

As Athens sprawls, groups debate growth plans

RUSSELL McLENDON

Issue date: 8/6/04 Section: [News](#)

As Athens matures into a bustling metropolitan center, the city is beginning to feel some growing pains.

Continued development outward from the city's core has led to fears of urban sprawl and its possible effects on Athens' natural environments.

With growth inevitable, the land-use debate focuses on methods of growth and locations for development. The ultimate goal is a plan of sustainable development, a happy medium between preservation and sprawl.

"The rate of growth is really beyond the government to determine," said Nanette Nelson, staff economist for the University's Institute of Ecology and president of The Athens Land Trust, Inc. "But they can choose how to handle it. They can be proactive, like setting aside areas that are environmentally sensitive."

Athens' Comprehensive Land Use Plan was revised in 1997 to better address urban sprawl and overdevelopment issues, but many have expressed concern that its vision isn't being achieved.

"It's a good start, but it probably needs to be tweaked," said Dick Field, the recently appointed environmental coordinator for Athens-Clarke County Central Services. "It hasn't been in place that long, and it's allowing certain kinds of development that we thought shouldn't be there."

Athens realtor Nancy Connell said the most growth she sees in Clarke County is away from town to the east and west.

Connell said she detests the destruction of trees that often results from development over such natural areas.

"I'm sad to see some of the latest areas that have been cleared for development, where they've come in and plowed down every tree in sight," she said. "I wish they wouldn't approve any more development like that."

Connell added that a lack of green can be bad for business.



A sign with a computer-generated image of the new Hilton stands in front of the downtown site where the hotel will be built. The site is an example of infill development, in which new structures are built on older, vacated sites. (Kendrick Brinson - The R
[\[Click to enlarge\]](#)

"It's hard for development to sell in areas where all the trees have been removed," she said. "People want trees."

It's cheaper for a developer to clear out trees, though, because it allows total control over construction, Connell said. With an open site, developers can put roads and lay out lots wherever they want, she said, without having to work around existing trees.

Beth Gavrilles, information coordinator for the Institute of Ecology and president of Athens Grow Green, said while the current land-use plan has good intentions, their implementation falls short.

The Zoning and Development Standards, passed in 2000, is the document that actually puts the plan into use, Gavrilles said.

"The land-use plan is very progressive, with the basic idea of preventing sprawl," she said. "But the Zoning and Development Standards is a different matter, to say the least. It got watered down."

But the zoning ordinance is not written in stone, Gavrilles said, and has evolved since it was first enacted.

"It's being gradually revised so it gets closer to the land-use plan," she said. "It's a work in progress."

Despite the incongruities between the land-use plan and the zoning ordinance, many in the local conservation community still applaud the ACC for its continued efforts to perfect the land-use standards.

"They're interested in doing the right thing," Nelson said. "I think they're on the right track."

Drew Page, president of the ACC Economic Development Foundation, said he sees the necessity of a detailed land-use plan as a sign that Athens is coming of age as a metropolitan center.

"A land-use plan is really a byproduct of a community maturing," Page said. "The more urban an area is, the more restrictive the land-use plan, because there's less land to develop."

A possible answer in TDR programs?

Several Athens conservation groups are conducting a study to determine the local feasibility of a specific program to deal with urban sprawl issues, called Transferable Development Rights.

TDR programs move development away from land deemed worthy of preservation, or "sending areas," onto land approved for urban growth, or "receiving areas."

Under a TDR program, the local government establishes sending and receiving areas, but sending areas must first meet IRS standards as having some conservation value.

Property owners on sending areas can give up rights to develop on their land in exchange for development credits. These credits can be sold or traded to anyone, with the price left up to the participants and the free market.

The land in sending areas is then placed under a conservation easement, or legal agreement restricting development.

Nelson said not only could a TDR program protect many undeveloped areas in Athens, but it could also focus on improving partially developed areas and maximizing their potential without contributing to urban sprawl.

"It's a tool you can use to channel the growth where you want, and at the same time you can protect areas that need it," she said. "A landowner who happens to be on wetlands or a stream, they can receive some cash for the fact that they're not going to let their land be developed."

The feasibility study will determine whether there is enough supply of sending areas and enough demand of receiving areas in Athens.

Nelson listed local riparian, or streambed, buffers and contiguous parcels of forest as some of the potential sending areas in most dire need of preservation.

"The 'green belt' was a vision that there would be a developed center with a doughnut of green around Athens-Clarke," she said. "The part of the county that borders Oconee County has pretty much been developed, so it's not as much a doughnut now as a horseshoe.

"There are only a few contiguous parcels over 100 acres left, and saving those remaining few would definitely be a priority."

Field said there is no shortage of potential for infill development in Athens either.

"We have areas that could be more intensively developed," he said. "A good example is the new five-story building on Baxter Street. That's exactly the kind of thing we need more of; that's where housing is, that's where the jobs are. It makes more sense to do that than out on Barnett Shoals someplace."

Nelson also cited vacant commercial lots, like the old Wal-Mart or old Target stores off Atlanta Highway, as other potential receiving areas.

"One of our objectives is to find out what would lure developers back into those ghost retail shops," she said. "That's part of the feasibility program, to contact developers and see what would entice them."

Once a TDR program is put in place, it's essentially out of the government's hands.

Because the transfer of the development rights occurs between private landowners, the process consists of private transactions. The government's role is simply to enforce the new development rights.

"The great thing about (a TDR program) is it's driven by the market," Gavrilles said. "Growth is directed where the community wants growth."

But because TDR programs depend on local economic factors, they may not be effective. That's why a feasibility study must be done before a TDR program can be implemented in Athens.

"We'll have to wait and see what the study says," Nelson said. "If there's not enough supply or demand, we might start looking regionally."

A regional program would encompass a larger area than just Athens-Clarke County, but also would require a lot more work and organization, Nelson said.

'You can't grow at any one rate forever'

In December 2003, Gov. Sonny Perdue proclaimed Georgia the fourth-fastest growing state in the country.

According to the 2000 Census, Georgia averages 141.4 persons per square mile, compared to 79.6 in the United States as a whole. Clarke County averages 840.2 persons per square mile, and is one of the nation's smallest counties.

In her keynote address at the annual Red Clay Conference in April -- which was held on the University campus and featured a variety of lectures and panel discussions on land-use issues -- Director of Georgia Environmental Protection Division Carole Couch cited a recent study that listed the top 10 most sprawling metropolitan areas in the country.

Six were in the Southeast, with Atlanta at No. 4.

"We (in the Southeast) have got abundant, relatively cheap and geographically unconstrained land," she said.

Couch, who is responsible for enforcing 25 environmental laws, said in an area with such rapid growth, local enforcement of development and zoning ordinances is a crucial part of controlling urban sprawl.

"The regulations of the nature we've conducted in this country are necessary, but they're going to be insufficient in and of themselves," she said. "The rubber meets the road at how well these regulations get implemented at the local level."

While the problem is not yet unmanageable, Field said overdevelopment has already occurred to some degree in Athens. He cited traffic problems and recent sewer overflows as examples.

"There's no one area that's way overdeveloped, but there are some areas that probably have more people than there should be," he said.

Ultimately, Field said, growth is unstoppable. The best any land-use plan can do is damage control, saving seats before the entire auditorium fills to capacity.

"Sustainable growth is kind of an oxymoron," he said. "You can't grow at any one rate forever. There's always going to be limits."