

Community Character Areas

Growth Concept/ Character Areas Map: Descriptions

The Growth Concept Map organizes the county into three general areas: “Traditional Athens,” in the central area of the county; “Greater Athens,” the more recently developed suburban ring around Traditional Athens; and the “Rural” areas of Clarke County that extend along to the county boundary.

Within those three areas, there are various types of Concept Centers, falling under two headings: Regional Centers and Local Centers. The largest influence on our land use patterns is held by the Regional Centers such as the Downtown, the University and other Major Commercial Centers. These Regional Centers are of great importance to the Athens-Clarke County community as well as to the surrounding counties and region. Local Centers hold importance for Athens-Clarke County as a whole. The Community Centers, medium-sized in scale and influence, serve and draw from the Athens-Clarke County Community as a whole. The Neighborhood Centers support and influence the area of Athens-Clarke nearby their location. The fact that they serve a smaller constituency does not diminish their importance, as Neighborhood Centers are vital to the type of traditional urban development that is held as a goal in Athens-Clarke County. Rural Centers focus on the new schools constructed in those outlying areas. Employment Areas are essential to our community as they house the engine for our local economy.

The Growth Concept Map references existing land use patterns, infrastructure, and zoning designations, as well as population and employment projections through the year 2020.

Major Character Areas Categories

Traditional Athens

This area forms the heart of Athens, encompassing the historic core of the community and, roughly, the old boundaries of the City of Athens prior to unification with Clarke County. It includes Downtown, the University, the historic neighborhoods, the central area of the county and historic community centers such as Five Points. It is laid out, more or less, on a grid pattern of streets that are well connected and is the most pedestrian and bike friendly area of the community. It will remain the center of community life – accessible, vital, vibrant and safe. While diverse in nature, the aesthetics and architecture of Traditional Athens helps create the area’s sense of place and uniqueness and

should be encouraged to continue in new developments within the Traditional Athens boundaries. The university and government centers are located here, along with the lion's share of cultural, arts and entertainment opportunities. Economic activity is centered in Downtown, with a focus on entertainment, education, government, offices and specialty retail. The main streets and community centers within Traditional Athens are important also and provide local services and retailing for residents and visitors. Furthermore, the area acts as a central hub for alternative transportation options and easy access to Greater Athens. The area is an enclave of successful traditional urban design.

Greater Athens

Greater Athens is the more recently developed suburban ring around Traditional Athens. Greater Athens contains most of the residential and employment population within Athens-Clarke County. Within the ring lie many shopping areas, which are identified as community and neighborhood centers, as well as areas of manufacturing and employment. Perhaps most importantly, this area includes sufficient developable land to accommodate expected population and employment growth.

Rural

The Rural Areas of Clarke County extend along the county boundaries. This is an area of largely low intensity, sparsely developed agricultural land and open areas. This land is not needed for the level of growth expected to occur by the year 2020. The Rural Area is appropriate for low density rural housing and agriculture.

This is the green buffer that surrounds the current and future urban areas of Greater Athens and the surrounding areas. It offers a relief from a continuous urban landscape and should be protected through air, ground, and water quality standards.

The corridors that traverse the Rural Areas are an exception to the relatively low intensity development and agricultural development that characterizes them. These corridors must be monitored to ensure that the rural nature is maintained.

Concept Centers

These range from the larger Regional Centers of Downtown Athens, the University of Georgia and the Georgia Square Mall area, to Local Centers that are typified by Community Centers in areas such as Beechwood and at either end of Gaines School Road, and Neighborhood Centers in areas such as Five Points, Normaltown, Danielsville Road, and Jefferson Road, Rural Centers around outlying schools and Employment Areas.

Regional Centers

Regional Centers are focal points that draw people from the surrounding counties and the Northeast Georgia Region as a whole. Some Regional Centers, such as the University of Georgia, may draw from farther a field – as commuting from Atlanta to the UGA campus is becoming more and more common heightening the urgency for transportation options between Athens and Atlanta. The increasing sophistication and quality of Athens healthcare facilities are also drawing large numbers of people from the surrounding areas. Large retail, large office spaces, campus, manufacturing and distribution areas are present and regionally oriented.

Downtown Athens

Downtown Athens is the most important 300 acres in the community. The Downtown is one of the defining characteristics of Athens-Clarke County. It is full of history and is home to some of Athens' more dramatic buildings. It is the governmental, educational cultural, and entertainment center of the region. The economic vitality of the Downtown is crucial for the health of the greater community. Downtown Athens is successful but could use a greater percentage of investment, business activity and mixed use residential to assure overall prosperity within the community.

A critical component to the success of Downtown Athens is its pedestrian friendly character. Downtown's sustained walkability has enabled the city center to thrive in an era of suburbanization. Downtown Athens is not perfect, but is, by most standards, extremely successful and has survived with the same basic design for nearly two centuries. The newer parts of Athens can learn from and emulate it.

University District

To a great extent, the community identity of Athens-Clarke County is founded upon its role as the home of the University of Georgia. The University is the largest employer in Athens-Clarke County and the students who attend the University, make up a large segment of our population. The University enhances the attractiveness our community.. A strong, mutually beneficial relationship between the University and the community as a whole is essential, because the University's land use actions have substantial impact on the community.

Major Commercial Centers

These development nodes are large, employment and retail centers that draw business and shoppers from the Northeast Georgia region. The most prominent is the office and retailing concentration called the Atlanta Highway Regional Center.

The Atlanta Highway Regional Center is typical of these Major Commercial Centers as it is a dynamic combination of office, retail and potential high-tech employment. Its location on the edge of the community, bisected by the Atlanta Highway, and its relative isolation from the bulk of the Athens-Clarke County Community means its character is auto-oriented, although it is a good destination for transit as well. This area forms a gateway into the community and serves as visitors' first impression as they arrive from the west.

An essential aspect in the further development of these areas is the inclusion of live/work developments. The introduction of mixed-use properties should be encouraged in these areas to facilitate the growth in both density and size while maintaining smart development patterns. The creation of a diverse landscape containing commercial, residential, and office spaces will help create the areas own sense of place as well as uniqueness.

Local Centers

Community and Neighborhood Centers

These two types of development nodes, are similar in function, but differ in scale and attributes. The main distinction between neighborhood centers and community centers is one of size and market area. Community centers are

larger—up to 300,000 square feet in total size—and primarily serve an area within a three-mile radius. They usually involve several developments located around a key intersection or along an important road. Neighborhood centers are smaller in scale—usually less than 100,000 square feet in total building area—and offer basic services within about a one-mile radius. . Five Points is always held as an example of a successful local center.

Community Centers

Secondary focal points but more developed than Neighborhood Centers. Community Centers are hubs of multiple neighborhoods and contain high density residential and commercial development. Retail, civic, service commercial and professional offices are concentrated on street level with high density residential located above. While these hubs are more auto-centric than Neighborhood Centers, greenspace, open areas, sidewalks and other trails facilitate and encourage pedestrian movement as well as connect different uses while limiting automobile traffic. The Alps / Baxter/ St Mary's Hospital area and Normaltown are examples of Community Centers.

Neighborhood Centers

Neighborhood Centers are the focal point of a neighborhood with higher density of housing, mixed-use residential accommodating small retail, service commercial and small professional offices. Neighborhood Centers are highly pedestrian-oriented. Greenspace, open areas, sidewalks and other trails facilitate and encourage pedestrian movement as well as maintain a neighborhood feel while limiting automobile traffic. The neighborhood orientation towards pedestrian works best if supported by dense population living in neighborhoods with notable walkability. Pedestrian infrastructure is also critical for the success of these centers. The best example of a Neighborhood Center is Five Points.

Manufacturing and Distribution Areas

These are areas where larger scale commercial, retail, office and large-scale light and heavy industrial developments are and should be located. The key to the area economy is, in part, defined by its industrial and business centers. These areas are auto-oriented and may benefit from the construction of local traffic access road. Physically, they are characterized by collections of large-scale buildings and development; as such, buffers between the facilities and the road are appropriate.

Corridors, Parks, and Environmental Areas

The map also identifies important transportation corridors, environmental corridors, larger parks and open spaces.

Corridors

The Concept Plan concentrates development of housing and employment in centers that function as nodes along the key corridors in the community. Street design is critical. Gateways, for instance, should be attractive entries into the community or perceptible transitions into Traditional Athens. Corridors should be protected as they are the framework of the transportation network and should include alternative modes to enhance their viability. Attention must be paid to aesthetics and function through context sensitive street design. Because corridors allow for appropriate transitions between center types, street transect design is critical to establishing and maintaining desired corridor character (examples can be found in the ACC Corridor Management Study dated November 6, 2006.) This creates an ideal situation for transit service to provide efficient and cost effective service along these corridors. With the development of so many destinations and good pedestrian environments along concentrated routes, transit becomes a feasible alternative to driving a car. This benefits the whole community by making better use of the roadway's capacity, protecting air quality, and promoting greater public health.

Parks

This community wide system of green and open spaces is an essential component in preserving the quality of the community. These parks can include linear parks, greenways and as well as active and passive recreation space.

Environmental Areas

One of the most important areas to preserve in Athens is the system of river, creeks, lakes, wildlife habitats and corridors, steep slopes, granite outcroppings, tree canopy and viewsheds and wetlands that are the most dominant natural feature of the County, providing greenways, natural habitat, protection from flooding, and important water quality benefits.

Gateway

Gateways mark the transition points from one land use category to another or between Athens-Clarke County and other surrounding counties. Gateways should be attractive entries into the community and into the Major Character Areas Categories.