



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.

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| Project I.D.: | DRI #3220 |
| Name of Project: | Oconee Mercantile |
| Name of Host Jurisdiction: | Oconee County |

Background

DRI review was initiated following the developer's request for a rezoning from Oconee County. The rezoning would be from Industrial (I) and Office-Business Park (O-B-P) to Highway Business (B-2). Potentially affected parties were asked to submit comments on the proposal during the 15-day period of 01/19/21-02/03/21.

Proposed Development

Oconee Mercantile LLC is proposing construction of a 161,000 SF mixed-use office and commercial development on a 23-acre site along US-441/Macon Highway at its intersection with Hog Mountain Road (7920 Macon Highway), in Oconee County (parcel numbers: C-03, 017B, 017AB, 017R, and 017E). In addition to seven commercial and office buildings, two stormwater retention ponds, and 756 parking spaces would be constructed. The project would be completed in one phase with an estimated completion date in 2022. Currently, the site is occupied by the Stone Store landscape supply company and an office/warehouse building with parking. The rest of the site is wooded. The landscape supply company would be replaced by the project, but the office/warehouse would be incorporated into the project. The developer has noted the possibility of converting Building 5 (see site plan) from offices to a hotel. Although final uses and tenants have not been settled, the developer has stated that the site plan should remain the same.

Compatibility with Existing Plans

The site is identified as "Civic Center" on Oconee County's Character Area Map (dated 04/25/2018). The Civic Center Character Area is described as, "the center of civic activities in unincorporated Oconee County." The Area's vision includes a "relatively high-intensity mix of businesses, retail shopping, offices, sports and recreational complexes, public schools, a college campus, and other public and semi-public uses." Consumer-

based commercial establishments and employment-based businesses are listed as primary land uses for this Area. Accessibility to public water and sewer and a transportation network that can adequately support demand are considered prerequisites for development. Paths and sidewalks are encouraged to connect to commercial activity centers within walking distance of residences. Buildings within a planned project should share similar design characteristics, and there should be adequate buffering between commercial properties and adjacent residences. Large parking areas should be placed behind buildings and not along right-of-ways, where possible. Shared parking is encouraged. The zoning category B-2 (Highway Business) is listed as an appropriate zone in this Area. The proposal is generally consistent with the Comprehensive Plan with one apparent exception: the proposal does not include sidewalk or path connections to adjacent residential areas. The developer should consider adding paths and sidewalks to adjacent residential subdivisions to allow residents the option of walking or biking to this project instead of adding more vehicle trips to the road network.

The site is identified as “Developing” 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. The developer has not submitted renderings or illustrations that would allow the NEGRC to judge the contribution—or lack thereof—to the region’s character. The Regional Plan also encourages infill and compact development that makes use of existing infrastructure and allows for multiple modes of transportation. Additionally, it recommends that local governments should price in the cost of the potential impacts on public infrastructure and natural resources. The current design does not allow for meaningful multi-modal transportation options and would likely affect US-411’s current primary function for moving long-distance travel. The NEGRC encourages developments that minimize automobile dependence, where possible. The consequences of making automobiles the only reasonable travel option include congestion, a diluted tax base, fiscal fragility, an increased need for stormwater management, increases to the cost of living and doing business, and a variety of negative social and physical health outcomes. Adding sidewalks and paths between the proposal and adjacent subdivisions could allow residents to walk or bike to and through the project, helping create key connections for the nascent bicycle and pedestrian network in Oconee County. In addition, should a hotel be constructed, patrons would benefit from a walkable area. The NEGRC strongly recommends shifting the location of the proposed sidewalks to the interior of the parking lot buffers/within the proposed landscaped areas to protect users from the vehicular traffic along US-441/Macon Highway, particularly due to the high-speed design of that roadway. Widening the proposed sidewalks to accommodate both bicycle and pedestrian traffic is also recommended. With the new Presbyterian Village development and Mars Hill Road improvements nearby, this area of the county will likely experience continued development pressure; it is important to establish multi-modal connections and encourage walkable development patterns now in order to optimize the quality of development that occurs in this area.

Potential Interjurisdictional Impacts

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. A stream runs adjacent to the rear property line (east); the site plan shows a 25-foot state water buffer along the stream and no development activities are proposed within that buffer area. In addition, a natural buffer of 50-feet is proposed along the adjacent residential areas to the east and south. Portions of the natural buffer will also serve as additional protection for the adjacent stream. Areas of this natural buffer are expected to be disturbed, assumedly during construction; supplemental plantings are proposed in those areas. The County should examine the current and proposed composition of plantings (evergreen vs deciduous) and consider the project’s lighting design and noise levels to ensure the buffer will be adequate.

The National Wetland Inventory (NWI) does not identify any wetlands onsite; three acres of wetlands are located within one mile of the site. The Northeast Georgia Regional Plan's Conservation and Development Map (dated 7/19/2018) identifies zero acres of "Conservation" land onsite; 11.5 acres of "Conservation" land are within one mile of the site. No Regionally Important Resources are identified within one mile of the proposed site. A 25-foot state water buffer is identified along the creek at the rear of the property and a 50-foot natural buffer will provide additional protection along portions of the creek. An estimated 78% of the site would be covered in impervious surfaces, and two retention ponds are planned to manage stormwater runoff. Reductions to the proposed impervious surface coverage should be explored. The parking lots create significant, low-value areas of impervious surfaces; stacked parking and a reduction to the total number of parking spaces should be considered to decrease stormwater runoff and optimize use of the site. Bioswales, permeable pavement, and other low impact design measures should be incorporated into the project design. 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.

The project would be served by Oconee County's water and sewer systems with an estimated daily demand of 0.055 MGD for water, and 1.048 MGD for sewer service. The applicant states that these demands can be covered by existing capacity. No water or sewer line extensions are anticipated.

The applicant estimates the project would generate 586 cubic yards of solid waste annually and that sufficient landfill capacity exists to handle this waste. No hazardous waste would be generated.

W&A Engineering has completed a traffic impact analysis that estimates a total of 7,863 daily trips would be generated by the site. The analysis estimates that 817 new trips would occur during the AM peak hour and 1,156 trips would be generated during the PM peak hour. Three driveways would provide access to the site, including one at the existing signalized intersection. The study recommends signal timing modifications to solve potential peak hour traffic delays. The study does not appear to account for the potential hotel, mentioned in this submittal. If a hotel is expected, a new traffic study should be performed to ensure proper roadway improvements are made. A shuttle or shared-ride service to downtown Athens, Hartsfield-Jackson Airport, and other key destinations would benefit the project, reducing personal vehicle trips and providing a mode of transportation attractive to visitors as well as Oconee residents. US-441/Macon Highway serves as an efficient connection between Athens and I-20, with frequent truck traffic moving through to Athens and I-85. In addition, Hog Mountain Road/GA-53 serves as a connection toward Atlanta (via US-78 and US-29/SR-316). Adding thousands of local trips to this intersection could jeopardize the road's ability to serve its current purpose as a transportation corridor.

The applicant estimates that the project would be worth \$20 million and generate \$20,000 in annual local tax revenue. On a per-acre basis, the proposal would be worth \$870,000 and generate \$870 in annual tax revenue. Before approving this proposal the County should ensure that the tax value generated by the project is enough to cover life cycle service and maintenance costs for the site.

Comments from Affected Parties

Alan Hood, Airport Safety Data Program Manager, Georgia Department of Transportation

The proposed development is approximately 6 miles from Athens-Ben Epps Airport (AHN). It is located outside any FAA approach or departure surfaces, and airport compatible land use areas, and does not appear to impact the airport.

However, if any construction equipment reaches 200' above ground or higher, an FAA Form 7460-1 must be submitted to the Federal Aviation Administration. That may be done online at <https://oeaaa.faa.gov>. The FAA must be in receipt of the notification, no later than 120 days prior to construction. The FAA will evaluate the potential impact 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.