

# varnell elementary school

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University of Georgia • College of Environment and Design • Public Service and Outreach • June 2003

# The Varnell Report

## Charrette Executive Summary

Summer 2003

# THE VARNELL REPORT

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The Limestone Valley Resource Conservation and Development Council invited the University of Georgia's College of Environment and Design, Office of Public Service & Outreach to conduct a design charrette for the Varnell Community. Funding from the Georgia Forestry Commission's Urban and Community Forestry Program made this collaborative effort possible.



## Introduction

The Limestone Valley Resource Conservation and Development Council, Georgia Forestry Commission, National Resource Conservation Service, staff at Varnell Elementary School, and community leaders from the City of Varnell invited the University of Georgia's Office of Public Service and Outreach to conduct a design charrette. The charrette was made possible by funding from the Georgia Forestry Commission's Urban and Community Forestry Program.

A team of students and faculty from the University of Georgia's College of Environment and Design met with charrette participants to assess the needs of Varnell Elementary School and its role within the Varnell community. A pre-charrette community meeting was conducted in the weeks prior to the arrival of the University of Georgia team. From that meeting a list of priorities was developed for consideration in the charrette.

Recommendations included:

- development of a nature trail
- planting more trees
- a greenhouse
- improvements to play structures
- establishment of connections between the school, city, and Prater's Mill.

During the design charrette members of the Varnell community spoke fondly about what makes their town special. Descriptions included terms such as:

- historic
- community-friendly
- crossroads of change
- tradition
- green space

Suggestions for improvements to Varnell Elementary echoed those from the pre-charrette meeting, but also included many new ideas. School children drew pictures and shared ideas of what they would like to see happen at Varnell. Additionally, as part of the charrette process the UGA team visited several of Varnell's special places including Prater's Mill, the springs and the blacksmith shop. Through this process the team began to develop a vision for an improved Varnell Elementary School.

The recommendations for Varnell Elementary School are summarized in this report and draw from a number of different sources. The suggestions of charrette participants were influential in guiding our vision of what Varnell Elementary School can become. Likewise, the [Georgia Model Urban Forest Book](#), published by the Georgia Forestry Commission provided guiding principles for our design recommendations. The UGA team combined ideas and principles from these sources with our own knowledge and experience to produce a conceptual plan for Varnell Elementary School. The concepts

expressed in the report are CONCEPTUAL and should be considered in this context. Parts of the plan may not be readily achievable and community members should follow a phased approach to ensure that, in time, their visions for Varnell Elementary and the surrounding community become reality.

We must thank Doug Cabe of the Limestone Valley Resource Conservation & Development Council for inviting the Office of Public Service and Outreach to conduct the charrette and for his help in coordinating the effort. Special thanks go to the Georgia Forestry Commission for providing the funding and guidance that made it possible for us to work with the Varnell community. Thank you, Judy Alderman, of the Prater's Mill Foundation, for leading our tour and for teaching us the history of Varnell. Finally, we would like to thank the charrette participants who shared their time, dreams, and visions (and in the case of the school children – their drawings). Although the production of this report signifies an end of the charrette process it does not signify an end to the design process. The process is still just beginning and it is now in the hands of the Varnell community. Use this report to guide you through the design process. Base your decisions on the “spirit” of this report and do not forget to dream.

## **Concept**

Clothespins are very simple objects. The old style clothespins, simply shaped and sculpted of wood were designed for the sole purpose of holding clothes to the clothesline. For Varnell the clothespin is a connection to the past, the days when chenille bedspreads were hung along Peacock Alley. Today the clothespin is a largely forgotten tool, but the University of Georgia team did not forget its symbolic relationship with Varnell.

In the design process the need for unity and connectivity at Varnell Elementary School and within the community became apparent. As a result, the design concept for Varnell Elementary School is based on the principles of unity and connectivity. Throughout the charrette these principles were interwoven in the ideas and suggestions brought forward. Charrette participants described how it is often difficult to walk around the property with car traffic present. School children discussed their enjoyment of the Peacock Alley Playground but explained that it was too far from the school, bathrooms, and drinking fountains. In addition to these physical aspects of connectivity and unity there are also intangible aspects. Suggestions for nature trails, bird observation areas, and a greenhouse indicate a desire to tie the school grounds to an educational curriculum that utilizes the whole school campus and not just the school building.

In addition to unifying the school grounds, there is also a need to tie the school together with other community icons. On our tour we visited Prater's mill, the springs and the blacksmith shop. These are the places that make Varnell unique and distinct from other communities, but without the help of community members who guided us on a tour of these special places, we never would have recognized their importance to Varnell.

It sometimes takes a physical tool to link things together. Our concept connects these special places with the history of Varnell just as a clothespin connects the day's wash to the clothesline.

## **Unifying and Connecting Varnell Elementary School**

The charrette team looked at the many different activities (education, recreation, and nature based recreation) that take place on the grounds of Varnell Elementary School and organized the grounds so that all these activities can occur without interfering with each other or competing for space. The following list of site enhancements are recommended in order to create a school campus that will remain diverse in its offerings, but that will be unified in its design. The recommendations are broken down into three areas of the school grounds: the school area, the natural area, and the recreation area. These areas are not intended to have strict boundaries but are instead intended to connect and transition the wide array of activities from one area to another.

### **The School Area**

#### **Playgrounds**

Based on a brief study of the existing playground sites it is recommended that the playground equipment be consolidated into one space and be developed based on a theme. An ideal location for this new arrangement is to the northeast of the school where a current playground exists. As seen on the conceptual master plan, the proposed location for the consolidated playground has ample space to accommodate the existing playground equipment and basketball courts. This location is in close proximity to the school building and allows for views of the neighboring baseball fields.

The proposed new arrangement offers many advantages. Teachers would be able to easily lead their students to a large, centralized recreational area and avoid a long walk over to Peacock Alley, the play area Varnell school children favor most. Parents involved with after school baseball games in the adjacent fields can both monitor the game and their younger children at play. The discreet placement of all play equipment behind the school keeps the children safely within quick adult assistance and close to restrooms and drinking fountains. Open space for play would still exist in the front of the school for activities that do not require playground equipment.

In addition to consolidating the play areas into one space, some new elements are proposed to further enhance the site. By locating the rail car from Prater's Mill next to the existing railcar the playground would be divided into loosely defined outdoor rooms. These railcars, significant to the local railroad heritage, can be creatively incorporated into recreation equipment as either platforms for slides, jungle gyms, or act as shady places to escape the sun's heat. They could also

serve as special classrooms for reading, viewing videos, art projects or learning about local history.

There is an urgent need for vegetation. Not only will planting new trees and shrubs provide a cooling effect with shade, the proposed placement of such greenery will better define, shape, and enclose the playground. The new spaces created with trees and shrubs will be enjoyable areas for teachers to enjoy lunch with each other under a cool canopy while monitoring students hard at play.

The timing of the recommendation for consolidating playgrounds was also a consideration of the design team. Peacock Alley includes many of the play structures that the children enjoy, but unfortunately the equipment is beginning to show its age. An appendix to this report documents the problems with the equipment at Peacock Alley in greater detail. The need to address the deterioration of Peacock Alley creates the perfect opportunity to remove equipment that is unsafe or beyond repair and to consolidate existing equipment in a central play area.

### **Landscape**

Landscape improvements include a three-part plan to phase out the Bradford Pear trees (*Pyrus calleryana*) on the school grounds. The Georgia Model Urban Forest Book, published by the Georgia Forestry Commission provides many reasons why it is important to grow large canopy trees. In the context of the Varnell Elementary School, the need to begin growing larger hardwoods is apparent. Bradford pears, though ornamental, are prone to splitting and do not provide the shade that larger trees do. Hardwoods will age gracefully as the school ages and will offer memories of favorite spots to read and play. Many areas such as parking lots, playgrounds, seating for sporting events, and the proposed walking path are in need of significant shade that cannot be achieved with low growing ornamentals. Canopy trees can also help to reduce the energy costs of heating and cooling the school. Large growing canopy trees will also begin to provide a unified transition from forested natural areas to the more man-made areas of the school grounds.

The first phase of removing the Bradford Pear trees (*Pyrus calleryana*) is the immediate removal of 1/3 of the trees and replacing them with a mixture of hardwoods and pine trees. The second phase of the plan is to under-plant 1/3 of the Bradford Pear trees (*Pyrus calleryana*) with hardwood trees for two years and then to remove them. The third phase is to allow the remaining Bradford Pears (*Pyrus calleryana*) to finish out their lifespan and to replace them with hardwood species. In addition to planting new trees, care of existing trees is needed. Railroad tie boxes around the trunks of trees should be removed to prevent the added soil around the trunk from killing the trees. The soil mounds around the trees literally suffocate them. Also, selective pruning should be used where power lines and trees come together. Trimming the canopy of trees into a “V”

shape compromises the beauty of the trees and increases the likelihood that these trees will split.

### **Curb Appeal**

In the school area the design team recommends a series of enhancements collectively referred to as “curb appeal” to improve the main façade of the building. Pools filled with fish and aquatic plantings replace the large junipers that now fill brick planters. Below the large willow oaks the grass should be replaced with *liriope* and *aspidistra elatior* and a stone path can connect the different entrances on the west side of the building. A railing is needed for the handicap ramp by the main entrance to help provide support for those with difficulty walking and to assist with deliveries. Finally, if the “no parking” signs are needed, their presence should be less dominant.

### **Cold Frames**

During the charrette, the development of a greenhouse for school experiments was a popular topic. The existing greenhouse structure is not yet complete and poses long-term maintenance issues, especially after storms, in winter and during summer breaks. An easy and comparable alternative to construction and maintaining a greenhouse is the use of cold frames. Cold frames are essentially planting boxes with hinged windows for lids. These allow seeds to be sown earlier in the planting season than normal because they protect the plants from frost and cold weather. They also trap the sunlight and heat that accelerates plant growth. In this way, cold frames can provide the desired educational needs without the exceptional maintenance issues. The cold frames also tie together the functions of learning with the development of plantings for the adjacent natural area.

### **The Natural Area**

With the relocation of a small playground and basketball court from the west portion of the property, the design team saw the opportunity to create a natural area that can become the centerpiece for an environmental education curriculum.

Varnell Elementary has exceptional natural resources located on school property and adjacent to academic buildings. These resources should be fully developed and incorporated into the academic curriculum, as well as integrated into the school’s social and recreational services to the broader community. Currently, a trail system exists in the forest adjacent to the school. These trails will be enhanced with proper upkeep and should be extended to connect to a proposed network of trails that will cover the entire property and allow visitors to travel easily across the site.

A diversity of habitats can be developed on the site by changing current landscape management practices. First, decrease the amount of mowed lawn area and allow

a portion of the lawn to return to a natural successional meadow. Second, the establishment of a wetland at the site's low-point can easily occur by limiting the amount of water that flows off the site. The low area, which currently experiences periodic flooding, can be enhanced by placing a small check dam to control outflow under Georgia Highway 2. Once created, this wetland will cover portions of what is now lawn and lowland forest. Third, vegetative transitions between zones should be allowed to occur. As changes are made to the site these transitions will happen naturally without human interference. The forest will encroach upon the wetland and climb into the meadow creating a buffer between the road and the school. The wetland will change shape and size according to rainfall and topography. Lastly, the meadow will diversify as more tree and shrub species appear. This successional landscape will diversify and improve plant and wildlife habitat, especially songbirds, thus enhancing educational and recreational opportunities.

The changes outline above will create four distinct habitat zones that are illustrated on the two plan drawings titled, "Habitat Zones" and "Trails". School curriculum should highlight the different ecosystems within these four habitats as well as the natural succession of plant communities between habitat zones.

In addition to the changes described above, a few additional changes are recommended to enhance the natural areas of the school. Plantings of Eastern Red Cedars (*Juniperus virginiana*) around the septic field and electric transformers will shield them from view. Near the school is a grove of fruit trees and picnic tables that delineates the transition from school areas to natural areas. A new seating wall with a view of the wetland, forest, and meadow is proposed below the ancient Eastern Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) tree. As described above, landscaping at this location includes the addition of hardwoods and pines through planting and natural regeneration. A large portion of the field will be devoted to an open meadow of native grasses and wildflowers. This area will attract birds and butterflies and can serve as an enhancement to the environmental curriculum. It can be developed over a series of several years through class plantings and a mowing program that will gradually reduce the area of mowed lawn

## **The Recreation Area**

### **Parking**

A lack of parking was a constant theme during the charrette. With the relocation of the Peacock Alley playground, this area can be opened up for a gravel parking lot. This area is ideal for additional parking, because it is away from baseball fields that could damage cars and the location makes it suitable for events held at the new recreation center, baseball fields, or school. In addition, the new parking area will be planted with large trees to provide much needed shade. Existing



parking will be more accessible with the addition of the walking path and recreational mall.

### **Buildings**

In order to create a welcoming and balanced entryway to the baseball fields, a new building is proposed. This building would be identical in size to the larger two-story score keeper building and would replace the smaller score keeper building. The concession stand/restroom building and all the score keeper buildings would be painted brick red and cream to provide consistency with the school buildings and transition to the new recreation center.

### **Landscape**

The area around the baseball fields and recreation center should be enhanced with plantings of large canopy trees as indicated in the plan. Tulip poplars (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) grow straight and would be a good choice in areas close to the baseball fields. These plantings will provide shade for spectators, create a formal feeling of being at a ballpark, and connect the recreation areas with the natural areas. Removal of building materials (leftover brick and concrete block, telephone poles, and gravel piles) from the grounds is needed for safety and aesthetic reasons.

### **Perimeter Walking Path**

A perimeter-walking path connects the three main areas of the school grounds. It provides a safe and easy path for moving throughout the school, which was a concern expressed during the charrette. The paved walking path can be a place for parents to bring young children to ride bicycles without the fear of cars. For adults the path can be a safe place for exercise and for leisure. During school the path can be used for gym classes. The existing fitness equipment located behind Peacock Alley (or similar equipment) could be used as stations along the trail. The path would be marked with discreet mileage markers so walkers and runners could measure their progress. It is recommended that the path be constructed of concrete for ease of maintenance and for handicap accessibility.

### **The Mall**

The mall is a tree-lined walkway extending from the recreation center, through the central school ground, and then ends in a semicircular plaza. It enables easy access to all parts of the school campus. The trees create shade for baseball spectators and make the area between the baseball fields more than an extension of the parking lot. The mall is the connection that physically ties the recreation, school, and natural areas together. At the conclusion of the mall is a plaza that serves as a community guidepost. Included in the plaza is a map showing sites that are important parts of the Varnell community and interpretive signage that gives a history of the sites. The mall serves as a structure that unifies the areas of the school and begins to connect community icons.

The mall at Varnell Elementary school provides a means for connecting community icons together, but the design team felt that something more was

needed to direct people to Varnell's special places. The solution for connecting the community icons draws on Varnell's history and returns to the chenille bedspreads of Peacock Alley. Sculptural signage designed to look like clothespins will direct community members and visitors to important locations. At the intersection of Cleveland Highway and Georgia Highway 2, signs will be placed showing the direction of Prater's Mill, Varnell Elementary School, Varnell, and the spring. These signs will become Varnell's trademark and will signify its location. At each site, additional signage will be used to identify the site and to provide relevant historical information.

## **Conclusions**

"Cross Roads of Change" was one phrase that stands out even weeks after the conclusion of the charrette. Changes are coming to Varnell, but as many charrette participants suggested change can be a good thing. However, when change creates generic places communities begin to lose their individual identities and without notice they all begin to look the same. Varnell has many special places that make it different from every other town and it is not too late to shape future developments into community appropriate places. Bubbling pools of crystal clear spring water, the turbines, millstones and machinery of Prater's Mill, a true small town Post Office, a rare blacksmith shop, sections of the trail of tears, Varnell Elementary School where the Community gathers to play, learn and relax. These places make Varnell special.

In this report we have recommended many changes. Some changes, such as giant clothespins for signs might seem a bit unusual, but this is precisely why they are important. They are a symbol of Varnell's past and its connection with the chenille bedspreads of Peacock Alley and of its future as unique town in northwest Georgia. They are not the typical historic markers or street signs because Varnell is different. We believe that the recommended changes will help enhance Varnell's identity and give it a framework for embracing future change. Interestingly the crossroads at the intersection of Cleveland and Georgia Highway 2 was a turn that we almost missed when trying to find Varnell Elementary on the first morning of the charrette. Our design concept celebrates Varnell's location at these crossroads and makes it a place that future travelers will not miss. Through our design we have sought to enhance Varnell Elementary and to create connections to Varnell's special places. When a visitor travels down Cleveland highway and sees the signs they will know that they are somewhere that is different from every other place. When a community member travels down Cleveland highway and from a distance sees giant clothespins rising before them they will know that they are finally home.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Problems with Peacock Alley

When it comes to community and school playgrounds Peacock Alley is a favorite among kids. The towers, bridges, tunnels, slides, and swings provide children with infinite options for imaginative play. The paved paths create the opportunity for children to ride their bikes in a safe environment, and the symbolic references to the carpet industry creates a reminder of place. However, the popularity of the playground and time have taken a toll on Peacock Alley. Part of the master plan for Varnell Elementary School is a recommendation for the relocation of the Peacock Alley Playground to a more centralized location. The following maintenance issues need to be addressed as part of the relocation or renovation of Peacock Alley.

#### **Swings:**

The Peacock Alley Playground has many swing sets for children to play on. Unfortunately, many swings are missing from the swing sets. Swing sets need to be checked for stability, and if they are stable the swings should be replaced. If the swing sets are not stable; they should be removed.

#### **Sand Garden:**

The sand garden provides a place for children to play and dig in the sand. Kids can sift sand through funnels and pipes. Metal digging tools exist in the playground, but they are broken and in need of repair or replacement. Additionally, more sand needs to be added, and weeds need to be maintained in this area.

#### **Fitness Elements:**

Fitness elements such as pull-up bars and sit-up station are disconnected from Peacock Alley. The tall weeds that have grown up around these elements discourage their use. Additionally, these elements are better suited for use on a fitness trail rather than as part of the playground.

#### **Leftover Building Supplies:**

Leftover building and maintenance supplies (concrete block, bricks, railroad ties, dirt mounds, mulch piles, telephone poles) surround Peacock Alley and need to be removed and concentrated in an area away from the playground. In addition to being unsightly and hazardous, these materials are beginning to show up in the play areas of Peacock Alley.

#### **Wooden Elements:**

The rough abuse that children inflict upon play elements is evident in the current state of the wooden lattice that has been used throughout the playground. This material was never meant to withstand playground use. In many areas it has been broken leaving splintered edges and metal staples exposed. The remaining lattice needs to be removed and if necessary replaced with a more durable material.

Broken boards throughout the playground structures have splintered edges exposed. Fortunately, boards are not broken on platforms or bridges where children could fall through them. Most broken boards were on the sides or roofs of play structures. It is important that broken boards are replaced quickly. Not only are the splintered remains of broken boards dangerous to children, but where boards are missing or broken children are able to pull or hang on the next board until several consecutive boards are broken.

**Landscape Fabric:**

The landscape fabric that was put under mulch to prevent weeds is now exposed in areas around slides and landings. The exposed fabric needs to be removed or buried below several inches of mulch so that running children do not trip on it.

**Edges:**

Several plastic elements are cracked or broken exposing jagged edges that could injure children. These elements need to be replaced or removed.

**Tables, Benches and Seating:**

There are a number of seating options for parents and teachers to use while children play. Picnic tables and benches need sit upright and level. Additional trees should be planted to shade the playground from the summer sun.

**Railroad Ties:**

Railroad ties segment the adjacent play areas with 2' tall walls. The walls prevent easy movement from one area to another and are also coming apart. Railroad ties have created a maintenance issue because mowers cannot get up to their edges, and as a result, string trimming is needed but is not happening.

**Weedy Maintenance:**

Maintenance around the playground's borders has been neglected. More mulch needs to be put around the playground to create a simple edge for mowers and to smother weeds. Railroad ties should be removed from the grassy areas around the playground to simplify maintenance.

**Appendix B: Management of Sensitive Areas Surrounding Springs Varnell, Georgia**

1. Use manual labor to clean around springheads. No heavy mechanized equipment, no earth disturbing activity.
2. Water runoff from higher elevations should be filtered through vegetative buffers.
3. Steep slopes should be stabilized with natural materials (i.e. limestone boulders and plant materials).
4. Steps down to the stream should be gently installed. Stone steps should be nestled into hillside rather than using soil disturbing techniques.
5. To the greatest extent possible, all surrounding paved surfaces should be permeable or have positive drainage away from the springhead.

6. All native vegetation should be pruned rather than removed.
7. Invasive exotics should be removed.
8. Automobile traffic should be kept as far from water source and stream banks as possible.
9. All springs in the Varnell vicinity should be mapped and registered with the appropriate planning agencies.

Tourist and visitors should be educated about the value of the springs and directed to their locations with information regarding the health, myth, and history of the Varnell water source.

### **Appendix C: Use of Railroad Ties at Varnell Elementary School**

The use of recycled railroad ties for landscaping and gardening is a practice that became popular in the last two decades. Although railroad ties offer an affordable solution for landscaping needs, they also present several problems. Creosote is a wood preservative applied to railroad ties to prevent them from rotting. Creosote is made of coal tar and a number of other chemicals. In the hot sun it can often be seen bubbling up on the surface of the wood and can cause rashes and stains on clothing. In 1999, the European Union banned the sale and use of creosote, and the EPA has said that coal tar is a probable human carcinogen. The risk posed by the railroad ties at Varnell Elementary School is probably low. However, it is a risk that should be avoided. The railroad ties seem like a good solution, but by the time the railroad begins replacing them they are already in a state of decay. A quick look around Varnell Elementary School reveals that many of the railroad ties have cracked and are coming apart. Additionally, the railroad ties have created unnecessary maintenance difficulties. The potential health risks, decaying wood, and maintenance issues indicate that the use of railroad ties at Varnell Elementary School is not the best solution. A simple solution is to use mulch and shallow trenches to keep turf separate from other areas.

Other notes on railroad ties:

- Railroad ties should not be stacked around trees to form planters because the additional dirt around the trunk can kill the trees.
- Railroad ties should never be burned due to their chemical content.
- Railroad ties should not be placed in areas where they may contaminate water supplies or used for garden boxes.

### **Appendix D: Control of Invasive Exotics In Natural Areas**

Invasive exotics are plants that are not native to the local habitat. These plants have been introduced through use in yards, government and highway plantings, and through accidental introductions. They often come from Asia or Europe. In their native lands these plants have natural competition that keep their growth under control. In landscapes in the United States the lack of natural competition results in the uncontrolled growth and

spread of invasive exotic plants. Removal of these plants is important for maintaining the diversity and natural functions of our ecosystems. Invasive exotics can displace native plants that are valuable resources for wildlife and create monotonous and jungle like growth that destroys unique and diverse places. Common invasive exotics that threaten Varnell Elementary School's natural areas include Chinese privet, Japanese honeysuckle, English ivy, vinca, kudzu, and mimosa trees. Many people enjoy these plants, but their presence alters and destroys the functions of natural ecosystems. Removal of these species should be part of an environmental education program that teaches children how to be stewards of the land and how they can contribute to maintaining healthy ecosystems. This will need to be an ongoing effort, but the result will be a natural area that is a keystone in the education of Varnell's school children.

# varnell elementary school masterplan



- Cold Frame
- Perimeter Walking Path
- Fruit Trees & Picnic Tables
- Wall Seating
- Mowed Lawn
- Constructed Wetland
- Outdoor Classroom
- Raised Viewing Platform
- Enhanced, Labeled Nature Trail
- Boardwalk
- Directional Map
- Successional Forest
- Red Cedar
- Successional Meadow

- Consolidated Play space Peacock Alley "Reborn"
- Relocated Prater's Mail Car
- Parking
- Tree Alle
- Plaza
- Recreational Mall
- Walking path
- Tree Alle

## Concept:

Clothespins are very simple objects. The old style clothespins are merely sculpted wood designed for the sole purpose of holding clothes to the clothesline. For Varnell the clothespin is a connection with its past and the days when chenille bedspreads were hung along Peacock Alley. Today the clothespin is a largely forgotten tool, but the University of Georgia team did not forget its symbolic relationship with Varnell.

In the design process the need for unity and connectivity at Varnell Elementary School and within the community became apparent. As a result the design

concept for Varnell Elementary School is based on the principles of unity and connectivity. Throughout the charrette these principles were interwoven in the ideas and suggestions that were brought forward. Charrette participants described how it is often difficult to walk around the property with car traffic present. School children discussed their enjoyment of the Peacock Alley Playground, but explained that it was too far from the school, bathrooms, and drinking fountains. In addition to these physical aspects of connectivity and unity there are also intangible aspects. Suggestions for nature trails, bird observation areas and a greenhouse indicate a desire to tie the school grounds into an educational curriculum that utilizes the whole school campus and not just the school building.

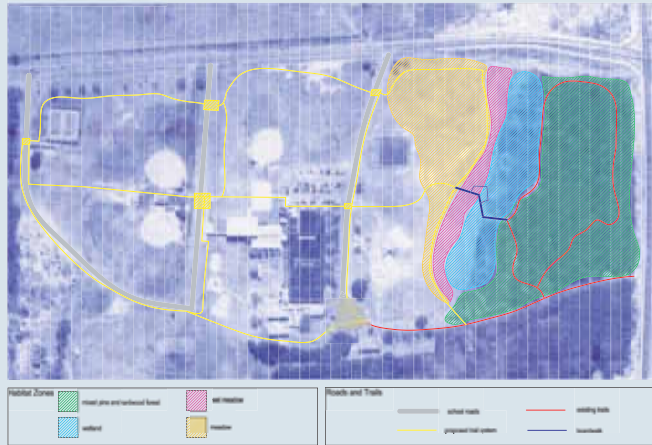
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Our concept is one that highlights the important places in Varnell, the history of the area and connects them together just as a clothespin connects the day's wash to the clothesline.

# varnell elementary school

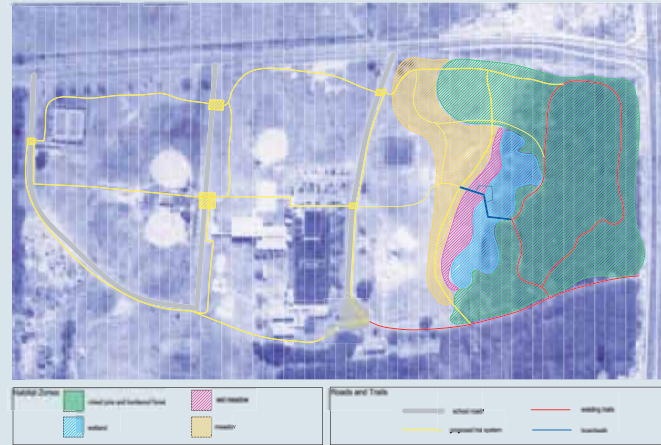
Varnell Elementary School

Habitat Zones / Paths and Trails Phase 1



Varnell Elementary School

Habitat Zones / Paths and Trails Phase 2



## Natural Areas

With the relocation of a small playground and basketball court from the west portion of the property the design team saw the opportunity to create a natural area that can become the centerpiece for an environmental education curriculum.

Varnell Elementary has exceptional natural resources located on school property and adjacent to academic buildings. These resources should be fully developed and incorporated into the academic curriculum, as well as integrated into the school's social and recreational services to the broader community. Currently, a trail system exists in forest adjacent to the school. These trails will be enhanced with proper upkeep and should be extended to connect to a proposed network of trails that will cover the entire property and allow the visitor to travel more easily across the site.

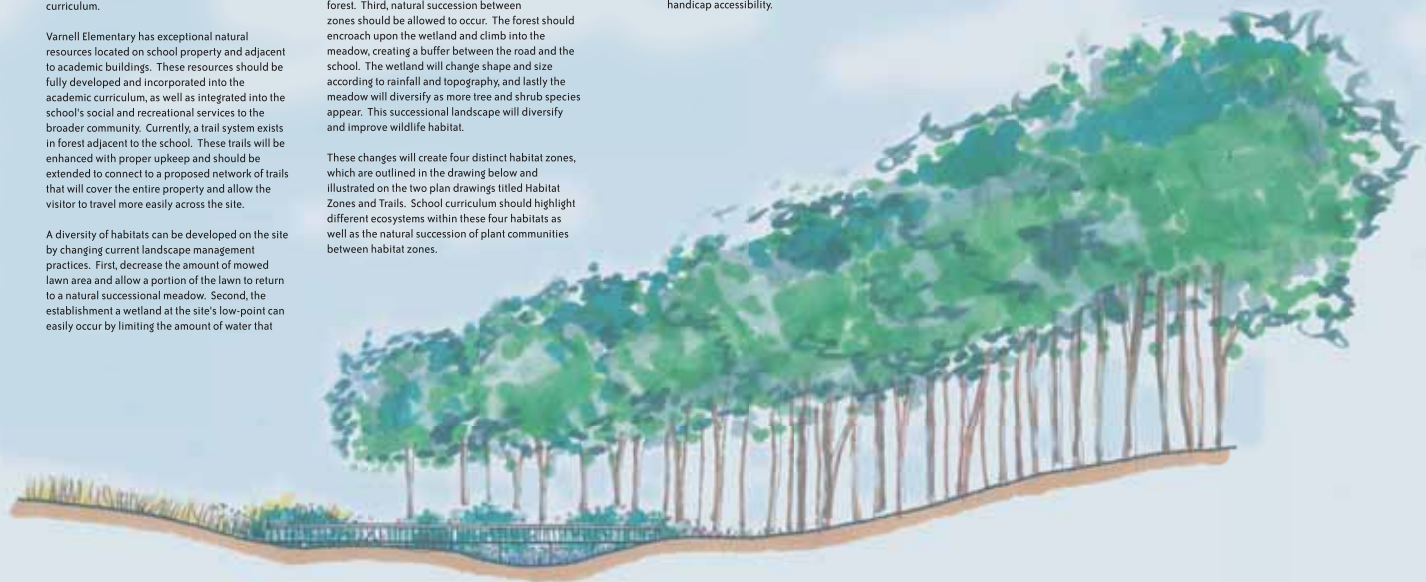
A diversity of habitats can be developed on the site by changing current landscape management practices. First, decrease the amount of mowed lawn area and allow a portion of the lawn to return to a natural successional meadow. Second, the establishment a wetland at the site's low-point can easily occur by limiting the amount of water that

flows off the site. This area, which currently experiences periodic flooding can be enhanced by placing a small dam to control outflow under Georgia Highway 2. Once created, this wetland will cover portions of what is now lawn and lowland forest. Third, natural succession between zones should be allowed to occur. The forest should encroach upon the wetland and climb into the meadow, creating a buffer between the road and the school. The wetland will change shape and size according to rainfall and topography, and lastly the meadow will diversify as more tree and shrub species appear. This successional landscape will diversify and improve wildlife habitat.

These changes will create four distinct habitat zones, which are outlined in the drawing below and illustrated on the two plan drawings titled Habitat Zones and Trails. School curriculum should highlight different ecosystems within these four habitats as well as the natural succession of plant communities between habitat zones.

## Perimeter Walking Path

A perimeter-walking path connects the three main areas of the school grounds. It provides a safe and easy path for moving throughout the school, which was a concern expressed during the charrette. The paved walking path can be a place for parents to bring young children to ride bicycles without the fear of cars. For adults the path can be a safe place for exercise and for leisure. During school the path can be used for gym classes and the existing fitness equipment located behind Peacock Alley (or similar equipment) could be used as stations along the trail. The path would be marked with discreet mileage markers so walkers and runners could measure their progress. It is recommended that the path be constructed of concrete for ease of maintenance and for handicap accessibility.





# varnell elementary school

## problems with peacock alley

### seating

A number of seating options exist for parents and teachers to use while children play. Positioning of picnic tables and benches needs to take place so that they sit upright and level. Additional trees should be planted to shade the playground from the hot summer sun.



### exposed edges

Many plastic elements are cracked or broken exposing jagged edges that could injure children playing on them. These elements need to be replaced or removed.



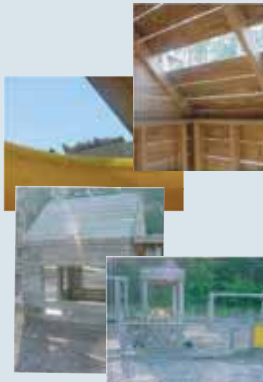
### building supplies

Leftover building and maintenance supplies (concrete block, bricks, railroad ties, dirt mounds, mulch piles, telephone poles) surround Peacock Alley and need to be removed and concentrated in an area away from the playground. In addition to being unsightly and hazardous to play on these materials are beginning to show up in the play areas of Peacock Alley.



### broken boards

The rough abuse that children inflict upon play elements is evident in the current state of the wooden lattice that has been used throughout the playground. This material with its thin strips of wood held together by metal staples was never meant to withstand playground use. In many areas it has been broken leaving splintered edges and metal staples exposed. The remaining lattice needs to be removed and if necessary should be replaced with a more durable material.



Several boards are broken throughout the playground structures leaving splintered edges exposed. Fortunately boards are not broken on platforms or bridges where children could fall through them. Most broken boards were on the sides or roofs of play structures. It is important that boards are replaced quickly when they are broken. Not only are the splintered remains of broken boards dangerous to children, but also where boards are missing or broken children are able to pull or hang on the next board until several consecutive boards are broken.

### swings

The Peacock Alley Playground has many swing sets for children to play on. Unfortunately many swings are missing from the swing sets. Swing sets need to be checked for stability and if they are stable the swings should be replaced. If the swing sets are not stable they should be removed.



### landscape fabric

The landscape fabric that was put under mulch to prevent weeds is now exposed in areas around slides and landings. The exposed fabric needs to be removed or buried below several inches of mulch so that running children do not trip on it.



## playground solutions

### a centrally located play space

Based on a brief study of the existing playground sites it is recommended that the playground equipment be consolidated into one space and be developed based on a theme. An ideal location for this new arrangement is to the northeast of the school where a current playground exists. As seen on the conceptual master plan, the proposed location for the consolidated playground has ample space to accommodate the existing playground equipment and basketball courts. This location is in close proximity to the school building and allows for views of the neighboring baseball fields.

The proposed new arrangement offers many advantages. Teachers would be able to easily lead their students to a large, centralized recreational area and avoid a long walk over to Peacock Alley, the play area Varnell school children favor most. Parents involved with after school baseball games in the adjacent fields can both monitor the game and their younger children at play. The discreet placement of all play equipment behind the school keeps the children safely within quick adult assistance and close to restrooms and drinking fountains. Open space for play would still exist in the front of the school for activities that do not require playground equipment.

In addition to consolidating the play areas into one space, some new elements are proposed to further enhance the site. By locating the rail car

from Prater's Mill next to the existing railcar the playground would be divided into loosely defined outdoor rooms. These railcars, significant to the local train heritage, can be creatively incorporated into recreation equipment as either platforms for slides, jungle gyms, or act as shady places to escape the sun's heat. They could also serve as special classrooms for reading, viewing videos or learning about local history.

There is an urgent need for vegetation. Not only will planting new trees and shrubs provide a cooling effect with shade, the proposed placement of such greenery will better define, shape, and enclose the playground. The new spaces created with trees and shrubs will be enjoyable areas for teachers to enjoy lunch with each other under a cool canopy while monitoring students hard at play.

The timing of the recommendation for consolidating playgrounds was also a consideration of the design team. Peacock Alley includes many of the play structures that the children enjoy, but unfortunately it is beginning to show signs of its age. An appendix to this report documents the problems with the equipment at Peacock Alley in greater detail. The need to address the deterioration of Peacock Alley creates the perfect opportunity to remove equipment that is unsafe or beyond repair and to consolidate existing equipment in a central play area.



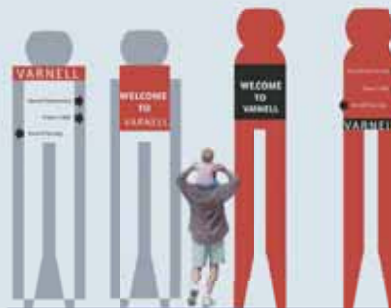
# varnell elementary school

## Connecting Community Icons

The mall at Varnell Elementary school provides a means for connecting community icons together, but the design team felt that something more was needed to direct people to Varnell's special places. The solution for connecting the community icons draws on Varnell's history and returns to the chenille bedspreads of Peacock Alley. Sculptural signage designed to look like clothespins will direct community members and visitors to important locations. At the intersection of Cleveland Highway and Georgia Highway 2 signs showing the direction of Prater's Mill, Varnell Elementary School, Varnell and the spring will be placed. These signs will become Varnell's trademark and will signify its location. At each site additional signage will be used to identify the site and to provide relevant historical information.



The history of Varnell has a strong tie with the production of Chenille bedspreads. The region is famous for selling bedspreads along the road. The inspiration for the signage system comes from the clothespin used to hang the bedspreads along highway 41.



### POINTS OF ENTRY

#### HIGHWAY SIGN

As you approach Varnell, WELCOME SIGNS will be placed at strategic points.

As you get closer to the core of town, directional signs will direct people to the sites.



Varnell Elementary School Entrance with signs



Baseball area with signs



### POINTS OF DECISION

At the school, and other important sites a big clothespin with the name of the site will be at the entrance.

Inside the school, mini signs will help children understand where they are.

### POINTS OF ARRIVAL

As you arrive to each zone at the Varnell School, signs attached to the wall or pole will indicate where you are. The colors chosen are easily remembered by children and will be an easy way of explaining all the places they can go around school.

# varnell elementary school

## RECREATION AREA

### PARKING

A lack of parking was a constant theme during the charrette. With the relocation of the Peacock Alley playground this area can be opened up for a gravel parking lot. This area is ideal for additional parking because it is away from baseball fields that could damage cars and its location makes it suitable for events held at the new recreation center, baseball fields, or school. In addition the new parking area will be planted with large trees to provide much needed shade. Existing parking will be more accessible with the addition of the walking path and recreational mall.

### BUILDINGS

In order to create a welcoming balanced entryway to the baseball fields a new building is proposed. This building would be identical in size to the larger two-story score keeper building and would replace the smaller score keeper building. The concession stand/restroom building and all the score keeper buildings would be painted brick red and cream to provide consistency with the school buildings and begin to transition to the new recreation center.

### LANDSCAPE

The area around the baseball fields and recreation center should be enhanced with plantings of large canopy trees as indicated in the plan. Tulip poplars grow very straight and would be a good choice in areas close to the baseball fields. These plantings will help provide shade for spectators, create a formal feeling of being at a ballpark, and connect the recreation areas with the natural areas. Removal of building materials (leftover brick and concrete block, telephone poles, and gravel piles) from the grounds is needed for safety and aesthetic reasons.



## THE MALL

The mall is a tree-lined walkway that extends from the recreation center, through the central school ground and ends in a semicircle plaza. It enables easy access to all parts of the school campus. Its trees create much needed shade for baseball spectators and make the area between the baseball fields much more than an extension of the parking lot. The mall is the connection that physically ties the recreation, school and natural areas together. At the conclusion of the mall is a plaza that will serve as a community guidpost. In the plaza is a map showing the location sites that are important parts of the Varnell community and interpretive signage that gives a history of the sites. In this manner the mall serves as a structure that unifies the areas of the school and begins to connect community icons.

# varnell elementary school



A charrette-style workshop is a visually engaging, interactive, and collaborative series of public workshops, focus groups, field condition inventories and design sessions. It offers opportunities for friendly, informal discourse and debate among community citizens, and the process achieves workable visions and solutions for specific neighborhoods or a whole community.

Walkable Neighborhoods  
Dan Burden



The charrette workshop establishes a platform for a free flow of information and opinion sharing. Its primary role is to provide a forum for building community consensus on a vision for the future.



"The University of Georgia's School of Environmental Design has been using the charrette process to help communities for many decades. The process has many proponents and has gained special favor in a new era of contemporary town planning, new urbanism, neo-traditionalism and just plain, hometown, good old fashioned concern for where you live."

Pratt Cassity, PSO Director

What really comes out of a charrette are the ideas and dreams of residents, filtered through urban planning professionals who understand how to turn a design idea into a real community improvement.

"Our charrettes are high energy, new vision, community improvement events!

They result in concepts that leverage implementation funds. Nearly all of the communities where charrettes were done have gone on to receive grants or local funds to implement our recommendations.

In short, Charrettes WORK! "

Pratt Cassity, PSO Director

## Our Mission

The mission of the Public Service and Outreach (PS&O) Office of the School of Environmental Design (SED) is to provide service learning experience for students in landscape architecture and historic preservation. By utilizing a mix of professional and student staff members, towns throughout the South have the opportunity to obtain professional design services. These communities are provided high quality design services they could not otherwise afford and students receive practical hands on experience, a situation that benefits everyone involved. The PS&O office contracts with governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, civic groups and other funding sources to carry out projects, conduct research, provide training and deliver administrative services. The PS&O office at SED produces community-based results to meet the goals of students, citizens, elected officials, local decision makers, and UGA faculty.

## What is a Charrette?

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

Today, "charrette" has come to describe the rapid, intensive, 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 collaborative solution. Charrettes are product-oriented. The public charrette is fast becoming a preferred way to face the planning challenges confronting American cities.



Charrettes for New Urbanism, Victor Dover