



DEVELOPMENTS OF REGIONAL IMPACT

Final Report

Northeast Georgia Regional Commission • 305 Research Drive, Athens, Georgia • www.negrc.org

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 #3192
Name of Project:	Oconee Connector Center
Name of Host Jurisdiction:	Oconee County

Background

DRI review was initiated following the developer's request for a rezoning from Oconee County. The parcels are zoned B-1 PUD, B-2, and R-1 and the developer is requesting that the entire site be rezoned to B-2 Highway Commercial. Potentially affected parties were asked to submit comments on the proposal during the 15-day period of 11/16/20-12/01/20.

Proposed Development

The proposed development would occupy property totaling 47 acres at the intersection of the Oconee Connector and Mars Hill Road off GA-316 in Oconee County. The parcel numbers are C-01-045, C-01-045B, and C-01-45D. The proposal consists of 320,000 square feet of commercial mixed-use properties including a 48,000 square foot grocery store and outparcels in Phase One, and 240 hotel rooms, restaurants, retail, and an auto service and sales center in Phase Two. The overall project would be completed in 2025. The site is currently wooded and undeveloped.

Compatibility with Existing Plans

The site is identified on the Oconee County Comprehensive Plan's 2040 Character Area Map (dated 04/25/2018) as a Regional Center with a buffered area along the intermittent stream labeled as Conservation. The Conservation Character Area includes stream buffers and corridors that are protected from land development activities to preserve the county and region's water quality, natural habitats, and provide valuable tree cover. The Comprehensive Plan's Character Area description states that "Development within this area should be limited to minimize the adverse impacts of development on water quality." The proposal's site plan shows that this stream would be mostly paved and built over, which is wildly inconsistent with the

intent of the Character Area. Any development plan for this site should seek to preserve this stream as much as possible. For example, the stream could be preserved as greenspace or usable parkland with trails and footbridges.

The Regional Center Character Area includes uses such as hotels, offices, shopping centers, and individual “big box” retail stores conditioned on the availability of public water and sewer plus transportation network capacity to handle additional traffic. The proposed uses align with the Regional Center Character Area description; however, the site is not currently served by public sewer and water (would require two-mile extensions of water and sewer lines) and the submitted traffic study identifies concerns regarding the project’s effects on adjacent, public roadways and intersections (discussed later in this section).

The site is identified as “Developing” on the Northeast Georgia Regional Plan’s Regional Land Use Map (dated 06/07/2018). The Regional Plan recommends that development contribute to, rather than take away from, the region’s character and sense of place, encourage infill and compact development that makes use of existing infrastructure and allows for multiple modes of transportation, and to price in the cost of the potential impacts on the public infrastructure and natural resources. This proposal is inconsistent with these Regional Plan recommendations: it does not use a compact development pattern, requires new infrastructure rather than using existing infrastructure, lacks multi-modal transportation options, lacks a sense of place, and disrupts the onsite natural resources rather than preserving and incorporating the stream and wetlands into the project.

The NEGRC recommends that the buildings be clustered along a walkable main street or organized around a central square of parkland that would protect the stream and provide some walkability and a sense of place within the site. Parking should also be drastically reduced or reorganized (for example, through shared, on-street, and stacked parking) since excessive parking increases stormwater runoff, degrades the sense of place, dilutes the tax base, increases automobile dependency and traffic, and often goes unused. Where parking is provided, it should serve multiple buildings instead of being dedicated to a particular structure or business to encourage efficient use of available parking.

In general, the NEGRC’s Regional Plan recommends that local governments and developers construct roadways and real estate so that they are safe, comfortable, and accessible for people walking and biking. This includes providing sidewalks and protected bike lanes, designing local streets so that drivers do not exceed 30 MPH, minimizing land devoted to automobile parking, and constructing buildings with front doors that are close to the street and are easily accessed by people arriving on foot or bike. The proposed roadways within this project do not appear consistent with those recommendations.

Potential Interjurisdictional Impacts

The applicant states that the project would likely affect wetlands. None of the other environmental quality factors identified on the DRI Additional Form, including water supply watersheds, groundwater recharge areas, protected mountain and river corridors, floodplains, historic resources, and other environmentally sensitive resources are expected to be affected. The National Wetland Inventory (NWI) identifies 0.04 acres of wetlands onsite; 3.28 acres of wetlands are located within one (1) mile of the site. The Northeast Georgia Regional Plan’s Conservation and Development Map (dated 7/19/2018) identifies 2.89 acres as “Conservation” within one (1) mile of the site and zero (0) acres of “Conservation” land onsite. An estimated 80% of the site would be covered in impervious surfaces and two retention ponds are planned to manage stormwater runoff. With the approval of the Georgia Environmental Protection Division, the developer would eliminate and build over an intermittent stream that diagonally cuts through the center of the property. Portions of the stream

outside of the construction area would have a 25-foot buffer, per state regulations. This proposal is inconsistent with regulations and practices that protect and manage water resources. The proposal should be designed to minimize disruption to the intermittent stream and its riparian wetlands to avoid erosion, flooding, and degraded water quality onsite and downstream from the site. In addition, deviation from best management practices for stream protection and stormwater management can result in costly impacts to public infrastructure, including the stormwater system and roadways. At minimum, the project should be in accordance with the latest edition of the Georgia Stormwater Management Manual (Blue Book).

The project would be served by the Oconee County Department of Water Resources with an estimated daily demand of 0.072 MGD for each system. The applicant states that these demands can be covered by existing capacity. However, water and sewer lines would need to be extended approximately two (2) miles to serve the site. Prior to approval, Oconee County should compare this proposal's expected return in tax revenue to the projected maintenance expenses for the new infrastructure required to serve the site.

A&R Engineering performed a traffic study for the project and projected 984 new AM Peak Hour trips, 1051 PM Peak Hour trips, and 13,430 new trips per day overall upon project completion. Proposed improvements include a four-lane private street with a new, full-access driveway on the Oconee Connector as well as five (5) access driveways along Mars Hill Road. Adding this many local trips next to a regional road like GA-316 risks degrading the performance of GA-316 as an efficient, high-speed connection between Athens and Atlanta. The location of this site is hostile to multi-modal transportation because of the high speed and volume of automobile traffic, and the lack of suitable bike and pedestrian infrastructure on nearby streets—particularly Mars Hill Road. The proposal itself is oriented entirely around automobile-based transportation. The traffic study, performed by A&R Engineering Inc., recommends a number of infrastructure improvements to handle the significant volume of automobile trips that this proposal would generate. Recommendations include a new signalized intersection between Daniels Bridge Road/Mars Hill Road and GA-316, widening Mars Hill Road from Mars Hill Baptist Church to Old Mars Hill Road to add a two-way center turn lane, and adding right-turn lanes for each of the proposed six driveways. The study also notes that the Oconee Connector/GA-316 intersection currently has an overall Level of Service of "E." With the addition of this project the intersection would decline to an "F" during the PM peak hour. Short of building an overpass, no further improvements are possible for this intersection. GA-316 serves as a critical high-speed regional connection between Athens and Atlanta. Adding congestion-inducing local trips to this regional artery is not recommended.

The applicant estimates the project would generate 800 tons of solid waste annually and that sufficient landfill capacity exists to handle this waste. No hazardous waste would be generated.

The project would be worth an estimated \$50 million upon completion and generate an estimated \$1.7 million in property and sales tax annually. On a per-acre basis, the project would be worth \$1.06 million and generate \$36,170 in tax revenue. Before approving this project, the County should measure the life cycle costs of the infrastructure necessary 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

The proposed mixed use development is 12 miles east of the Barrow County Airport (WDR). It is located outside any FAA approach or departure surfaces, and airport compatible land use areas, and does not appear to impact the airport.

If any construction equipment or construction exceeds 200' 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 the buildings and 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.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed development.