Centerville

NEW | TOWN | CENTER





Produced by the University of Georgia Center for Community Design & Preservation in partnership with the City of Centerville | March 3 - 5, 2007

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CHARRETTE REPORT

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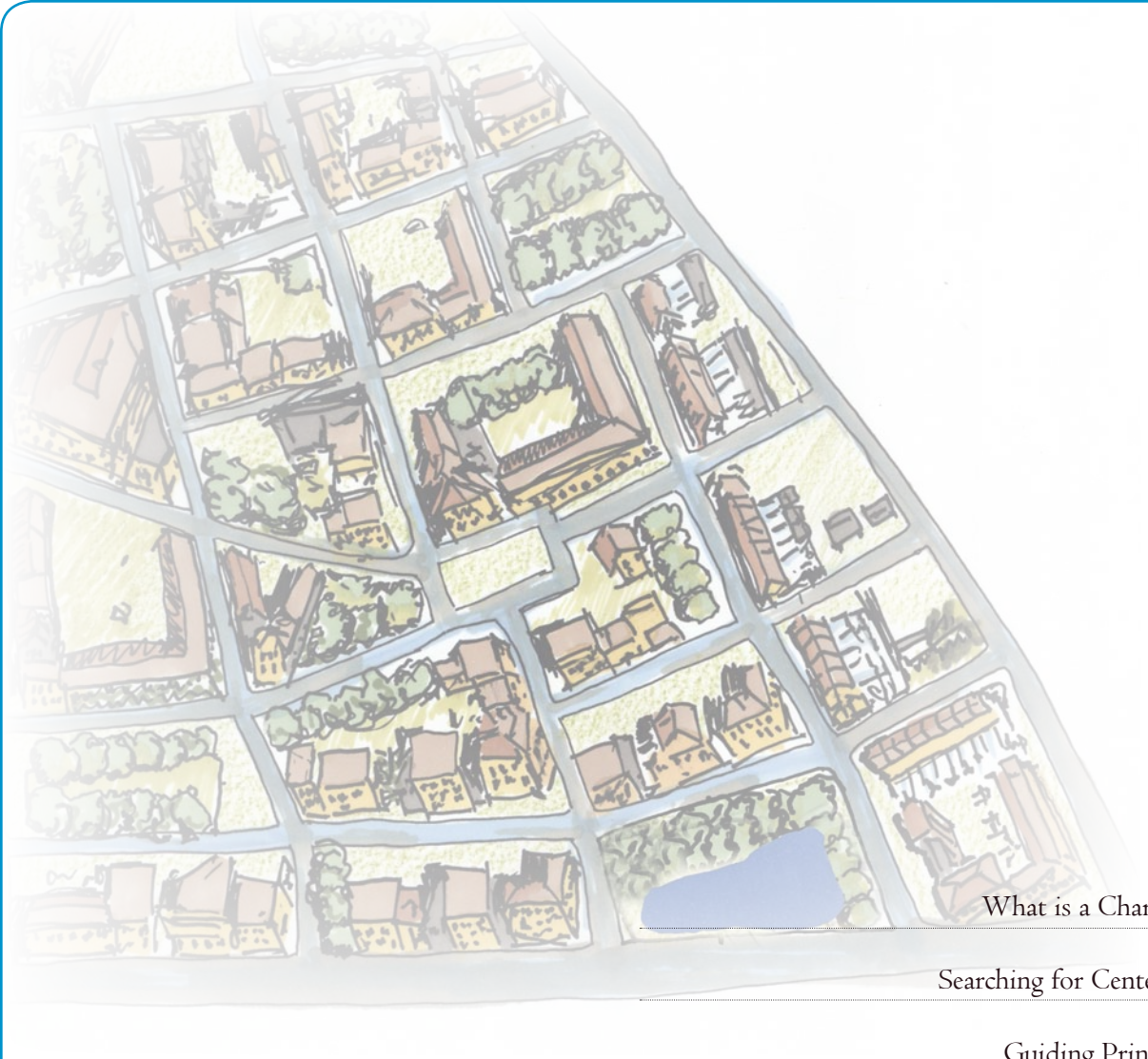

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What is a Charrette

Charrette cart.

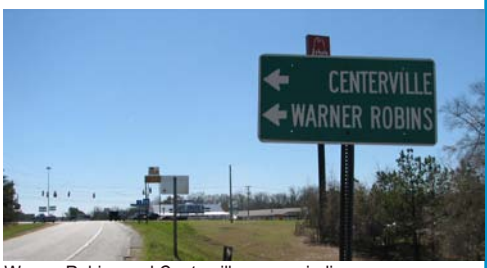
WHAT is a CHARRETTE?

Charrette is a French word that translates "little cart." At the leading architecture school in the 19th century, the École des Beaux-Arts ("School of Fine Arts") in Paris, students were assigned tough design problems to complete under time pressure. They would continue sketching as fast as the could, even as the little carts (charrettes) carried their drawing boards away to be judged and graded.

Today the word "charrette" describes a rapid, intense, and creative work session, usually lasting a week or more, in which a design team focuses on a particular design problem and arrives at a collaborate solution. Charrettes are product oriented, and are fast becoming a preferred method to solve planning challenges confronting American cities.

The University of Georgia charrette for Centerville took place March 3 - 5, 2007 in Centerville's city hall. This project represents a collaborative effort between the University of Georgia, the City of Centerville, Centerville's Downtown Development Authority and the Middle Georgia Regional Development Commission (RDC). The project studied a pre-defined area of the City of Centerville and provided design solutions which can be used to sustainability grow a downtown for the city which literally lacks a center.

The charrette process is a way of evaluating resources through new eyes. Fresh ideas are what help communities maintain and build their vitality. With this report and supporting materials, readers will experience the enthusiasm and commitment which comes from a broad group of students, faculty, practitioners, and the public.



Warner Robins and Centerville appear indistinguishable from each other.

Student rendering perspective of new town center

Working during charrette

Charrette team

Developing ideas during charrette

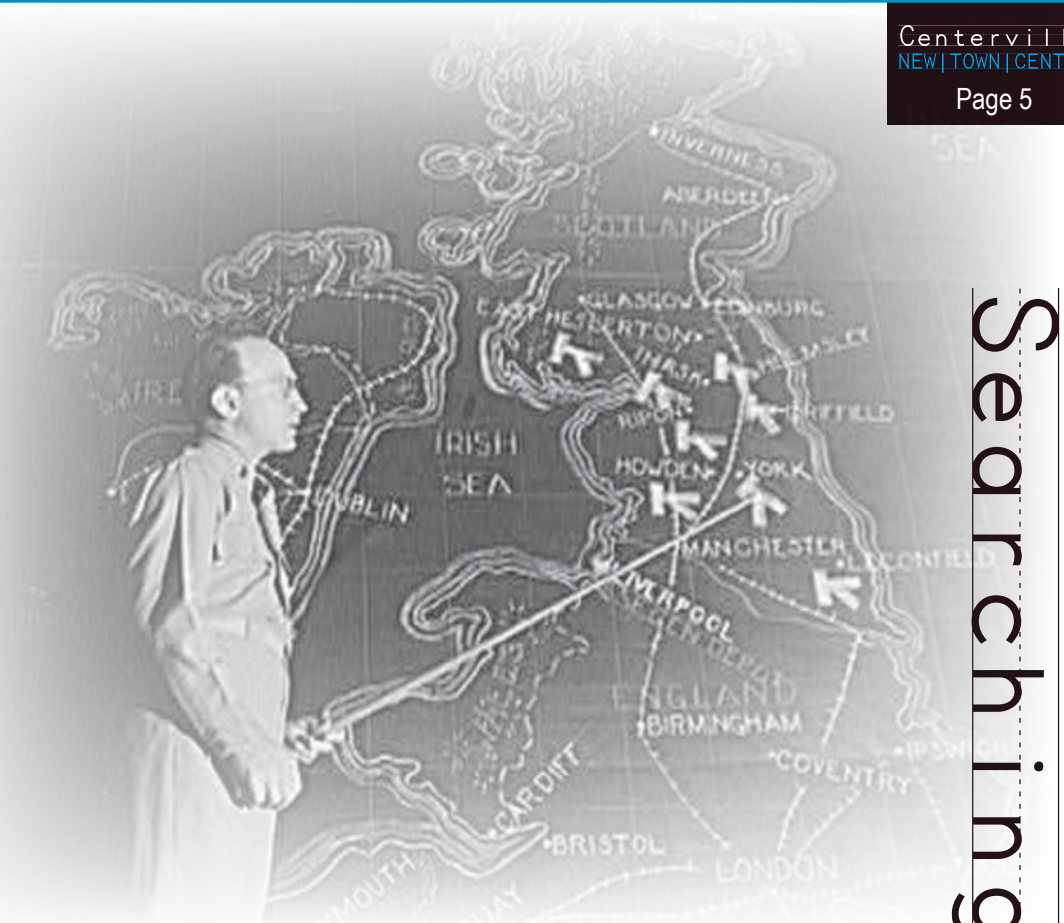
Centerville Water tower.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Robins Air Force Base.

Galleria Mall, Centerville.

Galleria Mall from above, Centerville.

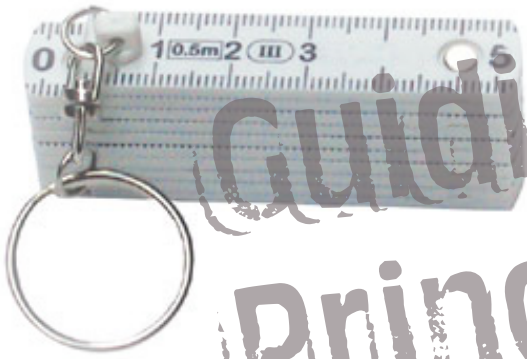


Searching for Centerville

SEARCHING for CENTERVILLE

The charrette team began their work at a community input session held in City Hall on Saturday, March 3, 2007. The team heard from local residents and city staff, walked and drove the streets to uncover the community's identity.

We wondered: Where is the center of Centerville? It was illusive. We wondered, is Centerville just an exit on the Interstate? Is it just a neighbor of Warner Robins? It wasn't always easy to find. But after searching, we began to pull the pieces together and determined that Centerville is more than a mall, more than a water tank, more than a bedroom community for Macon or the Robins Air Force base. It is a distinctive community which needs a focus. This project developed concepts for a Center for Centerville.



Guiding Principles

Successful town centers are built upon fundamental elements of city building which are evident in the most beloved cities and towns in the world. Successful cities do not just happen, they must be continually shaped and guided. The guiding principles of the charrette team's work should be followed by the city of Centerville in the development of any new town center concept.

A. Utilize compact building design

1. Require buildings to front streets & public spaces, with parking in the rear
2. Buildings should share party walls with their neighbors
3. Multi-story buildings are encouraged
4. Allow developers to share the cost of stormwater abatement in lieu of on site mitigation.

B. Create a walkable, connected community

1. Invest in sidewalks & crosswalks
2. Reduce street widths to slow traffic and encourage pedestrian crossing
3. Line streets with trees, providing shelter, cooling sidewalks, and separating walkers from automobile traffic
4. Buffer sidewalks with on street parking
5. Encourage pedestrian-friendly connections to adjacent neighborhood areas
6. Capitalize on green space

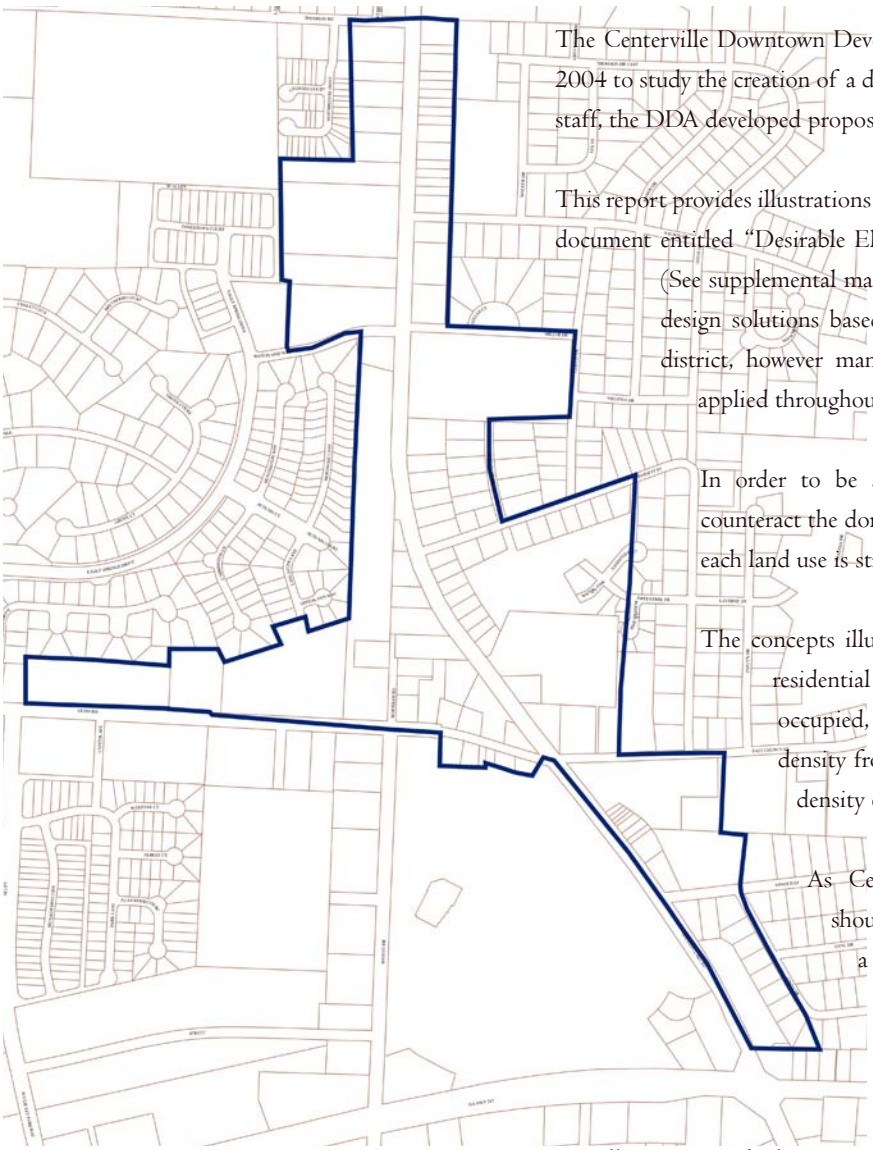
C. Mix building uses

1. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices
2. Reserve special sites for civic buildings
3. Invest in special public spaces

D. Insist on a network of interconnected streets

1. Build a street grid by avoiding cul-de-sacs
2. Reduce traffic congestion through an interconnected grid of streets
3. Leave a legacy for future generations, by making Centerville adaptable for transit opportunities

CONCEPT



The Centerville Downtown Development Authority (DDA), was formed in 2004 to study the creation of a downtown for Centerville. Working with city staff, the DDA developed proposed downtown district boundaries.

This report provides illustrations to support the vision described in the DDA's document entitled "Desirable Elements for a New Downtown Centerville." (See supplemental materials). The charrette team developed their design solutions based on the area designated as the downtown district, however many of the principles could and should be applied throughout the city.

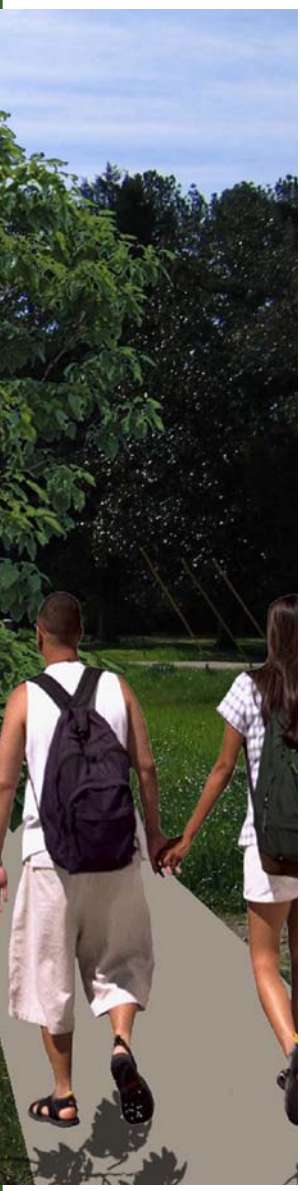
In order to be a truly vital downtown, Centerville must counteract the dominant characteristic of sprawl which is that each land use is strictly segregated from others.

The concepts illustrated in this report propose a variety of residential units, including both rental and owner occupied, following a progression of decreasing density from the highest-density center to the lowest-density edge.

As Centerville grows and redevelops, the city should pursue a continuous street network with a hierarchy, from high-capacity boulevards to narrow rear lanes or alleys. Neighborhood streets should have relatively narrow roadways, small curb radii, and sidewalks, to accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists as well as motor vehicles. Lots narrower than 50 feet should have parking accessed from the rear by a lane or alley. Parking lots and garage doors should not face the street.

Greening Houston Lake Road

A beautified Houston Lake Road, (looking south) with new ammenities: street trees, a vegetated median, and new sidewalks separated from the roadway by a planting strip.



Existing conditions of Houston Lake Road north of Highway 247.

Rendering of the same area of Houston Lake Road with street trees, illustrating the difference small steps can make in growing a more pedestrian friendly Centerville.

Greening the way!

When the team looked at Houston Lake Road, immediately the need for softening of this exposed space with plant materials was obvious. Currently, it is hot in the summer and lacking pedestrian space.

ONE OF THE FIRST STEPS must be the planting of street trees along Houston Lake Road. Vegetation will provide an element of distinction from the dreariness of other roads leading into Warner Robins. It will also slow traffic and give people a reason to get out of their cars. Visitors find it difficult to tell whether they are in Centerville or Warner Robins. Even small steps such as street trees and shrubs on Houston Lake Road, will make visitors and residents feel themselves being pulled toward a center.

Houston Lake Road should be a place where it is pleasant to walk, pleasant to invest in, and a place where businesses make changes that are compatible with a new, unique Centerville character. To do this, infrastructure improvements and other physical changes along the highway are necessary.

New Town Center Concept One

Three concepts for the development of Centerville's new town center emerged. All of the solutions adhere to the over arching guiding principles of this report but take slightly different approaches in applying those principles.

New Town Center Concept One

Houston Lake Road with a tree lined median, sidewalks, street trees and downtown buildings lining the street.

Bird's eye view of concept one, illustrating a proposed round about at the intersection of Margie Drive and Gunn Road, mixed use buildings and parking behind buildings.

New Town Center Concept One

1

Concept one envisions a dense commercial and residential node for Centerville's new town center. Buildings are illustrated in pink with parking in grey. Parking is located on-street and in the interior of blocks. This configuration allows for the building facades to front the tree lined streets, as is typical of traditional downtowns.

The proposal envisions the intersection of Margie Drive and Gunn Road replaced with a roundabout traffic circle to calm traffic and provide additional access to the new town center. The vision for Margie Drive is a beautiful, walkable avenue; Houston Lake Road is transformed into a four lane boulevard with a central tree-lined median. Urban style parks anchor the new town center near the current intersection of Bassett St. and Houston Lake Rd., and at the intersection of Houston Lake Road and Gunn Road. A new, pedestrian walkway is proposed to connect the residents of Eagle Springs neighborhood to the new town center.

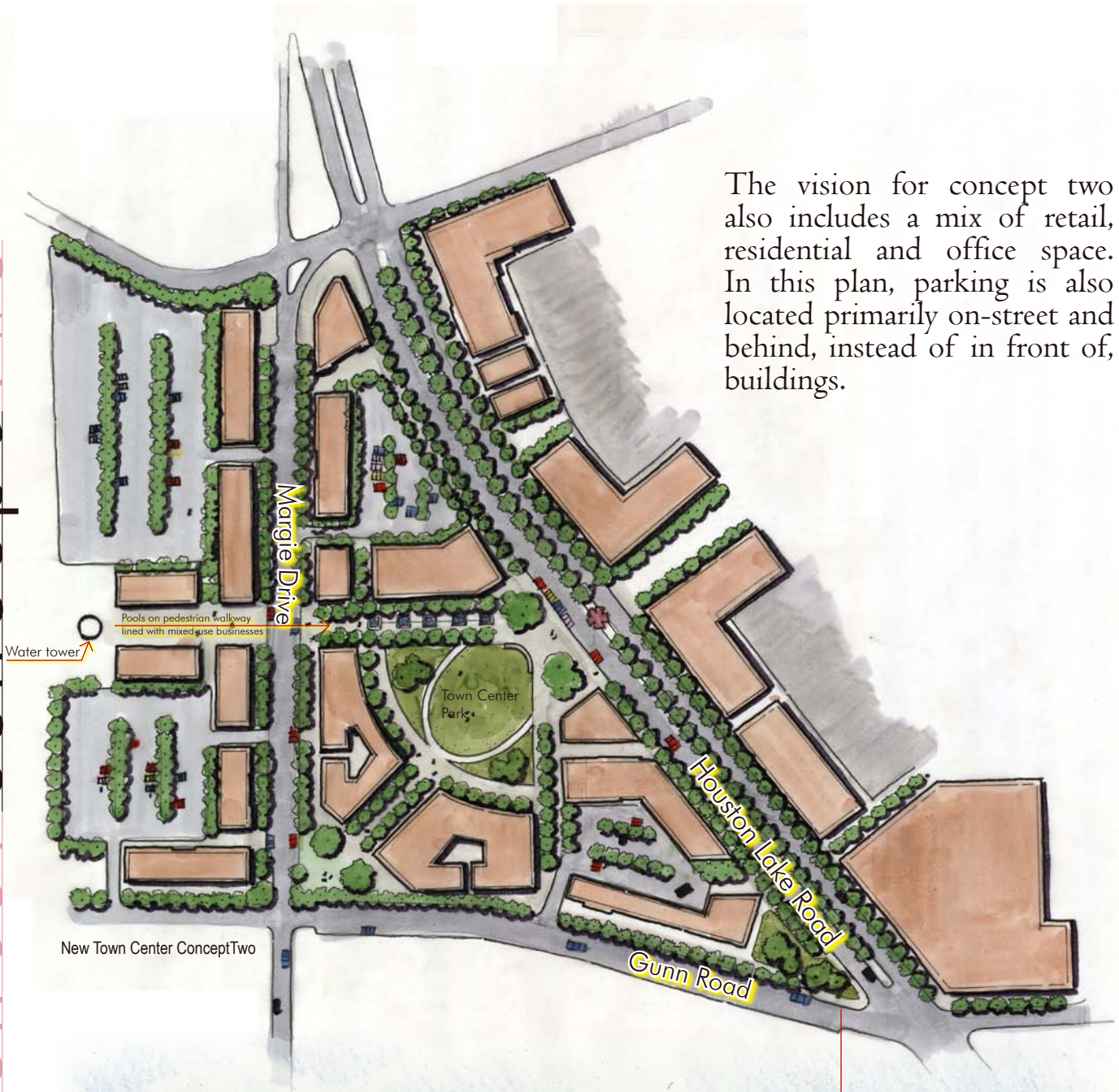
The proposed mix of business uses in all three concepts includes office, retail and housing. Additional uses such as civic, governmental or educational are encouraged and will positively contribute to the function of the downtown. The mix of building uses is essential for the city to realize its goal of an active, thriving, downtown district. Future studies should include market analysis to determine the square footage of each type of land use that can be accommodated.

Sidewalks and tree lined streets form an interconnected grid throughout all three concept plans. Downtown streetlights should be designed to support the character of downtown, control glare, minimize direct upward light emission, and promote effective security. Light fixture and pole height should be scaled proportionally to the adjacent buildings.

Business signs should make a positive contribution to the general appearance of the street. The scale of signs should be proportional to the building on which they are placed. Pedestrian oriented signs that are designed to be easily readable from the sidewalk are encouraged.

New Town Center Concept Two

The vision for concept two also includes a mix of retail, residential and office space. In this plan, parking is also located primarily on-street and behind, instead of in front of, buildings.



Mixed use building and trees at the corner of Houston Lake Rd. and Gunn Rd. signal a sense of arrival.

New Town Center Concept Two

Bird's eye view of concept 2, illustrating the town center park, mixed use buildings and the Centerville water tower terminating an important vista.

2

Pedestrian circulation is encouraged through several new avenues and greenspaces. A central urban park, illustrated in the plan serves as a public gathering space for outside concerts and events. A pedestrian walkway with a series of water features is a fundamental element of this plan. The axis of the pedestrian walk is terminated with a view of the Centerville water tower.

The illustrated series of pools are located along the north side of the proposed park; nearby benches and street trees are also illustrated. Those that work, live and shop in the downtown will enjoy the sound of moving water and the cooling effect of the pools and shade trees.

To improve the transition from the most urban areas of downtown to the existing, adjacent residential neighborhoods, building height and massing should decrease incrementally. This will make the downtown more compatible and bring the districts together rather than creating an abrupt demarcation between the two.

View of pedestrian walkway lined with mixed-use businesses.

New Town Center Concept Three

Central Park

Rather than directing new growth inside the triangular piece of land created by the proposed extension of Margie Drive, this team proposes a central park to become the visual identity for Centerville.

Mixed-use buildings front Margie Drive, Houston Lake Road, and Gunn Road on one side, and a central park is located on the other. On-street parking, parallel parking is located on either side of the three roads, providing a generous amount of spaces that also contribute to traffic calming within the new town center. The proposed central green space, while providing identity to Centerville, also serves as a public gathering space for civic functions and passive recreation.

This plan also emphasizes connections to the Galleria Mall through infill buildings on the south side of Gunn Road, which step down to the Galleria.

New Town Center ConceptThree

New Town Center Concept three

Bird's eye view of concept 3, illustrating central park and Galleria Mall in the background.

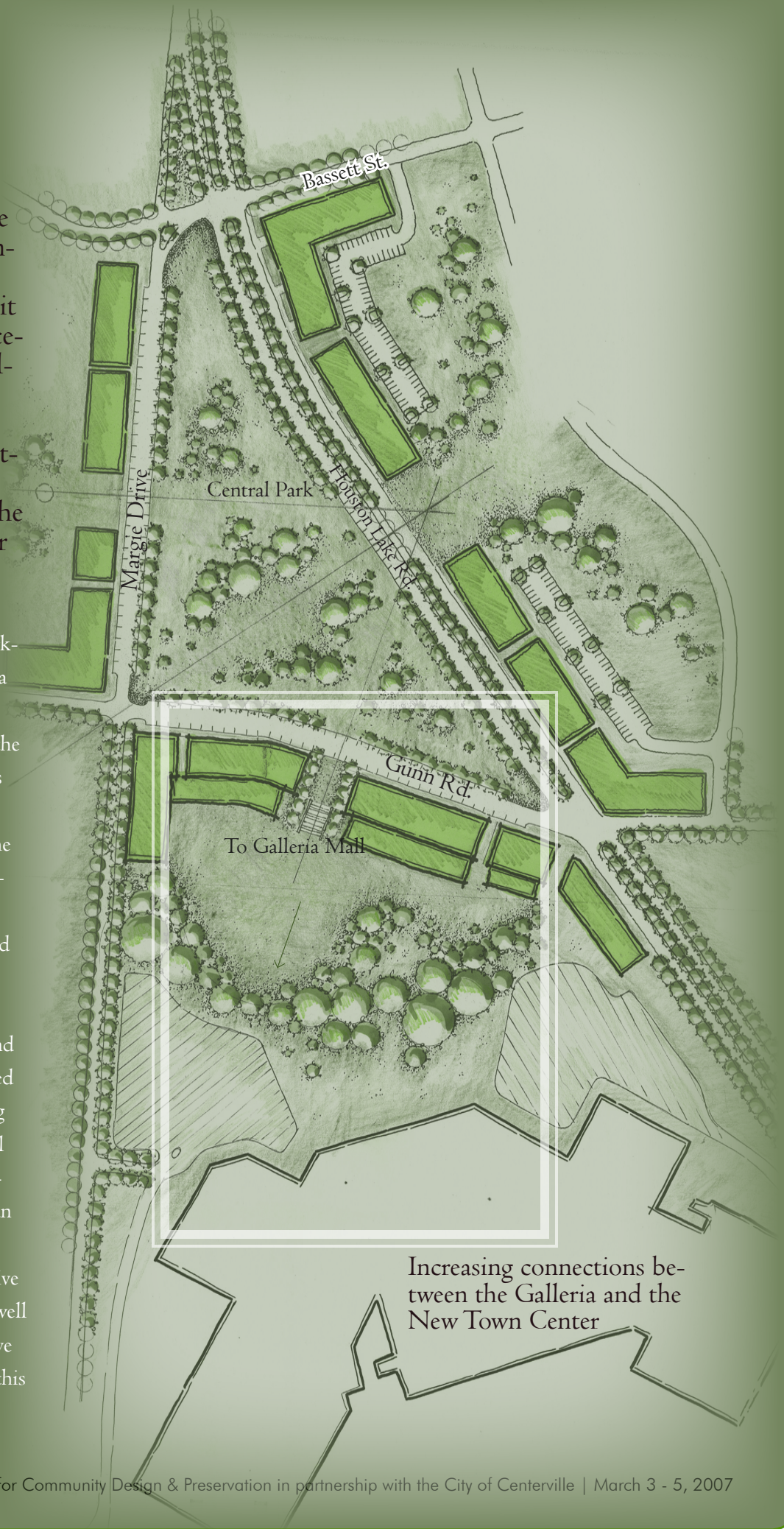
Studies have shown that people feel more comfortable in towns where buildings frame the street in close proximity to sidewalks and each other. In Centerville's new town center, buildings must sit close to the street, framing the roadways, creating a more pleasant pedestrian environment. Pedestrians should be buffered from automobile traffic by street trees, wide sidewalks, and planting strips. When buildings are designed traditionally and scaled for humans, investment potential is raised, a unique and marketable core of buildings is created, and quality of life increases.

Mixed use buildings with ground floor retail and residential apartments above.

Connecting Town Center to the Galleria Mall

Currently the mall is the commercial core of Centerville. While this is a good economic engine, it is not a very good "placemaker." It is an internalized retail structure of typical suburban form. For these reasons a greater attempt to urbanize the mall and link it to the externalized town center is needed.

The topography of the rear parking area lends itself to creating a stair stepped promenade to the elevated town center. Through the introduction of tiered buildings that can take full advantage of the steep hillside and capture the surrounding view. This connection is critical for unifying the two seemingly incompatible land use patterns. The way that this is accomplished can be tailored to fit the needs of merchants and landowners. Drivers have created an "unofficial" dirt path linking Houston Lake Road to the mall parking which is a clear demonstration of the need for an urban design change to link the lower level to the upper zone. Attractive vegetation and seating areas as well as elevators for persons who have difficulty climbing stairs make this solution especially inviting.



Increasing connections between the Galleria and the New Town Center

Section view of tiered building fronting the Galleria to the left and Gunn Rd. to the right

Approaching mixed use building from the Galleria, sloping up toward Gunn Rd.

Rethinking the Galleria Mall

Research and real estate trends have shown that the type of retail that people are attracted to is no longer the enclosed shopping mall. About ten years ago, when you asked kids where they would go, they would tell you that they go hang out at the Mall. Now, when they have access to them, the majority of kids will hang out in downtowns.

This represents a significant shift in retail trends. Today, in cases where you find malls being built, they often look more like a mall turned inside out. The retailers call them lifestyle centers, and they really begin to look like a typical downtown by making parcels of a site function a little differently. This concept explores that.

The Galleria Mall is currently doing well. However, when you look ahead 10, 15, 20 years, that may no longer be the case. Centerville should have a plan to prepare for the demise of the Mall, and the reintegration of this site into the fabric of the city.

Existing conditions circa 2006

We looked at this in a step-by-step basis. The first thing you look at when you start doing this is: how is it connected to the community? Right now you have a racetrack with a main entrance and a few side entrances.

Initial progress

However, if you visually connect the roadways, you can begin to see neighborhood and town form. As that Mall changes over time, perhaps there are some anchors that are staying, but breaking the Mall apart can be something that you plan for.

In our generation

Over a period of 75 years, 100 years, you might actually have a very vital grid pattern that reconnects your town. You can prepare for a better quality experience than living in sprawl.

Rethinking the Galleria Mall

A two-story office building is created from the blank walls of a former department store in Chattanooga, Tennessee. (Courtesy of Dover Kohl & Partners).

Galleria Mall: long term prospects

The long term prospects for the redevelopment of the Galleria Mall include reintegrating the entire site into an interconnected grided network of streets and blocks.

The approach we describe to mall redevelopment is not new. The Eastgate Mall in Chattanooga, Tennessee has undergone the transformation from dead mall to vibrant town center.

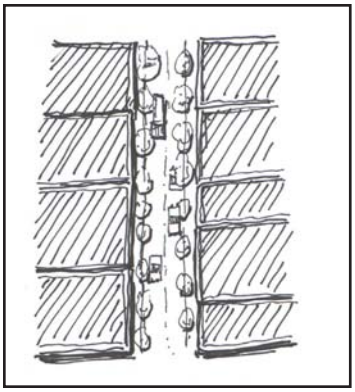
Planning Firm, Dover, Kohl & Partners completed the redevelopment plan which emphasized incremental phases responding to market demand. The mall is to be gradually replaced with normal, time-tested mixed use building types found in the best traditional town centers. Buildings will be arranged to form high quality, well-defined public streets and spaces, creating higher real estate values. Each new piece will add to make the picture more complete.

When the time comes for Centerville to begin the redevelopment of the Galleria Mall, special sites should be reserved for civic buildings. The majority of buildings should be multi story and mixed-use. Instead of looking out from highway 247 onto a sea of asphalt, a vital neighborhood and commercial area could exist, filled with character and high quality architecture.

The way to achieve this design quality is design guidelines, which is an architectural vocabulary: a combination of pedestrian amenities, shaded sidewalks and trees, bricked faced buildings, will play in unison rather than single notes played alone. As time goes on, you begin to have pedestrians on the street, as the city is restored.

New Construction in the Downtown District

These guidelines will help create a new and unique identity for an area of Centerville where little to no cohesive visual character exists. These guidelines will create a safe, attractive and cohesive pedestrian-friendly environment. The success of these guidelines depends upon cooperation between building owners, politicians and developers. For best results during implementation, a regulatory overlay district that makes these guidelines compulsory helps maintain consistency for new development even if it is being done by a variety of people using a variety of funding tools (see section XII).

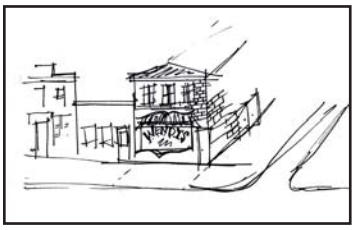


Siting

Zero lot lines – the setback of buildings should be no different than its neighbors and all buildings should be placed bordering the sidewalk

The downtown district's character should be village-like so that buildings should be close to one another and the sidewalk to form a continuous urban wall

Buildings



Facades of buildings visible from the public right of way should appear detailed and articulated (they should not appear as rear entrances if the public can see them)

Franchise architecture should reflect the design characteristics found within the downtown district rather than portraying a corporate identity foreign to the district

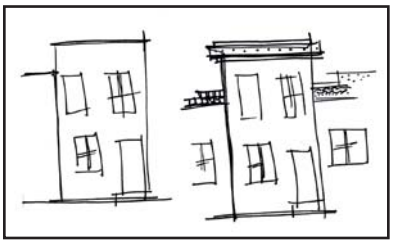
Primary entrances must face pedestrian traffic, though secondary entrances are encouraged

Must be two to three story buildings

Ground floors should be dedicated to commercial space and upper stories may be commercial if market will support it

Ornamentation should be compatible with the visual character of the district

Roofs



Tops of buildings should be finished with an architectural feature such as a cornice

Alternating roof heights, style and elements are encouraged to add dimension

Mechanical equipment located on roofs must be placed in least visible location

Both pitched and flat roofs are acceptable

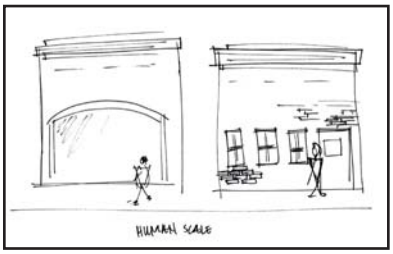
Windows and Doors

Should be human scale

Commercial buildings should incorporate glass storefronts

Facades without windows or doors should be avoided

Window openings can include traditional building elements such as arches, shutters, transoms and multi-paned sashes



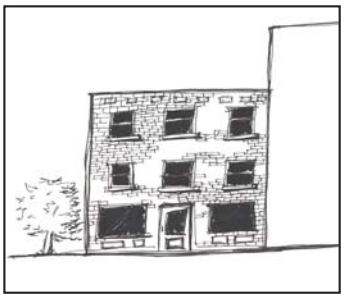
Windows can be double hung (i.e. upper and lower movable parts), casement, or other traditional window designs

No vinyl or other synthetic windows should be allowed

Certain building designs may accommodate alternative window designs, but should be used sparingly (such as large pane windows for upper story loft units)

Window heights and styles should vary between different facades

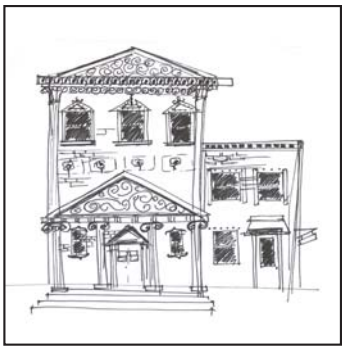
Only clear glass should be used; reflective or tinted glass is not compatible with district character



Exterior Building Materials

Traditional materials should be used

Brick exteriors should be the predominate material for the district



Materials on the exterior of buildings do not have to be the same; detailing should be subordinate to the brick exterior, and may vary

Ornamentation on buildings should not be excessive or attempt to replicate historic elements

Appurtenant features

Space should be provided for outdoor activities at the front or rear of buildings; in some cases space may be provided on the sides of buildings

Some structures should include stoops and porches to convey traditional character

Individual garden space is appropriate for some buildings, but not all

Awnings

Are intended for shade and shelter

Should be fixed

Should not curve or be internally illuminated

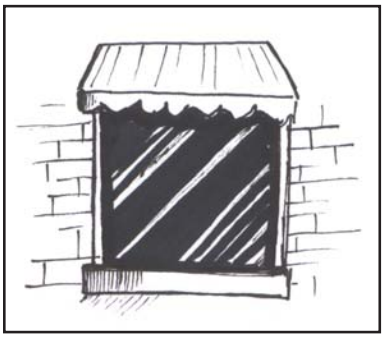
Natural materials should be used; metal is acceptable, but should be kept at a minimum across any given façade

Should not obscure building details and should fit within window and door openings

Should not extend across the entire width of the building

Retail logos and business names may be placed on the skirt or face of the awning but should be scaled to the size of the building

Signs

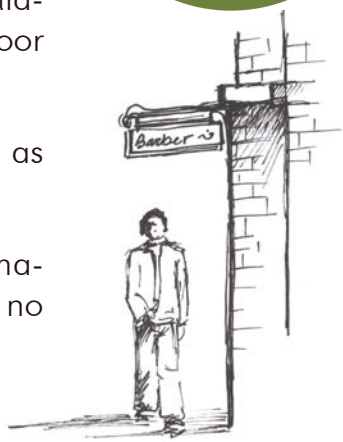


Signs should be proportional to the buildings façade and should comply with the sign ordinance for Centerville

Signs should be placed in traditional locations on buildings such as transoms, "sign bands," or painted on door and window glass

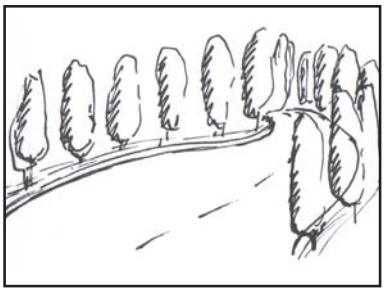
Signs may extend from buildings as hanging signs as long as they are small and pose no danger

Off-premise signs should be monument type with a masonry base, no internal illumination and should be no more than 30 square feet



Landscape

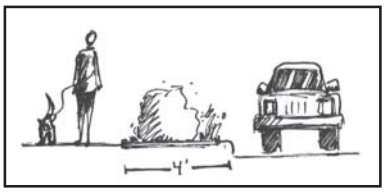
When feasible mechanical equipment and other new utilities should be buried or placed in the rear of buildings



All corridors should be vegetated and have street trees

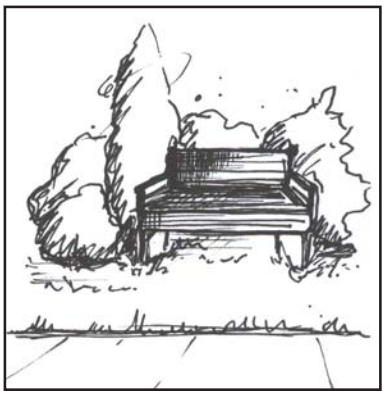
Canopy trees should be placed where there are no power lines; under-story trees are more appropriate beneath power lines

All sidewalks should be bordered by a four foot verge (a planting strip between the curb and the edge of the sidewalk)



Where street trees cannot be accommodated, easily maintained and drought resistant, low growing shrubs should be planted

Street Furniture and Lighting



New street furniture and lighting should not appear overly ornate or attempt to duplicate a historic precedent never found in Centerville

Street furniture should be human scale and placed inconspicuously

Areas for seating should be carefully considered and placed near human activity

Implementation Strategies

GEORGIA URBAN REDEVELOPMENT ACT

Benefits for local government under the Georgia Urban Redevelopment Act (O.C.G.A. 36-61)

- Gives cites the ability to buy, sell, and assemble property for redevelopment purposes.
- Expands public financing options available to local governments (revenue bonds, fees, and taxes).
- Promotes public-private partnerships by permitting long term intergovernmental contracts.
- Allows cities to develop enforceable master plans because URAs give municipalities the ability to waive local development regulations, allowing for otherwise illegal features such as cottage development, narrow streets, and mother-in-law suites.
- Provides flexibility; sale of property under the act need not be to the highest bidder. Competitive RFPs may be solicited and evaluated; bidder's qualification and the desirability of their concept plans may be considered.
- Conditions related to the Urban Redevelopment Plans must be attached to deeds and will continue to apply to the land regardless of future ownership

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

In Georgia cities, implementation strategies are as varied as the towns themselves. They range from using regional and statewide service providers like the Regional Development Center, state agencies like the Department of Community Affairs, academic institutions, not-for-profit organizations and techniques for marketing opportunities to the private sector. The right combination of these approaches is the responsibility of the local organizers and stakeholders, in this case the Downtown Development Authority, property owners and elected officials.

Communities, who embark on major redevelopment schemes, like the one proposed for Centerville, are most successful when they use a combination of strategies. The Georgia Department of Community Affairs offers a handy guide to implementation for projects on their website: http://www.dca.state.ga.us/. Additionally, we have included in the Supplemental Material at the end of this report two articles describing different approaches to making projects happen.

Particularly useful for many redevelopment projects is the Georgia Urban Redevelopment Act of 1955. This Act and the process of using it for community improvement is one that must be considered carefully. A copy of the Act is also included in the Supplemental Material.

Using private sector incentives and marketing the projects to private developers will be a key component of successful project completion. Many communities rely on the private sector to carry their ideas to fruition. Developers adept in town center planning in neo-traditional contexts are becoming more and more numerous. New urbanism and the return to universal principles of good city building have created a group of architects and real estate developers who understand the delicate and sensitive approach needed in projects that break from the corporate/franchise model of sprawl-based development.

Communities no longer have to reinvent the wheel to have successful projects. Georgia and the other states in southeast are learning from each other that best management practices for implementing redevelopment projects must be shared.

Supplemental Material

Suwanee
Medium City Winner,
Community & Economic Development

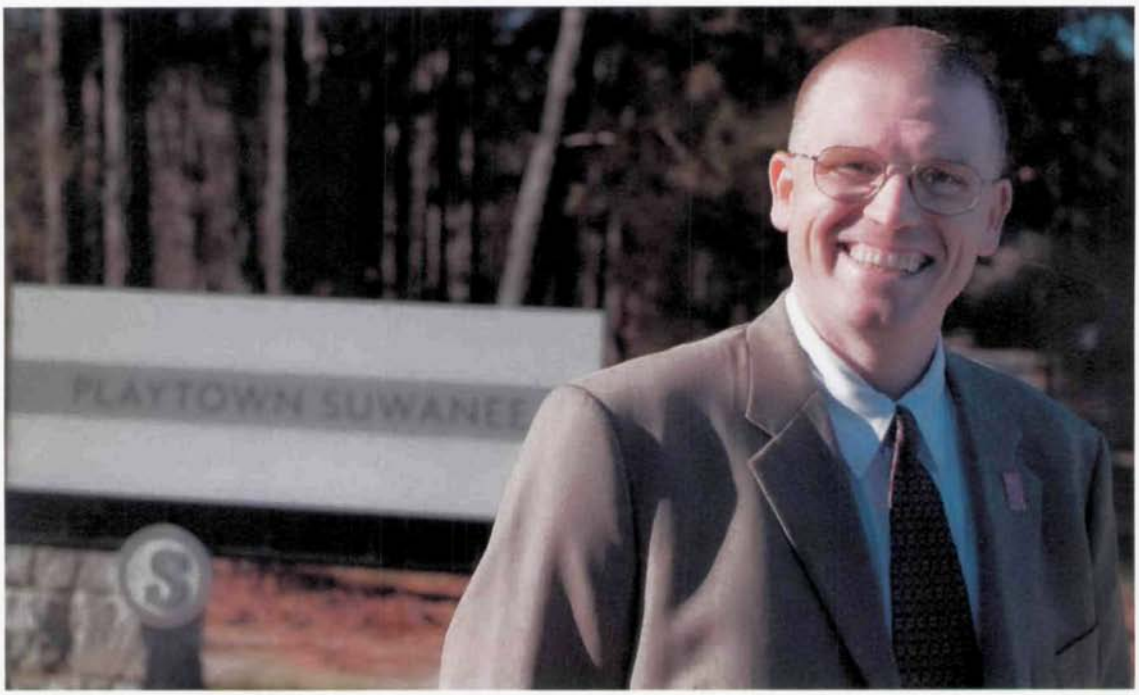


Photo: RL Hodnett

Going green: City Manager Hardin Watkins says Suwanee voters approved a 140 percent tax increase to fund new greenspace

Open Spaces

Embracing parks and greenspace for a growing city

As the end of the last century approached, residents of Suwanee must have felt they were about to be washed away by the flood of new arrivals to their community.

From 1990 to 2000, the little Gwinnett County town grew 262 percent to a population of 8,700. In the wake of that growth, the landscape changed and open space was filled with new homes, retail stores and office buildings.

Suwanee, it seemed, was going the way of its home county, one that had sunk to the bottom 10 in Georgia's ranking of forests as a percentage of total land. The shade of trees was being replaced by the shadows of buildings. Then, in 2001, Suwanee residents voted to stem the tide of growth — or at least steer it away from their shrinking open lands. That year, voters — by a 58 percent to 42 percent margin — directed their leaders to invest $17.7 million from a bond referendum into the purchase of undeveloped property for use as parks and greenspaces. It was a watershed event.

"First of all, the voter turnout was three times the biggest we had had," says Suwanee City Manager Hardin Watkins. "But people were seeing trees cut down for new homes, and strip centers were going up, too. And at the polls, they said, 'We want a different future.'"

To buy that future, and the open spaces that would ensure it, voters had to approve a 140 percent increase in property taxes. Residents had two reasons to do so: First, they were already paying one of the lowest property tax rates in the Metro Atlanta area and, at a series of town hall meetings long before the vote, they had told their leaders

Embracing parks and greenspace for a growing city

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they were willing to pay more to get what they wanted. And what they wanted was more open space.

In 1999, Suwanee leaders began conducting a series of hearings and planning sessions, in part to conform with a legislative mandate requiring cities to assess the present and future delivery of services. That process gave birth to the city's Recreation and Open Space Needs Assessment and the Old Town Master Plan, two studies that now figure prominently in the community's future. It was at the Open Space Needs Assessment hearings that citizens told city leaders they wanted a big tax increase and they wanted it now.

"We were in a meeting on open space and we were looking at ways to raise the money; and we were pressed for time because of the rapid growth," says Suwanee Mayor Nick Masino. "We thought we could look for grants and other avenues but the citizens began to raise their hands and stand up. They said there was no time for that. Then one of them said, 'I'll give up two pizzas a month to buy open spaces,' and the rest agreed and that was it. We voted to raise taxes 140 percent and you know what, when I ran the next time after that I was unopposed."

With their vote, Suwanee's citizens told its leaders they wanted a place to picnic, throw Frisbees and attend concerts, but they are getting more. Since that 2001 bond vote, the city has acquired 235 acres of open space and developed parks and gathering sites. Meanwhile, the Old Town Master Plan, a study begun in 2002, is moving Suwanee back to more peaceful times.

"We are as close to a 19th-century village as we can get with I-85 running through town," Masino says. "All of our plans call for getting out of the automobile. Nobody will say, 'Spending time in an automobile improves my quality of life.'"

Suwanee's new Town Center, a part of the master plan, is a 23-acre flashback to the downtowns of yore, centered on a 10-acre park with an amphitheater featuring 1,000 terraced seats. Careful planning has attracted private investment in the shops, offices and residences going up around the park.

Last October, ground was broken on Town Center's first building, a 42,000-square-foot, three-story building that will house shops and restaurants on the first floor, with offices on the second and third floors. The project is a product of Main Street

Embracing parks and greenspace for a growing city

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Corners, LLC. Investors at Madison Retail, LLC, including Post Properties founder John Williams, have launched plans to construct a 31,200-square-foot building to house stores, restaurants, townhomes and apartments. Renderings of the two projects show facades reflecting classic late-19th-century small-town architecture in keeping with the city's "new old look." With its carefully planned future, Suwanee is seeing a residential and commercial boom built on the oldest means of transportation — walking.

Photo: RL Hodnett

Car-free: Suwanee Mayor Nick Masino

AD SUPPRESSED

When a traditional planned residential neighborhood, Shadowbrook at Town Center, opened its sales office last October, homebuyers camped out overnight and stood in line the next day for a shot at the $200,000 three- and four-bedroom homes and $170,000 townhomes. The moment drew a satisfied laugh from Mayor Masino. "They sold 50 homes in the first 30 days," he says. "I think 50 percent of that is the fact that those homebuyers knew they were getting a neighborhood that backed up to a protected area at one end and a half-million-dollar park with an amphitheater at the other." There is also the attraction of nearby shops, restaurants and offices, he adds. "In Suwanee, you will be able to walk from where you live to where you work and play in five minutes. All of our plans point to getting people out of the automobile."

Suwanee is one of several Atlanta area communities finding gold in the purchase and preservation of greenspaces and the return to the small town feel of the simpler life; one without commutes. "It's hard to do this in the urban context of Post-Industrial America," says Watkins, the city manager. "But people are looking for a sense of place and we will have it."

How One Developer's Vision Sharpened the Focus of a Community

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FACES OF PUBLIC HEALTH

CENTERING Suburbia

How One Developer's Vision Sharpened the Focus of a Community

Doug Spohn on Duluth's newly created Town Green. Photos courtesy of Catherine Staunton.

Supplemental Material

How One Developer's Vision Sharpened the Focus of a Community

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| Rachel J. Wilson

METRO-ATLANTA–BASED developer Doug Spohn operates his development firm around a simple theory about human nature: if given the opportunity, people will gravitate toward activity and social interaction and, therefore, a better quality of life. Spohn's latest development project has provided him with the perfect testing ground for his theory. In 1998, Spohn was asked to help transform a sprawling Atlanta suburb into a centered, healthy community. Along with several key community members and the local government, Spohn has turned parking lots and decrepit buildings that once loosely represented downtown Duluth, Ga, into an open-air stage upon which neighbors can connect with each other, opt to burn calories instead of gasoline, and ground themselves within their community. In planning this transformation within the heart of Duluth, Spohn was resolved to tackle several key health issues associated with urban growth, including the health of the environment and both the physical and emotional health of all community members, regardless of their demographics.

FADING TRADITION

Located 25 miles northeast of Atlanta in Gwinnett County, Duluth covers 9.8 square miles and has an ethnically and economically diverse population of more than 22 000. The city's commercial and corporate corridor is among the county's busiest; more than 1600 businesses are based within Duluth's city limits. Originally, the Duluth area was home to Cherokee Indians. The city was officially chartered in 1876 and was one of the first to be established within Gwinnett County.

Although Duluth has a rich history and small-town charm, because of its proximity to Atlanta, it fell victim to the urban sprawl that so often accompanies population growth. Within the past few decades, as more metro-Atlanta residents began to move further away from the Atlanta city limits, Duluth came to typify the sprawling suburb: extensive roads, homogeneous neighborhoods, and strip malls built to the specification of stringent and inflexible zoning laws. The shift in land-use patterns in Duluth resulted in increasing dependence on the automobile and consequently in such negative effects as a deteriorated and economically depressed downtown area, the creation of an urban heat island (i.e., an increase in temperature caused by an abundance of asphalt and a lack of green space), lower water and air quality, and more car crashes and injuries. Duluth residents were at increased risk for the adverse physical and psychological effects of urban sprawl.

MOVING TOWARD THE PAST

Working hand in hand, Duluth residents and the local government formed the Downtown Development Committee, vowing to put the brakes on the suburban momentum that was so negatively affecting their community. Duluth needed revitalization to provide its residents a renewed sense of community pride. Spohn was contacted by the city of Duluth in 1998. He was the ideal addition to the team of residents and politicians who wanted to see downtown Duluth turn around. Not only did he have more than 30 years of experience in developing local land for residential and mixed use, but he had a unique vision that set him apart from most metro-Atlanta developers.

> *"In planning this transformation within the heart of Duluth, Spohn was resolved to tackle several key health issues associated with urban growth, including the health of the environment and both the physical and emotional health of all community members, regardless of their demographics."*

Doug Spohn, progressive developer.

Spohn already had been operating with the health of homeowners and the environment in mind, developing neighborhoods that provided residents with ample recreation options, from walking to visit neighbors on shaded sidewalks to exercising in designated green-space areas. When the city contacted Spohn, the timing was right; he had become frustrated at county zoning ordinances that had restricted him from placing green space where it was most needed, from building a park where it would most benefit a community's residents, and from using parcels of land for both commercial and residential purposes.

How One Developer's Vision Sharpened the Focus of a Community

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"Barriers in government prevent smart growth. Most zonings stifle creativity because they are very prescriptive," says Spohn, adding that restrictive zoning ordinances can handicap developers interested in promoting the health of a community. The opportunity to collaborate with the local government and to be granted more flexibility in his community design sparked his interest in the Duluth project.

In planning for the new Duluth, Spohn considered many factors. As a 5-year member of the Atlanta Regional Commission's Environmental and Land Committee, Spohn is knowledgeable about the complex environmental health issues surrounding a population shift to the suburbs; encouraging smart growth to help clean up the environment was one of his primary concerns. One of the most complex issues that would need to be addressed was the use of automobiles. Dependence on motor vehicles for transportation substantially contributes to many negative human and environmental health effects; however, in transforming the heart of Duluth, Spohn maintained realistic expectations for the future.

"Through his work in Duluth, Spohn strives to "raise the bar" for other developers who might consider making similar changes to other existing downtown areas."

"[Americans] are likely never going to get rid of the car—especially those who live in the suburbs," says Spohn. He realized early on in his planning that the best way to reduce the adverse effects of automobiles was to create a city that would decrease overall driving time. "Atlanta still leads the nation in the number of miles driven per person per day, at 35 miles," he notes. "If you took 2 miles off of that, Atlanta would comply with the Clean Air Act; if you cut the 35 miles in half, the [environmental degradation] process would be reversed tremendously. This is my goal."

Driving time to Atlanta could be cut by creating "nodes," or townships, within a suburban area that provide additional options for work and leisure. Spohn comments that "It makes a lot of sense for products and services to be located in nodes, because it creates a shorter drive and therefore increases the quality of air and decreases stress levels." For example, driving could be reduced if people walked or drove a short distance to theater events instead of driving 20 miles to attend a downtown performance. Creating nodes would also make public transit a more viable option. Because his ultimate goal was to encourage Duluth residents to walk or bicycle instead of drive, the city also had to plan for alternative, walkable and bikeable routes and make existing roads more pedestrian and cyclist friendly.

The way in which land is used also affects the health of the environment. Leaving plenty of green space would be key to the success of Spohn's plans; increasing tree canopy and replacing asphalt with grassy parks reduces the environmentally detrimental heat-island effect. Making the downtown Duluth area appealing for home buyers is also critical in maintaining water quantity; revitalizing an existing community allows water taps and sewers to be reused instead of abandoned and reduces the need for additional water systems. According to Spohn, in as few as 30 years, metro-Atlanta builders will likely be restricted from creating communities that would require new water taps.

Spohn also made the health of Duluth residents a priority in his plans. He knew that in designing the downtown Duluth area, he and his fellow Downtown Development Committee members would need to create a backdrop that would provide residents with connectivity—a place where people of all ages and cultural backgrounds could work, play, and live. Traditional zoning ordinances would have no place in such a town; residential and commercial property would need to intermingle. The new downtown would need to be filled with activity, a place that would tempt locals to walk or bicycle to the town's center instead of driving to a suburban shopping mall. The heart of Duluth would need to be accessible to its residents; sidewalks would have to be poured and streets modified to slow traffic and accompany a new, more active lifestyle. The emotional health of the community also took center stage in the plans. Scheduled social events and performances would motivate residents to venture outdoors and reconnect with their neighbors. In addition, restaurants with outdoor seating, kid-friendly water fountains, and unique retail stores would entice people to the town center.

BUILDING SUCCESS

In the fall of 2000, ground was broken, the first step in moving Duluth back to the "village atmosphere" so vital to improving the health of the community. Now, more than 2 years later, the first phase of the project has

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been completed. The heart of Duluth now consists of a 5-acre Town Green, a grassy area upon which locals can relax or play. A large fountain is located toward the center of the Green, providing an area for both reflection and recreation. One end of the Green is bordered by a street, which, despite being heavily traveled, has now been made more pedestrian friendly by being paved with a raised brick pedestrian walkway to prevent drivers from traveling at excessive speed.

At the other end of the Green, a terraced amphitheater serves as a community gathering place. Unique retail stores, restaurants with outdoor seating, and lofted homes were built around the Green in a style reminiscent of the past, reminding locals of the city's history. The most striking building on the Green is a teahouse that also houses small retail and commercial businesses. Built in 1901, the teahouse was originally a private home. When Spohn undertook the Duluth project, the building had become dilapidated and subdivided into 4 rental units. One of Spohn's first priorities was to refurbish the turn-of-the-century home, which would become the city's architectural anchor.

Because parking is often limited in downtown areas, the success of the businesses located on the Green and of the overall village concept hinges on accessibility by local patrons. Walking to the Town Green is only possible if sidewalks are available. Although most newer subdivisions in the Duluth area were built with sidewalks, they ended at subdivision entrances, taking homeowners, according to Spohn, "nowhere." Therefore, through Gwinnett County's Special Purpose Limited Option Sales Tax (a tax that provides millions of dollars for the creation of sidewalks, bicycle paths, and other community-friendly projects), extensive sidewalks have been made available to residents who opt to walk rather than drive to the Town Green. Even more sidewalks will be added to connect neighborhoods to the downtown area as they are needed.

Although more downtown Duluth development is planned for the future, Spohn already can see the rewards of his work on a daily basis. His development company, Spohntown Inc, is now based in the second story of the teahouse facing the downtown Town Green. He needs only to look out of his office window to see his success: teenagers gathering after school at the old-fashioned soda fountain, toddlers running in and out of the fountain on a summer day, and many locals enjoying being outdoors and catching up with neighbors. Spohn is not the only one looking. "Here you see people of all sizes and backgrounds sitting and watching children play and taking in the architecture and fresh air," he remarks. By 2005, the atmosphere originating in the Town Green area will radiate outward even further, as more neglected buildings are given a facelift and additional green space is planted.

Spohn credits the city of Duluth, local residents, and Gwinnett County for much of the project's success. Duluth residents organize a fall festival each year, the proceeds of which go directly toward paying off the debt for the construction of the village amphitheater, and the city of Duluth funded the construction of the Town Green. Gwinnett County historically has worked hard to purchase land for recreation purposes, creating a precedent for the downtown Duluth transformation. According to Spohn, in the last 5 years, Gwinnett has done an "enviable job" of creating both "passive" and "active" parks. In addition, the state-funded Neighbor Woods Program, operating through the county's Clean and Beautiful Board, has already been instrumental in coordinating the planting of more than 3000 trees since 2000.

ASPIRING TO A MODEL COMMUNITY

Other developers have indicated an interest in Spohn's project since ground was broken more than 2 years ago. Through his work in Duluth, Spohn strives to "raise the bar" for other developers who might consider making similar changes to other existing downtown areas. "My hope is that if other developers could do 80% of what I have done in Duluth, we will all benefit," he says. However, he admits that taking on such a project can be challenging for developers, because getting financing for unconventional development projects is difficult. In general, lenders feel safer funding projects that keep with tradition; however, that tradition is now characterized by sprawl. Spohn was fortunate to obtain funding from a lender that was familiar with his previous projects and willing to take a risk.

Spohn also realizes that the new Duluth "works" because demand for commercial buildings and for homes is greater than the supply. He encourages the city of Duluth to hire an independent, third-party consultant to evaluate absorption rates because, in Spohn's words, "the worst thing a city could do is try to make decisions regarding growth based on opinion." He cautions other developers against the mind-set that "bigger is better," noting that Duluth residents regularly voice appreciation of the city's intimacy.

The success of the Duluth project has inspired Spohn to plan the transformation of other suburban areas into more independent townships in the future. Although critics have called the creation of metro townships a fad, Spohn could not disagree more. His development of downtown Duluth has helped restore the tradition that a century ago united the community. It has also given the city's residents a renewed sense of pride that will keep them anchored to their town, resulting in a lasting vitality. ■

About the Author

Rachel J. Wilson is a freelance writer and editor who has worked with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other health organizations around the country for more than a decade.

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The Georgia's Urban Redevelopment Act

Excerpt from "A Guide to Using Georgia's Urban Redevelopment Act" by GA DCA, April 2005
http://www.dca.state.ga.us/communities/DowntownDevelopment/publications/URAhowto.pdf

A Guide to Using Georgia's Urban Redevelopment Act

Prepared by the
Georgia Department of Community Affairs

April 14, 2005

Supplemental Material

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Supplemental Material

History and Purpose of the Act

The Urban Redevelopment Act (O.C.G.A. 36-61-1 et. seq.) was adopted in 1955 by the Georgia General Assembly. The 1950s were a period when many Federal resources were focused on improving living conditions and addressing poverty and blight in American cities. Most states, including Georgia, created state enabling legislation to access Federal Housing and Urban Renewal funds. Much has changed since O.C.G.A. 36-61-1 was adopted. Fewer federal funds are now available for community redevelopment, and over the last five decades many lessons have been learned about the economics of adaptive reuse and historic preservation, creating livable communities, and the positive and negative social impacts of physical design. Still, for Georgia cities and counties embarking on community revitalization projects, the Urban Redevelopment Act remains the most powerful, flexible and easy to use legislative tool governing the use of eminent domain and bond financing to support successful public/private revitalization partnerships.[1]

The Urban Redevelopment Act gives cities and counties in Georgia specific powers to rehabilitate, conserve or redevelop of any defined geographical area that is designated as a "slum area." As a prerequisite to exercising these powers, the city council or county commission must adopt a resolution finding that the area constitutes a "slum area" as defined by the Act and that redevelopment of the area is "necessary in the interest of the public health, safety, morals, or welfare" of the residents of the jurisdiction. In addition to designating by resolution an "urban redevelopment area" appropriate for redevelopment projects, the Act requires adoption by the local government of an urban redevelopment plan for the target area.

The word "urban" in the title is actually misleading, since the Act is applicable to, and can be especially useful in, very small rural communities and even suburban settings. In fact, rural counties were among the first governments to use the Act for the purpose of rehabilitation of deteriorating neighborhoods or increasing their supply of affordable housing. Unfortunately, there is no actual record of how many urban redevelopment plans have been implemented using this statute, since the law does not require local governments using the Act to report to or seek approval from a state agency.[2]

Another factor that has reduced the use of this Act is that it is easily confused with the similarly titled Urban Redevelopment Powers Act (O.C.G.A. 36-44-1), which authorizes tax allocation districts. Although both laws have community development as their goals, the Urban Redevelopment Powers Act is more procedurally complex, more difficult to implement, and has a much narrower focus and applicability.

Because of its age, certain assumptions implicit in the Act are somewhat out of tune with the latest trends in city planning and community development. Since the era when this law was drafted, city planners and local governments have made costly mistakes and learned important lessons about development and redevelopment--and their potential unintended effects on neighborhoods and downtowns. For example, some language in the Act implies that neighborhood decline, crime, and economic problems are linked to too much population density. More recent research tends to contradict this assumption.

[1] The power of local governments to do community redevelopment and create special districts is authorized in the Georgia Constitution.

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And yet in spite of some dated language, the provisions of the law in no way prohibit a local government from encouraging higher density projects as part of a workable revitalization strategy.

Today, with suburban sprawl impinging on an ever-shrinking supply of undeveloped land, the pendulum of public policy and city planning theory have swung away from separation of land uses that characterized the zoning ordinances of the 1970's and 1980's. Land use patterns based primarily on accommodating automobiles are now being retrofitted successfully with denser, more pedestrian oriented and use-integrated development modeled on the layout and aesthetic components that are so livable in the historic cores of our Georgia cities. Neo-traditional development principles (often labeled "smart growth") include: traditional gridded street patterns, smaller lots, narrower streets and setbacks, pedestrian circulation systems and village style neighborhood commercial nodes. The residential densities and lot sizes drawn from Georgia's historic districts have also proved to be good patterns for building more neighborly neighborhoods. These design elements along with a synergistic mix of land uses, are proving very marketable. While suburbs still house a large percentage of America's population, there is growing evidence that many people are gravitating toward neighborhoods with more nightlife and cultural diversity as well as a less stratified socio-economic mix.[3]

The Urban Redevelopment Act can be used alone, or in combination with many of Georgia's other legislative redevelopment tools (see appendix) to support local comprehensive planning, revitalize faltering commercial corridors, recruit and nurture small businesses, rehabilitate older homes and neighborhoods, ensure architecturally compatible infill development, and generate new adaptive reuses for old industrial and agricultural facilities. O.C.G.A. 36-61-1 offers solid support for innovative and thoughtfully crafted development strategies needed to solve the problems of these designated target areas.

The Urban Redevelopment Act has become more relevant recently for a variety of reasons. First, some sectors of the population (especially aging baby boomers, younger singles, and couples) are becoming increasingly interested in moving from the suburbs, which require long commutes to work, back into neglected section of large cities or relocating to small, charming towns. Real estate prices are appreciating and housing demand is strong near reinvigorated town centers and "village" commercial nodes. Second, our supply of affordable housing is aging and shrinking while the population needing this housing is growing; so many governments are looking to provide moderate income residents with viable options to manufactured housing. Third, at the state policy level, legislators and state agencies are encouraging cities and counties to be more strategic and creative in combining the state's wide array of legislative, programmatic and funding tools for community revitalization. Accordingly, adopting an urban redevelopment plan pursuant to the Act has now been added as a threshold criterion for accessing some important development incentives. Communities are being encouraged to

[3] Creating new housing within walking distance of downtown and neighborhood commercial nodes; adaptively reusing vacant mills, warehouses, and factories; and amending local fire and building codes to allow upstairs loft living in historic downtowns are common success stories based on re-integrating uses and exciting people places with varying levels of activity and interactivity.

focus multiple resources and tools in target areas that are economically disadvantaged or held back by impediments that discourage private sector investment.

Recent changes to Georgia's brownfield regulations and new streamlined programs created by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) now reduce liability for innocent investors (private or governmental) seeking to redevelop brownfield sites and offset site cleanup costs with tax incentives. These constructive changes should help Georgia attract private investors to sites that were not economically viable previously, many of which are in or near downtowns and older neighborhoods. The Act is a promising tool for brownfield redevelopment because it simplifies land acquisition and allows the public sector to help finance infrastructure or related improvements.

Additionally, several programs created or administered by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA) are being modified based on refinements to state planning statutes resulting from the 2004 legislative session. Progressive communities that adopt urban redevelopment plans (especially in combination with other innovative redevelopment tools) may now be eligible for higher job tax credits and more competitive scoring on Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) applications.[4] These program initiatives were designed to enables both urban and very rural communities to create more effective strategies to address pockets of poverty. DCA has observed an increase in requests for information, training and technical assistance related to the Act, and this publication is intended to outline the Act and provide practical advice on developing an urban redevelopment plan.

Compared to some of Georgia's other planning and community development statutes, the Urban Redevelopment Act is straightforward, flexible and free from unnecessary red tape. The Act also does a good job of balancing the community's need to remove the barriers to its overall economic development created by slum and blight with protection of the rights of property owners, and low income residents in particular.

It should also be emphasized here that the great majority of existing urban redevelopment plans implemented under this statue to date have entailed neither major displacement of residents nor the use of eminent domain to acquire private property. Most neighborhood residents have ended up with improved living conditions with equal or even lower housing costs. Home ownership opportunities have been expanded, and the vast majority of land transactions under these plans have been between willing buyers and sellers.

Promising Uses for the Urban Redevelopment Act

- Deteriorating or underutilized sections of downtowns
- Brownfields
- Old warehouse or industrial districts
- Declining commercial corridors (grayfields)
- Deteriorating neighborhoods
- Mixed-use and neo-traditional developments
- Substandard or obsolescent mobile home parks
- Neighborhoods that might be negatively affected by facilities such as airports or water treatment facilities

[4] See appendix and DCA's website for more information on Opportunity Zones related CDBG program changes and information on other state regulatory tools and redevelopment incentives.

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Advantages and Powers of the Act

O.C.G.A. 36-61 expands the normal powers of local governments in some important ways. Specifically, adopting the required resolution and a qualifying urban redevelopment plan:

- Provides a detailed blueprint of the public sector's vision and goals for a mapped defined urban redevelopment area.
- Allows the implementing entity to attach design and use requirements or limitation to specific parcels as covenants which run with the land.
- Provides multiple options for designating the appropriate implementing entity. A local government may implement the plan directly, or assign it to a Downtown Development Authority (DDA), a Housing Authority created under O.C.G.A., or a specially created Urban Redevelopment Agency appointed by the local government.
- Simplifies the assembly (and possible replatting) of large enough tracts of land to attract private developers.
- Expands local government powers of eminent domain.
- Protects the rights of private property owners to participate in and benefit financially from the redevelopment strategy.
- Permits the local government or its designated redevelopment agency to issue tax exempt bonds for redevelopment purposes. These may be secured by loans, grants, leases, and other development revenues and do not count in the local government's general indebtedness cap.
- Helps local governments plan, prioritize, and publicize local government infrastructure investments that will be provided to support revitalization of designated urban redevelopment areas.
- Allows a community to make exceptions to its development ordinances in order to achieve stated economic and aesthetic outcome in the redevelopment area.
- Expands access to some state grant and loan programs and allows the community to expand incentives for private investors.
- Provides a legal framework for binding intergovernmental contracts where communities elect to delegate redevelopment powers to a separate redevelopment agency. (O.C.G.A. 36-61-18)

Local Government Actions Required to Use the Act

City and county elected officials are the only bodies authorized to establish Urban Redevelopment Areas as defined under this Act. Because of its origin and intent, using the Act requires a local legislative or "finding of necessity" specifying geographic areas that have been determined to meet the definition of "slum and blight" included in the Act.[5] Such a resolution should outline the negative conditions present in the proposed redevelopment areas and commit the local government to adopting a "workable" redevelopment plan for the area(s) to be revitalized.[6]

[5] O.C.G.A. 36-61-5
[6] O.C.G.A. 36-61-2(18); O.C.G.A. 36-61-5; O.C.G.A. 36-61-7

Note that cities should be very careful to review their city charters when drafting the language of their enabling resolutions, because these charters may require specific formats, unique language or other requirements needed to make resolutions legal and binding.

The Act defines a "slum area" as:

> an area which by reason of the presence of a substantial number of slum, deteriorated, *or deteriorating* structures; predominance of defective or inadequate street layout; faulty lot layout in relation to size, adequacy, accessibility, or usefulness; unsanitary or unsafe conditions; *deterioration of site or other improvements*; tax or special assessment delinquency exceeding the fair value of the land; the existence of conditions which endanger life or property by fire and other causes; by having development impaired by airport or transportation noise or by other environmental hazards; *or any combination of such factors* substantially impairs or arrests the sound growth of a Governmental Entity, retards the provisions of housing accommodations, or constitutes an economic or social liability and is a menace to the public health, safety, morals, or welfare in its present condition and use.

The State Legislature asserted in the Act that the "existence of slum areas:

- Contributes substantially and increasingly to the spread of disease and crime; Constitutes an economic and social liability;
- Substantially impairs or arrests the sound growth of municipalities and counties;
- Retards the provision of housing accommodations; or
- Aggravates traffic problems, and substantially impairs or arrests the elimination of traffic hazards and the improvement of traffic facilities;
- Are local centers of disease;
- Promote juvenile delinquency; and
- Contribute little to the tax income of the state and its municipalities and counties, consume an excessive proportion of its revenues because of the extra services required for police, fire, accident, hospitalization, and other forms of public protection, services, and facilities."

While it might seem politically unpalatable to brand any part of a community with this somewhat dated and pejorative label, it is sufficient (and essential) to include this finding in the written resolution of intent to use the Act. Handled sensitively, the urban redevelopment area designation need not be a subject of extensive public debate, community friction, or negative press coverage. Instead, the positive economic, aesthetic, and functional results of proposed revitalization should be the focus of community consensus building.

All of the above conditions need not exist in an area in order for a local government to invoke the powers of the Act. Any combination of these conditions would likely be sufficient to designate an urban redevelopment area. Obviously some of these slum and blight indicators are quite specific while others are more subjective. The key finding is

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that such conditions "substantially impairs or retards the sound growth of the municipality or county."

The good news is that Georgia case law has consistently affirmed the principle that local governments must define slum and blight for themselves in the context of their local economies and thus communities have broad latitude to define appropriate target area boundaries. While a well written urban redevelopment plan will identify and provide examples of such conditions, Georgia courts have ruled that:

> "Under this section, it is not required that any evidence or proof be taken or considered but simply that a resolution be adopted. This can only mean that the officials concerned exercise their own judgment based upon what they know or believe and make their findings. The very nature of matters required to be found by the resolution shows them not capable of being brought under judicial determination." [7]

These rulings mean that courts are unlikely to step in and second guess a local governing body's legislative intent. This may also be the reason that the Act does not actually dictate quantifiable measurements of blight or research methodologies, either in the authorizing local resolution or in the plan. Nevertheless, there are a number of useful and reasonably accessible indicators of physical and economic decline that should not only help local governments evaluate and identify appropriate urban redevelopment area boundaries, but also inform the development of more effective remediation strategies. These indicators can also be used as benchmarks for measuring long range success as conditions in the target area begin to improve.

Possible Blight Indicators

Examining some of the following data should help a community identify and target appropriate redevelopment areas:

- Lower than average growth in assessed tax value
- Low real estate values
- Lower numbers of building permits than surrounding areas
- Deteriorated or poorly maintained housing stock
- Obsolescent buildings or facilities
- Visual Blight (examples might include poor quality strip commercial buildings, barren parking lots, broken or missing sidewalks and curbs, poor drainage, garish or poorly maintained signage, excessive and distracting utility poles and overhead lines and wires, junk, graffiti, and litter)
- High crime statistics
- Higher unemployment rates than the surrounding area
- High commercial vacancy rates (or a concentration of vacant or underutilized buildings)
- Lower than average (per square foot) rents
- High rental vacancy rates
- Greater percentage of the population below the poverty level
- Many bankruptcies and business closures

[7] Allen v. City Council, 215 Ga. 778, 113 S.E.2 d621(1960)

- Substandard public infrastructure (lack of sidewalks and pedestrian amenities, lighting, recreational facilities or open space, poor water quality or drainage)
- Confusing, dangerous or inefficient street layout (look at accident statistics)
- Fragmented, inappropriate or commercially nonviable subdivision platting or lot layout
- Unclear property ownership (clouded titles) inhibiting investment in the area
- High rate of delinquent property taxes
- Situations in which the high land to building value makes properties economically viable for redevelopment

While it is prudent for communities to back up subjective impressions of slum and blight by reviewing these indicators and trends, it may prove counterproductive to include massive amounts of point-in-time data in the actual redevelopment plan, because 1) extensive data gathering is likely to increase the cost and time needed to prepare a plan, 2) many of the data sources change rapidly and thus might require updating the plan frequently with little practical benefit, and 3) there is some possibility that incorrect or questionable data used to justify the actions proposed in the plan might provide grounds for legally challenging the plan. A reasonable and balanced approach to this issue is to look carefully at all the data available and then summarize relevant findings in more general terms in both the resolution and the plan.[8]

Planning Requirements of the Act

Fortunately, the specific planning requirements of the Act are not excessive or overly complicated. It is also helpful that the minimum information required for an urban redevelopment plan is actually specified in the Act. The plan is primarily intended to provide citizens, existing landowners, and potential developer/investors with unambiguous details concerning the local government's vision for the revitalization area.

The amount of detail and complexity required of the plan may differ widely based on the size of the redevelopment area(s), the complexity and types of activities envisioned, and the entities chosen to carry out the plan. Plans may vary from a few pages if an urban redevelopment area will only address a single public facility or clean up deteriorated housing in a single neighborhood to many pages for a complex mixed use commercial development. The amount of detail in the plan should be appropriate to the community's specific goals and intentions for the target area.

Removing uncertainty is one key to spurring private market investment in target redevelopment areas. Once potential private partners and residents understand the long-range vision for the area, as well as the constraints, incentives and special financial tools available within these target areas, it will be easier for all parties to arrive at realistic and equitable land prices, project costs and potential profit margins for alternative build-out scenarios and secure construction and development financing for revitalization projects from banks and lenders.

Under the definition of "urban redevelopment plan" contained in O.C.G.A. 36-61-1(21)8 a plan must:

[8] Communities' first data source should be their Comprehensive Plans which will likely contain information on many of the listed indicators.

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> (A) Conform to the general plan for the municipality or county as a whole; and
> (B) Be sufficiently complete to indicate such land acquisition, demolition and removal of structures, redevelopment, improvements, and rehabilitation as may be proposed to be carried out in the urban redevelopment area; zoning and planning changes, if any; land uses; maximum densities; building requirements; and the plan's relationship to definite local objectives respecting appropriate land uses, improved traffic, public transportation, public utilities, recreational and community facilities, and other public improvements.

Plan elements should include:

- A Statement that the URP is consistent with the city's comprehensive plan
- Clearly defined boundaries of the redevelopment area(s) (which need not be contiguous
- Explanation of negative conditions in the area necessitating redevelopment and an explication of how the area meets the act's definition of slum and blight
- The city's land use objectives for the area (types of uses, building requirements, zoning changes, and development densities)
- Description of land parcels to be acquired
- Structures to be demolished or rehabilitated
- A workable plan for leveraging private resources to redevelop the area
- A strategy for relocating any displaced residents
- Any covenants or restrictions to be placed on properties in the redevelopment area in order to implement the plan
- Public infrastructure to be provided – transportation, water, sewer, sidewalks, lighting, streetscapes, public recreational space, parking, etc., to support redevelopment of the area
- A workable strategy for implementing the plan.

In addition, the plan must provide for:

- A feasible method for the relocation of families who will be displaced into decent, safe, and sanitary housing within their means, and
- Maximum opportunity for the rehabilitation or redevelopment of the area by private enterprise.

As a general rule, communities will benefit by providing more than the minimum required information in their plans, including using appropriate graphics and conceptual illustrations of the desired redevelopment outcome. Since the plan may place limitations on the possible uses of private property, it is important to have a reasonably detailed conceptual design and desired land use mix for the area. Also, to ensure that the community's vision for a redevelopment area can actually be crafted into a realistic and workable plan, local governments should seriously consider spending some of their planning budget on a professional commercial/retail market analysis or (depending on the particular focus of the redevelopment district) assessing the meaning and implications of local housing conditions, demands, and preferences.[9] If cost is a concern, local

[9] Experience with plans produced pursuant to the Atlanta Regional Commission's Livable Centers Initiative suggests that almost every redevelopment effort has required some sort of market analysis in order to determine the feasibility and relative economic benefits of various future development scenarios.

governments may be able to reduce consultants' fees by doing in-house data collection or using staff to conduct related public meetings.[10]

Developing a Vision

The decision to use the Urban Redevelopment Act as a revitalization tool should be begin with identification of problem areas and developing clear goals and a shared long range vision for each area under consideration. It is impossible to develop a meaningful plan until there is general consensus on the end results desired.

Assembling an Urban Redevelopment Team

Regardless of whether a urban redevelopment plan is prepared in-house or with help from consultants, key local decision makers should be involved (and communicating with each other) from the start. Depending on the specific focus of the redevelopment goals, elected officials, city manager, downtown/economic development staff, planning commission members, housing and public works departments, city/county attorney, fiscal planners, grant writers and administrators and park and recreation planners may need to collaborate at some point during the planning or implementation stage of the revitalization process. It is a good idea to have a brainstorming session with these sorts of local actors before making the decision to use the Act. Early on in the process, local governments should develop a project timetable and even a "to do" list for all members of the team. In addition, it is important to communicate with, and seek feedback from, key stakeholders such as neighborhood advocacy groups, merchants' associations, various development authorities, major property owners and employers located in or near the urban redevelopment area.

At some point in the planning process it may even be productive to solicit suggestions for alternative development scenarios from potential public/private partners, although care should be taken not to make any actual or implied verbal commitments to prospective developers about the details of the plan before it is adopted. Collaboration with non-profits and social service agencies can also help implement the plan, and their input should be valuable in understanding the needs and priorities of disadvantaged residents.

Consensus Building Strategies

Although it is procedurally simple to adopt an urban redevelopment plan, trouble free implementation and long term success will require building broad public support around the community's vision for the urban redevelopment plan (as well as that of occupants and property owners within the proposed redevelopment area). A readable, practical, detailed (and hopefully inspired) plan can help to set priorities and deadlines and promote the collaboration and hard work that will be needed to make that vision a reality.

It is critically important to get input from affected stakeholders and potential developers, but community experience has proven that there are risks to extended public discussion of the plan. There is a danger that people will over focus on the issue of eminent domain,

[10] A qualifications-based selection process for choosing and negotiating fees with professionals is recommended by DCA as well as many organizations representing both governments and professional groups because it allows frank discussion about different aspects of the proposed work items and input from consultants about where costs can best be cut.

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even if it is not a major aspect of the redevelopment strategy. It is also vital to educate the media about the urban redevelopment plan and its positive benefits and to work with local reporters to increase the chances that press coverage of the project will be accurate and positive.

Some key steps to creating consensus include:

- Identifying and communicating with key stakeholders
- Examining potential barriers to plan implementation
- Working with neighborhood organizations and non-profits serving the area
- Creating enthusiasm and good press with design charettes, resource teams, and community character workshops
- Developing press releases and educating the media
- Ensuring that elected officials and other community leaders and volunteers supporting the plan get public credit for their good work

Procedural Requirements and the Designation Process

The Act requires a local government to adopt a resolution with a "finding of necessity" before adoption of the urban redevelopment plan and to hold a single public hearing. Following the public hearing, a local government is free to adopt the plan. At this point, the local government will also need to formally designate an implementing entity for each redevelopment area and clearly identify redevelopment district boundaries. Unlike Tax Allocation Districts created under the Urban Redevelopment Powers Act O.C.G.A. 36-44, creating urban redevelopment areas under this act does not require approval from property owners within the target area or a public referendum. Although not required by the Act, the plan should probably be available for public review and comment for a couple of weeks before its adoption.

Urban redevelopment plans are also quite simple to amend, allowing local governments to respond appropriately to changing economic conditions or evolving public concerns, "provided that, if modified after the lease or sale by the municipality or county of real property in the urban redevelopment project area, such modification shall be subject to such rights at law or in equity as a lessee or purchaser or his successor or successors in interest may be entitled to assert."[11] Care should be taken to honor commitments or contracts executed under the original version of the plan. Changes to the redevelopment plan will require a second public hearing and resolution adopting the amended plan

Ensuring Consistency with Other Local Plans

The Urban Redevelopment Act requires that redevelopment plans be consistent with "local general plans" (O.C.G.A. 35-61-7(d)(2)). Although the act predates the Georgia Planning Act of 1989, presumably, at a minimum, the redevelopment plan should not directly conflict with a community's local Comprehensive Plan. Comprehensive Plans enjoy special legal status in Georgia as opposed to other kinds of master plans and development proposals, because once adopted, they represent the official policies, goals and objectives of each city and county in Georgia.

[11] O.C.G.A 36-61-7

This being said, it is probably not generally advisable for local governments to adopt urban redevelopment plans as integral components of their local comprehensive plans or append them to the plan by reference. The reason is practical. Procedural requirements established by the Georgia Planning Act, including multi-jurisdictional review, update and plan amendment procedures required for comprehensive plans are significantly more complex than those specified in 36-61-1, so changing a redevelopment plan adopted into a comprehensive plan could be complicated by this approach.

On the other hand, minor amendments to local comprehensive plans to assure consistency, and addition of specific work items called for in the redevelopment plan to the comprehensive plan's short term work program should definitely be considered.

Typical Planning and Implementation Costs

Urban redevelopment plans need not be prohibitively expensive or complex. Factors affecting planning costs include the size and number of designated areas, the diversity and complexity of the plan's scope, data collection and mapping expenses, and professional services (legal, planning, design and engineering). Existing urban redevelopment plans adopted in Georgia have run from five or six pages to hundreds of pages in length depending on their purpose and scope. Developing a plan meeting the minimum legal requirement should be possible in a relatively short time frame. Local governments should carefully consider whether it has qualified staff that has time to prepare the plan in-house or whether specialized consultants should be employed to develop some or all of the document.

In many cases, communities have excellent preexisting planning documents at their disposal. Before drafting an urban redevelopment plan, communities should take time to find and review previous documents that cover the potential redevelopment areas such as small area development plans, neighborhood housing plans, other physical design master plans, tourism or housing documents, etc. While some information from these documents may be outdated, they often include excellent ideas and design solutions that are still entirely relevant, but were never acted upon. It may be possible to integrate, update or expand such documents to meet the requirements of the Act with minimal investment of time and money.

While the Act does not require the inclusion of maps, photographs, diagrams or drawings in the plan, much of the information it does require may be more easily and fully explained (especially to the public and potential developers and investors) by the addition of graphic components rather than with pages of text. "Before and after" renderings of problem areas, sketches or architectural models are also good tools to explain development plan proposals to the public.[12]

It is extremely important to be precise about the boundaries of the urban redevelopment area(s). Whether this is done by attaching legal descriptions to the plan or coding specific parcels with a GIS mapping system, the public must be able to determine which individual properties are affected by the designation. If a single parcel is split by a redevelopment area boundary (not generally recommended) a survey may be required.

[12] Visual preference surveys, photometric inventories of visual blight and computer generated before and after drawings of the same site are all excellent tools for illustrating existing and desired conditions in an urban redevelopment area.

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The most expensive part of realizing a community's vision for a target area may not be the redevelopment plan itself but creating or modifying existing (and often outdated) development regulations, design guidelines, zoning categories and/or modifying development review procedures in order to implement the community's revitalization strategy in a way that produces the desired type of development and creates the desired aesthetic character of the area. However, if the community's land development regulations are generally current and well written it may be possible to minimize code revisions. In addition, previously adopted development policies, design standards or special review procedures that have been applied in other areas of a jurisdiction may usually be extended to target areas by referencing them in the redevelopment plan and making minor amendments to existing ordinances.

Considerations for Choosing Target Areas

There is no limit to the size or number of redevelopment areas that can be included in a single urban redevelopment plan, nor are target areas required to be contiguous. However, since the legal basis for the Act is addressing slum and blight, communities should be careful about including prosperous parts of the community or focusing primarily on undeveloped "greenfield" property as redevelopment target areas.[13] This would be particularly inappropriate if more obviously blighted or declining areas of the community are being ignored or left out of the plan.

Many communities initially consider using the Act in response to very specific problem sites or facility needs. However, designating appropriate redevelopment area boundaries should be a thoughtful and deliberate process. Before establishing an urban redevelopment area boundary designed to address a unique site, it is important to step back and seriously consider any systemic factors that may be contributing to blighted, economically challenged or unattractive areas throughout the jurisdiction. While not prohibited in the Act, defining a redevelopment area comprised of one parcel of land owned by a particular difficult property owner might be viewed as harassment, whereas including parcels owned by the same landowner within in a larger target area boundary exhibiting similar physical and social problems might promote the preservation and improvement (or at least motivate the sale or lease) of blighted or long-vacant property.

Creating a plan for multiple redevelopment areas at one time may have several benefits. Defining redevelopment areas with large parcels suitable for major developments will likely make it easier to attract large developers with access to private funding. Drawing boundaries with consideration for major infrastructure projects that may be on the drawing board may also make these simpler to fund and coordinate.

Under a single urban redevelopment plan, projects may be phased over time so that the community can focus on the most critical areas first, while laying out long range build-out concepts for target areas that can be used by planning commissions and/or community development staff in reviewing and negotiation development proposals. The Act does not define strict schedules or deadlines for fully implementing the plan; however, a prudent community should be prepared to demonstrate steady progress toward

[13] The act provides the implementing agency to provide for affordable housing development within a five mile radius around a designated redevelopment area, and this could include some greenfield development. 12

its proposed redevelopment scenario. This is only fair since the urban redevelopment plan will impose some limits on development options for private properties in the target area.

The decision of whether to have a single phased plan versus adopting new ones over time depends on various factors. It will likely be somewhat less expensive to create a phased redevelopment plan covering all the community's proposed target areas than to commission individual redevelopment plans for each new target area identified. On the other hand, if no action at all is to be taken for five or ten years on in an area under consideration, it may be better to wait and cover that area under a separate plan or amend the original plan to change boundaries once the first priority redevelopment areas are achieving success.

In addition to reviewing the relevant local comprehensive plan recommendations, local governments should consult their development staff and planning commission and carefully review current ordinances and administrative procedures (which often contain outmoded provisions that actually disallow or discourage some of the best new ideas in neo-traditional urban design). It may also be useful to get the perspective of an external party to provide a visitor or tourist eye view of what might be considered slum or blight.

Some questions to consider are:

- Are there areas in the community that are significantly more blighted or underdeveloped than the specific area the city want to designate?
- Has sufficient thought been given to alternative future uses of the chosen target area?
- Are the residents or landowners in the proposed redevelopment area likely to support the local government's vision and implementation strategy for the proposed target area?
- Are there demographic conditions (such as high poverty or unemployment rates) in certain parts of the community that, if included, would allow leveraging significant state or federal resources?
- Do the boundaries being considered divide existing neighborhoods or run down the middle of major corridors? (It is almost impossible to effectively revitalize one side of a corridor without working on the other side simultaneously. This would seem obvious, but it is a common mistake found even in corridor plans prepared by urban design and planning professionals.)
- Are the various development scenarios being considered for the target area(s) informed by accurate, timely market analysis or housing data?

Choosing the Appropriate Plan Implementation Structure

Choosing the most effective and appropriate legal entity to oversee the redevelopment area is one of the most important decisions affecting the successful implementation of a redevelopment area plan. There are four basic entities that can assume development powers under the act as described by O.C.G.A. § 36-61-17, each of which has advantages and limitations:

- The local governing body can itself exercise urban redevelopment powers

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- A county or city can establish and delegate powers to a new urban redevelopment agency[14]
- A housing authority can be designated as the redevelopment entity
- Municipalities may also delegate redevelopment powers to a new or preexisting downtown development authority.

The "urban redevelopment project powers" that a local government may confer on an urban redevelopment agency, DDA or Housing Authority, as well as the powers that cannot be delegated are described in O.C.G.A 36-61-17. It should also be noted that local governments can customize the bundle of redevelopment powers they choose to delegate to an urban redevelopment agency or other public body. For example, a local government could delegate all power but that of eminent domain. It is also important to realize that once powers in an urban redevelopment area are delegated, they may no longer belong to the city or county. Therefore, if a local government wishes to delegate these power for a finite period of time this should be covered in the resolution and/or through an intergovernmental agreement.

The powers of an urban redevelopment agency do not extend beyond those defined by the Act. The powers of DDAs and Housing Authorities designated by a local government to serve as urban redevelopment agencies under the act are a little more complicated because these entities are also governed and limited by their own enabling statutes, or in the case of constitutional created DDAs, by their individual charters. Georgia case law for DDAs and Housing Authorities will also affect what these bodies can and cannot do to implement a redevelopment strategy. In general, once a local government delegates its powers under the act to an authority, the authority can use these powers in any way consistent with the act and not prohibited by its own charter or statutory enabling legislation.

Urban redevelopment agencies are defined as distinct "public bodies" under the Act, and O.C.G.A 36 61(7) authorizes local governments to enter into binding agreements with such public bodies for up to 50 years just as they can with other types of authorities. The ability to enter into such long term agreements is important because they are binding on local governments even should commissions and city councils change at election time and also because local governments can contract with other public bodies to do things they cannot legally do themselves.

O.C.G.A. 36-61-18 describes how local governments set up urban redevelopment agencies, appoint and remove members and also covers eligibility requirements, conflicts of interest and reporting procedures. Some local governments may like the flexibility offered by an urban redevelopment agency because:

- unlike DDAs, urban redevelopment agencies may be abolished or sunset provision may be applied[15]

[14] The Act automatically creates a redevelopment agency in each local jurisdiction, but it is not activated until the local government adopts a resolution declaring the need for such an agency.

[15] If an urban redevelopment agency issues bonds, or enters into other intergovernmental agreements, it cannot be abolished by a local government while these legal commitments are still in effect. Abolishing an urban redevelopment agency would also require holding a public hearing and amending the urban redevelopment plan.

- the local government specifies number of members and term limits and appoints the chairman
- members need only be residents of the jurisdiction, not necessarily live in the redevelopment area (allowing maximum flexibility in putting together the right skills to get the plan implemented)
- urban redevelopment agencies can work on any type of project that advances the redevelopment plan—residential, commercial, housing, public facilities or infrastructure, etc, whereas DDA's and Housing Authorities have their own statutory limitations.

One possible reason for delegating redevelopment powers to a DDA or Housing Authority rather than a redevelopment agency is that there are many more project models and more established case law for these entities than for redevelopment agencies created under this Act. In some cases, local government attorneys concerned about entering relatively uncharted legal territory may feel more comfortable advising local governments on what these more common legal entities can do. Also, if such authorities are already active in a community, it may be important to avoid creating multiple public bodies charged with the same mission for an overlapping target area. Creating mission overlap is very likely to create political difficulties and confusion for land owners and developers.

Another important advantage is that Georgia Courts have consistently held that obligations under intergovernmental agreements are not "debt" as defined by the constitution and are therefore not subject to local government debt limitation provisions. Since, in the exercise of their powers under the Urban Redevelopment Act, redevelopment agencies are specifically authorized to provide or develop certain public improvements, the Act can provide a means of financing public facilities or improvements through lease arrangements between redevelopment agencies and local government. (This is in contrast to the limited powers of DDAs to finance public facilities under the DDA law). Alternately, where the community has existing agencies such as a DDA, the local government may choose to serve as its own implementing agency and contract with the DDA or Housing Authority to implement specific portions of the plan rather than delegating its redevelopment powers; however, it should be noted that simply contracting with these agencies does not vest them with the powers of the Act so that they must perform their duties within the powers granted by their own enabling legislation. For example, a local government could not contract with a DDA to implement projects outside of its legally established DDA boundaries.

The Act does not specifically allow for a local government to delegate redevelopment powers to two different entities within in a single urban redevelopment area. One option might be to prepare a single plan designating separate redevelopment areas and delegating each to the appropriate implementing entity. Or, while adopting a single plan, a local government or its designated urban redevelopment agency could contract, under the intergovernmental contract provisions of the Georgia Constitution, with various authorities or even non-profits to perform different functions within the redevelopment area.

Apart from the formal powers of these various entities there are also human and political factors to consider that may be just as important to a successful revitalization process. Some questions to consider are:

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- How interested and experienced are the local housing authority or DDA in taking charge of revitalization activities?
- Are there already several competing entities, organizations or departments with overlapping responsibilities in the community, do they work well together, and if not, how can the redevelopment process steer clear of old business?
- Do the eligible preexisting authorities have the appropriate skill set or clout on their boards to bring the community's vision to fruition?
- Is the local government desirous of keeping tight staff control of the project, or are the political and legal firewalls that come with designating decision making to a separate agency more important?
- Would the redevelopment strategy be strengthened by the ability to execute intergovernmental contracts?
- Will financing any public facilities or buildings be part of its redevelopment strategy?[16]
- Does the logical redevelopment area boundary include both city and county parcels?
- Will the project require floating bonds?
- Does the local government need provide a new urban redevelopment agency with any start up funds, office, or operations budget?

[16] DDAs are prohibited by Georgia case law from acquiring land for, or participating in the development of, government buildings, whereas urban redevelopment agencies are specifically enabled to do this.

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Additional Georgia Redevelopment Tools

Some of the information below was reproduced from a DCA-GMA document entitled *Georgia's Downtown Development Laws* which was most recently revised in 2003. Also see DCA's website at www.dca.state.ga.us.

Bond Allocation Program

For businesses and individuals seeking long-term, low-interest rate financing for the construction or improvements of manufacturing facilities, single and multi-family housing projects, tax exempt financing is available both at the state and local level. DCA is responsible for implementing a system for allocating the use of private-activity bonds, as permitted by federal law, in order to further the economic development of the state, to further the provision of safe, sanitary, and affordable housing, and otherwise to further the purposes of the laws of the state which provide for the issuance of such bonds.

Enterprise Zones

In 1997, the General Assembly enacted the Enterprise Zone Employment Act, recognizing the need for revitalization in many areas of Georgia. The State Enterprise Zone program intends to improve geographic areas within cities and counties that are suffering from disinvestment, underdevelopment, and economic decline, encouraging private businesses to reinvest and rehabilitate these places.

The Enterprise Zone area must meet at least four of five criteria:

1. Pervasive poverty established using 1990 Census data. Each block group must have at least 20% poverty.

2. Unemployment Rate (average for preceding yr.) at least 10% higher than State or significant job dislocation .

3. Underdevelopment evidenced by lack of building permits, licenses, land disturbance permits, etc. lower than development activity within local body's jurisdiction.

4. General distress and adverse conditions (population decline, health and safety issues etc.).

5. General Blight evidenced by the inclusion of any portion of the nominated area in an urban redevelopment area.

Incentives:

- Property tax exemption -- OCGA §36-88-8(a)(1)
- Abatement or reduction in occupation taxes, regulatory fees, building inspection fees, and other fees that would otherwise be imposed on qualifying business -- OCGA §36-88-9(a)
- Reduction or waiver of local ordinances to minimize adverse effects on rehabilitation, renovation, restoration and improvement of properties in the zone – O.C.G.A. 36-88-7

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Supplemental Material

Job Tax Credits

Georgia Job Tax Credit Program
The Job Tax Credit Program provides a tax credit on Georgia income taxes for eligible businesses that create new jobs in counties or "less-developed" census tract areas. Counties in Georgia are designated by tiers that relate to a sliding scale of maximum credits.

Tax Allocation Districts

The Redevelopment Powers Law
O.C.G.A. § 36-44-1

Note: The mechanism referred to as Tax Increment Financing in most states is called Tax Allocation Districts in Georgia's law

Tax increment financing (TIF), a tool widely used in many states, became available in Georgia through the Redevelopment Powers Law passed by the General Assembly in 1985. TIF helps local governments in constructing certain public facilities and infrastructure improvements in association with business development projects in deteriorating areas of a community. It allows the costs of these improvements to be charged directly to the businesses that use them rather than to the public at large. In return, the businesses benefit from the construction of facilities that otherwise might not be available to them.

How Does it Work?

A city or county government must identify a specific area in need of redevelopment and determine those public improvements (streets, water lines, etc.) needed to help the area attract new private development. When a developer provides a firm commitment to undertake a development project in the area, the city or county will issue bonds to pay for the necessary improvements.

After the public improvements and the private development are completed, the area will realize a significant increase in taxable value. Therefore, the local government will earn increased property tax revenues from the project. These revenues will be split so that the increase in revenues will go to a special fund to pay off the bonds that financed the public improvements. The remainder goes to the city and county general funds as normal.

After the bonds are repaid, the total tax revenues from the project, including the increased amount, will go to the general fund for the support of all city and county services.

Where Can It Be Used?

TIF can only be used in areas in need of redevelopment. Decaying industrial areas and deteriorated commercial areas are likely candidates.

What Types of Public Facilities Can Be Funded?

Traditional public facilities and infrastructure such as water and sewer lines, streets, sidewalks, parking facilities and public parks are included, along with building construction, building rehabilitation and land assembly.

How Is TIF Implemented Locally?

In general, the following steps are required: 1) local legislation is passed by the General Assembly which authorizes the local use of the redevelopment powers specified in the general law; 2) the local legislation is approved by the voters through a special election; 3) a local redevelopment

agency is created by resolution; and 4) a redevelopment plan is prepared; public hearings on the plan are held; and the plan is approved by the local government.

Regional Economic Assistance Projects (REAP)

Regional Economic Assistance Projects (REAP) provides a mechanism for local and state governments and the private sector to cooperate on large-scale tourism-related projects with multiple uses that will create jobs and enhance the local tax base. Upon meeting the requirements of the REAP statute and the REAP Rules, a developer of a certified REAP project may apply to the Georgia Department of Revenue for a state license for the sale of malt beverages, wine, or distilled spirits by the drink for consumption on the premises only. House Bill 1482, signed by the Governor on April 20, 2002, broadened the eligibility criteria for the REAP program. Effective July 10, 2002, the Department updated the REAP rules and application manual accordingly.

CIDs and CBIDs

City Business Improvement Districts
OCGA 36-43-1

In recognizing that many cities in the state are suffering from economically depressive conditions and that the conditions unfavorably contribute to the decline of those areas, state law allows for the establishment of City Business Improvement Districts (CBID), which is an effective means for restoring and promoting commercial and other business activity within such business districts.

A CBID is a special taxing district designed to promote the economic development of a city's commercial areas. Once established, a CBID may provide such services as advertising, promotion, sanitation, security, and business recruitment and development.

How is a City Business Improvement District Created?

A city can create a CBID upon adoption of a plan for the proposed district. The plan cannot be adopted unless there is a written petition signed and acknowledged by either:

a) At least 51% of the municipal taxpayers of the district proposed for creation as a CBID (or for the extension of the district); or

b) Municipal taxpayers owning at least 51% of the taxable property subject to ad valorem real and personal property taxation in the district.

The plan included with the petition must provide a map of the district, a description of its boundaries, present and proposed uses of the land, maximum millage to be levied for providing the supplemental services, and a time frame for carrying out the plan. Under Georgia law, the duration of a CBID may not be less than five years and can be no longer than ten years, and will terminate unless renewed by ordinance.

Operation of City Business Improvement Districts

After the adoption of a CBID, the city may levy annually a millage on real and personal property within the district (or a surcharge on business licenses and occupation taxes). These taxes will be collected in the same manner as other city taxes. The city may then provide the supplemental services called for in the plan, or it may contract with a nonprofit corporation or a downtown development authority to provide all or part of these services. The city can, if it chooses, mandate design and rehabilitation standards for buildings located within the district subject to existing historic preservation ordinances.

The Georgia's Urban Redevelopment Act

Excerpt from "A Guide to Using Georgia's Urban Redevelopment Act" by GA DCA, April 2005
http://www.dca.state.ga.us/communities/DowntownDevelopment/publications/URAhowto.pdf

Supplemental Material

Community Improvement Districts
O.C.G.A. § 99-9-7.1

Georgia law authorizes property owners in commercial areas to establish special tax districts to pay for infrastructure enhancement. These Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) do not replace traditional city and county infrastructure improvement programs but supplement them by providing a means to pay for required facilities in densely developed areas such as those around large shopping malls.

Projects which can be funded by a CID include street and road construction and maintenance, sidewalks and streetlights, parking facilities, water systems, sewage systems, terminal and dock facilities, public transportation, and parks and recreational areas.

How does it work?

A CID is created through local legislation passed by the General Assembly with the approval by resolution of the city or county government which has jurisdiction over the area in which the CID would be located. Any law creating or providing for the creation of a CID shall require the adoption of a resolution consenting to the creation of the CID by:

(A) The governing authority of the county if the CID is located wholly within the unincorporated area of a county; or

(B) The governing authority of the municipality if the CID is located wholly within the incorporated area of a municipality; or
(C) The governing authorities of the county and municipality if the CID is located partially within the unincorporated area of a county and partially within the incorporated area of a municipality.

In addition, written consent to the creation of the CID must be given by:

(A) The owners of real property within the proposed CID which will be subject to taxes, fees, and assessments levied by the administrative body of the CID; and

(B) The owners of real property within the CID which constitutes at least 75% by value of all real property within the CID which will be subject to taxes, fees, and assessments levied by the administrative body of the CID.

The administrative body of each CID is authorized to levy taxes, fees and assessments on all property subject to the tax up to a level which amounts to 2.5% of the assessed value of the property, i.e., 25 mills. Bonded debt is permitted but such debt may not be considered an obligation of the state or any other unit of government other than the CID.

Supplemental Material

Desirable Aspects for a New Downtown Centerville

Downtown Development Authority

Desirable Aspects for a New Downtown Centerville

Downtown Development Authority, City of Centerville, GA

Supplemental Material

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Supplemental Material

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to outline public feedback about a future downtown Centerville and also to incorporate desirable aspects as discussed by the DDA, Mayor and City Council.

This document should be used as a "design guide" when recommending design elements for a new Centerville downtown.

History

The Centerville DDA was formed by the Centerville City Council and Mayor in 2004 to look at the creation of a Downtown District for the city.

Joint Comprehensive Plan

Concurrent with the efforts of the Centerville DDA is work on a Comprehensive plan for Houston County. This is a joint effort with Houston County, and the Cities of Centerville, Perry and Warner Robins.

Work on this "Comp" plan is ongoing and not yet adopted. An effort has been made to follow the principals outlined in the Joint Comprehensive plan. To the degree that this document may conflict with that plan, the Comprehensive Plan will take precedence.

Additional information about the Houston County Joint Comprehensive Plan can be obtained at the following website address: http://mgrdc.org/jointplan/introduction.html

Designated Downtown Area

The last page of this document (http://mgrdc.org/jointplan/docs/ca_centerville.pdf) includes a map outlining the Centerville Downtown District as well as surrounding areas that are to be considered for zoning overlays to guide future development efforts.

When considering creative means to achieve the long term goals for a Centerville downtown, the entire designated downtown area should be considered. A phased approach to achieving these long term goals should include development of a downtown core in an early phase and closer integration with the rest of the designated downtown area in subsequent phases. The focus of this document is more on the early phase development of a downtown area.

Potential Sites for Phase One Development

Two potential sites have been identified within the "Downtown District" as logical locations for a first phase development of a new downtown. Both sites are currently vacant and are predominately bordered by North Houston Lake Blvd north of Gunn and Church Roads.

Desirable Aspects for a New Downtown Centerville

Downtown Development Authority, City of Centerville, GA

Supplemental Material

Potential Sites for Downtown Development - continued

The first site is part of the Eagles Springs PUD and is roughly identified from Gunn Rd at Margie Dr, north to the Eagle Springs entrance, Waterland Way. This parcel is for sale and available for commercial development.

A feature of the site that limits its potential use is the presence of high power lines. It is highly unlikely that these lines can or will be moved or otherwise placed under ground.

Monies were approved in the recent countywide SPLOST for the potential acquisition of a right of way to extend Margie Dr to North Houston Lake Blvd which would improve access and provide significant road frontage to this parcel.

The second potential site includes two contiguous vacant parcels on the east side of North Houston Lake Blvd. Roughly bordered by the cemetery north of Church Rd, going north ending just prior to Bassett St.

These vacant parcels are not currently for sale. It has been suggested that the City/DDA approach the owners to gauge interest on their part to sell the property.

Several single family homes along North Houston Lake and adjacent to these two parcels are for sale. These could be included in a downtown site, significantly increasing the frontage on North Houston Lake Blvd.

Integration with Surrounding Area

A successful plan for a downtown Centerville should include close integration with the surrounding areas as defined in the document referenced previously.

How this is achieved shall be left to the creativity of the firm/entity chosen to design the new downtown. Feedback from the public and other sources includes the desire to easily walk or bicycle to/from important nearby sites including the elementary school on North Houston Lake Blvd, City Hall Galleria Mall, and the public library.

The new downtown area should also integrate closely with nearby single-family residential areas like Eagle Springs.

Design Elements

The overriding desire is to create a downtown that will attract visitors and businesses, and create a safe pleasant environment that will help facilitate a vibrant “alive” downtown area.

The downtown area should be pedestrian friendly with a mix of businesses that is conducive to an extended visit to the downtown area by the public. A strong mixture of restaurants with judicial use of “mixed use” architecture will help to provide this desired affect.

Supplemental Material

Unique Centerville Identity

The area must be pedestrian friendly, with dedicated "open space," and should have adequate parking without having the feel of a "sea of asphalt."

A successful design will provide for a unique "Centerville identity" and should include architectural elements that identify Centerville as a thriving "Southern" town. "Ultra-modern" building styles should be avoided.

Building Facades

It is anticipated that the downtown area will include individual "store fronts" contained within a larger building footprint. It is desirable for a successful plan to include differentiation of the individual businesses. This can be achieved in a number of ways. Differing brick styles, slight changes in awning styles, and varying the fronts of the building are ways that should be considered. Building designs must not place an undue burden on existing Centerville services, especially fire department services.

Exterior Lighting

Exterior building lighting is an important design consideration. Fixtures should be attractive and in keeping with other architectural elements as well as durable and long lasting. Exterior lighting of business signs is more desirable than allowing lighted business signs.

Building/Business Signage

Types and styles of business signs should complement the architecture, not be a distraction. Simple durable signs with just the business name should be considered. Signage style should provide a modicum of uniformity without making the business appear to be identical.

Business Mix

Restaurant and Retail

While a varied mix of business types will be an important design consideration, it is felt that a vibrant downtown area must include certain types of businesses. Foremost should be restaurants and retail shops. Building design should help attract these types of businesses. I.e.: Potential restaurant sites should allow for outdoor seating.

Mixed Use and Professional

Mixed-use residential and some professional uses will help to attract people to the downtown area.

Desirable Aspects for a New Downtown Centerville

Downtown Development Authority, City of Centerville, GA

Supplemental Material

Impact on Surrounding Areas

Placement of business types should be made with consideration to the impact of surrounding residential areas. For example restaurants in close proximity to residential may impact that residential area negatively (noise considerations, etc).

A potential solution may be to include mixed-use buildings of professional and residential. This may be more desirable to the surrounding homeowners as professional businesses tend to close much earlier than restaurants and generate much less noise while open.

Streetscapes

Sidewalks

As mentioned, an overriding goal is to provide a safe "pedestrian friendly" downtown area. Large, wide sidewalks should be used to facilitate pedestrian and wheelchair traffic while helping to insulate pedestrians from adjacent vehicle traffic. Where crosswalks are needed, bump outs should be considered to make that crossing safer.

A program that includes selling bricks with the donors name may be a way to help raise money and community awareness for the project.

As previously stated, sidewalks should serve to integrate the downtown area with the surrounding neighborhoods.

Exterior Lighting

Street Lighting has the dual-purpose role of not only complementing the architectural style of the buildings but of also enhancing the safety of the public utilizing the downtown area.

Lighting chosen should not only fit the style of the area but materials must be low maintenance and durable.

Street Signage

Street signage, unique to the Centerville Downtown is desirable. Signage should be architecturally compatible with surrounding buildings, informative, low maintenance and durable.

Parking/Transportation

The area will require adequate off street parking to accommodate, not only visitors to the downtown area, but also residents of any mixed-use residential included downtown. Care should be taken to avoid large asphalt expanses dedicated to parking.

A long term downtown design should consider ways to take advantage of the proximity of the Galleria Mall. We do not desire to "cannibalize" the mall for businesses for downtown Centerville. A transportation link between the two areas may help to avoid this.

Landscapes

Open Areas

Open areas are desirable to provide a place for people to congregate in and around the downtown area. These can include small park areas for families and others, and open areas suitable for public activities and/or outdoor vendors.

Design of open area(s) should be relatively low maintenance to eliminate an undue burden on the taxpayers of Centerville.

Trees

Mature trees that provide relief from hot summer days is desirable. Seating around and near these trees should be included in a successful design.

Historic Preservation

The City of Centerville has a group interested in restoring the City's first fire truck, and preserving it for display within the downtown area. This group is considering incorporating as a historic preservation group, with the truck restoration and display as its first project. A successful downtown design should include an area where this fire truck could be on public display.

Conclusion

This document is provided to communicate design ideas as compiled from several sources including public input. It is by no means a definitive document nor should it stifle creative ideas. It should be utilized in conjunction with sites visits, interviews and other sources of input.

This CD contains:

- Graphics used on this report
- A PDF version of this report
- A Movie of New Town Center
- CAD files

Supplemental Material

The University of Georgia

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To download an electronic copy of this report visit us at:
http://www.sed.uga.edu/pso/charrettes/centerville2007.pdf