

Design Suwanee Charrette



Georgia Department of
Community Affairs



The University of Georgia

Why Suwanee?

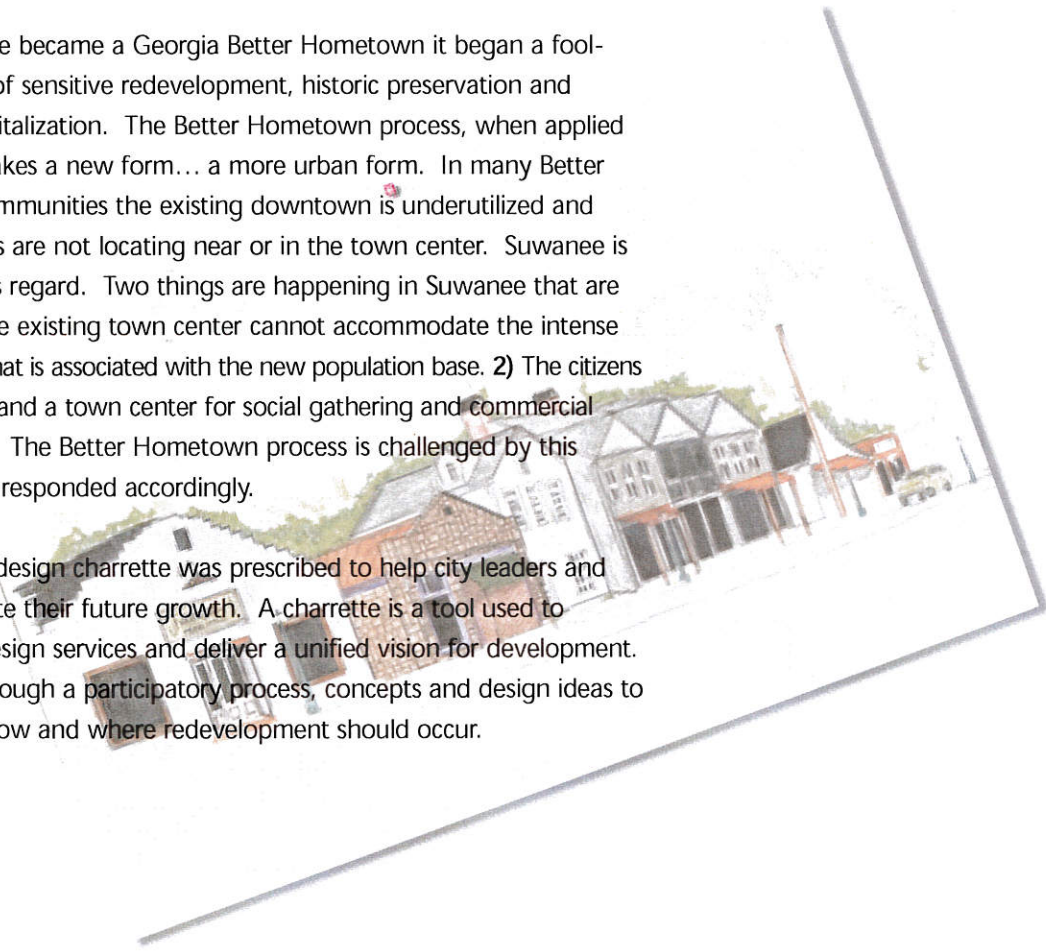
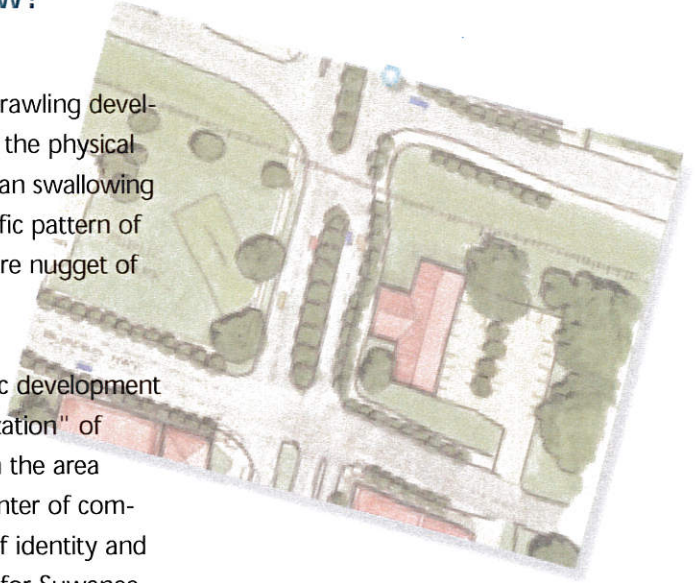
Why a charrette? Why now?

Suwanee is, again, at a transition point. The large-scale sprawling development associated with Atlanta's edge has already shaped the physical environment of Suwanee, Georgia. Despite the super-human swallowing of small town characteristics, and perhaps due to the specific pattern of sprawl, Suwanee has "boxed-in" a quaint, delicate and pure nugget of North Georgia hometown flavor.

Referred to as Old Town, this undisturbed center of historic development is almost museum quality in its rareness in the "Gwinnettization" of North Atlanta. At the same time the population growth in the area demands services, a place to call downtown and a new center of commercial and institutional functions. The need for a sense of identity and the need for protection of the unique past become critical for Suwanee in its post-Falcon plans.

When Suwanee became a Georgia Better Hometown it began a fool-proof process of sensitive redevelopment, historic preservation and downtown revitalization. The Better Hometown process, when applied to Suwanee, takes a new form... a more urban form. In many Better Hometown communities the existing downtown is underutilized and new businesses are not locating near or in the town center. Suwanee is different in this regard. Two things are happening in Suwanee that are different: **1)** the existing town center cannot accommodate the intense development that is associated with the new population base. **2)** The citizens want and demand a town center for social gathering and commercial concentration. The Better Hometown process is challenged by this difference and responded accordingly.

A community design charrette was prescribed to help city leaders and citizens evaluate their future growth. A charrette is a tool used to concentrate design services and deliver a unified vision for development. It provides, through a participatory process, concepts and design ideas to give form to how and where redevelopment should occur.



The Suwanee Charrette was organized through the services of the **Public Service and Outreach Program** at the **School of Environmental Design** at the **University for Georgia**. A team of students and professionals descended on the town for a four-day blitz September 9 – 12, 2000. What resulted was a unique scheme for preservation *and* development.

The principles of new urbanism and neotraditional planning guided the charrette. A plan that utilizes the conservation of open space and the preservation of cultural resources emerged from the charrette. What follows is a detailed description of that scheme. It should provide a format for any future planning that occurs. It contemplates a "recentering" of Suwanee's downtown and the protection of Old Town. This double whammy is unbeatable. You can have your cake and eat it, too! Suwanee must carefully follow the guidelines provided by the charrette. The city must not allow irresponsible and unplanned growth to further disintegrate the fabric of old Suwanee. This report and the examples provided through site plans, written standards and drawings will give planners, elected officials, citizens and developers a new mandate for an improved, better hometown.

Charrette definition of

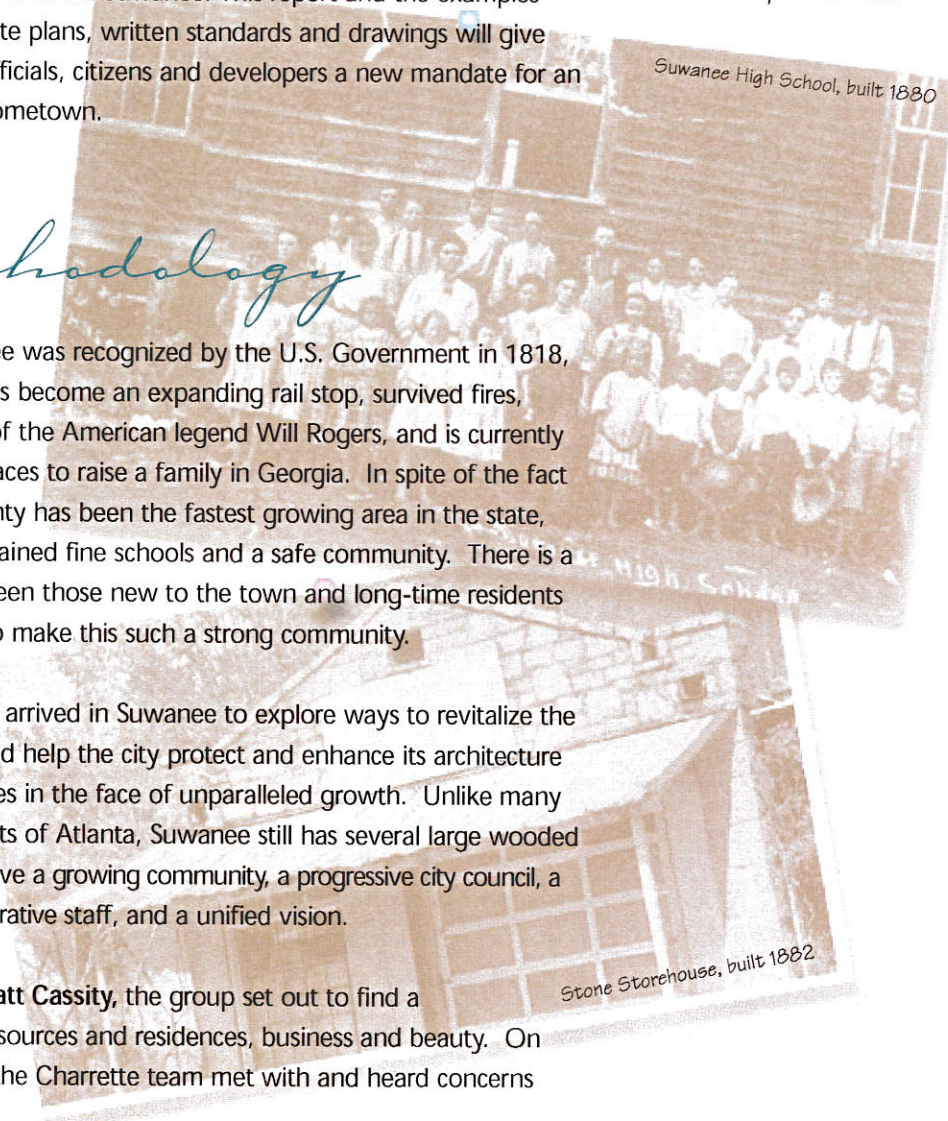
In the 19th Century Parisian architectural studios at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, students were instructed to toss their assignments in a cart, a charrette, when it was pushed between their drafting tables. The assignments were to be turned in whether complete or incomplete. This idea has taken root in American design circles and is used to describe a visioning process that is conducted for a short time period in a particular location. All energy is devoted to solving a community problem and the resulting products are presented as concepts to provide guidance for decision-makers and other professionals.

Methodology

The City of Suwanee was recognized by the U.S. Government in 1818, and since then it has become an expanding rail stop, survived fires, housed the family of the American legend Will Rogers, and is currently one of the finest places to raise a family in Georgia. In spite of the fact that Gwinnett County has been the fastest growing area in the state, Suwanee has maintained fine schools and a safe community. There is a good balance between those new to the town and long-time residents who have helped to make this such a strong community.

The Charrette team arrived in Suwanee to explore ways to revitalize the old Town Center and help the city protect and enhance its architecture and natural resources in the face of unparalleled growth. Unlike many areas on the outskirts of Atlanta, Suwanee still has several large wooded areas. They also have a growing community, a progressive city council, a professional administrative staff, and a unified vision.

Led by Professor **Pratt Cassity**, the group set out to find a balance between resources and residences, business and beauty. On Saturday morning, the Charrette team met with and heard concerns



from members of the community. Then they went out into the town and surveyed Suwanee's current condition. That evening, they met with members of **The Better Hometown Design Committee** and discussed Suwanee's Old Town Center. Monday, the Charrette team had a meeting with experts from **Georgia Tech** and the **Urban Land Institute** to discuss market feasibility and retail niche evaluations. The Monday morning session also involved funding discussions, with **DCA** representatives pointing to the possibility of available funds from the *Downtown Revolving Loan Fund*, *ISTEA*, and *Tax Increment Financing*. Afterwards, the team sequestered themselves in City Hall and went to work.



Community Input

Suwanee's goal should be to protect those resources that are irreplaceable and enhance those that are commonplace and contemporary. The things we heard in our stay here were all based on images of the past and images of regional flavor, images that are found throughout Georgia's Piedmont region, but are vulnerable to sprawling urban development.

What makes Suwanee special?

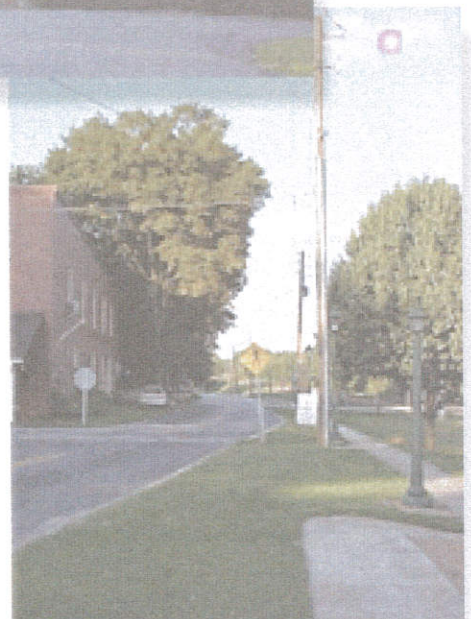
mountain simplicity • small town character • **railroad heritage**
 rolling topography • **hardwood trees** • narrow lanes • **native building materials** • family life • **Summer music series** • weekend bluegrass concerts • **neighborliness** • community festivals • **safety and convenience** • walkability • **quaintness** • agricultural legacy

What comes to mind when you think of a Town Center?

brick stores • familiarity: everyone knows someone • park • **warmth**
 trees/green • **red caboose** • benches • **gathering** • celebration
shopping • cafe/restaurant • **pedestrian facilities** • communicating
children • fun • **easy to get to**

Current characteristics of Suwanee

young families • residents are upwardly mobile • **lots of kids** • safe
good schools • good environmental character • **attractive areas**
 low rate of Out Migration • **pavilion as community gathering place**
 North Gwinnett High School is close • **Suwanee Day**



What are the impediments to achieving an ideal Town Center in Suwanee?

lack of sewer • lack of land; already "built out" • **lack of interaction; cooperation**
no overall plan • **lack of signage for Old Town, the Metal Plant** • not enough
community events • **lacks a magnet to draw more people** • lack of visual
aesthetics; fountains, lighting, etc. • **better use of the caboose** • lack of parking
scattered parking • **lack of bike lanes and area to bike** • lack of sidewalks
isolation due to no through streets

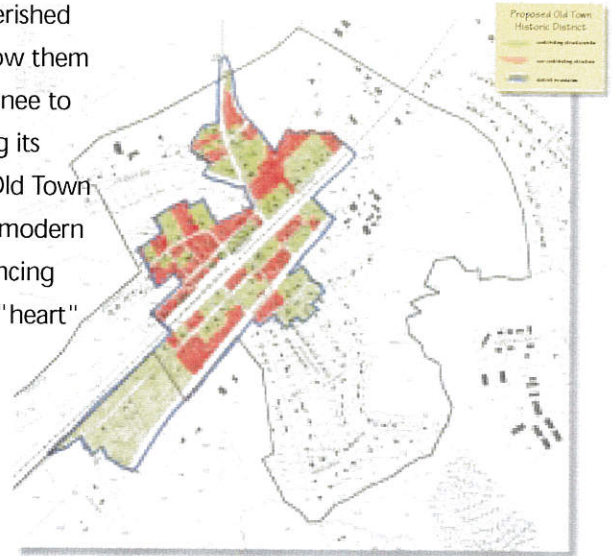
What image do you want the Town Center to have?

traditional • tasteful use of color; no neon, mauve, or taupe • **a sense of
community character** • charming • **mix of detached and non-paved
(permeable) roads** • residential areas need to relate to the revitalization of
downtown • **local businesses, not chains** • businesses that are profitable
**a centralized district to include: theatre, cafe/restaurant, bookstore, small
shop, consignment, antiques, local art** • a commitment to conservation-
based zoning changes

Improvements to be made for Suwanee

improve infrastructure • more jobs that are close to home • **stream
protection** • traffic calming needed on cut-throughs • **improvement in
pedestrian opportunities** • better use of public space • **find good location for
clock** • progress in transportation • **better water provisions** • more consideration
for Senior Citizens • **make big highway crossings less dangerous for
pedestrians** • light rail: will help Old Town become what it used to be • **need
more public park space** • limit automobile access to Old Town • **schools to go
to Old Town on field trips** • preserve historic character • skateboard park
community gathering place for African American community • restaurants in
Old Town • **community center for youth** • replica of Train Depot • **preservation
of the history of the Good Samaritan Lodge** • city arborist • **find an effective
solution to the Metal Plant problem** • ability to safely ride bikes downtown

It became clear that while the residents of Suwanee loved and cherished their Old Town area, they longed for development that would allow them to shop, play and dine at home, rather than having to leave Suwanee to seek these things. But how can Suwanee grow without destroying its small town charm? The design team found a way to protect the Old Town area and concentrate new, larger developments at Suwanee's main, modern intersection just half a mile away. By protecting the old and enhancing the new, a full and rich community is created in Suwanee, with a "heart" that its residents have been looking for.



Protect

- Historic structures and structures compatible with the historic character of Suwanee. Creating a local historic district will ensure that Old Town will retain the unique character that everyone recognizes and loves.
- Narrow lanes within the Old Town Character Area by limiting vehicular traffic.
- Civic space and gathering areas like the Caboose, the pavilion and the open areas around City Hall.
- Mixture hardwood trees and wooded roadways.
- Natural buffers, especially those along Suwanee Creek and the wetlands north of McGinnis Ferry Road and east of Buford Highway.
- Open space, especially south of Suwanee Dam Road and east of Peachtree Industrial Boulevard.



Design Guidelines

for Old Town Historic District

Residential Guidelines

General Architectural Requirements

In relation to existing buildings, all new construction within the district should:

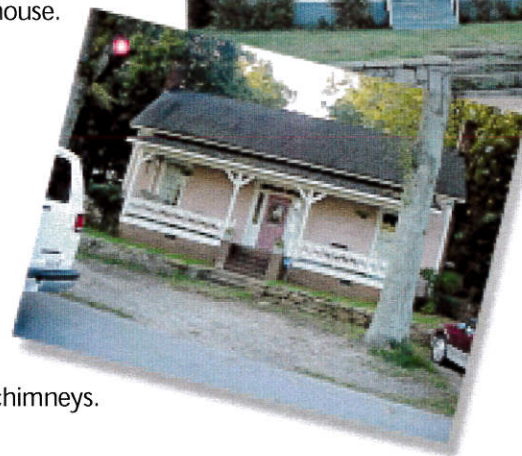
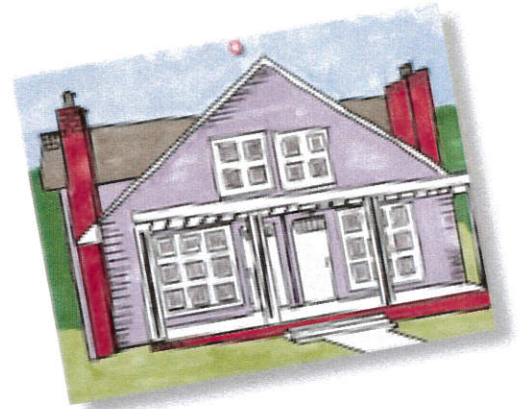
- Be similar in scale and massing with 25% maximum lot coverage.
 - Be 1 to 2 stories.
 - Have porches on the front of the building.
 - Have a minimum set back of 20 feet.
 - Be similar in orientation to the street (i.e. long side of building to street.)
 - Have gable and hip roofs — no flat roofs or multiple roof lines.
-
- If retaining walls are required they should be masonry, preferably constructed of unpainted stone or brick.
 - Front yard fencing is discouraged; if used, it should be no more than four feet high. No chain link or vinyl fencing. Agricultural wire fencing with wooden posts is appropriate. Fencing should be transparent; and should be painted or plastic coated dark green or black. Privacy fencing (solid) is inappropriate. Plant mates should be used if screening is needed.
 - Garages are discouraged; if used, they should be detached from the house and located behind a line equal to the rear wall of the house.

Building Materials

- Siding shall be wood. Foundations should be stone or brick.
- Roofing should be asphalt shingles, tin, or other metal.
- Chimneys should be brick or stone.
- Driveways of permeable paving material are encouraged.
- With the exception of accent/trim materials, there shall be no more than two primary building materials used.
- Brick and natural stone should be limited to foundations and chimneys.

The following building materials shall not be permitted

Stucco • Dry-Vit • glass (except as windows) • painted concrete block tilt/architectural pre-cast concrete • split faced block/concrete masonry unit brick veneers which are intended to simulate brick exteriors • marble limestone • terra cotta • cast stone • tiles • painted stone painted masonite brick • vinyl or aluminum siding



Residential Environment Guidelines

Any new road construction shall be in the style of existing roads.

New roads shall be

- Narrow; no more than 15' wide.
- Following with the topography of the land, minimal grading.
- Center-crowned without curbs and shall have swales on both sides.
No roadside sidewalks shall be constructed in residential areas.

- Paving materials shall remain consistent with existing paving materials.
- Intersections shall not be on right angles. The Suwanee Old Town plan should not be a grid.
- No street or signal lights shall be installed. Street signs shall be on wooden posts.
- There shall be on-street parking in the residential district.

Commercial Guidelines

Architectural requirements for new construction

- Freestanding, detached 1-2 story buildings, with similar setback to other buildings along the street.
- Awnings shall be shed style and may be made of vinyl, canvas or metal. No curved, asphalt shingle or interior-lit awnings shall be permitted.
- Building materials may include brick, stone or wood. Painted brick or stone is discouraged.
- Roof shape and pitch should follow the character of the adjacent historic buildings.
- No freestanding signs shall be allowed. Signs shall be flush on the buildings and shall be proportional to the façade or hanging. Signs should not cover more than 10% of the façade and should be externally illuminated.

The following building materials are not permitted

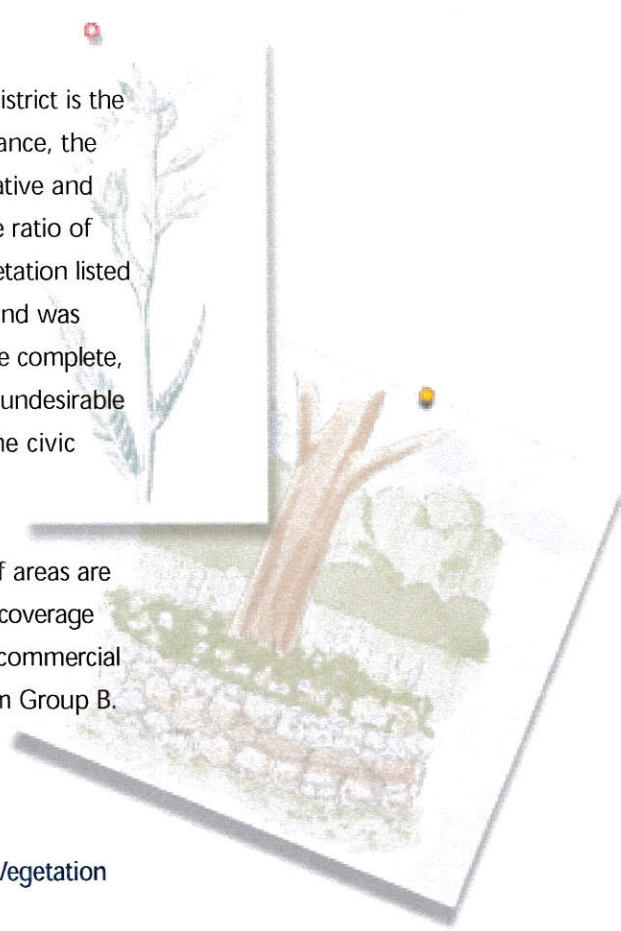
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Plant material

Another element affecting the overall appearance of the Historic District is the plant material used. To help maintain the Historic District's appearance, the following provides a basic plant palette from which to choose. Native and non-native plants are separated on the list because a change in the ratio of either creates a noticeable contrast in districts. The non-native vegetation listed is believed to be that which would have been historically planted and was compiled by a brief visual inventory in Suwanee. This list may not be complete, but should be a basis for selecting plant material. The short list of undesirable plant material was included because these plants detract from the civic character or are an environmental nuisance.

Within the residential areas, all plant material intended for non-turf areas are to be primarily drawn from Group A with no more than 20% of the coverage (including tree canopy spread) derived from Group B. Within the commercial areas, all plant material should come from Group A, and none from Group B.



Group A – Native Vegetation

Upland Shade Trees

- Southern Red Oak • Sassafras
- Water Oak • White oak
- Tulip Poplar • Magnolia
- Post Oak • Winged Elm
- Sweet Gum • Loblolly Pine

Upland Small Trees

- Dogwood • Red Maple • Cedar
- Persimmon • American Holly

Lowland Shade Trees

- Cottonwood • Box Elder • Sycamore

Lowland Small Trees

- River Birch • Black Willow
- Button Bush

Lowland Herbaceous Perennials

- Aster • Joe Pye Weed
- Cardinal Flower • Swamp Sunflower

Group B – Non-Native Vegetation

Shade Trees

- Pecan • Chinese Chestnut • Mulberry

Small Trees

- Fruiting Apple and Pear Species
- Crepe Myrtle • Silver Maple • Wax Myrtle

Shrubs

- Hydrangea • Old Fashioned Rose
- Nandina • Bridal Veil Spirea
- Yucca • Tea Olive • Cleyera

Herbaceous Perennials

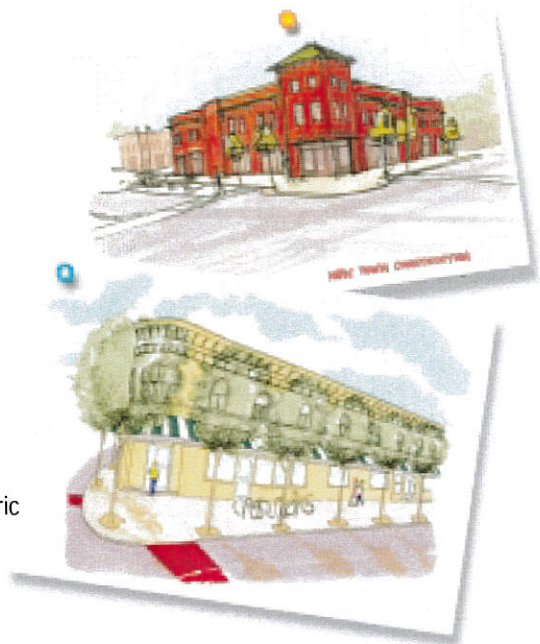
*No Stipulations

Suggested Alternatives to Undesirable Plants

No	Yes
Privet/Ligustrum	Dwarf Youpon
Bradford Pear	Any Appendix A
Leyland Cypress	Virginia Cedar
English Ivy	Winter Jasmine

Enhance

- Create a New Town Center at the intersection of Buford, Main and Lawrenceville Suwanee Road. This area should become a new mixed-use "downtown" for Suwanee's citizens and visitors alike. New construction should be densely located on the land lots at this large intersection, with parking lots/decks and neighborhoods radiating away from the core intersection. Design new buildings that are modeled after Georgia's many historic commercial downtowns: two- and three-story brick buildings at the sidewalk's edge with retail on the ground floor and residential/office space above. Creating a high density of commercial activity at this already busy node will create shopping opportunities for Suwanee residents and visitors while protecting Old Town from further development that would threaten its historic character. New Town will become the "center" and identity that Suwanee residents are longing for.



- Redesign the lane configuration and use traffic calming techniques along Lawrenceville-Suwanee Road to better manage traffic as it moves through the New Town Center. Enlarge the landscaped median at Lawrenceville Suwanee Road. Small medians can be added on both sides of the road to divide the thoroughfare from single exit lanes and parallel parking. This will allow drivers to move at a slower pace when stopping in New Town while commuters can pass through normally. Large street trees would separate the parking from pedestrians and provides a buffer between them and fast-moving traffic.

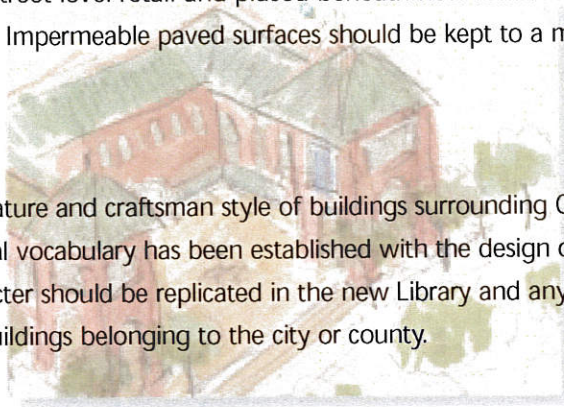


existing intersection of new Town Center (above)

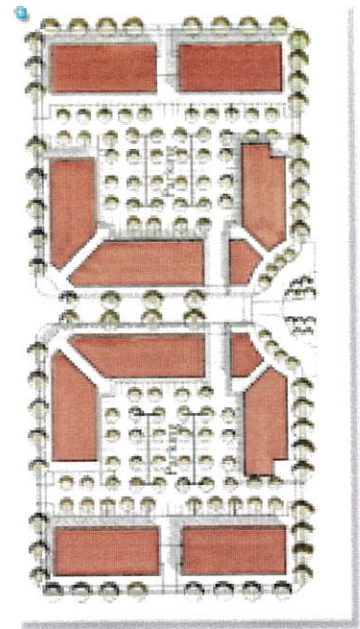
- Remove the old city hall building and expand the city-owned park to create a large, green "square" in front of the new city hall. This space should be redefined to incorporate the old cemetery at the main intersection as well. This civic square will also help to create a "center" of town by patterning itself after so many of Georgia's historic downtown courthouse squares.



- Develop adequate parking as part of the New Town Center. Parking should be easy to get to, located behind buildings, and disguised in parking decks that have street level retail and placed beneath new retail/residential structures. Impermeable paved surfaces should be kept to a minimum.



- The civic nature and craftsman style of buildings surrounding City Hall. An architectural vocabulary has been established with the design of City Hall. That character should be replicated in the new Library and any additions made to buildings belonging to the city or county.



The new Gwinnett County library in Suwanee should be designed with a similar architectural vocabulary to what is found in the new City Hall. The design should also reference historic library design: a monumental front entrance with wide steps, elevated first floor, many regularly spaced windows. This is an important public building and should be recognizable as such. It is also imperative that the Library building and its main entrance be located close to the sidewalk with a parking area behind the building. The library's design should cater to the neighborhood residents who will be arriving on foot or bike, not to the automobile.

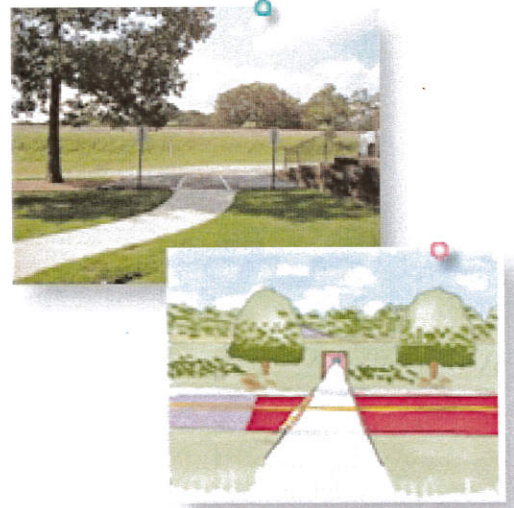


- New buildings along Buford Highway should be constructed in a residential style. Their style and placement should resemble the historic development pattern of houses in the area. Curb cuts should be minimized and parking should be placed in the rear when possible. Vegetative buffers of native plants should be required for ALL buildings along Buford Highway, especially those that do not conform to the predominantly residential appearance. Requiring a tree buffer along Buford Highway will allow for development, yet the beauty and character of this tree-lined road will be preserved. The necessary width of the buffer will vary depending on the topography of the land along the road.



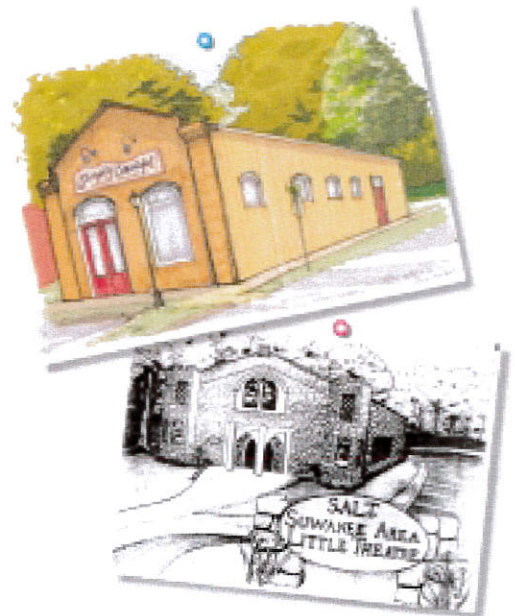
The BBQ restaurant can be redesigned and expanded on its location in the new Town Center. The design of the new building should reference the large historic houses in Old Town and will be distinctive from the rest of New Town.

- Unite the historic area of Suwanee with pedestrian pathways to link the New Town Center, the new library, Richard Trice nature walk and Richport's 'Old Suwanee' development. Pay special attention to rail line crossings. Pedestrian underpasses would serve as safe passageways between the two "halves" of Suwanee that are bisected by the railroad. Creating an underpass at the new library site that will connect to the city complex is ideal.



Section of pedestrian and bicycle circulation map (left) and example of proposed pedestrian rail underpass (above).

- Create economic incentives to attract local entrepreneurs to open a unique café, coffee shop, or small restaurant in the historic commercial buildings on Main Street. These small-scale businesses could be of the nature that could be dependent on a largely neighborhood clientel and yet could accommodate some visitors.



Historical structures can be preserved and adapted for new uses.

Charrette Team Participants

The School of Environmental Design (SED) Public Service and Outreach program is a partner with the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA) to administer the Better Hometown Program. UGA's role in the program is to provide design assistance and preservation planning input to the 40 towns which have been selected to participate in the program. This charrette is one of the services provided for Better Hometowns. The staff at DCA and the faculty and students at UGA are proud to offer our assistance and support to the City of Suwanee.

This is Suwanee's chance to go back to the future. It is now time to protect the valuable historic, natural, and human resources, while mandating the highest quality in all new development. We want to encourage you to use our recommendations as a stepping stone for community improvements. Community development is an incremental process and this should serve as an excellent beginning.



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Suwanee Design Charrette – 2000

The City of Suwanee, Georgia is located in northeast Gwinnett County. In the 1990s Suwanee was one of the fastest growing small cities in Georgia, experiencing an over 260% population growth increase between 1990 and 2000 (U.S. Census, 2000; Visser, 2006). The City grew from 2,500 people 1990 to close to 8,000 by the year 2000, and its population is continuing to increase (U.S. Census, 2000). The area known as Old Town Suwanee is the geographic center of the city. It consists of fewer than a dozen historic buildings, most of which are one story tall. Physical constraints including topography, zoning, adjacent historic neighborhoods and an abutting rail line, made it difficult for the city to direct new growth into the city's historic center.

The sprawl growth pattern characteristic of Gwinnett County is well known throughout north Georgia (Duffy, 2006; Freeman, 2005; Green, 2006). The pattern of growth is characterized by big box stores located behind expansive surface parking lots, large, rapidly constructed houses on lots of one acre or more, and wide, congested roadways. The city of Suwanee wanted to be different from the other municipalities in Gwinnett County. They wanted to retain what was left of their community character and grow in a more sustainable way, reported Denise Brinson, Suwanee Economic Development Director (D. Brinson, personal communication, Feb 6, 2007). The city was accepted into the DCA Better Hometown program in 2000. A few months later the UGA charrette for Suwanee took place; the project focused on improving the city's historic downtown as well as recommendations for the development of a New Town Center. The mixed-use Town Center was recommended as a focal point for the community's new growth. Mixed residential and commercial uses in a compact urban form would place less of a burden on the city's infrastructure and create a walkable, pedestrian-friendly, and more sustainable city (Suwanee Charrette Report, 2000).

The city of Suwanee implemented the charrette recommendations within a few years (Fig 5.9). In order to move from concept to implementation, additional studies and design work were needed (D. Brinson, personal communication, February 6, 2007). A total of six planning, market analysis, architecture, and engineering firms studied, designed and redesigned Suwanee's New Town Center following the UGA design charrette. These studies validated the city's interest in the New Town Center concept by demonstrating that the local economy could support it. Studies also determined that the New Town Center could be very popular and valuable because of the scarcity of comparable options in the area.

The city proposed a 17.7 million dollar tax referendum for open space and parkland acquisition, which was voter approved in 2001, and resulted a 140% tax increase for the community ("Open Spaces," 2005). A voter approved tax increase of this magnitude represented an impressive amount of faith on the part of Suwanee residents in local government ("Open Spaces," 2005). Denise Brinson, noted that resident trust in the city has been built over time as the city has maintained a reputation of fiscal responsibility and following through on promises.

Another decision, which was key in the implementation of Suwanee's New Town Center was the city's establishment of an Urban Redevelopment Agency (URA). Under Georgia law O.C.G.A. 36-61, cities and counties have the authority to establish urban redevelopment agencies to undertake redevelopment projects. After creating a URA and adopting the Urban Collage Inc. designed plan for the Suwanee New Town Center, the land was declared as blighted (D. Brinson, personal communication, February 6, 2007). The URA purchased the land at a market rate from the property owners using bond referendum funds.

Construction of the New Town Center began in 2003. As of February, 2007, the first of several construction phases had been completed, and all available residential and commercial space was fully occupied (D. Brinson, personal communication, February 6, 2007).



Figure 5.2 Suwanee New Town Center. View of mixed use residential and commercial buildings from across New Town Center Park.



Figure 5.3 New neighborhood adjoining the mixed use area of Suwanee New Town Center.



Figure 5.4 Site plan for Suwanee Town Center Park. Design by Jon Benson and Associates.



Figure 5.5 Aerial photograph of Suwanee Town Center Park. Photo taken shortly after construction was completed in 2003.



Figure 5.6 Suwanee Town Center Park 2005.



Figure 5.7 Suwanee New Town Center and adjoining neighborhood.



Figure 5.8 Phased development plan for Suwanee New Town Center. Each colored section surrounding the Suwanee Town Center Park has been purchased for development. Construction in the blue, purple, gray, and green areas has been completed.