



A Vision for Athens: A Future Land Use and Development Plan

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City Planner



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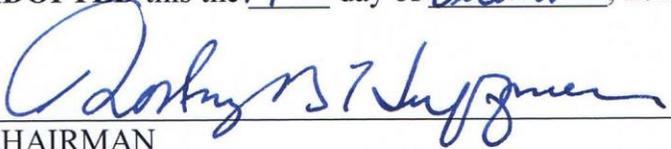
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CERTIFICATE OF ADOPTION BY THE CITY OF ATHENS PLANNING

COMMISSION

ADOPTED this the 17th day of December, 2013.



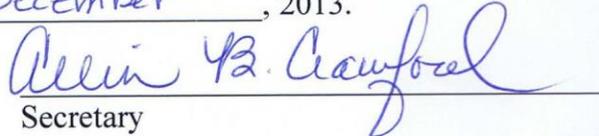
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CERTIFICATION OF SECRETARY

STATE OF ALABAMA)
LIMESTONE COUNTY)

I, Allison B. Crawford Secretary of the City of Athens Planning Commission, do hereby certify and attest that the above and foregoing is a true and correct copy of a Resolution duly adopted by the City of Athens Planning Commission, on the 17th day of December, 2013.

Witness my hand this 17th day of December, 2013.


Secretary

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Ronnie Marks, Mayor

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Harold Wales ó District 2

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Introduction

Athens is a city of 21,897 in north-central Alabama. It is located at the heart of the Tennessee Valley region, roughly 24 miles west of Huntsville and 13 miles north of Decatur. For much of its history, Athens has been a small, agricultural town housing the seat of government for Limestone County. However, with the onset of the 21st century, Athens has continued to develop into an industrial and commercial center for Limestone County and a bedroom community within the Huntsville metropolitan area.

The purpose of the Future Land Use and Development Plan (the Plan) is to create a new collective vision for the future development of land in the city based on what the citizens of Athens desire going forward. In 2003, the Planning Commission of Athens adopted a master plan, which includes the future land use plan currently guiding land use decisions. Today, we find a community that has undergone substantial change over the past decade. With the continued growth currently experienced in Huntsville, it is expected that Athens and Limestone County will continue to house an increasing number of residents, businesses and industries. One of the challenges for the City of Athens, as will hopefully be addressed in the Plan, will be meeting the needs of the growing number of citizens with housing, recreation, municipal services, employment centers, and commercial services, arranged in an orderly fashion that maximizes benefits to the community.

Conversations with citizens of Athens suggest that there is optimism for the future, but concerns exist regarding the current state of the community and the apparent direction it is headed if the course is unaltered. Such concerns include a lack of identity, threats to revenue streams, lack of focused direction, and the decline of older portions of town. Some view the community as not capturing the best residents and businesses coming to the Tennessee Valley because of a general apathy toward the appearance of the community, the types of businesses we attract, and a dislike for change.

Apart from the old core of the city, development in Athens has taken a largely suburban, low density form with a separation of uses and automobile oriented design. This has been the pattern of development experienced in much of the country over the past 50 years and requires the support of local governments to service such development. However, with rising costs of services and negative long-term economic, social and environmental effects such development has on the community, residents and city leaders alike are searching to see if there are alternative forms of development that will meet the needs of the community in an attractive, economic, and sustainable fashion.

With such close proximity to a major employment center like Huntsville, change in Athens is inevitable. So long as the Huntsville metropolitan area continues to grow in size, population, and importance, the city of Athens will continue to grow. The real question the community faces is "How will it grow?" Though the market determines how ripe Athens is for development, it is ultimately up to the community to decide how the community should develop over time, what such development should look like, and how it should function.

Land use decisions are crucial to the development pattern of the community. Land can be considered a resource whereby land use decisions are interrelated and impact the quality of life for the entire community. It is impossible to engage in planning without making value judgments concerning the relative desirability or undesirability of possible future uses of land (City of Wilmington, NC, 2004). Land development decisions have long-reaching and long-range affects. Decisions that are made in the here and now will affect a developing property, surrounding properties, and the entire community for a considerable span of time, either to the benefit or the detriment of the community.

This is not the first time the City has engaged in a major planning activity. The 2003 Comprehensive Master Plan was developed and adopted 10 years ago. The City chose to undertake a comprehensive plan at that time since no such exercise had been carried out for approximately 30 years. The general sentiment among City officials was that quite a number of issues needed to be addressed and the city, both from a policy and facility standpoint, had a lot of ground to make up to be brought into the 21st century. After adoption of the plan, the City went to work implementing it, resulting in a decade of policy and infrastructure improvements that have contributed to our community's growth. While not exhaustive, Figure *i* illustrates a number of these improvements.

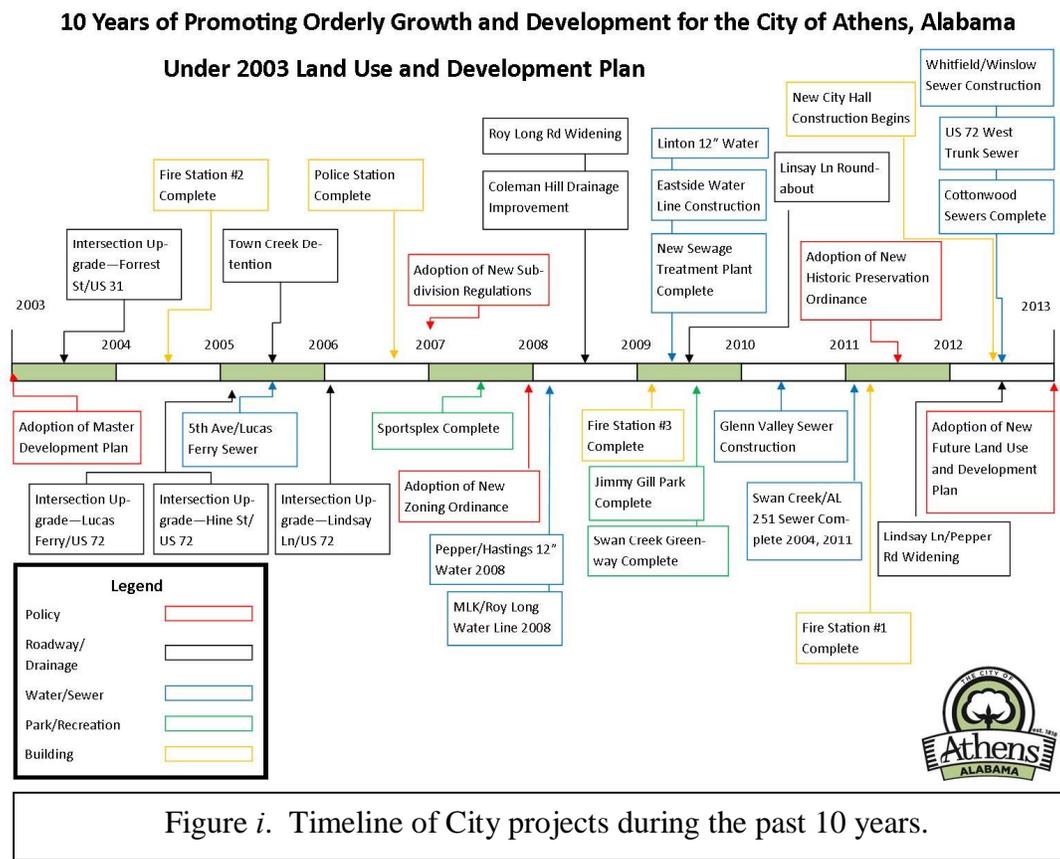


Figure *i*. Timeline of City projects during the past 10 years.

Today, we find ourselves in a position where the community is ready to take a fresh look at the future and another step forward. The 2003 plan set the table for the City being able to take more of an incremental approach to planning. Instead of having to make up a tremendous amount of ground in our planning program, we can improve upon our current situation. While the vision for the future development of the community may be different in the Plan, the implementation of the 2003 plan put us in a position to better understand the desired direction and act upon it rather than leaving us to completely rebuild our planning program.

The vast majority of citizens involved in the shaping of the Plan view Athens as a special place, hungry for growth and improvement so long as it is not at the expense of its rich history and identity. It is also the opinion of many in the community that Athens is currently developing in a manner that makes it look and function like any other city, eroding the characteristics that make Athens unique and interesting. This planning exercise is a conscious effort to promote the health, safety and welfare of the general public through encouraging harmonious land development patterns, anticipating and addressing the future needs of the community while working to develop a vision of what Athens *should* look like and how it *should* function, and preserving Athens' unique identity. It is the goal of this plan to lay the groundwork for guiding land use and development decisions and policy in a way that is intended to benefit the community as a whole.

After a brief discussion on current planning issues and my methodological approach to this project, the Plan will present a strategy for development and a land use framework to be implemented over the next 10 to 20 years. The Strategic Development and Future Land Use sections of the Plan will be accompanied by various illustrations that will lay out the broad development and land use pattern the community seeks to achieve over the life of the plan. My findings as they relate to the community profile and the public participation program can be found in the appendix.

Literature Review

City planning is a process which produces guidance for the harmonious and orderly development of a community, promoting the health, safety, and general welfare of its citizens. Planning aims to translate the community's collective vision for a better future into a guide for making that vision a reality. The guidance may include plotting where land uses are to develop in the future, as well as addressing anticipated needs in transportation, housing, recreation, water/wastewater infrastructure, schools, etc., all the while setting in place a prioritization of city resources. The task for a planner consists of formulating said plans to make things better in our community, or at the very least, keep things from deteriorating (Rhea and Billingsley 2013).

City planning is also required by law in the State of Alabama. According to the Code of Alabama 1975, Section 11-52-8, a city must develop a master plan and adopt it in whole or in part. The inspiration for this and other state's planning and zoning enabling legislation is born out of the Standard State Zoning Enabling Act of 1926 and the Standard City Planning Enabling Act of 1928.

According to Daniels, comprehensive planning in small towns didn't take hold until the 1970's and 80's, when small communities either began to quickly grow as a result of fast paced urban sprawl or decline due to loss of manufacturing and agricultural jobs (2007). Until then, the closest action many small towns took toward planning was to present basic population and housing data in order to obtain grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development after 1952. Daniels continues that toward the end of the 20th century, planning began to be embraced as a powerful tool for addressing various problems and challenges facing communities like Athens across the nation using institutions such as regional planning commissions or regional councils of government, universities, and, when affordable, private planning firms (2007). Over the same period of time, many small towns have been consumed by urban sprawl, becoming bedroom communities (Kaplan 2004), then places with auto-oriented landscapes dominated by freeways, shopping centers, and office parks (Calthorpe and Fulton 2001). Athens itself has witnessed the transition from a railroad town and agricultural hub to serving more as a bedroom community for Huntsville and Decatur.

In his book *Redesigning Cities: Principles, Practice, Implementation*, Jonathan Barnett lists five main objectives that should be considered in drafting any city plan and design. These objectives include "community, livability, mobility, equity, and sustainability" (Barnett 2003, p. 4). With so many cities and towns currently plagued by "the weakening role of the neighbourhood in individual lives, commodification of public life and urban space, a waning public realm, and the propagation of nonplace edge-city phenomena," planners are looking for ways to remedy such ills and create communities that better meet the needs of the citizenry (Garde 2006, p. 34). For some communities these problems can be compounded by uncertainties in the economy. With energy prices remaining higher than in previous decades, the U.S. slowly emerging from a subprime mortgage crisis, and limited loaning capacity of many banks, the need for more

sustainable and livable communities that provide a variety of economic and social opportunities is prevalent (Goodman 2008; Hanan 2005, p.27).

Sustainability is defined as development that "meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1986, 43). This definition, when applied at the local level, provides guidance on addressing the community's needs regarding the economy, environment, equity and livability without compromising the next generation's ability to do likewise (Berke et. al. 2006). To this end, planning serves as the means to accomplish the task through gaining an understanding of the community's current state and developing a course of action to achieve common goals (Daniels et. al. 2007).

Other important factors to consider in city planning in the 21st Century relate to the changing demographics and social trends of the American populous. According to Carol Rhea and Graham Billingsley of the Orion Planning Group, in a presentation at the 2013 Alabama APA Annual Conference, the United States is "undergoing the most significant socio-demographic change since the huge wave of immigrants in the early 20th Century." These trends illustrate the changing needs of the American public and will change the way cities nationwide approach land use, transportation, and housing among other planning topics.

Among the observed trends, the population is projected to become older due to the increased life expectancy of individuals and a decrease in the number of births. By 2030, 1 in 5 residents will be over the age of 65. The needs of this growing segment of the population require various smaller scale housing types, closer proximity to supportive services, the provision of alternative and accessible means of transportation.

While the overall life expectancy is still increasing, the quality of life and the level of health and fitness seem to be on the decline for many Americans. Obesity rates are on the rise across much of the nation, particularly the South and Appalachia. These areas also have witnessed an explosion in the number of cases of diabetes and other complications tied to obesity, with diagnosis rates over 10% for many counties in the two regions (Center for Disease Control, 2010). The geography of these trends seems to correspond to areas of the country where communities are more sparsely developed and automobile dependent and fewer opportunities exist to walk or bike to destinations.

The makeup of the American family has changed drastically over the past 50 years. The traditional nuclear family (husband, wife, and children) has been on a steady decline. Various factors, including fewer marriages, divorce, individuals waiting until later in life to marry, increased percentage of women in the workplace, increased number of births out of wedlock, and an increase in the number of individuals that cohabitate without marrying have led to an ever increasing make-up of alternative family arrangements that have different needs associated with them. These alternative family structures, many with a single adult, require affordable housing options other than large, single family detached homes on large lots. They also demand expanded transportation

options such as walking and biking facilities and close proximity to schools, commercial services, and recreational facilities (Rhea and Billingsley 2013).

In summary, the national trend of development is beginning to sway away from the suburban style of development that has dominated communities for the past half century and moving toward a more compact, mixed-use type development pattern that is highly accessible by a number of transportation means other than the automobile. Even in Athens, we are beginning to see the shift. Athens has witnessed an increase in town homes, apartment development, and elderly housing in recent years, while many developing single-family subdivisions have struggled to build out. More residents are making their thoughts known as to the need for improved alternative transportation infrastructure such as sidewalks and bike trails, the need to re-establish the neighborhood as a scale of development that meets most of the needs of its residents, a greater variety of housing options, and the need for more commercial and recreational destinations that are within a short distance of their home and accessible by walking or biking.

It is important to recognize that the suburban-style, automobile-oriented development pattern will remain a viable one for Athens and the Tennessee Valley for the foreseeable future. It is the pattern of development with which most Americans are familiar. However, the aforementioned trends indicate that the need for more urban, compact development is on the rise. Cities across the country are finding themselves scrambling to meet the needs of the changing demographics. Those cities that plan ahead for these changes are more likely to succeed in providing a good quality of life for their residents. Our planning efforts should encompass a healthy balance of both development types.

Methodology

The Plan is largely based in ethical normative theory in that it seeks to understand the *characteristics* and *values* of the community, examines them in relation to trends experienced by the community, and provides a rational course of action that seeks to produce a desirable outcome (Brooks 2002, 22). This theoretical approach gives credence to the notion that long range city planning is more of an art than a science, with good plans being tailored to fit the unique qualities, characteristics, and values of their respective communities rather than being based on a standardized mathematical formula. Cities are complex systems that are subject to discontinuities of past trends, such as shifts in the economy and energy prices, making the use of forecasting as a sole method for planning a questionable methodology (Phdungsilp 2011, 708). However, this is not to say that forecasting exercises, such as projecting population, are not useful in helping to describe the current state of the city (for example - whether or not it is growing).

Using this theoretical approach, the methodology selected for the overall framework of this planning effort is known as *backcasting*. Backcasting is a future studies approach to planning that requires the client, in this case the City of Athens, to begin the planning process with the end in mind, envision a successful outcome, and take steps from the present to achieve the vision (The Natural Step 2013). Originally used to help develop plans for technology development and sustainability practices, the backcasting method has in recent years become a popular methodology for city planning, enabling the community to develop a vision for what it thinks *should* take place in its future, then *back up* and develop a strategy for how to achieve the vision. This differs from forecasting - an exercise attempting to determine what *will* happen in the future and planning in anticipation for that projected scenario - in that it focuses on developing a plan for a future that is desirable rather than one that is completely dependent on past trends.

The method of backcasting that I utilize consists of five basic steps: (1) developing a community profile, describing the present and analyzing trends; (2) developing a vision for the future; (3) setting criteria and goals; (4) determining a course of action in order to attain the vision; and (5) analyzing the results to determine if alterations to the course of action are needed. Throughout the process, public input is crucial to ensuring that the plan is well-informed and in tune with the values and desires of the community. The citizens of Athens, through stakeholder focus groups, online survey instruments, and open public workshops, will add important data layers to each of the five steps.

The purpose of developing the community profile is to gain a full understanding of the community at the present, creating a *snapshot in time* to help serve as a baseline for the project moving forward. According to Hammond (2005), complementarity is the *elaboration, enhancement, illustration, and clarification of the results from one method with the results from the other* (249). In order to retrieve the necessary data slices to fully develop this profile, I will conduct my research following a mixed-method strategy, utilizing methods that complement one another and help to create a holistic image of the

community in its present state. According to Gaber and Gaber (1997), mixed-method research is a research strategy that allows planners to combine "quantitative methods with qualitative methods into a single research project" in order to gain a "more holistic understanding of the problems they are investigating" (95). This research method can be applied given the understanding that neither quantitative methods nor qualitative methods are superior to the other and that planners should adopt a "paradigm of choice" meaning they consider that different situations call for different methods to derive a suitable explanation (1997; 98, 101). In the case of Athens, an analysis of census data may produce a base line understanding of what population currently resides in the community, but by itself will not provide sufficient insight into the day-to-day dynamics and interactions within the community. Within this mixed method study, I will employ a "methodological triangulation" approach "using multiple methods to analyze the conditions of Athens (Gaber and Gaber 2007, 136). The particular methodological design I will implement will be "between-method triangulation" where I will use multiple tools, such as census data and field research, to retrieve multiple empirical data slices that triangulate toward one "big picture" image of the community's conditions (2007, 136-37).

According to Daniels et. al. (2007), the community profile provides a summary of "the physical, economic, and social" characteristics of the community, "an excellent introduction to the plan, and helps build interest of residents and non-residents in the rest of the plan" (67). This profile will pull from both primary data sources "data slices collected first-hand by the researcher" and secondary data sources "data slices gathered in previously published research. The profile will present data and information regarding geography and history, population and economy, environment, land use, and existing transportation and infrastructure systems. Given the time and financial constraints, much of the data provided in the community profile "especially that pertaining to population and the economy" will be retrieved from secondary data sources like the Census. Gaber and Gaber (2007) state that planners should search for existing useful data slices previously published in order to cut down on the expenditure of limited resources on new research whenever possible.

As mentioned before, census data alone cannot convey the entire picture of the complexities of the community. In addition, relying solely on secondary data sources can compromise the internal validity of the project "if the researcher made the correct observations based on the data (Gaber and Gaber 2007). Thus, I seek to validate and complement the data presented by the Census by producing primary data slices by means of qualitative methods in the form of field research and photographic research. The variables I seek to obtain in the area surveys and photographs include evidence of the community's strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities as I see them. Such variables include information addressing the following questions:

- *Which portions of town are more prosperous and which are not?
- *What is the current condition of the downtown area?

- *Where do the town's various populations reside?
- *Where is the greatest amount of development occurring?
- *What shape are the city's neighborhoods in?
- *What type of transportation facilities exist and in what condition are they?
- *What aspects/areas of the community are positive and should be exploited?

The methods of field research I will engage in include windshield surveys and site reconnaissance. Both approaches are part of a non-participant research strategy and are used to gain first-hand qualitative information about the community. A windshield survey is the act of gathering observations by traveling by automobile throughout the community to gain a macro perspective, while site reconnaissance is a method by which the researcher studies the smaller details of the community by walking along corridors and through neighborhoods (Gaber and Gaber 2007). I intend to use these methods to familiarize myself with Athens, noting significant impressions, trends, and divergent observations I see playing out in the field. I will seek to protect myself from questions of internal validity by providing, at a minimum, "thin descriptions" of the empirical observations I make. Issues of external validity – the generalizability of the findings – are resolved by the understanding that no two communities or their respective situations are alike. The reliability of my findings will be questioned or confirmed when presented in the public participation workshops later in the planning process.

Next, I will engage in photographic research. I will conduct a mapping and survey form of photographic investigation. Mapping involves the use of aerial imagery to provide a birds-eye view of the study area, while survey photography captures a first-hand, eye-level view of the research site (Gaber and Gaber 2007). High resolution aerial imagery of Athens for the mapping investigation is provided by the Athens/Limestone County GIS Consortium and will provide the greater context for the survey images.

I will gather survey imagery first-hand when conducting field research. Before taking photos of the research site, I must consider the data slices I need to collect in the images, determine how the images will be taken, and develop a system of organizing the shots. Survey images will be taken in the form of medium and close-up shots in order to get high amounts of detail in the variable while still being able to relate them to the general context. These shot ranges are also considered to provide greater anonymity to individuals captured in the images, allowing for less obtrusiveness into the daily activities on the citizens of the community. In dealing with questions of internal validity, I will research the needed variable before taking photos and attempt to take shots that accurately display the situation being observed in the field. I will attempt to combat threats to external validity by fully explaining the role the imagery plays in addressing the research question. Coupled with the mapping imagery, both forms of photographic research will be used to further complement data provided by the Census and by written observations I make in the field research portion of the project. Once the implementation

of these techniques helps create a "big picture" view in the community profile, the resulting profile will then be used to help inform and shape the public discussions initiated in the visioning workshops – thus building a sequential framework into the research project.

The second step in this sequential process of acquiring information concerning the present state of the community is that of actively seeking input from the "stakeholders" of the plan, those that would "affect the plan or be affected by the plan" (Berke et. al. 2006, 275). Hanna (2000) demonstrates the necessary and informative interaction in the plan making process between the information provided in the community profile and the insight gained in citizen participation:

The relationship between participation and information centers on the nature of participation. Participation helps shape information development. Its influence is synergistic. Participation not only facilitates the additions to the planning process of new information and new interpretations of existing data; it also diffuses knowledge to those who may be peripheral players in the process. Preparing and analyzing data, interacting with non-agency players, and presenting information to the public can be transformative action – even though their impact may not be explicit. Information is a key component of consensus building. The process of developing and agreeing on information is a critical part of embedding the influence of information on individual and institutional understanding. (401).

The goal of the public participation program is not only to provide a more holistic view of the community in conjunction with the census data, but to bring citizens, community leaders, and various local organizations together to begin serious discussion about creating a positive future for the community. Within the planning participation program, the participants will engage in the practice of visioning – a process by which citizens form a consensus regarding the current state of the community and craft a vision pertaining to their desires for the future condition of the community. Through the process of visioning, my goal is to get the stakeholders to collaborate with one another to discuss the community's current condition and issues to be addressed (Cuthill 2004). The public participation program will consist of three phases: focus group visioning workshops, an online survey, and open public workshops.

The focus groups I have assembled for the first phase of the public participation program include individuals with particular interests and expertise in four areas: economic development, quality of life, youth concerns, and downtown development. The economic development group includes real estate developers, business owners and managers, and representatives of organizations such as the economic development association and the chamber of commerce. The quality of life focus group includes members of civic organizations, educators, and environmental enthusiasts. The downtown development focus group includes owners of businesses and properties

downtown, as well as several individuals with a keen interest in preserving and promoting the area.

For the youth focus group, I selected rising high school seniors representative of the racial, cultural, and gender makeup of the community who have achieved academic excellence according to school faculty. The key attribute that these students carry is that they will one day have a choice as to whether or not they will return to Athens, assuming that their academic pursuits continue on the track of success they have exhibited thus far. Since it is widely accepted in the community that it is desirable to attract well educated professionals, particularly our own successful youths, to Athens after they conclude their academic pursuits, these successful students will provide important insight into how we may become a more attractive option for those types of individuals looking to locate in a community and begin their professional careers and families.

I will work with the focus groups by holding a series of workshops with each to work through the visioning process. First, we will focus on discussing the past, present and future of the city from each participant's point of view. In the introductory meeting, Daniels et al. (2007) suggest beginning the discussion by addressing two questions:

- Where have we been?
- Where are we now? (16).

Next, the topic of discussion will be for the citizen participants to begin setting desired goals for the community to attain over time (Berke et. al. 2006). Daniels et. al., (2007) suggest framing this discussion in the visioning process by asking the following questions:

- Where are we going?
- Where do we want to go?
- How do we get there? (16)

These questions really get at the heart of the visioning process and will be the foundation for the discussion in the first workshop. The goal of this step is for the citizens to craft their vision for the future development of the community and gain a better understanding of what it will take to attain that vision.

In the next exercise, we will implement a SWOT analysis as a catalyst for further discussion to build upon the issues covered in the first workshop by asking the participants to analyze the community's *strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats*. After we have a thorough list of issues from the SWOT analysis, we will then discuss how to take advantage of or address the issues brought forth.

The focus groups will then discuss what a common vision for the city of Athens should entail over the life of the plan and discuss various goals and objectives each group would like to see reached over that time. Goals will be general statements of desired results, while objectives will be more defined and measurable benchmarks for

accomplishing the goals. This exercise is meant to add further clarification as to the type of community the participants wish to see develop over the life of the plan.

The lone exception to this format will be in working with the youth focus group. Since their life experiences in the past are limited, their frame of reference is much different from that of adults, which have a full range of experiences in their past and can recall life in the community from times past. The focus for the youth will be more heavily influenced by what they are currently experiencing and what they would like to see of the community should they decide to move back upon concluding their educational aspirations.

The second phase of the public participation program will be the utilization of an online survey instrument. This offers an inexpensive and convenient means of getting a considerable amount of input from a large segment of the population. However, there are challenges to the validity of the results, namely due to the fact that some individuals in the community do not have immediate access to the internet, especially older or lower income residents. In an attempt to address this issue, the planning department will provide physical copies of the survey to community organizers and civic organizations that represent the subject people groups with a lower probability of having home access to the internet.

The information from the survey is meant to serve as another layer of input, not an instrument for gathering data for in-depth statistical analysis. Simply put, we will be treating the results as if they were gathered at an open town hall meeting. Given time and resource constraints, we could not hope to cover as many topics as the survey will cover in open public meetings. The survey will ask questions about a variety of topics, including general perceptions of the community in whole and in part, adequacy of city services, desired development types, and what the City should focus its resources on in the coming years. The survey will also ask some basic questions about the person filling out the survey to give us an idea of who contributed input, but not enough to run extensive analysis.

For the third phase of the public participation program, we will hold a series of three public workshops, designed to provide a high level of input to our planning efforts from the community at large. Since the City feels it has limited resources and a lack of experience with these types of workshops, the City believes it is in the best interest of the project to contract with a consultant with extensive expertise in extracting the right information out of a large group of participants. The workshops are to be facilitated by Community Design Solutions, a planning firm with a workshop program designed to do just that.

The first two workshops will cover the same material, but at separate locations in the community to provide convenient access to community residents. These workshops will ask broad questions concerning current conditions in the community, a desired vision of the city's future, and items the public desires the City to address in the plan. The third workshop will take the form of a "visual preference survey," which will help audience

members attribute pictures to the vision they developed in the first two workshops. The results from workshop 3 will also be used to inform the final illustrations within the plan, which will assist in communicating the community's vision graphically.

As I continue to produce the plan, developing the vision and its supporting goals, objectives, and implantation actions, I will assemble and consult with a steering committee of stakeholders of well-respected individuals in the community that represent various interests and people groups. Simultaneously, I will meet with the mayor and department heads of the City administration, as well as members of the City Council. The primary aim in involving these groups through the completion of the plan and presentation to the Planning Commission is to build consensus amongst the leaders of the community. They will serve as a gauge for how well I am adhering to the vision as communicated by the citizens in the public participation program. I will keep them abreast of the community vision taking shape and provide them an opportunity to ask questions and give input as the plan is drafted.

When the initial draft of the plan is complete, I will present it at a public workshop hosted by the Planning Commission. Some initial questions may be answered at that time, but the primary purpose of the workshop is to introduce the plan to the Planning Commission and the public. The volume of information presented will most likely prevent an extended period of public comment. Instead, a separate public hearing will be scheduled some time following the workshop. In the interim, the plan will be posted online and made available in physical form at City Hall so the public may study it and prepare comments and questions for the public hearing. The scheduled date for the adoption of the plan by the Planning Commission is December 17, 2013, the Commission's regular meeting for that month.

In order to analyze the functionality of the Plan and its ability to achieve desired results, the Plan should be reviewed, and the City's progress in implementing it should be assessed over time. Traditionally, the first thorough assessment of a plan occurs approximately 5 years after its adoption. This timeframe is recommended for the assessment of the Plan given that the short-term actions presented herein are to be taken within 5 years. Public participation should be a part of the 5-year assessment of the plan. Adjustments should be made if the implementation of the plan is off schedule or resulting actions create results counter to those desired by the community. The City should repeat the planning process and consider revising the plan after 10 years to account for changing characteristics and values of the community.

The Plan

Purpose

The Plan is meant to serve as a framework for the overall future growth of the city, guiding decisions and investments that will affect the development and use of land within its corporate limits. The Plan illustrates a vision for Athens' future as communicated by the citizens and leaders of the community. The Plan illustrates a future that is desirable to achieve within the next 10 to 20 years and provides guidance for its implementation.

The Plan is not intended to be an exact blueprint for things to come, for the future is never truly certain. Rather this Plan will serve as a living document that will guide public officials and private citizens alike as they consider decisions, actions, and commitments of resources that will have an impact on the development of the community. The Plan should be monitored closely over time for its effectiveness in carrying out the community's vision. The Plan may be adjusted over time to reflect ever-changing physical conditions, economic circumstances, and community values.

We acknowledge that achieving all that the Plan illustrates is a lofty goal indeed. Some of what the Plan calls for may not be realized within 20 years, if at all. However, even if the Plan is not achieved in whole, we envision its application in part providing guidance in a number of projects and decisions that will allow Athens to realize some level of improvement.

The Plan is meant to serve as the first step in fulfilling the duty conveyed on the City and its Planning Commission to "make and adopt a master plan for the physical development of the municipality" according to Sections 11-52-8 through 11-52-10 of the Code of Alabama 1975, as amended. The Plan itself is not an all-encompassing master plan, but rather the first in an incremental series of plans that will serve as a comprehensive guide for our actions going forward. The Code permits the Commission to adopt the master plan in whole or in part. We anticipate developing additional plans as they relate to transportation, capital improvements, recreation, and other needs. These future plans will each be a component within the City's overall master planning program. Each incremental step in the planning program, including this plan, will adhere to the methods of adoption spelled out in the Code. In the meantime, the City will look to implement the Plan in its near-term policy decisions, particularly as they relate to land use and development controls such as zoning and subdivision regulations, and the dedication of the City's finances and resources.

Framework

Problem Statement

Athens faces the challenge of planning for issues such as:

- ▣ Extremely low density in development.
- ▣ External threats to our potential of developing new revenue streams.
- ▣ Little connectivity in newer developments.
- ▣ Threats to the viability of our city's core.
- ▣ Threats to environmentally sensitive areas / reduction in farmland.
- ▣ Maintaining infrastructure over such a large area.

While Athens is poised to capture a substantial amount of development spurred on by the economic success of the Huntsville-Decatur metro area, the City's viability and quality of life will be challenged if growth takes place in a fashion that is poorly planned.

Vision Statement

We are Athens, Alabama. Our community is rich in history and character. We pride ourselves in having a place that has a unique identity all its own. We also live in a community with a promising future, with burgeoning economic opportunity here and within the larger Tennessee Valley region. We rejoice in the fact that Athens is a place where families can enjoy a high quality of life with peace and prosperity and consider this home for generations. We are proud of our achievements in being the 9th best city to live in and the 3rd most business friendly city in Alabama.

We recognize, in light of our achievements and strengths, there are threats to our community going forward. We see older, established areas of town showing signs of deterioration. We see that these areas, including downtown (our "heart and soul"), our older neighborhoods (our "living room"), and our main interstate interchange (our "front door"), are not as attractive and functional as they should be and need attention. We acknowledge that competition is growing amongst cities in the Tennessee Valley for businesses and residents. We see that our existing, sprawling pattern of development leads to inefficiencies in services and lack of connectivity within the community of both a physical and social nature. We further acknowledge that the cumulative effects of these challenges threaten the quality of life we cherish.

Therefore, we desire for this and subsequent plans to take a "grow inside-out" approach. We primarily desire the revitalization of our historic downtown and neighborhoods, the development of Exit 351 into an attractive and fully vibrant gateway into the community, and the development of vacant or underutilized pockets of land within the core of the community into neighborhoods that fit within the context of surrounding neighborhoods. We desire for our community to be well designed, functional, and pedestrian friendly. We desire more opportunities to work, live, and play here in Athens.

With this approach, we feel as though we can address the threats to our quality of life and become a community that sells itself to new residents and businesses. With this vision, we see a bright future for Athens, our home.

In short, we desire for our community to be beautiful and growing ó from the inside out.

Key Factors

Before delving into the plan, a couple of things need to be identified as key influences on land development and use, and thus, this plan. One, there are factors that exist that are beyond the control of the Athens city government. These factors include policies adopted by other levels of government or neighboring communities. Though they are beyond our control, it is important to understand them and be able to react to such forces appropriately. The following paragraphs do not present an exhaustive list of these forces, but present a few important examples.

The federal government institutes policy that controls development in floodways and floodplains and areas with endangered species. Developments are subject to approval by the Army Corps of Engineers should they involve a "blue line" stream. TVA is a federally controlled utility with easements and facilities within the community.

The State of Alabama is another governmental entity with powers that supersede local laws and policies. The State requires that local development be in compliance with its adopted environmental and historic preservation policies. State controlled and maintained rights-of-way come under the governance of the Alabama Department of Transportation, and any and all activity and access within said rights-of-way must be approved by that authority.

The State does delegate a considerable amount of power to the city to regulate land use and development through its planning and zoning enabling legislation. However, the State also has the ability to intervene and remove those powers through amendments to the State Constitution. Athens is unique in that the State removed all police and planning jurisdictions for incorporated cities within Limestone County. As a result, the City of Athens has no authority to plan or govern subdivisions beyond its corporate limits.

There are also forces at play locally that are outside of the City's control. One example pertains to the provision of water and sewer service within the eastern and southern extremities of the city limits. A consent judgment issued by the Limestone County Circuit Court in 2007 established a water and sewer service boundary for Athens's Water Services. Said boundary is not coterminous with the city limits. In areas outside of the service boundary, but within the city limits, the Limestone County Water and Sewer Authority (LCWSA) has an obligation to provide water and sewer service to City specifications and levels of service. A key asset within this jurisdiction is the Interstate

65 exit 347, otherwise known as the Tanner Interchange. Until the LCWSA refuses to service or is unable to provide service to development within this area, the City may not provide sewer service to the area, limiting our ability to influence development at the interchange.

Other factors beyond our control may present themselves in the future. These factors may include natural or manmade disasters, conflicts, fluctuations in the economy, or major economic opportunities in the area. Surrounding communities may also make land use and development decisions that Athens will have no control over. These factors may slightly affect our implementation of the plan or render it completely irrelevant. What Athens can control is its response to said factors. The City should consider the values and vision expressed by the public in this Plan before taking a responsive course of action.

Key Assumptions

There are also several assumptions I make in the production of this plan that must be discussed. These are based on my observations of activities within our community, activities in other communities, and references discussed in the Literature Review. The assumptions are as follows:

- ▣ Athens will be affected by the rapid change in demographics nationwide and will need to respond to changing needs.
- ▣ Developing a vision and a strategy for implementing it (öBackcastingö) will reach a more desired result than planning based solely on past trends, particularly with demographic shifts occurring.
- ▣ Taking a öcore firstö approach to city building, which includes focusing on developing the city from the inside out through (1) infill development, (2) core revitalization, (3) increasing population density, and (4) increasing connectivity of infrastructure, results in higher revenue and a better quality of life for the city's citizens (figure 1). This assumption is partially based on the economies of scale that come with more residents and businesses (City service customers) being located in areas where the City provides little or no additional resource input.

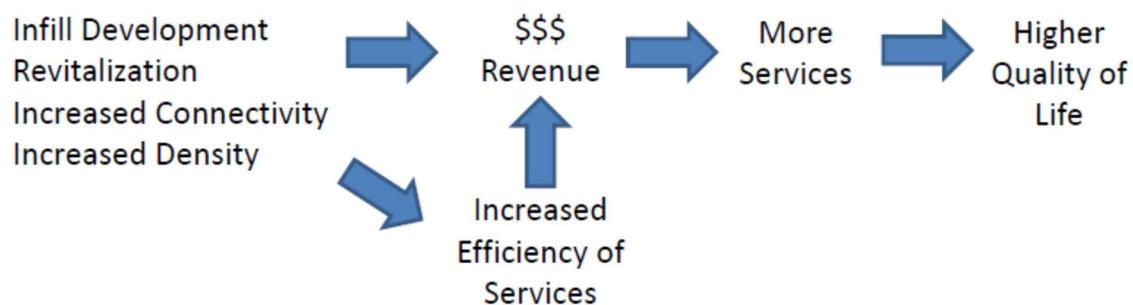


Figure 1. Core first approach to increased revenue and higher quality of life

Illustrating the Plan

In order to convey the vision of the Plan in a fashion that the entire community understands, the Plan includes a variety of illustrations to accompany the text. The following are means in which the plan is illustrated:

- ▣ City-wide and intermediate scale maps
- ▣ The Transect Model
- ▣ Intermediate scale architectural renderings
- ▣ Street level photo renderings

The maps produced at the city-wide and intermediate scales are drawn by the Planner Department utilizing GIS software. These illustrations show basic land use and development patterns using a color pallet that communicates various levels of use and intensity.

The Transect Model originally devised by the Florida based architecture and planning firm Duany Plater-Zyberk and Company and revised by others utilizes a series of watercolor images to convey the physical form of development in a sequential pattern from low density community edges to dense neighborhood and urban cores. As you progress along the transect from the city's edge to the core, you will see an increase in the density of the built environment, an increase in the mixture of uses, and a physical environment that is built more so to the human scale, with buildings oriented closer to the street and streetscape treatments designed with pedestrians and bicyclists in mind. The images are labeled so to correlate to the development patterns communicated in the city-wide and intermediate scale maps produced by the City and are shown on said maps. The transect imagery used in the Plan (figure 2) were drafted by Dover Kohl and Associates for the City of Fayetteville, Arkansas, and are used here with the expressed permission of the City of Fayetteville, Arkansas.

- Illustrating the Plan – Transect Model

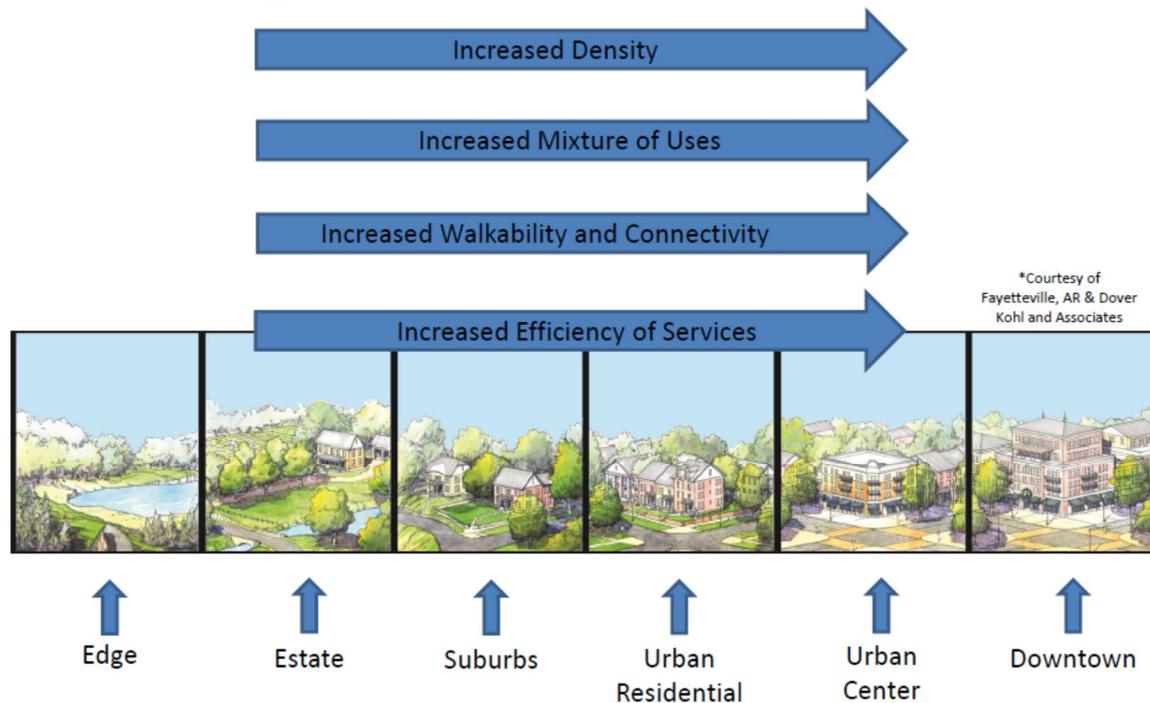


Figure 2. Transect model. Source: Fayetteville, AR and Dover Kohl and Associates

Intermediate scale architectural renderings are utilized to illustrate conceptual development patterns in specific focus areas throughout the city. They provide a depth of form, detail, and color to the landscape that is difficult to achieve in GIS mapping software. Examples of this include illustrating additional buildings, their orientation to the street, landscape improvements, and other treatments and improvements to the physical landscape. These illustrations were drawn by Andy Kalback through the consulting services of Community Design Solutions.

The final layer of illustration provided in the Plan is that of photo-renderings. Whereas GIS maps and architectural renderings provide an overhead view of land use and development patterns at the intermediate and city-wide scales, photo-renderings attempt to illustrate what the various forms of development and improvements look like from the human perspective. Photos are taken of certain points of interest within the community and altered with the addition of physical features such as buildings, trees, sidewalk, and other treatments. With this type of illustration, readers of the Plan will be able to see firsthand what affect the development policies being proposed in the plan will have at street level. These illustrations were produced by Randy Wilson of Community Design Solutions.

City-wide Strategic Development Component

The Strategic Development component of the plan (figure 3) illustrates the placement of nine development types across the city. These include the following, listed in order from the perimeter of the city to the center:

- ▣ Edge Management ó Illustrated in light green, this area consists of mostly undeveloped agricultural land. The purpose of this designated area is to create a "green" area encircling the city, protecting existing agricultural operations from development and creating a well-defined edge to the city. Permitted development would consist of agricultural facilities, open fields, recreational space, and estate style residential development of 3 to 5 acres and larger.
- ▣ Suburbs ó This area, shown in orange, indicates the portion of the city where the suburban style of development experienced over the past 50-60 years is encouraged to persist. Development within this area may include developmental residential subdivisions and automobile-oriented institutional developments.
- ▣ Industrial ó This developmental area, shown in dark purple, illustrates where continued industrial development is encouraged. Most of this area is located within and adjacent to the city's two industrial parks, Elm Industrial Park (located on Elm Street in northern Athens) and Breeding Industrial Park (located on the south side of town along Durham Drive, Martin Luther King Drive, and Roy Long Road). Industrial development is discouraged outside of these areas, with the exception of light, low impact industries locating within the Office, Distribution, and Technology area.
- ▣ Office, Distribution, and Technology ó This territory, illustrated in light purple, is meant to accommodate the development of office parks, distribution centers, and industries that are technology based, clean, and/or have a no adverse impact on surrounding properties. These areas are located in close proximity to the city's secondary interstate interchanges, where little development has occurred. Development within these areas should be well landscaped, be comprised of high quality materials, and be designed to add an aesthetically pleasing aura to the gateways where they are located. The Tanner Interchange presents a particularly attractive prospect for this type of development, given that it is surrounded by large, undeveloped tracts of land and a large project is needed to create demand for a sewer line, which the interchange presently lacks. The openness of the properties and the excellent visibility at Exit 347 allows for the city to showcase these prominent, attractive industries to the traveling public.
- ▣ Commercial Corridor ó Shown in light red, this district is designated for large, automobile oriented commercial development along the city's major thoroughfares. Since development in this area is highly visible and accessible to a large volume of automobile traffic, the developments therein should be attractive, with large amounts of landscaping and high quality building materials.

- Developments within this corridor should also have safe and efficient accessibility. The thoroughfares themselves should also be beautified in order to present an aesthetically pleasing experience to those passing along said corridors.
- ▣ Preserved/Recreation ó This area, represented in dark green, should not be developed unless it is for recreational purposes. The majority of this area is located within the various floodways and floodplains in the city. A sizable portion of the existing tree canopy is found here as well. As seen in the Community Profile, most steep slopes within the city are located adjacent to streams, with the remaining territory having a gentle, rolling nature. Development is already forbidden or strictly limited for much of this area.
 - ▣ Priority Infill ó These areas, presented in a blue and white hatch pattern, indicate areas of the city that are currently undeveloped, but have immediate access to infrastructure including roadways, electricity, water, sewer, and gas. Such development would take advantage of public investments already made to service development farther out from the core of town. Additionally, these areas are strategically located as to provide additional customers to existing commercial corridors within the city, thereby increasing our sales tax base. As the name indicates, new residential, mixed-use, and smaller scale commercial development should be encouraged to locate here before moving to areas farther from the city's core. Development within this area should be designed so as to maximize use of the land, while also fitting the context of surrounding developed areas. The transportation network within these areas should be designed with a high degree of connectivity, preferably a grid-like system with minimal use of cul-de-sacs.
 - ▣ Neighborhood Centers ó One of the main objectives of the plan is to build the community at the neighborhood level. As such, a key starting point is the development of centers within those neighborhoods. Illustrated with pink circles, these neighborhood centers are located at key intersections throughout the city. These locations should provide essential services to the surrounding neighborhoods, including neighborhood scale commercial development. The public realm should include treatments that make the center readily identifiable with the surrounding neighborhood. A mixture of uses, higher density housing, and public spaces are encouraged close to these centers. The centers should be connected to the surrounding neighborhoods by sidewalks and bicycle facilities.
 - ▣ City Center ó This area, indicated in dark brown, encompasses much of the city in and around the historic core. The development pattern in this portion of town predates the City's land development and use regulations, much of it being developed prior to 1950. As such, the Plan recommends treating this area much different from the largely suburban portions of the city developed within the past 50 years, returning to traditional urban neighborhood development principles, such as high density development, mixing of uses, access to public spaces, and a high degree of walkability, to rebuild and revitalize this area. Further guidance for development in this area is dealt with in the "focus areas" section of the Plan.

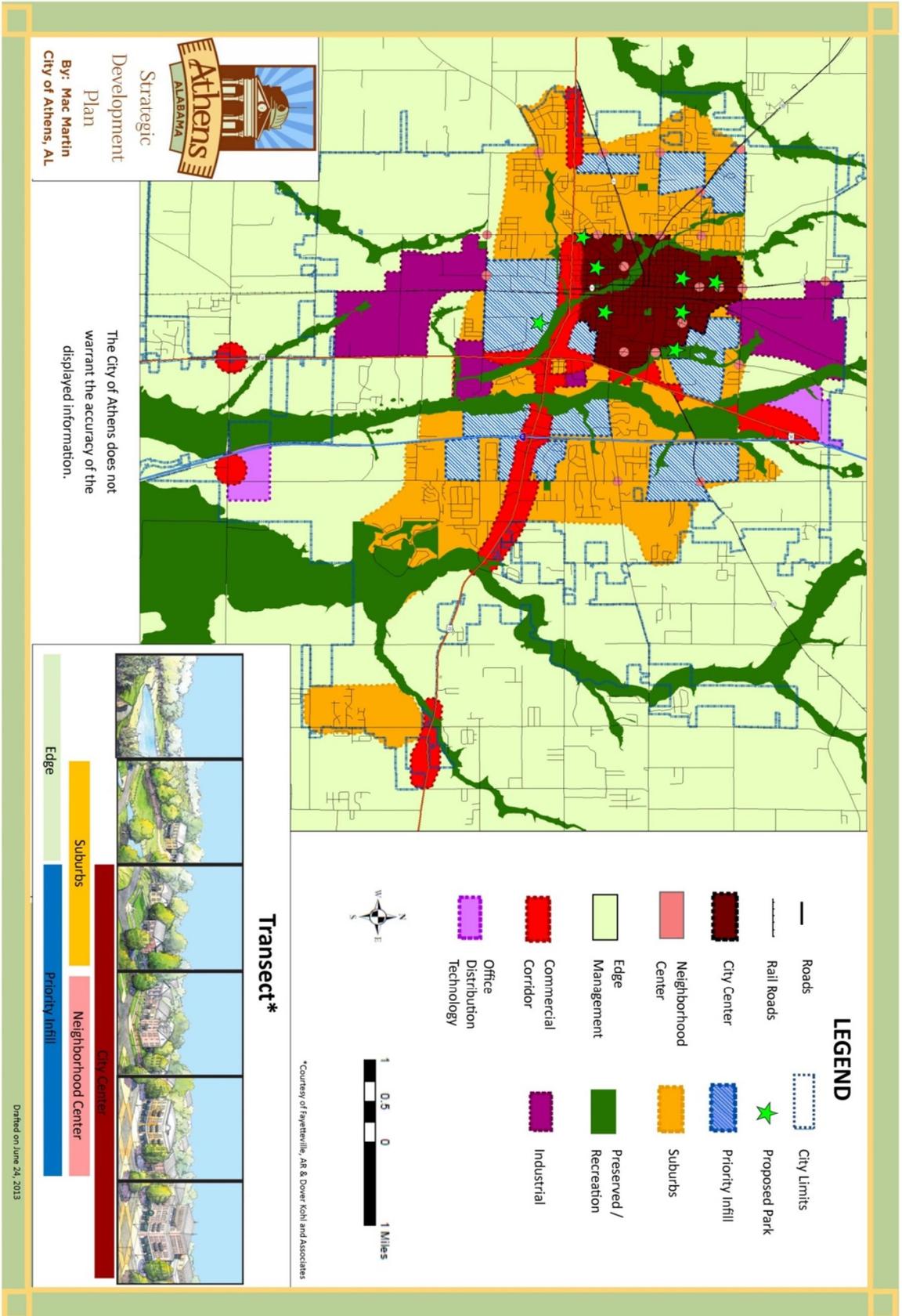


Figure 3. City-wide strategic development plan.

Focus Areas

While citizens expressed a desire for the City to consider the entire community when developing this Plan, several key areas of focus came to light during public input sessions. These areas were identified as places worth additional attention due to their nature as key assets and points of opportunity, or because they were in great need of improvement. Much of the success of this Plan hinges on these focus areas receiving the attention and resources needed to take full advantage of what these areas have to offer in the way of building up our community and seeing its full potential come to fruition. These focus areas include the following: Exit 351, the city center, downtown and environs, North Jefferson Street, and the closed chicken plant.

Exit 351

This focus area, serving as the primary interstate interchange for accessing Athens, was identified as the "front door" of the community and the site of immense opportunity. Traffic counts indicate approximately 50,000 cars per day use the interchange. This interchange also offers some of the best access to and visibility from Interstate 65 in the greater metro area. As such, this area has been identified as having the greatest potential for being a regional retail destination, and thus a primary revenue stream for the foreseeable future.

One traveling along US 72 through this focus area may get the sense that it is already fully developed. However, a look at the greater vicinity, as seen in figure 4, shows that a substantial amount of land beyond the road frontage along US 72 remains undeveloped. Also identified as a primary infill area, public infrastructure already traverses or is readily accessible to this focus area. Going forward, this interchange should be a primary focus in the City's efforts to attract new retail and service development. None of the other interstate interchanges comes close to matching its traffic counts and the number of residences nearby.

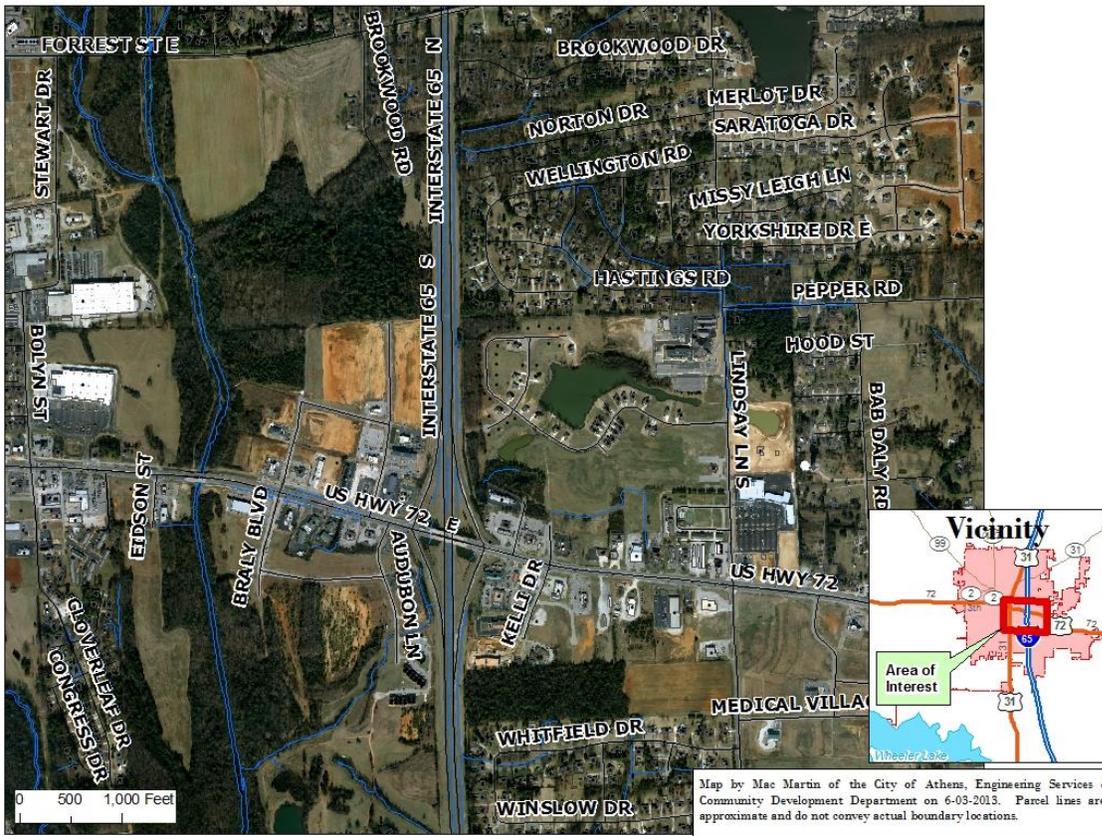


Figure 4. Aerial photo of Exit 351 and vicinity.

This area should accommodate large-scale retail development, as well as supporting commercial and, more to the periphery, high density residential development. Where abutting existing development, new development should be designed to fit the context created by said development in order not to create conflicts between abutting uses. Access to new development should be focused at existing signalized intersections, while other intersections and median crossovers along US 72 need to be analyzed and addressed in order to increase traffic's ability to navigate the area safely and efficiently. Careful attention should be paid to the aesthetics of all developments and roadways within this focus area so that the community has a "front door" gateway of the highest quality.

With these development goals in mind, the Plan offers figure 5 as a master development plan for this focus area. The Exit 351 plan shows a conceptual illustration that, if fully developed, would maximize the potential of the land around the interchange. It is important to understand that this plan is not meant to convey the location of individual buildings to be built at some point in the future, but rather to illustrate concepts that will make the interchange a key to the City's future financial stability and a primary gateway that will serve as the city's main entrance. For instance, the illustration shows large scale, big box-type retail development in the northwest quadrant of the interchange.

However, the southwest quadrant also has the infrastructure and land availability to support such development.

The important concepts to note in this illustration include the following: large-scale retail opportunities near US 72 and visible from Interstate 65, smaller scaled and mixed use development further from the highway frontages that makes for an appropriate transition from highway oriented development to neighborhoods already in place, and attractive landscape treatments at the interchange and along US 72. The quadrants along the west side of the interstate have the most land availability and interstate visibility to accommodate large-scale retail development. Steps should be taken to increase visibility of these developments from US 72, such as making allowances for attractive business center signs along the highway and clearing vegetative thickets behind frontage properties that add no value to the aesthetics of the district.

Beyond the large-scale retail centers, development should become smaller in scale and a mixture of mutually compatible uses should be permitted. This transition zone will accommodate more service and small-scale retail options. It is also meant to provide for multifamily apartment options. Currently, there are few options for those looking for upscale apartment housing in Athens. This area provides the best option for more upscale (class "A"), market oriented apartment development with quick access to US 72 and Interstate 65, a residential type Athens currently lacks. Farther to the edge, the use transitions over to single-family residential development, both attached and detached.

The Plan identifies the Swan Creek Greenway as a key asset to the development of the western quadrants of the interchange. Access to this resource opens up numerous recreational opportunities for residents and visitors alike, connecting residential and commercial developments at the interchange with a multipurpose path along the creek, preserved forested areas, Swan Creek park, and the Sportsplex. With a transformation of Hobbs Street to a complete street format, with good sidewalks and bike lanes, downtown and Athens State University become accessible to interchange development via means other than automobile.

The appearance and functionality of the Exit 351 interchange and US 72 corridor leading from it is of vital importance. This is the largest gateway into the community and should be viewed as the city's "front door." It must present the best possible impression to those entering. In many cases, we will have one chance to provide a good first impression. We desire to give residents coming home from work and visitors passing through a unique "Athens experience" as they pass through this critical gateway.

Several treatments are illustrated on the development plan and in figure 6, which present a street-level view of possible improvements to the interchange itself. Included in these treatments are monumental signs at the off-ramps with community brand and welcome message and landscape treatments throughout the interchange area and US 72 corridor. The street-level illustration also shows pole signs for businesses being shorter with reduced square footage, balancing the need to advertise individual businesses with emphasizing the community's identity and welcome message. The cumulative effect of

these treatments is meant to provide a lasting impression to all travelers of how special our community is compared to any other they pass through. We believe that this front door treatment will allow us to stand out from other communities along the Interstate corridor and the Tennessee Valley, while communicating our own unique identity and welcoming atmosphere.

All development within the interchange focus area should have a high level of connectivity. Facilities should be provided to allow customers to safely and efficiently pass from one development to the other regardless of transportation mode. A high degree of connectivity allows for customers of one establishment to easily access others, maximizing the revenue potential of all businesses in the area and adding to the "Athens experience" we desire for our interchange.



I-65/Lee Highway Interchange Conceptual Master Plan



Figure 5. Development plan for Exit 351 and vicinity.



Figure 6. Existing conditions of Exit 351 and photo rendering showing potential improvements

City Center

This area of interest, bounded roughly by US 72, US 31, Elm St., Town Creek, and Hine St. contains the oldest portions of the City. Much of this area has been developed for more than 50 years. At its center is downtown, the site of the original city at its founding. Standing at the center is the iconic courthouse that has come to symbolize the spirit and identity of the community.

Given that this portion of town is so old, much of it was developed prior to the institution of zoning laws, and certainly prior to our more suburban contemporary zoning ordinances. As documented in the Community Profile and in the satellite image in figure 7, this area exhibits traits much different from portions of the city that have developed within the past 50 years. The streets are largely arranged in a gridiron pattern, lots are smaller, and buildings are built more closely to the street and one another. The development pattern lends itself to that of an interconnected framework of urban neighborhoods rather than suburban developmental subdivisions.

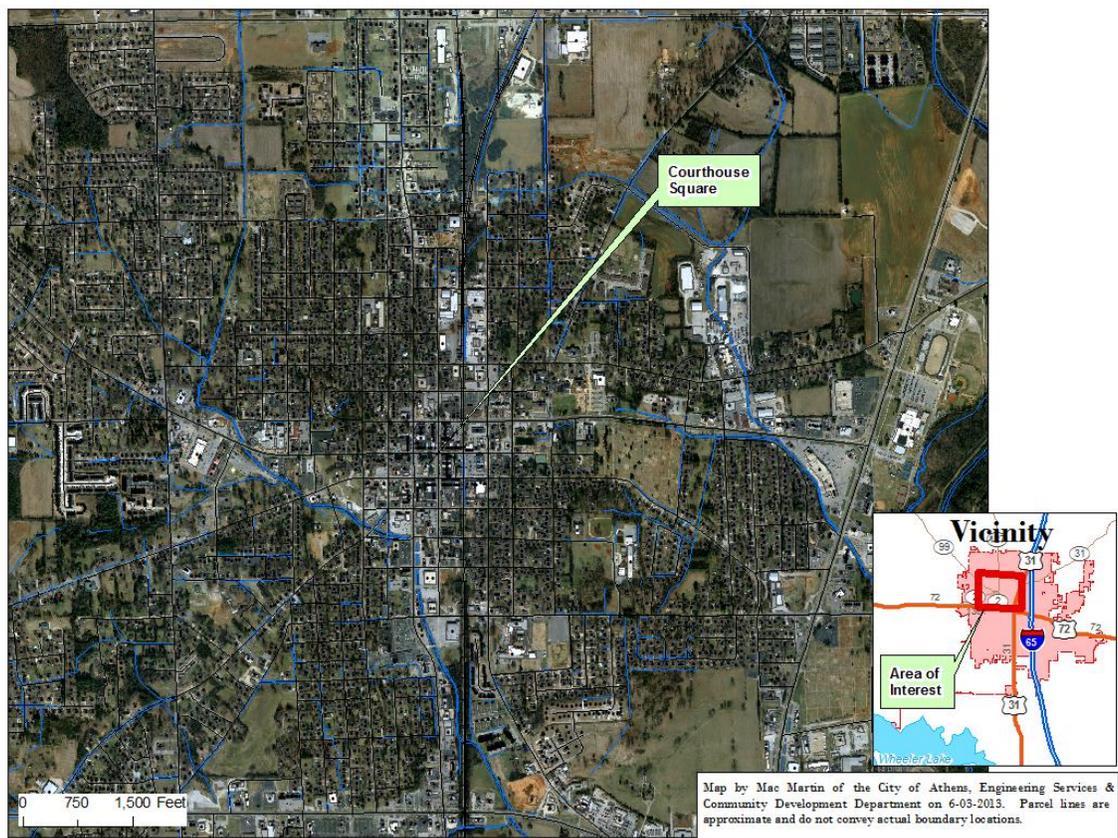


Figure 7. Aerial photo of city center

The Plan seeks to embrace this urban framework rather than discourage it. As noted in the Community Profile, a sizeable portion of the City Center is and has been experiencing decline. It is my assertion that a major reason for this is that current zoning standards for use and lot size prohibit the urban environment from flourishing, requiring larger lot sizes, greater setbacks, and a separation of uses. The public realm, including streets, sidewalks, and park spaces are either in disrepair or non-existent.

The Plan calls for this portion of the city to be revitalized through the building up and redevelopment of neighborhoods in the subject area (figure 8). The neighborhoods should be complete, with a central node, a mixture of uses and housing options, public spaces that serve as gathering places and recreational outlets, and a network of "complete streets" that connects each neighborhood with its respective centers and downtown. Density, mixture of uses, and pedestrian and bicycle friendliness should increase as one approaches downtown and urban neighborhood centers. Full implementation of this strategy would place many of the needs of life within walking distance of every residence, leading to less reliance on the automobile, and provide more options for those seeking housing accommodations other than what can be found in most of our developmental subdivisions.

The city center development plan is best described by examining the individual components/geographies that make up the plan. These include downtown and surrounding environs, urban neighborhood centers, urban neighborhoods, general neighborhoods, the North Jefferson Street corridor, and a proposed central park.

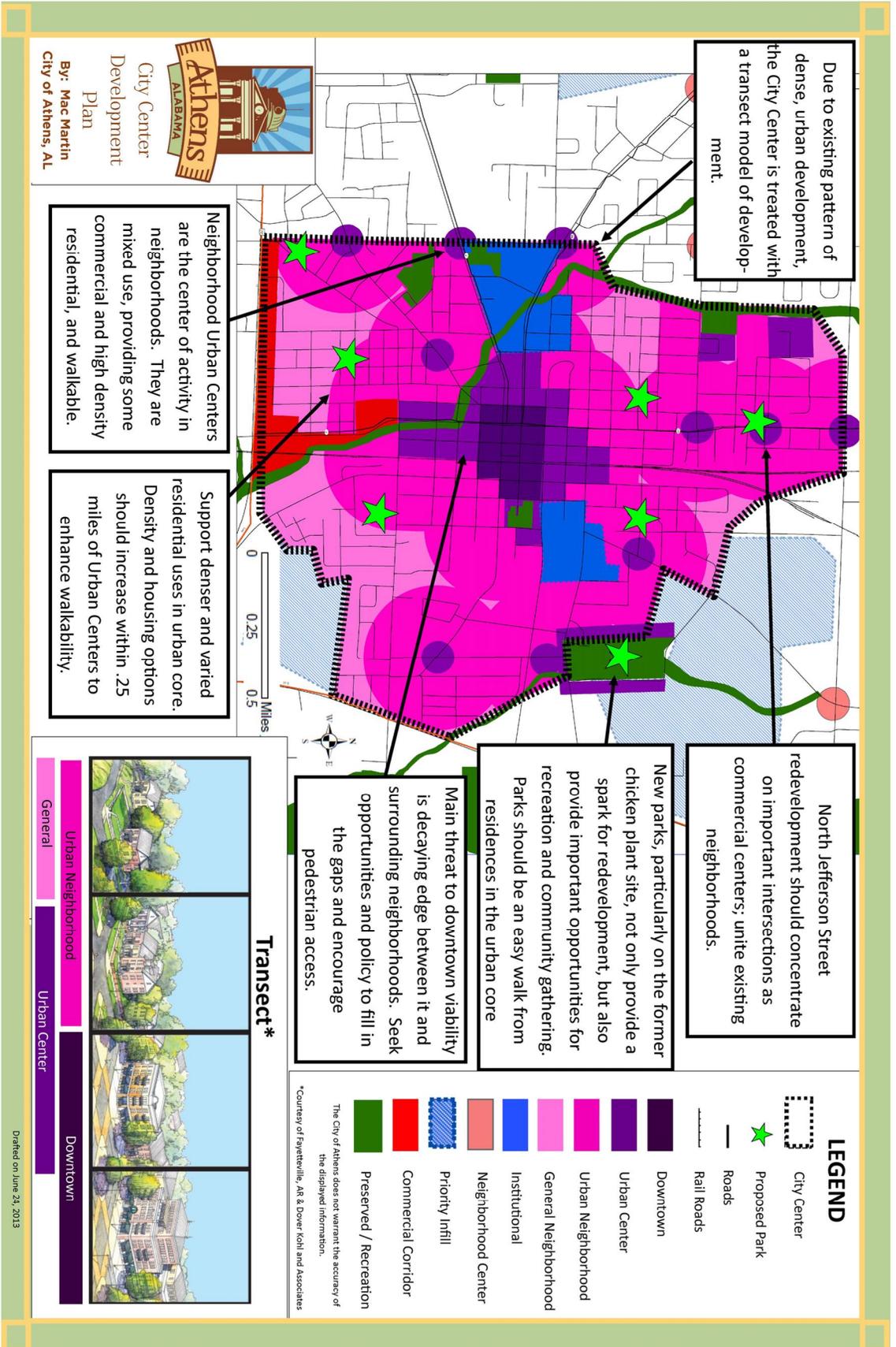


Figure 8. City center strategic development plan.

Downtown and Surrounding Environs

Downtown has largely experienced an upswing in activity in recent years. The building stock remains fairly intact, vacancy rates are low, and there is no shortage of traffic during the daytime hours. What is missing in downtown is a streetscape that enhances the district. As noted in the Community Profile, there are no design standards currently in place for street lamps, sidewalk furnishings, and landscape treatments. If downtown is emblematic of our community's identity, as stakeholders have indicated, it should be treated as a showpiece. The Plan calls for the addition of streetscape treatments that accentuate downtown as the heart and soul of the community. The treatments should be standardized to give a clean, attractive, and consistent appearance. Figure 9 shows downtown and its environs with the addition of landscaped treatments. Figure 10 shows a before and after scenario from a street level perspective of what additional streetscape treatments would look like around the courthouse square.

The Plan calls for City policy to be more permissive of a mixed use development pattern. While commercial uses should occupy ground floor spaces, residential uses should be encouraged for upper floors of older structures as well as new, infill construction. For downtown to reach its full potential, it must be active for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This is accomplished with the incorporation of residential space, which occupies spaces overnight and creates a human presence at all times. This not only contributes to the success of businesses in the district, but it also enhances safety.

The chief concern expressed by the community with the long-term viability lies within the areas of decline immediately surrounding the center of downtown. The areas can be found along Jefferson St. and Marion St. to the south of the Square, and to the east between downtown and Athens State University. As mentioned in the Community Profile, these areas include commercial structures that have outlived their commercial viability for various reasons and create dead zones that separate downtown from surrounding neighborhoods and institutions. Without a well-defined edge, downtown will continue to sit on an island surrounded by a sea of blight. The Plan prescribes a development pattern for this area that fits the context of downtown's pedestrian first environment while creating connections with surrounding neighborhoods and institutions.

As shown in figure 9, this district should exhibit the following characteristics:

- Development should include a compatible and mutually supportive mix of land uses including retail, service, and office functions as well as higher density residential housing like single-building apartments (2-4 units), lofts and townhomes.
- The development pattern and streetscape should be pedestrian oriented. Parking should be placed either on-street (where safety permits) or to the rear of buildings.

- Buildings should address the street and locate to the sidewalk. Buildings should be attached or have side setbacks large enough to accommodate driveways and small buffers (where applicable). Setbacks should not be so large as to detract from the urban, pedestrian friendly setting the district is attempting to create.
- Streetscape enhancements should be a priority throughout the district, particularly along streets that provide direct connections with surrounding neighborhoods and institutions. Ample sidewalks, crosswalks, street lamps, and street trees should be provided.
- Small public spaces such as pocket parks are encouraged.
- Building materials should be of a high quality, such as brick, stone, or cement composite (Hardie plank).
- Building architecture and signage should be of an appropriate design and scale.

Following these design criteria promotes an environment in which this district feels a part of downtown and has a high degree of connectivity with the historic districts, Coleman Hill, the medical district, Athens State University, the Alabama Veteranø Museum, Limestone County Events Center, and the new library. Streets are neatly enveloped by buildings and sidewalks are constructed with standard treatments implemented throughout downtown, creating an atmosphere that is walkable and inviting. These design features along with the mixture of uses the Plan prescribes make this a contributing area within the City Center rather than a ñno manø landö that folks wish to ignore and pass through as quickly as possible.

Another opportunity identified by the Plan is the location of city utility easements along Town Creek near the Farmerø Market. The market has become an ever growing asset for the City Center with the advent of the Spirit of Athens opening the Saturday Market throughout the summer. The success of that weekly event has spawned more interest in the marketø operations at other times during the week. The City, Keep Athens-Limestone Beautiful, and the Spirit of Athens have also worked to improve the facilities. Having the easements in place along the creek creates an ideal opportunity to connect the market with neighborhoods to the west through a greenway trail connection at a reasonable expense.



Conceptual Downtown Master Plan



Figure 9. Development plan for downtown and environs



Figure 10. Existing conditions of courthouse square and photo rendering of possible improvements

Urban Neighborhood Centers

The urban neighborhood centers, illustrated as purple circular areas on the City Center development map, are to be located at key intersections throughout the City Center. These centers are meant to be centers of activity, anchoring their respective neighborhoods and given them a sense of identity. An example of an urban neighborhood center is illustrated for the intersection of Hine Street and Washington Street in figure 11. The City's redevelopment efforts at the neighborhood scale should begin at these centers. This district should exhibit the following characteristics:

- Development should include a compatible and mutually supportive mix of land uses including neighborhood scale businesses as well as higher density residential housing like single building apartments (2-4 units), lofts and townhomes.
- The development pattern and streetscape should be pedestrian oriented. Parking should be placed either on-street (where safety permits) or to the rear of buildings.
- Buildings should be located close to the sidewalk. Buildings should be attached or have side setbacks large enough to accommodate driveways and small buffers (where applicable). Setbacks should not be so large as to detract from the urban, pedestrian friendly setting the district is attempting to create.
- Streetscape enhancements should be a priority at these intersections. Ample sidewalks, crosswalks, street lamps, and street trees should be provided.
- Small public spaces such as pocket parks are encouraged.
- Building materials should be of a high quality, such as brick, stone, or cement composite (Hardie plank).
- Building architecture and signage should be of an appropriate design and scale.



Figure 11. Existing conditions at potential neighborhood center site and photo rendering of possible improvements

Urban Neighborhoods

Urban neighborhoods are designated for areas within walking distance, or approximately one quarter of a mile from neighborhood centers and the greater downtown area (urban centers). This district should exhibit the following characteristics:

- Connections to urban centers by pedestrian and bicycle facilities (where automobile traffic volumes require separation) should be provided, as shown in figure 12.
- Development should include higher density residences such as single-building apartments (should conditions warrant), townhomes and single-family detached homes on smaller lots.
- Streets should have complete streets design. Streetscapes should include street trees, lamps and sidewalks, particularly along more prominent streets. On-street parking should be encouraged, particularly on local streets.
- Contextual setbacks should allow homes to be built relatively close to the street, leaving more yard space to the rear of the home. Side setbacks should be wide enough to accommodate driveways, but narrow enough to allow greater density.
- Parking facilities should be placed to the rear of homes.
- Public parks should be located within one quarter of a mile of residences within this district wherever possible. City and City Schools should discuss the possibility of opening school recreational spaces to the public after school hours.
- Building materials should be of a high quality, such as brick, stone, wood, or cement composite (Hardie plank).



Figure 12. Existing conditions along neighborhood street and photo rendering of possible improvements

General Neighborhood

General neighborhoods are designated for areas beyond one quarter of a mile from neighborhood centers and the greater downtown area (urban centers). This district should exhibit the following characteristics:

- Connections to urban centers by pedestrian and bicycle facilities should be provided along more prominent, heavily trafficked streets.
- Development should include single family detached homes on smaller lots than typically found in newer developmental subdivisions. Development may also include townhomes.
- Contextual setbacks should be further away from the street than in urban neighborhoods. Side setbacks should be wider than those found in urban neighborhoods.
- Public parks should be located within one quarter to one half of a mile of residences within this district wherever possible. City and City Schools should discuss the possibility of opening school recreational spaces to the public after school hours.
- Building materials should be of a high quality, such as brick, stone, wood, or cement composite (Hardie plank).

North Jefferson Street

The North Jefferson Street corridor was identified as an area in special need of revitalization. Residents stated that conditions have been deteriorating along this stretch of Jefferson Street for decades. The downward transition of this corridor has had negative effects on the surrounding neighborhoods, now populated with substandard housing. These conditions, along with a deterioration public realm, are noted in the Community Profile.

The Plan calls for a neighborhood approach to redeveloping this corridor (figure13). An assumption of the Plan is that the corridor is no longer viable as a sustainable automobile oriented commercial corridor, particularly since the building stock and the traffic counts do not compare to what is found along the major arterials in the community. The Plan calls for locations where Jefferson Street intersects with 5th Avenue, 9th Avenue/Cherry Street, and Elm Street to be identified as urban neighborhood centers. These centers should follow the same development pattern prescribed for the other centers within the City Center.

One opportunity the Plan has identified is the County government's ownership of the old L&S shopping center at the intersection of Jefferson Street, Cherry Street and 9th

Avenue. This is the proposed neighborhood center at the midpoint of the North Jefferson Street corridor. The shopping center is currently vacant, with the exception of a lone hair salon. If the County determines that the existing buildings have no viability for their purposes, this site would be a great location for a small park or plaza anchored by neighborhood oriented commercial development. The park would serve a part of the community without park facilities within a considerable distance (5th Avenue Park being the closest and well out of walking distance). Neighborhood scale commercial development would also be more viable than the automobile oriented commercial services that have vacated the premises.

The ultimate goal is to unite the residential neighborhoods on either side of Jefferson Street with one another through these nodes. Infrastructure improvements in this area should begin at the neighborhood centers and along Jefferson Street prior to expanding into the neighborhoods themselves. The improvements will take time. However, over time, the plan envisions this becoming an attractive corridor and thoroughfare into the heart of the city (figure 14).



Figure 13. Development plan for the North Jefferson Street corridor.



Conceptual North Jefferson Master Plan



Time





Figure 14. Existing conditions along North Jefferson Street and photo renderings of possible improvements

Central Park

Another area of concern within the City Center is the site of the former Pilgrim's Pride chicken processing plant. Located along Pryor Street, Cornish Drive, Sussex Drive, and Sweet Sue Drive, the 32-acre site has slowly been surrounded by the community over its lifespan (figure 15). The plant has been shuttered for several years and has little prospect of reopening. Most of the site is located within the floodway corresponding to the stream flowing through the middle of the property. Apart from the floodway issue, reopening the industry would once again produce noxious effects felt by the surrounding neighborhoods.



Figure 15. Aerial photo of existing idle chicken plant on Pryor Street

Given the circumstances surrounding the location of the property, the Plan envisions a large, open concept park space for the property as being its highest and best use (figure 16). According to the public and City officials, open and flexible park space is one thing that is missing from our current recreation facility inventory. This location is ideal for such a space. The Plan envisions a large open space bisected by the stream. Sidewalks traverse the park in a well-designed fashion, surrounding grass meadows that can be used for a variety of purposes including sports, kite flying, and musical gatherings. In addition to this being a premier recreational space, the Plan envisions it serving as a catalyst for economic development on undeveloped land and existing neighborhoods around its periphery. The Plan encourages the development of high density housing around the park to take full advantage of the facility. The school system's plans to build new schools nearby should serve only to further development potential in this area.



Conceptual Park Master Plan

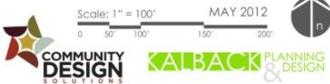


Figure 16. Development plan for Central Park on chicken plant site

Future Land Use Component

The Future Land Use component corresponds directly with the development pattern illustrated in the Strategic Development component. It offers additional insight and guidance as to the use envisioned for territories within the city. The two components are meant to serve as complimentary guides that convey a holistic vision for the community's future, and should be reviewed when considering policy decisions and resource allocations that directly influence the development and use of land. Of course, as mentioned earlier, should an opportunity arise that is not reflected in the Future Land Use component that would have a clear and substantial positive impact on the community, the best interest and long term success of the community should be given more weight.

The Future Land Use component of the plan illustrates the placement of use designations at the city-wide scale (figure 17) and in the city center (figure 18). These include the following, listed in order from the perimeter of the city to the center:

City-wide

- ▣ Agriculture/Estate ó Largely corresponding to the Edge Management area in the Strategic Development component, uses within the area should be of a low intensity, separated by larger setbacks, and require fewer city services than other portions of the city. Such uses include agricultural uses and large lot, estate style residences (3-5 acres or larger). Residential lots should be large enough to accommodate septic systems should sewer not be available. They should also be able to accommodate accessory agricultural uses such as gardens and hobby farms. Institutional and governmental uses requiring large amounts of land should also be permitted.
- ▣ Low Density Residential ó This area, shown in light orange, indicates the portion of the city where low density (0.5-1 acre lots) residential developmental subdivisions are encouraged. These subdivisions should be serviced by sewer. Larger institutions requiring ample parking should be permitted where conditions warrant.
- ▣ Industrial ó This area, shown in dark purple, illustrates where industrial uses are encouraged. Areas adjacent to Elm Industrial Park and Breeding Industrial Park are included in this district to foster future expansion of industrial uses in the vicinity.
- ▣ Office, Distribution, and Technology ó This area, illustrated in light purple, is meant to accommodate low impact and attractive employment centers that require large amounts of space and quick access to the interstate. Such uses, given their location at gateways to the community, should include neatly manicured, well landscaped campuses. Uses permitted in the area include office parks, distribution centers, governmental facilities, and low-impact industries.

- ▣ Commercial ó Shown in bright red, this area should permit large, automobile oriented commercial development along the city's major thoroughfares. Uses include a variety of retail and service commercial establishments. These uses should be attractive, with large amounts of landscaping and high quality building materials. Lots closer to major thoroughfares should permit larger, more intense commercial uses. The City is encouraged to protect large lots along highway frontages with the potential for larger scale, well planned developments from being subdivided into smaller lots with less development potential. Commercial uses closer to residential areas should be less intense, and adequate buffering should be implemented to protect neighborhoods.
- ▣ Preserved/Recreation ó This area, represented in dark green, is meant to accommodate open space or recreational uses only. The majority of this area is located within the various floodways and floodplains. Encroachments into the floodways should be prohibited and those extending into the 100 year floodplain should be kept to a minimum. Forested areas should remain intact whenever possible. Recreational uses, particularly those that require large amounts of open space, are encouraged to locate in this area.
- ▣ Institutional ó These areas, presented in a blue, are meant to house the largest institutions, or congregations of institutional uses. The large institutional area located along US 31 is set in place to accommodate existing and new large academic, cemetery, and assembly facilities. The institutional area near the intersection of US 72 and Lindsay Lane is in place to accommodate health oriented institutions. Large retirement oriented communities should be encouraged in the vicinity of this intersection, given the number of commercial and medical services nearby. Other institutional areas are designated in the City Center in and around the hospital and Athens State University campuses.
- ▣ Neighborhood Business ó Illustrated with pink circles, these neighborhood business nodes are located at key intersections throughout the city. Smaller scale, lower intensity commercial activities that provide essential services to the surrounding neighborhoods are encouraged at these locations. The public realm should include treatments that make the center readily identifiable with the surrounding neighborhood. Some mixing of uses, higher density residential uses, and public spaces are encouraged close to these nodes.
- ▣ Mixed Use ó These areas, illustrated with a red and white hatched pattern, are areas of use transition between highway-oriented commercial development and neighborhoods. Smaller scale commercial uses and high density residential uses are encouraged to locate here in close proximity to one another. The Plan encourages uses in these areas to be designed in such a way as to carry on a symbiotic, harmonious relationship with surrounding commercial and neighborhood scale residential uses, while simultaneously serving as a buffer between the latter two uses.

- ▣ Mixed Residential ó These areas, illustrated with a brown and yellow hatch pattern, are meant to accommodate traditional neighborhood development. These neighborhoods should be denser than the developmental residential subdivisions in the low density residential area. The types of residential uses permitted should include a mixture of single family detached housing types and sizes, with lot sizes averaging 0.5 acres, and townhomes. The street network should have a high degree of connectivity, like that of the traditional grid network. Planned Unit Developments (PUDs) with a traditional neighborhood format are encouraged to ensure a high degree of planning in developments within this area. Some multifamily development may take place within this area with conditions that they can fit within the surrounding traditional neighborhood context.

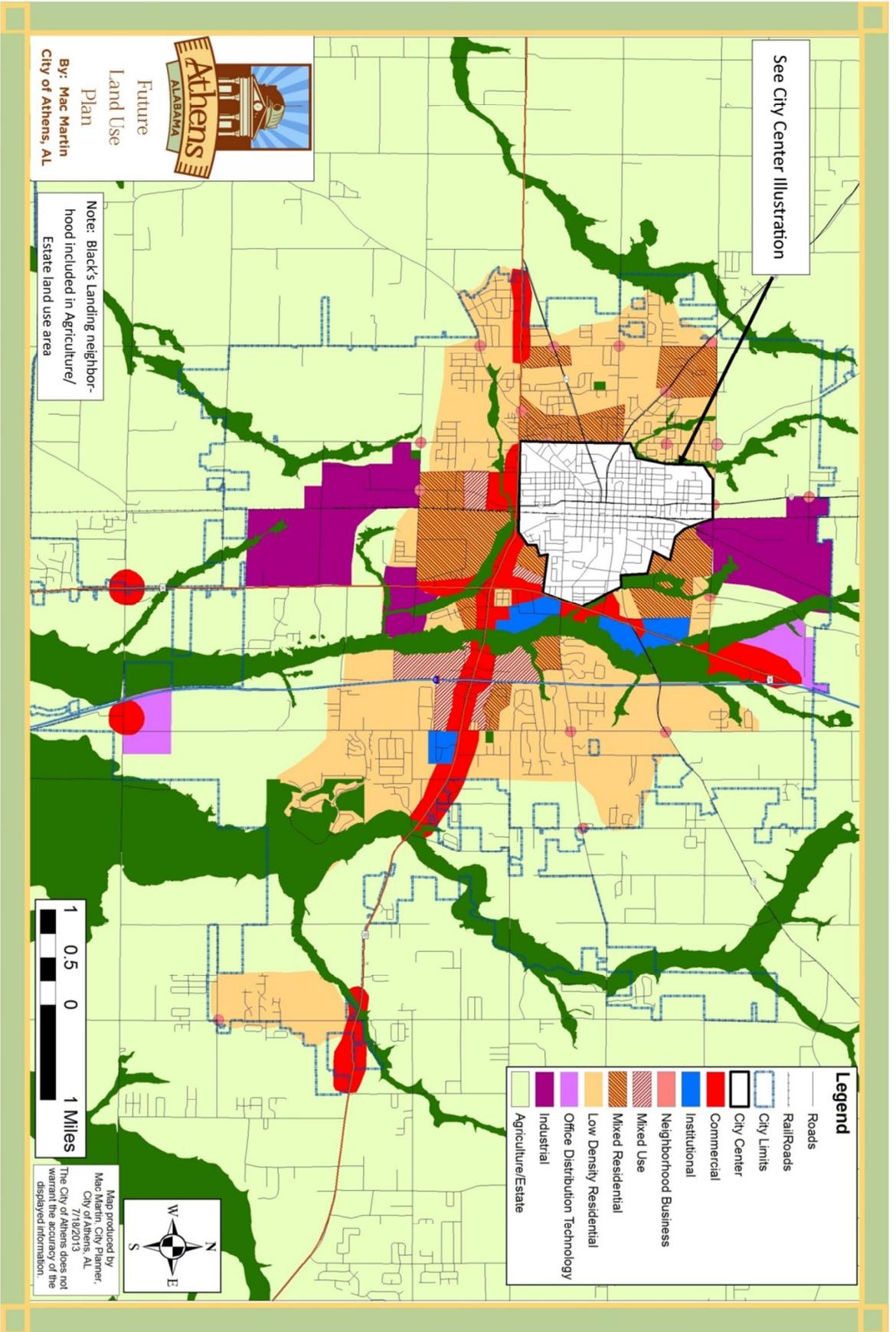


Figure 17. City-wide future land use plan

City Center

- ▣ Downtown ó Illustrated in the darkest shade of purple, this area should accommodate a mixture of uses at the highest density levels found in the city. Retail and service uses should locate on the ground floors of buildings, while office and residential uses should occupy the upper floors. Parking in this area, both on-street and off-street, should be open to the public and serve all of the uses found here. Private off-street parking is discouraged as it tends to create “dead zones” and take up buildable space. Governmental and assembly uses are encouraged with adequate public parking.
- ▣ Mixed Use ó Shown in a lighter shade of purple, this area is meant to accommodate a mixture of uses in densities less than that of downtown in a context appropriate format. Where located around downtown and at the epicenter of the neighborhood centers, commercial uses or a mixture of uses are encouraged, with retail and service uses occupying ground floors and office and residential space permitted on upper floors. Toward the edges of these areas, buildings that are completely residential in nature may be permitted. Governmental and assembly uses are encouraged with adequate public parking. Private parking lots should be located to the rear of building.
- ▣ High Density Traditional Neighborhood ó This area, illustrated in dark orange, is meant to accommodate a mixture of housing types at a high density, all within walking distance of a neighborhood center. Housing types include small lot (under 0.25 acres) single family detached, townhome, and single building multifamily (2-4 units) where conditions warrant. Public spaces are also encouraged.
- ▣ Medium Density Traditional Neighborhoods ó This area, illustrated in light orange, is meant to accommodate a mixture of single family detached residences on 0.25 to 0.5 acre lots and townhomes where conditions warrant. Public spaces are also encouraged.

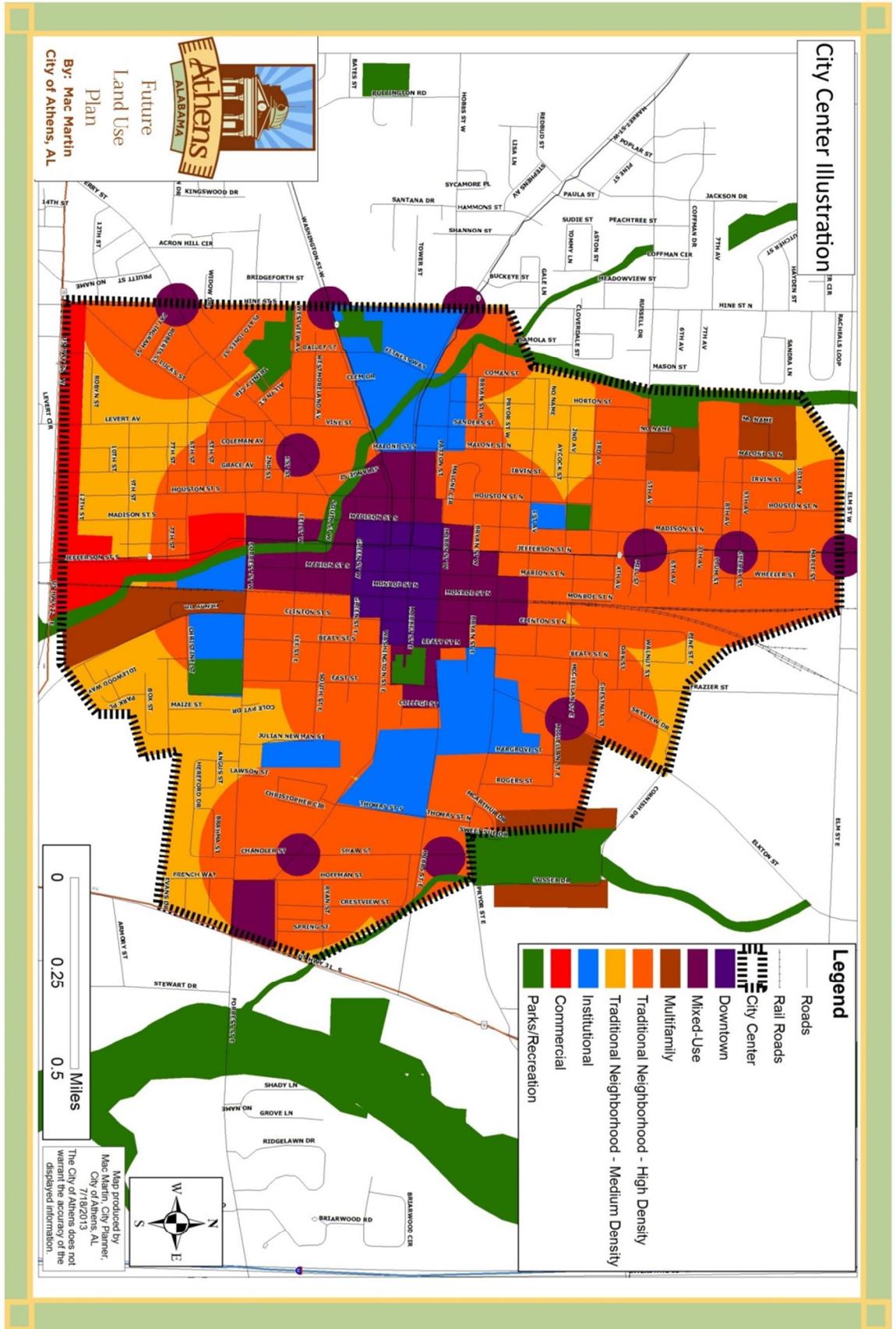


Figure 18. City center future land use plan

Recommended Implementation Strategy

The Plan represents the collective vision of the citizens of Athens. Just as its formulation required a comprehensive look at issues facing the community and cooperation amongst many interests of the community, so too will the implementation of the Plan require a collaborative effort across the public and private sectors. The City will need to implement the vision of the Plan through policy revisions; individual decisions and actions by the Council, Administration, Planning Commission, and other appointed boards; and through direct investments and operating budgets. The private sector will contribute through investment in site development and adherence to adopted policies and ordinances. Other agencies in the community, particularly the various institutions and non-profit organizations, are also encouraged to join the implementation process by tailoring their future plans and investments with the vision herein.

Only through the collective efforts of the community as a whole can we realize the full potential of our community and see this vision come to fruition. This section of the Plan recommends a course of action for the community to take over the life of the plan. The strategy presents recommended goals, objectives and actions organized into 3 categories: Community development and form, cooperation amongst various institutions and governmental agencies, and continued education. The implementation strategy includes specific actions, the agency responsible for taking the actions, and a timeframe for completing the actions. The timeframes are divided into short-term (1-5 years), long-term (5-10 years), and on-going actions that will be carried out throughout the life of the plan.

Community Development and Form

The Plan calls for the city to develop and grow "from the inside out." The Plan directs the City to accomplish this by focusing its efforts on (1) building up and reinvesting in the central portion of the city, (2) directing new development to occur in undeveloped territories close to the city's core where public investments in infrastructure have already been made, and (3) investing in key locations with economic development potential to secure additional revenue streams. This approach was born out of the public's assessment of our current circumstances and their vision for how our strengths and opportunities may be fully utilized to improve the quality of life for current and future residents. The Plan proposes that we focus our efforts on the following development themes (Goals 1-11) to accomplish the community's vision, in order from the broadest themes to more specific ones:

Goal #1 ó Make Athens the best place to live, work, and play in the Tennessee Valley. Do this by building the city in a sustainable fashion that makes adequate provision for land uses and development while protecting the City's fiscal health, promoting the City's ability to provide an exceptional level of service, and providing an ever-increasing quality of life for current and future generations.

Objective #1A - Identify locations of land for residential, commercial, industrial, public, and semi-public uses in amounts needed to accommodate future growth in order to sustain future economic opportunities and fiscal health

Objective #1B - Promote growth of existing and potential commercial and industrial activity centers and ensure that adequate land is available for job growth and economic development.

Objective #1C - Promote a compatible and mutually supportive mix of land uses with a high degree of connectivity in order to maximize the use of the city's land resources, maximize efficiency of public services and facilities, and elevate the quality of life for citizens

Objective #1D - Promote development of a housing stock that is diverse and features high quality materials and design.

Objective #1E - : Pursue the annexation of unincorporated island areas and unincorporated areas to the periphery of the City when it is determined that doing so would lead to more revenue to the City, would allow for the provision of more efficient services to customers, and would promote compatible development opportunities consistent with City policies.

Objective #1F - Provide sufficient protections for the city's natural and agricultural resources

Objective #1G - Link capital facilities planning and land use planning

Implementation Strategies	Responsible Agencies	Timeframe
Review and update land use and development policies to reflect the desired development pattern in the Plan.	Engineering Services & Community Development (ES&CD)	Short Term
Explore ways to better manage growth, provide public services, maximize fiscal efficiency, and minimize negative land use impacts	City Departments	Short Term
Develop a new official Zoning Map to coordinate with the Plan and implement goals and objectives	ES&CD	Short Term

Develop a Capital Improvements Plan (CIP) for financing, scheduling, and constructing physical improvements illustrated in the Plan and define each department's role in fulfilling the plan.	City Departments	Short Term
Clearly define and publish (pamphlets and online), by department, the process for and fees associated with developing land and opening a business in the community, creating a "one stop shop" for critical information.	City Departments	Short Term
Coordinate location of city schools within neighborhoods and develop program to share recreational facilities	ES&CD, City Schools System, Parks and Recreation	Short Term
Develop plans for future locations of public facilities	City Departments	Short Term
Preserve areas suitable for major commercial and industrial development from excessive subdivision of property and encroachment of other uses	ES&CD	Ongoing
Develop creative methods of financing improvements and services	City Departments	Ongoing
Review and update impact fee programs	ES&CD, Utilities, Clerk's Office	Ongoing
Pursue annexations of completely encircled islands in the city limits if such action provides clarity and efficiency in services	ES&CD	Ongoing
Coordinate plans and decisions regarding new development areas and annexations with service	City Departments	Ongoing

provision and utility extension policies		
Provide efficient, effective, and friendly service to all customers throughout the development process.	City Departments	Ongoing

Goal #2 - Improve the appearance and design of all uses, particularly along and within key corridors and gateways.

Objective #2A ó Promote high quality design administered through an efficient and fair review process

Implementation Strategies	Responsible Agencies	Timeframe
Develop improved guidelines and standards for the use of high quality materials, particularly in new commercial construction projects.	ES&CD	Short Term
Review landscaping and signage regulations for effectiveness and balance in beautifying the community and advertising businesses. Update where appropriate.	ES&CD	Short Term
Review parking regulations for effectiveness and balance in providing sufficient parking and stacking space versus creating too much hardscape. Update where appropriate.	ES&CD	Short Term

Goal #3 ó Protect and promote the unique identity of our community by incorporating the òAthens brandö into development and revitalization efforts across the community.

Objective #3A ó Promote a standardized appearance in development that plays off of and reinforces Athens' unique identity

Objective #3B ó Standardize streetscape treatments that play off of and reinforce Athens' unique identity

Implementation Strategies	Responsible Agencies	Timeframe
Develop improved guidelines and standards for architecture in commercial development that enhances the aesthetics of the community and builds upon its identity.	ES&CD	Short Term
Develop standards for streetscape treatments on City rights-of-way, including but not limited to street lamps, garbage receptacles, benches, landscaping containers.	ES&CD, Streets and Sanitation, Electric	Short Term
Implement standards in development plan review and in streetscape improvement projects	ES&CD, Streets and Sanitation, Electric	Ongoing
Review architectural criteria for development in historic districts and revise where appropriate	ES&CD	Long Term

Goal #4 ó Focus future growth within the City Center and targeted infill areas

Objective #4A - Promote well connected and appropriate infill development in areas where public infrastructure already exists, taking advantage of public capital investments already in place and reducing costly õsprawlö development.

Objective #4B - Encourage and facilitate redevelopment of distressed areas

Objective #4C ó Focus on attracting retail development as the ölife-bloodö (primary source of income) of the community

Implementation Strategies	Responsible Agencies	Timeframe
Consider policy changes to promote infill and redevelopment opportunities, particularly in the Priority Infill and City Center areas	ES&CD, Utilities	Short Term
Focus public infrastructure	City Departments	Ongoing

investment on needs in the Priority Infill and City Center areas (include in CIP)		
Explore incentives to promote reinvestment in Priority Infill and City Center areas, such as pro rata public/private investment partnerships, relaxed regulations or fees, and demolition of obsolete structures	City Departments	Short Term
Develop strategy for attracting retail development and build partnerships to implement the strategy	ES&CD, Chamber of Commerce, Limestone County Economic Development Association (LCEDA), Spirit of Athens (SOA)	Short Term

Goal #5 ó Promote õgreenfieldö development that is more compact in nature with mixes of mutually supporting land uses, integrates neighborhoods, shopping areas, and employment centers, and promotes the protection of prime agricultural lands and natural resources.

Objective #5A - Support a future land use pattern and mix that focuses new õgreenfieldö growth in and around existing developed areas

Objective #5B - Promote land use policies and facility planning that integrates and connects neighborhoods, shopping areas, and employment centers in order to encourage compact and connected growth patterns

Implementation Strategies	Responsible Agencies	Timeframe
Examine existing zoning and subdivision policies and adjust where needed to accomplish these goals and objectives.	ES&CD	Short Term
Incorporate incentives in development policy for developments that achieve desired growth pattern	ES&CD	Short Term

Goal #6 - Promote improved development forms in areas defined as suburban in nature

Objective #6A ó Strengthen existing suburban neighborhoods through increased walkability, better interconnected transportation systems, mixtures of uses, more diverse housing choices, and by providing services and employment in closer proximity to residential areas

Objective #6B ó Promote the same development characteristics in new suburban neighborhoods

Implementation Strategies	Responsible Agencies	Timeframe
Examine existing zoning and subdivision policies and adjust where needed to accomplish these goals and objectives.	ES&CD	Short Term
Incorporate incentives in development policy for developments that achieve desired growth pattern	ES&CD	Short Term

Goal #7 - Reinvest in and promote redevelopment in core, urban neighborhoods in a manner more traditional to those neighborhoods

Objective #7A ó Redevelop older urban neighborhoods with a focused nodal pattern that promotes mixed uses, a pedestrian friendly environment, better land use integration with surrounding neighborhood areas, and multi-modal transportation choices

Objective #7B ó Seek to maximize the fiscal benefits of infill and redevelopment while minimizing potential negative impacts on surrounding neighborhoods

Implementation Strategies	Responsible Agencies	Timeframe
Examine existing zoning and subdivision policies and adjust where needed to accomplish these goals and objectives.	ES&CD	Short Term
Incorporate incentives in development policy for developments that achieve desired growth pattern	ES&CD	Short Term
Improve streetscapes	Public Works, Nonprofit	Ongoing

within core business districts and neighborhoods with sidewalks and landscaping. Improvements should begin at prominent intersections and along prominent thoroughfares (include in CIP)	Organizations and Institutions	
Improve sewer facilities to accommodate dense infill development (include in CIP)	Water Services	Ongoing

Goal #8 - Reinvest in and promote the continued revitalization of downtown as our heart and soul.

Objective #8A ó Reinvest in aging and deteriorating infrastructure, including sanitary sewers, water lines, electrical facilities, and streetscapes, beginning with the courthouse square and continuing outward

Objective #8B ó Create distinctive edge between downtown and surrounding neighborhoods through mixed use infill development with appropriate design

Objective #8C ó Maintain vistas of the courthouse where they exist, particularly along the Jefferson Street and Brownsferry Street corridors

Implementation Strategies	Responsible Agencies	Timeframe
Examine existing zoning and subdivision policies and adjust where needed to accomplish these goals and objectives.	ES&CD	Short Term
Develop and implement phased strategy for improving streetscape and other infrastructure in downtown and surrounding environs. Improvements should begin at the Square and extend out. (include in CIP)	City Departments, Nonprofit Organizations and Institutions	Ongoing
Incorporate incentives in development policy for	ES&CD	Short Term

developments that achieve desired growth pattern		
Develop standards for street treatments to create seamless and aesthetically pleasing appearance	Public Works, Spirit of Athens, Beautification Board	Short Term
Make connections between downtown and Athens State University, hospital, library, and surrounding neighborhoods by extending streetscape treatments toward said destinations (include in CIP)	Public Works	Ongoing
Connect downtown with the City's greenway and multipurpose path network (include in CIP)	Public Works, ALDOT	Long Term

Goal #9 - Promote the full utilization and enhancement of Exit 351, treating it as our front door gateway and primary source of new revenue.

Objective #9A ó Phase development in declining intensity from US 72 to existing neighborhoods to accommodate new large-scale retail development, a mixing of smaller commercial and multifamily uses, and single family residential development.

Objective #9B ó Improve the appearance of the interchange and US 72 corridor through landscape enhancements

Objective #9C ó Ensure development is designed to be attractive, to move vehicular and pedestrian traffic safely and efficiently, and to be well connected to the street network and recreational facilities within the focus area and the surrounding environs.

Implementation Strategies	Responsible Agencies	Timeframe
Examine existing zoning and subdivision policies and adjust where needed to accomplish these goals and objectives.	ES&CD	Short Term
Incorporate incentives in development policy for developments that achieve desired growth pattern	ES&CD	Short Term
Install new landscaping to	Public Works, ALDOT,	Ongoing

beautify corridor (include in CIP)	Nonprofit Organizations and Institutions	
Design and install monument features at interchange to accentuate the community's "front door" and communicate community identity (include in CIP)	ES&CD, ALDOT	Long Term
Develop roadway network that opens more land to development in the vicinity of the interchange and connects with roadway already in place around the periphery of the focus area (include in CIP)	Public Works	Long Term
Connect the 4 quadrants of the interstate interchange with the City's greenway and multipurpose path network (include in CIP)	Public Works, ALDOT	Long Term

Goal #10 - Provide more recreational opportunities to Athens residents

Objective #10A ó Continue to improve upon existing recreational facilities

Objective #10B ó Provide park space within walking distance of residences in urban neighborhoods

Objective #10C ó Link suburban developments to parks, neighborhood centers, and to each other using recreational facilities that double as functional transportation systems (greenways, multipurpose paths)

Implementation Strategies	Responsible Agencies	Timeframe
Develop new or revise existing recreational facilities plan to incorporate recreational facilities illustrated in the Plan	Parks and Recreation, ES&CD	Short Term
Develop pocket parks in urban neighborhoods (include in CIP)	Parks and Recreation, Public Works	Ongoing
Develop Central Park on	Parks and Recreation,	Long Term

the grounds of the idle chicken plant (include in CIP)	Public Works	
Expand existing greenway network, particularly along tributaries where easements exist, to connect more neighborhoods with the recreational and transportation network (include in CIP)	Parks and Recreation, Public Works, Utilities	Ongoing

Goal #11 ó Develop a city-wide transportation network that safely and efficiently moves multiple types of traffic around and through the city.

Objective #11A ó Promote safer, more efficient travel along major roadways through limiting access points and cross-overs

Objective #11B ó Provide an integrated network for travel by bike or on foot to reach destinations throughout the city

Objective #11C ó Promote the creation of complete streets within urban neighborhoods and business districts

Implementation Strategies	Responsible Agencies	Timeframe
Develop a city-wide transportation plan and implementation strategy that complements the Future Land Use and Development Plan	ES&CD	Short Term
Implement the transportation plan	Public Works	Ongoing

Cooperation and Coordination

Goal #12 - Cooperate and collaborate with other organizations and agencies on promoting the community, making land use decisions, and aiding in development efforts.

Objective #12A - Cooperate and collaborate with Limestone County on land use and capital facility planning in order to promote economic development opportunities and compatibility of County facilities with surrounding uses.

Objective #12B - Cooperate and collaborate with Athens City Schools to ensure school locations are coordinated with land use decisions

Objective #12C - Cooperate and collaborate with the major institutions, such as the hospital and Athens State University, on campus planning to ensure neighborhood compatibility and provide land uses that are mutually supportive of campus activities

Objective #12D ó Coordinate with the Chamber of Commerce in our community's efforts to attract new retail development and retain existing businesses

Objective #12E ó Coordinate with Limestone County Economic Development Association (LCEDA) in our community's efforts to attract new industrial development and retain existing industries.

Objective #12F ó Coordinate with the Spirit of Athens to ensure that downtown's physical, aesthetic and economic form is in "showpiece" condition and worthy of its characterization as the "heart and soul" of Athens

Objective #12G ó Coordinate with the Tourism Association to ensure that the Athens "brand" is communicated to the outside world and that all who visit enjoy the "Athens experience"

Objective #12H ó Coordinate with other organizations in the community to ensure the future illustrated in the plan comes to fruition

Objective #12I ó Facilitate partnership amongst all parties in order to present a united front and enable such public/private partnerships as to successfully lure large economic development projects (commercial and industrial) to Athens

Implementation Strategies	Responsible Agencies	Timeframe
Promote and market our community and its unique identity to potential businesses, residents, and visitors in a unified fashion through the full utilization of the tools created in the community branding campaign	All agencies and organizations	Ongoing
Develop competitive incentive packages to entice "generational" retail and industrial development through partnerships with various organizations	City, County, City Schools, County Schools, Athens State University, Calhoun Community College, Chamber of Commerce, LCEDA, etc.	Ongoing

Develop retail recruitment and retention strategy that defines partnership between City and Chamber of Commerce	ES&CD, Chamber of Commerce	Short Term
Develop industrial recruitment strategy, outlining specific types of industry the community should target and how to attract them	ES&CD, LCEDA, Industrial Development Board	Short Term
Develop strategy for educating front line employees in the hospitality and service sector on entertainment, culinary, recreation, and cultural opportunities available in the community	Chamber of Commerce, Tourism Association, Spirit of Athens, ES&CD	Short Term
Develop strategy for attracting more high paying professional jobs to the community	ES&CD, LCEDA, Chamber of Commerce, Athens State University	Short Term
Partner with Athens State University and the hospital to ensure there is an appropriate transition and ample connectivity between their facilities and surrounding neighborhoods and business districts	ES&CD, Athens State University, Athens-Limestone Hospital	Ongoing
Determine locations of school facilities that will enhance neighborhoods, foster economic development, and improve overall quality of life	ES&CD, City Schools	Ongoing
Develop focused strategy to promote and market the City Schools System as a key selling point to potential residents and businesses	City Schools, Chamber of Commerce, LCEDA, ES&CD	Short Term
Determine appropriate future use of public	ES&CD, City Schools, County Schools, County,	Ongoing

facilities should they relocate	Library Board	
Develop course of action to develop/redevelop underutilized public property	City, County, City Schools	Ongoing

Continued Education

Goal #13 ó Continue to educate the public on planning concepts and practices and how they can help the community achieve a greater degree of livability and sustainability.

Objective #13A ó Continue to collaborate with the public on future planning efforts

Objective #13B ó Continue to educate the public on the relationship between sound planning policies and an elevated quality of life issues.

Objective #13C ó Continue to educate the public on how land use and development planning relates to housing, recreation, transportation, economic development, etc.

Implementation Strategies	Responsible Agencies	Timeframe
Engage the public in the implementation of this plan and the creation and implementation of subsidiary plans.	ES&CD	Ongoing
Engage the public in long term assessments of the plan and its implementation	ES&CD	Long-term

Conclusion

The ultimate goal for Athens to achieve is to be the best place to live, work, and play in the Tennessee Valley region. Athens is a growing community with an excellent geographical location. As the greater Huntsville metropolitan area continues to attract new businesses and residents, Athens, with its direct access to so many transportation options and relatively close proximity to all of the economic activity taking place within Huntsville, is poised to capture a share of that growth. There are questions facing the community concerning future growth and how we go about achieving the aforementioned goal. Do we continue to grow in a sprawling, low density manner where the greatest emphasis is on fringe, greenfield development? Or, should Athens grow in a manner that takes full advantage of public investments already made heretofore and focuses on revitalizing the core of the community?

After consulting with the people of Athens through the public participation program, it has become evident that the community wishes to see the City take the latter path to future growth. The community asserted that this seemed to be the best way to ensure that the city offers an exceptional level of service and quality of life. The residents voiced their concerns about undeveloped areas on the edge of the city continuing to develop, while our city's core business districts and neighborhoods deteriorate. The rising cost of servicing a sprawling development pattern wasn't lost on the public either. Indeed, with much of the country still reeling from the Great Recession, cities across the nation are having to more carefully take stock of the cost of servicing their territories and consider developing in a more efficient fashion.

The residents of Athens have requested that the vision illustrated in the Plan focus on growing the city from the inside out. The Plan calls for more emphasis to be placed on building up and revitalizing downtown and our core neighborhoods, viewing them as crucial to maintaining and projecting our community's unique identity. The Plan also calls for the City to focus its retail development efforts on Exit 351 and placing considerable resources there to improve the appearance of the interchange, treating it as the "front door" into the community. Furthermore, the Plan envisions new development to be focused in undeveloped pockets of land within that portion of the city where public services and infrastructure already exist, promoting appropriate infill development above development on the fringe of the city that will require a considerable amount of new public investment to service.

As the saying shared in planning circles goes, "to plan is human, to implement is divine." The implementation strategy included in this plan attempts to lay out simple steps that various departments within the City administration and other organizations can take to carry the vision illustrated in the plan to fruition. The Plan acknowledges that it will take a team effort from the City, County, organizations, and individuals in the community to accomplish the many components of the plan.

The Plan was conceived through a process that operated under the theory that planning is more art than science. While past trends help to explain why the city is in its

current state and can provide a backdrop for the plan, the future is uncertain and can be as influenced by actions of the community as outside forces and past trends. With that in mind, will the Plan be considered a "good" plan and be successful? Will all that comprises the vision illustrated in the Plan come to pass? That will depend on whether or not members of the community go beyond embracing it and become champions of the plan. Time will only tell and we should be able to determine to some degree its success when the Plan is evaluated in 5 years. In the end, the Plan will ultimately be what the community makes of it.

The Code of Alabama 1975, as amended, requires that a City's Planning Commission develops and adopts a master plan, in whole or in part. As the title indicates, this plan addressed the desired arrangement of land uses and development types across the city. This plan will inform future components and policy decisions, such as zoning. The City anticipates the Future Land Use and Development Plan will be the first in a series of plans that will make up an incremental master planning effort.

The Code also provides that the Commission shall conduct any studies, surveys and public hearings necessary to inform planning efforts and involve the public at large. The City's Planning Department has fulfilled these requirements through engaging the community in an intensive public participation program. A public hearing held by the Planning Commission on November 19, 2013 concluded the public participation program, which lasted 2 years. During this time, the City has accepted comments from the public in multiple ways including stakeholder focus groups, an online survey (with hard copies made available for members of the public without sufficient access to the internet), and open town hall workshops and hearings. The City feels that adequate effort was made to inform the public and invite everyone to participate. Following the public presentation made on October 22, 2013, a digital version of the plan and all of its maps and illustrations were placed on the City website for public inspection. The Plan was also provided in physical format to the public at City Hall and the library for public inspection. We feel that the Plan and the process through which we developed it complies with the requirements of Alabama Code, Sec. 11-52-8,9,10.

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APPENDIX A – Community Profile

Community Profile

This section attempts to provide a snapshot in time of what the city of Athens is like today. It is meant to provide the data slices necessary to understand the current conditions of the community and help inform discussions with stakeholders, and ultimately the Plan. These data slices include the physical geography of the community, the population that lives here, economic circumstances, the special arrangement of current land uses, and development trends.

Geography

The city of Athens is centrally located in Limestone County in the north central Alabama. The city is also located at the center of the Tennessee Valley region (figure A1). It is approximately 25 miles west of Huntsville, 13 miles north of Decatur and the Tennessee River, 45 miles east of the Shoals area, and 15 miles south of the Tennessee state line (figure 1). Athens and Limestone County are included in the Huntsville metropolitan statistical area.

Athens serves as a transportation hub for North Alabama with access directly to major roadways and railroad, and close proximity to water and air transportation facilities. Athens lies at the crossroads of two major roadways: Interstate 65 and US Hwy 72, major north-south and east-west corridors respectively. Athens is approximately halfway between Birmingham and Nashville and is accessible from Interstate 65 at three locations: Exit 347 (Huntsville-Brownsferry Road), Exit 351 (US Hwy 72), and Exit 354 (US Hwy 31 South). The main CSX rail line between Birmingham and Nashville runs through the core of town. Several railroad spurs offer direct access from industrial properties to the railroad network. Port facilities in Decatur allow for goods traveling by railroad and highway to be transferred to barges on the Tennessee River, where goods can travel throughout the Tennessee Valley, down the Tennessee-Tombigbee canal to Mobile, or throughout the greater Mississippi River watershed.

Huntsville International Airport is approximately 15 miles away via Interstates 65 and 565. The airport, which straddles the Limestone County/Madison County Line, not only offers passenger air service to cities around the country, it also recently expanded its facilities to accommodate the largest cargo planes in the world, which now fly to and from the airport delivering goods across the globe. The airport is the largest in Alabama in terms of handling and transporting cargo (Port of Huntsville 2013).

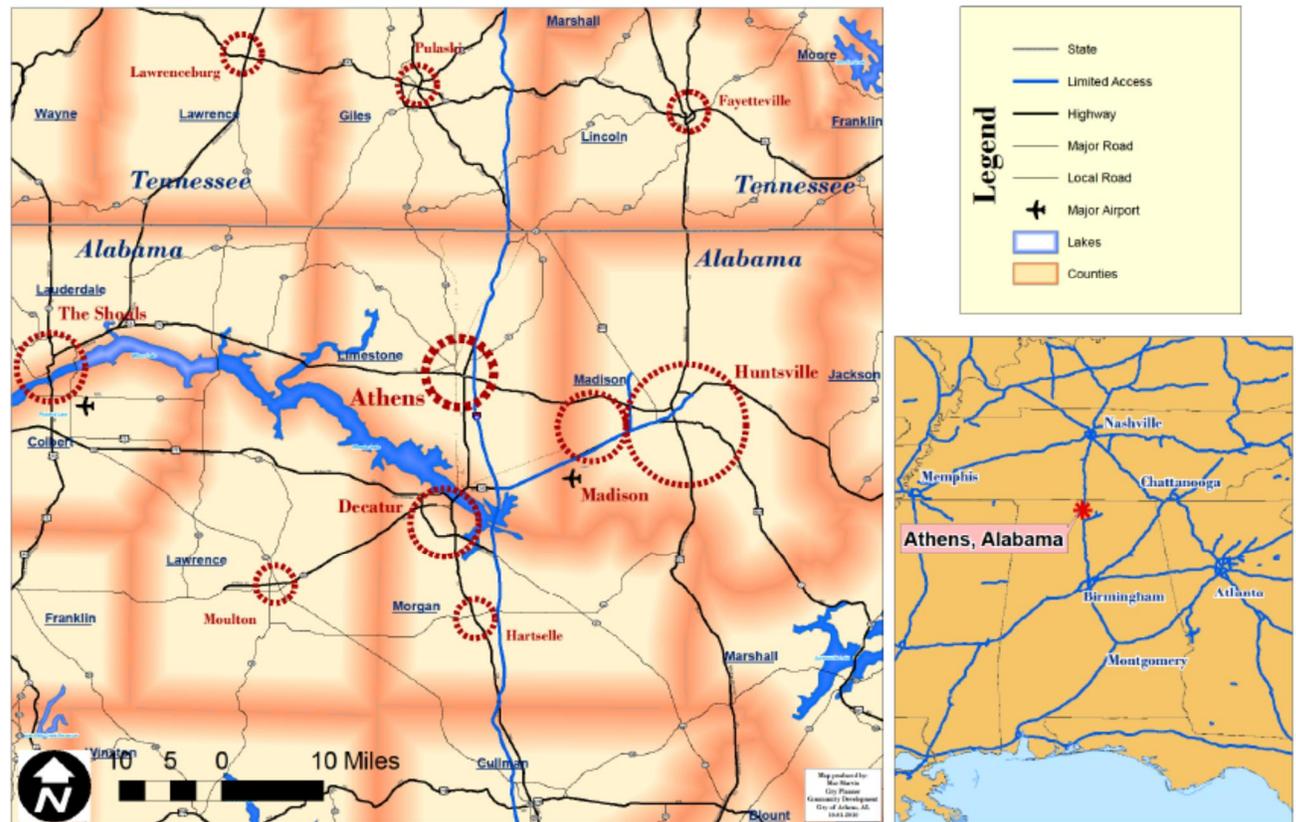


Figure A1. Map of Athens and Surrounding Region.

The city is largely surrounded by agricultural lands, though a number of larger properties east of the city have developed as residential subdivisions affiliated with the unincorporated East Limestone community. The majority of the landscape is flat to gently rolling. The elevation varies from sea level to about 600 ft along Swan Creek near Huntsville-Brownsferry Road to approximately 770 ft above sea level near the northern terminus of the corporate limits (figure A2). Most of the city has a gradual slope of less than 5%. In fact, the only locations where slopes measure greater than 5% are along the banks of the various creeks and streams that flow through Athens (figure A3).

Elevation, Athens, AL

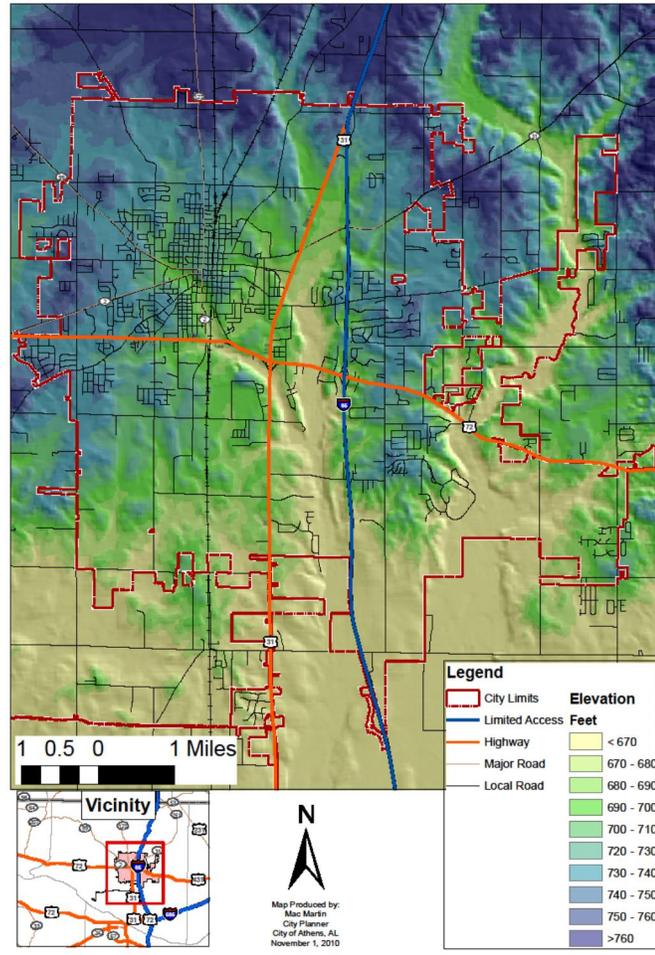


Figure A2. ALWRIC Elevation Relief Imagery.
 Accessed through Alabamaview.org

Slope, Athens, AL

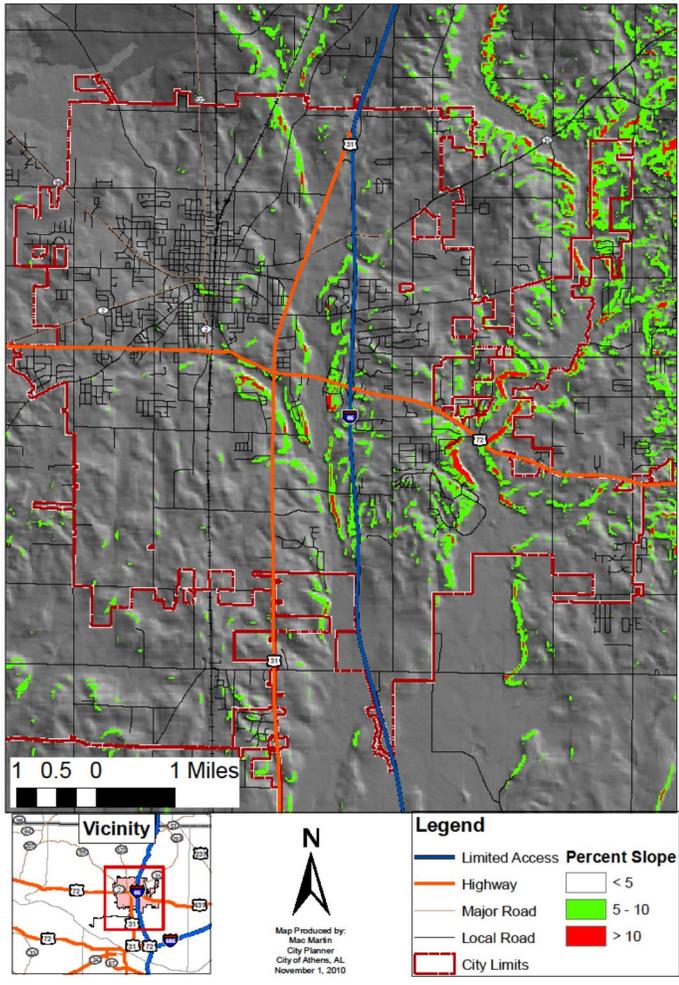


Figure A3. ALWRIC Slope Imagery. Accessed through Alabamaview.org

Flood Zones, Athens, AL

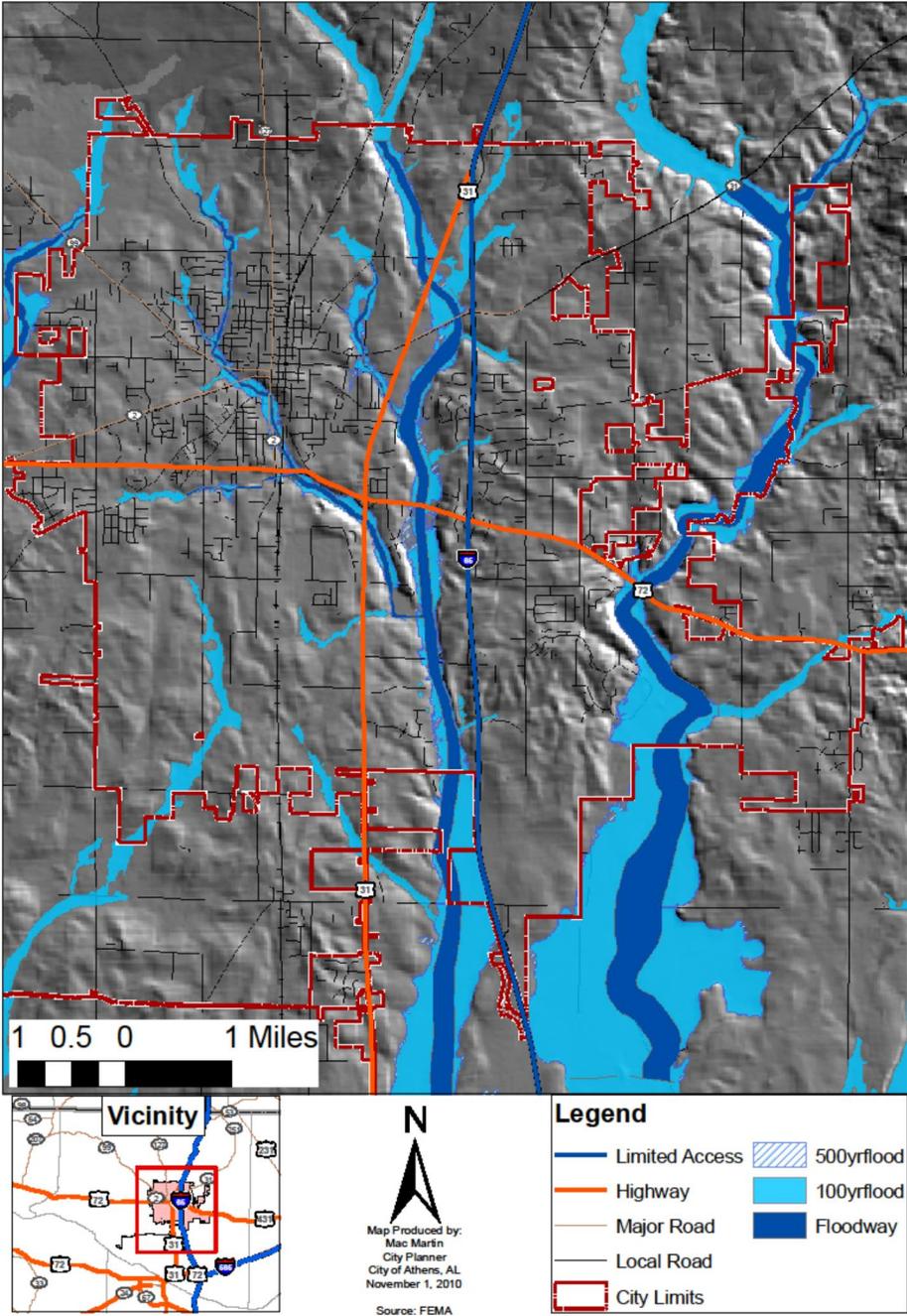
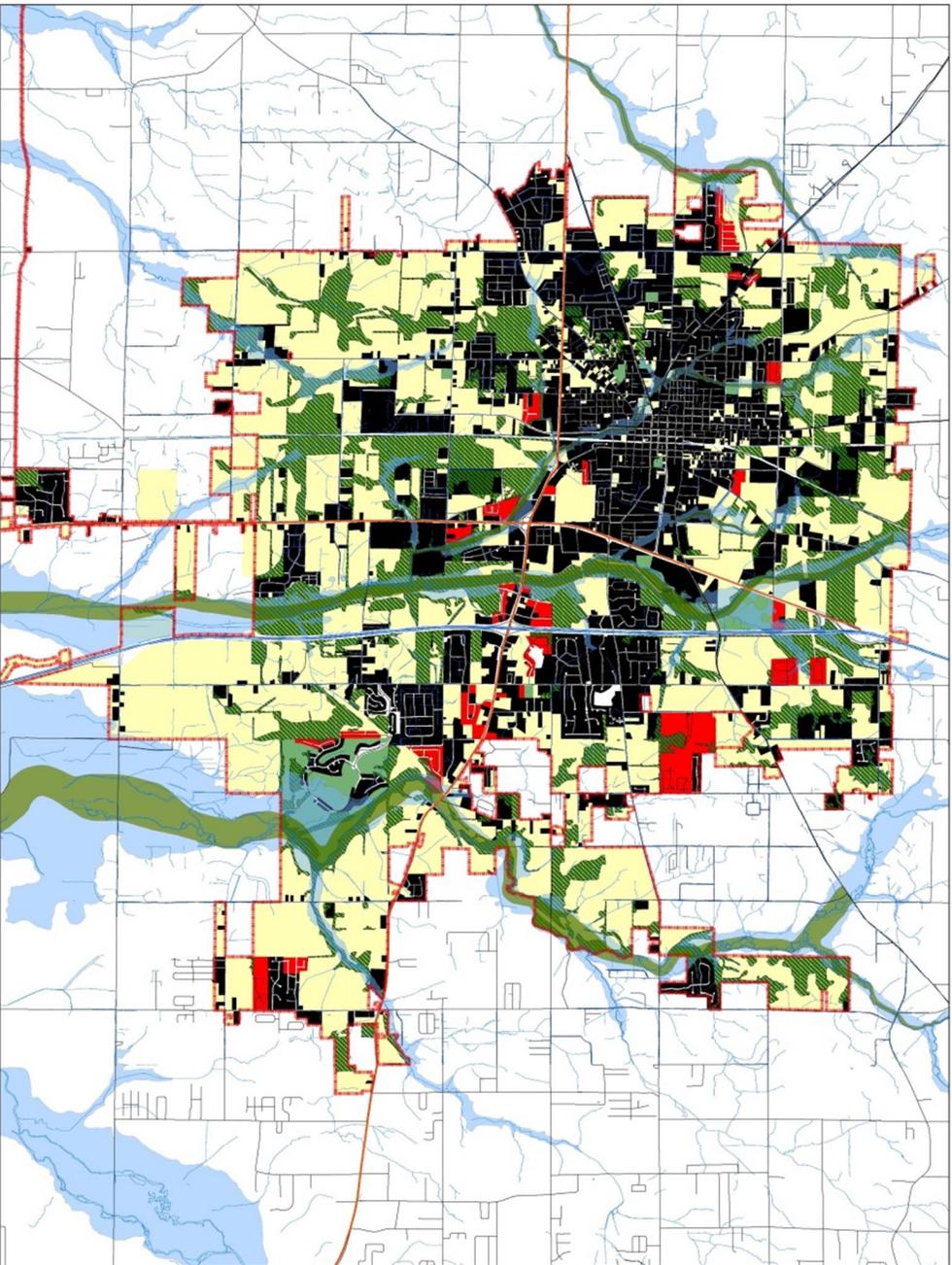


Figure A4. Floodways and 100 year floodplains

Natural Landscape



Legend

-  City Limits
-  Roads
-  Streams
-  Floodway
-  100yr/flood
-  Existing_Tree_Cover
-  Parks/Recreation
-  Developing Areas
-  Developed
-  Not Developed/Underdeveloped



Map produced by
Mac Miller, City Planner,
City of Athens, AL
5/17/2013
The City of Athens does not
warrant the accuracy of the
displayed information.

Figure A5. Natural and Developed Landscape

There exist 100 year flood plains (AE and A flood hazard zones) along each of the tributaries in Athens, and floodways designated by FEMA along larger streams (figure A4). For most of the city, these flood hazard areas are largely confined within the banks of their respective streams. As the elevation lowers and the terrain becomes flatter toward the southern end of the City, the flood hazard areas become more widespread. The City currently has an ordinance that adds specifications for development within the 100 year flood plain and strictly limits development within floodway.

The study area also includes several environmentally sensitive areas outside of the creeks and streams and their respective flood zones. Pockets of wetlands and forested areas exist throughout the city (figure A5). As in much of Limestone County, the wetlands and forests often coexist, with much of the rest of the land area outside of wetlands either being purposed for agriculture or development. These areas are home to abundant wildlife including deer, coyotes, rabbits, and other wide animals. Many of the larger forested areas in town are connected via forest bound streams, creating a green corridor network for wildlife to travel and citizens to enjoy.

The climate of Athens, along with the rest of Alabama, is classified as humid subtropical (Cfn) according to the Koppen Climate Classification system (Wikipedia, 2013). Average temperatures are slightly milder than those experienced in more southern portions of the state. July is the warmest month, with an average high temperature of 89 degrees and an average low of 67. January registers as the coldest month with an average high of 48 degrees and an average low of 28 degrees. Athens receives a healthy amount of precipitation throughout the year, averaging over 58 inches per year (Belsoft 2013).

The primary weather hazards that threaten Athens and the greater Tennessee Valley region are severe thunderstorms and tornadoes. While the area can experience thunderstorms throughout the year, spring and fall produce the greatest amount of severe weather. Alabama ranks at the top of the list of states that experience the most violent tornadoes. Of the 59 F5/EF5 tornadoes on record since 1950, 7 struck within the State of Alabama, each of them striking a portion of the state north of the Interstate 20 corridor (NOAA 2013). The most recent EF5 tornado to strike Athens hit the southeast fringe of the city on April 27, 2011 as part of a tornado outbreak that struck several states (figures A6 and A7).



Figure A6. April 27, 2011 tornado damage in eastern Athens. Source: City of Athens,

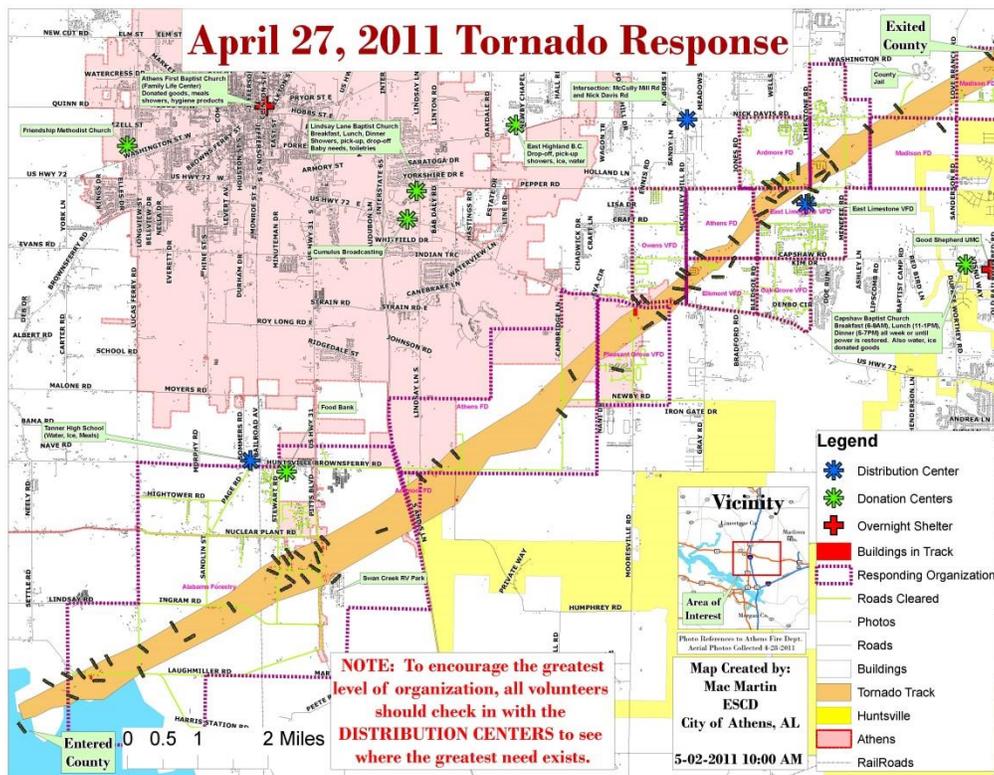


Figure A7. April 27, 2011 tornado path through Limestone County.

Population and Economy

According to the U.S. Census, 21,878 people resided within Athens's corporate limits in 2010. According to the 2010 Census, 73% of the population was White, while Blacks/African Americans represented 17.5% of the population (figure A8). Males and females accounted for 47.6% and 52.4% of the population respectively. The age distribution by sex of the city (figure A9) indicates that Athens has a healthy population within each age cohort.

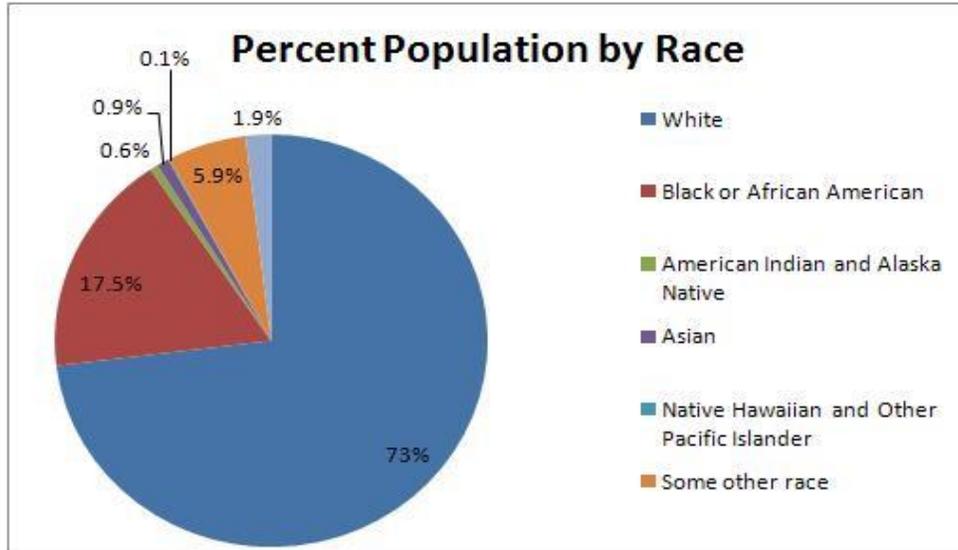


Figure A8. Population by Race. Data Source: U.S. Census

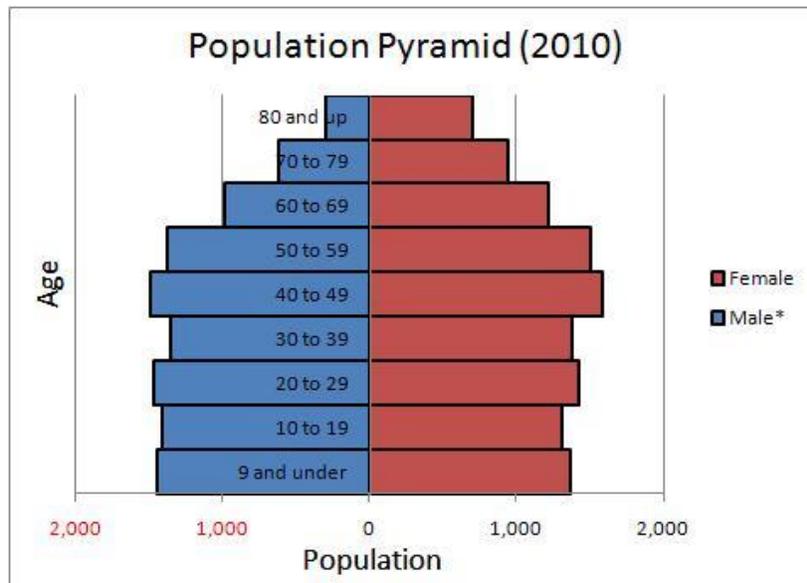


Figure A9. Population Pyramid of Athens. Source: U.S. Census

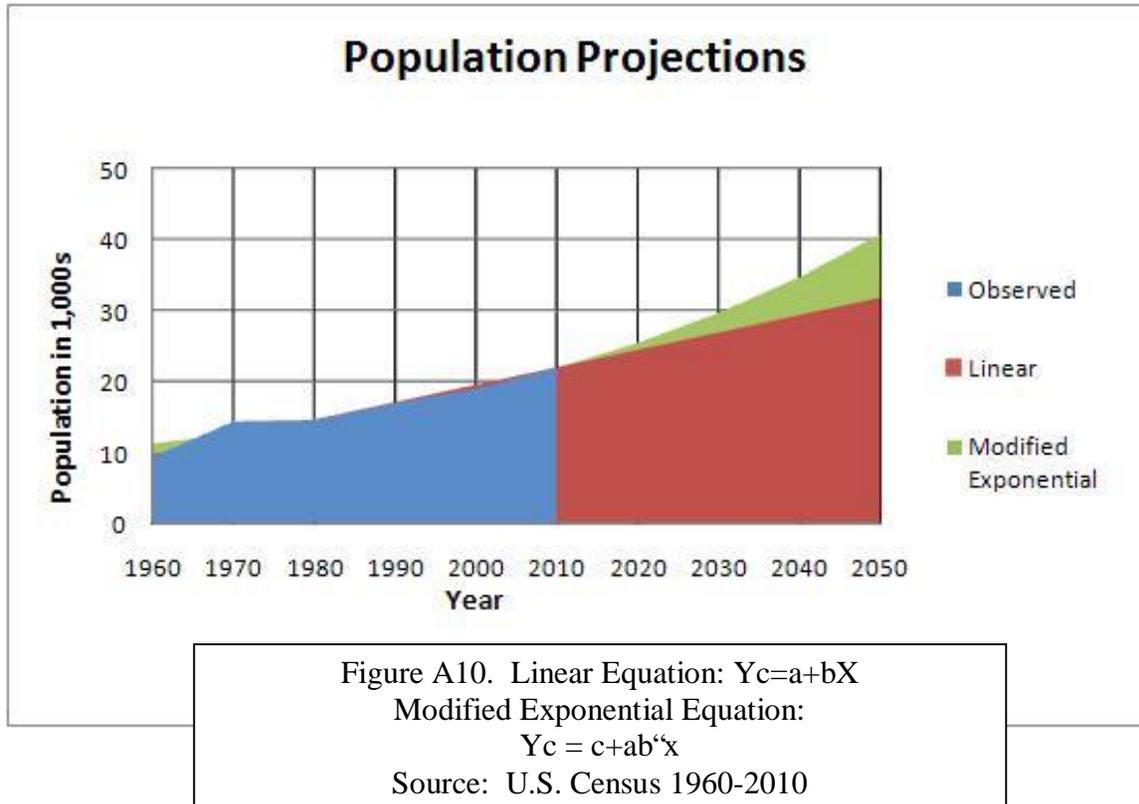
According to Buxton's population profile of the community (table A1), Athens' population has grown to 22,462 according to 2012 estimates, and is projected to see population gains over the next 5 years of 3.5%. The gender make-up is projected to remain the same over the same time interval.

Population Demographics										
	2000		2010		2012A		2017		Percent Change	
	Census		Census		Estimates		Projections		2000 to 2010	2012 to 2017
Total Population	19,611		21,878		22,462		23,279		11.6%	3.6%
Population Density (Pop/Sq Mi)	495.89		375.37		385.40		399.41		-24.3%	3.6%
Total Households	7,925		8,946		8,982		9,355		12.9%	4.1%
Population by Gender:										
Male	9,304	47.5%	10,419	47.6%	10,685	47.6%	11,078	47.6%	12.0%	3.7%
Female	10,306	52.6%	11,458	52.4%	11,777	52.4%	12,201	52.4%	11.2%	3.6%

Table A1. Short term population projections for Athens. Buxton, Experian, US Census 2012

For a more long-range forecast of the population, I calculated multiple population projections over the next several decades using U.S. census population data. Having multiple projections generated from multiple models helps create a more robust forecast and a more holistic picture of the trend(s) being studied. For this plan, I used the following projection models: Linear (figure A10), modified exponential (figure A10), and cohort component (figure A11).

The simple linear equation ($Y_c = a + bX$) is devised from the observed population of each decennial census from 1960 to 2010, where Y_c is the calculated value for the dependent variable when the independent variable is equal to X_i and a and b are fixed parameters (Klosterman 1990; 9, 209). The linear curve predicts the population increasing to 24,413 residents in 2020 and 26,862 by 2030. The second projection, illustrated in green, utilizes a modified exponential formula ($Y_c = c + ab^x$) and observations over the same period of time. The modified exponential formula seeks to project the growth of the community while recognizing that it is extremely unlikely that a community will experience boundless growth in a continuous fashion forever. This equation assumes that growth will taper off over time, though the trend may continue for some time before approaching the growth limit (Klosterman 1990, 19). The modified exponential curve predicts a growth rate slightly higher than the linear curve, with a population of 25,402 by 2020 and 29,614 by 2030. The projections are educated estimates in situations absent of natural or man-made disaster and shifts in the economy.



As an additional means of projecting population, the cohort component model uses population data for age and sex cohort, survival rates of each cohort, fertility and birth rates, and migration rates to project the population of each sex and age cohort in a pyramidal illustration. Adding the projected cohort populations together provides a projection of total population. In calculating these projections, I used the assumption that the survival rates and fertility rates of Athens residents were the same as those of the entire state. The state rates were the best available data.

This model projects the total population of Athens to be 25,561 in 2020 and 28,390 by 2030. A quick examination of all of the projections shows that the three models are predicting very similar results, thus boosting our confidence level that Athens will continue to grow. The benefit of using the cohort component model is that it provides a more granular view of what the population may look like in the future. According to the projection, each cohort, by age and sex, will grow over the next 20 years. According to the model, Athens should see a substantial amount of growth in the number of children and retired persons living in the community. This will translate into the need for the City to provide additional services that cater to the needs of these cohorts.

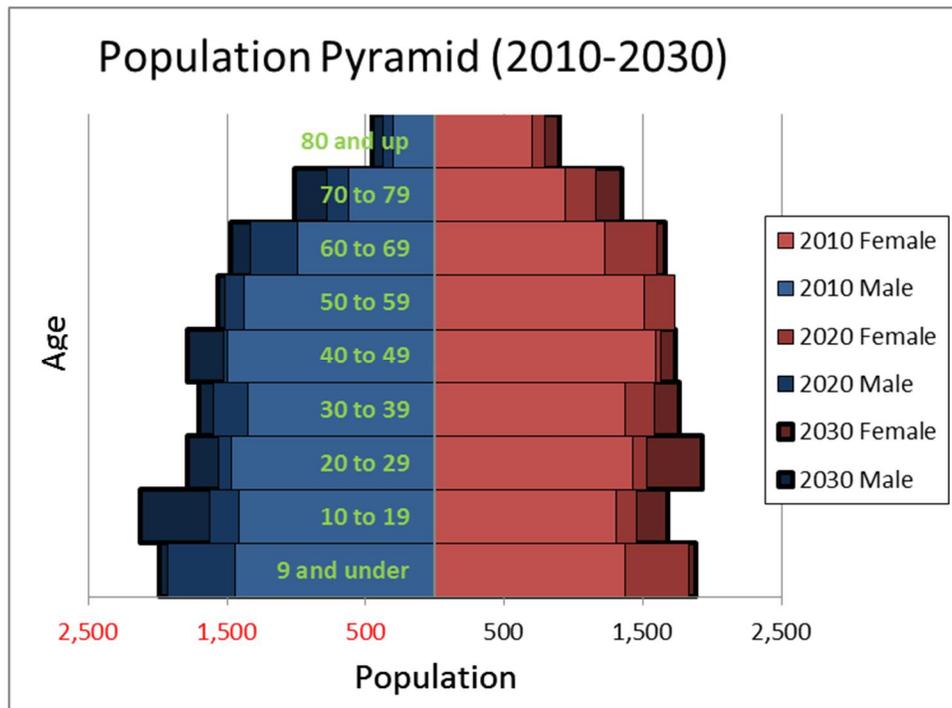


Figure A11. Cohort Component Model population projections by age and sex cohorts. 2010 data source: U.S. Census

As mentioned earlier in the Plan, Athens is anticipated to continue to grow along with the greater Huntsville metropolitan area. However, the economy is heavily dependent on the vitality of the Huntsville economy, with Redstone Arsenal as the primary catalyst for growth. Shifts in the Huntsville economy and the operational capacity of Redstone Arsenal will have a direct impact on the growth rate of Athens, for better or worse.

The median household income (table A2) in the community increased from \$32,919 per year in 2000 to \$40,059 in 2010. The median household income is projected to continue to increase by almost 15% by 2017. This positive news is attributed to the strength of the economy of the Huntsville metropolitan area. Another sign of an improving economy is the low unemployment rate that the community currently enjoys. 2012 estimates show that only 4.6% of Athens residents who are working age (16+) are unemployed (table A3). That number, below the state and national average, is expected to decrease over the next 5 years.

Households by Income

	2000		2010		2012A		2017		Percent Change	
	Census	%	Census	%	Estimates	%	Projections	%	2000 to 2010	2012 to 2017
\$0 - \$15,000	1,998	25.2%	1,596	17.8%	1,603	17.8%	1,419	15.2%	-20.1%	-11.5%
\$15,000 - \$24,999	1,209	15.3%	1,422	15.9%	1,408	15.7%	1,322	14.1%	17.6%	-6.1%
\$25,000 - \$34,999	935	11.8%	910	10.2%	902	10.0%	898	9.6%	-2.7%	-0.4%
\$35,000 - \$49,999	1,156	14.6%	1,390	15.5%	1,388	15.5%	1,316	14.1%	20.2%	-5.2%
\$50,000 - \$74,999	1,271	16.0%	1,450	16.2%	1,466	16.3%	1,612	17.2%	14.1%	9.9%
\$75,000 - \$99,999	685	8.6%	911	10.2%	911	10.1%	1,072	11.5%	33.1%	17.6%
\$100,000 - \$149,999	477	6.0%	842	9.4%	860	9.6%	1,131	12.1%	76.4%	31.6%
\$150,000 +	193	2.4%	424	4.7%	444	4.9%	585	6.3%	120.1%	31.5%
Average Hhld Income	\$45,466		\$57,899		\$58,316		\$65,829		27.3%	12.9%
Median Hhld Income	\$32,919		\$40,059		\$40,453		\$46,460		21.7%	14.9%
Per Capita Income	\$18,373		\$23,920		\$23,562		\$26,688		30.2%	13.3%

Table A2. Household Income. Source: Buxton, Experian, US Census 2012

Employment

	2010		2012A		2017		Percent Change	
	Census		Estimates		Projections		2012 to 2017	
Total Population 16+	17,468		17,917		18,578		3.7%	
Popn 16+:Civilian, Employed	9,341	53.5%	9,364	52.3%	10,246	55.2%	9.4%	
Popn 16+:Civilian, Unemployed	981	5.6%	821	4.6%	572	3.1%	-30.4%	
Popn 16+:In Armed Forces	95	0.6%	94	0.5%	93	0.5%	-0.7%	
Popn 16+:Not In Labor Force	7,051	40.4%	7,638	42.6%	7,668	41.3%	0.4%	

Table A3. Employment. Source: Buxton, Experian, US Census 2012

The housing stock in the community is estimated at approximately 10,000 units (table A4). Of these units, 60.5% are owner occupied, 37.5% are rental units, and 9.2% are estimated to be vacant. The vacancy rate jumped by 20% between 2000 and 2010, and is projected to go up another 4.3% over the next 5 years. A combination of factors, including the onset of the Great Recession in 2008, the economy's inability to return to pre-recession activity levels, and an aging housing stock are likely to be contributing to the vacancy numbers. The recession resulted in a large inventory of lots within the city, with no new developmental residential subdivisions being submitted within the last two years. However, according to the Building Department, recent activity suggests that some of the inventory is being filled, with \$89,723,711 of new residential construction being permitted over the last 5 years, with an uptick witnessed over the last 1-2 years, in

subdivisions including Canebrake, Village at Piney Creek, Canterra Place, and Ridges at Oakdale.

Housing Units										
	2000		2010		2012A		2017		Percent Change	
	Census	%	Census	%	Estimates	%	Projections	%	2000 to 2010	2010 to 2017
Total Housing Units	8,683		9,856		9,889		10,301		13.5%	4.2%
Total Occupied Housing Units			8,946	90.8%	8,982	90.8%	9,355	90.8%		4.1%
Owner Occupied: Owned with a mortgage or loan			3,554	39.7%	3,624	40.3%	3,813	40.8%		5.2%
Owner Occupied: Owned free and clear			1,967	22.0%	1,994	22.2%	2,062	22.0%		3.5%
Renter Occupied			3,425	38.3%	3,365	37.5%	3,479	37.2%		3.4%
Vacant	758	8.7%	911	9.2%	906	9.2%	946	9.2%	20.1%	4.3%

Table A4. Housing. Source: Buxton, Experian, US Census 2012

The commercial market in Athens remains fairly stable. By looking at the community's commercial properties, vacancy rates appear to be low. There are some spaces available in the Athens Town Center, Athens Shopping Center, and Eastside Junction, three of the city's largest shopping centers. However, the anchor tenant locations are occupied and most supporting storefronts are as well. Athens has also experienced a number of new commercial developments within the past year, including Fairfield Inn, Redstone Federal Credit Union (east branch), IHOP, Jack's Family Restaurant, Athens Shoppes, and Dollar General. The Building Department estimates the city having \$34,406,896 in commercial development, new construction only, within the last 5 years.

A growing concern related to commercial development is the shrinking of the Athens trade area. A retail leakage analysis (table A5) shows that approximately \$145 million in sales is leaking from Limestone County. That means that 20% of consumers in Limestone County are going elsewhere to purchase items. As the traditional commercial hub of Limestone County, Athens is going to have to work to stem the tide of sales, and tax revenue, going to other communities. This is proving to be a difficult task with developers and large chain stores opting to locate their developments on the west side of Huntsville and Madison. Said commercial developments are locating in a manner aimed at attracting Limestone County residents, especially those living in the eastern portions of the county. It is crucial not only for Athens residents, but Limestone County residents as well, to consider where they are shopping, given that so many of our services, including our public schools, are funded through sales tax.

Store Type	Potential	Actual Sales	Leakage
Motor Vehicle Parts & Dealers	246,451,225	264,369,594	1.1
Furniture & Home Furnishing Stores	26,860,412	25,809,190	1.0
Electronics & Appliance Stores	24,436,419	2,538,554	0.1
Building Material & Garden Equipment & Supply Dealers	128,640,175	124,194,453	1.0
Food & Beverage Stores	131,391,403	63,515,906	0.5
Health & Personal Care Stores	60,223,524	73,192,193	1.2
Clothing & Clothing Accessories Stores	47,670,435	16,239,391	0.3
Sporting Goods, Hobby, Book, & Music Stores	20,102,341	3,378,390	0.2
General Merchandise Stores	132,250,751	139,585,386	1.1
Miscellaneous Store Retailers	28,445,833	21,836,532	0.8
Foodservice & Drinking Places	87,484,851	54,040,820	0.6
Total	933,957,369	788,700,409	0.8

Interpreting Leakage Index

1.0 = equilibrium, meaning that demand and sales in the area being analyzed are in balance.

.80 = demand exceeds sales by 20%, meaning that consumers are leaving the area being analyzed.

1.2 = sales exceed demand by 20%, meaning that consumers are coming from outside the area being analyzed.

Table A5. Retail Sales Leakage, Limestone County, Alabama. Source: Buxton 2012
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Current Land Use and Development Pattern

A study of the current land use and development pattern finds that the community exhibits a low density of development (figure A12). There are approximately 40 square miles within the City's corporate limits. Of that geography, approximately 34% is developed, while the remaining 66% of the city's territory is undeveloped or underdeveloped, with uses such as agricultural operations, open pasture, forested areas, and residential lots over 5 acres. The bulk of the developed territory in the city is occupied by single family detached residential development, with approximately 21% of the city classified as that use. Three percent of the city's land use is classified as commercial, with the majority of commercial development located along US Hwy 72, US Hwy 31, and in the business district in the core of town. Three percent of the land is used for a variety of institutional uses, such as churches, government buildings, schools, and cemeteries. Four percent of the city is occupied by industrial uses, with the bulk of them located within Breeding and Elm industrial parks. The remainder of the land is occupied by small amounts of park and recreation space and multifamily developments.

An analysis of parcel sizes (figure A13) throughout the city finds that there is a substantial correlation between the uses of land and the sizes of lots. More to the point, the parcel size analysis highlights the developed and undeveloped portions of the city. Smaller lots (those under 5 acres) are congregated in a couple of district clusters: the largest being the city's core neighborhoods and business districts, the intermediate sized suburban development near Exit 351 and Lindsay Lane, and the smaller far east suburban development on Mooresville Road. Other developed areas are more scattered in nature, with few connections between them.

Most of the territories currently under development are located in and around the suburban development cluster along Lindsay Lane (figure A14). This development includes a couple of residential subdivisions within the Canebrake development and along Oakdale Road, US Hwy 72, and Lindsay Lane. This cluster is also home to a number of commercial developments that are in the pipeline or completed. The newest cluster, the one located on Mooresville Road, has witnessed the development of three neighborhoods since 2001. Latter phases of Fieldstone and Old Stone subdivisions are still being developed.

As mentioned earlier in this section, Athens exhibits a low density level in its development pattern. In order to develop a clearer understanding of the density issue, and to answer the question as to whether or not it was good for Athens to have this development pattern, I thought it was important to measure our community with those that are considered the best in the country or considered by locals to be communities worth emulating (table A6). These "successful suburbs" were selected from CNN/Money Magazine's Best 100 Small Cities to Live In, as published in 2010, or are suburban communities from around the South that most people in Athens would be familiar with. These communities are renowned for their excellent quality of life, made possible by healthy economies, numerous public services, excellent schools, and myriad of recreational options.

A common trait these communities exhibit is their high population density relative to that of Athens. These cities generally have a comparable or higher population within a smaller geographical area. It is from this study that I draw my key assumption in the Plan that higher population density and infill development equals more tax revenue, the ability for the City to provide more services, and a higher quality of life for city residents. It is a matter of economies of scale, whereby higher population densities and infill developments place more customers of City services on existing resource inputs, requiring little or no additional public investment. As for the communities on the list, each has a given amount of resources that it invests in a smaller geographical area than that of Athens.

Admittedly, there are other factors at play that this study did not cover that likely contribute to these cities receiving such high notoriety. The tax structure within these communities may be such that they have more resources available to them than Athens does. The population is more affluent in some of these communities than Athens. Some of the communities shadow larger cities than Huntsville. Some have more retail development. There may be certain values that a community's residents and leadership hold on to that propel it into a position of notoriety. Fairhope, for example, places a high emphasis on maintaining its identity by heavily landscaping the town and implementing policies that place a higher emphasis on attracting and retaining small businesses over big box stores in areas close to the city's core (as evidenced in the case of the location of Fairhope's Wal-Mart).

However, it would be hard to deny that population density plays an important role in the success these cities have attained and that the assumption is a good one. Take for instance a study the City conducted in 2005 to help determine the cost to service single family residential households from the general fund in an effort to better inform annexation decisions. The study found that single family households cost an estimated \$1,157 a year to service. The study also estimated that single family households bring in an average annual income of \$267, including \$75 in property taxes, \$105 retail and service taxes from disposable income, and an additional \$87 from the percentage of utility bills earmarked for the general fund. Together, single family residences cost the City \$890 per house per year. This figure is elevated if the City annexes residences that are farther away from our existing footprint because such action requires further extension of City services. However, the more homes that are built within our existing geographical area, particularly where City infrastructure already exists, the lower this net cost becomes because little or no extension of services is required.

It should also be noted that more residents locating in the core of the city provides more customers to the community's primary commercial corridors. The additional roof tops and traffic counts associated with said infill development makes our commercial corridors more attractive for the large scale retail developments residents desire. Neighborhoods developing on the fringes of town, especially to the south and east of the core of town, will have residents that are more likely to shop elsewhere instead of driving into Athens, especially if those residents are commuting from Huntsville. Having these commuters pass by Athens businesses on their way home should increase the likelihood that their purchases are made here and their tax dollars remain in the community.

Current Land Use

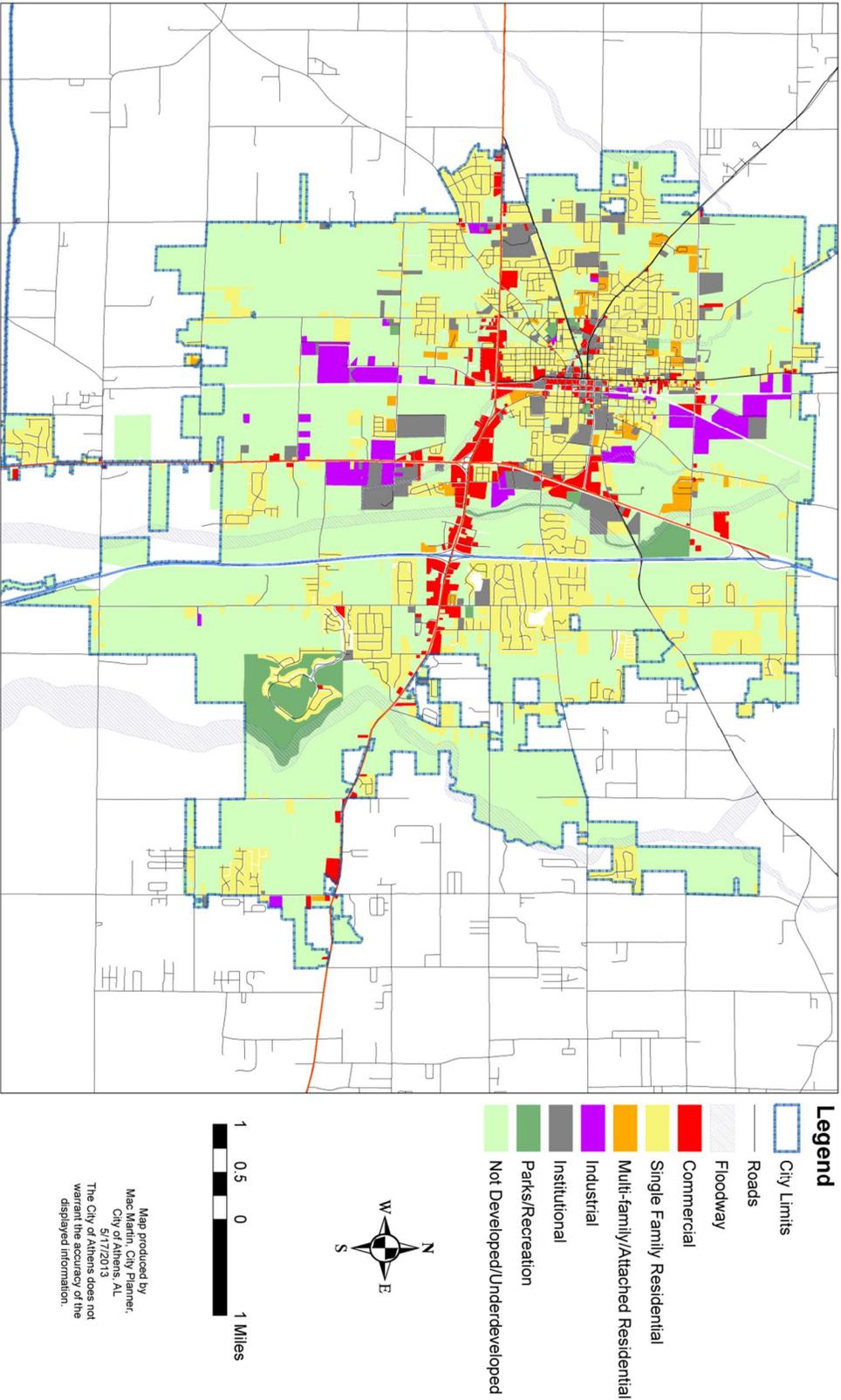


Figure A12. City-wide current land use map

Parcel Size Analysis

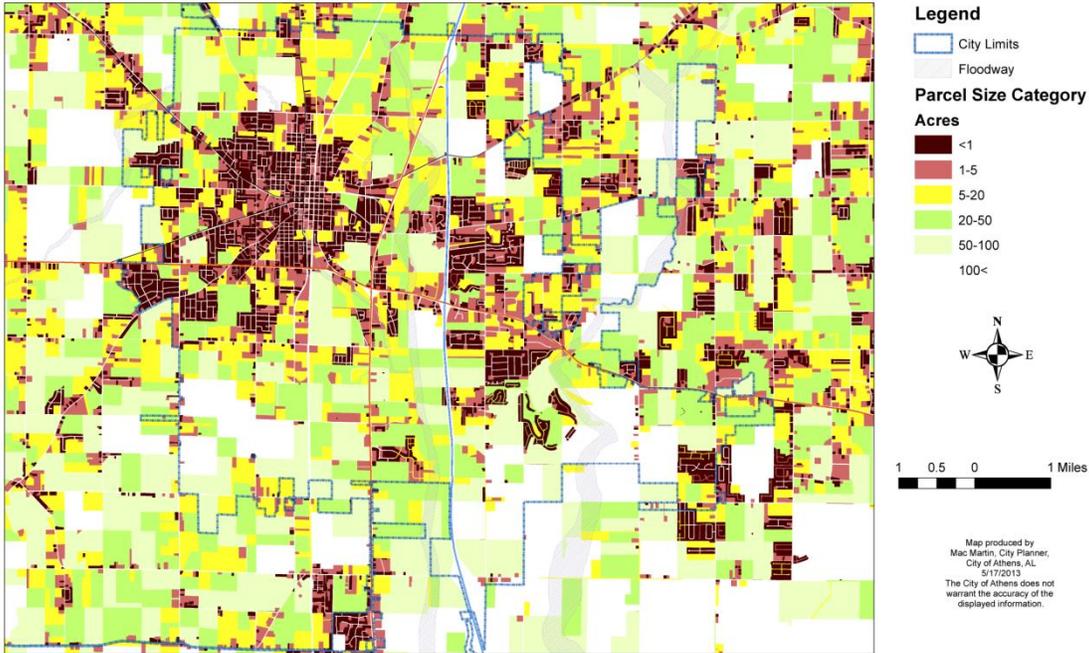


Figure A13. Parcel size analysis

Development Status

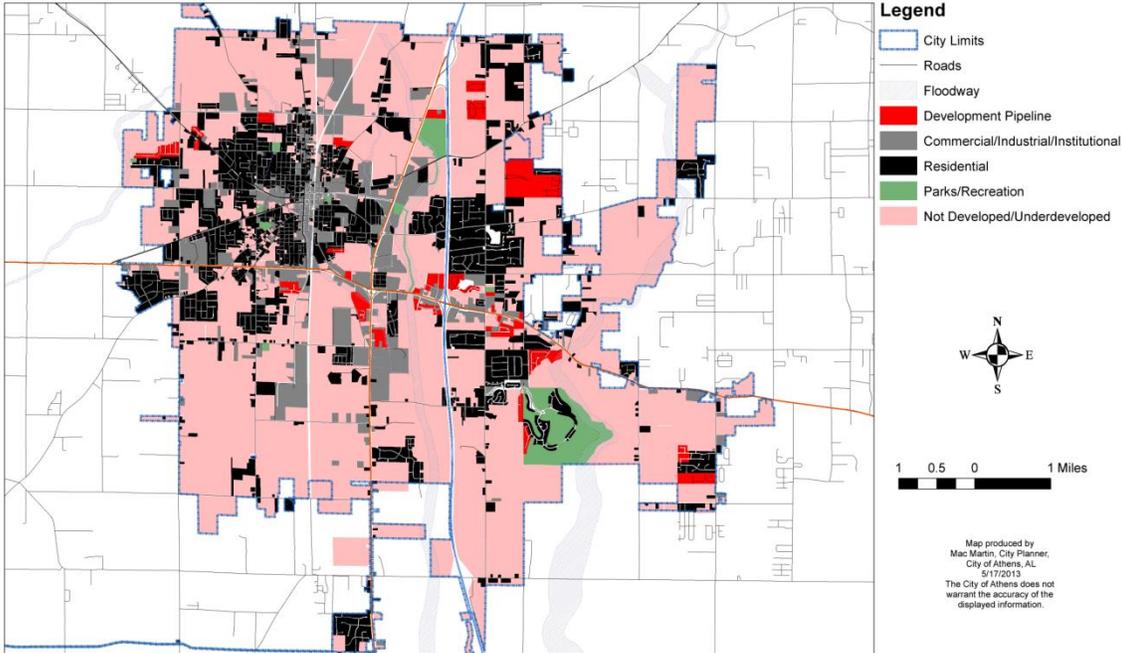


Figure A14. Development status

City	State	Population*	Land area (sq mi)	Population
				Density (sq mi)
Athens	AL	21,897	40	547
Fairhope	AL	17,147	11	1,559
Chanhassen*	MN	23,700	24	988
Papillion*	NE	22,200	4	5,550
Middleton*	WI	16,900	9	1,878
Milton*	MA	25,400	13	1,954
Keller*	TX	38,100	18	2,071
Newnan	GA	30,474	19	1,604
Franklin	TN	58,481	30	1,949
Bixby*	OK	20,678	24	862
Urbandale*	IA	38,369	21	1,827
Apex*	NC	31,600	11	2,873

Table A6. Population Densities Source: U.S. Census
 *CNN/Money Magazine 2010 Top 100 Small Cities

Sewer Service and Extension

One of the most critical services the City can provide for larger scale development is sanitary sewer. With the help of the Water and Wastewater Services Department, I was able to develop a sewer service map covering the life of the Plan (figure A15). According to this map, sewer extension is to be targeted to areas where we envision large-scale, revenue-producing development to take place over the life of the plan, or we have an obligation to provide sewer service.

The area shown as "Short Term Priority" includes areas along the eastern extent of US Hwy 72 within the city limits, as well as the new neighborhoods with moderate density located along Mooresville Road. The Plan envisions the intersection of Mooresville Road and US Hwy 72 as being ripe for commercial development should sewer service be available, given the intersection's daily traffic counts and developing neighborhoods in the vicinity. The City also has an obligation to provide sewer service to the residences within the Fieldstone, Plantation East, and Oldstone subdivisions. The subdivisions were approved by the City with the inclusion of sewer gravity lines. The City currently removes the sewage generated by these neighborhoods by transporting it via pump truck to the treatment plant. The extension of gravity trunk lines to this priority area would accomplish both economic development and service obligation goals. Said lines would feed into an existing force main that currently pumps sewage across the interstate to our treatment facility.

The portion of the city illustrated as "Long Term Priority" includes areas along US Hwy 31 from just south of Sanderfer Road to the southern terminus of the City's water and wastewater service boundary. The primary reason that this area is indicated as a priority is to support future industrial development in and around Breeding Industrial Park, Roy Long Road, and US Hwy 31. Existing gravity sewers extend about as far as the watershed will permit. Expansion of industrial development in the vicinity will need new sewer infrastructure, with gravity sewers draining to the lowest point in the service area and a force main carrying the effluence north to the treatment plant. This project will be costly and will likely hinge on luring industrial prospects to the area that are unable to locate in areas currently provided ample sewer service.

The rest of the water and sewer service area is shown in gray. Currently, the City does not plan to extend sewer service to these areas due to a lack of demand for development that would cover the expense of the extension. Of course, as with other components of the plan, should an opportunity arise that would generate substantial benefit to the City, and said opportunity would require sewer service, the City may amend its plans accordingly.

20 Year Sewer Service Map

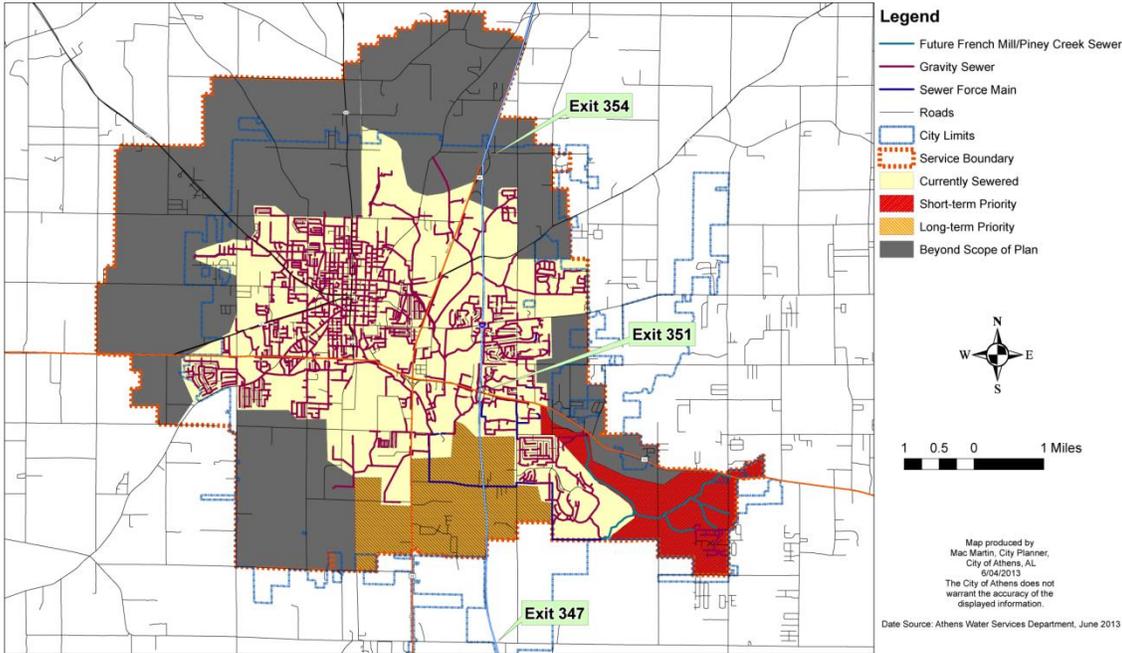


Figure A15. Sewer service map

Field Observations

As mentioned in the methodology section, I conducted a survey and photographic investigation of the study area. The qualitative data gathered in the field is meant to enhance the data obtained from secondary sources and create a better overall picture of the study area so as to enter the workshop phase of the project more informed on the community. I recorded my qualitative analysis in the field by dividing the community into sectors (figure A16). The sectors include the Core Business District (including Downtown), Core Neighborhoods, Highway Business District, Interstate Business District, Suburbs, and Industrial Centers. Within these sectors, I collected photographic and descriptive data that best describe the area with regard to physical conditions. With these data, I can gain a better understanding of the forces at work within each small area and draw more informed conclusions about the town as a whole.

The synopsis that follows is based solely on my observations in the field. My observations and conclusions may differ from others examining the subject areas. This section is not meant to imply whether or not certain areas of the community bolster or negatively affect the health and vitality of the community. However, it is an attempt to present an honest assessment of subject areas in the community, presenting both positive and negative attributes that the Plan directs us to take advantage of or address.

Field Study Districts, Athens, AL

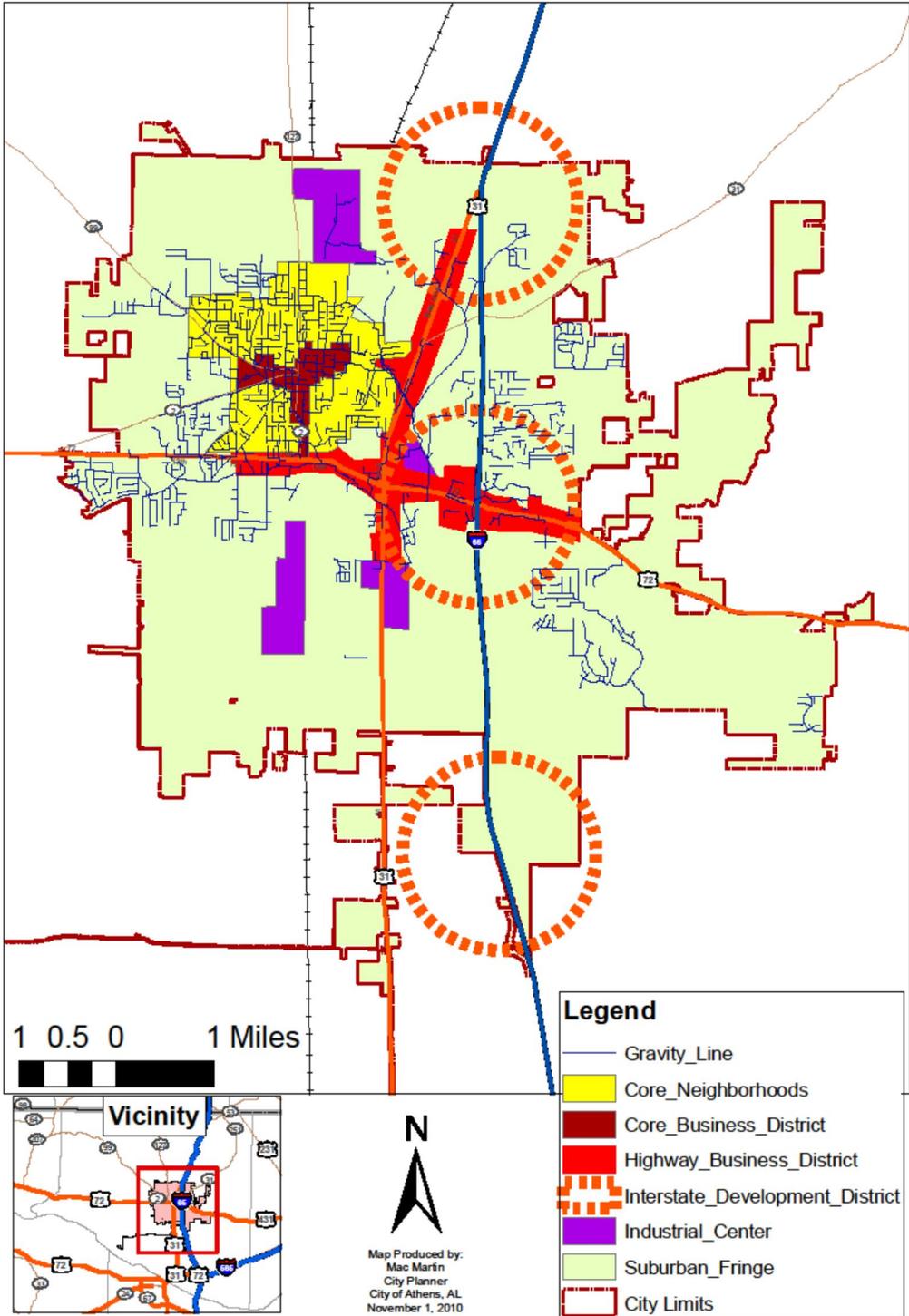


Figure A16. Field Research Sector Map

Core Business District



Figure A17 . Limestone County courthouse, located in the center of the square in downtown



Figure A18. Downtown businesses along Market St. on the north side of the courthouse square



Figure A19. Festival on the courthouse square.



Figure A20. Church located in downtown



Figure A21. Hardware store in downtown, in continuous operation since 1912



Figure A22. Athens-Limestone Hospital, located in the medical district west of downtown



Figure A23. Abandoned grocery store south of downtown, soon to be re-purposed as a library

The Core business district includes downtown, Athens State University, the hospital, and areas around and between those locations that are developed primarily for business purposes. This area is characterized by the many small businesses and institutions found here. This area represents one of the largest and most diverse economic centers in the city and county.

At the heart are downtown and the courthouse square. The courthouse looms large of the square, with its green discolored cupola and stately columns. The buildings around the periphery of the square fit snugly up to the sidewalk. The downtown has managed to survive with many of its historic buildings remaining intact over the decades. The aura that these buildings and the environment they sit within cast an identifiable quality on the town that other communities in the Tennessee Valley have either lost to redevelopment over the years or never had to begin with. The downtown, and in essence the city as a whole, has been able to retain the “small town feel” while growing into the 21st century.

Downtown is at the center of life in the community. Folks may travel here for a variety of reasons - to do business, to worship, to voice their opinions and concerns to elected officials, to gather for an event or celebration, or just stroll after a meal at one of the restaurants. It is the one place in the entire County that every individual who votes or drives a vehicle has to come. Many in the community can recall times in their past where they come to downtown for these reasons, or simply to “cruise the square” in their

automobiles. This place is so special that it was designated as the one symbol that the citizens felt was truly emblematic of the spirit of the community. The result of the community branding campaign, completed in 2012, resulted in the brand/logo representing the community as a whole prominently displaying the courthouse.

One can witness a tremendous amount of activity during normal business hours throughout the workweek. Nights and weekends have become more active with the opening of several restaurants and a couple of boutiques. Late evenings are largely still and quiet, with few inhabitants remaining after the restaurants close. The noise and intensity of all of the hustle and bustle of the day fades to a gentle quietness late at night, with only the orange glow of the street lights and the rumble and horn blast of the occasional train generating any measurable energy.

The streets of downtown are not the most aesthetically pleasing. The streetscape is heavily on hardscape, with few landscaping and pedestrian treatments. The treatments that are in place have little rhythm given the lack of standardization. The treatments have been placed by various organizations through programs of their own making and the pattern resembles it. Few of the items placed on the streetscape match.

Landscaping on the streetscape is at a minimum. Of course, in an urban setting such as this, too much landscaping and the wrong kind of landscaping can have negative effects. However, no landscaping, undersized treatments, inappropriate vegetation, or mismatched landscaping can have a devastating effect on pedestrian comfort and aesthetic quality of the space. I find that the latter statement describes much of downtown and its streetscape. Pedestrians attempt to avoid entire segments of the downtown streetscape because of the repressive heat of the sun bearing down on a sidewalk devoid of shade. The trip between vehicle and building is also hampered by a lack of consistent lighting (at night), water fountains, vending, comfortable seating, and public restroom facilities. The public space certainly doesn't properly accentuate the importance of the space.

The situation seems to reinforce the stance of those saying there is a lack of parking. With each trip I have made to downtown, I have been able to spot an ample amount of parking space a mere block or two away, regardless of the time or day. People gladly walk the same distance or farther without complaint at shopping centers or big box stores. However, I do recognize from observations and first-hand experience that the trip around downtown is not as comfortable for the pedestrian as it could be for the reasons stated above.

The condition of the streetscape beyond the square is worse. The streetscapes are completely devoid of treatments. Sidewalks either deteriorate or completely disappear as you traverse outward. This, along with a lack of appropriate building orientation to the street creates a bit of a pedestrian *õno manõs land,* with a streetscape that is uninviting. The current condition of these streetscapes creates a separation between downtown and surrounding neighborhoods and institutions that leaves downtown on a functional island,

comfortably accessible by automobile only, even from locations within a sensible 0.25 mile walking or biking distance.

In addition to the derelict streetscape condition, I also find that the rest of the built environment surrounding downtown is in a state of deterioration. Once the location of auto-oriented big box stores and shopping centers, properties along Jefferson Street and Marion Street south of the courthouse square have slipped into the secondary and tertiary commercial market, taken on public functions, or have become completely obsolete and sit vacant. The conversion of the old Kroger building into the new library will certainly improve the appearance and level of activity along this corridor. However, it appears that keeping this area vibrant and healthy will take a considerable amount of redevelopment. Large scale retailers that once filled the sizable spaces constructed along this corridor have long since left for greener pastures along newer, more heavily trafficked highways and are unlikely to ever return. Redevelopment will have to take on a more urban, street oriented scale appropriate to the environment surrounding the corridor.

Core Neighborhoods



Figure A24. Street scene in the Houston Historic District



Figure A25. Street scene in core neighborhood.



Figure A26. Street scene in core neighborhood with smaller houses and no streetscape treatments.



Figure A27. Scene along busy collector street with no sidewalk



Figure A28. Aging infrastructure in core neighborhood

For the purpose of this section, the core neighborhood areas consist largely of those residential areas developed prior to 50 years ago. The area contains three historic districts: Beaty, Houston, and Athens College. Many residences within these neighborhoods date back 100 years or more and exhibit a number of architectural styles. Other historic homes can be found in neighborhoods along Colman Avenue and 1st Avenue, or more sporadically intermingled with newer homes.

The housing stock within the core neighborhoods maintains a high degree of variety, not just in architectural style, but in price, size, and amenities. The area is home to some of the largest and most expensive homes in town, particularly in the historic districts, while also containing a sizeable number of small scale "mill house" residences with few amenities. As such, there are more housing options for a larger cross-section of the community's population here than in the suburbs. The housing within these neighborhoods is also in close proximity to numerous businesses in the core business district, highway business districts, and industrial districts that lie adjacent to them, allowing for relatively short commuting distances between homes, places of employment, and critical services. Corresponding to the housing stock, this area contains the most diverse population of any residential area within the city. The population makeup includes a number of white, black, and Hispanic residents from across the economic spectrum within a relatively small geographical area.

One thing cited by many residents as a concern is the perceived downward transition of large portions of the core neighborhood areas. Large areas outside of the designated historic districts have witnessed a decline in the condition of the housing stock. Areas such as the neighborhoods north of Athens State University, Coleman Hill, along 5th Avenue and North Jefferson Street, and along portions of Hine Street have seen the most significant decline in the past several decades. Many residences have become rental properties, with few resources invested in their rehabilitation. The homes' deterioration and the increased demands of the middle class for amenities such as multiple bathrooms and garages lessen the viability of the housing stock within these transitional neighborhoods.

The large area collectively referred to as "North Town" or "North Athens" has been the subject of much discussion during the Plan's public participation program. The downward spiral has garnered considerable attention from city leaders and residents concerned that the area may be completely lost and the decline will extend into adjoining neighborhoods. My investigation has found that a number of issues plague this area. Through longstanding policy decisions of past community leaders, many uses have occupied this area that detracted from the residential setting. In fact, the long established zoning for this area has discouraged residential development and revitalization, instead providing for commercial and industrial uses as permitted by right, particularly in those areas closer to North Jefferson Street and the railroad tracks.

Over the years, industrial development has moved to large industrial parks with easy access to rail and larger highways. Commercial development likewise moved to locations along major thoroughfares. With the changing model of site location, the North Athens area is no longer a viable option for most commercial and industrial development. Much of what remains are secondary and tertiary market commercial operations, such as automotive repair services and automotive wrecker and salvage yards — uses that do not lend themselves to enhancing a residential neighborhood environment. Additionally, the residential neighborhoods that were intended to be "zoned out" remain. However, as nonconforming uses in commercial and industrial districts, the financing mechanism available for the purchase or rehabilitation of these homes through bank loans remains unavailable. Therefore, most of the residential properties are now under the ownership of landlords that have been known to rent out the properties to groups of individuals, many of them transient Hispanic laborers and their families, and put few resources into rehabilitating the properties.

Where it is observed that private land owners are not reinvesting in properties and are allowing them to decline, the City also appears guilty of not reinvesting in the public realm of the core neighborhoods. Streetscape treatments, sidewalks in particular, remain in poor condition or do not exist at all. Several busy thoroughfares, including sections of Hine Street, Market Street, and 5th Avenue are without sidewalks, forcing the pedestrian traffic to traverse the unimproved shoulder of the roadway or in the vehicular lanes themselves. Sidewalks that exist within the neighborhoods are cracked, uneven, and are devoid of handicap accessible ramps at intersections. With the substantial number of

people that are retired or in a lower income range living within the core neighborhoods, many depend on these facilities to travel to destinations.

The streetscapes within the core are certainly not built to the same standard as those found in the suburban portions of the city developed over the past 50 years. There is also a marked difference between streetscape treatments within the core neighborhoods, with the City maintaining and improving sidewalks, gutters, and landscaping within the historic districts. Though these treatments in the historic districts are not in the greatest shape, there is a stark transition in the condition of the streetscape as one exits the historic districts and enters the surrounding transitional neighborhoods. Those treatments experience further decline and neglect, or disappear altogether. Of course, much of the core area was developed prior to zoning, subdivision, and other development standards that require treatments such as curb and gutter systems, sidewalks, and landscaping when initially developed. However, these rights of way are the City's responsibility to maintain and many are aesthetically and functionally obsolete.

The core neighborhoods are also home to many of the school facilities operating in the community, including three of the four elementary schools and the middle school. Athens Bible School is also located on the eastern edge of a core neighborhood. For much of the school system's history, its institutions have served as anchors and community centers to the neighborhoods they are a part of. However, as the overall development pattern of the community took a more automobile oriented suburban form, the school system followed suit over the past several decades and has elected to build new school facilities on large tracts of land outside of and apart from residential neighborhoods. While these properties offer ample land for future growth, they are also isolated from the neighborhoods they once enhanced and too far for the students to access by walking or biking. Particularly as plans are made regarding new school construction, with Athens Elementary School and Athens Middle School being at the center of the exercise, a discussion concerning the future use of those facilities should the schools move is of critical importance. Should those properties become vacant and left to stand as empty shells, I believe the neighborhoods for which they serve as a community center would be dealt a devastating blow.

Highway Corridors



Figure A29. Newer development along US 72 after the adoption of updated site development standards.



Figure A30. Older development along US 72 prior to sign and landscaping ordinances



Figure A31. Scene from US 31 at Forrest St.

This sector includes long segments along US Highways 72 and 31 where automobile oriented commercial development has occurred. These highway corridors, along with the areas surrounding Athens' interstate interchanges, are home to the majority of the community's retail and large scale commercial services. As such, this area is the primary source of sales tax revenue for the City. A number of institutions, including the high school and sportsplex, are also located along these corridors.

Much of the development along these corridors has occurred over the last 50 years. Most development over the past 10 years has occurred along US Hwy 72. As the main east-west corridor through Limestone County and the most direct route to Huntsville and Madison, traffic counts are higher along US Hwy 72 than any other roadway in Athens, including the interstate. Traffic counts climb to over 30,000 cars per day along the segment directly in front of Wal-mart, near the interchange with US Hwy 31. The newest development has occurred around Wal-mart, near Interstate 65, and the intersection with Lindsay Lane further to the east.

Many of the older developments can be found along stretches of US Hwy 72 to the west of Wal-mart and along the entire length of US Hwy 31. Older developments are beginning to show their age as the buildings slowly wear and the lack of landscaping becomes more apparent. Many of these developments, once housing stores like Wal-mart and Winn Dixie, are now occupied by secondary market retail stores and services. Their aesthetic value has also declined as the community has come to desire more landscape

treatments and high quality building materials. Many of these developments also have signs that are much larger than newer developments since most were built prior to the existence of a sign ordinance.

Newer developments along these corridors exhibit a more aesthetically pleasing aura, with greater amounts of landscape treatments, new methods of site lighting, standardized signage sizes, and higher quality building materials. Newer developments are also required to provide adequate parking, onsite traffic circulation, and limited access directly onto major highways. These requirements allow for a safer and more efficient flow of traffic. Older developments often have many access points to major thoroughfares and drive aisles with inadequate stacking space, not only reducing the attractiveness of the development, but creating more conflict points for traffic flow on and around the site.

The highways themselves have few landscape treatments, leaning on the developments themselves to add aesthetic value. The lighting along US Hwy 31 was installed around 50 years ago. They consist of metal halide lamps attached to creosol coated wooden posts. Many of the fixtures are rusted and leaning in different directions. Beyond being inefficient, the lamps detract for the aesthetic appearance of the corridor. Streetlamps along US Hwy 72 are relatively new and have a sleeker, more up-to-date appearance than those on US Hwy 31.

The aesthetics of the corridors are improving as a result of the city's branding campaign. The City recently installed welcome signs and an initial phase of way finding directional signs that display the attractive community brand, giving travelers a sense of arrival, direction to destinations, and a taste of the "Athens experience." There are also plans to install banners along the corridors that will add a splash of color and further enhance the traveling public's experience while traversing the highways.

It should be noted that the rights-of-way along US Hwy 31 and 72 are controlled by the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT), not the local government. All improvements have to meet the State's standards and be permitted by ALDOT. Any effort by the City of Athens to improve the look and functionality of these roadways will have to be coordinated with ALDOT.

Interstate District



Figure A32. Interstate oriented development at Exit 351



Figure A33. Interstate oriented development at Exit 351



Figure A34. Highway oriented development and entrance to vacant commercial park on US 72 near Exit 351



Figure A35. Vacant land behind frontage properties at Exit 351



Figure A36. Ample developable land at Exit 354

The areas surrounding the interstate exits within the city of Athens are the subject of this section. There are three such access points to the interstate in the community, including Exit 347 (Huntsville-Brownsferry Road), Exit 351 (US Hwy 72), and Exit 354 (US Hwy 31). Of the three, the most heavily trafficked is Exit 351. Approximately 50,000 cars pass through the interchange every day according to ALDOT's traffic counts, with slightly more vehicles traveling along US Hwy 72 than Interstate 65. As a result, this interchange is home to more businesses than the others. It serves as the primary gateway into the city of Athens. Much of the frontage property has been developed near the interchange. Due to a lack of sound long-range planning, the development along the frontage has obscured much of the visibility of the vast vacant acreage beyond. One of the challenges going forward will be overcoming this obstacle and opening the developable land beyond the frontage to the traveling public.

Even with this issue present, Exit 351 still has the greatest viability for future development. The entire infrastructure necessary for development is already in place. So long as Athens protects the corridor from traffic congestion and diversion, traffic counts should continue to rise. The interchange is also central to most of the residences within Athens. The combination of these attributes makes this interchange more attractive than the others for large-scale commercial development.

Many in the community feel the appearance of Exit 351 does not reflect the values and identity of the community. The aesthetic quality of the interchange leaves much to be desired. There are some landscape treatments in place and the interchange is lighted. However, nothing about the interchange allows it to stand apart in a positive way

from so many others that the traveling public will pass through. The landscaping is rather minimal and several of the lights are often out or completely missing. The signage along the interchange also distracts the traveling public from any aesthetic qualities the interchange may have, with some signs reaching heights of 150 feet.

The interchange area also suffers from a lack of efficient and safe access along US Hwy 72. There are multiple median crossings used as access to busy developments that are out of alignment and lack safety devices. The left turn movements on US Hwy 72 at the access points to Interstate 65 also seem to exhibit a lack of adequate stacking space, especially if large tractor-trailers are attempting to turn. These issues create congestion, indecision by motorists, and ultimately additional conflict points.

Exit 354 serves as a secondary gateway into the northern part of the city along US Hwy 31. There is ample land for development and the sportsplex, one of the largest traffic generators in the community, is located here. Sewer is also available at the interchange. However, one major issue hampering development is the amount of subdivision of property that has occurred, especially along the west side of US Hwy 31 north of Elm Street/AL Hwy 99. The smaller and often oddly shaped lots make it difficult for retail development of any appreciable size to locate. Traffic counts are also fewer than that of Exit 351, with fewer than 40,000 cars per day passing through the interchange. Also, with the orientation of the interchange, there is no access to the east side of the interstate at the interchange.

Exit 347 remains undeveloped at the current time. All that is there are large cultivated fields and a couple of residences along Huntsville-Brownsferry Road to the east of the interchange. The majority of property to the west of the interchange lies within the 100 floodplain and floodway associated with Swan Creek.

The primary reason is that sewer is not available. The interchange is largely located within the city limits of Athens. However, it resides outside of the City's water and wastewater service boundary, set into place in a consent judgment resulting from a lawsuit between the City of Athens and the Limestone County Water and Sewer Authority (LCWSA). As a result, LCWSA maintains the obligation to provide water and sewer service to the interchange. The distance between the interchange and the nearest sewer line, a force main, is approximately 1 mile. At present, it will be costly to extend service to the interchange. The ability to provide sewer to the interchange is currently a factor beyond the City's control.

The interchange also lacks traffic counts and residential rooftops necessary to draw large scale commercial development. Traffic counts are projected to be on the rise, with the State and local governments contributing to a project to enhance the nearby intersection of US Hwy 31 and Huntsville-Brownsferry Road to handle additional traffic and tractor-trailers traveling to and from new industries along US Hwy 31. However, until sewer service is extended to the interchange, development prospects will remain limited.

Suburbs



Figure A37. New neighborhood off Mooresville Rd.



Figure A38. Street scene in suburban neighborhood



Figure A39. Street scene in suburban neighborhood



Figure A40. Street scene in older suburban neighborhood



Figure A42. Street scene in newer suburban neighborhood



Figure A41. Golf course in suburban neighborhood



Figure A43. Street scene in estate style suburban neighborhood

The suburban areas of Athens exhibit many of the same characteristics of those found throughout the country. Most development in this district takes the form of developmental subdivisions. The vast majority of homes here are single family detached. Residences range in home size, lot size, architectural detail, material quality, and price depending on which neighborhood you are in. Much of this area has developed within the last 50 to 60 years. As such, much of the housing stock and the infrastructure are in better shape than what is found in the core of town, with homes and infrastructure improvements within each development being subject to an ever increasing number of standards and codes through the years.

The development pattern here is low density, almost entirely automobile oriented and dependent, and neighborhood residences are mass produced and separated by price point. The transportation network here is more disjointed than that which is found near the city's core, with heavy use of cul-de-sacs, a more organic pattern with non-traditional blocks covering great distances, and few access points to arterials, collectors, or other. With the greater geographical coverage and greater distances between developments found here, City infrastructure, such as public sewer, water, streets, and sidewalks are required to extend farther to service development. Furthermore, City service vehicles, school buses, emergency responders, and sanitation trucks are required to travel farther, consume more energy, and take on more wear and tear to service these developments as well. Much of the new infrastructure is installed or paid for by developers at the time of installation. However, once built and accepted into the public maintenance program, the

City is responsible for the maintenance of these facilities from then on. While this development pattern does make homebuilding more efficient, it also places a greater strain on City services than denser developments with more connectivity.

Though these suburban developmental subdivisions are more costly to maintain over the long term, it remains a development pattern that is desirous by a substantial number of Americans, many of whom are more accustomed to this development pattern than any other. It has, after all, been the dominant development pattern throughout the lives of most American citizens.

Industrial Centers



Figure A44. View toward the north Elm Industrial Park

Industrial development has taken place in several different areas within the city over its lifespan. Earlier in the city's history, industries located largely along the railroad tracks near the city's core. Over time, as industrial development demands and zoning laws evolved, demanding more space for operations and greater distances from other uses, industries have gravitated toward the periphery of town. Today, we find most of our industrial development locating within the City's two industrial parks ó Elm Industrial Park, located on Elm Street/AL Hwy 99, and Breeding Industrial Park, located at the southern terminus of Jefferson Street. Both parks are located along the railroad, allowing for easy access to ship and receive goods. Both parks also have quick access to state highways and the interstate beyond. Custom Polymers, the largest single employer in the city, is located in Breeding Industrial Park.

There are still a number of locations within town where industries are located besides the industrial parks. A few industries remain along the railroad a couple of blocks from downtown, though the number of operations there are considerably fewer than in times past. Those industries that do remain are not very compatible with surrounding neighborhoods. Large vacant spaces also remain where industries once stood and have not redeveloped because of the proximity to existing industries and the perceived and real existence of site contamination.

Other industrial areas are located apart from the railroad and depend solely on truck transport. One such area was host to a chicken plant for a number of decades. The site of the former Pilgrim's Pride chicken processing plant is located along Pryor Street east of Athens State University. Many years ago, Pryor Street was US Hwy 31 and the main thoroughfare out of the northeast side of town. When the plant was established, it was located on the northeast fringe of town. Over time, the city has grown around the site, with a neighborhood extending along Pryor Street on both sides of the plant. The plant closed its operations within the last 3 to 4 years, remaining idle and with little prospect of reopening. Apart from the employment lost and the loss of a large utility customer, the community seems not to miss the operation. Citizens seem to enjoy the absence of the traffic, noise, and odors the site produced. Since its closure, the community has found that many of the jobs at the plant were held by migrant workers, most of whom were Hispanic, and many left after the plant closed. It seems that most of the negative impact from the plant closure was felt in North Athens where a number of businesses catering to the Hispanic population have closed, downsized, or relocated.

Another small cluster of industries not located on the railroad exists east of US Hwy 31 along Freeman Avenue and Stewart Drive. One large industry, Federal Mogul, and several smaller operations are located here. This industrial cluster is bounded by US Hwy 31 to the west, Lowes Home Improvement and US Hwy 72 to the south, Roselawn Cemetery to the north, and the Swan Creek greenway to the east. Apart from the small neighborhood located to the southwest of the cluster, residential development trends have remained a substantial distance from the area.

One concern that remains as it pertains to industrial development is that a substantial amount of land in areas ill-suited for industrial use remains zoned for industrial activity. Besides the idle chicken processing plant, much of this land is located along the railroad through the heart of town and adjacent to Exit 351 in the southeast quadrant. The reason for concern is that new industrial development or the location of uses permitted in the industrial zoning districts, from manufacturing to salvage yards, would have noxious effects on adjacent uses. Downtown and core neighborhoods would not be well served by these uses locating nearby. Also, similar uses locating on industrially zoned land near our front door interchange could have negative effects on the quality of businesses we desire to locate and the improved appearance we would like to foster at our primary gateway into the community.

APPENDIX B – Public Participation Program Results

Public Participation Program

The following sections cover the input generated by the various stages of the public participation program. The results presented here are summaries of extensive discussions. Additional information on these discussions and results are provided on the "Future Land Use Plan" section of the City of Athens website.

Focus Group Visioning Workshops

Economic Development

Workshop I- Intro and Visioning

- ▣ Where have we been?
 - ▣ Once an agricultural community, railroad town, now more developed
 - ▣ Growing due to Huntsville, Redstone Arsenal
 - ▣ Developing as a bedroom community, suburb
- ▣ Where are we going if our course remains unaltered?
 - ▣ Continue to have our citizens shop elsewhere, shrinking trade area
 - ▣ Continue to grow at current pace, largely suburban
 - ▣ Will miss out on opportunities without cooperation amongst community leaders
- ▣ Where do we want to go? / How do we get there?
 - ▣ We want to have a community that is business friendly
 - ▣ We want our community to continue to develop in a responsible, orderly fashion
 - ▣ We want to attract more high paying jobs to Athens

- ▣ We want to have more retail options, help stem the tide of retail leakage.
- ▣ We have to be willing to change
- ▣ We have to work together to accomplish big things
- ▣ We have to continue to focus on providing an excellent education in our community.

Workshop II ó SWOT Analysis

- ▣ Strengths
 - ▣ Resurgent, fairly well preserved core.
 - ▣ Access to Interstate 65
 - ▣ Athens State University
 - ▣ Calhoun, Robotics Center
 - ▣ Work force
 - ▣ Great transportation
 - Exit 351 and highway corridors
 - Close access to rail, international airport, water
 - ▣ TVA: Employer and low rates
 - ▣ Strong school system
- ▣ Weaknesses
 - ▣ Aging infrastructure
 - ▣ Low density of development
 - ▣ Retail leakage
 - ▣ Lack of ties with Calhoun

- ▣ City borders ÷chopped upö
- ▣ Opposition to revenue producing change
- ▣ Low tax structure ó Can't pay for incentives and improved services
- ▣ Low property taxes
- ▣ 1% sales tax to general fund (has since been addressed)
- ▣ Threats
 - ▣ Shrinking trade area.
 - ▣ Decline of older neighborhoods.
 - ▣ Lack of an identity and a common brand for our community.
 - ▣ Lack of communication with other cities
 - ▣ Sentiment that is content with status quo
 - ▣ Duplication of services with organizations
 - ▣ Having to compete with other cities that have more funds at their disposal for services and incentives
- ▣ Opportunities
 - ▣ Continued growth in the area.
 - ▣ BRAC ó If not this round, then the next.
 - ▣ Best access to I-65 and to its traffic.
 - ▣ Motivated citizens
 - ▣ ASU plans to develop business incubator
 - ▣ It's not too late to address weaknesses and threats

Workshop III ó Goals and Objectives

- ▣ Goal: Focus on efforts that will bring the most benefit to the city
 - ▣ Objectives:
 - ▣ Prioritize investments based on what will have the greatest improvement to the city's economy and quality of life
 - ▣ Reduce overlap in services provided to the community
- ▣ Goal: Grow in an orderly fashion that promotes infill development and connectivity over sprawl.
 - ▣ Objective:
 - ▣ Create policies and incentives that encourage infill development.
 - ▣ Make reinvesting in infrastructure near the city's core a priority.
 - ▣ Use city projects/investments in the city's core as an economic development tool
 - ▣ Support new schools being built close to city core.
- ▣ Goal: Get to word out about Athens/Limestone County
 - ▣ Objectives:
 - ▣ Develop an identity for the community, brand it and market it.
 - ▣ Utilize community branding and marketing to attract county residents to Athens to shop.

- ▣ City govt. needs to be in position to promote all aspects of community.
- ▣ Identify who represents the workforce living in Athens with some granularity and use info to promote the city.
- ▣ Goal: Reduce sales leakage
 - ▣ Objectives:
 - ▣ Develop a strategy for reducing sales leakages.
 - ▣ Create a destination (music, Alabama museum, Trinity School, retail destination, Life-Long Learning Center, travel ball)
 - ▣ Communicate to State/RSA about destination ideas. Funding for destination.
 - ▣ Promote a clean, tidy appearance for thoroughfares and existing businesses
 - ▣ Attract businesses to Athens that keep people in town ó no commuting.
 - ▣ Develop incentives for attracting businesses for underserved retail sectors.
- ▣ Goal: Promote revitalization of core business and residential areas
 - ▣ Objectives
 - ▣ Invest in refurbishing infrastructure (streets, sidewalks, lighting, sewer, drainage, etc).
 - ▣ Build new infrastructure facilities where needed.

- ▣ Work to make downtown residential development and overall increased building safety a reality; economically feasible.
- ▣ Work to connect and integrate ASU and the hospital into the core business district.
- ▣ Goal: Promote full utilization of our interstate interchanges, particularly Exit 351
 - ▣ Objectives:
 - ▣ Develop policy that gives interchanges a unique and tidy appearance. Incorporate community brand.
 - ▣ Plan for development in such a way as to maximize potential beyond the frontage.
 - ▣ Ensure that traffic flows efficiently and safely. Work with ALDOT to improve access and safety on state maintained highways.
- ▣ Goal: Promote further development and attractiveness of highway business corridors
 - ▣ Objectives:
 - ▣ Coordinate with ALDOT on improving circulation, safety and appearance along highways.
 - ▣ Make east/west travel through town easier
 - ▣ Signal coordination for improved traffic flow
 - ▣ Updated lighting for US 31 and its interchange w/ US 72

- ▣ Determine if improvements are needed to ordinances dealing directly with the appearance of businesses (sign, landscaping, construction materials, etc.).
- ▣ Encourage increased uses of shared access and parking.
Currently no reduction in requirements for like businesses.
- ▣ Goal: Promote new neighborhood development in a manner that generates revenue, allows for services to become more efficient, and promotes a high quality of life.
 - ▣ Objectives:
 - ▣ Develop policy that encourages new developments to take the form of öinfillö rather than sprawl. (Residents locating closer to the core of town are more likely to shop in town.)
 - ▣ Encourage greater connectivity between developments and existing facilities through more street connections, greenway trails - a more traditional and efficient style of development.
 - ▣ Develop policy that encourages more of a mixture of housing types and non-noxious businesses.
 - ▣ To promote infill, waive fees for certain areas.
- ▣ Goal: Promote the expansion of industry in Athens that improves employment opportunities without compromising our quality of life.
 - ▣ Objectives:

- ▣ Identify areas for future expansion of industrial parks and new industrial parks away from other uses.
- ▣ Study existing ordinances to see if improvements can be made to industrial district regulations that promote development and a tidy appearance.
- ▣ Promote our community to industries that can take advantage of the transportation network, educational institutions and the high tech economy of North Alabama.
- ▣ Explore creating more of an industrial/commercial park presence on the east side of town or Tanner Interchange.
- ▣ Place more emphasis on bringing technology oriented industry to the community.

Quality of Life

Workshop I ó Intro and Visioning

- ▣ Where have we been?
 - ▣ Everything used to be downtown
 - ▣ More was in walking distance
 - ▣ Sidewalks were more inviting and safe
 - ▣ City was altogether more attractive
 - ▣ Athens has always been a unique place
- ▣ Where are we going if our course remains unaltered?
 - ▣ East, development that is
 - ▣ Overall quality of life will deteriorate

- ▣ Deterioration of city's core
 - ▣ Deterioration of rental stock will continue
 - ▣ Homelessness is on the rise (people living in motels)
 - ▣ Lose more community pride
- ▣ No increase in the utilization of local resources (recreational resources like the rivers, for example)
- ▣ Large events will continue to go elsewhere
- ▣ Become harder for new residents and visitors
- ▣ Where do we want to go? / How do we get there?
 - ▣ We want for our community to
 - ▣ Be a bedroom community with a vast array of choices in amenities.
 - ▣ Be a tourist destination
 - ▣ Find and maintain its identity
 - ▣ Have strong support from the private sector.
 - ▣ Pull in a young professional population

Workshop II - SWOT Analysis

- ▣ Strengths
 - ▣ Location (close to other cities and amenities)
 - ▣ Events for residents to enjoy
 - ▣ Good educational system
 - ▣ Access to all modes of transportation
 - ▣ Human resources
 - ▣ Hospitality

- ▣ Amenities for older residents
- ▣ Low crime
- ▣ Good access to healthcare
- ▣ Retained small town feel/charm
- ▣ Recreational opportunities / sports
- ▣ Events Center
- ▣ Good climate for business

- ▣ Weaknesses
 - ▣ City and County don't work well together
 - ▣ Lack of vision/theme in the community
 - ▣ Lack of leadership
 - ▣ Duplication of services among organizations
 - ▣ Nothing for young adults, teenagers to do
 - ▣ No alternative modes of transportation besides automobiles
 - ▣ No attachment to the community by many residents
 - ▣ Cultures don't come together
 - ▣ Community misses opportunities for funding
 - ▣ City doesn't do well drawing county residents
 - ▣ Substandard housing, residents in motels

- ▣ Threats
 - ▣ Lack of follow through
 - ▣ Complacency
 - ▣ Economic stagnation

- ▣ Viability of jobs here and jobs we're attracting
- ▣ Viability of housing
- ▣ Lack of choices (stores, housing types, etc.)
- ▣ Losing tax dollars to other areas.
- ▣ Madison development (shopping, hospital, etc.)
- ▣ General appearance isn't welcoming
- ▣ Cuts in funding for programs
- ▣ Commuting/Gas prices
- ▣ Competition within the community
- ▣ Opportunities
 - ▣ Continued growth in the area.
 - ▣ BRAC ó If not this round, then the next.
 - ▣ Best access to I-65 and to its traffic.
 - ▣ Motivated citizens
 - ▣ Its not too late to address weaknesses and threats
 - ▣ Progressive elements to the community
 - ▣ School system poised for growth

Workshop III - Goals and Objectives

- ▣ Goals
 - ▣ Clean up the city
 - ▣ Make the city more bike friendly, educate citizens on benefits of alternative transportation
 - ▣ Preservation/expansion of greenspace

- ▣ Improve appearance of city ó especially highway corridors
- ▣ Improve streams (clean, make usable greenspace)
- ▣ Foster nice/attractive development at Exit 354
- ▣ Improve quality of new development, identify with the unique qualities of Athens
- ▣ Improve communications between government sectors and organizations
- ▣ Educate citizens on the importance of high quality development
- ▣ Uniform, attractive signage
- ▣ More transparency in appointing members to community boards and commissions
- ▣ Preserve the historic integrity of Downtown
- ▣ Project Downtown outward, beyond the Square
- ▣ Address issue of deteriorating rental stock
- ▣ Rethink the type of businesses we actively recruit
- ▣ Work to develop loft apartments Downtown
- ▣ Promote connectivity/expansion of greenway network
- ▣ Objectives
 - ▣ Lofts
 - Work with two-story property owners
 - Set up meetings and discuss barriers to development
 - ▣ Substandard Housing
 - Condemn worst properties
 - Research two-year C/O method (AG opinion ó permissible)

- Create reinvestment districts with tax incentives
- ▣ Improve appearance
 - Community Image Building Project
 - Improve signage/landscaping along thoroughfares
- ▣ Greenway Expansion/Connectivity
 - Hobbs St. to Transition to three lanes with bike lanes
 - Develop trail along Town Creek to existing hospital trail and sewer easements

Downtown

Workshop I - Intro and Visioning

- ▣ Where have we been?
 - ▣ Major retail center in the -50s and -60s
 - ▣ Many people would gather for shopping and events
 - ▣ Many businesses open, mixture of business types satisfying many needs
 - ▣ Used to have businesses like emporiums
 - ▣ Businesses operating for generations
 - ▣ Downtown began to die with large stores moving further out
 - First, South Jefferson and Hobbs
 - Then, US 31 and US 72
 - ▣ Spike in downtown interest, development when Hendrix Building was rebuilt to then another dip in activity
- ▣ Where are we now?

- ▣ Overall, downtown is improving, trending up
- ▣ Many events ó more in past 5 years than previously
- ▣ Streetscape in bad shape, needs improvement
- ▣ North side of the square has most activity
- ▣ Other sides still lack activity
- ▣ Major events are in planning stages (Athens Grease Festival)
- ▣ Clean
- ▣ Building stock is still in fairly good shape
- ▣ Landmark courthouse/square is central feature
- ▣ Streets are too wide, excess asphalt
- ▣ Perception problems (parking, lackluster events, store options, etc.)
- ▣ Stores close at 5PM ó studies show that most retail purchases are made after 5PM.
- ▣ Where are we going (if course is unaltered)?
 - ▣ Without a plan/vision, we won't know where we're going.
 - ▣ About to experience some change
 - ▣ Loft apartments and the presence of residents will change how downtown operates
 - ▣ City not seeing full value of a lively downtown
- ▣ Where do we want to go? Measure of success?
 - ▣ COMPLETE DOWNTOWN!
 - ▣ Friendly streetscape
 - ▣ More of a mixture of uses/amenities

- ▣ More lofts/residents
- ▣ More educational seminars touching on downtown improvement ó including Q&A with City leaders
- ▣ Improve entrance corridors and establish better connections with surrounding areas
- ▣ More retail and dining options
- ▣ Revisit the alcohol ordinance
- ▣ On-street dining and alcohol sales should be allowed
- ▣ Goal #1 ó Have the BEST downtown in the Tennessee Valley!
- ▣ How do we get to where we want to go?
 - ▣ Need resources - \$\$\$
 - ▣ Need buy-in from leadership (city/county), merchants, property owners, residents
 - ▣ Enhance and create programs to improve downtowns appearance (facades, streetscape, etc.)
 - ▣ All interests need to work toward the same vision/goal set
 - ▣ Install wayfinding signs and improve entrance corridors
 - ▣ Develop a phased approach to streetscape improvements, pocket parks, parking area improvements, appropriate landscaping
 - ▣ Develop Farmers Market into viable facility & program on Saturdays
 - ▣ Need a more focused approach to grant application
 - ▣ One point of contact

- ▣ Establish statement of understanding between City, County, and interest groups, enumerating responsibilities
- ▣ Improve SOA website listing information concerning educational programs, available space, etc.
- ▣ Create WiFi hub downtown
- ▣ Revise Zoning Ordinance to meet needs

Workshop II - SWOT Analysis

- ▣ Strengths
 - ▣ Town square with iconic, historic courthouse
 - ▣ County seat of Limestone County
 - ▣ Solid building stock
 - ▣ Good starting point
 - ▣ Downtown is still lively, even without resources
 - ▣ Generational & family owned businesses in place
 - ▣ City is of a size that should encourage entrepreneurs and small business (downtown is an optimal location for small business)
 - ▣ There exists a willingness to listen to new ideas amongst leadership
 - ▣ Currently have a good restaurant and retail mix
 - ▣ Lots of available upper floor space vacant
- ▣ Weaknesses and Threats
 - ▣ Lack of \$\$\$
 - ▣ Limestone Co. residents going to Madison to shop

- ▣ Increasing competition from other cities' downtowns (others are putting considerable resources in their downtown)
- ▣ Lack of coordination b/w City, County and organizations
- ▣ Rent/sales price too high in vacant buildings when you consider the amount of work needs to be put into them
- ▣ Absentee/apathetic ownership
- ▣ Apathy towards the appearance of downtown
- ▣ Lack of interest from community leaders (though improving)
- ▣ Lack of interest in assisting local entrepreneurs as opposed to large, out-of-town companies
- ▣ Opportunities
 - ▣ Improving interest in downtown
 - ▣ Increasing interest and support from citizens and community organizations in improving downtown's appearance and condition (ex. Rotary Club purchasing downtown banners advertising the Square and Christmas events)
 - ▣ Upcoming events will advertise downtown and the community as a whole
 - ▣ Huntsville metro area continues to grow, bringing more opportunities to Athens and its downtown
 - ▣ Emerging technology provides better communication (social media, wifi, advertising)
 - ▣ Increasing willingness to proactively solve issues with policy

- ▣ Large young population in the community to engage

Workshop III - Goals and Objectives

- ▣ **Goal: Improve the overall appearance, integrity and landscape of downtown**
 - Objectives: Develop landscape and infrastructure improvement plan and a program to implement it.
 - Bury existing overhead utilities underground over time as they need to be replaced.
- ▣ **Goal: Promote historic preservation of historic assets in a manner that will not delay business.**
 - Objective: Explore ways of implementing design criteria in construction and rehabilitation projects that can be approved administratively by City officials.
- ▣ **Goal: Make downtown more friendly, convenient and comfortable to those who visit.**
 - Objectives: Provide wifi access to visitors.
 - Provide more sidewalk facilities such as benches, trash cans, vending machines, bicycle parking facilities, etc.
 - Allow for sidewalk dining.
 - Revise alcohol and zoning ordinances to allow for the consumption of alcoholic beverages for sidewalk dining and outdoor events.
- ▣ **Goal: Address parking needs downtown.**
 - Objectives: Provide more lighting and landscaping in public parking areas.
 - Educate community on parking availability.
 - Improve signage for parking areas.
 - Improve connections between parking facilities and the square.
- ▣ **Goal: Promote downtown.**
 - Objectives: Improve web portals, social media, and interactive maps for downtown.
 - Expand way finding system in downtown area
- ▣ **Goal: Continue the development of a healthy mixture of uses and activities.**
 - Objectives: Develop strategy for targeting specific businesses to locate downtown.
 - Maintain a healthy government and institutional presence (current levels with new City Hall).
 - Develop incentives for start-up and small businesses locating downtown.

- Amend zoning ordinance to make loft apartments permitted by right rather than special exceptions.
- ☐ **Goal: Create better connections between downtown and historic neighborhoods, Athens State University, and the medical district.**
 - Objectives: Develop "complete streets."
 - Make sidewalks and streets more bicycle and pedestrian friendly.
 - Provide more lighting and landscaping.
- ☐ **Goal: Develop creative ways of paying for needed improvements and achieving goals.**
 - Objectives: Develop public/private, public/nonprofit, and public/public partnerships to achieve the vision set forth in this statement.
 - Apply for grants that can be applied to downtown improvements.
 - Utilize City, County and volunteer labor to cut costs.

Next Generation

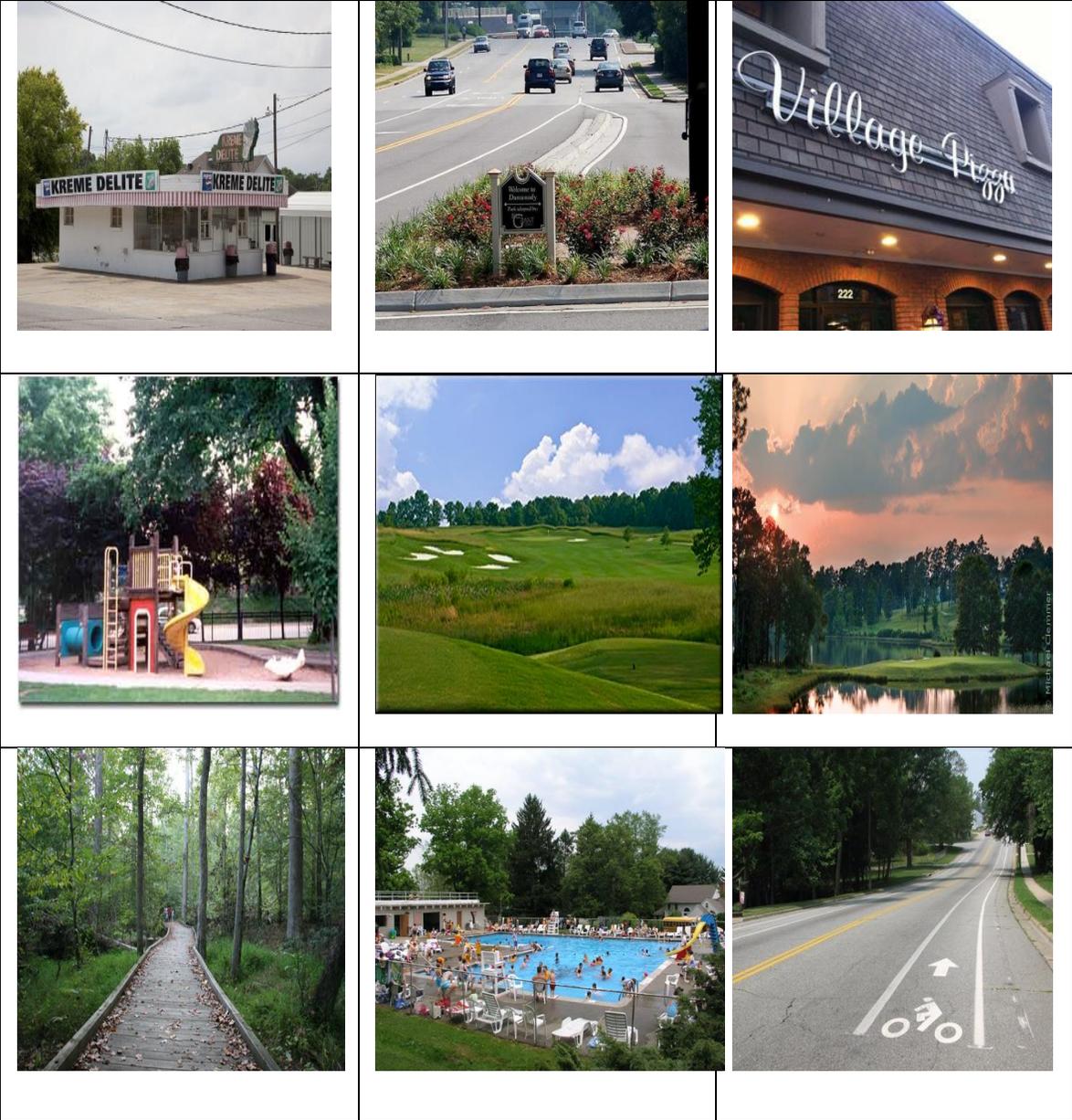
Workshops I & II- Intro and Visioning

- ☐ Is Athens a place you would like to return to if given the opportunity?
 - ☐ Mixed response
 - ☐ Most would at least consider it if given the opportunity
- ☐ Why would you return?
 - ☐ Family
 - ☐ Athens is a good place to raise a family
 - ☐ Schools are good
 - ☐ Community is pretty quiet
 - ☐ Low crime
 - ☐ Good food
- ☐ Why would you not return?
 - ☐ The need for some separation from family and community

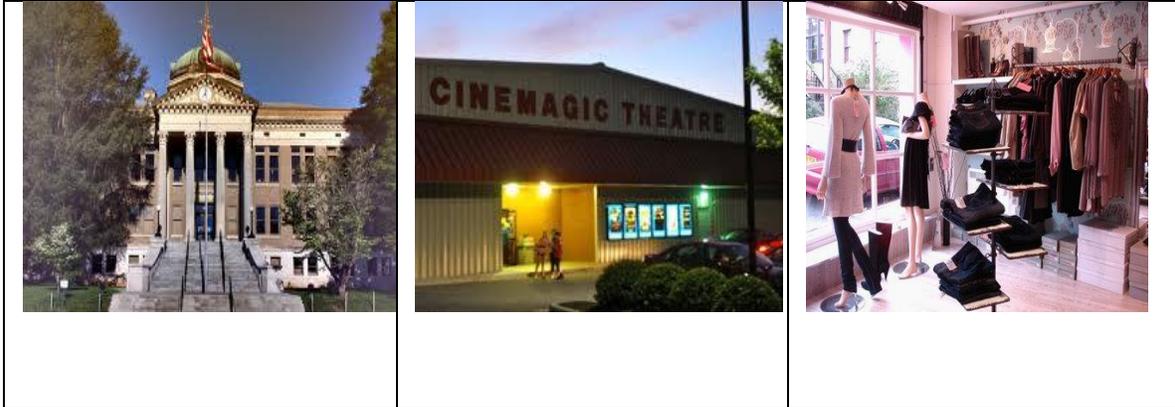
- Social pressures ó everyone knows everyone's business
- Not much to do (social, entertainment)
- More career opportunities elsewhere
- Better shopping elsewhere
- What are some things you like about Athens?
 - A lot of park space
 - Downtown
 - Consensus: Favorite part of the city
 - Lively
 - Many events
 - Brings community together
 - Community involvement is good (ballgames, events, etc.)
 - Small feel, but not too small
- What do you dislike?
 - Not much for younger people to do
 - Not even in surrounding communities
 - Huntsville has a curfew ó no teens allowed without parental supervision after 8PM
 - Perception is that parts of town aren't safe
 - Much of the town is not attractive ó "Nothing worth noticing" in many areas, especially along the major highways.
 - Public facilities, including parks, are largely outdated.

- ▣ What are some other places/cities that you have traveled to that you really liked?
 - ▣ Gatlinburg, TN
 - ▣ Nashville/Franklin, TN
 - ▣ Chicago
- ▣ What about those places did you like?
 - ▣ All of the activity and energy
 - ▣ There is a lot to do
 - ▣ People walking along sidewalks filled with shops, restaurants, etc.
 - ▣ Beautiful college campuses
 - ▣ So many different things going on/to do within a small area
 - ▣ Cities are bigger than Huntsville/Athens.
- ▣ What can we do to make things better here/more attractive for you to return?
 - ▣ Make the city more attractive (improve appearance)
 - ▣ People don't take notice until an effort is made to improve the appearance of the community (For example - landscaping at the intersection of Hobbs St. & US 31; landscaping at new businesses)
 - ▣ More sidewalks
 - ▣ More activities and entertainment options.

☐ Pick photos (from around Athens and from other places) that best convey what you would like to see more of in our community.







Workshop III ó Next Generation Vision Statement and Goals/Objectives

▣ Vision Statement

We are seniors at Athens High School and we constitute the future of our community.

By being a safe and family friendly community, Athens has helped shape who we are today. Characteristics our town has, including a great school system, historic downtown, and decent amounts of park space, plus a family friendly environment, lead most of us to consider moving back to Athens. This would depend on improvements in our community.

If we did choose to return to Athens, we would like to see more entertainment options for young adults, such as better park space and recreational facilities and other options to satisfy young adults' tastes. We would like to cater towards a better overall appearance. We want to create a community that we can be proud of. We see the best chance for improvement in our downtown, which offers a meeting place for our community.

We, as the next generation, would love to have a community that gives us an opportunity to thrive.

- ▣ Goal: Develop/encourage more housing options that are nice and affordable
 - Objectives:
 - Develop policies that encourage loft apartments, apartments, townhomes that young professionals would want to live in
- ▣ Goal: Continue to develop and improve downtown
 - Objectives:
 - Work to have downtown serve as central location for our socializing, shopping, entertainment needs
 - Work to create more lively downtown
 - Encourage more loft housing for Y.P.
 - Frozen yogurt, coffee lounge and other similar destinations downtown
- ▣ Goal: Improve shopping options
 - Objectives:
 - Attract more market options
 - Attract businesses that offer more up-to-date/trendy products
 - Attract more tech product oriented shops if market permits
- ▣ Goal: Develop more alternative transportation options
 - Objectives:
 - More sidewalks that connect residents w/ other neighborhoods, services, facilities, etc.
 - Extend existing greenway
 - Develop more complete streets w/ bicycle lanes, sidewalks

- ▣ Goal: Continue to improve school facilities
 - Objectives:
 - Take more input from students in design
 - Develop improved/new high school and middle school
 - Develop school facilities that are less prison-like
 - Consider centralized location for facilities

Community Survey Summary Results

The survey was made available to the public via a link on the City's website and physical copies made available at City Hall and Public Works.

The survey was open to the public to fill out (self-selected). Though the survey was expressly meant for all residents and persons employed in the city limits to fill out, there were no technical restrictions in place to prohibit potential respondents from filling out surveys.

“ Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have volunteered to participate in the City of Athens online surveys and polls. The data have not been weighted to reflect the demographic composition of the population as a whole. Because the sample is based on those who initially self-selected for participation in the survey rather than a probability sample, no estimates of sampling error can be calculated. All sample surveys and polls may be subject to multiple sources of error, including, but not limited to sampling error, coverage error, and measurement error.

“ *Limitations on developing a mathematically sampled population include time, manpower, \$\$\$.*

▣ Athens Places and Activities

- ▣ Most respondents feel that Athens’s small town feel and charm (67%) and cost of living (59%) contribute to an improved quality of life
- ▣ Most respondents (58%) feel that their quality of life has improved over the last 5 years.
- ▣ Lack of preferred retail options (57%) tops the list of issues contributing to a decline in quality of life.
- ▣ Most respondents feel that the historic core, including downtown, should be preserved and improved.
- ▣ Respondents largely cited North Athens as the area where improvement is needed the most.
- ▣ Most respondents shopped locally for basic goods and services, while shopping in Huntsville for larger expenditures, luxury items, and entertainment.
- ▣ Respondents stated that variety of merchandise (91 %) and prices (80 %) are the main drivers for their decision to shop in another community for products available in Athens.
- ▣ Advertising (52%) was the least important factor.
- ▣ Most respondents said that more stores and more varieties of quality merchandise would sway them to shop in Athens more often.

- ▣ The most common responses cited as communities we should pattern ourselves after are Madison, AL and Franklin, TN, noting the latter has a balanced approach to interstate and downtown development.
- ▣ Many respondents felt that Athens is unique because of its charm, strong sense of pride, and proximity to amenities, and that there is no need to pattern itself after another city.
- ▣ Most respondents reported attending the Fiddlerø Convention (70%) and parades (68%), while few reported attending Heritage Day (9%).

- ▣ Future of Athens
 - ▣ Most respondents (56%) feel that we are right on track with our pace of growth.

 - ▣ Residential Development
 - More single family homes, townhouses, lofts and condominiums.
 - Apartment Development should remain about the same.
 - Fewer mobile homes

 - ▣ Industrial Development
 - More light manufacturing, tech oriented, distribution, agriculture.
 - Prefer no change in quantity of heavy industry

 - ▣ Commercial Development

- More of everything except strip malls and fast food/convenience establishments
- ▣ Highest Priorities for Planning Efforts Based on High Importance Ranking
- Increase employment opportunities ó 81%
 - Provide public services (police, fire, schools, etc.) ó 70%
 - Manage traffic ó 65%
 - Increase shopping opportunities ó 57%
- ▣ Schools, streets, police protection topped the spending priorities list.

Public Workshops

Workshop I & II Results

Question #1 - Why should your best friend choose to live in Athens?

- ▣ Workshop I
- “ People here are open door & accept new people ó we have great
 - “ schools
 - “ You will not be bored
 - “ Still has historic character
 - “ Great Faith-based community
 - “ Great Food

- “ More inclusive of younger families
- “ Strong network of volunteer organizations that work together to better our community and provide plenty of opportunities to volunteer
- “ Great place to raise a family i.e. great schools, faith based
- “ Safety is important to this community
- “ Athens State University
- “ Small Town Charm with a Big City Attitude
- “ Small but close to metropolitan areas
- “ Serves as a good bedroom Community to the other major cities in the area

▣ Workshop II

- “ Great location ó well-located to larger areas
- “ Down home ó friendliness
- “ Schools
- “ Attractive downtown
- “ Good quality of life w/good amenity package
- “ Proximity to Lake/water
- “ Good recreation facilities
- “ Cost of living
- “ Employment base
- “ Mayor Marks
- “ Safe
- “ Lot of volunteer opportunities/giving community

“ Nice recreation for our children

Question #2 - Why should my mother-in-law not choose to live in Athens?

▣ Workshop I

“ Everyone knows your business. (Good that they know my kids' business, but not mine)

“ Train going through town

“ Sidewalk issues and accessibility issues

“ Need more to do for 18 -32 year

“ No Community emergency Shelters

▣ Workshop II

“ Huntsville's Better

“ Too hot in the summer

“ Too slow a pace

“ They don't have activities for seniors or communities that cater to seniors

“ Don't have public transportation

“ Too many signs or how much of your signage gets people out of town vs. how much gets people downtown

Question #3 - If you had a magic wand, what one area would you improve?

▣ Workshop I & II (Priority based on combined results)

“ 1. Residential Neighborhoods

“ 2. Downtown

“ 3. All areas equally

“ 4. Interstate

Question #4 - We received a grant to do one major project. What do we work on?

▣ Workshop I

- “ Renovate some of our neighborhoods that have just run down
- “ Focus on the Details ó sidewalks w/really crisp curbs ó details in downtown areas ó nice light posts ó ornamental type of things ó Signage at same level and same size (regulated)
- “ Redo existing sewer and provide sewer to every home inside City Limits ó Infrastructure
- “ Something to uniquely define that overpass at I-65 bridgescape - something to distinguish our exit from others ó something to invite people off at our exit then entices them to downtown
- “ Landscaping
- “ Job opportunities
- “ More housing opportunities for young families ó making them accessible to downtown area
- “ Apartments
- “ Make it the destination ó not just to pull them off the interstate ó need to have something happening in downtown every month to draw people here
- “ Renovate Trinity High School and the area surrounding it ó
- “ Some major entertainment center/cater to a younger/diverse crowd
- “ Building an overpass to keep the railroad off the ground from Elm Street to Sanderfer Road ó Standardize the street widths ó align intersections
- “ Look at building a new high school ó an attraction for young families

▣ Workshop II

- “ Sidewalks /communities
- “ Blighted areas upgraded and offer affordable houses
- “ Project could be a project to generate additional revenue to help you do other things óprojects and businesses put in to generate other income
- “ School infrastructure
- “ Disparity in neighborhood infrastructure óstreets, curbs, sidewalks óbring parity to all neighborhoods
- “ Improvements to major corridors throughout the community óstreetscape, improvements, landscaping
- “ Update the infrastructure downtown, do a total resource campaign to renovate-contributing downtown storefronts and offer funding to offset costs of sprinkler systems to encourage upper floor housing.
- “ Bring back/restore the brick streets downtown

Question #5 ó What do we do about the abandoned chicken plant in the center of town?

▣ Workshop I & II (Items in no particular order)

- “ Turn that into the Athens Recycling center to give us room to expand
- “ Create a large, central, open-concept park
- “ Put new high school or business there
- “ Incubator along w/Central Park area
- “ Apartments because it is so close to Athens State ó
- “ Entertainment Center/Venue
- “ Civic center

Question #6 - Describe Athens using human characteristics.

▣ Workshop I

“ Athens

“ Woman

“ A grandma who gives good hugs

“ Smart but doesn't want to tell people she is smart

“ Comfortable

“ Older with a lot of history

“ Kind of set in her ways

“ Well-educated and cares about other people being educated

“ Generally cheerful

“ Prefers living in a small town

“ She knows all of her neighbors

“ Cooperative

▣ Workshop II

“ Woman

“ Sweet

“ Starting to try to move forward

“ Aging

“ Old Money

“ On the come back

“ Set in her ways

“ Classy and stylish

- “ Strong sense of history & loves God
- “ Antebellum
- “ Caring

Question #7 ó What do you absolutely want the City to do in their planning efforts?

▣ Workshop I

- “ Include Transportation planning (this is a separate plan from Land Use)
- “ Focus on the West side of town
- “ Treat all areas equally
- “ Make sure all new neighborhoods have sidewalks
- “ Take care of what we have before we bite off something new
- “ Fix places like North Town
- “ Incentivize the businesses that you bring in
- “ Maintain our identity ókeep safety, jobs, schools and quality of life
- “ Remember the new industrial park areas
- “ Do things to encourage people to get out (mile markers) and promote a healthy lifestyle
- “ Maintain the beauty of our downtown

▣ Workshop II

- “ Make sure that everybody everywhere gets to walk
- “ Whole City needs to be pedestrian friendly
- “ Trees/landscaping to unify the City -
- “ Focus on making what we have better ónot just more of it

- " Focus on Everywhere
- " Do it well = high quality (DO NOT ACCEPT JUNK)
- " Incentivize the private sector to contribute their energy & efforts
- " Encourage infill
- " Include the property owners
- " Revitalize Trinity High & the surrounding neighborhood
- " Install sidewalks all the way down every street
- " Standardize streets and sidewalks
- " Do it with a plan and stick to it!

Question #8 - What do you absolutely not want the City to do in their planning efforts?

▣ Workshop I & II

- " Just focus on the areas that are already populated
- " Allow another sub-standard business of any type to go into an already deteriorated neighborhood óonly allow positives
- " Allow blight to take down some of our old neighborhoods
- " Make everything look the same ónot cookie cutter
- " Try to make us like anybody else óborrow the best of it but don't lose who we are
- " Just give us a small plan ógive us something that is truly worthy of Athens
- " Don't treat different areas differently
- " Encourage continued sprawl
- " Force more government on people who don't want it

“ Don’t settle ódemand quality

Workshop III Results ó Visual Preference Survey

▣ Top 10 items to address

“ #1- Landscaping: Treatments



Lush and colorful
landscaping, plentiful,
requires additional
maintenance

“ #2 - Streetscape: Residential



Segregated sidewalks, on-
street parking, mature trees,
houses set FAR back

“ #3 - Thoroughfares



Bury utilities, use vintage poles,
sign ordinance

" #4 - Parks and Open Spaces



Downtown / Urban
"pocket park" approach

" #5 - Streetscape: Downtown



Rich treatments at crosswalks
and medians

" #6 - Architectural Character: Downtown



Interpretation of historic style

" #7 - Connections: Path Systems



Impervious material

" #8 - Gateways: Downtown District



Branded banners, trailblazer
signs,
crosswalks, colorful
plantings

" #9 - Gateways: Interstate



" #10 - Street Furniture: Vintage Light Pole



APPENDIX C – Maps

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