



North Athens Phase 2 (AKA Bethel Midtown Phase 2) Alternative Compliance Application Report

July 3, 2025 – W&A File #230216

REQUEST SUMMARY

Applicant:	W&A Engineering, Georgia
Location:	530 N. Hull Street
Tax Parcel :	163C5 C001A and 163C5 C001
Size:	2.01 Acres
Current Use:	Multi-family
Current Zoning:	C-D (North Downtown Design District)

The purpose of this request is for the approval of proposed methods of meeting Alternative Compliance for Section 9-10-6.C.8 regarding the height of proposed retaining walls as shown in the attached exhibits.

EXISTING SITE

The existing site is currently developed and contains Building 160 and Building 180 of the current Bethel Village Development. There are existing parking areas and a portion of the existing N. Lumpkin Street within the limits of the project. The appropriate plan reviews and approvals for the demolition of these existing facilities, and the relocation of public streets, utilities, and other associated infrastructure have been submitted, been approved or are pending approval. The existing site location is highlighted by the yellow box in Figure 1 below.



FIGURE 1 – EXISTING SITE CONDITIONS

PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

Vision

The subject development is Phase 2 of the North Downtown Athens Redevelopment also referred to as Bethel Midtown Redevelopment. As outlined in the Downtown Athens Master Planning Study, the vision of the proposed development is to transform the former Bethel Village, a 190 unit privately held subsidized housing community to create a new mixed income community, including units at 30% AMI, 60% AMI, and market rate units. The construction of Phase 1 of the North Downtown Athens Redevelopment was completed in early 2025 through a partnership between the Unified Government of Athens-Clarke County, the Athens Housing Authority, Columbia Residential, and Johnathon Rose Companies.

The Downtown Athens Master Planning Study represents the culmination of extensive community engagement and careful consideration of the impacts of the proposed redevelopment. An overview of the masterplan and the location of Phase 2 is shown in Figure 3 below.

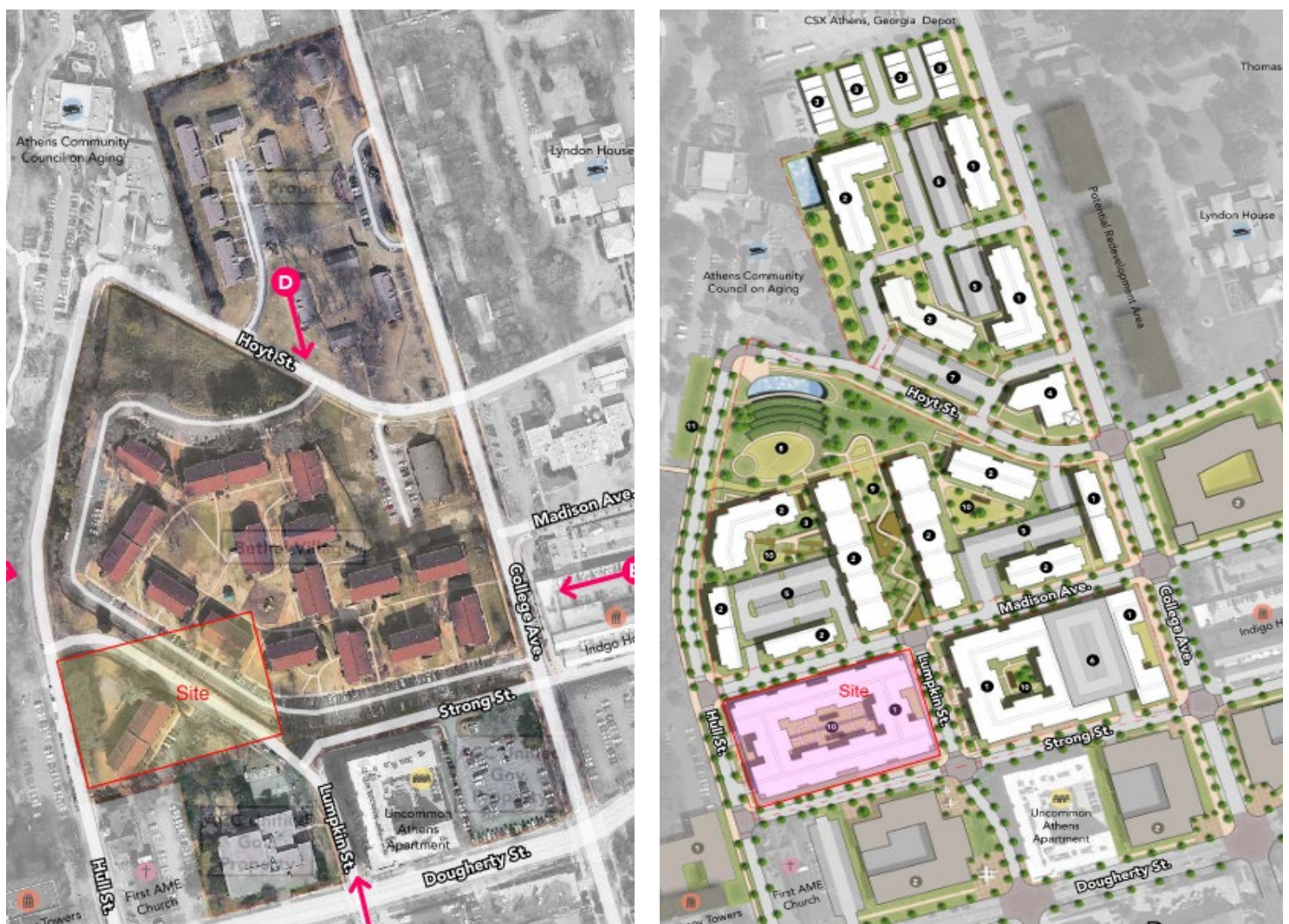


FIGURE 2 – EXERT FROM NORTH DOWNTOWN ATHENS MASTER PLANNING STUDY

SITE CHARACTERISTICS

SITE TOPOGRAPHY

The site falls sharply from south to north, approximately 70 vertical feet, from Strong Street to Hoyt Street. This stark change in elevation was identified in the North Downtown Athens Master Planning Study as an existing condition that would require strategic planning, engineering, architecture, and design effort to ensure walkability, accessibility, and human scale for the proposed redevelopment. Phase 2 of the development has approximately 30 vertical feet of fall between the corner of N. Lumpkin Street and Strong Street and the corner of N. Hull Street and Madison Avenue.

SITE SECTION



FIGURE 3 – EXERT FROM NORTH DOWNTOWN ATHENS MASTER PLANNING STUDY

REDEVELOPMENT AND REGULATORY EXPECTATIONS

The site is currently zoned C-D (Commercial Downtown) and lies within the North Downtown Design Area, allowing ground floor dwelling units. The proposed project, as envisioned by the North Downtown Athens Master Planning Study, proposes ground floor dwelling units throughout the project's street frontage.

In accordance with A-CC Code of Ordinances, Section 9-10-6.D.7.A, all ground floor dwelling units shall have direct access to the street and public sidewalk. The proposed project has been designed in compliance with this requirement and vetted by the A-CC Planning Department.

The proposed project must meet specific rules and regulations for accessibility as set forth by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requiring that all dwelling units be on an accessible route. 24 C.F.R. § 100.201, 24 C.F.R. § 100.205(a). The ground floor dwelling units have been designed to be on an accessible route to the fullest extent practical.

The proposed project must comply with the recommendations of the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) that require additional entrances to dwelling units to be accessible if they access public and common use areas. All proposed ground floor units have two entrances, one from the internal corridor within the proposed building, and a secondary entrance from the public street to comply with A-CC Code of Ordinances Section 9-10-6.D.7.A.. This secondary entrance from the public street must be designed to be accessible to the fullest extent practical.

A-CC Code of Ordinances Section 9-10-6.C.8 requires that all retaining walls adjacent to a public right of way be set back a minimum of two feet for every foot of wall height above three feet in height. To provide accessible access to secondary entrances for the ground floor dwelling units in accordance with DOJ recommendations, site retaining walls must be designed to provide an accessible route to all ground floor unit entrances to the fullest extent practical.

Due to the existing site topography, the finish floor elevations of the these ground floor dwelling units are constrained. These constraints require minor design alternatives as requested below to achieve the appropriate accessible egress to these ground floor dwelling units.

ALTERNATIVE DESIGN PRINCIPLES

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The Comprehensive Plan for Athens-Clarke County identifies Downtown as a special area, which is to have specific design standards, to “protect the historic character” and to “ensure that new buildings develop in a downtown style and are of sufficient intensity.” The Comprehensive Plan also introduces certain “corridors” in which a preferred character should be promoted through regulations.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The Comprehensive Plan states that the community should “develop and implement design standards for new development and redevelopment that address architectural composition (both material and form), site circulation, site and parking lot landscaping (including tree planting standards for parking lots), lighting and noise level standards.” These standards are further founded on considerations of urban design, which are set forth in the Comprehensive Plan. These include:

- Create a pedestrian friendly environment.
- Establish a sense of visual continuity while encouraging creativity and diversity in individual building design.
- Promoting a mix of uses contributes to the vitality of Downtown.
- Conveying a sense of human scale.

REQUESTED ALTERNATIVE COMPLIANCE

The request is for the following alternatives to compliance.

1. **Wall A** – This request for alternative compliance is to allow portions of the proposed Wall A highlighted in orange on **Sheet C302** to be constructed as shown, having a maximum wall height of 7 feet and a minimum setback from the public right of way of 3 feet, allowing direct egress to the dwelling unit served by Wall A. Wall A would have a clay brick veneer similar to the image in Figure 4 – Phase 1 Brick Veneer Retaining Wall and Direct Egress Example. The 4-foot-deep planting area located between the public sidewalk and face of the proposed Wall A would be landscaped as shown in **Sheet LC510**.
2. **Wall F2** – This request for alternative compliance is to allow portions of the proposed Wall F2 highlighted in orange **Sheet LC511 and Sheet C303** to be constructed as shown having a maximum wall height of 10 feet and a minimum setback from the public right of way of 4 feet, allowing direct access to the dwelling units serviced by Wall F2. Wall F2 would have a clay brick veneer similar to the image in Figure 4 – Phase 1 Brick Veneer Retaining Wall and Direct Egress Example. The 5-foot-deep planting area located between the public sidewalk and face of the proposed Wall A would be landscaped as shown in **Sheet LC511**.
3. **Wall J2** – This request is to allow portions of proposed Wall J2 as highlighted in orange on **Sheet C305** to be constructed as shown having a maximum wall height of 6 feet and a minimum setback from the public right of way of 2 feet, allowing the proposed building elevation to the transition between Second Level and the First Level in a tiered approach along the proposed realignment of N. Lumpkin Street as shown in Exhibit C. Wall J2 would have a clay brick veneer similar to the image in Figure 4 – Phase 1 Brick Veneer Retaining Wall and Direct Egress Example. The 2-foot-deep planting strip located between the public sidewalk and face of the proposed Wall A would be landscaped as shown in **Sheet LC512**.

4. **Wall J3** – This request is to allow portions of Wall J3 as highlighted in orange on **Sheet C305** to be constructed as shown, having a maximum wall height of 5 feet and a minimum setback from the public right of way of 2 feet, allowing the proposed building elevation to the transition between Second Level and the First Level in a tiered approach along the proposed realignment of N. Lumpkin Street as shown in **Exhibit C**. Wall J2 would have a clay brick veneer similar to the image in Figure 4 – Phase 1 Brick Veneer Retaining Wall and Direct Egress Example. The 2-foot-deep planting strip located between the public sidewalk and face of the proposed Wall A would be landscaped as shown in **Sheet LC513**.

REPRESENTATIVE IMAGES



FIGURE 4 – THE VIEW AT NODA – PHASE 1 – VIEW ALONG N. HULL STREET



FIGURE 5 – THE VIEW AT NODA – PHASE 1 – VIEW ALONG N. HULL STREET



FIGURE6 – THE VIEW AT NODA – PHASE 1 – VIEW ALONG N. HULL STREET



FIGURE 7 – THE VIEW AT NODA – PHASE 1 – LANDSCAPE STRIP



FIGURE 7 – THE VIEW AT NODA – PHASE 1 – LANDSCAPE STRIP

CONCLUSION

This request would result in public benefits greater than any potential negative impacts. The continued redevelopment of Bethel Midtown Village is consistent with the vision set forth by the North Downtown Athens Master Planning Study, previously approved by this body. The required alternative compliance allows for the development of ground floor units promoting the diversity of uses in the C-D Zoning District, improving the appeal of Downtown so that it feels like everyone's neighborhood.

This request is consistent with the goals, objectives, and policies set forth in the 2023 Comprehensive Plan for the Athens-Clarke County Unified Government. The proposed alternatives promote equitable access to public infrastructure, sidewalks and enhance neighbor identity by creating a walkable, human scale and engaging space.

This request is consistent with the attributes of Downtown and of the North Downtown Design Area described in the Alternative Compliance Guidelines. The North Downtown Design Area is characterized by the sharp elevation changes. The design approach to these alternatives incorporates these topographic challenges into design solutions that create vibrant, safe, and creative places that provide access to a range of diverse users, housing, and public spaces.

This request conforms with relevant Alternative Compliance Guidelines. While the Alternative Compliance Guidelines does not specifically address retaining walls, it does suggest that designs should consider pedestrian friendly environments, establish a sense of visual continuity while encouraging creativity and diversity in individual building design, promote a mix of uses contributes to the vitality of Downtown, and have a sense of human scale. These design alternatives address the sites topography incorporating pedestrian accessibility, creating a diversity in the building architecture while maintaining continuity, promotes a mix of new residential uses that promote vitality and diversity in people, and are designed at a human scale.

The requested Alternative Compliance is consistent with the North Downtown Athens Master Planning Study, it promotes affordable and accessible housing and builds upon the architectural diversity of Downtown.