

Executive Summary

This is the Gwinnett County Open Space and Greenway Master Plan, a comprehensive document intended to inform and guide the County's ongoing greenspace preservation program. This is the culmination of an 18-month process by a project team which includes Lose & Associates, Inc., the University of Georgia Institute of Ecology and Greenways Incorporated.

The master plan is divided into six sections followed by an appendix. The six sections are the *Introduction; Overview of Gwinnett County, Currently Protected Greenspace and Targets for Preservation; Open Space Acquisition, Administration, Management and Funding Analysis, and Policy Recommendations; Funding Issues; Land Availability Analysis; and Gwinnett County Greenway System Plan.*

The master planning process was guided by a staff committee and a citizens' steering committee. The staff committee was composed of representatives of various Gwinnett County departments, while the steering committee included representatives of the public from around the County. Public input was also solicited in thirteen public meetings and four focus group meetings with special interest groups. Representatives of Gwinnett County municipalities also provided comments and recommendations at one of the special interest group meetings.

Based on public input and County guidance, the project team identified the following goals for the master plan:

Primary Goals

- Increase recreation opportunities
- Protect and improve water quality
- Increase connectivity via a system of greenway trails
- Reduce environmental impacts of development

Secondary Goals

- Enhance aesthetics throughout the County
- Protect plant and animal habitat
- Promote biodiversity
- Enhance air quality
- Improve transportation opportunities
- Mitigate traffic congestion
- Realize economic benefits of open space and greenways
- Enhance tourism opportunities
- Promote good health
- Protect historic and archeological resources
- Protect cultural resources

Based on these goals and analyses of demographic, economic and environmental conditions in the County, the following targets for preservation were identified:

1. Streams and Floodplains (to protect water quality)
The County should consider developing a buffer/floodplain acquisition program.
2. High-Quality Watersheds (to protect water quality and provide increased recreation opportunities)
The County should consider targeting significant open space acquisition toward the Apalachee, Little Mulberry, Alcovy and Big Haynes watersheds in order to protect high quality watersheds and drinking water sources.
3. Parkland in Urbanized Areas (to provide increased recreation opportunities)
To the extent these are reasonably available, the County should consider identifying and purchasing properties in the highly developed western and central portions of the County in order to provide recreation opportunities. Acquisition in urbanized areas can include development sites that are under-utilized at the present time.
4. Restoration of Stream Banks in Urbanized Areas (to improve water quality and provide recreation opportunities)
The County should consider coordinating greenspace preservation with restoration projects throughout the County, especially in the more urban areas.
5. Prime Wildlife Habitat (to reduce the environmental impacts of development)
Habitat documented to contain state and federal threatened or endangered species should be considered a priority.
6. Greenways
The County should consider establishing greenways in locations providing the greatest connectivity between existing greenspaces and where they can serve as useful transportation corridors.
7. Distribution of Greenspace
The County should consider acquiring land in both developed and undeveloped areas of the County.

Gwinnett County has recognized that it cannot meet all its greenspace protection goals by acquisition alone, although purchase of lands will continue to play an important role. In consideration of these facts, the following policy recommendations were developed.

Policy Recommendations: Acquisition

1. The County should consider adopting a system of evaluating properties for fee-simple acquisition based in concordance with the recommended targets for preservation described in Section 3.

2. The County should examine the feasibility of establishing a system for the Purchase of Development Rights (PDRs). The PDR program could be focused on acquiring easements for stream banks and floodplains.
3. The County should consider negotiating multi-purpose easements that combine greenway public access rights with sewer and access easements.
4. The County should consider establishing a system for accepting donations of land. Preparations for receiving such donations could include:
 - enacting an enabling ordinance for land donations
 - establishing a system and responsibility for reviewing and evaluating offers of donations
 - asking the Board of Assessors to evaluate state law regarding the assessment of properties with conservation easements
5. The County should consider establishing *its own* wetlands/streambank mitigation bank to provide a low-cost mechanism to restore and protect streams and wetlands in the County.
6. The County should consider providing incentives for development projects that provide a public access greenway consistent with the Greenway System Plan.

Policy Recommendations: Planning, Zoning and Regulatory Approaches

1. The County should monitor the effectiveness of the conservation subdivision ordinance in protecting open space, and consider changes as necessary.
2. The County should consider extending the option for conservation subdivisions to other zoning districts.
3. The County should work to increase public awareness of the economic and quality-of-life benefits of mixed-use development, greenways and higher density residential developments.
4. The County should consider mapping priority protection areas and development nodes on future land use maps.
5. The County should consider creating a transferable development rights program, should the state enabling legislation be amended.
6. The County should consider providing redevelopment incentives.
7. The County should consider a program to provide highway buffers.

Effective management of a major greenspace program may require some changes in administrative processes in Gwinnett County, although these can be made without significantly altering any departmental structures. It is recommended that a full-time Open Space Coordinator be hired with other full-time positions likely to prove necessary in the future. The Department of Community Services is the most logical choice to serve as the lead department in administering the master plan, under the

direction of the County Administrator. It will be necessary to coordinate greenspace protection with other departments, including Planning and Development, Public Utilities, Transportation, Law, Support Services, Police Services and Financial Services, each of which has a unique role to play. The Transportation, Public Utility and Planning Departments will need to appoint a staff person to oversee open space and greenway activities within their divisions. These appointees will be responsible for working with the open space coordinator on intra-division acquisition, planning and construction matters.

Specific geographic targets for greenspace preservation have also been identified in Section 5, along with detailed maps of undeveloped land throughout the County.

There are special concerns related to greenway development, and a greenway system plan is presented in Section 6. Design standards, regulations and management recommendations are provided, along with proposed greenway routes. Two pilot greenway projects have been identified in this section.