

A New Approach to Planning and Quality Growth in Georgia

Headlines like these are typical in many communities throughout Georgia. People are concerned about changes in their way of life – decline in the character of their neighborhoods, encroaching commercial development, increasing traffic, loss of trees, farmland or open space, and water quality or other environmental problems. But community change doesn't have to be traumatic. Communities can work out ways to guide change and development, making sure that new growth enriches the community and promotes a better quality of life for all residents. This manageable type of community change is called quality growth.

“New Discount Retailer Threatens Downtown Businesses”
“Road Widening to Remove Historic Buildings”
“Residents Protest Shopping Center Rezoning”
“Opponents Protest High-Density Project at Hearing”

What is Quality Growth?

This is a difficult question to answer, as many people have different perspectives on what quality growth is, but in its simplest terms, quality growth means returning to the way we used to build our communities and neighborhoods. They were places where people could walk to school or the corner drugstore, pursue recreational activities at a nearby park, or just sit on the front porch and get to know their neighbors. Over 30 public and private organizations have joined forces as the Georgia Quality Growth Partnership (GQGP) to promote a return to quality growth in Georgia's communities. The partnership has adopted the following principles that define what quality growth does:

- Ensures equitable access for all citizens to a range of options for education, transportation, housing, employment, human services, culture, and recreation;
- Creates opportunities for citizens to learn more about community planning and actively encourage their involvement in public decision-making;
- Respects and protects our natural resources - wildlife, land, water, air and trees;
- Shapes appealing physical environments that enhance walkability and positive social interaction;
- Recognizes that community decisions have an impact on neighboring jurisdictions and, therefore, must be made from a responsible regional and statewide perspective;
- Incorporates practices learned from our local experience as well as from other communities and cultures;
- Preserves and enhances our cultural and historic places for future generations;
- Provides for the efficient and economical use of public infrastructure;
- Employs the principles of sustainability and balance to ensure the economic viability of all communities and to enhance the state's economic competitiveness.

What are the Benefits of Quality Growth?

Quality growth can yield a number of benefits for your community. In addition to an improved quality of life for residents, including more affordable housing, cleaner water and air, more walkable neighborhoods, and reduced commuting times, there are a number of

quantifiable fiscal and cost benefits for businesses, developers and the local government. Developers experience reduced infrastructure and land costs and more predictability in the development approval process and local governments benefit from reduced service delivery costs, increased tax revenues, and enhanced economic development potential.

Cost Savings of Quality Growth

Studies show that sprawling development costs government in terms of provision of public services like water and sewer, emergency services and transportation. Research by the Real Estate Research Corp. shows that compact growth can be as much as 70 percent cheaper for governments than in areas with more dispersed growth patterns. Comparing the costs for governments in 10 counties, the University of Kentucky found that police, fire, and school services cost less in those counties where growth was concentrated and highest in those with scattered growth. In South Carolina, a study concluded that planned development could save 12 percent in infrastructure costs that would be spent providing the same infrastructure under sprawling growth projections. The development community saves costs as well through reduced per-unit costs for power and telephone lines, small streets, and more efficient service delivery.

Protection of the Environment

Implementing quality growth principles like compact development, greenspace protection, better street connectivity and greater opportunities for using alternative transportation lead to less urban runoff into streams to pollute our waters and less traffic exhaust to pollute our air. A 2000 study by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of three California neighborhoods suggested that the environmental benefits of quality growth are real and can be measured. A more recent study by NRDC and EPA in Nashville corroborates this study and further suggests that the combination of better transportation accessibility and a modest increase in land-use density can produce measurable benefits even in automobile-oriented suburban communities. These studies are the first to evaluate actual neighborhoods rather than conceptual models. In the Nashville study, a more densely populated neighborhood closer to downtown Nashville out performed a suburban, lower density neighborhood in terms of land consumption, water consumption, air pollutant emissions, greenhouse gas emissions, and storm water runoff.

Economic Development Benefits

The quality of life offered by quality growth development is important to residents, and contributes to economic development. Corporations are more mobile than ever, and quality of life is a big location factor for business. A case in point is Hewlett Packard's decision not to construct a second office tower in the Atlanta region because of its traffic congestion and air quality. Research also shows that perceived decline in quality of life leads to lower retention of skilled workers. Recent surveys in Austin, Texas show that the more educated residents are, the more likely they are to perceive decline, and skilled residents who do perceive decline are more likely to leave the area.

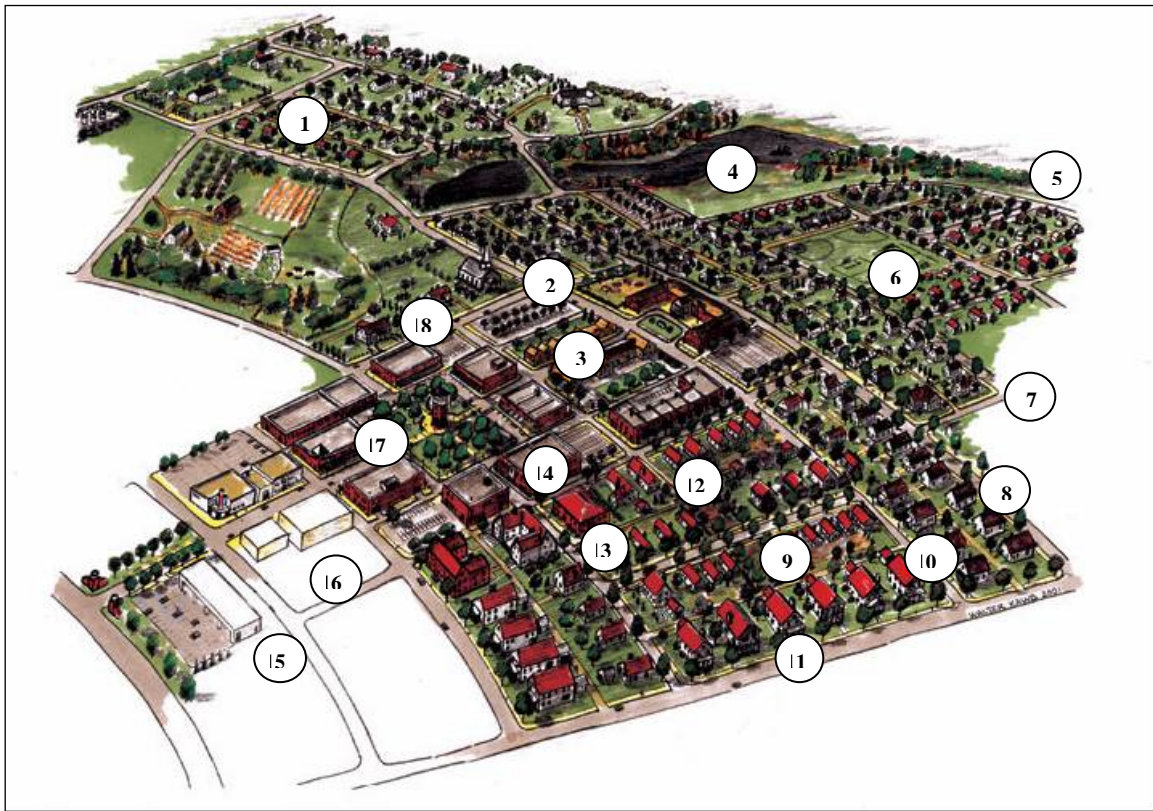
Public Health Benefits

Quality growth is an emerging issue in the public health field where significant research is starting to focus on the relationship between sprawl and obesity related diseases like diabetes and heart problems. Such research is underway now at the Centers for Disease Control and at Boston University's School of Public Health and is expected to demonstrate that better development patterns improve health on community residents. Active Living by Design, a joint program of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is devoted to issues of public health and the built environment, financing both research on the issue, and actual projects testing the impact of community design that fosters daily activity.

What does Quality Growth Look Like?

The Quality Growth Principles describe what quality growth does, but what does it mean to put these principles into practice? What does quality growth actually look like “on the ground”? This is an important question, because community leaders have found that it’s easier to explain quality growth through drawings, photographs, and other visual aids. One tool for discovering the preferences of citizens for different patterns and types of development is a Visual Preference Survey which allows them to be compared and voted on, usually through photographs from the community. The Department of Community Affairs is developing a similar tool called a Community Preference Survey that can be used to conduct such a survey. The tool may be used by communities when developing (or implementing) their local comprehensive plans.

The following graphic was designed to illustrate the characteristics of quality growth in practice. Below it are captions keyed by number to the different features of quality growth as well as a few photographs and drawings that show some of these features in more detail.



1. New subdivisions match the mix of housing types and styles of the older, closer-in neighborhoods of the community. Street layouts also match those in older parts of the community and connect to the existing street network at many points. The cul-de-sac subdivisions typical of most suburban areas are discouraged.

2. Traffic calming measures are employed along major roadways to slow traffic speeds and thereby create a pedestrian-friendly environment. These measures include narrowed street widths, on-street parking, or raised pedestrian crossings.

3. The community is relatively compact, with new development matching the typical densities of the older center of the community. The typical historic sections of Georgia towns have average lot sizes of around one-quarter acre.
4. Environmentally sensitive areas of the community (such as stream banks, floodplains, or steep hillsides) are set aside from development and used as parks or passive recreation areas to be enjoyed by all community residents.
5. The community has a clear boundary, where town stops and countryside begins. Unattractive rural sprawl along roadways has been avoided by concentrating any housing and commercial buildings in small, well-planned villages, leaving lots of intervening farmland or open space.
6. Schools and their playgrounds/ballparks are located within the neighborhoods, making it possible for children to walk to school. This also permits neighborhood residents to make use of school facilities (meeting rooms, playground or ballparks) when school is not in session.
7. Sidewalks and bike trails are provided throughout the community to encourage walking and bicycling as an alternative to driving to most destinations.
8. Street trees are planted throughout the community to enhance appearances and provide shade for pedestrians and bicyclists.
9. Mix of housing sizes and types in each neighborhood, to provide opportunities for people of different incomes to live near where they work or go to school.
10. Garage apartments or similar secondary housing units are encouraged as a means to bring affordable housing into all neighborhoods of the community.
11. Houses throughout the community are located near the street, with large front porches that encourage interaction with neighbors. Garages are located to the rear of each property, (accessible via alleyways) or on-street parking is used for residents' automobiles.
12. Vacant sites near the center of the community are used for new development that matches the character of the surrounding neighborhood. This infill development reduces the need for as much new development on the edges of the community.
13. Each neighborhood has a healthy mix of uses, like corner groceries, barber shops, or drugstores within easy walking distance of residences.
14. Higher intensity uses, such as retail shops, offices, or apartments, are concentrated along major roadways, making it feasible to provide limited public transit along these routes.
15. All commercial structures, such as shopping, warehouses, or offices, are located near the street front, with parking provided in the rear of these buildings. This makes the community more attractive (no visible expanses of parking lots) and creates a friendlier environment for pedestrians.
16. An older strip commercial area is being fixed up to match the traditional development patterns of the community. Sidewalks are being added, street trees planted, excessive signs and billboards are being removed, and new buildings are being built near the street front to hide large parking areas.

17. An attractive town center serves adjacent neighborhoods. This area is very pedestrian friendly, and includes pleasant community gathering spaces. Residences located over shops bring round-the-clock activity to the area.

18. New industry or other major employers are located close in to town, making jobs accessible to all residents by way of transit, walking, or bicycling.

Getting (Back) to Quality Growth: Is Your Community Ready?

Fostering livable communities once again requires innovative solutions. Since the 1950s, a variety of factors have contributed to patterns of development very different from the traditional neighborhoods of the past. Increasingly, complementary land uses such as homes and shops, which once were located within convenient travel distances of one another, are separated by many miles. Students of this problem point to many factors, but among the most commonly agreed upon were the development of an extensive highway system across the nation, the suburbanization of the countryside and our increasing dependence on automobile travel for meeting daily needs. The planning and regulatory approaches accompanying these changes have also contributed to the separation of land uses. As a result, the development of traditional neighborhoods is no longer encouraged or in some cases even allowed.

In order to “get back to quality growth” each community should examine its policies and its current development patterns to determine if its own practices facilitate quality growth or hinder it. A variety of approaches can be taken in performing this examination, including a “quality growth audit” provided in DCA’s Model Code for Alternatives to Conventional Zoning. The Department of Community Affairs is also developing a more detailed tool that can be used to perform this community assessment, which is one required step in development of a local comprehensive plan. It involves comparing the community’s current land development patterns and its current planning practice and policies to the Department’s Quality Community Objectives, which are listed below. These objectives are recommended for adoption as guiding principles by communities that wish to return to a more traditional pattern of community growth and development.

Development Patterns

- **Traditional Neighborhoods:** Traditional neighborhood development patterns should be encouraged, including use of more human scale development, mixing of uses within easy walking distance of one another, and facilitating pedestrian activity.
- **Infill Development:** Communities should maximize the use of existing infrastructure and minimize the conversion of undeveloped land at the urban periphery by encouraging development or redevelopment of sites closer to the downtown or traditional urban core of the community.
- **Sense of Place:** Traditional downtown areas should be maintained as the focal point of the community or, for newer areas where this is not possible, the development of activity centers that serve as community focal points should be encouraged. These community focal points should be attractive, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly places where people choose to gather for shopping, dining, socializing, and entertainment.
- **Transportation Alternatives:** Alternatives to transportation by automobile, including mass transit, bicycle routes and pedestrian facilities, should be made available in each community. Greater use of alternate transportation should be encouraged.
- **Regional Identity:** Regions should promote and preserve an “identity,” defined in terms of traditional regional architecture, common economic linkages that bind the region together, or other shared characteristics.

Social and Economic Development

- **Growth Preparedness:** Each community should identify and put in place the prerequisites for the type of growth it seeks to achieve. These may include housing and infrastructure (roads, water, sewer and telecommunications) to support new growth, appropriate training of the workforce, ordinances to direct growth as desired, or leadership capable of responding to growth opportunities.
- **Appropriate Businesses:** The businesses and industries encouraged to develop or expand in a community should be suitable for the community in terms of job skills required, linkages to other economic activities in the region, impact on the resources of the area, and future prospects for expansion and creation of higher-skill job opportunities.
- **Educational Opportunities:** Educational and training opportunities should be readily available in each community - to permit community residents to improve their job skills, adapt to technological advances, or to pursue entrepreneurial ambitions.
- **Employment Options:** A range of job types should be provided in each community to meet the diverse needs of the local workforce.
- **Regional Cooperation:** Regional cooperation should be encouraged in setting priorities, identifying shared needs, and finding collaborative solutions, particularly where it is critical to success of a venture, such as protection of shared natural resources.
- **Regional Solutions:** Regional solutions to needs shared by more than one local jurisdiction are preferable to separate local approaches, particularly where this will result in greater efficiency and less cost to the taxpayer.
- **Housing Opportunities:** Quality housing and a range of housing size, cost, and density should be provided in each community, to make it possible for all who work in the community to also live in the community.

Resource Conservation

- **Heritage Preservation:** The traditional character of the community should be maintained through preserving and revitalizing historic areas of the community, encouraging new development that is compatible with the traditional features of the community, and protecting other scenic or natural features that are important to defining the community's character.
- **Open Space Preservation:** New development should be designed to minimize the amount of land consumed, and open space should be set aside from development for use as public parks or as greenbelts/wildlife corridors.
- **Environmental Protection:** Air quality and environmentally sensitive areas should be protected from negative impacts of development. Environmentally sensitive areas deserve special protection, particularly when they are important for maintaining traditional character or quality of life of the community or region. Whenever possible, the natural terrain, drainage, and vegetation of an area should be preserved.

Planning for and Implementing Quality Growth in Your Community

Your local comprehensive plan is a principal vehicle for getting your community "back to quality growth". The Department of Community Affairs has revised its local planning requirements to facilitate this and offers supporting State Planning Recommendations, online planning assistance tools and other resources to help communities develop and implement quality growth plans. Under the new planning requirements, the plan consists of three parts.

The first part is the community assessment, which including the self-assessment described above and identifies major trends affecting the community. The second part is the community participation program, which sets out the plan for involving the public and stakeholders in developing the third part of the plan, the community agenda. Though last in order, the community agenda is first in importance because it includes the community vision and implementation program - this is where the community sets forth the specific steps it will take to achieve a quality growth future. For more information about your community's comprehensive plan and DCA's new planning requirements, go to www.georgiaplanning.com, the Department's planning and quality growth website.

Quality Growth Funding Sources

A variety of funding sources are available to assist with the implementation of DCA's State Planning Recommendations and the quality growth best practices on the Georgia Quality Growth Partnership (GQGP) website. The link below will take you directly to the GQGP website Financial Sources Directory.

<http://www.dca.state.ga.us/toolkit/FinancialSources.asp>

Other Resources

Georgia's Urban Redevelopment Law

http://www.legis.state.ga.us/cgi-bin/gl_codes_detail.pl?code=36-61-1

Georgia's Housing Source

http://www/housing/HOUSING_at_DCA.pdf

Quality Growth Technical Assistance & Training Opportunities

A variety of resources are available to assist with the implementation of quality growth best practices on the Georgia Quality Growth Partnership (GQGP) website. The links below will take you directly to the GQGP website Technical Assistance Directory and Training Opportunities page.

Technical Assistance - <http://www.dca.state.ga.us/toolkit/directory.asp>

Training Opportunities - <http://www.dca.state.ga.us/toolkit/training.asp>

Quality Growth Toolkit

The Quality Growth Toolkit provides advice to local governments on tools that may be used to put quality growth principles into practice at the local level. The link below will take you directly to the Georgia Quality Growth Partnership (GQGP) website Toolkit page.

<http://www.dca.state.ga.us/toolkit/toolkit.asp>