

The Northeast Georgia Regional Commission (NEGRC) has completed its review of the following Development of Regional Impact (DRI). This report contains the NEGRC’s assessment of how the proposed project relates to the policies, programs, and projects articulated in the Regional Plan and Regional Resource Plan. Also included is an assessment of likely interjurisdictional impacts resulting from the proposed development, as well as all comments received from identified affected parties and others during the fifteen-day comment period.

The materials presented in this report are purely advisory and under no circumstances should be considered as binding or infringing upon the host jurisdiction’s right to determine for itself the appropriateness of development within its boundaries.

Transmittal of this DRI report officially completes the DRI process. The submitting local government may proceed with whatever final official actions it deems appropriate regarding the proposed project, but it is encouraged to take the materials presented in the DRI report into consideration when rendering its decision.

Project I.D.:	DRI #4178
Name of Project:	Meissner Corporation – Athens Campus
Name of Host Jurisdiction:	Athens-Clarke County

Background

DRI review was initiated following a request for consolidation of the four affected parcels by the developer. Potentially affected parties were asked to submit comments on the proposal during the 15-day period of 4/9/2024 – 4/24/2024.

Proposed Development

Meissner Corporation is proposing the construction of 800,000 square feet of light industrial and corporate office space use on a 341-acre site in Athens-Clarke County. The proposed site plan indicates that there will be two main entrances, one truck entrance on Athena Drive and one public-facing general entrance on Spring Valley Road, leading to four (4) buildings. The majority of the development is proposed to be on the northern half of the site. The number of loading bays and parking spaces are unspecified, but the overall proposal is estimated to create 1,700 jobs on-site. The site plan shows 16 retention ponds placed along the two entry roads and parking areas. Bioswales are proposed between parking bays to retain stormwater on-site. There is a woodland trail and a campus multi-use path to provide employees and visitors with passive outdoor amenities and non-automobile circulation across the campus. A vegetative buffer would screen the development from Spring Valley Road and Athena Drive. Approximately 200 of the 341 total acres would be left undisturbed and/or wooded, including an existing 13.5 acre pond. While most buildings are located on the north side of the site, a small conference center building is proposed on the southern side of the pond. Currently, the site is a mixture of woodland and open farmland surrounded by undeveloped land, other industrial properties, and low-density rural residential land.

Compatibility with Existing Plans

The site is identified as “Employment” on the county's Future Land Use Map (dated 5/2/2023), indicated as “Employment Center” in the area descriptions. The “Employment Center” land use is described in the Athens-Clarke County Comprehensive Plan as a standard industrial category. The proposal’s compatibility with the “Employment Center” Future Land Use category is summarized in the table below:

Character Area Compatibility

FUTURE LAND USE	CHARACTER AREA NARRATIVE EXCERPTS	PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT’S COMPATIBILITY WITH CHARACTER AREA
EMPLOYMENT CENTER	<p>DESCRIPTION & GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS: Described as areas of industry, office, research parks, and flex-space mixed uses. Large-scale employment areas, which include large industrial areas, manufacturing, office parks, and research centers, are incompatible with housing. Smaller-scale employment areas are appropriate to be in close proximity to a neighborhood area. Design standards regulating building placement, landscaping, and buffering should apply. Small amounts of retail may be compatible in some areas.</p>	<p>Bio-tech manufacturing, industrial, and/or corporate office uses are consistent with the uses described in the plan. The plan’s Compatibility Matrix for Zoning Districts (pg. 54) shows that zoning categories E-O, E-I, I, IN, G, and P are all applicable for this area. Additionally, the site plan does not include housing, shows a relatively undisturbed vegetative buffer between the industrial buildings and main roads, and will serve as a “large-scale employment center” providing an estimated 1,700 new jobs.</p>

The site is identified mostly as “Developing” with a thin section along Spring Valley Road identified as “Rural” on the Northeast Georgia Regional Plan’s Regional Land Use Map (dated 6/15/2023). The Regional Plan recommends development that enhances economic mobility and competitiveness; elevates public health and equity; supports and adds value to existing communities; creates housing that is diverse, adequate, equitable, and affordable; includes transportation choices and is well-connected with existing and planned transportation options; and protects natural and historic resources. The table on the next two pages summarizes the project’s compatibility with these recommendations.

Proposed Development's Compatibility with the Northeast Georgia Regional Plan

REGIONAL PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS	PROPOSED PROJECT'S COMPATIBILITY WITH RECOMMENDATION
Enhances economic mobility and competitiveness	The applicant states that the regional workforce is sufficient to meet the demand created for the proposed project. The project would expand employment opportunities in the Athens-area bio-tech industry by providing an estimated 1,700 new jobs in a variety of professions.
Elevates public health and equity	<p>According to the site plan, the site would be visually well-screened by woodland areas and would include access for employees and visitors to outdoor amenities. The site, as shown, would be accessible via multiple modes of transportation, allowing equitable access across segments of the population.</p> <p>No information about the proposed facility's planned products, services, or operations was submitted with the DRI application, so it is unclear whether this facility would contribute to essential goods and services such as food, utilities, and/or healthcare.</p>
Supports and adds value to existing communities	The master plan excerpts indicate that the developer used context-sensitive and science-based design principles to determine the placement of infrastructure and buildings on the site. The development is located on a greenfield, however, it is located within the Athens-Clarke County greenbelt and in relative proximity to goods and services. Additionally, a vegetative buffer is included which should prevent an imposing presence on surrounding residential neighborhoods and rural areas. Lastly, as indicated by the applicant, the proposed development will be served by existing capacity for water, sewer, transportation, and waste disposal.
Creates housing that is diverse, adequate, equitable, and affordable	Not applicable to this project type.
Includes transportation choices and is well-connected with existing and planned transportation options	<p>The proposal includes two main entrance options: one for heavy truck traffic from Athena Drive and one "community-facing" entrance for general automobile traffic on Spring Valley Road. Both roads are two-lane, bi-directional county roads. An additional secondary entrance is shown connecting to Anderson Lane, a small loop road along Athena Drive.</p> <p>The site plan notes that a trail system will be included in the development and that it will have a connection to the future multi-use Firefly Trail segment (which will run parallel to Spring Valley Road), connecting downtown Athens with the City of Winterville. However, the site plan does not show this connection with the "Woodland" trail system. The cross-section example of Loop Road "C" shown in the master plan excerpts includes a multi-use path that seems to provide pedestrian connectivity between the proposed facility and the two access roads, Athena Drive and Spring Valley Road. The local government should determine whether a connection will, in fact, be included at the Spring Valley Road main entrance so that bicycle and pedestrian access to the Firefly Trail corridor is planned for in an appropriate manner.</p> <p>The project site is located 2.4 miles (by road) from the Athens-Ben Epps Airport, providing convenient access to multi-state air travel options.</p> <p>The development will be served by an existing weekday and evening fixed-route public transit service (#30, North Side Circulator) by Athens-Clarke County Transit. The route follows Spring Valley Road and Athena Drive. However, there may need to be new stops designated at build-out as currently there are no stops at this location.</p>

REGIONAL PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS	PROPOSED PROJECT’S COMPATIBILITY WITH RECOMMENDATION
Protects natural and historic resources	<p>The proposal has considered the existing vegetation types in the site analysis and building placement. The “mixed hardwood” areas, “plantation pine” areas, and “stream valley” areas were all mostly avoided for ground disturbance. Additionally, areas with a 15% slope or greater are shown to be mostly avoided.</p> <p>An existing lake, named Christian Lake, will remain undisturbed with a 500’ buffer between the main industrial building(s) and the lake edge. This will aid in maintaining the lake’s “high water quality” as determined in a water sample test performed in 2023.</p> <p>The historic Firefly Trail rail corridor is adjacent to the site. The proposal, as shown, will have no adverse effects on the corridor. No historic buildings or sites will be affected by the development.</p>

Potential Interjurisdictional Impacts

Natural Resources

The applicant states that the project is unlikely to affect any of the environmental quality factors identified on the DRI Additional Form, including water supply watersheds, groundwater recharge areas, wetlands, protected mountain and river corridors, floodplains, historic resources, and other environmentally sensitive resources. One stream, downstream of Christian Lake, will be disturbed by a heavy truck access road. The stream crossing is slightly upstream from a jurisdictional wetland and should be carefully constructed and maintained as to not create any long-term issues with erosion or sedimentation.

The chart below summarizes the number of acres within the site area as well as within a one-mile buffer around the site that contains 1) wetlands, 2) conservation land, 3) regionally important resources, and 4) threatened regionally important resources. Please refer to the footnotes for definitions for each of these terms.

Wetland, Conservation, and Regionally Important Resources

	AREA TYPE	AREA (ACRES)	PERCENT OF AREA
SITE AREA (344 acres)	Wetland Acres ¹	28	8.13%
	“Conservation Land” ²	263	76.55%
	Regionally Important Resource Land ³	242	70.25%
	Threatened Regionally Important Resource Land ⁴	227	66.11%
1 MILE BUFFER AROUND SITE (4,253 acres)	Wetland Acres	195	4.58%
	“Conservation Land”	3,036	71.39%
	Regionally Important Resource Land	2,153	50.63%
	Threatened Regionally Important Resource Land	1,492	35.08%

¹ Wetland acres are derived from the National Wetland Inventory (NWI)

² “Conservation” land is derived from the Northeast Georgia Regional Plan’s Conservation and Development Map (6/15/2023).

³ Regionally Important Resources were identified as a part of the Northeast Georgia Resource Management Plan for Regionally Important Resources (2/15/2018).

⁴ This area represents the intersection between Conservation areas (identified on the Conservation and Development Map, 6/15/2023), adopted Regionally Important Resources (RIR), and “Developed” and “Developing” Regional Land Use areas (identified on the Regional Land Use Map, 6/15/2023).

Approximately, 70.25% of the site includes Regionally Important Resource land, stemming from the Firefly Trail. The RIR acreage is part of the Northeast Georgia Green Infrastructure Network as identified in the Northeast Georgia Resource Management Plan for Regionally Important Resources (dated 8/7/2018). The Northeast Georgia Green Infrastructure Network is intended to serve as a strategically planned and managed network of wilderness, parks, greenways, conservation easements, and working lands with conservation value that benefits wildlife and people, supports native species, maintains natural ecological processes, sustains air and water resources, links urban settings to rural ones, and contributes to the health and quality of life for the communities and citizens sharing this network.

The Firefly Trail is the one Regionally Important Resource within one mile of the site. The proposal's master plan notes that connection to the Firefly Trail with trails on-site is intended. This would expand the local trail network and promote employees' use of active transportation methods. This compliments the Firefly Trail corridor's potential to serve as a recreational resource and provide economic opportunity for communities along the corridor. Additionally, the vegetated buffer between the development and Spring Valley Road shown on the site plan assists in maintaining the corridor's character as a rural, scenic route outside of the city's urban core. The site plan does not clearly identify a connection to the Firefly Trail corridor; therefore, the local government should consider explicitly requesting this connection be shown on site plans during local review.

Transportation

W&A Engineering completed a traffic impact study that projects 4,947 daily trips resulting from the proposed development, including 539 AM peak hour trips and 558 PM peak hour trips from the proposed development.

The traffic study estimates that the current intersection is operating at an acceptable Level-of-Service (LOS) during AM and PM peak hours. At build-out, the LOS at the Spring Valley Road and Athena Drive intersection would change to "F" for AM peak hour and "E" during PM peak hour in design year 2045. To optimize the LOS of these roads at build-out, there are six recommended actions outlined in the traffic impact study, four for Spring Valley Road and two for Athena Drive. Recommendations include:

- **Spring Valley Road/Old Elberton Road at Voyles Road/Moores Grove Road**
 - Construct a single lane roundabout with a 140' inscribed diameter.
- **Spring Valley Road at Driveway 3**
 - Construct a full width right turn lane 175' long with a 100' taper.
 - Construct a full width left turn lane 235' long with 100' bay taper and a 270' approach and departure taper (based on symmetric widening).
- **Spring Valley Road at Driveway 2**
 - Construct a full width right turn lane 175' long with a 100' taper.
- **Spring Valley Rd at Athena Drive/Moss Road**
 - The intersection appears to be minimally impacted by the Meissner development in the build year. It is recommended to monitor the intersection for future operational considerations.
- **Athena Drive at Anderson Lane/Driveway 1**
 - Construct a single lane roundabout with a 140' inscribed diameter.
- **Athena Drive at Olympic Drive**
 - The intersection appears to be minimally impacted by the Meissner development in the build year. It is recommended to monitor the intersection for future operational considerations.

According to the site plan, a traffic circle at the Athena Drive entrance is proposed. However, none of the other recommended improvements are shown, in part due to their locations outside of the developer's project scope. The local government and developer should consider incorporating recommendations listed in the traffic study for the "Spring Valley Road at Driveway 3" and "Spring Valley Road at Driveway 2" at build-out.

Water Supply and Wastewater

The project would be served by the Unified Government of Athens-Clarke County water and sewer systems with an estimated daily demand of 0.08 MGD for each system. The applicant states that these demands can be covered by existing capacity. Water and sewer lines would require an extension to serve the proposed development. Sewer lines would need to be extended from the southern end of the site at Athena Road to the northern end of the site. Water infrastructure would be able to be extended from either Spring Valley Road or Athena Road.

Stormwater Management

The applicant estimates that 30% of the site would be covered in impervious surfaces and 16 retention ponds are planned to manage stormwater runoff. Cross sections of the parking lot areas are shown to include bioswales and tree plantings between parking rows to manage runoff as well. No other information was provided regarding stormwater runoff management.

The proposal should be designed to minimize disruption to the existing streams, associated wetlands, and floodplains to avoid future erosion, flooding, and degraded water quality onsite and downstream from the site. Low impact design measures and green infrastructure should be incorporated into the project design, where possible. At minimum, the project should be in accordance with the latest edition of the Georgia Stormwater Management Manual (Blue Book) and meet all relevant EPD requirements.

Solid Waste

The applicant estimates the project would generate 3,900 tons of solid waste annually and that sufficient landfill capacity exists to handle this waste. According to 2023 annual tonnage reports from the Georgia Environmental Protection Division, almost all municipal solid waste (MSW) generated in Athens-Clarke County is disposed of in a landfill within the county. The applicant states that no hazardous waste would be generated.

Lifecycle Costs and Revenues

The applicant estimates that the project would be worth \$250 million at build-out in 2034 and generate \$13 million in annual local taxes. On a per-acre basis, the project would be worth approximately \$733,138 and generate approximately \$38,123 in tax revenue. Prior to approval, the County should measure the life cycle costs of the infrastructure needed to serve this project to ensure that they would not be committing to more maintenance expenses than the new tax revenue can cover.

Comments from Affected Parties

Alan Hood

Airport Safety Data Program Manager, Georgia Department of Transportation

This proposed construction of 800,000 square feet of light industrial corporate office facility space, including roadway improvements and related infrastructure, on a 341-acre tract in Athens-Clarke County is just over 1 mile north of the Athens/Ben Epps Airport (AHN). It is located under or outside of any FAA approach or departure surfaces, and outside airport compatible land use areas, and does not appear to impact the airport.

If any construction equipment or construction exceeds 150' AGL, an FAA Form 7460-1 must be submitted to the Federal Aviation Administration according to the FAA's Notice Criteria Tool found here (<https://oeaaa.faa.gov/oeaaa/external/gisTools/gisAction.jsp?action=showNoNoticeRequiredToolForm>). Those submissions for any associated cranes may be done online at <https://oeaaa.faa.gov>. The FAA must be in receipt of the notifications, no later than 120 days prior to construction. The FAA will evaluate the potential impacts of the project on protected airspace associated with the airports and advise the proponent if any action is necessary.

Ethan Armentrout, P.E.

DITO District Traffic Operations Manager, Georgia Department of Transportation

The DRI and Traffic Study reviewed several intersections in and around the proposed site where the Major Collectors intersect. That being said, per my cursory review I did not see where it studied several intersections where these Major Collectors connect to GDOT's Principal Arterial roads. These intersections are predicted to be affected by the increase in traffic. We can discuss it further, but the following intersections will likely be affected so they will need to be added to the study:

- 1) US 29/ SR 8 at Athena Dr
- 2) 441/ SR 10 Loop – the entire Clove Leaf, including the intersection at Hull Road (are we expecting people to get off of the bypass and take Old Hull Road to Athena Dr to get to the site?)
- 3) SR 72 and Voyles Rd (to access Olympic Drive)
- 4) SR 10 at Olympic Dr/ Peter St

A few other intersections may need to be added to the list as well.