

GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY AFFAIRS
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SERIES

DISCOVERING AND PLANNING YOUR COMMUNITY CHARACTER

GUIDEBOOK FOR CITIZENS
AND LOCAL PLANNERS

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PART 1

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDEBOOK

WHO SHOULD USE THIS GUIDEBOOK?

Anyone involved in preparing, implementing, or using comprehensive plans in Georgia can benefit from this guidebook. However, the guidebook is designed to be most useful to citizen planners, local government staff and officials with little specific training in comprehensive planning, and planners in small cities and towns or rural counties. Larger local governments will more likely have several professional planners to provide planning services that meet local needs for administering programs on a daily basis, conducting studies, and preparing comprehensive plans. It is the first situation where more help is needed. Many of Georgia's local governments are small and depend on a city or county clerk, city or county manager, building official, or citizen volunteers to prepare comprehensive plans.

WHAT KIND OF INFORMATION IS IN THE GUIDEBOOK?

This guidebook describes character areas, provides tools and techniques for identifying character areas, and discusses the processes for visioning in your community. The Department of Community Affairs is providing several guides to planning, including guides to implementing character areas and preparing form-based codes. Form-based codes are an excellent means of implementing character areas. This guidebook, which is a set of "how-to" instructions on discovering the character areas in your community, is a companion to these guides on implementation and land use management.

Included in this guidebook are examples of character areas and the characteristics that distinguish one area from another. There are many ways to "see" character areas; no one way is the right or only approach. In addition, there are many useful tools for envisioning your community and the character areas that lie within it. These tools will help you discover your vision, discover the character areas, and begin to develop plans to implement your vision.

The appendices identify some additional resources for background reading or details on what other communities have done.

PART 2

THE CHARACTER OF YOUR COMMUNITY

The major component of most plans – at least until recently – has been land use. That means that a primary part of the community’s comprehensive plan is the identification of what use may be made of any parcel of land. Traditionally, planning has focused on the issues of physical forms of development as described by the types and locations of individual land uses. Often, a community focuses on land use as a way of addressing other issues, such as compatibility and the adequacy of public infrastructure. However, this focus has often resulted in a lack of attention to the overall pattern of development. An emerging trend, reflected in some of the Smart Growth concepts and New Urbanism concepts, is the focus on pattern of development, rather than individual land uses. The patterns of development throughout a community create individual areas that have an identifiable character. In Georgia, such areas are called “character areas.”

WHAT EXACTLY IS A CHARACTER AREA?

No matter what name we use to label a part of our community – district, zone, neighborhood, sector, or area – most people recognize that a community is made up of several distinct areas, each with a specific character. The character of an area can best be understood or described by identifying the characteristics that make a particular development unique. The following descriptions should help explain character areas as defined in the “local planning requirements” from the Georgia Department of Community Affairs. Character areas are defined as specific geographic areas that meet the following criteria:

- Have unique or special characteristics;
- Have potential to evolve into a unique area when provided specific and intentional guidance; or
- Require special attention due to unique development issues.

The character of developed areas can be explained by looking at several typical characteristics. Consider the following characteristics to identify areas within developed parts of the community:

- Site and configuration of lots;
- Site design features, such as degree and location of landscaping, parking, driveways, accessory structures, stormwater facilities, and other features;

- Street design;
- Intensity of development;
- Building location, dimensions, and orientation;
- Types and quantities of natural features;
- Location, extent, and type of civic buildings and public spaces; and
- Interactions among uses within the area.

Many of these characteristics exist regardless of the activity which occurs within the buildings in the area (offices, homes, shops, and so on). Thus, the characteristics are based on form and pattern, not individual use. Form and pattern describes how buildings, lots, site features, and streets are physically arranged. Most communities are familiar with defining areas based on character, even if the areas are not labeled as “character areas.” Downtowns and historic districts are often identified because of the form, pattern, and character of the area, rather than the array of individual land uses.

In addition to examining existing characteristics, you can identify future development patterns desired and expressed by the vision for the area using these same ideas. Further, it is important to consider whether there are any redevelopment needs for the area. The vision may identify the need to create new character for the area. In these cases, an area should be identified based on both existing and future development characteristics.

Another way to identify character areas is based on environmental characteristics. Your community most likely has identified significant natural features for protection. These features form an important part of the overall character of the community and give shape to the community. The character of environmental areas is based primarily on the natural resources that are present and shape the area. Character areas include:

- Greenways or green corridors;
- Bodies of water, such as lakes, rivers, streams, and seas;
- Wetlands;
- Floodplains and floodways;
- Habitats;
- Aquifer recharge areas;
- Karst terrain; and

- Mountains or areas with steep slopes.

Open spaces are an important feature in your community. This leads to a third type of character areas, especially if you are planning for a county. There may be areas that are vacant or sparsely settled, but are not environmental areas or developed (partially or wholly) character areas. While not all vacant land should ultimately be developed, some will be needed to accommodate future growth. Such open space areas will most likely fall into three categories:

- Agricultural production;
- Open space; and
- Future development areas.

Future development areas should be identified based on development potential. When considering characteristics of these areas, future development characteristics as envisioned in the comprehensive plan will guide decisions. There are no existing characteristics to preserve or redevelop, so such areas are really a “blank slate” as character areas. This situation is the opposite situation to the developed areas planned for preservation or redevelopment.

IT ALL STARTS WITH A VISION

*We must stop talking about the American dream
and start listening to the dreams of Americans.
- Reubin Askew, former Governor of Florida*

ENVISIONING THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

Creating a useful comprehensive plan begins with identifying the commonly held vision for the future of the community. Preparing a plan for the future of the city requires an understanding of what the city will be or become. *Visioning* – the identification of a vision – is a process to find out what the citizens in a community want for the future. A *vision* is the overall image – in both words and illustrations – of what the community wants to be and how it wants to look at some point in the future. It is the starting point for creating a plan and actions to implement the plan.

There are three parts to preparing a comprehensive plan in Georgia – assessing the current situation in the community, involving the people of the community in the planning process, and preparing an agenda to guide future decisions that implement the plan. Visioning should take place early, involve the people of the community, and guide the preparation of the community agenda.

The visioning process should consider both the community as a whole and the character areas within the community. The overall vision is likely to be a statement describing the preferred future, possibly accompanied by a general map that depicts

the vision in broad, conceptual terms. Visioning for the character areas should be more detailed, providing a written and graphic statement about the future of each character area. These statements will guide the preparation of strategies that direct future development in each area.

A combination of visioning techniques will likely be needed in order to address effectively the overall vision for the community as a whole and the vision for character areas that make up the community.

A successful visioning process is built upon an understanding of the community. This is the community assessment that includes an analysis of existing development patterns, identification of character areas, and identification of the issues and opportunities that are present in the community. The visioning process is a time for the people of the community to dream about and imagine their future. However, it is often hard to imagine the future without some idea about where the community is now.

Tools and techniques to help you with the visioning process are described in Part 3 of this guidebook. You should also consult the [*Planning for Community Involvement*](#) guidebook from DCA for discussions of organizing and carrying out citizen involvement programs, including visioning.

VISIONING FOR CHARACTER AREAS

Preliminary identification of character areas: During the preparation of the community assessment, the planning team will assemble data about the community. Data will include maps that describe the community, statistical information that quantifies various aspects of the community, and narrative descriptions of features in the community. The planning team makes the first identification of character areas. With the data that is collected, the team is best able to make a preliminary determination of the location and types of character areas in the community.

The steps in the process are:

- Determining the location of physical boundaries for a potential character area;
- Identifying the vision for the future of the area;
- Formulating objectives for the area in order to achieve the vision; and
- Preparing development regulations or guidelines to implement the objectives.

Maps are helpful to show a lot of information in a concise and useful way. Information on maps will depict:

- Natural features throughout the community, such as bodies of water, environmental features, floodplains, areas with high aquifer recharge potential, areas with good or poor soils, and locations of natural resources.
- Existing development, showing the types and location of land uses, transportation systems, and similar information.
- Areas with special needs, such as historic areas, archaeological areas, cultural features, or declining areas in need of redevelopment.

Later, the preparation of a Future Development Map will include the boundaries of the character areas as adjusted and finalized during the visioning process.

This information provides an excellent basis to identify character areas and begin the visioning process for those areas. The final delineation of a character area should flow from the visioning process, not from a predetermined list of character areas.

Statistical information will describe such things as the current population, projections of future population, numbers and condition of housing, and information about infrastructure, such as water systems, sewer systems, schools, and so on. This information helps you understand the community and the trends that have brought the community to this point in time.

It is helpful to have some written information to accompany maps and statistics. Written information might include a brief history that helps understand the heritage and culture of the community. It could include descriptions of natural features and conditions that affect those features. Written information helps explain the meaning of the statistics, providing you will more understanding of the current situation.

With this base of information – the community assessment – you can reach a preliminary agreement on the location and type of character areas in your community and embark on the visioning process for individual areas as well as the whole community. Tools and techniques in Part 3 of this guidebook will help you with this process.

However, before you can discover your vision for the character areas, the various character areas in your community must be identified.

IDENTIFYING CHARACTER AREAS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

The fundamental question is how to identify the character areas in your community. While the planning team makes the first determination, the discussion in this section will help you understand the process and help you make your own determination. There will be several ways to begin this process of identification. Remember that a character area meets several conditions:

- It is a specific geographic area.
- It is unique and can be distinguished from other areas due to its unique characteristics.
- It requires specific attention to ensure that development is consistent with the characteristics that distinguish the area from other areas.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND HERITAGE CHARACTER AREAS

In order to determine the types and locations of character areas in your community, consider a two-fold approach: identify character areas centered on specific environmental, historical, cultural, or archaeological features; and identify character areas based on the form and pattern of development.

Start with the first group of character areas:

1. Locate areas with significant natural resources and environmental features. It will be relatively easy to study maps of natural resources and environmental features and identify those areas which require protection. It may be more difficult to delineate the boundaries, especially where some development has occurred in and near areas with significant environmental features and resources. Start with delineation of wetlands and floodplains. The boundaries of these features are often already established. Likewise, areas with significant groundwater resources are likely to be mapped for your community. Rivers, streams, and protected corridors are also known. In addition, consider whether you should identify as a character area those areas with poor soils for development, steep slopes, or other natural features.

You may wish to label all character areas with natural and environmental features as “environmental character areas” or “conservation character areas” or another name that is descriptive of the environmental characteristics that distinguish these areas.

2. Determine other important resources that you wish to protect in your community. Examples are historic resources, important landmarks, cultural resources, or archaeological sites. Locate these resources and determine where a boundary should be placed to encompass the resource.

These character areas will probably have a common label, such as “heritage areas” based on the traditional and cultural characteristics that distinguish these areas.

These two types of character areas will be easy to identify because of the presence of specific features. The remainder of your community will require some

additional analysis to determine what kinds of character areas you have and where the boundaries should be placed.

CHARACTER AREAS IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Some useful background on city form and identifying districts within a city can be found in the classic text by Kevin Lynch. *Image of the City* was published in 1960 and reprinted for the following 15 years. When reading current literature on city form, now called urban design, the lessons in the Lynch book are fresh again. In studying cities, he learned that there is a unique pattern to the shape of a city and the shape of districts within the city. The pattern comes from paths (connections and channels for movement, such as streets or sidewalks), edges (specific boundaries, even barriers between two areas), nodes (points or strategic concentrations – often called “centers” today), and landmarks.

You are already familiar with a character area that is found in most cities and towns – the downtown district. It is unique and easily distinguishable from other areas. What are the characteristics that most often set downtown apart as a character area? Compact development, with buildings close to or at the property line, parking on the street or in central lots, high degree of pedestrian access, taller buildings, a high degree of mixed uses, and a predominance of civic and cultural buildings and spaces are typical characteristics. Downtown is the ceremonial heart of the community.

Using some of the methods described below, you can identify other character areas in your community.

1. Examine maps that show street patterns. Character areas typically have one predominant street layout, such as a grid pattern, radial pattern, or curving and circle streets.
2. Examine aerial maps to identify patterns of lot configuration and building placement. Urban neighborhoods will have small, regularly shaped lots, with small or very small front yards, and often with alleys to provide access to garages at the rear of the house. Suburban neighborhoods more often have larger lots, deeper setbacks at the front of the house, garages that face or take access from the street, and more open space throughout the neighborhood. Shops in urban areas tend to be scattered throughout the neighborhood, often at corners, and in buildings that are similar in scale to the residential development on the same street. In suburban areas, commercial development is mostly in shopping centers, malls, or large discount centers. All of these features are readily observable on aerial maps and photos.
3. Drive through the city, observing patterns of streets, lots, and building placement. You are looking at forms and shapes, not individual uses. An example may help you focus on form rather than use. In many cities,

warehouse and industrial districts that once housed storage, distribution, or assembly centers, have been remodeled into buildings filled with art galleries, modern shops, restaurants, and loft apartments on upper levels. The form of the buildings and surrounding streets has remained fairly constant, while the uses have changed.

4. Ask people – in workshops or through surveys – to identify places in the community by name and characteristics. In workshops, people can draw simple maps of their own neighborhoods, identifying the features and boundaries that set it apart from other areas. Consider a photo essay project to help identify specific areas. These results of these projects can be used during visioning programs to confirm the locations of character areas and identify what should be preserved and what should be changed – which will in turn help in preparing the community agenda.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TYPES OF CHARACTER AREAS

Every community is different. However, in examining character areas in several communities throughout Georgia and the United States, it appears that character areas typically fit into one of the following categories:

- Conservation, Preserves, Reserves, Environmental, or areas named for specific features, such as mountains, rivers, or lakes
- Greenways or Greenway Corridors
- Agriculture
- Rural, Rural/Agricultural, or Rural Residential
- Rural Village, Hamlet, Crossroads Community, or Rural Center
- Suburban, Suburban Residential, or Suburban Neighborhood
- Traditional Neighborhood
- Urban Village or Town Center
- Commerce Center, Marketplace, Marketplace Center, Regional Center, Regional Marketplace, or Interchange Center
- Employment Centers, Industrial Centers, or Marketplace Production
- Corridor or Highway Corridor (could be in town, scenic, or major highway corridors)

- Downtown
- Historic, Cultural, or Civic, or other special purpose areas
- Special Purpose Areas, such as Redevelopment Districts or Redevelopment Neighborhoods
- Single Purpose Areas, such as Industrial, Hospitals, Airports, “Big Box” Buildings, and similar situations

Don’t forget the vacant or sparsely settled areas that will evolve into one of these types of character areas.

There are several predominant characteristics for the character areas in each group. The following table may be helpful as you begin to identify the character areas in your community.

Character Areas	Predominant Characteristics (existing or future characteristics)
Conservation, Preserves, Reserves, Environmental	Very high degree of open space Significant natural features Views of natural features Low accessibility by vehicle due to few roads Primarily undeveloped natural lands and environmentally sensitive areas not suitable for development
Greenway Corridors	Primarily protected open space in a linear pattern, typically following natural features such as stream corridors
Rural, Rural/Agricultural, or Rural Residential	Low degree of pedestrian access No transit Very large lots High degree of open space Very large amounts of separation between buildings Pastoral views Predominantly rural, undeveloped land likely to develop for rural/residential and agricultural or land that is primarily rural/residential or residential and agriculture
Rural Village, Hamlet, Crossroads Community, or Rural Center	Low pedestrian orientation and access, except within the center itself Little or no transit Distinct edge for the village or center Clustering of buildings within the village or center, but high open space surrounding the center Mixture of uses to serve rural and agricultural areas

<p>Suburban, Suburban Residential, or Suburban Neighborhood</p>	<p>Low pedestrian orientation Little or no transit High degree of open space, often focused on golf courses or large recreation amenity High to moderate degree of building separation Predominantly residential with scattered civic buildings Varied street patterns, often curvilinear, cul-de-sacs, or loop roads</p>
<p>Traditional Neighborhood</p>	<p>High pedestrian orientation Moderate or high transit, including transit stops and shelters Sidewalks, street trees, and street furniture On-street parking Small, regular lots Limited open space Buildings close to or at the front property line Predominance of alleys Low degree of building separation Neighborhood-scale businesses scattered throughout the area</p>
<p>Urban Village or Town Center</p>	<p>Often contains a community focal point High degree of pedestrian orientation High degree of transit, including transit stops and shelters Typically has sidewalks, street trees, street furniture On-street parking or central lots Limited open space Buildings at front property line Predominance of alleys Buildings are close together Mixed uses within buildings, with residential on upper floors</p>
<p>Commerce Center, Marketplace, Marketplace Center, Regional Center, Regional Marketplace, or Interchange Center</p>	<p>Often focused on regionally marketed commercial and other nonresidential development High degree of access by vehicular traffic High degree of pedestrian use High degree of transit, including transit stops, shelters, and transfer points On-site parking Low amount of open space Tall or high-rise buildings Large tracts of land, campus or unified development</p>
<p>Employment Centers, Industrial Centers, or Marketplace Production</p>	<p>High degree of access by vehicular traffic High degree of transit, including transit stops, shelters, and transfer points On-site parking</p>

	Low open space Mid-rise buildings Large tracts of land, campus or unified development
Corridor or Highway Corridor (could be in town, scenic, or major highway corridors)	Orientation of buildings to highway High transit, including transit stops and shelters On-site parking Large set-backs for buildings Focus on streetscape features
Downtown	Recognizes as the traditional central business district High degree of accessibility High degree of pedestrian use High degree of transit use Tall or high-rise buildings Maximum building coverage of lots Parking predominantly in lots and on-street High degree of public space High degree of mixed uses

Note: These examples of character areas may not be identical to other lists of character areas provided by the Department of Community Affairs: [State Planning Recommendations Recommended Character Areas](#).

It is useful to recognize that there is more than one way to identify and characterize unique areas within your community. However, you will also see that there are similarities among the various approaches to identifying and labeling character areas. This means that your way, which may not follow exactly any of these lists, will not be wrong, just different.

Now that you have identified character areas in your community and the planning team has provided an assessment of the community, it is time to discover the vision you hold for the community and the character areas. Once you have discovered the vision, it will guide you in refining the character areas, creating detailed maps, and developing strategies for achieving the vision.

PART 3

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES TO ENVISION THE FUTURE OF YOUR COMMUNITY

*If you can dream it, you can do it.
...Walt Disney*

DISCOVERING AND IMPLEMENTING YOUR VISION

We have always imagined the future and dreamed about the possibilities. In comprehensive planning, visioning is being used as a process to engage citizens in imagining the future of their communities. How does this happen? There is no single way to “do visioning.” There are many tools and techniques that help shape the process and lead to formulating an answer to the question “What do you want?” There are many aspects to that question in the planning process.

- What do you want your community to become?
- What do you want your neighborhood to become?
- What future development do you want in your community?
- What strategies to do you want to implement your plan?

Whatever the specific question, the tools and techniques suggested here will help you formulate a visioning process that meets your budget, time, and human resources for planning.

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

There are many ways to identify and plan for character areas. Consider the tools and techniques described here. Also consider the toolkit described in the Community-Based Planning Guidebook, which describes tools for engaging citizens in planning. Some are similar to the ones listed below. All are excellent ways to work together to identify character areas and discover your vision for the future of each area.

SWOT ANALYSIS

SWOT is an acronym for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats to an area identified in the comprehensive plan. Typically conducted as a brainstorming activity, one large or several small groups identify the various conditions and situations in the community that fit into the categories of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. All ideas are listed – some may actually fit more than one category. For example, strong leadership may be seen as a strength, but may also overpower citizens who want to participate.

The purpose of the analysis is to identify strengths followed by identifying ways to preserve and capitalize on the strengths. Weaknesses are identified following by brainstorming ways to overcome, reduce, and eliminate the weaknesses. There should be strategies to take advantage of opportunities and not to let them slip away. Finally, the group should brainstorm ways to eliminate, reduce, or overcome threats.

A SWOT analysis is a good companion to other activities in the overall visioning process; however, SWOT itself is not visioning. It is particularly helpful in identifying strategies and actions to implement the vision.

DESIGN CHARRETTES

Typically, a design charrette is used to solve design problems in a neighborhood or specific area. However, through a charrette process, citizens can come together and identify the characteristics of their neighborhood or several neighborhoods in the community. Using drawings, maps, and photographs, citizens can not only identify the characteristics that make an area one with a unique character, but can also identify what they want the area to become in the future.

The charrette should probably be conducted over several days. This allows the team to help guide the participants through several steps of

- identifying, mapping, and describing the character areas as they are today,
- brainstorming about the characteristics that are desirable to keep, enhance, and strengthen,
- brainstorming about ways to redesign aspects of the area that need redevelopment or improvement, and
- finally, producing maps and descriptions of their vision for the future of the character areas.

There is additional discussion about the use of design charettes along with preference surveys to engage citizens in planning and visioning the community in the guidebook for [Planning for Community Involvement](#).

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are called “focus” groups because the group consists of members with a specific interest. The focus may be geographic, economic, environmental, cultural, historic, or any specific aspect of the community. These focus groups can carry out any number of visioning or small group processes to identify character areas or plan for the future of character areas that have already been identified. A focus group, for example, might be engaged in a SWOT analysis or brainstorming activity to identify problems and ways to solve them. A focus group that is based on geographic areas could engage in design charettes to identify character areas and envision their future.

Refer to the guidebook on [Planning for Community Involvement](#) and the discussion of consensus building in small groups for further discussion of the use of focus groups.

COGNITIVE MAPPING

An excellent way to identify character areas is to engage citizens in a mapping exercise. Providing blank paper and drawing materials, ask citizens to draw their neighborhood and the features that make it a special place. They can work individually or in groups. The composite results of this exercise will identify specific and unique areas and the characteristics that make the area unique.

This mapping exercise can also be expanded as described in the [Planning for Community Involvement](#) to build a community map useful in envisioning the future of the community as well as the character areas.

Cognitive mapping can be used with focus groups or as a beginning activity in a design charrette. People know their own neighborhoods well and can quickly define the location, boundaries, and characteristics. This is a useful double-check for work by the planning team to identify character areas and to revise the character areas with citizen direction.

DESIGNING AND VISIONING WITH BOXES AND BLOCKS

One technique that helps people “see” their community is the use of small boxes representing houses and businesses to depict a neighborhood, special area, or the whole community. The boxes can be decorated to depict houses, stores, shopping centers, offices, or any part of the community. They can be arranged in

neighborhoods, shopping districts, campuses, or any configuration to depict what is and what they want.

If small boxes are too large to allow participants to build an entire area or community, consider using something like Legos™ or other building blocks to represent houses, stores, and other buildings. Base maps with streets and natural features are helpful in guiding this activity.

Building a “box city” is a good technique to use in a festival setting, both to identify character areas and envision how the areas should be in the future. A useful web site for “box city” is www.cubekc.org. This web site has excellent resources for festivals and for engaging students at any grade level in similar planning activities.

PHOTOGRAPHS TELL THE STORY

What better way to identify a specific area than through photographs? Through photographs people can see the characteristics and better understand how the parts of an area fit together to form a character area. Photographs can be used in several ways:

- The planning team can assemble photographs for use in a design charrette, focus group meeting, or planning festival. These photographs should depict likely character areas and the components that make it unique. Citizens can engage in a SWOT analysis or other brainstorming activity to verify the character area location and characteristics as well as to envision how the area should be in the future.
- Citizens can be asked to identify neighborhoods or special areas through photographs. They bring the photographs to a meeting, festival, or other event and work together to create a tapestry of photos that depict each character area. Once assembled, the planning team can engage the citizens in other activities to create a narrative of the characteristics and envision the future.
- The planning team and/or the citizens can identify design features and neighborhood characteristics that they prefer and want to see in the future. This is an excellent way to begin or continue the process of envisioning the future for the community as whole or individual character areas. Some of these photographs may be part of a preference survey during focus group meetings or other events that are part of the visioning process.

SCENARIO BUILDING

An excellent way to engage citizens in visioning is through creating different scenarios, evaluating each scenario, and choosing one (or combining several) scenario that represents the preferred future. What is a scenario?

A scenario is a description of the future condition or situation for the community or a character area. By condition or situation, we mean the economic, physical, social, demographic, and cultural characteristics that describe the area. It describes how the area is viewed not only by the people who live and work there, but also by others who travel through or visit.

In visioning, citizens are developing answers to several questions:

- What do you want the area to become?
- What kind of reputation do you want the area to have?
- What values and beliefs should be represented in the area?
- How should the area function within the community?

Each scenario should represent a different future. For example, it is useful to create one scenario based on continuing exactly as you are now – preserving the status quo. Other scenarios should focus on changing in specific ways – growing into a different kind of area, improving in a particular way, or other future condition.

For each scenario, the group answers some specific questions.

- What are the implications of achieving this scenario? What does it mean to residents? To business people? To visitors?
- What are the financial implications of achieving this scenario? What funds are needed and where will they come from?
- How does this scenario fit into the entire community, socially, culturally, economically, and other ways.

The answers to these questions will help participants determine which scenario is best for the area, or to merge parts of two or more scenarios.

IMPLEMENTING CHARACTER AREAS

Now that you have identified character areas and discovered your vision for the areas, how do you achieve the development that you want? How do you implement a plan for the character areas? The following information is excerpted from an excellent report, *“Techniques for Delineating and Implementing Character Areas,”* by Jerry Weitz.

As described in earlier portions of this guidebook, the planning process begins with the preliminary identification of character areas and the establishment of a vision. The next steps are:

- Formulation of objectives for the area to achieve the vision, and
- Creation of development recommendations, design guidelines and/or standards and regulations to implement the objectives of the area.

Just as the discovery of the vision is highly interactive with citizen participation, these steps in formulating objectives and guidelines for development to implement the vision also requires citizen participation.

Answer the following questions to help craft the objectives for each area:

1. What is the primary outcome you want to achieve? Do you want to preserve the current characteristics that identify the area? As an alternative, do you want to achieve a specific new or different type of character?
2. What kinds of activities should be permissible in the character area? An answer to this question will most likely be in the form of a list of land uses.
3. What steps or programs will be needed to achieve the primary outcome? Do you need code enforcement for a declining area? Do you need architectural review procedures for a special purpose district? Do you need an airport overlay district to protect the airport from encroachment of incompatible uses? This about each area and the activities that you should describe to achieve the vision or outcome.
4. What kinds of design standards will be needed to achieve the primary outcome? Design standards may include zoning standards, such as setbacks, or may have performance-based standards to allow flexibility in design. Performance standards are often expressed as a ratio rather than a prescribed outcome. For example, the amount of coverage of a lot can be expressed as “impervious surface ratio” which mans how much of the lot can be covered with buildings and pavement. This provides more flexibility than requiring a specific front, side, and rear yard that dictates exactly where a building must be placed. Consider the standards in the following list:
 - Minimum parcel or building site area
 - Minimum or maximum lot coverage
 - Height
 - Setbacks
 - Building separation (if relevant)
 - Encroachments permitted
 - Densities permitted (if applicable)
 - Landscape easements, and public or private open space required

- Building design, massing and height
- Parking ratios/standards, location and orientation
- Entrances, access and on-site circulation
- Orientation of structures (massing, elevation treatment)
- Site coverage
- Grading (as applicable)
- Streetscapes
- Buffers and separations
- Parking areas
- Landscape palette recommendations
- Hardscape elements:
 - Paving
 - Walls and Fences
 - Street furniture
 - Focal points, fountains, water features, sculptures, shade structures, courtyards
- Architectural Features
 - Overall character (historical context or theme and relationship to area entries, transitions, destinations, edges)
 - Positive and negative architectural design features
 - Lighting
 - Signage
 - Architectural elements (roofs, elevations, colors, decorative elements, materials, windows, screening, building service areas)

You should also consult the [Quality Growth Toolkit](#) for additional help on techniques to implement character areas in your community.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A:

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Boyd, Susan, Concern, Inc., and Roy Chan, Environmental Simulation Center, *Placemaking: Tools for community action*, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and Denver Regional Office of the U.S. Department of Energy, Fall 2002. This guide helps users with community participation techniques, simulation and visualization, and other tools available to help in the planning process. Further information on tools for placemaking can be found at www.placematters.com.

Freund, Adrian P., *Form, Character and Context in Jefferson County, Kentucky*, Conference Proceedings, American Planning Association, 1997. Louisville/Jefferson County, Kentucky, created a new comprehensive plan based on form districts. These districts were identified by the predominant characteristics of each form of development.

Lynch, Kevin, *The Image of the City*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1960. This is a standard text about city form. The principles and concepts described in this book are useful today for anyone trying to understand the arrangement of places and spaces in the city. Most useful are the descriptions of city image in Chapter III and the discussion of city form in Chapter IV.

Planning Advisory Service, *Quick Notes No. 1, Form-Based Zoning*, American Planning Association, October 2004. Form-based zoning, also called form-based codes, provides a contemporary means of regulating many character areas. *Quick Notes* includes some references to communities with good codes.

Scottsdale, Arizona, Planning, Building and Zoning Department, *Character Area Planning*. Available at the city's web site: www.scottsdaleaz.gov. The city has implemented character area planning and has several useful documents on the web site.

Wates, Nick, editor, *The Community Planning Handbook*, Earthscan Publications Ltd., London, 2002. This handbook contains dozens of techniques for planning activities and exercises, many useful in discovering and envisioning character areas. Check the web site at www.earthscan.co.uk

Weitz, Jerry, *Techniques for Delineating and Implementing Character Areas*, Jerry Weitz & Associates, Inc., Planning and Development Consultants, for Office of Planning and Quality Growth, Georgia Department of Community Affairs, Atlanta, Georgia, April 2005. This excellent resource supplements the information in this guidebook and leads the reader through the implementation process.

APPENDIX B:

CHARACTER AREA TYPOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION,

BY JERRY WEITZ, AUGUST 31, 2004

CHARACTER AREA TYPOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

OVERVIEW

“Conventional zoning schemes are ‘counterintuitive’ to the way in which we ought to be planning and regulating urban development” (Duany and Talen 2002). Local governments that conduct visioning exercises about the general character of places and sub areas and then look directly at implementation devices to meet the identified character (not just the future land use map), will attain more meaningful plans that have greater ownership by the community.

DEFINITION

There is no clear-cut definition of a “character area” and no common approach to applying the concepts of character areas. Based on a review of comprehensive plans, community plans, and specific plans, a “character area” can be defined as follows:

A geographic area which is unique and distinguishable from other areas in the region or locality due to its natural features, predominant land use, mix of land uses, economic relationships, and/or design characteristics of the built environment, and for which a common vision can be articulated regarding its preservation, growth, or change. Such areas serve as a basis for plans, guidelines, regulations, and programs prepared specifically for the unique area.

In most cases a character area involves the following:

- Determination of physical boundaries;
- Establishment of a vision or intent for the area;
- Formulation of objectives for the area to achieve the vision.
- Creation of development recommendations, design guidelines and/or standards to implement the objectives of the area

CHARACTER AREAS IN PRACTICE

	Lumpkin County Land Use Plan and Code	Walker County Resource Team	Georgia 400 Resource Team	White County Resource Team	Franklin County, Tenn. Plan	Douglas County Comp. Plan
Conservation	X	X		X	X	
Agricultural preservation	X	X		X		
Rural places or rural residential	X	X	X	X	X	X
Residential growth areas	X					X
Urban Residential						X
Suburban areas		X		X	X	
Commerce or major highway	X	X	X	X		X

corridor						
Gateway or scenic corridor	X		X	X	X	
Centers (town, neighborhood, community, regional, etc.)	X	X	X	X	X	X
Industrial	X			X		X

Franklin County, Tennessee

The Franklin County, Tennessee, Comprehensive Plan utilizes a four-tiered approach (from fundamental to specific) to land planning which includes “character areas” as one of the tiers. The first tier of the Plan is the establishment of Design Concepts for the following types of desired development: Conservation; Conservation Subdivision; Rural Areas; Suburban Neighborhoods; Traditional Neighborhood Development; Transit Oriented Development; Mixed-Use Center; Activity Center. The second tier consists of the determination of appropriate land uses which fit within the types of desired development. In some cases these land uses may be mixed – in some it is encouraged. There are 13 broad categories of land uses which are intended to identify the appropriate range of land uses within a given Design Concept. They can occur in various densities, mixes, and patterns, depending on their location. As the third tier, Design Concepts and their appropriate land uses are clustered into 9 Character Areas. In the case of the Franklin County Comprehensive Plan, Character Areas represent the broadest planning category for the community. Each Character Area has an identified existing or planned character that distinguishes it from other areas. Each is defined by a set of established or desired qualities, such as natural resources, land use patterns, infrastructure, function, and other elements. There may be a combination of Design Concepts and a mix of the broad land use categories in each Character Area. As well, particular parcels, assemblage of parcels or larger areas may be subject to more specific policies and recommendations due to unique circumstances which dictate that the policies related to the Design Concepts or Land Uses be modified or made more specific. Additional specifications are made for Special Areas within each Character Area. As the fourth tier, a series of Gateways and Corridors is envisioned to knit the various Design Concepts and Character Areas into a coherent and integrated region. These include travel corridors and environmental greenway corridors, with gateways signaling entry into the community and at transitions between distinct areas.

The Franklin County Comprehensive Plan Design Concepts component actually reflects our interpretation of Character Area. The Design Concepts are the keystones to the Plan and used toward the identification of appropriate land uses for larger areas without specifically designating future development on a parcel by parcel basis, and to promote high quality design while allowing land use flexibility. The Design Concepts establish a series of design templates that provide general guidelines to be followed in the development design and review process. The guidelines are not considered hard and fast rules to be applied systematically to all situations – they are intended to provide guidance in interpreting the intent of the Design Concepts – and may be tailored more specifically for individual areas. The Design Concept guidelines are intended to supplement the City’s Design Standards which focus on more detailed aspects of individual site design. The combination of the Design Concepts with the City’s Design Guidelines can lend direction to the definition and design/development approach proposed for each of our “Character Areas”. The potential for individual jurisdictions to take the general concepts and tailor them to fit unique circumstances is also particularly applicable.

Boulder, Colorado

The Boulder, Colorado, Comprehensive Plan establishes four levels of elements which define the structure of the City and its environs. The fourth element (after establishing its major centers and functions) is “special character areas”. These encompass the individual character of the centers and neighborhoods. In short, areas have different (unique) qualities and the uniqueness should be preserved and/or enhanced.

Community design policies are established for areas such as activity centers, mixed-use, trail corridors, and linkages. Character areas are defined based on several considerations: historic character; physical size, intensity of activity, ability to serve special functions (such as industry), and uniqueness of uses

The Plan breaks down the community into Sub-communities, which may be then further broken into Area Plans. The Sub-community is implemented by a plan comparable to a large area Specific Plan (California model-based) or a master plan. The Area Plan is comparable to a California model based Specific Plan for a smaller geographic area and may include one or more “character areas” as we see it.

Douglas County, Georgia

In the context of the Douglas County Comprehensive Plan, urban design describes a classification of development patterns, their distinct differences, and their relationship to one another. At the scale of the Comprehensive Plan, urban design strategies focus more on the organization of neighborhoods, commercial areas, and open spaces and their connectivity to one another within a larger framework.

The Vision for Douglas County is based on a pattern of continued growth focused on identified development nodes, corridors, and character areas that discourage urban sprawl, inefficient use of infrastructure, and land use incompatibility. The two-step growth management strategy begins with the definition of the character of a place (Community Character Areas) and the establishment of regulatory measures (zoning and associated zoning overlays) required to protect the character.

The “Community Character Areas” are intended to ensure compatibility and unified development within specified areas of the County. The Future Land Use Map is broken into ten Community Character Areas which reflect the rural, developing commercial and industrial base of the County: Rural Places; Residential Growth Areas; Urban Residential; Transitional Planned Development Corridor; Neighborhood Village Center; Community Village Center; Commerce Center; Workplace Centers; Industrial Workplace; and Intensive Industrial.

The Community Character Areas define the overall land use characteristics in generalized areas of the County, including such components as density, land use, economic development, natural and historical resources, and types of community facilities. Each Community Character Area also identifies associated zoning districts which are applicable to the character area. The Plan proposes that urban design plans be developed, as needed, for specific areas within the County, which would outline uses, circulation patterns, and design compatibility. A zoning overlay could be used to address issues such as the intensity of development along streets and open spaces, parking requirements, setbacks, streetscape, landscape, architectural materials and expression, and guidelines for the mix of uses.

The individual types of character areas in the Douglas County Comprehensive Plan are particularly relevant to the establishment of types of character areas for statewide application, as they are reflective of a good deal of the development status at the larger jurisdictional level. The Plan describes the character of these areas and recommendations for future development treatment in a way that is comparable to a definition we might generate. The general categories of design and features addressed by the standards and guidelines serve as a solid framework for identifying the content of DCA’s “character area” recommendations.

California Specific Plans

In California, a specific plan is a mechanism to provide a greater level of detail than what is proposed by the Comprehensive Plan for sites of special interest to a community or region. The specific plan provides an opportunity to create a comprehensive site development program based on site considerations, environmental considerations, and public policy. Basically, it establishes the nature, character and location of development activities within an orderly growth pattern.

Specific Plans are tools used to implement the assignment of a defined geographic area which have been assigned as an “Area Plan”, a Character Area, some kind of overlay, or a Specific Plan designation of the Land Use Map. Usually it is overlaid on an underlying Land Use Element land use category, or categories, but some plans may simply assign the area “Specific Plan”. The Specific Plan must be generally consistent with the goals, policies and programs of the Comprehensive Plan and may be based on the Zoning Code, although typically it establishes its own standards so that each type of land use contained within the land use plan is tailored to accommodate the intended character and function of the Specific Plan.

A specific plan is a regulatory plan which, upon adoption by the jurisdiction, becomes the land use policy and zoning for the property/properties. It describes the comprehensive development for an area and can be applied to a site as small as about 4 acres for a specific use which requires more detailed planning and development consideration, or a huge acreage of thousands of acres. There may be a single property owner, or many. However, the larger plans are typically comprised of a primary land owner which holds the majority of the site, and usually the large acreages are comprised of lands which are at the brink of developing from farmland or vacant status, with just a few scattered existing uses on them. Within a large area, the Specific Plan may be used as almost a “new town” guide and may actually contain multiple “character areas,” each with its own objectives, development standards, design guidelines, and mixes of land uses. Specific Plans are often used to guide the development of a redevelopment area or a corridor, with a great deal of focus on design guidelines and standards for new or rehabilitated development.

A specific plan provides detailed guidance and standards for a particular area or project. A specific plan details the overall development scheme, establishes development standards and guidelines that future projects in the plan area will follow, and identifies the public facilities and infrastructure required to support the development of the project. A Specific Plan clearly articulates the intended character and development direction for an area, provides clear guidance, and is flexible to allow changing responses to market conditions.

The specific plan has two relevant associations to the character area. The first is the required elements of the criteria for development, including the community framework section which includes: site planning and design (massing, scale, orientation and setbacks); landscape; streetscape; walls and fences; signage; architectural guidelines (style, color, special features); access (both pedestrian and vehicular as applicable), etc. The second is that there are many examples of specific plans in which the land plan is broken down into numerous “character areas”, each with objectives and physical methods for achieving the desired intent, that we can draw from in establishing the recommendations for each character area.

LINK TO LITERATURE AND EXISTING TYPOLOGIES

The Land Classification Approach

A land classification plan can be defined as a “more general map of growth policy areas rather than a detailed land use pattern.” Often used at the county and regional level (and sometimes entire states), land classification plans describe areas where urban growth will be encouraged and areas conservation or rural areas where it is discouraged. It has its roots in Hawaii’s state land use law (1961), McHarg (1969), and Oregon’s land use law (1973) (Kaiser and Godschalk 1995).

Calthorpe’s Regional City

Peter Calthorpe (2000) contends that only four elements or “building blocks” are needed to design complete regions, cities, and towns. They are: *centers, districts, preserves, and corridors*. Calthorpe’s typology acknowledges there are different scales for “centers,” but it mixes together the various scales of geographies (regions, cities, and towns). The typology also discusses neighborhoods as possibly constituting part of a center but does not recognize them as a distinct building block. Calthorpe does not include the neighborhood as a building block, perhaps because strategies that focus on individual neighborhoods may miss the regional perspective he advocates.

- *Centers*: Local and regional destinations at the neighborhood, village, town, and urban scale. There is hierarchy from village center to urban center. Centers are mixed use by definition (jobs, housing, services, retail). Centers are primarily retail, civic, and workplace dominated with some residential uses mixed in. Centers are distinct from neighborhoods but may include a neighborhood.
- *Neighborhoods*: Neighborhoods are primarily residential with some civic, recreational and support uses mixed in.
- *Districts*: Special use areas outside of neighborhoods and centers which are necessarily dominated by a single primary activity. Examples include university campuses, airports, industrial districts, and military bases. By definition, they are functionally separate from centers and neighborhoods. Although dominated by a single use, districts can and should be closely integrated with centers and other mixed-use areas.
- *Preserves*: Open space elements that frame the region, protect farmlands, and preserve critical habitat. Examples include productive agriculture and wildlife management areas. Preserves can and often do serve a “community separator” function.
- *Corridors*: Connecting elements based on either natural systems or infrastructure and transportation lines. They represent a flow – of water, traffic, or habitat movement. Examples include Main Street, riverfront, strip commercial corridors, abandoned railroad tracks, and utility corridors.

Duany’s Transect

Andres Duany has described a planning approach and principles to create a set of human habitats that vary by their level and intensity of urban character. This “more enlightened” approach is known as “transect planning” (Duany and Talen 2002). A transect is a “geographical cross-section of a region used to reveal a sequence of environments” and “a way of applying a set of core principles of good urban form to a range of human habitats” (Duany and Talen, 2002, p. 246, 247). Transect planning is based on ecological theory but also has roots in the well-known “urban-folk continuum” concept (Redfield 1947), which has inspired sociologists, anthropologists, and urban planners for decades. Transect planning promotes a continuum of urban patterns that are sustainable and

coherent in design. It emphasizes “locational character.” It seeks to specify and arrange elements that comprise the environment in a way that is expected given the nature of the place (Duany and Talen 2002).

The notion of transect planning relies on a segmentation typology based on a rural-to-urban continuum that together provide a diverse range of human habitats. Specifically, six “ecozones” are the result of that Rural \leftrightarrow Urban segmentation typology (Duany and Talen 2002, p. 247):

- Rural preserve. Open space, legally protected.
- Rural reserve. Open space, not yet protected.
- Sub-urban. Least dense, most residential community habitat.
- General urban. Generalized, primarily residential, community habitat.
- Urban center. Denser, fully mixed-use community habitat.
- Urban core. Densest residential, business, cultural, and entertainment concentration of a region.

The diagram of the transect system shows these six ecozones (and in addition, a seventh category called “special district”), which are distinguished in terms of natural features, buildings, and various aspects of the built environment such as density, buildings, hardscape, lighting, and parks. Principles of traditional neighborhood development are woven into each of the transect categories. For rural preserve, the diagram includes selected protection techniques such as purchase of open space and conservation easements. What appears to be missing from the six ecozones is an area that might be termed “exurban,” or not yet suburban but also not set aside as a preserve or to be set aside as a reserve; there are areas in rural Georgia that are a combination of private land uses such as exurban/rural residential and agriculture.

SYNTHESIS OF REGIONAL CITY AND TRANSECT

“Character Areas” (Local Government “Vision” addresses these as applicable)							
\leftarrow “Development Concepts Map” \rightarrow (i.e., covers an entire regional or local jurisdiction)							
Rural \leftrightarrow Urban							
Rural Preserve	Rural Reserve	Exurban	Suburban	General Urban	Urban Center	Urban Core	Special District
Preserve	Preserve						
Corridor	Corridor	Corridor	Corridor	Corridor			
		Crossroads center	Village center	Town center	Urban center	Regional Center	
			Neighborhood	Neighborhood			
							District

Source: Synthesis of Calthorpe (2003) and Duany and Talen (2002) by Jerry Weitz & Associates, Inc.

COMPARISON OF CHARACTER AREAS BY ELEMENTS

Element	Rural Preserve	Rural Reserve	Exurban	Suburban	General Urban	Urban Center	Urban Core	Special District
Function	Nature	Nature	Transition	Residential Living	Mixed-use community	Mixed-use activity	Mixed-use activity	Unique activity
Objective	Preserve	Protect	Manage	Manage	Manage	Manage	Manage	Accommodate
Open space	Primary use/activity	Intended use/activity	Consumed as a commodity	Parks; greenways	Parks; greenways	Pocket Parks; Greens	Pocket Parks; Greens, Plazas	Variable depending on unique activity
Natural corridors	Riparian, mountain chains, soil classes	Riparian, mountain chains, soil classes	Riparian, agricultural or forest belts	Riparian	Riparian	Riparian	Riparian	Rivers; encroachment buffers
Man-made corridors			Roads	Utilities; roads	Utilities; roads	Utilities; roads	Utilities; roads	Utilities; roads
Land Use Mix		No urban activities	Residence, agriculture	Segregated or unmixed	Primarily Residential	Primarily Commercial	Mostly Commercial	Single (special) use
Residence type(s)			Farm-related; detached	Mostly Detached	All types	Apartments and lofts	Apartments and lofts	Variable
Residential Density		1 unit for each 25 acres or more	1 unit for each 5 acres or more	1-3 units per acre	3-15 units per acre	Floor-Area Ratio	Floor-Area Ratio	Variable depending on unique activity
Type of Center			Crossroads	Village	Town	Urban	Regional	
Primary Intensity Measure			Impervious surface coverage	Maximum building coverage	Maximum building coverage	Floor-Area Ratio	Floor-Area Ratio	Variable measures can be applied
Water Service			Individual wells	Wells, public water, community systems	Public water	Public water	Public water	Public water
Sewage Disposal			On-site septic	Sanitary sewer or on-site septic	Sanitary sewer	Sanitary sewer	Sanitary sewer	Sanitary sewer
Roads	Restricted access	Rural or scenic	Rural or scenic	Hierarchical	Hybrid grid & hierarchy	Network grid pattern	Network grid pattern (fine-grain)	Variable
Connectivity of Roads			Disconnected	Disconnected	Connected	Connected	Connected at fine grain	Connected
Typical Block Width				800-1500	600-800	400-600	200-400	Variable
Transit service			Not provided	Generally not provided	May be provided	Likely to be provided	Essential	May be provided
Pedestrian Orientation			None	Limited	Provided	Essential characteristic	Essential characteristic	
Walkway Type		Optional	None or path	None or narrow sidewalk	Average width sidewalk	Wide sidewalk	Wide sidewalk	Variable depending on unique activity

**REGULATORY TECHNIQUES FOR WHICH MODELS ARE AVAILABLE
AND THEIR MATCH WITH CHARACTER AREAS**

Guidance Available for Regulatory Techniques	Rural Preserve	Rural Reserve	Exurban	Sub-urban	General Urban	Urban Center	Urban Core	Special District
Agricultural lands designation		X	X					
Agricultural/large lot zoning		X	X					
Agricultural use notice/waiver		X	X					
Bicycle facility specifications				X	X	X	X	X
Cluster development		X	X	X				
Conservation easements	X	X	X	X				
Conservation subdivision		X	X	X				
Corridor or official map	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Design review board		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Development agreement		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Development performance standards		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Environmental impact review		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Hillside development		X	X	X	X			X
Historic preservation		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Infill development standards				X	X	X	X	X
Interim development regulations		X	X	X				
Land development regulations		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Land use guidance system		X	X	X	X			
Major permit requirement		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Mixed-use zoning					X	X	X	X
Overlay districts	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Planned unit development				X	X			X
Redevelopment				X	X	X	X	
Scenic corridors		X	X					
Sign regulations		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Specific plans				X	X	X	X	X
Septic system regulations			X	X				
Street standards (alternative)		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Subdivision regulations		X	X	X	X			
TND ordinance				X	X	X		
TOD ordinance					X	X	X	
Tree protection/landscaping				X	X	X	X	X
Zoning or land use districts	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

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