



## MEMO

DATE: November 7, 2025  
TO: Chris Matthews, Division Director, Nature Preserves and Natural Resources, MCPR  
FROM: Josh Jacobson, Interim Leadership Services, Carolina Raptor Center  
CC: Gabor Zsuppan, Executive Director, Carolina Raptor Center (Starting 12/1/25)  
RE: Proposal: Sunset of Current Lease Agreement for Quest

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On behalf of the Board of Directors for Carolina Raptor Center (CRC), I am pleased to share this memo that outlines a proposed sunset of the current Quest lease agreement between Mecklenburg County and CRC. This memo is a follow-up to discussion had at the July 28, 2025 CRC Board Meeting, a lunch meeting on August 29, 2025, and a meeting on-site of CRC on November 7, 2025.

### **Background**

Over the past decade, the Raptor Trail at the Quest Nature Center has represented a major aspiration for CRC, envisioned initially as a \$5 million environmental education project and later evolving into a \$20+ million capital campaign for a world-class, bird-centered zoo. Despite a long-held lease agreement with Mecklenburg County (effective through 2036), the project has faced persistent delays due to fundraising shortfalls, leadership transitions, and shifting priorities.

In June 2025, CRC's Board of Directors convened for a strategic retreat facilitated by Next Stage to determine a future path for Quest. The group reviewed three pathways: delaying a decision, affirming the Quest vision with a revised plan, or stepping away to reinvest in the current property. After much discussion, the board decided it was time to move on from the Raptor Trail at Quest and instead create a new vision for the current campus at 6000 Sample Road.

On July 28, 2025, CRC's Board of Directors formally voted to enter into negotiations with Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation to sunset the current lease and enter into a new agreement based on the organization's \$1 million investment in the project previously allocated.

This memo proposes components of a new agreement between CRC and Mecklenburg County.

### **Financial Investment by CRC**

As outlined in Section 10.4 (Capital Contributions by CRC) of the Lease, CRC agreed to provide Mecklenburg County with a total capital contribution valued at \$1,000,000. This included a combination of cash, construction materials, and potentially FF&E (furniture, fixtures, and equipment) that the County was responsible for purchasing under the Agreement.

With this commitment completed in full, CRC met the requirements of the lease and established a clear record of its financial partnership in the development of Quest.

### **Proposed Terms**

Building on the \$1 million investment already made by CRC under the original lease agreement, the organization seeks to establish a new framework with Mecklenburg County that reflects this commitment while providing clarity and mutual benefit going forward. The following proposed terms are designed to recognize CRC's completed obligations, protect the organization's ongoing operations, and foster continued collaboration with the County. Together, these terms create a practical pathway for resolving outstanding questions, ensuring noncompetitive land use, and supporting both parties in advancing shared community goals.

- **Waived Expenses** – Under Section 6.1(a) of the Lease Agreement, CRC was originally obligated to cover 18.5% of operating costs incurred at Quest (CRC's Allocable Share). While CRC prepared to meet this obligation, delays in construction and the onset of COVID protocols in 2020 meant that CRC never fully occupied its space, and Mecklenburg County paused these payments without establishing a clear start date for when they would resume. Given the significant \$1 million investment already made by CRC under Section 10.4, and the lack of use and benefit derived from the facility, CRC requests that all past and future operating cost obligations under this agreement be waived in total. This would create clarity for both parties and reflect the reality of CRC's contributions to the project.
- **Use of Joint-Use Spaces** – A key component of the original lease agreement was CRC's access to joint-use spaces within Quest, including large classrooms that support community programs and conference rooms supporting staff engagement. These facilities continue to hold value for CRC as the organization advances educational programming and works toward future capital development at its Sample Road campus. CRC proposes that this access be formalized at up to 30 hours per month, on a first-come, first-served basis, following the established reservation system, with fees waived. Such access ensures CRC remains able to host occasional offsite programs, meetings, and events in a professional, well-equipped environment, while remaining respectful of County operations and scheduling needs. CRC further requests that this arrangement be established without an end date, ensuring ongoing, long-term access consistent with the spirit of the original agreement.
- **Marketing Kiosk** – To maintain visibility with the thousands of visitors who come to Quest each year, CRC proposes installation of a small, branded marketing kiosk prominently located near the entrance of the facility. The kiosk, envisioned as a 3x3 floor unit developed by CRC and installed by the County, would share information about CRC's programs, facilities, and upcoming events, including a QR code that directs visitors to digital resources. CRC would maintain responsibility for updating content on a periodic basis, ensuring that information remains current and engaging. A dedicated kiosk would help connect Quest visitors to CRC's long-established campus just down Sample Road, supporting broader community awareness and sustained visitation. The County would have input on the design of the kiosk.

- **Noncompetitive Use** – The original lease designated 20 acres of land for the development of the Raptor Trail. With CRC’s decision to sunset the Quest project, clarity is needed regarding the future use of this acreage. To protect the integrity of CRC’s visitor experience at its existing campus, CRC requests that the County agree not to use this land for outdoor avian or animal-themed attractions and exhibits that would directly compete with CRC’s mission or operations.
- **Collaboration on Master Plan for 6000 Sample Road** – CRC has initiated a multi-phase master planning process for its current campus at 6000 Sample Road, beginning with immediate priorities tied to deferred maintenance. In the near term, this includes critical repairs to aging bird enclosures and construction of new visitor amenities such as a raptor-themed playground. Looking ahead over the next five years, CRC anticipates launching a comprehensive capital campaign to raise funds for a new Raptor Hospital, an Education Center, renovations to the Visitor Center, an expanded parking lot, and expanded public trails. To align these investments with regional priorities, CRC requests Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation’s involvement as an advisor and collaborator in the master planning process. This partnership would ensure coordinated problem solving, technical input, and a shared commitment to elevating the site as a premier destination for environmental education and wildlife conservation.

With a new agreement reflecting these components, CRC would agree to relinquish all rights and claims to the 20 acres previously designated for the Raptor Trail at Quest under the original lease agreement, thereby releasing Mecklenburg County from any future obligations related to the property.

