

SECTION FIVE - IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This Plan offers a new vision for the future development of Athens. The Plan is a public document composed of narrative and maps which set out guidelines to be used ultimately for the construction and/or reconstruction of the community's existing and future parts. The Plan is not a law in that it prescribes precise restrictions; rather, it is a document that influences land use law and regulations in the area because its recommendations have been reviewed and supported by the citizens of the community.

In implementing the policies established in the Plan, the City of Athens has several alternatives. First, the City may choose to prescribe and define new land use regulations (zoning ordinance and subdivision regulations) which effectively translate the policies of the Plan into law. Second, the City may make commitments to further study the policies recommended in the Plan so that new and more exact land use regulations can be formulated, reviewed, and eventually adopted. This section outlines the implementation strategies proposed for this Plan. The section has been structured to include each of the alternative methods described above. A brief commentary on each action is included so that the specific policies implemented by the action can be identified.

5.2 ZONING ORDINANCE AMENDMENTS

Throughout the planning process, the plan for the future of Athens clearly pointed to a need for new zoning districts and land use regulations to implement the vision. The existing ordinance includes districts that are too broad in nature to offer specific options and incentives for certain types of development. Without these new standards, the clarity of the vision would be lost and the Plan's guidelines for decision-making may prove to be insufficient in certain cases. As a result, the Plan recommends three broad categories of land use regulations be created and adopted by the Engineering Services and Community Development Department:

- New Zoning Districts for New Land Use Classifications
- New Regulations for Community Design Standards
- New Administrative Standards for the Review of Development Proposals

5.2.1 New Zoning Districts for Mixed Use and Office/Distribution Land Use Areas

The current zoning ordinances of the City of Athens do not contain zoning districts which correspond to the land use, density and 'vision' created in the MU and OPD land use classifications found on the Future Land Use Map. Although some sections of the existing zoning ordinance accommodate various portions of this vision, there is no single zoning district that best encapsulates the framework of a comprehensive MU or O/D zoning district. Consequently, this Plan recommends the drafting, review and adoption of new zoning districts which will correspond to the uses, densities and standards anticipated in the Mixed Use and Office/Distribution land use classifications. Appendices C and D present a starting point for the City in regards to possible district use, bulk and design standards.

5.2.2 Traditional Neighborhood Development Alternative

The existing Athens zoning ordinance incorporates and requires the development of property using techniques derived from suburban development practices. These practices do not serve well the

traditional urban fabric of the older sections of the City or encourage the development of self-sustainable “neighborhoods” instead of conventional “sprawling” patterns.

The Traditional Neighborhood (TN) district provides an alternative by allowing development under the conventional development practices currently permitted in the existing ordinance, or by utilizing the techniques of TN development. This overlay district, where applied, will function as an overlay addition to the current base zoning of the property; the property will maintain the current base zoning in order to provide the option of development patterns.

For areas within the City, such as the Downtown Focus Area, the TN zoning district will encourage, perhaps through incentive packages, the development or redevelopment of land to complete, improve, and strengthen existing neighborhood patterns. For areas in the City that are largely undeveloped, such as the southern and eastern quadrants, and the Tanner interchange area, the TN zoning district encourages, perhaps through infrastructure improvements or other incentive packages, the development of individual neighborhoods and villages as an alternative to typical suburban sprawl models. Appendix E outlines a Traditional Neighborhood District that provides these use, bulk and design standards that can be used by the City to guide the future development in these key areas. The Engineering Services and Community Development Department and Department of Codes Administration will be responsible for the review of any development that requires a building permit within the boundary of property zoned TN. While these standards may supercede those in the zoning ordinance, they are not intended to supercede adopted building codes or accessibility legislation.

Where obvious physical restraints exist on the property zoned TN (i.e. floodplain, etc.), the Planning Department may review alternative solutions as they relate to the design intent of the TN district. Alternative solutions are unique to the situation and should not provide precedent for future development.

5.2.3 New Regulations for Community Design Standards

In addition to the need for new zoning districts to accommodate new land uses, the planning process also emphasized the desire for a well-designed and aesthetically pleasing community for future development following the conventional zoning regulations of the existing zoning ordinance. To this end, the Plan includes various policy statements regarding design standards and community design components. To aid in implementing these standards across the entire community and fairly for all new development, the following recommendations are proposed.

- A. Community Design Guidelines Manual: The general framework of design policies and standards included in Appendix B should be reviewed and its most important elements documented in a proposed “Community Design Guidelines Manual.” This manual should provide further graphic and narrative depictions of how these policies are to be implemented throughout the study area. If necessary, the manual could codify the standards in order that the recommendations of this Plan can become regulations for future development.
- B. Infrastructure Standards Manual: Section Four included design policies and standards that recommended enhanced design standards for certain infrastructure elements, primarily

those centering on street sections. More detailed review of potential street sections should be prepared and the appropriate revisions to the subdivision regulations be made to incorporate these design standards into future developments in Athens. These revisions should include minimum right-of-way widths, landscaped median standards, access control regulations, street tree standards and underground utility requirements. Appendix B indicates possible framework for residential street design standards.

5.2.4 New Administrative Standards for Future Development Proposals:

A key tool in ensuring that the specifics of any given development proposal meet the expectations of the overall 'vision' of this plan is the development of new administrative procedures and development regulations. A consistent theme among the Task Force discussions and community meetings was the desire to identify the look and function of a proposed development, rather than granting a 'blanket' zoning that could accommodate a variety of uses and densities which may or may not be consistent with the goals of the Plan. Accordingly, this Plan recommends that the City and County strongly encourage that developers in the development of their proposals use a Planned Development approach. The City's current site plan review procedures and regulations should be revised to represent more valuable tools for use in implementing this approach. These zoning tools will require new development proposals to clearly identify (with site plans and other data) uses, densities, design standards and other key site plan elements which demonstrate the project's overall conformance to this Plan. Appendix F outlines the recommended plan requirements and approval process for developments within zones that require master development and site plan review and approval.

5.3 IMPLEMENTATION METHODS REQUIRING FURTHER STUDY

The proposed land use ordinance amendments will provide immediate help implementing the policies and accomplishing the goals set forth in the Plan. This part of the implementation section suggests actions for implementing some of the more advanced and progressive policies of the Plan. The suggestions contained in this section may not require immediate attention, but they should be considered 'short term' goals for the community to achieve and implement. The continued development of the community will necessitate the adoption and use of these proposed strategies.

5.3.1 Infrastructure Study – Water and Sewer Master Plan for Serving the South and Eastern portions of the Future City Limits

As indicated on Exhibit 4.12, the proposed development of the City's current and future southern and eastern areas (i.e. Piney Creek and Swan Creek basins) will stretch the current water and sewer infrastructure capabilities beyond their limits. As illustrated on the Future Land Use Plan, this area, because of its accessibility to Interstate 65 and proximity to the growing residential portions of suburban Madison County and Limestone County, is proposed to include a significant interstate interchange development area at Tanner and an expanding residential base between I-65 and Mooresville Road. Because of this potential infrastructure demand, the Plan recommends that a more detailed study of this area be performed (based on more data regarding potential or pending developments) to determine the potential demands and the most feasible means for the City to service these demands. This study will better allow the City to be better prepared to address this potential demand when development occurs.

Furthermore, this study should also recommend alternative funding mechanisms for the development of this infrastructure in order that the cost of extending or developing new facilities are not borne by the existing rate payers of Athens Utilities. There are several conceptual cost sharing models that can be investigated, including sewer and water assessment districts (Madison, AL model, Murfreesboro, TN model), developer recapture provisions for upsizing of lines or development of major regional facilities (various locations in Ohio), and other impact fee or facilities tax models for the study to review.

5.3.2 Concurrency Management Program and Capital Improvements Program

Appendix G outlines the broad outlines of a potential concurrency management program that should be reviewed and evaluated by the City as it seeks to implement the conclusions, policies and recommendations of the Plan. The program is intended to serve the long term interests of the City by implementing a system of assessments or analyses that are conducted prior to the approval of a development proposal to ensure that the development does not unduly burden existing infrastructure elements and the existing residents of the area. This Plan identifies several areas of community infrastructure and facilities that require the City's attention and review during the process of evaluating development proposals, including:

- Water and Sewer Infrastructure
- Traffic Impact Studies and Roadway Improvements
- Police, Fire and other Public Safety Services
- Parks and Recreation facilities
- Stormwater Quality and Runoff
- Miscellaneous Services/Facilities (solid waste, etc)

In addition to the Concurrency Management Program, the City should develop a formal program of projecting and budgeting for future capital expenses for items related to their future growth and development. Currently, there is little or no capital funds available to critical infrastructure programs that are needed to maintain the current level of services within the community or provide new areas for development by extending or expanding services. With the exception of the nominal fees charged by Athens Utilities for development projects (approximately \$650 per acre), there is no formal means by which new infrastructure or facilities can be funded other than the City's bonding capacity. While general obligation bonds represent one means by which a community can address critical needs, the sporadic nature of the selling of bonds and funding of needed improvements will likely lead to a competition between departments for those funds.

To fund a formal Capital Improvements Program, several alternatives should be investigated. Although any one or combination of these alternatives could generate concern among some interest groups within the City, not funding these needed infrastructure items could endanger the current and future quality of life within the City. Alternatives could include:

- Property and Business Tax Increases
- User Fees for Facilities (parks, water, sewer, etc.)
- Development Impact Fees or Adequate Facilities Taxes on new developments
- Assessment Districts for high growth areas

- Development Exactions at the time of Development Approval (i.e. donate land for parks, schools, etc)

5.3.3 Community Facilities - Greenway and Bikeway Design Plan for Athens

Community infrastructure does not just include roads and utilities. The City has made tremendous strides in providing needed recreational and community facility infrastructure elements across the area with the Sportsplex and the construction of walking trails, and this Plan recommends that the City plan, design and develop an extension of this Greenway network into the extended Athens area. This Greenway Design Plan should provide use the conceptual routing included in Exhibit 4.11 to create detailed design solutions for the area and provide regulations and construction standards that can be used by the City when new developments are proposed. The Greenway Plan should clearly identify the Greenway network as integral parts of the urban infrastructure in Athens and encourage new developments to install this “green” infrastructure.

5.3.4 Community Design - Design Standards for Implementing Traditional Planning and Design Techniques in the Athens Community

Over the past several years, the concept of traditional planning has become very popular in many communities across the United States as an effective planning tool. Although many locations within suburban settings, such as Athens, do not particularly accommodate or foster these planning techniques, the southeast quadrant represents one of the best opportunities within Limestone County to implement these principles. This area of Athens has the advantages of a good number of large tracts of relatively level land and recently planned community infrastructure improvements (i.e., interchange, utilities, etc.), and all of these factors can play important roles in the successful planning of traditional neighborhood developments. The combination of large, accessible tracts of land, little or no natural constraints to development and the City’s existing and proposed planned development and Traditional Neighborhood zoning regulations illustrated in Appendix E may permit developers to adopt this mode of development, if they so choose. This Plan stops short of recommending that new developments be required to implement traditional site planning standards, but does encourage the City to evaluate the necessity or desirability of these techniques applied across the greater Athens community.