

## 2.3 Housing

From the establishment of the Suwanee Post Office in 1838 to its incorporation as a formal town in 1949, Suwanee was largely an agricultural town. The population was small, life was rural and commerce had focused on the railroad. The newly incorporated town still reflected the pattern first laid down when the Norfolk-Southern railroad came through in 1871: a small commercial district, fringed with residences, extending in a linear pattern east to west along the railroad tracks and Buford Highway. In 1960, the city contained just 115 houses.



The construction of I-85 in the 1960's caused a small burst of growth with the addition of 98 residential units, bringing the total number of units to 213 in 1970. Four primary housing types characterized the pre-1970 Suwanee: ranches, bungalows, historic Victorian and regional farm style homes.

Over the next two decades the city continued to grow slowly as the number of housing units increased to 825 units in 1990. This time period also saw the introduction of a new housing type with the addition of 25 multifamily units. Single-family units were a mix of large expensive homes built primarily in the 1980's and smaller more moderately priced homes constructed primarily in the 1960's and 1970's. Suwanee Farms (Meadowbrook Circle), Timberlost Trail, and Leaf Lake Lane typify the type of development occurring during this time period. Most of the homes during this period were served by septic systems only.

In the 1990's Suwanee emerged as a bedroom community when the metro Atlanta growth wave hit. By the end of the decade, the number of residential units increased to 3,144 units, include 2,459 single-family residences and 685 multifamily residences. During this time period single-family housing growth was characterized by more suburban-style single-family residential subdivisions with cul-de-sac streets and neighborhood amenity areas. Ruby Forest, Chattahoochee Run, and Forest Plantation/Stoneridge are examples of the types of neighborhoods constructed during this time. These more expensive homes were built on smaller lots served by sanitary sewer. This decade also introduced two apartment complexes along McGinnis Ferry Road, which are gated and, like their single-family counterparts, include significant neighborhood amenity areas.

Largely as a result of a change in policies outlined in the 2020 Comprehensive Plan in 2000, the last eight years were characterized by residential units that were built in mostly mixed-use communities. During this period the city's total housing unit count increasing to 5,992 units. New construction included housing types new to Suwanee like townhouses, apartments above storefront commercial, and gated single-family neighborhoods. At this point single-family residential units comprise 67 percent of the total housing stock; multifamily units 23 percent, and townhouses 10 percent.

Although detached single-family residential homes continue to be the dominant form of housing in Suwanee, the units constructed during the last decade are often smaller in size, with some lots as small as 1/10 of an acre. The units are generally more consistent with traditional styles of development, including larger front porches, rear-loaded garages, and reduced front yard setbacks. This development form is often New Urbanism or Traditional Neighborhood Development.

While the lot sizes in Suwanee have continued to shrink, price points have continued to rise. The neighborhoods built during this period also tend to mix housing types and provide a mix of nearby community retail and office uses. While still served by resident-only amenity centers, the neighborhoods are often also served by formal passive parks and informal community owned natural areas. Finally, two conventional garden-style apartment complexes were also constructed in this timeframe.

#### **QUANTITY AND TYPE OF HOUSING UNITS:**

	New by unit type			Total by unit type			Total Units
	SF	TH	MF	SF	TH	MF	
<b>2000</b>	110	0	342	2,569	0	1,027	3,596
<b>2001</b>	87	0	0	2,656	0	1,027	3,683
<b>2002</b>	74	8	0	2,730	8	1,027	3,765
<b>2003</b>	65	69	0	2,795	77	1,027	3,899
<b>2004</b>	180	97	336	2,975	174	1,363	4,512
<b>2005</b>	299	240	23	3,274	414	1,386	5,074
<b>2006</b>	619	123	0	3,893	537	1,386	5,816
<b>2007</b>	130	46	0	4,023	583	1,386	5,992

Table 2.3-a

Source: City of Suwanee Planning Department

## Housing Age and Occupancy

The City added over 2,300 residential units in the 1990's and more than 2,800 residential units in the last eight years. This indicates that almost 50 percent of the housing stock in Suwanee is less than 8 years old, and 86 percent is less than 17 years old. While Suwanee's housing stock is still relatively new, in the next 20 years the city will need to be prepared to develop strategies to ensure that these units are well maintained.

Suwanee has traditionally been a community where owner-occupied housing units dominate. In 1980, only 22 percent of the total residential units were renter-occupied. This number dropped quickly to 12.6 percent in 1990. With the addition of two apartment complexes in the 1990's the rental rate increased back to roughly 22 percent. Current occupancy data is not available, but since 23 percent of the residential units in Suwanee are apartments, the rental rate has certainly increased slightly beyond the 22 percent in recent years.

## Cost of Housing

Relative to Gwinnett County, Suwanee is an expensive community for housing, whether renter or owner. Among other county municipalities and compared to unincorporated Gwinnett, only Berkeley Lake has a higher median home price than Suwanee, at \$208,900. Most of the apartments in Suwanee are relatively new; and as such, rental prices are somewhat higher than the rest of the county. The median contract rent in Suwanee is \$826 per month, compared to \$719 in Gwinnett. Again, only Berkeley Lake has a higher rental rate.

In 2007, the City developed a Housing Affordability Study which examined the impact of the high rental rates and median home prices on housing affordability. This study determined that 50 percent of Extremely Low Income households were paying more than 30 percent of their gross income for housing; although affordable housing for workforce households (those earning 50 percent or less than the area's median income) can be found in older single-family detached and new townhouse stock. The study found that new homes are relatively expensive, but there were significant rental opportunities within the city's various apartment complexes. The report also concludes that people employed in lower-paying jobs in the city can and do find housing within their means in rental areas and within other parts of the county within a reasonable commute distance away.

## Housing Forecasts and Needs

Opportunities for large-scale single-family developments will be limited in the future as large tracts of land necessary to develop these types of communities will no longer be available. Single-family residential development is likely to be focused on infill opportunities particularly in the Old Town area but also in limited places in the Suwanee North and Smithtown Road character areas. There is also a considerable number of available attached and detached single-family residential lots in existing neighborhoods including Highland Station, Three Bridges, McGinnis Reserve, Stonecypher, Village Grove and Suwanee Station. Given that these units will likely be built in the next five years, the city should concentrate on creating a sensitive infill strategy for areas around Town Center and Old Town to accommodate limited amount of new single-family homes. The city should also re-evaluate housing affordability – a critical community concern – regularly, and determine whether other infill locations and policies are appropriate. The city should also consider collaborating with Gwinnett County to work toward a land use strategy for unincorporated and undeveloped land near the city limits to both address the countywide need for moderately-priced units as well as evaluate the impact of additional residential development on city facilities.

There is also ample opportunity for future townhouse and multifamily development associated with potential mixed-use projects in Suwanee Gateway and some areas along Peachtree Industrial Boulevard. When located appropriately, increased densities can have beneficial impacts by providing customers for nearby shopping areas and employee residences for businesses. Community opposition to higher density – particularly apartments – must be considered when evaluating the appropriateness of such uses.

In some circumstances townhomes could provide useful and appropriate transitions from the commercial intensive areas, such as the PIB corridor to the existing single-family residential area. Market demands also suggest that future multifamily units are more likely to resemble the type of buildings found in Town Center as opposed to the garden-style complexes that characterized the 1990's and early 2000's. The city should continue to advocate for this positive change where appropriate, and with subsequent updates evaluate the possibility of transitioning out the garden-style developments to the mixed-use platform over time.

Like the rest of the country, Suwanee's population will continue to change. There will be an increase in the community's average age which will increase the demand for senior housing opportunities. Increased demand for single-level homes, coupled with associated services, will be needed in the future. Since few large tracts suitable for master planned communities are available, this need will be largely met by infill opportunities and multi-family facilities.