

Golf Cart Use on Public Roads: Policy Options for Unincorporated Chatham County

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Introduction



Overview

- At the request of the Board of Commissioners due to substantial resident inquiry, staff has developed options for the Board of Commissioners to consider, and the considerations of each.
- Background:
 - Briar Chapel was originally developed with private streets run and maintained by the Briar Chapel Community Association (BCCA), and the Association allowed golf cart use within the neighborhood at that time.
 - Beginning in 2016, as different phases of Briar Chapel were completed, streets within the subdivision were accepted into the NCDOT-owned and maintained roadway system. As a result, the BCCA's previous golf cart policy no longer governs golf cart use on those streets, and golf carts are not permitted unless they meet the applicable requirements of N.C.G.S. § 20-121.1.
 - Under North Carolina law, counties may regulate golf cart use by ordinance on public streets, roads, or highways with speed limits of 35 mph or less in unincorporated areas.
- The following slides outline the policy options available to the Board of Commissioners, including whether and how the County may choose to regulate golf cart use moving forward.



Definitions

- Golf Cart. – A vehicle designed and manufactured for operation on a golf course for sporting or recreational purposes and that is not capable of exceeding speeds of 20 miles per hour.
- Low-speed vehicle (LSV) – A four-wheeled vehicle that is either electrically powered or propelled by a gasoline engine whose top speed is greater than 20 miles per hour but less than 25 miles per hour.



General Statute and County Ordinance Overview

Existing State Framework

- Under G.S. § 20-121.1, qualifying low-speed vehicles may operate on state maintained streets and highways with posted speed limits of 35 miles per hour or less.
- Low-speed vehicles must comply with applicable State registration, insurance, equipment, and operator requirements.
- Traditional golf carts that do not qualify as low-speed vehicles and are not authorized under this framework.

County Ordinance Authority

- North Carolina law authorizes counties, by ordinance, to regulate and allow the operation of golf carts, as defined in G.S. 20-4.01(12a), on public streets, roads, or highways where the posted speed limit is 35 miles per hour or less within the unincorporated areas of the county, as well as on property owned or leased by the county.
- A County ordinance may establish:
 - Registration of golf carts
 - Charge a fee for the registration
 - Specify who is authorized to operate golf carts, and
 - Specify the required equipment, load limits, and the hours and methods of operation of golf carts.
- To-Note:
 - No person less than 16 years of age may operate a golf cart on a public street, road, or highway.
 - Private subdivisions may regulate (allowing or disallowing) golf-cart use on private roads regardless of ordinance.



Options



Option Overview

The Board may consider three general approaches:

Option 1 — Status Quo

Continue relying on existing State allowances for qualifying low-speed vehicles.

Option 2 — High-Level Framework

Develop a County ordinance and companion policy through which communities may request authorization.

Option 3 — Case-Specific Framework

Direct staff to work initially with Briar Chapel to evaluate community support and develop a community-specific ordinance proposal.



Status Quo

- The County would not adopt a golf cart ordinance.
- Qualifying low-speed vehicles could continue to operate as currently authorized under State law.
- Vehicles would remain subject to State registration, insurance, equipment, and operator requirements.
- Traditional golf carts that do not meet the definition and requirements of a low-speed vehicle would remain unauthorized on public streets.
- No new programs would be created by the County.



Status Quo – Considerations

- **Advantages**

- No additional County administrative or enforcement responsibilities.
- No County permitting, inspection, or registration program would be required.
- Maintains a consistent framework based on existing State requirements.
- No new County staffing or program costs.

- **Challenges**

- Does not address resident requests to authorize traditional golf carts.
- Qualifying low-speed vehicles may be more costly than traditional golf carts.
- Does not provide a community-specific process for evaluating local interest or transportation patterns.
- May not reflect prior expectations in communities where golf cart use was historically allowed on private streets.



Decisions Prior to Ordinance

If the Board would like to move forward with an ordinance in any form, staff will need to explore:

Geographic and Roadway Scope

- Whether the ordinance should establish a countywide process or begin with a specific community.
- Whether communities must be individually added to the ordinance.
- Which streets or types of streets may be considered.
- How eligible geographic boundaries and routes would be established.
- How NCDOT-maintained roads, intersections, crossings, and posted speed limits would be addressed.

Community Support and Approval

- Who may initiate a request on behalf of a community.
- Whether a petition, survey, public meeting, or combination of methods would be required.
- The minimum percentage of residents or property owners needed to demonstrate support.
- Whether both an initial petition threshold and a final approval threshold should be established.

Registration and Program Administration

- Whether golf carts would be registered annually with the County.
- Which department would administer registration, decals, renewals, and recordkeeping.
- Whether inspections would be required and who would perform them.
- The appropriate fee and whether it should recover all or part of the County's costs.
- Enforcement decisions.
- Coordination with North Carolina Highway Patrol.
- Additional resources needed to fill financial gap to provide registration program, and how those fees are covered, and if the cost would be covered by the community or County taxpayers generally.

Safety and Operating Standards

- Required vehicle equipment and insurance.
- Operator age and driver's license requirements.
- Hours of operation.
- Passenger and seat belt requirements.
- Rules for crossings, routes, parking, and prohibited roads.

To Note: This list is not exhaustive and additional items will be considered as necessary.



Ordinance and County-Wide Framework

- **Under Option 2 - Ordinance and High-Level Framework the Board of Commissioners would:**
 - Adopt a County golf cart ordinance establishing the standards under which golf carts may be authorized.
 - The initial ordinance would establish the regulatory framework and reference to a list of approved communities but would not automatically authorize operation in every community.
 - A companion County policy would establish a standardized process through which communities may request inclusion and list of approved communities.
 - A recognized homeowners association, property owners association, governance committee, or similar representative body could initiate the process.
 - Communities would be evaluated individually because roadway conditions, community characteristics, operating needs, and potential impacts may differ.
 - The Board would retain final authority to approve each community and include the approved geographic area and roads.
 - Under this framework, staff would return with an ordinance draft and policy to be adopted.



County-Wide Framework – Considerations

Advantages

- Creates a consistent and transparent process for communities throughout the County.
- Requires demonstrated community support before authorization.
- Allows each community to be evaluated based on its particular conditions.
- Establishes clear expectations regarding engagement, safety, fees, administration, and enforcement.
- Preserves the Board's authority to approve or deny each request.
- Avoids automatically authorizing golf carts throughout the unincorporated County.

Challenges

- Requires development of both an ordinance and a detailed administrative policy.
- May generate requests from multiple communities.
- Each request would require community engagement, interdepartmental review, and Board consideration.
- Registration, inspection, enforcement, signage, and administration may require additional resources.
- Petition, survey, and community-support thresholds would need to be carefully defined.
- Registration fees may not fully offset County costs.
- Staff would need Board direction on the framework before ordinance drafting could begin.



County-Wide Framework – Initial Process/Policy

1. Initial Community Request

- A recognized community governing body submits a formal request.
- The request identifies the proposed geographic area, roadway network, and perceived community need.

2. Demonstration of Initial Interest

- The community demonstrates support from a Board-established percentage of residents or property owners.
- This threshold would be met before significant County staff resources are committed.

3. Standardized Community Engagement

- Working with the Homeowners association or recognized community governing body a County-approved survey and engagement process would be conducted.
- Residents would receive information regarding:
 - Proposed operating boundaries and roads
 - Vehicle and operator requirements
 - Registration and permit fees
 - Enforcement and safety considerations
 - Potential County and community costs

4. Staff and Agency Review

- Staff would evaluate legal authority, roadway eligibility, safety, administration, enforcement, and financial impacts.
- NCDOT and affected County departments would participate as appropriate.

5. Board Consideration

- Staff would present the results, fiscal implications, proposed boundaries, and recommendations.
- The Board would determine whether the community should be added to the ordinance.



County-WideFramework – Policy Framework

1. If directed to pursue the high-level option, staff would return with a proposed policy addressing:

- Eligible applicants and community governing bodies
- Required petition information
- Initial-interest threshold
- Standard survey methodology
- Minimum survey response rate
- Required level of community support
- Community notification and engagement requirements
- Roadway and safety review criteria
- NCDOT coordination requirements
- Registration, renewal, inspection, and decal procedures
- Fee structure and cost-recovery expectations
- Process for adding, modifying, suspending, or removing an authorized community
- Periodic review of the program and its costs



Specific-Area Framework

- **Under Option 2 - Ordinance and High-Level Framework the Board of Commissioners would:**
 - The Board could direct staff to begin by working specifically with Briar Chapel.
 - This option would still contemplate adoption of a County ordinance but would focus the initial engagement and analysis on one community.
 - Staff would work with Briar Chapel representatives and residents to:
 - Identify the proposed geographic area and roadway network
 - Determine the nature and extent of community interest
 - Conduct a standardized survey and engagement process
 - Evaluate roadway ownership, speed limits, connectivity, intersections, and safety
 - Coordinate with NCDOT and affected County departments
 - Estimate registration, enforcement, signage, inspection, and administrative costs
 - Evaluate potential fees and anticipated program participation
 - Develop proposed vehicle, operator, and operating standards
 - Staff would return to the Board with community engagement results, analysis, cost implications, and a proposed ordinance framework for Briar Chapel.
 - The Board of Commissioners would then decide whether to adopt a golf cart ordinance for the Briar Chapel Community.
 - The Board could later determine whether the process should be expanded into a county-wide policy.



Specific-Area Framework – Considerations

Advantages

- Directly responds to the community associated with the current request.
- Allows the County to better understand the full scope before establishing a countywide program.
- Provides an opportunity to develop and test engagement, survey, fee, registration, enforcement, and administrative procedures.
- Limits the initial analysis and resource commitment to one defined community.
- Lessons learned could inform a future countywide framework.

Challenges

- Does not immediately establish a process for other interested communities.
- The County may still need to develop a broader policy following the Briar Chapel process.
- A community-specific approach could create inconsistent expectations if additional communities are considered later.
- Significant community engagement and staff analysis would still be required.
- The same ordinance, fee, registration, enforcement, and coordination decisions would ultimately need to be addressed.
- Authorization would remain dependent on roadway eligibility, legal review, community support, and applicable NCDOT requirements.



Option Review

The Board may consider three general approaches:

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Option 3 — Case-Specific Framework

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Questions, Direction, or Discussion?

