

Getting Greenspace Out In The Open

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Prodded By State Money, But With Time And Land Running Out And Not Much Citizen Involvement, Local Government Slowly Moves Toward Protecting Some Acreage

With more than \$650,000 from the Georgia Greenspace Program in the bank, Athens-Clarke County is gradually moving ahead with plans for setting aside and permanently protecting open land. Twelve pieces of land have been nominated as candidates for purchase or protection by conservation easement. During the next few months, two committees – one made up of ACC staff and the other a recently appointed citizens committee – will review and evaluate the properties.

"We hope to get at least the first batch of these reviews to the Mayor and Commission by the end of the year, and they'll make the final decisions," says Bruce Lonnee, Senior Planner with the ACC Planning Department, which is responsible for coordinating Athens-Clarke County's Greenspace Program.

Greenspace advocates say they're happy the process is finally moving forward. But the purchase of land with state greenspace funds represents only a small part of the overall greenspace plan - which has the ultimate goal of preserving 20 percent of land in the county. A lack of public involvement, the slow progress so far, and specific questions about some elements of Athens-Clarke County's plan have generated some doubts about the level of commitment.

"The goal of preserving 20 percent open space is laudable," says Beth Gavrilles, President of the Athens Grow Green Coalition, "but I don't get the impression from reading the plan that the county is really gung-ho about it."

Both Gavrilles and Laura Hall Gabriel, Conservation Coordinator of the Athens Land Trust, say they're concerned that the plan does not put enough emphasis on the use of conservation easements. "My main concern is that I would like to see them use conservation easements to protect land, instead of only looking at purchasing land fee simple," Gabriel says. "Other counties are using conservation easements, which makes the dollars go further and therefore protects more land."

Several environmental advocates also mention that efforts by Athens-Clarke County to count recreational fields as greenspace are evidence that the plan doesn't show a real understanding of the importance of preserving connected corridors of land in a natural state.

But Lonnee says, "It would be nice if we could get active recreation fields to qualify. I understand the concerns about the use of pesticides and herbicides and lime for lining

fields, things like that. But we're asking what if we put in place a set of Best Management Practices, then could we claim these areas as greenspace? It's really hard as a public official to purchase open space that people won't have access to. Environmentalists might understand why that's important and see it as a good thing, but for the general public, it's harder to understand. If you're buying it with public funds, they want to get some use of it."

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The smallest county in the state, Athens-Clarke County faces some unique problems in saving greenspace. The University of Georgia, federal labs and the Navy School take up a lot of land; and the rest is already intensively developed. The ACC Planning Department estimates that only about 20 percent of Athens-Clarke County's land remains undeveloped now, and Lonnee says a lot of this land is privately owned and being held for development.

"I think Athens-Clarke County's greenspace plan is realistic," says Dick Field, Chair of the Oconee Rivers Greenway Commission and a member of the newly appointed citizens committee. "It may be more innovative than some other counties' plans because of the challenges we face with so much land that's under public ownership already but not under control of the local government. This is a big issue, and it hasn't been resolved yet."

Many say the real key to whether the county's greenspace plan actually saves land in a substantial way will be public involvement - something that's been scarce and sketchy to this point.

"The process was staff-based for months, and that can result in a product that doesn't have broad citizen support," says Hans Neuhauser, executive director of the Georgia Land Trust Service Center. "If all the planning is done internally, citizens don't have ownership in what's proposed."

"Alternatively, if citizens are involved," Neuhauser says, "the proposals would have broad support, the kind of support, for example, that would be necessary for passage of future SPLOST referendums and other actions that would be needed to accomplish the 20 percent goal. I think citizen support for such initiatives is vital, and I think the Mayor and Commission have made a mistake by being so slow to involve citizens in a meaningful way."

The Georgia Greenspace Program

The Georgia Greenspace Program was signed into law in April 2000 by Governor Roy Barnes. The program makes grants to rapidly developing counties throughout the state to encourage the preservation of open land. A county is eligible to participate if it has a population of at least 60,000 or is growing by an average of 800 people a year. Athens-

Clarke County qualified in the first year, and has now received funding for both 2001 and 2002. In Northeast Georgia, several other counties, including Oconee, Oglethorpe, Jackson and Barrow, also have received funds.

To receive funding, a county must establish a community greenspace program that outlines a plan to preserve at least 20 percent of its land area as connected and open greenspace.

"The idea is to create a green infrastructure that will support the quality of life in the community," explains Mike Wharton, Division Administrator of Natural Resources for the ACC Leisure Services Department. "We often talk about infrastructure as something built – like roads, sewer lines, water lines – but we're learning that green infrastructure is also extremely important for the quality of life in a community."

"Interconnected greenspace is a very important part of this concept," he continues. "We can't protect everything, but we can connect habitat corridors to allow the movement of plant and animal life so that sustainable populations can be maintained."

In 2001, Athens-Clarke County and the City of Winterville received \$367,000, plus a supplemental grant of \$1,100. In 2002, the county and Winterville have received \$315,869, and a supplemental grant of \$20,811 is expected later this year. So at this point, there's \$683,969 plus accrued interest in the ACC Community Greenspace Trust Fund, with an anticipated total of \$704,780 once the supplemental grant is received.

None of this money has been spent yet. It can only be used to purchase land or conservation easements, or for other costs directly associated with land acquisition.

Athens-Clarke County's Community Greenspace Plan - which Planning Department staff say they hope to have on their website soon - identifies the kinds of land being considered for protection and outlines several different methods that will be used in order to reach the 20 percent goal. Outright purchase of land, privately held conservation easements, regulatory controls, conservation subdivisions and transferable development rights are among the methods listed.

The kinds of land targeted for protection include river corridors, groundwater recharge areas, other environmentally sensitive lands, non-programmed recreation space, private greenspace, educational or special use properties, and historic or archaeologically significant areas.

Nominations Are Open

Although funding from the state greenspace program will actually contribute only a small portion toward the 20 percent goal, the process of deciding how to spend those funds may be the most visible and easily understood part of it. Any citizen or organization can nominate land for protection by completing a form available at the planning department. The property owner must consent to the land being considered. There are no deadlines for

submitting nominations.

"We'll handle the nominations in batches until the funding is expired," Lonnee says. "Really, the way we do this depends a lot on how many nominations we get. We have tried to do public awareness, but we only had two nominations for the first whole year. Right now, we are right at 12 nominations. But once we get through with the process of confirming that property owners are willing to have their property considered, we may not have that many.

It's not yet clear whether the new citizens committee will play any role beyond reviewing and evaluating the properties nominated for protection, and at this point, there are no steps being taken to involve the public in other ways.

But active interest on the part of citizens could make a crucial difference in just how green Athens-Clarke County remains in the future.

"I think it's very important to get information about this project out to the public," says Laura Hall Gabriel. "There has not been good public involvement in the process so far, especially compared to what some other counties have done. And I don't think the public realizes that their participation really could help and that we could have not just a plan but a great plan."

Sigrid Sanders