

Blueprints for Successful Communities: How the Georgia Conservancy Promotes More Livable Places

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Every day 130 new residents arrive at the doorstep of the Atlanta metropolitan region, which includes 10 counties, two area codes, and 417 census tracts. The metro area reaches northward toward Chattanooga, and the area between the two cities has been called “CHATLANTA” by the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. By the year 2020, this region will add approximately 1.2 million people and expand its current boundaries by 500,000 additional acres.

As Georgia’s population continues to grow, a new way of thinking, new strategies, and new partnerships will be needed to manage the growth. The Georgia Conservancy, in partnership with the Urban Land Institute, the Greater Atlanta Home Builders Association, the Atlanta Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, and the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation recently launched an ambitious initiative known as *Blueprints for Successful Communities* to foster public education and facilitate a process for creating successful communities in Georgia. The project was developed to help individuals and groups determine alternative ways of building communities that are truly livable.

Georgians are hungry for alternatives to the destructive patterns of development that have eroded our sense of community and the social responsibilities and opportunities that true communities give us. Our traditional development patterns have led to urban sprawl that requires the use of the car almost every time we step out the front door. It requires us to cut trees and destroy existing neighborhoods to build roads to serve new neighborhoods that are farther and

farther away from where we work, shop or meet. With urban sprawl, we needlessly waste resources and increase pollution at the same time.

The last time that frustration with uncontrolled growth crested, Georgia created the Growth Strategies Commission and adopted the Georgia Planning Act in 1992. This law is succeeding in putting land use plans on the books, but has not helped to bring about effective growth management. Although many local plans have been adopted and many regional plans are underway, nothing in these plans is likely to slow the routine lot-by-lot zoning and rezoning that has become Georgia’s primary land use control.

Meanwhile, development creeps ever outward, consuming productive farm and forest lands, and forever changing the character of what we have known as Georgia. The Georgia Department of Transportation pours pavement while local governments extend public services such as water and sewer systems, and police and fire protection, on the wallets of the existing tax payers, thus subsidizing development that otherwise is unable to pay for itself.

Alternative Transportation Modes and Development Patterns

Blueprints for Successful Communities actually evolved in response to The Georgia Conservancy’s staunch position against a 211-mile perimeter freeway proposed by the Georgia Department of Transportation. This superfluous freeway would be located 25 miles outside the city’s existing perimeter highway, Interstate 285. The Conservancy believes that the “outer loop” will do little good and much damage to the region; and after much research and discussion, the Conservancy decided to address this issue by advocating for alternative transportation

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Old Models for New Communities

Well before there were principles of neo-traditional development, vibrant and diverse communities were based on viable, historic development patterns. Traditional in-town Atlanta neighborhoods such as Virginia-Highlands and Candler Park share common characteristics with successful Georgia towns such as Newnan, Madison, Rome, and Washington. Each of these neighborhoods or communities can be compact and identifiable, with boundaries and edges determined by natural or other features. Traditional communities rely upon a logical roadway system and spatial hierarchy, whether set on a grid pattern or crossroads. Streets, roadways, and sidewalks create social channels conducive to neighborly interaction. There is a mixture of land uses, housing types, and economic resources. Even in commercial areas, large scale parking areas are rare, with on-street parking more prevalent. These communities are visually coherent, establishing a subtle but pervasive formal order of architectural components such as style, materials, and details such as fences and porches. Most importantly, traditional towns and neighborhoods convey a unique representation of their setting and history in establishing a particular sense of place.

modes and development patterns that will lead to communities designed foremost for people, not for cars. *Blueprints for Successful Communities* has prompted community leaders, developers, planners, architects, and government officials to come together to explore land use and transportation alternatives that will be less damaging to the environment. A series of invited speakers have brought the message to Atlanta that if the communities of metro Atlanta and the entire state of Georgia are to thrive, there must be more thoughtful and innovative approaches to land use.

The alternatives that have been discussed over the past year will enable counties to grow more efficiently and will encourage the economic rebirth of declining inner cities. Alternative land use strategies discussed in the *Blueprints* series can be applied to both new growth areas and to infill and redevelopment. Redevelopment and infill projects can ensure that existing infrastructure is used efficiently and that downtown cores of employment and housing remain strong.

These alternatives will help reduce air pollution in a region that is in violation of federal clean air standards because of ground level ozone, and where 37 percent more children visit regional hospital emergency rooms on bad air days than on days without air quality alerts. Air quality concerns will receive increasing attention in the near future as the regional transportation plan is developed under EPA sanctions to reduce congestion and vehicle miles traveled. Because successful communities are more conducive to walking, biking, and transit, air quality is improved. When people don't use their cars, they don't create emissions.

Improved efficiency of land use will also improve water quality in a state where 67 percent of rivers and streams fail to meet water quality standards. Because livable communities are more compact, there is less impervious surface resulting in less downstream flooding. When streets are narrower and shorter, runoff and associated pollution is reduced. When communities incorporate the natural landscape into the overall community design, there is less damage or destruction of existing open space, wetlands, and other important natural areas.

A Different Development Paradigm

If Georgians want a different development paradigm, they must ask for it. But what exactly is it that we are asking for? The concerns of approximately 1,000 *Blueprints for Successful Communities* participants can be distilled into the following categories. These categories parallel design principles discussed in planning literature as Traditional Neighborhood Development, neo-traditional design, and New Urbanism:

- Community Design
- Accessibility
- Open Space
- Community Destiny
- Essential Elements

Community Design

Community Design refers to developing compact efficient communities that are integrated with shops, homes, schools, and other public activity centers. The design characteristics of compact communities include a mix of land uses and development densities, communities that are transit-oriented and pedestrian friendly, and a more efficient pattern for infrastructure and government services.

Zoning ordinances are the primary tools used by local governments to implement the future conditions envisioned in the communities' comprehensive or land use plans. Most communities in Georgia strictly apply the separation of land uses that makes creation of walkable communities impossible. Several basic modifications can be made to most zoning ordinances, such as:

1. eliminating prescribed street widths, turning radii, and set-back requirements;
2. prohibiting exclusionary single land use districts in favor of allowing different housing and land use types within a defined district;
3. using performance zoning to create flexibility in implementing zoning requirements based on functionality; and
4. developing mixed use districts that encourage linkage of homes, work places, and shopping.

Georgia's Planning Act requires that local land use plans be updated every five years. As the cycle of revision and updating begins, the Georgia Conservancy will encourage modifications consistent with the *Blueprints for Successful Communities* recommendations.

Accessibility

Accessibility to places of work and commerce and the general mobility of citizens is of great concern to automobile dependent residents in metro Atlanta. Current land use patterns and neighborhood design encourage automobile use by providing large lots, multiple-lanes arterial roadways that don't have sidewalks, and dispersed destinations for work, shopping, and medical attention. Metro Atlanta has the fewest residents per square mile of any of the nation's 35 largest cities. Metro Atlanta residents also

drive an average of 34 miles per day—more than any residents of any comparable American city.

Transportation and mobility need not be harnessed to roadways: transportation and mobility can be servants of the community. Transportation planning and land use planning must work in tandem in order to design communities that are people and pedestrian oriented, protect natural areas, and improve air quality. Considering that people are more important than cars, successful communities should contain a mix of commercial and residential areas where people can walk to work, school, and shopping, as well as have easy access to public transportation.

Open Space

Open space is one of a community's most valuable assets. Depending on its design within and around a community, open space serves a variety of functions, including biodiversity and ecosystem health, physical separation of adjacent land uses, enhanced tree canopy with improved evapotranspiration and reductions in solar gain, and a heightened sense of community, history, and pre-history.

Several types of open space help create livable communities: community commons that are similar to the town squares of New England; active and passive recreation areas such as parks, play lots, nature preserves, and public gardens; greenway networks that typically use stream corridors or other natural features to link residential areas with retail and commercial development and also provide a separation of those land uses; green spaces that serve as boundaries to development and that buffer agricultural or sensitive habitat areas; and, finally, backyards.

The commons or town center is a principal component of neo-traditional development. Typically, public common areas include civic squares, parks, and play lots which form the destinations for neighbors to gather for casual conversation or public events. These public realm spaces are generally absent in current development patterns, therefore precluding social interaction and a shared sense of responsibility to the community.

Community Destiny

Community destiny is the part of creating livable place that involves people as resources. Thriving communities use collaborative problem solving strategies to resolve regulatory or other obstacles to

compact development forms. The *Blueprints for Successful Communities* program promotes several public participation strategies including Visual Preference Surveys; design charrettes, guided tours, simulation games, and other "hands-on" exercises; and community based strategic planning with neighborhood groups and civic associations.

Essential Elements

The essential elements of creating successful communities do not emerge from a template, but rather from careful reflection of local concerns that comes from public participation and collaborative problem solving. Communities that employ the concepts discussed by The Georgia Conservancy are ones in which businesses, governments, and households desire to make efficient use of natural, historic, social and economic resources. These communities aim to provide a high quality of life and minimize the environmental effects of growth and development. These are communities that provide safe and secure surroundings with clean air to breathe and clean water to drink and enjoy through recreation.

How well have these concepts worked in Georgia? To date, over 1,000 people have attended the six *Blueprints* sessions. Throughout 1997, the Georgia Conservancy and its *Blueprints* partners will host another series focusing on transportation issues, investment strategies, and urban design. The success of the *Blueprints* program during its first year is also reflected in the receipt of the prestigious Golden Glasses Award presented by the Atlanta Regional Commission for visionary collaboration among the *Blueprints* partners. The Atlanta Chapter of the American Institute of Architects presented the Conservancy with a Citation of Excellence for its Successful Communities work. Partners at Georgia Tech and Georgia State University and other governmental officials and practitioners have formed the Interprofessional Urban Design Committee to support future *Blueprints* work.

Through continued education, innovative public participation strategies, and workshops for local officials, the *Blueprints* partnership intends to facilitate the completion of a neo-traditional demonstration project within the next two years and to champion the necessary changes in local planning and zoning ordinances throughout the ten-county Atlanta metropolitan area. **CP**

Interprofessional Urban Design Committee

The Interprofessional Urban Design Committee began meeting in late 1996 as a mechanism for collaboration among planners, designers, architects, engineers, and other practitioners following the successful Summer Olympic Games held in Atlanta. A core group consisting of representatives of the Georgia Planning Association, Georgia Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the American Society of Landscape Architects, and the Institute of Transportation Engineers began meeting to help build the image of the city and recapture the energy that was generated in preparing the Atlanta metro area for the Olympic Games. The lasting physical legacy of the Olympics, as illustrated by the placement of urban art, landscaping and streetscapes, urban design initiatives, and the renewed attention to parks and public gathering places was the group's initial focus.

The group then began to explore a common concern about effects of sprawl and the possible solutions suggested by the principles of Traditional Neighborhood Design and the New Urbanism. In the coming year, the group is committed to implementing the recommendations and solutions developed through the *Blueprints* series and also in continuing to educate local government officials about alternative development patterns and practices.