

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 #3205
Name of Project:	Homestead
Name of Host Jurisdiction:	Athens-Clarke County

Background

DRI review was initiated following the developer’s request for a rezoning from Athens-Clarke County. The developer is requesting a rezoning from AG (Agriculture) to C-R (Commercial-Rural) and RS-8 (Single-Family Residential). Potentially affected parties were asked to submit comments on the proposal during the 15-day period from 11/30/20 – 12/15/20.

Proposed Development

The proposed development would occupy property totaling 233 acres along Old Elberton Road near the intersection of Pittard Road and Old Elberton Road, across from Coile Middle School, in Athens-Clarke County. The parcel number is 273 001. The proposal includes 814 residential units of various types, 34,000 square feet of commercial space, seven (7) stormwater management ponds, approximately 900 parking spaces, and a recreational trail. Currently, the site is undeveloped. The project would be completed in one phase with an estimated completion date in 2026.

Compatibility with Existing Plans

The site is identified as “Rural” on the Athens-Clarke County Comprehensive Plan’s Future Land Use Map (dated 6/13/2018). According to the Comprehensive Plan’s description, “Rural lands are intended to have very low residential density. To maintain open space, clustering of dwellings is encouraged with common open spaces protected by conservation easements. Agricultural uses are encouraged, as well as other compatible uses, such as limited low-impact commercial uses, equestrian and other animal boarding facilities.”

The site is identified as “Rural” on the Northeast Georgia Regional Plan’s Regional Land Use Map (dated 6/7/2018). 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 public infrastructure and natural resources. The Firefly Trail, a Regionally Important Resource as identified in the Northeast Georgia Resource Management Plan (dated 8/3/2018), is located approximately one (1) mile from the proposed site.

The proposal meets and exceeds the Regional Plan’s Goal of providing diverse housing options within the same neighborhood: it proposes a mix of townhouses, walk-up apartments, corner “manor house” stacked units, bungalow courts, detached single-family, and even a few quadplexes. The proposal stands out for its compact block structure and street grid, which encourages walking and biking as transportation options. The project would also meet the Regional Plan’s Goal of encouraging multi-modal transportation by placing parking in the rear of buildings, providing on-street parking, and limiting the overall number of spaces to approximately one space per unit. The profligate use of street trees in this proposal further encourages walking while raising property values and providing environmental benefits. The proposed commercial sites are designed to fit into the rest of the project and create a true mix of uses, also consistent with the Regional Plan’s vision for compact, walkable development.

While the project meets many of the Regional Plan’s recommended development standards, there are several opportunities to optimize the design. The proposal’s location in an overall rural area fails to deliver the benefits of proximity that come with urban development and reduces the likelihood that residents would truly have multi-modal lifestyles. It also creates conflict between the proposed high-density development and adjacent rural area that the community wishes to remain rural (per the Athens-Clarke County Future Land Use Map). Although the proposed internal street and trail network provides good connections within the site, there are very few connections to adjacent properties. This would create a peninsula effect on the local transportation network that would encourage auto-dependence, similar to the cul-de-sacs of typical suburban subdivisions. Street stubs, such as the one proposed between Block DD and FF, are recommended between Blocks GG and FF, U and Z, Z and BB, and MM and NN to provide opportunities for future development to tie in and create the kind of grid-like network that enables true multi-modal transportation. Additionally, the orientation of development away from the existing gravel drive creates a moat between the project and Coile Middle School. Establishing a strong bike and pedestrian connection to Coile Middle School could also eventually be extended to connect with the Firefly Trail. Given the proximity, it would be a missed opportunity if a short bike and pedestrian connection were not provided. The trail network could also be expanded, particularly between the existing trail and Block X, between Block H/N and OO, and between the existing trail and Block GG/FF. Finally, attention must be paid to the relationship between the public and private realm (i.e. between the street and the buildings). While no renderings have been provided, the site plan appears to encourage a strong relationship between the two through reduced set-backs and rear- and on-street parking for non-residential and higher-density residential structures, and many of the single-family homes being alley-fed. These design features encourage pedestrian activity. To foster connection amongst neighbors, residences should come with usable front porches, stoops, or balconies. Houses with front-loaded garages should, at minimum, have a driveway that is long enough for cars to park without blocking the sidewalk. Garages could be recessed or even detached and placed at the back of the lot to avoid the “snout house” which discourages connection amongst neighbors.

While this proposal, at face value, is consistent with many of the goals and objectives identified in the Regional Plan and demonstrates quality overall design, it is inconsistent with both the Regional Plan’s and Athens-

Clarke County Comprehensive Plan's visions for the area in which it is proposed. The project would bring an intense urban land use pattern that is in stark contrast to an area that is characterized as rural in both its current form and on the Future Land Use Map. A suburban or urban context would be a better fit for this kind of proposal because it would be able to take advantage of existing infrastructure and services while fitting in with the surrounding neighborhood character. If this project were constructed, it would likely induce further development of adjacent rural properties and create expensive new demands for infrastructure and services at the edge of the Athens metro area. Urban land-use patterns derive much of their benefit by putting people and their activities near to each other. This proposal would create an island of urban land use in an otherwise rural sector, causing irreversible change to the area.

Potential Interjurisdictional Impacts

The applicant states that the project would likely affect floodplains and a protected river corridor. None of the other environmental quality factors identified on the DRI Additional Form, including water supply watersheds, groundwater recharge areas, wetlands, protected mountains, historic resources, and other environmentally sensitive resources would be impacted. The site plan shows a 75-foot riparian buffer would be preserved along the stream as required by Athens-Clarke County.

The National Wetland Inventory (NWI) identifies 3.7 acres of wetlands onsite and 45 acres of wetlands within one (1) mile of the site. The Northeast Georgia Regional Plan's Conservation and Development Map (dated 7/19/2018) identifies 2.2 acres of "Conservation" onsite and 1,080 acres within one (1) mile of the site. Much of this acreage is considered to be part of the Northeast Georgia Green Infrastructure Network by the Northeast Georgia Resource Management Plan (dated 8/3/2018). Please note that these figures may be slightly different than the actual site because the project covers only part of parcel 273 001—which has not been subdivided to reflect this proposal at this time. An estimated 35% of the site would be covered in impervious surfaces, and seven (7) stormwater management ponds would be constructed to manage runoff. According to the site plan, a 75-foot riparian buffer would be maintained around the stream, per Athens-Clarke County regulations, and two additional ponds would be preserved. Of the 233 acres onsite, 91 would be preserved as open space. Due to the intensity of the proposed development in contrast to the surrounding area, Low-Impact Development measures, including green infrastructure and multi-functional stormwater detention areas, should be incorporated to reduce the effects of stormwater runoff from the project on adjacent areas and waterways as well as the contrast between the proposed urban-style development and surrounding rural area. 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 Athens-Clarke County's Public Utilities with an estimated daily demand of 0.3025 MGD apiece for water and sewer service. The applicant states that these demands can be covered by existing capacity. However, water lines would need to be extended 4.8 miles, and sewer lines would need to be extended 5.8 miles to serve the site. The extension of these utilities may create more long-term maintenance expenses than the revenue produced by this project. The Regional Plan calls for infill development on existing infrastructure rather than extending new infrastructure to serve greenfield development.

A&R Engineering conducted a traffic impact study which estimates that the proposal would generate 631 new AM peak hour trips and 747 new PM peak hour trips. Overall, the project would generate 8,353 new trips per day. The site would be accessed via three (3) full-access driveways off Old Elberton Road. The study recommends the installation of a southbound channelized right-turn lane at the 'all-way stop-controlled' intersection of Old Elberton Road/Spring Valley Road at Voyles Road/Moores Grove Road. It also recommends a signal warrant analysis for that intersection upon project completion.

The applicant estimates the project would generate 1,915 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 \$200,740,000 upon completion and generate \$2,705,975 in annual tax revenue. On a per-acre basis, the project would be worth \$861,545 and generate \$11,614 in 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

None received.