
Planning and Land Use

As elected officials, county commissioners have the ability to influence the landscape of Georgia in remarkable ways. While the General Assembly is empowered by the state constitution to enact laws restricting land use in order to protect and preserve natural resources and vital areas of the state,¹ most land-use decisions are made at the local level. The constitution in fact vests the power of planning and zoning in local governments. However, it is important to note that the General Assembly is empowered to enact general laws establishing procedures for the exercise of zoning power.² Since land-use decisions affect private property, all requests to change designated land uses (usually referred to as zoning changes) must be made by elected officials, never by staff. In short, commissioners are responsible for valuable economic, natural, and community resources within their counties, and their decisions have lasting impacts. How do we, as counties in the largest state east of the Mississippi River, plan for the use of our vast land areas, and how do we build communities that people are glad to call home?

Since 1989, with the passage of the Georgia Planning Act, every local government in Georgia has been required to complete a comprehensive plan in order to maintain its qualified local government status.³ The act requires that each government update its comprehensive plan at least every 10 years. Throughout the 1990s, as counties and cities completed their plans, the prevailing sentiment in Georgia seemed to be “okay, now that we’ve completed our plan, we’re done.” As with any new skill or activity, the first effort was not necessarily the best. The State of Georgia needed some practice in learning how to use the plans its communities had worked so hard to create the first time.

As of 2009, most counties either were beginning the next 10-year planning process or had recently completed it. Moving into the 21st

century, counties are seeing the utility of following these plans, not simply completing them. Statewide discussions about water quality and quantity, housing opportunities, transportation, job availability, and land conservation highlight the need for an agreed-upon approach to these difficult topics; county comprehensive plans offer such an approach. Long-range, comprehensive planning presents the best opportunity for creating successful communities for the future.⁴

Plans of any type, whether business, governmental, or personal, ask and answer three basic questions:

1. What do you have? (inventory and assessment)
2. What do you want to have? (needs and goals)
3. What are you willing to do to get it? (implementation strategy)

While Georgia's comprehensive plans provide guidance for a variety of community topics, including economic development and regional cooperation, by and large these plans can be roadmaps for the physical development of a community—how the community uses and shapes the land. “Land use” refers to any decisions made about the land and zoning regulations. Behind the concept of planning and land use is the assumption that decisions regarding a jurisdiction's land are made in accordance with an adopted comprehensive plan. By employing a comprehensive plan, a county commission makes decisions about the shape and form of the land under its jurisdiction and directly affects the design of the county. In short, the commission considers what the county will look like, both now and in the future.

Georgia is changing rapidly—growing in population overall—but some communities and populations in the state are in decline. Leaders who have a clear vision for the future are necessary to guide communities through these tough economic times. Regardless of the population, land mass, and economic makeup of each of Georgia's 159 counties, sound planning (followed by decisions based upon that planning) can make a positive difference in each community and collectively in the entire state.

PLANNING

Purpose and Intent of the Comprehensive Plan

The purpose of the local planning requirements promulgated by the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) is to “provide a framework for preparation of local comprehensive plans that will . . . provide a guide to

everyday decision-making for use by local government officials and other community leaders.⁵⁵ Decision making is difficult at the best of times, even more so when it is done in the public eye. The plan represents the voice of the citizens of the community—what they want the community to look like, what they cherish, what they would like to change, what they consider to be the prevailing issues and opportunities in the community. As such, the comprehensive plan can and should act as a guide for commissioners when making decisions for the public good.

The physical size of the comprehensive plan for a community can be daunting—in some cases amounting to several hundred pages of material. However, once the plan is explored, it is relatively easy to find the important information that can help a board of commissioners make reasonable, fair, and predictable decisions about the future of a community.

Components of the Comprehensive Plan

The Community Agenda

In order for a comprehensive plan to comply with local planning requirements, it must include three components: (1) a community assessment, (2) a community participation program, and (3) a community agenda. The assessment and community participation program, also commonly referred to as the public participation program, must be submitted to DCA prior to the adoption of the community agenda. The community agenda is what is commonly known as the plan, or the comprehensive plan. The local planning requirements state that the community agenda must include the following three major components:

1. a community vision for the future physical development of the community, expressed in the form of a map indicating unique character areas, each with its own strategy for guiding future development patterns;
2. a list of issues and opportunities identified by the community for further action; and
3. an implementation program for achieving the community's vision for the future and addressing the identified issues and opportunities.⁶

The Future Development Map

The foundation of the agenda is the future development map (often called a character area map). This map should identify the areas of the county that provide character in whatever form the community has

deemed important. There are no “right” amounts or types of character areas. Depending on the size, population, developed areas, natural characteristics, and employment centers of a community, a map may show as few as 5 or as many as 20 different character areas.

If the future development map for a county appropriately identifies the unique individual characteristics of the county in a way that makes sense to the board of commissioners and the citizens, then it is a “good” map. When the board of commissioners uses the map to make decisions about land use, community facilities, or capital improvements, the comprehensive plan is being put to its best possible use.⁷

The Defining Narrative

The descriptions of the character areas on a future development map are part of the defining narrative. Local planning requirements state that these descriptions must include the following:⁸

- Written descriptions, pictures, and/or illustrations that make it clear what types, forms, styles, and patterns of development are to be encouraged in the area
- List of specific land uses or (if appropriate for the jurisdiction) zoning categories to be allowed in the area
- List of the quality community objectives that will be pursued in the area
- Identification of implementation measures to achieve desired development patterns for the area

Simply put, the defining narrative should describe clearly what kind of development a county expects—and will approve—in the various character areas. Whitfield County in northwest Georgia provides an excellent example of a defining narrative. The community has defined “rural crossroads” as unique to its rural mountain character:

The Rural Crossroads character area . . . [is] intended to serve adjacent residential or agricultural areas with limited goods and services concentrated around an intersection rather than spread out in a linear fashion along a roadway. Small scale retail uses, public facilities such as churches, fire stations, post offices and libraries, and agricultural support businesses such as commercial nurseries, farm implement sales and supply stores, farmer’s markets and feed and seed stores are appropriate uses in this character area.

Also discussed in the defining narrative are development patterns, primary land uses, and implementation strategies. A development pattern should seek to do the following:

- Protect rural character
- Provide small-scale commercial opportunities for meeting local needs
- Cluster buildings at an area's center
- Maintain open space surrounding the center
- Encourage compatible architectural styles (rather than “franchise” or “corporate” architectural styles) that maintain the regional rural character
- Limit clearing and grading
- Reduce access points along the highway
- Connect to greenways or trail systems wherever possible

Primary land uses include neighborhood or rural commercial uses, civic or institutional uses, and passive or active parks. In terms of implementation strategies, a community may adopt a rural crossroads zoning overlay district that includes minimum standards for commercial building and site design. Another strategy would be to widen roadways only when absolutely necessary.⁹

The description for each character area is followed by implementation measures, which are the means by which a community will achieve its vision (that is, the best-case scenario for the area). In the Whitfield County plan, the community has identified the need to adopt an overlay code to protect its rural crossroads and a policy that it will widen rural roadways only when absolutely necessary. A commitment to those adopted measures will help Whitfield County maintain its mountain beauty in the coming years.

Issues and Opportunities

As a community is developing its plan, elected officials have opportunities to hear from citizens regarding what they think are the biggest challenges facing the community and the biggest opportunities in the future. Along with public opinion, the available data about a community help shape the comprehensive plan. The data will show (among other things)

- whether the community is growing, remaining stable, or losing population;
- the types of jobs that are available in the community;
- the types and levels of education of most citizens in the community; and
- the types of natural resources in the community and their location.

The issues and opportunities in the comprehensive plan are those identified by community members and leaders as being the most important to address over the next 10 years. Accordingly, the local planning requirements state that each of these issues or opportunities must be followed up with corresponding measures in the implementation program.¹⁰

The Implementation Program

A comprehensive plan is, most of all, a visionary document that helps answer the question, “What do we want our community to be like in 20 years?” In order to achieve that goal, each community will have to take smaller steps over the years that will eventually result in fulfillment of that vision. The short-term work plan should outline those steps in five-year increments. The short-term work plan should consist of actions or activities that will improve or enhance the community. The long-term measures or policies are those items that may be ongoing or are based on the core values of the community. For instance, a community that values transportation options may have a stated policy of providing walking and biking options along with all road improvements. Similarly, a community that values an agricultural lifestyle may choose a policy of maintaining very large land parcels for agricultural use.¹¹

Quality Community Objectives

In 1999, the Board of DCA adopted quality community objectives as statements of the development patterns and options that will help Georgia preserve its unique cultural, natural, and historic resources while looking to the future and developing to its fullest potential. The local planning requirements state that each local government should determine which of these objectives are important to pursue in each character area identified on the future development map:

(a) Regional Identity Objective. Regions should promote and preserve an “identity,” defined in terms of traditional regional architecture, common economic linkages that bind the region together, or other shared characteristics.

(b) Growth Preparedness Objective. Each community should identify and put in place the prerequisites for the type of growth it seeks to achieve. These may include housing and infrastructure (roads, water, sewer, and telecommunications) to support new growth, appropriate training of the workforce, ordinances to direct growth as desired, or leadership capable of responding to growth opportunities.

(c) Appropriate Businesses Objective. The businesses and industries encouraged to develop or expand in a community should be suitable for the community in terms of job skills required, linkages to other economic activities in the community, impact on the resources of the area, and future prospects for expansion and creation of higher-skill job opportunities.

(d) Educational Opportunities Objective. Educational and training opportunities should be readily available in each community in order to permit community residents to improve their job skills, adapt to technological advances, or pursue entrepreneurial ambitions.

(e) Employment Options Objective. A range of job types should be provided in each community to meet the diverse needs of the local workforce.

(f) Heritage Preservation Objective. The traditional character of the community should be maintained through preserving and revitalizing historic areas of the community, encouraging new development that is compatible with the traditional features of the community, and protecting other scenic or natural features that are important to defining the community’s character.

(g) Open Space Preservation Objective. New development should be designed to minimize the amount of land consumed,

and open space should be set aside from development for use as public parks or as greenbelts or wildlife corridors.

(h) Environmental Protection Objective. Air quality and environmentally sensitive areas should be protected from negative impacts of development. Environmentally sensitive areas deserve special protection, particularly when they are important for maintaining traditional character or quality of life of the community or region. Whenever possible, the natural terrain, drainage, and vegetation of an area should be preserved.

(i) Regional Cooperation Objective. Regional cooperation should be encouraged in setting priorities, identifying shared needs, and finding collaborative solutions, particularly where it is critical to the success of a venture, such as protection of shared natural resources.

(j) Transportation Alternatives Objective. Alternatives to transportation by automobile, including mass transit, bicycle routes, and pedestrian facilities, should be made available in each community. Greater use of alternative transportation should be encouraged.

(k) Regional Solutions Objective. Regional solutions to needs shared by more than one local jurisdiction are preferable to separate local approaches, particularly where this will result in greater efficiency and less cost to the taxpayer.

(l) Housing Opportunities Objective. Quality housing and a range of housing size, cost, and density should be provided in each community in order to make it possible for all who work in the community to also live in the community.

(m) Traditional Neighborhood Objective. Traditional neighborhood development patterns should be encouraged, including use of more human scale development, mixing of uses within easy walking distance of one another, and facilitating pedestrian activity.

(n) Infill Development Objective. Communities should maximize the use of existing infrastructure and minimize the con-

version of undeveloped land at the urban periphery by encouraging development or redevelopment of sites closer to the downtown or traditional urban core of the community.

(o) Sense-of-Place Objective. Traditional downtown areas should be maintained as the focal point of the community, or for newer areas where this is not possible, the development of activity centers that serve as community focal points should be encouraged. These community focal points should be attractive, mixed-use, pedestrian friendly places where people choose to gather for shopping, dining, socializing, and entertainment.¹²

The Plan Adoption Process and Qualified Local Government Status

The Georgia Planning Act requires that each local government (county and city) adopt a comprehensive plan in order to maintain its qualified local government status. Although there is no state-imposed penalty for not completing and adopting a comprehensive plan according to the schedule created by DCA, local governments that do not attain qualified local government status are not eligible for state-administered grants, loans, and some permits.

Detailed procedures for submitting a plan for review and adoption by a county board of commissioners are available on the DCA Web site.¹³ The process by which a government may achieve qualified local government status is as follows:

1. The plan preparer completes a community assessment and community participation plan.
2. After review of the documents, including a public hearing, the board of commissioners passes a transmittal resolution to send these documents to its regional commission for review.
3. The regional commission and DCA review and comment on the assessment and participation program.
4. The board of commissioners publicizes the availability of the assessment and participation program.
5. The plan preparer gathers community input and creates the community agenda.

6. The board of commissioners holds a public hearing prior to passing a transmittal resolution to send the community agenda to the regional commission for review.
7. The regional commission and DCA review and comment on the community agenda.
8. The board of commissioners allows the public 60 days from the public hearing to comment on the plan.
9. Upon receiving comments from the public, the regional commission, and DCA, the board of commissioners authorizes the plan preparer to make any necessary changes.
10. The board of commissioners adopts the comprehensive plan by resolution and notifies the regional commission of the date on which the plan is adopted.
11. Upon receipt of notification of adoption, DCA extends the government's qualified local government status.¹⁴

Implementing the Plan

Every decision a county commission makes is a step toward implementing the plan—or not. Did the commission consider the description of the character of the area before rezoning a parcel of property? Is its vote consistent with that description? Did the commission look at the future development map? Did it make a decision consistent with the measures outlined there? If the answers to these questions are yes, the commission has helped implement the plan. Conversely, when a commission votes inconsistently with its plan, it becomes increasingly difficult to show that the plan is the guide for community decisions.

The following questions can guide the implementation of a county's comprehensive plan:

- Will this decision further the vision for the character of the area described in the comprehensive plan?
- Is this decision consistent with the future development map?
- Is this decision consistent with a stated policy in the comprehensive plan?
- Does this decision address an issue or opportunity stated in the comprehensive plan?
- Does this decision address an item in the short-term work plan?

LAND USE

The term land use means just that: how a community uses the land within its jurisdiction. Is it used for agricultural or housing purposes? For industry or retail? For conservation? In the mid-20th century, when Georgia had a population of about a million people, land seemed limitless. Now, as Georgia's population approaches 10 million people, discussions about how to use the land have taken on a more urgent tone.

As previously noted, in Georgia most land-use decisions are made by local governments—either county boards of commissioners or city councils. With increasing populations and the same amount of natural resources within the state, these decisions are becoming more and more important each year. Local elected officials have enormous responsibility for the health, vitality, and appearance of Georgia's landscape and natural resources. Making good decisions about available resources may not be simple, but it is possible. Following the agreed-upon comprehensive plan can help take some of the emotion out of land-use decisions and make those decisions more predictable and fair. Decisions by boards of commissioners can be critical in determining the long-term economic and environmental health of not only a community but also the state.

Infrastructure

Infrastructure decisions at the county level concern both the type and location of infrastructure. The most common infrastructure decisions made by boards of commissioners pertain to the following:

- Roads and bridges
- Water
- Sewer
- Storm water facilities
- Parks and recreation facilities
- Police, fire, and emergency medical services facilities
- Libraries
- Schools

Boards of commissioners do not decide the location of schools, but it is important that commissioners make an effort to coordinate school

location decisions with local boards of education. Poorly sited schools can create safety, transportation, and other land-use problems that could otherwise be avoided by cooperation.

The placement of public facilities and investments directly affects land use and to a large extent determines the location of future private development in a community. Land adjacent to public infrastructure is more easily developed and likely to be converted from agriculture, conservation, or another “green” use to a more intensive use when public facilities become available. For this reason, boards of commissioners should be careful to avoid environmentally sensitive areas when choosing the location of water, sewer, and road facilities.

Building libraries and public safety facilities (especially fire stations and police precincts) invites nearby residential development. Consulting the comprehensive plan to identify areas that are most receptive to development—and avoiding those areas that cannot support development—helps ensure the long-term viability of the community.

Zoning and Sprawl

Zoning is the primary regulatory method used by local governments to influence, guide, and control development as they carry out their plans for physical and economic growth. Zoning codes are among the “police powers” granted to county boards of commissioners. The administration of these codes is governed by the Georgia Zoning Procedures Act.¹⁵ Failure to observe the procedural requirements in the act may render a zoning ordinance or zoning decision void.¹⁶

A zoning ordinance consists of (1) a map that divides a jurisdiction into various districts for particular classes of residential, commercial, industrial, and other uses and (2) a written ordinance that establishes the conditions under which land may be developed and used for particular purposes. A zoning ordinance specifies what types of development may take place in each zoning district of the jurisdiction. It stipulates the allowable size and height of structures and sets forth the requirements for lot size, setbacks, street parking, and other related considerations. A zoning ordinance is not a comprehensive plan or a land-use plan, but it can be used to implement such plans by controlling how land is used.

Most elected officials and local government staff recognize and understand what sprawl means in terms of land development, even without a formal definition. Most people would agree that sprawl is, at the very least, unattractive and, at worst, harmful to the natural environment. Zoning codes and sprawl are interconnected. Most local zoning plans are meant to separate different types of property uses. Residential uses

may be allowed in one area of a community, while retail and commercial uses are assigned another area. The original intent of zoning codes was to put space between the community and more noxious uses, like heavy industrial uses or landfills. Throughout the 20th century, most states continued to require separation of uses, resulting in communities in which transportation is dominated by the private automobile. Making room for numerous vehicles increased the sprawling landscape, as more parking spaces were required for more vehicles and wider streets were needed in order to accommodate traffic.

Between 1982 and 1997, the amount of urbanized land used for development in the United States increased by 45 percent (from 51 million acres to 76 million acres), and the population grew by 17 percent.¹⁷ Most observers believe that this type of land conversion is unsustainable, which makes the decisions made by boards of commissioners even more pressing in the 21st century. Some zoning code provisions that promote sprawl have to do with the following:

- Parking requirements
- Street connectivity requirements
- Building setbacks (that is, how far away buildings are required to be from each other and the road)
- Building height limitations
- Minimum lot sizes in excess of half an acre in all residential and commercial areas

The DCA Office of Planning and Quality Growth provides a variety of Web-based resources as well as technical assistance for local governments that are interested in changing their zoning codes in order to reduce sprawl.¹⁸

In addition to the zoning code in a community, decisions concerning rezoning requests have enormous influence on sprawl. When a commission votes to rezone property in order to build houses far away from a town center or a community resource, it is creating sprawl. Such development necessitates roads, public safety coverage, schools, and places for residents to buy goods and services. Over time, these resources creep out toward the housing areas, generally along a single roadway, creating a linear development pattern that devours land formerly used for agriculture, conservation, and other green purposes. This kind of creep tends to weaken the viability of existing town centers, resulting in

dead shopping centers, historic downtowns with no businesses, and gaps in productivity throughout the community.

By bearing in mind the stated visions that go along with a community's future development map, commissions can make decisions that may help reduce the spread of sprawl. A comprehensive plan provides commissioners with a foundation on which to consider the best interests of not only the community but also property owners when making decisions about rezoning requests.

The Planning Commission

A planning commission is an advisory board appointed by the board of commissioners. If it is a joint city-county planning commission, some members are appointed by the county governing authority; others, by the mayor and council. The planning commission's mission is to plan for the county's future, looking beyond short-term solutions, the technical views of county staff and department heads, and the particular concerns of local special interest groups. Members of the planning commission should have no actual, or even potential, conflicts of interest. They should be encouraged to attend training programs sponsored by universities, professional associations, and state and regional agencies.

Ordinarily, a planning commission interprets the zoning ordinance and amendments and makes recommendations to the board of commissioners regarding rezoning requests. The planning commission may act as a design review board, meaning that members will review and make recommendations concerning site and building design proposals, particularly for commercial development. The commission may receive technical assistance from a professional staff, department heads, and consultants in performing these functions. If the county does not have a planning commission, the board of commissioners usually assumes planning commission functions.

Transfer of Development Rights

Pursuant to state law, the governing body of any county may establish by ordinance procedures, methods, and standards for the transfer of development rights (TDR) for property within its jurisdiction in order to conserve and promote the public health, safety, and general welfare. Under a TDR program, the development rights from a naturally or historically significant parcel of land, called the sending property, are separated from the land and are sold for higher-density use on a tract more suitable for development, called the receiving property. A permanent conservation easement is placed on the sending property, and the

owner of the sending property is compensated for the loss of development rights by the owner of the receiving property. The owner of the receiving property then gains a higher-density usage of the property than is allowable under the zoning ordinance of the county. TDR can help steer development toward areas where growth is more desirable and can help communities preserve green space without having to pay for land. Any proposed transfer of development rights shall be subject to the approval and consent of the property owners of both the sending and receiving property. Prior to the enactment of the ordinance as required in state law, the governing authority shall provide for a public hearing on the proposed ordinance.¹⁹

Regional Planning and Land Use

Georgia has a great number and variety of natural, historic, cultural, and archaeological resources. Many of these resources do not adhere to formal jurisdictional lines but rather straddle cities, counties, and entire regions. Recognizing the importance of these resources to the state, Georgia has adopted a regional approach to managing, protecting, and enhancing these assets.

Regionally Important Resources

A regionally important resource is a natural or historic resource that is of sufficient size or importance to warrant special consideration by the local governments that have jurisdiction over the resource. The Georgia Planning Act of 1989 (the same law that requires comprehensive planning by local governments) authorizes DCA to establish procedures for identifying regionally important resources statewide. DCA has established rules for use by the regional commissions in preparing a regional resource plan that systematically identifies the regionally important resources in each region and recommends best practices for use in managing these important resources.²⁰

As of July 1, 2009, each regional commission is required to prepare a regionally important resources map and an accompanying resource management plan. Georgia's diverse regions range from the Appalachian Mountains to the Coastal Plain. The state's natural resources include floodplains, marshlands, steep slopes, and rivers and streams. Its historic resources include historic properties as well as archaeological and cultural resources.

Each regional commission has a resource nomination process. With regional involvement, a regional commission determines a final list of regionally important resources that form the foundation of the regional

resource plan. The state's goal is to create a green infrastructure network among these regionally important resources in order to preserve and enhance those elements that Georgians deem important. A green infrastructure network is a strategically planned and managed network of wilderness areas, parks, greenways, conservation easements, and working lands with conservation value that benefits wildlife and people, supports native species, maintains natural ecological processes, sustains air and water resources, links urban settings to rural ones, and contributes to the health and quality of life of the communities and citizens sharing this network. The network should encompass a wide range of elements, including natural areas such as wetlands, woodlands, waterways, and wildlife habitat; public and private conservation lands such as nature preserves, wildlife corridors, greenways, and parks; and public and private working lands of conservation value such as forests, farms, and ranches. It should also incorporate outdoor recreation and trail networks.²¹

Regional Planning

Much like a comprehensive plan for a local government, the regional plan prepared by each regional commission should guide decisions for the region. The regional agenda (the finished product) includes the region's vision for the future as well as the strategy for realizing this vision. Because the regional agenda provides guidance for future decision making about the region, it must be prepared with adequate input from stakeholders and the general public. The regional agenda must include

- a regional vision for the future development of the region,
- a list of regional issues and opportunities for further action, and
- an implementation program for achieving the regional vision and addressing regional issues and opportunities.

The implementation program must include the following:

- Guiding principles to be followed by all actors in making decisions affecting the future of the region
- Performance standards that establish minimum and exceptional levels of performance expected of all actors in implementing the recommendations of the plan
- A list of strategies that may be implemented by any actors in the region to assist with achieving the regional vision or addressing regional issues and opportunities

- A regional work program listing the responsibilities of the regional commission for implementing the plan
- An evaluation and monitoring plan to ensure that the regional plan is accomplishing the desired results²²

Developments of Regional Impact

Developments of regional impact are large-scale developments that are likely to have regional effects beyond the local government jurisdiction in which they are located. The Georgia Planning Act of 1989 authorized DCA to establish procedures for review of these large-scale projects. These procedures are designed to improve communication between affected governments and provide a means of revealing and assessing potential impacts of large-scale developments before conflicts relating to them arise. At the same time, local government autonomy is preserved since the host government maintains the authority to make the final decision on whether a proposed development will go forward.

Population and Development Thresholds

Thresholds are used to determine whether a proposed development qualifies as a development of regional impact. The thresholds vary by type of development and the population category of the county in which the proposed development will take place. Various categories of development, each with separate thresholds, include office, commercial, hospitals, housing, industrial, hotels, mixed use, airports, recreation, postsecondary schools, waste disposal, quarries and asphalt plants, wastewater treatment, and petroleum storage.

Because communities across the state have a wide range of population and development levels, two tiers, or population categories (metropolitan areas and nonmetropolitan areas), have been established. Thresholds vary for each because a development in a region with low levels of population and development is likely to have a greater relative impact than it would in an area with higher levels of population and development.

Local Government Role

The local government role related to developments of regional impact involves the following:

- Identifying potential developments of regional impact as part of the local development review process (examples of activities triggering the process include rezonings and issuance of development permits or building permits)

- Notifying the regional commission of all potential developments of regional impact for intergovernmental review
- Taking the findings of the regional commission into account when making a decision to approve, approve with conditions, or deny a proposed development of regional impact²³

SOURCES OF HELP

Most local elected officials play a variety of roles in the community, and most must juggle business and family responsibilities as well. In order to help officials with planning and land-use decisions, the State of Georgia provides a variety of resources, including individual technical assistance and Web-based information. Elected officials should also look to local staff resources. Even if a county does not have a professional planner, other staff members may be able to provide information or insight regarding the matter at hand. Of course, in any situation involving legal matters, the county attorney should be consulted.

Several public agencies and nonprofit organizations are dedicated to assisting local governments in Georgia, including the following:

- Regional commissions provide a wide variety of assistance to local governments in preparing and implementing comprehensive plans and are often the first place to call for planning help.
- Staff at the DCA Office of Planning and Quality Growth—the state agency responsible for implementing the Georgia Planning Act—can help local governments with questions to do with planning, land use, and plan implementation.
- The Association County Commissioners of Georgia serves as the consensus-building, training, and legislative organization for all 159 county governments in the state.
- The University of Georgia’s Carl Vinson Institute of Government provides education, assistance, research, policy analysis, and publications to assist public officials in serving citizens in Georgia and throughout the world.
- The Fanning Institute at the University of Georgia works with communities of all types, within and outside of Georgia, and provides customized approaches to developing skilled community leaders, creating vibrant communities, and promoting prosperous economies.

- The Georgia Institute of Technology Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development produces, disseminates, and helps implement new ideas and technologies that improve the theory and practice of quality growth.
- The Georgia Planning Association encourages, promotes, and assists physical, economic, and human resources planning within the state.
- The Georgia Conservancy advocates for the protection of the state's natural environment. Through its focus on clean air and water, land conservation, coastal protection, growth management, and education, the Georgia Conservancy works to develop solutions to protect Georgia's environment and promote the stewardship of the state's vital natural resources.

SUMMARY

The 21st century will be a time of great change for Georgia. Demographics are shifting, and the population continues to increase. In addition, the economy of Georgia—like that of other states—is affected by the national and international economies. It may seem that the decisions made in county commission chambers have little effect on the state, but when taken together, they have great impact.

Counties may have a more difficult job than cities when developing or redeveloping portions of their communities. Usually, there is no “downtown core” from which to start or maintain development. Builders and developers generally deal with one parcel at a time rather than tackling an entire community at once. Commissioners must also consider the effect their decisions concerning the built environment will have on the natural environment. Water quality, air quality, soil quality, and natural terrain are all affected by development decisions. Commissioners have the opportunity to consider the overall look and feel of a community when making land-use decisions. By availing themselves of all the available resources prior to formulating lasting decisions, local elected officials can help shape Georgia in positive ways.

NOTES

1. GA. CONST. art. III, §6, ¶(a)(1).
2. GA. CONST. art. IX, §2, ¶4; OFFICIAL CODE OF GEORGIA ANNOTATED (O.C.G.A) §§36-66-1 et seq., 36-67-1 et seq.

3. O.C.G.A. tit. 36, ch. 70, art. 1; §12-2-8; tit. 50, ch. 8, arts. 1, 2.
4. Herbert H. Smith, *The Citizens' Guide to Planning* (Chicago: Planners Press, 1993).
5. OFFICIAL COMPILATION RULES AND REGULATIONS OF THE STATE OF GEORGIA (GA. COMP. R. & REGS.) ch. 110-12-1-.01.
6. GA. COMP. R. & REGS. ch. 110-12-1-.05.
7. GA. COMP. R. & REGS. ch. 110-12-1-.05(2)(a)(ii).
8. GA. COMP. R. & REGS. ch. 110-12-1-.05(2)(a)(iii).
9. Whitfield County, Board of Commissioners, *Whitfield County Comprehensive Plan 2008–2018* (Dalton, GA: Whitfield County, Board of Commissioners, 2008), 2–10.
10. GA. COMP. R. & REGS. ch. 110-12-1-.05(2)(b).
11. GA. COMP. R. & REGS. ch. 110-12-1-.05(2)(c).
12. GA. COMP. R. & REGS. ch. 110-12-1-.06(3).
13. Department of Community Affairs, Standards and Procedures for Local Comprehensive Planning, Local Planning Requirements. www.dca.state.ga.us/development/PlanningQualityGrowth/programs/downloads/MinimumStandardsAdopted.pdf. Accessed May 6, 2010.
14. GA. COMP. R. & REGS. ch. 110-12-1-.08.
15. O.C.G.A. tit. 36, ch. 66.
16. *McClure v. Davidson*, 258 Ga. 706 (1988); *Tilley Properties v. Bartow County*, 261 Ga. 153 (1991).
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