



# Implementation Strategies and Recommendations

The process of maintaining and improving on the natural characteristics that exist in Suwanee today will not only require a financial obligation by the city but also regulation on future development trends. Placing increased buffer requirements on developments, roads, stream and river corridors will serve to preserve a greater percentage of natural habitats and tree canopies, thereby allowing for a greener community. The planning team has developed a list of recommendations and implementation strategies as relate to zoning and the provision of open space and recreation. Review of the current zoning ordinance has yielded recommendations for improvements and additions to help meet the overall city objective for increased green and open space.

## **Zoning Ordinance Review**

New development in a community has a direct impact on the need for open space. In reviewing Suwanee's Zoning Ordinance, several areas were identified that could be modified or amended to help provide and preserve open space and natural areas. These recommendations reflect input that was gathered during the public meetings and Lose & Associates' experience in working with other southeast communities who have used various zoning techniques to acquire parkland, open space and develop community greenway systems.

## **City of Suwanee Zoning Ordinance: PMUD Planned Mixed-Use District**

Among the zoning districts used by the City, one is the Planned Mixed-Use Development District. This zoning district permits mixed-use developments and includes policies and development standards to implement the goals of the City's Comprehensive Plan. Current goals for mixed-use development include the following strategies.

- A. Allow diversification of uses, structures, densities and open space when not in conflict with existing and permitted land uses on abutting properties.
- B. Reduce development costs through a more efficient use of land and a smaller network of utilities and streets than is possible through the application of standards contained in conventional land development regulations.
- C. Conserve the natural amenities of the land by encouraging the preservation of environmentally significant, scenic and functional open space.
- D. Provide maximum opportunity for the application of innovative site planning concepts through the creation of aesthetically pleasing environments for living, shopping and working on properties of adequate size, shape and location.

- E. Insure that development will occur according to the advantages and limitations of land, site design, population density, building coverage, improvement standards and construction phasing as authorized through the approval of a comprehensive site development plan.
- F. Provide a mechanism to incorporate and implement the goals and intent of the City of Suwanee Comprehensive Plan.
- G. Encourage pedestrians and transportation alternatives.

These goals for the mixed-use district area are all conducive to the protection of open space as desired by the City of Suwanee. Furthermore, they promote a greater sense of community by creating a more pedestrian-friendly environment and connectivity through the area.

As adopted, the mixed-use district provides guidelines for the protection of open space. The current requirements include:

- I. Common Open Space Requirements
  - 1. All designated common open spaces shall be preserved by one or more of the following methods:
    - a. Public dedication, subject to acceptance by the City Council by formal vote.
    - b. Conveyance to a property owners' association or nonprofit land conservation organization.
    - c. Retention of ownership, control and maintenance by the developer with a permanent conservation easement donated to a nonprofit land conservation organization.
  - 2. All privately owned common open space shall conform to its intended use and remain as expressed in the approved site development plan through the inclusion in all deeds of appropriate covenants. Said deed restrictions shall run with the land.

As written, the open space requirements should meet the intent of the Georgia Greenspace Program as permanently protected open space when a conservation easement or deed restriction is placed on the property. Portions of the open space that are used for community recreation or public park facilities, such as a swimming pool or tennis courts, would not meet the intent of the Georgia Greenspace Program.

## Recommendations

The mixed-use district zoning category establishes a goal for 20 percent of each development to be set aside as open space. No changes are recommended. The city should formulate a system for placing permanent protection on open space that is donated to the city to meet the Georgia Greenspace requirement.



## City of Suwanee Zoning Ordinance: Section 6.14 General Conditions

Within the Section 6.14 General Conditions, greenspace requirements are as follows:

- E. Provide a minimum 5-foot wide landscaped strip within the perimeter of a subdivided lot except for approved access points and utility crossings. The mixes of plantings are to include various types of trees, shrubs, plants and grasses.
- F. Provide a 5-foot wide landscaped strip outside of any dedicated right-of-way. Landscape the strip to follow the guidelines in "E".
- I. The developer shall be responsible for the ongoing maintenance of all landscaped areas within any required buffer against residential property as long as it remains residentially zoned.

Within the Section 6.14, General Conditions, Items E, F and I, specify the requirements for the development and maintenance of landscape buffer strips for single and multi-family, commercial and light manufacturing, and office institutional developments. A buffer is required along all road right-of-ways and along perimeter property lines. Additional buffers up to 50' are required elsewhere in the Ordinance when non-single family residential development adjoins single-family development. The intent of buffer areas are to protect the property value of the single family homes and reduce negative impacts such as noise, traffic, spill light, dust etc. that are the product of higher density residential and commercial land uses.

Without provision for pedestrian connections, an unintended by-product of the buffer areas can be segmentation of land uses. A common example is the development of single-family homes adjacent to a strip commercial center. The homes abut the back of the center with no pedestrian access to the front of the center via the buffer. Residents must drive to the center in order to shop, or walk a street route when sidewalks are provided along the right-of-way.

## Recommendation

It is recommended that the planning staff work with the Planning Commission and City Council to reevaluate the goals of the buffer requirements to include connectivity. If buffer width is increased between single family developments that adjoin one another, more room will be provided for greenway and park connections and connections to commercial areas that serve the community. With respect to all non-single family zone districts, increasing the buffer along right-of-ways should be considered. Larger landscape strips or buffers along roadways can serve to protect and or reestablish tree canopies along road corridors. It is recommended that the landscape strips be a minimum of 40' in width.



## City of Suwanee Zoning Ordinance: Tree Preservation and Replacement

While tree preservation is not the primary goal of providing public open space, it is a positive by-product. Throughout the citizen input phase of this planning process the loss of wooded sites and trees was a common concern. To protect the trees and forested areas of Suwanee, it is important to understand the distinction between tree preservation and tree replacement associated with development. Tree preservation promotes development practices that value existing trees and places a high value on protecting and incorporating these trees into the new development. Tree replacement promotes replanting trees that are removed due to development more than preservation of existing trees. It appears that the City's current Tree Preservation and Replacement Ordinance does a good job at replacing trees that are removed during construction, but except for very large trees, does not focus on general tree preservation.

Section 1704, Tree Preservation and Replacement Regulation detail, City of Suwanee requirements.

All new development in Suwanee must achieve prescribed tree density requirements as part of the plan approval process (20 tree density units per acre). Section 1704.6, Density Factor Analysis, as written, provides that an existing tree of up to 8" Diameter at Breast Height (DBH) is a lower credit than a newly planted tree of 1" DBH and likewise a 17" existing tree is equal to an 11" replacement tree. Currently, the only site-specific tree impact calculation that is presently required is based on specimen trees of 30" DBH, for large tree species and 12" DBH for smaller tree species. In order to encourage protection of these specimen trees, a tree density credit of two (2) times the assigned unit value is given. If the tree is removed, a tree replacement value of two (2) times the density credit is required. This section preserves large trees, but does not address most of the areas that are forested with smaller trees.

This ordinance is a good start on protecting trees, but due to the large size requirement of 30" for large tree species and 12" for small tree species, many quality trees of smaller size are removed without penalty or even an equal replacement value as illustrated in the preceding paragraph. Another approach to saving tree canopy would be to reduce the size of trees included in the existing tree evaluation and to require a 1" to 1" replacement value on trees less than the 30". Protection of the specimen trees of 30" and larger should remain at the current ratio of two (2) times the density value.

To maintain the positive impacts that trees have on the environment and aesthetics of Suwanee, a revision of the tree ordinance should be considered. The protection of trees will also provide wildlife benefits and help to preserve the natural character of Suwanee for future generations. Making preservation the primary focus of the ordinance rather than tree replacement is recommended. In many communities across the country tree preservation is achieved by requiring replacement on an inch per inch basis or with a fixed percentage of replanting for trees removed.

In Hendersonville, Tennessee their Design Review Manual requires that all isolated trees of 10" or larger be shown on all proposed site plans. In addition all forested areas

must be outlined and all trees of 10" or larger in the forested area must be identified. All trees removed must be replaced. In industrial zoned areas the replacement ratio is 25% and in all other areas the replacement ratio is 50%. Variances to the replacement requirements may only be made by the Hendersonville Planning Commission if the applicant can demonstrate the inability to assure growth of the replacement trees on site to unique soils, topography excessive amount or rock or limitations due to the size of the lot. In such a case, the applicant must then plant the trees in a public location found to be acceptable to the City or pay into a tree bank fund. Variances are not granted to allow the applicant to avoid the replacement requirements but to insure the health of the replanted trees.

Using a similar approach to that described above, the focus is shifted from replacement of trees to one of protection of existing trees and tree canopies. This ordinance has been in place for over 5 years and has had a dramatic impact on the number of large forested areas that have been protected.

Another tool that could be incorporated into the tree ordinance is a greater incentive program for the preservation of mature trees. Ratio could be formulated that allow increased density or higher floor areas ratios on sites where existing tree canopy areas are protected. On a residential site, the lot sizes could be reduced and the same number of units allowed on less acreage if areas of existing trees are protected. The number of lots could be increased above the base zone in cases where trees are protected within high priority zones such as along roadways, on ridge tops and along streams. The density bonus for tree preservation could be formulated into tables to allow developers to calculate the benefits for tree preservation in additional lots, units or square footage of retail or commercial space.

## **Recommendation**

It is recommended that the planning staff work with the Planning Commission to reevaluate the outcomes of the existing tree ordinance and shift the goal from tree replacement to tree protection. The requirements should be modified to place a higher value on tree protection rather than replacement. The ordinance should be modified to separate the trees required for parking lots and buffers from the total tree density requirements and replacement calculations. The ordinance should also include incentives for developers to protect existing trees.

## **Open Space Requirements**

The current City of Suwanee Zoning Ordinance establishes a 20 percent open space requirement only for mixed-use developments. In all other zoning categories the only open space that is required are the landscaped or buffer areas. The net result of the current zoning ordinance is a high rate of consumption of the open space that is developed. In other communities across the country, various options are used to provide more open space in the community.



For example, Gwinnett County's Development Regulations require a 6% open space set-aside for residential subdivisions. This can be reduced to 3% if a developed recreation area is provided for the community.

Also in Gwinnett County, a new Conservation Zoning category has been established for residential development that requires up to 50 percent of the site to be set aside as open space. One drawback to Gwinnett County's Conservation Zoning category at this time is the land that is set aside is not available for public use. It is allowed to be deeded to a property owners association. As such it would not count toward the Georgia Greenspace Program goals.

## **Greenway Dedication**

Suwanee has developed a detailed routing plan for various greenways. The Richard Trice Trail section of the Suwanee Creek Greenway System has been developed and an extension is currently planned. The creation of a greenway master plan should be considered to facilitate acquisition for additional parks and open space. Upon completion of a greenway master plan and adoption by the city, implementation of the plan should be started.

The adoption of the greenway master plan will put the city in the position of developing a greenway dedication and development policy. Several communities across the country have formulated policies that require greenways along designated routes to be built as part of a city's basic infrastructure system. Where these policies are in-place, the greenway is developed along with roads and utilities systems and turned over to the city. The state laws of Georgia would treat this type of improvement as a recreation improvement subject to impact fee legislation. It would be possible to require an impact fee on a system wide basis for the implementation of the greenway system a mile per person served basis.

## **Recommendation**

Develop a greenway master plan and an implementation policy that establishes an impact fee for greenways.

## **General Policy Recommendations**

In addition to recommendations regarding changes to existing zoning policies, the planning team has developed policy recommendations regarding greenways, parks, open space corridors and provisions for recreation. The following provides general recommendations by category.

## Greenways

- The city should provide a greenway system of trails, sidewalks and bike lanes that provide access to schools, parks, community open space and public facilities.
- The city should develop a Comprehensive Greenways and Bicycle Master Plan.
- Greenway facilities should:
  - A. Be separate from vehicular transportation systems whenever possible.
  - B. Be attractively landscaped to promote safe use for citizens.
  - C. Promote natural resource preservation and enhancement in all design aspects.
  - D. Have crossings at major roadway sections that are vertically separated from vehicular lanes.
  - E. Should connect to proposed county or regional greenway facilities to maximize transportation opportunities.

## Open Space

- Open space should be provided at all public facilities developed by the City of Suwanee.
- Open space should be a major component of the Old Town area.
- Open space parcels purchased for neighborhood park facilities should include a balance of forested and open field areas to allow for a variety of recreation activities.
- Landscape strips at a minimum of 40' should be established along Peachtree Industrial Boulevard, Lawrenceville Suwanee Road, Buford Highway and McGinnis Ferry Road. No tree removal or impervious materials should be allowed within the landscape strips.
- Remnants of historic farms should be protected and interpreted as part of the open space program.
- Standards for open space maintenance should be developed that reflect the desired level of citizen use and access.
- Stream corridor buffers should be increased to a minimum of 100' from the top of the bank on both sides of all streams with watersheds greater than 20 acres.

No impervious surfaces, other than greenway trails, boat launches or fishing access points should be located within the 100' minimum stream buffer.

No tree removal should be permitted within the stream buffer unless required to maintain proper stream flows. All tree cutting for stream flow maintenance should require a permit issued by the city's Planning Department.

## Recreation

- The city should provide neighborhood parks within one-half mile of all residential areas that are not served by county or homeowners' association recreation areas.
- The city should provide basic team sport practice facilities within selected neighborhood parks. Other parks should provide playgrounds, picnic facilities and open play fields and trails.



- Access to the Chattahoochee via trails and sidewalks should be provided from federal, state, county or city-owned park property.
- Open space, parks and greenways within the city should be maintained in a safe and aesthetically pleasing manner. Perpetual funding should be identified and maintained for all facilities.
- The city should seek out funding partnerships with the Gwinnett County Parks and Recreation Department for the development and operation of active recreation facilities that require high levels of operation and maintenance staff.
- The city should seek out partnerships with area athletic associations for development and maintenance funding for recreation facilities.