their total current population. All five municipalities remained above the national averages for per-capita income and the proportion of the population over twenty-five with at least a bachelor's degree. All had total poverty levels below the national poverty rate (See Appendix A).

In addition to all using a council-manager form of government, the five Boomburbs relied on part-time town or city councils. These governing bodies are predominantly White. Three Boomburbs, Cary, Henderson, and Olathe, have all-White councils. All five Boomburbs incorporated over a dozen citizen boards, committees, and commissions into their government activities. Every Boomburb has a strategic plan and/or a comprehensive plan guiding their local government actions.

### **Politics Always Finds a Way**

All Boomburbs held nonpartisan council elections. Despite this consistent format, there was universal agreement that politics and partisanship played a role in impacting local races. Leaders from Cary's Town Council expressed how slates of preferred candidates created by local party organizations can introduce party politics into nonpartisan contests.<sup>16</sup> Deputy City Manager McCommon of Bellevue shared how unions will publicize the list of individuals they support in local city council races.<sup>17</sup>

State actions consistently influenced Boomburb elections. Cary's most recent election cycle was altered by legislation passed by the state. All of the other four Boomburbs shared examples of how their home state had changed the dates of their local elections in some manner. State legislatures had switched elections in Bellevue and Olathe onto odd-numbered years. In Henderson and Chesapeake election dates were flipped into even-numbered years. These changes were accompanied by shifts in turnout and the influence of national contests on local races with moves into even-numbered years drawing greater voter turnout yet also greater national influence. Nevada voters further transformed Henderson's council by approving an amendment to the state constitution which set a twelve-year limit on the tenure of local and state officials.<sup>18</sup>



Located in Washington, the most unionized state in the country, Bellevue City Council candidates often receive endorsements from different unions throughout the community.

Image: A new playground space in Bellevue's Downtown Park

### **People Like To Be On A Winning Team**

Several other Boomburb leaders portrayed similar circumstances as those described by members of Cary's Town Council in connection to the tenure and success of its elected council body. Nearly all Boomburbs had multiple council members who had served for over a decade on the council. City Manager Price of Chesapeake described how he worked for the city early in his career as an intern. When he returned to serve as Chesapeake's executive leader years later, multiple members of the City Council who served during his internship were still in office.<sup>19</sup>

Managers Wilkes and Sherman of Olathe summarized the council situation of many Boomburbs well when they described their City Council. Council members could easily see their success as a group through both the rapid growth of Olathe and annual citizen feedback which praised the work of the city government in meeting their needs. They thus “felt like Tom Brady” leading a great team to the Super Bowl year after year. While such success is undoubtedly positive for any municipality, both managers raised the question of what do you do once “Tom Brady” retires and “players on the bench” now have to take the lead?<sup>20</sup>



**Leaders in Olathe and other Boomburbs like to be and stay on a winning team as their communities grow and thrive.**

**Image: Downtown Olathe**

### **Strategic Planning is a Booming Strategy**

All five Boomburbs have a strategic or comprehensive plan which outlined the vision and main goals of the municipality for the future. Several locations, including Cary, expressed the importance of acquiring and incorporating citizen input into the guiding principles and specific objectives described within their strategic plan.<sup>21</sup> Leaders from Olathe described how, after constructing their strategic plan following extensive community engagement, the city developed teams combining community volunteers and staff leaders to work towards each of its objectives.<sup>22</sup>

Planning was of particular importance to the City of Henderson as they grew. In addition to a strategic plan guiding its primary vision and goals for the future, the city follows its “Henderson Strong” Comprehensive Plan which outlines objectives guiding its physical development through continuous growth. While individual departments within the city government utilize unique strategic plans tailored to the work they complete, department leaders

remain dedicated to communicating with each other and with the city’s overarching strategic plan to ensure they are acting in accordance with the guiding vision of the city. Henderson has also been a key player in multiple regional planning initiatives across southern Nevada which have boosted its reputation as a planning leader.<sup>23</sup>



Current and former leaders in the City Council and the Henderson Redevelopment Agency combined planning and community engagement efforts to transform Water Street into Henderson’s thriving downtown core.

### **Boomburbs Want YOU To Engage With Local Government**

All five Boomburbs were working to engage more and more of their residents in the work of local government. This engagement included incorporating community voices into strategic planning and welcoming regular public feedback in listening sessions on council initiatives and/or annual surveys on the work of the council. All Boomburbs also utilized citizen boards, commissions, and committees as a key component of their local government structure. These groups varied slightly, however, in the amount of professional development, training, and staff assistance they received from the city or town.

One mechanism which several Boomburbs utilize to engage and inform more of their residents on the work of local government is citizen academies. The Town of Cary is one such Boomburb with its annual “Cary 101” program. This class aims to illustrate the services provided by the town and highlight further ways citizens can become involved in governance.<sup>24</sup>

The City of Bellevue hosts a similar program each year seeking to inform residents on how government in Bellevue functions with other governmental bodies and to build up potential candidates for the city’s citizen boards and commissions.<sup>25</sup> Chesapeake sponsors a supervisory

certificate program for members of its staff seeking to take on greater leadership positions in the city. This program allows the City to train up staff members to become department heads or board leaders without requiring them to leave the city to gain further skills or experience.<sup>26</sup>



**Chesapeake's in-house training programs allow employees to further their leadership skills without having to leave the city.**

**Image: Lake Drummond in Chesapeake**

## **V. Project Findings: How Cary Stands Out**

Cary shares multiple common themes with its peer Boomburbs. Yet it distinguishes itself from other rapidly growing municipalities along several demographic, economic, and political characteristics. These distinctions highlight both potential opportunities and challenges as Cary continues to boom.

### **A City in All But Name**

All Boomburbs retain some elements of their small town origins as they grow. Cary separates itself from the four other case study Boomburbs, however, by officially remaining a “Town” as opposed to a “City.” Henderson, Chesapeake, Olathe, and Bellevue have all transitioned into classifying themselves as cities despite these last two localities having a smaller population than Cary. Cary has recently moved away from directly displaying “Town” in some of its common identifiers such as the municipality’s logo and staff email addresses. Despite these branding changes, Cary remains the only municipality examined in this study which has yet to adopt the title of city.





While its four peer Boomburbs examined in this study refer to themselves as a “City,” Cary stands apart by continuing on its official identity as a “Town.”

Cary further defies its official classification as a town by growing at a comparatively higher rate. Cary’s population grew by twenty-nine percent between 2010 and 2020.<sup>27</sup> This rate is six percentage points greater than the next fastest expanding Boomburb of Henderson. It is seventeen percentage points greater than the growth rates of Chesapeake and Olathe. Even among its peer Boomburbs Cary is truly booming.

This incredible growth rate symbolizes Cary’s success and its continued reputation as an exceptional place to live, work, and play. It also highlights, however, how the political, economic, and planning challenges common of Boomburbs are going to be particularly prevalent in the town. The difficulties of big city governance may well emerge faster and with greater intensity in Cary than in other Boomburbs, and the town should be prepared to actively respond.

### **Socioeconomic Status and Staffing**

Although all five Boomburbs exceeded national averages on socioeconomic measures of income and educational achievement, Cary surpasses its peer Boomburbs on these same statistics. Outside of Bellevue, Cary has the highest per capita income and the greatest percentage of its



population with at least a bachelor's degree. It has the lowest poverty rate of all Boomburbs examined in this study.<sup>28</sup>

Cary also sets itself apart by maintaining a small governmental staff. Cary has the lowest employment levels of all five municipalities examined in this study with a total current full-time staff of just over 1,300 people.<sup>29</sup> This employment level translates to approximately 130 people living in Cary for every full-time staff member working for the town. None of the other four Boomburbs has more than 91 citizens per government employee.

These characteristics have financial impacts which are reflected in the property tax rates of each Boomburb. Cary has the lowest property tax rate with a \$0.345 charge for every \$100 of property value.<sup>30</sup> This figure is nearly \$0.40 lower than the next lowest rates in Bellevue and Henderson.<sup>31</sup> Cary thus does more with less in part thanks to the high socioeconomic status of its population and its streamlined staffing levels. Evolving demographics and a growing population require that these tax rates and staffing levels be regularly evaluated to ensure all in Cary receive needed services and staff members remain efficient but not over-worked.

### **Everyone is Invited to The Party**

Party politics and the politicization of local elections are on the rise within all five Boomburbs. Cary is the sole municipality in this study, however, to publish the party affiliation of current council members directly within their biographies on the town website. The other four Boomburbs required website visitors to make a trip to Ballotpedia or complete a thorough review of the member's local affiliations listed within their city website biography to ascertain their current party registration. The party information of numerous council members in other Boomburbs remained obscured even after exploring these additional resources.

### Research Insights: Publicizing Party Affiliation

**Current Party Affiliation: Republican**

**Current Party Affiliation: Democrat**

**Current Party Affiliation: Unaffiliated**

These screenshots taken from council member biographies on Cary's website show how town sources publish member party affiliation unlike other Boomburb websites.

Most voters would likely be able to learn the party affiliation or political leanings of all incumbent council members and new candidates on election day regardless of website structure due to candidate slate sheets and party endorsements. Removing this detail on the town website, however, would eliminate one easy path to identifying and politicizing current members for citizens conducting pre-election research. It would additionally reinforce that council elections are non-partisan. In the face of inevitable state intervention and outside tools constructed to assign partisan labels to candidates, insulating local elections from partisan influences as much as possible can begin with limiting unnecessary political identifiers in town materials.

### High Tenure, Low Pay

The members of Cary's Town Council have served on the governing body for an average of just over sixteen years. This level of experience is nearly five years greater than the average tenure of the next most veteran Boomburb city council in Chesapeake. Cary's council has an average of over eleven more years of council service than the City Council in Henderson where term limits have restricted longer careers on the local body.

The knowledge, expertise, and council cohesiveness built up through the tenure of Cary's current council is an incredible asset to the town. It is also, however, a sign that the challenges associated with increasing politicization of local elections and training up new leaders for elected

office could soon become much greater within Cary. The town must be ready to handle new individuals moving into leadership roles on the Town Council. Yet new leaders in Cary face a steeper learning curve than individuals in similar positions in other Boomburbs due to the heightened expertise and cohesiveness which has fueled the current council's success. Said differently, they have larger shoes to fill that will need to be filled more quickly to maintain the same level of success the town currently enjoys. Failing to build up future leaders in Cary now increases the likelihood that less knowledgeable, more partisan candidates take over the council once its current members retire or exit.

Building up new elected leaders will not be an easy task as council members in all five Boomburbs face the difficult responsibility of serving part-time in an increasingly full-time role. This reality can create barriers to service for many individuals passionate about local government who do not have another stable source of income and the schedule flexibility necessary to serve in a second "full-time" role.<sup>32</sup>

These challenges are further magnified in Boomburbs by the low compensation offered to council members working within council-manager systems. All five Boomburbs except for Henderson offer an annual stipend to council members below the annual per capita income level of the municipality in which they serve. Cary offers the lowest pay to its council members paying just \$12,610 per year of service on the governing body. This figure is \$7,000 less than the next lowest annual council member salary in Olathe Kansas, a city where the average income per capita is \$12,000 less than Cary.<sup>33</sup> Council member salaries must be considered if the town hopes to guarantee that qualified and experienced candidates are fully able to pursue future opportunities with the Town Council.

## **VI. Policy Recommendations**

Cary can best ensure governance in the town continues at its current level of excellence as the municipality grows by fostering and supporting new leaders within its community. The town can begin this work by promoting pathways to leadership spanning from its “Cary 101” citizens academy to the Town Council. This action would not guarantee or seek to guarantee that all future town council candidates have experience working in the town or run on a nonpartisan platform. It would, however, promote a strong pool of new leaders who are prepared to serve on the town council with limited knowledge loss and a quicker acclimation into the existing council culture if they wish to. It would also expand opportunities for a diverse pool of citizen leaders to become involved in all levels of local government in Cary.

Cary can further support these pathways to leadership by continuing and expanding professional development and growth opportunities for town employees. Government staff can then offer expert knowledge and guidance to elected leaders as they work through increasingly challenging and politicized issues facing the community. Constructing a unified vision for the town using strategic management would ensure that all in Cary are working in support of the same goals for the municipality. Community members pursuing pathways to leadership would become increasingly familiar with this vision as they moved from one opportunity to the next and be ready to further advance it if they sought elected office on the town council.

### **Recommendation One: Promote Pathways To Leadership**

Cary should promote pathways to leadership spanning from its “Cary 101” citizens academy to the Town Council. Like citizen academies in peer Boomburbs, “Cary 101” offers a unique opportunity for residents to learn more about the services which their local government provides and the processes by which they provide them. Such a course offers an excellent

introduction to government in Cary and participants possess the desire and skills needed to become further involved in governance within the town upon completing it. Leaders in Cary can promote pathways to leadership in this moment by encouraging recent Cary 101 participants to join one of the town's eighteen citizen boards, commissions, and committees.

As members of these bodies, former Cary 101 students can deepen their knowledge of town processes and procedures as well as the primary policy problems and opportunities in the area of greatest interest to them. Cary can help to encourage this growth by investing in professional development and training opportunities for members of citizen boards, committees, and commissions. The City of Henderson makes such an investment when it covers the dues to become a member of the American Planning Association for residents serving on its planning commission.<sup>34</sup> Building up citizen boards, committees, and commissions improves governance in Cary in the present and promotes pathways to further leadership in the future.

### *Flattening the Council Learning Curve*

Commenting on recent Town Council elections, one Cary council member expressed more concern about whether an individual would make a good teammate and coworker on the council than about the person's individual politics or policy priorities.<sup>35</sup> Promoting pathways to leadership as described above would help ensure that new council members are more likely to fulfill these expressed criteria in two ways. It would first increase the chances that new candidates would possess a good understanding of local issues in and around Cary and the mechanisms through which such challenges are typically addressed. This approach could reduce the knowledge side of the learning curve facing new members to Cary's council and increase the likelihood that such individuals could more readily comment on council discussions in an informed manner.

Promoting pathways to leadership would also help a greater proportion of new members more easily and rapidly adopt a positive view of the council and its work. Less experienced council members typically rank the representational effectiveness of the body on which they serve lower than their tenured colleagues.<sup>36</sup> This finding highlights that individuals often run for local elected office because they feel their current leaders are not representing the community well and that they can do better in doing so. These perceptions improve as council members serve for longer and become more acclimated to the culture of working on the council. Promoting pathways to leadership for participants on citizen boards and commissions who have already supported the council in developing their vision for Cary would reduce this early disparity in perceptions of the council and speed along the adoption of the existing council culture among new members.

Trainings and onboarding processes focused on sharing the norms and best practices of the council can assist in promoting pathways to leadership. In addition to introducing new members to department heads from across the Town and updating them on upcoming council decisions, these orientations can seek to share those practices which longer-serving council members know and utilize to complete their job more efficiently and effectively. New member trainings in Bellevue describe the processes by which council takes up a new issue to help recently elected leaders understand how to raise the priorities they ran on within the existing council culture.<sup>37</sup> Continuing to hold regular council retreats and drawing from sources created by the North Carolina League of Municipalities (NCLM) and the UNC School of Government can all further assist in developing trainings which help promote pathways to leadership.



**Promoting pathways to leadership can increase the likelihood that new council members more quickly acclimate to the existing council culture in Cary.**

### *Expanding Expertise Through Diverse Experiences*

Promoting pathways to leadership, if done correctly, would provide Cary with an opportunity to incorporate a broader range of perspectives into its government. Encouraging individuals from diverse backgrounds to join the Cary 101 program would welcome individuals typically outside of, or excluded from, government to learn more about governance in the town. Encouraging these same participants to then pursue more opportunities along pathways to leadership would begin to incorporate diverse perspectives more and more into town leadership. By valuing the unique knowledge and lived experiences of these individuals, Cary can strengthen the work completed by the Town Council and foster broader citizen participation in government work. Cary should ensure that pathways to leadership welcome in rather than further exclude new voices into government in order to best promote the future excellence of governance in the town.

#### **Recommendation Two: Strengthen Staff Through Professional Development**

Pathways to leadership can be further supported by continuing to emphasize professional development across all levels of government staff. Cary can build off the work it has already done to ensure Town staff are completing jobs they feel passionate about by creating opportunities for employees to acquire trainings and further their leadership skills in pursuit of new or bigger roles. Chesapeake's supervisory certificate program offers one example of how these opportunities could be structured to ensure staff leaders can stay within Cary to receive the skills they desire.<sup>38</sup>

Fostering this expertise and leadership at all levels within the town employment structure ensures that new members on the town council can rely on staff for clear guidance and knowledge on challenging or politically divisive topics. Current leaders on Cary's council described how staff expertise has already been influential in informing and depoliticizing conversations around

affordable housing between members.<sup>39</sup> Investing in the professional development of staff supports strong council teams and manages the politics on that team in a productive manner.

### **Recommendation Three: Construct a Unified Vision Using Strategic Management**

Continuing to utilize and invest in strategic planning and strategic management practices can further support the work of promoting pathways to leadership. The strategic planning process on its own is a valuable one as it offers an opportunity for significant community involvement in setting the direction and vision of a municipality.<sup>40</sup> Sharing this vision across the entire town and ensuring all individual department or citizen board and commission missions work within and towards it can be of even greater value to fostering new leaders in Cary. Broadening the work of strategic planning into a strategic management framework across Cary in such a way would stimulate the vertical and horizontal integration of local government responsibilities in the town.<sup>41</sup> Individuals pursuing pathways to leadership would thus be continuously working towards and better understanding the same vision and goals as they progressed from one position to the next. These same leaders would be ready to further advance this vision as a member of the Town Council if they sought elected office.



**Establishing a unified vision across all parts of the government structure in Cary would ensure that community members pursuing pathways to leadership work towards the same goals in every position they work in and are ready to further advance these goals if they seek elected office in the town.**



## VII. Appendices

### **Appendix A: Boomburb Demographic Information**

Demographic Metric	U.S. National Average	Cary, North Carolina	Henderson, Nevada	Chesapeake, Virginia	Olathe, Kansas	Bellevue, Washington
Total Population (July 2021)	-	176,987	322,178	251,269	143,014	149,440
Growth Rate over Last Decade (2010-2020)	7%	29%	23%	12%	12%	21%
Main City in Region	-	Raleigh, North Carolina	Las Vegas, Nevada	Virginia Beach, Virginia	Kansas City, Kansas	Seattle, Washington
Population by Demographic Group*	White: 59.3% Black: 13.6% Asian: 6.1% Hispanic: 18.9%	White: 61.0% Black: 7.6% Asian: 19.9% Hispanic: 8.1%	White: 62.5% Black: 6.0% Asian: 8.7% Hispanic: 17.3%	White: 56.4% Black: 29.7% Asian: 3.4% Hispanic: 6.5%	White: 75.5% Black: 6.0% Asian: 4.2% Hispanic: 11.1%	White: 47.7% Black: 2.6% Asian: 37.5% Hispanic: 7.4%
Per Capita Income	\$35,384	\$55,710	\$43,264	\$38,952	\$42,254	\$78,118
Percent of Population in Poverty	11.6%	5.7%	7.7%	8.0%	6.0%	6.9%
Property Tax Rate Within Municipality	0.99 per \$100 of property value	<u>0.345</u> per \$100 of property value	0.77 per \$100 of property value	1.05 per \$100 of property value	<u>1.27</u> per \$100 of property value (Johnson County)	<u>0.71</u> per \$100 of property value
Percent of Population over 25 with at least a Bachelor's Degree	32.9%	69.5%	34.8%	35.5%	50.2%	70.0%

\*White here describes individuals who identified as White, non-Hispanic individuals

## Appendix B: Boomburb Governance Metrics

Governance Metric	Cary, North Carolina	Henderson, Nevada	Chesapeake, Virginia	Olathe, Kansas	Bellevue, Washington
Form of Government	Council-Manager	Council-Manager	Council-Manager	Council-Manager	Council-Manager
Full time Mayor and/or Council?	No	No	No	No	No
Number of Council Members	Seven (Mayor, four district representatives, and two general representatives.)	Five (Mayor and four at-large council members from different wards in the city; currently one vacancy)	Nine (Mayor, Vice Mayor, and seven council members elected in general elections)	Seven (Mayor, four ward representatives, two general representatives)	Seven (Seven members elected at large; mayor and deputy mayor chosen from among council members)
Demographic Makeup of Council	White: 7 Non-White: 0	White: 4 Non-White: 0	White: 7 Non-White: 2	White: 7 Non-White: 0	White: 4 Non-White: 3
Average Tenure of Council Members	16.1 Years	4.25 Years	11.2 Years	9.6 Years	9.1 Years
Political Makeup of Council Members	Democrat: 2 Republican: 1 Unaffiliated: 4	Democrat: 0 Republican: 2 Unaffiliated: 2	Party information was not shared on city website. Party information for some candidates was revealed in their affiliations with local party organizations	Party Affiliation not made public on city or county elections website and not easily findable on Ballotpedia	Party Affiliation not made public on city or county elections website and not easily findable on Ballotpedia
Method of Choosing Council Members	Council members serve four year, staggered terms. Elections are held in odd numbered years, yet the last election was in May, 2022 due to state order.	Council members are elected at large on a nonpartisan basis. No two council members can be from the same ward of the city's four wards. Elections occur in even numbered years as of 2022.	Council members are elected in a general election to a four year term. Elections are held every two years in even numbered years.	Council members serve four year, staggered terms. Elections are held in odd numbered years.	Council members serve staggered four year terms and are elected in at-large elections. Elections are held in odd-numbered years.

Method of Choosing Mayor	At-large general election every four years in an odd-numbered year.	Mayor is elected in an at-large, nonpartisan election. Elections are now held in even number years due to change in state law.	Mayor is elected in a general mayoral election held every four years in even numbered years. Vice Mayor is chosen by majority vote of the council members.	At-large general election every four years in an odd numbered year.	Elected council members chose mayor and deputy mayor from among their membership to serve two year terms.
Number of Citizen Boards, Commissions, and Committees	18	17	31	14	15
Total Number of Employees	1,355	2,184	4,538	1,824	1862
Citizens per Employee	130.62	90.70	55.37	78.41	80.26
Annual Salary of Council Members	Council: \$12,610 Mayor: \$15,090	Council: \$55,118 Mayor: \$67,990	Council: \$25,000 Mayor: \$27,000	Council: \$19,655	Council: \$32,368
Strategic Plan or Comprehensive Plan	<a href="#">Cary Community Plan</a>	<a href="#">2019-2023 Strategic Plan</a> <a href="#">Henderson Strong Comprehensive Plan</a>	<a href="#">Chesapeake 2035 Comprehensive Plan</a>	<a href="#">Olathe 2040</a>	<a href="#">Bellevue 2035 and City Council Vision</a>

## Appendix C: Sample Interview Guide

### Project Background

In partnership with the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University and the Town of Cary, North Carolina, this project seeks to better understand what makes governments in rapidly growing areas particularly successful. It does so by focusing in on Boomburbs, or suburban areas which now have a population of over 100,000 people and have seen double digit population growth over the last decade but are not the largest city in their metropolitan area. Municipalities of this structure across the country share several similar demographic and governance characteristics. The following interview questions seek to explore those common characteristics of Boomburbs connected to governance structure, local election proceedings, and community representation to better understand why Boomburb governments are effective and successful.

### Interview Questions

1. Describe your motivations for running for City/Town Council in [insert Boomburb name]. What about [insert Boomburb name] inspired you to serve in local government?
  - a. To what extent do you think the Council represents the full population of [insert Boomburb name] well? How are others of diverse backgrounds able to share your passion for [insert Boomburb name] and join local government?
  - b. Are there any community groups or portions of the municipality which you feel are not well represented by Council?
    - i. If so, what factors may contribute to this outcome?
    - ii. What steps, if any, are being taken to change this result?
2. Describe the last local election you ran in. To what extent did state and national politics influence the proceedings and outcome of this race?
  - a. Have local council elections grown more or less partisan since you joined the council?
    - i. If more partisan, how have you and others on council overcome these changes?
  - b. How has the changing political landscape you described here impacted internal political dynamics between members of the Town/City Council?
    - i. Between Council and other entities in the municipal government such as the Town/City Manager/Administrator?
3. How has the overall tenure (level of experience) of members on Council changed since you first joined the governing body?
  - a. If the overall level of tenure has changed, what factors do you think have contributed most to this change?
  - b. Has this change in the overall tenure/level of experience of the collective council body impacted the effectiveness of the group or its ability to carry out its duties?
  - c. What sort of trainings or onboarding practices are in place to ensure new council members can effectively contribute to the success of Council?

- i. Are there forms of outside staff assistance for Council members and new members specifically?
4. Describe the role of other local government, private, and citizen/popular bodies in the city in helping the council to complete its work of governing [insert Boomburb name]?
  - a. How does the council interact with the City/Town Manager?
    - i. To what extent does the manager take an active role in coordinating council activities and navigating/managing the politics of the council?
  - b. Does the council interact with any homeowners associations (HOAs) or neighborhood associations?
    - i. If so, to what extent do these interactions help make the job of the council easier or harder to complete?
    - ii. Do these associations in general encourage more or less public participation in government?
  - c. How does the council seek to include broader citizen input in its decisions and encourage the people of [insert Boomburb name] to be engaged with government?
    - i. Are there any common issues or themes which emerge regularly in citizen input sessions?
    - ii. To what extent, if any, are citizen bodies in the government (boards and commissions for instance) offered trainings and other supports?
  - d. To what extent, if any, does [insert Boomburb name] utilize strategic planning and/or strategic management to plan and coordinate the actions of bodies sharing in the work of governing and operating the city? Are these processes effective?
5. What is one recent challenge which proved particularly difficult for [insert Boomburb name] to address?
  - a. What about this challenge made it uniquely difficult to solve or address?
  - b. How did the Council communicate with other bodies in the municipal government during this challenge?
    - i. Were these communication channels helpful?
    - ii. Were there any bodies or groups that were not easy to communicate with?
  - c. What if any changes did Council attempt to engender success with this initiative? Was there anything you learned from this challenge which changed how the government runs now?
    - i. Were any of these transformations successful? Why or why not?
6. What is one recent policy initiative or government reform which you think [insert Boomburb name] handled well?
  - a. What role did Council play in these actions?
  - b. What about this instance made the initiative/reform particularly effective?
    - i. Were there any elements of the initiative/reform which could have been better or which you would change for future initiatives?
7. Is there anything else you think is important to know about [insert Boomburb name] that I have not yet asked about?

## VIII. Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Lang, Robert E., and Patrick A. Simmons. 2001. *“Boomburbs”*: *The Emergence of Large, Fast-Growing Suburban Cities in the United States*.

<sup>2</sup> Lang and Simmons. 2001. *“Boomburbs.”*

<sup>3</sup> Lang, Robert E., and Jennifer B. LeFurgy. 2007. *Boomburbs: The Rise of America's Accidental Cities*. Brookings Institution.

<sup>4</sup> Lang and LeFurgy. 2007. *Boomburbs*.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. (Note: Increases in Hispanic populations in Boomburbs may be disproportionately high due to a high prevalence of Boomburbs in the U.S. Southwest).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. (Note: Cary was the top entry in the East Region on this list).

<sup>8</sup> 2021. *QuickFacts: Cary Town, North Carolina*.

<sup>9</sup> Lang, Robert E., and Jennifer B. LeFurgy. 2007. *Boomburbs: The Rise of America's Accidental Cities*. Brookings Institution.

<sup>10</sup> 2022. Cary Superlatives.

<sup>11</sup> Lang, Robert E., and Jennifer B. LeFurgy. 2007. *Boomburbs: The Rise of America's Accidental Cities*. Brookings Institution.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> 2022. *Mayor and Council*.

<sup>14</sup> Mayor and Council (Note: Cary had one non-White council member win election to the NC State House of Representatives last November).

<sup>15</sup> Kairis, Ashley. 2021. “Cary’s Municipal Election Postponed to March 2022.” *Cary Citizen*.

<sup>16</sup> Interviews with Harold Weinbrecht and Jack Smith, Town of Cary.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Nathan McCommon, City of Bellevue.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Debra March, City of Henderson. (See more info here: <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/Division/Research/Documents/Term-Limits-2019-FINAL.pdf>)

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Christopher Price, City of Chesapeake.

- <sup>20</sup> Interview with Michael Wilkes and Susan Sherman, City of Olathe.
- <sup>21</sup> Interviews with Harold Weinbrecht and Jack Smith, Town of Cary.
- <sup>22</sup> Interview with Michael Wilkes and Susan Sherman, City of Olathe.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview with Debra March, City of Henderson.
- <sup>24</sup> 2023. *Cary 101*.
- <sup>25</sup> Interview with Nathan McCommon, City of Bellevue.
- <sup>26</sup> Interview with Christopher Price, City of Chesapeake.
- <sup>27</sup> 2021. *QuickFacts: Cary Town, North Carolina*.
- <sup>28</sup> 2021. Quickfacts: Cary.
- <sup>29</sup> 2023. *State of Cary*.
- <sup>30</sup> 2022. *Wake County Tax Rates*.
- <sup>31</sup> 2022. *Bellevue Property Taxes*.
- <sup>32</sup> Lang, Robert E., and Jennifer B. LeFurgy. 2007. *Boomburbs: The Rise of America's Accidental Cities*. Brookings Institution.
- <sup>33</sup> 2021. *City of Olathe Salaries*.
- <sup>34</sup> Interview with Debra March, City of Henderson.
- <sup>35</sup> Interviews with Harold Weinbrecht and Jack Smith, Town of Cary.
- <sup>36</sup> Ihrke, Douglas M. 2006. "Council Member Perceptions Regarding Representational Effectiveness: Does Bureaucracy Make A Difference?" *Public Administration Quarterly*.
- <sup>37</sup> Interview with Nathan McCommon, City of Bellevue.
- <sup>38</sup> Interview with Christopher Price, City of Chesapeake.
- <sup>39</sup> Interviews with Harold Weinbrecht and Jack Smith, Town of Cary.
- <sup>40</sup> Denhardt, Robert B. 1985. "Strategic Planning in State and Local Government." *State and Local Government Review*.
- <sup>41</sup> Boston, Jonathan, and June Pallot. 1997. "Linking Strategy and Performance: Developments in the New Zealand Public Sector." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*.

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