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Growth Management
Comprehensive Planning
Zoning & Land Use Regulations
Land Development Applications
Expert Testimony
Public Policy Analysis

MEMORANDUM

TO: Harry Carter, City Manager
City of Cornelia

FROM: Jerry Weitz

DATE: July 21, 2003

RE: Audit of "Cornelia, Georgia: A Plan and Process for Community Design"
(Jordan, Jones & Goulding 2001) (i.e., "Downtown Plan")

This memorandum provides a quality growth audit of the above-referenced planning document for the city's downtown. Rather than use a checklist format, for the downtown plan it made more sense to provide a qualitative assessment in memorandum format.

This memo elaborates on how the plan meets commonly accepted principles of quality growth. The overall conclusion of this audit is that clearly, the downtown plan promotes virtually all major principles of quality growth. None of its recommendations pose obstacles to quality growth. It is comprehensive in its outlook and thorough (as the paragraphs in this memo indicate). About the only major area of quality growth that it does not address is housing affordability.

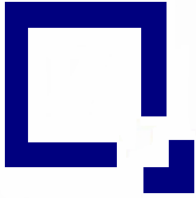
After presenting the audit's findings, this memo includes sections on the implications for the Quality Growth Audit project – for long range planning as well as amendments to land use regulations.

FINDINGS OF THE AUDIT

Quality of Place Objectives

The purpose of the planning document – to determine how to best benefit the downtown area to increase its value and attractiveness – is clearly consistent with quality growth objectives. It is mild but clear in its criticism of sprawl development patterns ("unfocused strip development"). The plan seeks to further enhance the image of Cornelia through the installation of gateway concepts (i.e., Northern Gateway Park). The plan, of course, pays great attention to urban design, an important emphasis in planning for smart growth.

Land Use Principles



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TO: Harry Carter, City Manager
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FROM: Jerry Weitz

DATE: July 21, 2003

RE: Results of Questionnaire/Comment Sheet: Cornelia Quality Growth Audit

Although we might still gain additional input from the survey instrument we prepared, I thought it would be fruitful to summarize the responses we have received so far on this public participation opportunity.

The original survey instrument has been used to compile responses, including "write in" statements as well as answers to questions using fixed, close-ended (Likert scale) responses.

A. Do you have comments, concerns, our suggestions about the work scope as presented?

Need to update codes; emphasis on greenspace
Quality growth in downtown; more stores

B. What, in your opinion, should be the three highest priorities for improvements in the city?

1. Updating water system
Fill empty buildings downtown
Making the city inviting
Housing
Diversity of shopping
Clean up the residential areas south/southwest of town
2. Additional help to enforce ordinances
Visually improve building facades, implement streetscapes
Sidewalks and trails connecting areas of the city
Streets
More restaurants
Use existing larger buildings such as old Ingles
3. Clean up streets other than downtown. Taking care of problems we already have.
Purchase land available for greenspace
Sidewalks
Continue to keep up and keep clean the city park and community house. Beautiful area!

Quality Growth Audit Questionnaire Results: City of Cornelia

C. Please respond the following statements (circle the most appropriate number):

1. The city has about the right mix of housing types (single-family dwellings, apartments, etc.).

0	1	0	6	0
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

If you strongly disagree or disagree, please state why: **Not enough nice housing for purchase by older people (condos, townhouses, etc. Older people moving in or downsizing have little to no suitable "nice" places to purchase. If they want no yard work and a very nice place, there is not enough to attract them.**

2. I can walk in my neighborhood and to nearby destinations and am comfortable doing so.

0	3	1	3	1
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

3. I have concerns about the types and density of dwellings put on vacant land near my property.

0	0	2	4	2
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

4. Mixing housing in with commercial uses in the city's downtown would fit the city just fine.

0	0	1	7	0
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

5. There's enough run-down commercial buildings that it's time the city did something about it.

0	0	0	6	2
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

6. Mixed land use (e.g., commercial-residential) sounds fine but only outside of single-family neighborhoods.

0	1	0	5	2
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

7. I wouldn't mind having a corner store, laundry, or other commercial service within or at the edge of my neighborhood.

0	6	0	0	1
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

8. It is important for Cornelia to take a leadership role in managing growth outside its boundaries.

0	2	0	3	3
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

Quality Growth Audit Questionnaire Results: City of Cornelia

9. I think it is reasonable to expect Cornelia to annex lands as they develop outside the city limits.

0	0	1	5	2
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

10. New developments should provide sidewalks along the roads fronting them.

0	0	0	6	2
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

11. New developments should provide shade trees along the roads fronting them.

0	0	1	3	4
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

12. New developments should set aside a reasonable amount of open space on their lots.

0	0	1	5	2
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

13. I support the idea that Ga. 123 should become a scenic corridor with land use restrictions.

0	0	3	3	1
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

14. I support the city initiating a major program to improve sidewalks, even if it meant a modest city tax increase.

0	0	1	4	3
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

15. I support the city initiating a major program to improve acquire open spaces, even if it meant a modest city tax increase.

0	1	1	3	3
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

D. Please share any additional comments you have. Attach another sheet for more space.

- Enforcing the ordinances we already have.
- People want to see something actually done, not just talk.
- Improve quality of life for everyone.
- Dress up downtown to attract small businesses with housing upstairs.
- Preserve and enhance
- City should lead in greenspace and parks
- Repair and keep up the older, truly beautiful buildings!
- Cornelia has always had a history of tearing down beauty to build ugly (ex. Buildings used by Dance-A-Lot, Comm. Bank, etc. on Main Street. The 1960s did not produce many attractive buildings. All the large trees on Main were cut down and houses removed for tons of concrete. Also, the ugly buildings where the P.O. now is are very unattractive buildings. The old P.O. would make a beautiful office building.
- Cornelia needs to join with the rest of the county and either remodel the existing facility or build something the size of the Gainesville Civic Center. If they had enough forethought in the late 1940s to build something so big, usable, dividable, and to keep updating it – why can't Habersham/Cornelia? If a function of more than 250/300 is planned – we are out of luck and the money (profit) goes to another county.

Goals suggest the desire to have mixed uses (i.e., “live, work, and visit”). The plan suggests there are mixed-use development opportunities in the block along Main Street and Wells Street. It specifically encourages mixed-use development as a part of the historic revitalization and preservation of downtown.

Public Investment Policies

The construction of streetscape projects in the downtown area makes for a more pedestrian friendly atmosphere, consistent with quality growth objectives. The planning document aspires to create a “sense of place,” which is an objective of smart growth. The plan further promotes quality growth objectives by recognizing the condition of utilities in the city. For instance, it finds the city has corroded pipes, inadequate electrical supply, and no broadband communications. These imply a prioritized commitment to infrastructure improvements in the downtown, as opposed to spending money facilitating development at the urban fringe. Hence, the downtown plan would score major points on a quality growth checklist for these emphases.

Reducing Automobile Dominance

The plan emphasizes use of streetscape projects to not only beautify surroundings but also to calm automobile traffic.

Green Objectives

Developing a new public plaza in the downtown is consistent with quality growth objectives. The plan recognizes that beautification will not end with tree plantings in streetscapes. Specific project improvements for parks are provided in the plan. A creek restoration project is envisioned as part of the proposed new Wells Street Park. The plan recognizes that the Mud Creek floodplain is a prime opportunity to establish a greenway. New parking lots serving the Civic Center and Civic Center Park would be well landscaped and shaded with street trees, reducing effects of a localized urban heat island.

Direction of Growth: Infill and Redevelopment

The plan recognizes that expansion of city limits is constricted by the cities of Mt. Airy, Baldwin, and national forest lands. It suggests that over time the fixed perimeters will lead to more “internal development” or “infill” development. It uses the Civic Center Park as a viable stimulus to residential redevelopment between 2nd and 3rd Streets. The plan includes a section on historic preservation and infill development. It also identifies commercial redevelopment areas at Clarkesville and Wayside Streets. Further, it suggests that downtown vacant commercial development are prime candidates for higher density residential or new commercial development.

The plan goes further in this regard by recognizing that industrial uses in the downtown may not be conducive to a pedestrian friendly downtown. To free up space for redevelopment (specifically Civic Center Park), industrial uses would be phased out of certain downtown locations. To compensate, an industrial park would be proposed with rail and road access via US 441 Bypass. The plan notes that sprawl will be discouraged by promoting residential and commercial development of the downtown area.

Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND)

The planning document also recognizes that “traditional forms of development” are more appropriate than contemporary development characteristics, given Cornelia’s history. It does not use the term traditional neighborhood development, but it is reasonably implied. The plan also incorporates TND principles by proposing Civic Center Park in the center of downtown, as well as other civic spaces.

Alternative Modes of Transportation

A major emphasis of the downtown plan is to provide for pedestrian and bicycle facilities, not only for the downtown, but with regional linkages to important destinations. It acknowledges limitations of the current sidewalk network and finds that portions of sidewalks have fallen into disrepair and need to be attractively renovated. The plan also argues for a cohesive system of pedestrian and bicycle accesses which will connect destinations. Specific project improvements for bikeways, sidewalks are provided in the plan.

Regional Considerations

The plan is regional in the sense that it acknowledges Cornelia’s surroundings and notes how regional and mountain bicycling are increasingly popular. The plan also makes frequent references to abutting cities of Mt. Airy and Baldwin. It envisions regional bicycle and pedestrian access using “existing abandoned rail corridors that already link Cornelia with Mt. Airy and Tallulah Falls. It finds that the abandoned railroad is still intact within the city. It envisions regional festivals taking place in Cornelia.

Specific Recommendations Relative to Land Use Regulations

The plan, under “funding opportunities,” indicates the city needs appearance and landscape standards for developments near Civic Center Park, to provide developers with a guide to redeveloping downtown residential areas into strong, cohesive neighborhoods.

IMPLICATIONS AND IDEAS FOR CITY PLANNING

- The plan is visionary and extremely valuable for city planning efforts. Where it leaves off, the products of the quality growth audit project should begin. That is, geographically the plan emphasizes the downtown but within a regional framework. Our attention should now focus on how the city’s other corridors and neighborhoods will logically extend the concepts of the downtown plan.
- The downtown plan confirms prior thoughts that the quality growth audit project should focus on pedestrian system improvements. In particular, sidewalk projects that will provide the “coherent system” outside of downtown (i.e., those areas which are not part of identified streetscape improvements) and into the city’s neighborhoods is needed.

IMPLICATIONS AND IDEAS FOR REVISING REGULATIONS

- **Possible need for an “official map.”** Official maps are no longer used much in Georgia, but they can be a potent tool for implementing the objectives of the plan. An official map is not an official zoning map. Rather, it is a map of public facilities to be

acquired, including corridors. It seeks to preserve identified public sites and corridors so that development does not intrude on future greenways, new road connections, and sites for public spaces. A map and accompanying regulations could be adopted with the purpose of delaying development in the path of designated future facilities, long enough for the city to either negotiate a right-of-way, easement, or clear path for a planned feature, or perhaps to acquire the land through condemnation. It seems that an ordinance (part of the city's land use regulations) which would help protect these corridors would be an important step to protect these lands and help ensure projects could be implemented in the future. The Model Land Use Management Code of the Georgia Department of Community Affairs has a "module" for corridor mapping which could be integrated into the city's regulations. A map could be prepared based on the projects identified in the downtown plan, showing greenway corridors, bikeways, park sites, and other major public improvements described in the plan.

- **Mixed-use development.** Mixed use development opportunities should be reflected in the city's land use element of its comprehensive plan. Zoning regulations should provide for mixed-use development in appropriate locations. A mixed use category should be added to the future land use plan map and text of the land use element. Mixed use development should be facilitated and encouraged either in the city's "central business district" or in a downtown redevelopment overlay zone. The mixed-use zoning or overlay district should provide certain desired specifications for the proper mixing of commercial, office, and residential uses.
- **Rezoning industry.** The downtown plan suggests that certain industrial uses are incompatible with the downtown concept and/or occupy space needed for downtown civic projects. Existing light industrial zoning, if allowed to continue, may perpetuate incompatible land uses in the downtown, and so the industrial zoning in the downtown should probably be changed to use districts more consistent with the downtown vision (see for example, the discussion of traditional neighborhood development below). The downtown plan also recognizes the need for a new industrial park, which implies the need to find a suitable location and perhaps pre-zone some other land for such an industrial park.
- **Leveraging private streetscape improvements with public dollars and regulations.** By Cornelia demonstrating commitment to an attractive downtown, and showing the financial support for such improvements, the city has also positioned itself to require that private development follow suit. The standards for quality development in the downtown, which include things like street trees and parking lot landscaping, can and should be included in regulations governing development along other corridors. Regulation alone can help ensure such similar improvements get made on private properties; however, by setting a good example itself, Cornelia will probably gain more willingness from property owners because public dollars leverage private opportunities and profits.
- **Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND) District.** The new zoning ordinance should provide a category for TND neighborhoods so they can evolve adjacent to the downtown as envisioned in the plan. Consideration should be given to pre-zoning for TND, as opposed to applying it only in the case a property owner applies for it (i.e., as a "floating zone" which is in the text but not yet mapped), although there is good argument

that public improvements may need to be further developed before assuming the viability of the TND concept near downtown Cornelia. To the extent that TND neighborhoods could incorporate multi-family and other higher density housing types, the downtown plan could provide a partial or thorough answer to the city's current concerns about the spread of multi-family housing in the city. That is, the city may adopt a strategy that future multi-family development must be restricted to downtown Cornelia, as a part of mixed-use developments, or within TND neighborhoods next to downtown in identified locations. This could be written into the city's housing and land use elements of its comprehensive plan. There might also be other opportunities, not specifically identified in the downtown plan, for TND development, and a reconsideration of the zoning map should account for this possibility.

- **Pedestrian access and improvements.** The plan clearly implies the need for new development to be served with adequate sidewalks, and in some cases, with bike paths or multi-use trails. This means that development regulations not only need to require sidewalks, but sidewalks on individual development sites need to connect to the public sidewalk system. This means that certain pedestrian network provisions must be included and made applicable to certain or all private developments. Specifications for bicycle facilities might also be desirable as part of the land development regulations.
- **Historic preservation.** While its recommendations are not specific, the downtown plan implies the need for protection of the cultural heritage of the downtown. That can be done through establishment of a historic preservation commission and an ordinance requiring review by the commission for developments within a designated historic district. This recommendation is far-reaching and may be beyond the immediate scope of the Quality Growth Audit project because of the documentation needed to support designation of historic districts. However, the commission could be established and the ordinance positioned so that preservation regulations would apply within an already established district. This argues for establishing either the CBD zoning district (perhaps with some changes to its current boundary on the ground) or perhaps a separately established overlay district as the geographic area within which historic preservation regulations would apply. This issue deserves further discussion by city leaders, for we would not want to embark on this complex, time-consuming effort unless we felt there was consensus for implementation of preservation policies.
- **Appearance standards and design guidelines.** As noted above, the downtown plan recommends more attention to design in the city's land use regulations. This can be done either through separate design guidelines (not part of the audit project) or through the inclusion of selected design concepts and regulations (e.g., landscaping specifications) in the new zoning ordinance.

Please note that these observations are in addition to other concepts identified in prior quality growth audit products submitted to you.

We should have time to discuss the merits of these ideas when we meet on July 23, 2003. I look forward to seeing you then.