

Environmental Subcommittee

Vision Statement

Clarke County will be an environmentally sustainable and aesthetically pleasing community in which air, water, soil, plant, animal and scenic resources are protected and enhanced, and not degraded or depleted..

In pursuit of this goal, Athens-Clarke County will adopt and enforce ordinances and regulations that minimize the harmful impacts of human activities on the natural world and educate and empower citizens to adhere to principles and practices that promote responsible environmental stewardship.

ISSUES COVERED BY THIS SUBCOMMITTEE:

1. Air Quality and Energy Conservation
2. Water Quality and Conservation
3. Natural Areas
4. Solid Waste
5. (Community)Environmental Education

Issues, Opportunities, And Work Plan Policies

1. Air Quality and Energy Conservation

Issue: Vehicle emissions, industrial discharges, diminished tree canopy and the effects of global climate change are polluting the air and moving Athens closer to non-attainment status under the Clean Air Act.

Opportunities: Provide more transportation options, limit tree canopy loss, reduce emissions from all sources, promote alternative fuels, encourage LEED-certified construction, require energy-efficient lighting.

Policies:

Encourage reduction in emissions from stationary sources:

- Investigate methods to require existing local industries to install the most effective and efficient pollution abatement technology.
- Encourage alternative energy sources (e.g., solar panels) through tax/government incentives.

Develop, adopt, and implement a county energy plan. Components of this plan should include:

- Targets and strategies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by the county;
- Implementation of county energy conservation policy;
- Coordination with UGA energy conservation committee;
- Monitoring to ensure that the targets are being met;
- A lighting ordinance that emphasizes energy-use reduction;
- Encourage the use of energy-efficient lighting and appliances by individuals, businesses, and partner agencies (such as the Athens Housing Authority) through government-supported incentives;
- Promote green building techniques; and
- Compare energy use in new LEED buildings with old buildings to quantify savings.

Provide measures to limit tree canopy loss:

- The Athens-Clarke County Tree Canopy should be closely monitored by funding a community forest tree canopy study every 5 years. The Tree Management Ordinance and the Environmental Areas Ordinance should be amended as necessary to ensure minimal reduction in tree canopy.
- Amend the tree ordinance to provide greater specificity and incentive for the protection of trees that have value due to their size, species, condition, etc. Provide more canopy credit for preserving existing trees.
- Apply the tree ordinance to developments of one acre or greater.

Provide transportation options that reduce the dependence on private automobiles

- Increase operating funds in ACC budget for Athens Transit;
- Support state level legislation that provides state operating funds for Athens Transit;
- Work on agreements with large local employers to encourage ridership;
- Support the development of the “Brain Train” passenger rail service to Atlanta.
- Seek additional opportunities for park-and-ride lots for UGA and downtown destinations. Encourage regional park-and-ride opportunities that work in conjunction with transit.

Encourage alternative transportation by improving cycling infrastructure:

- Update the ACC Bicycle Master Plan and create additional bike lanes as specified under the plan;

- Investigate additional opportunities for rail-trail extensions;
- Take all opportunities to implement the ACC Bicycle Master Plan and planned bicycle facilities in other Madison Athens-Clarke Oconee Regional Transportation Study (MACORTS) plans;
- Re-direct some funds for locally funded projects in the MACORTS Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP) toward bicycle and/or pedestrian uses;
- Increase funds in ACC budget for bicycle facilities;
- Encourage the addition of bike parking facilities at all commercial establishments; and require them in commercial areas accessible by routes on the Bicycle Master Plan;
- Attend to safety details such as positioning sewer grates perpendicular to traffic flow, repainting stripes that separate bike lanes, and regularly sweeping bike lanes free of debris;
- Pursue federal Transportation Enhancement funding.

Encourage the use of alternative fuels and fuel conservation

- Expand use of bio-diesel and other low-emissions fuels in county vehicles.
- Replace aging county vehicles with hybrids or other clean alternative vehicles.
- Provide education and incentives that would reduce the use of gas-powered mowers, edgers, blowers and other lawn maintenance tools.
- Provide progressive tax incentives (e.g. ad valorem discounts) to businesses that reduce their fleet emissions, and to individuals' vehicles with consumption specifications exceeding 30 mpg.

2. Water Quality and Conservation

Issue: Erosion and sedimentation, stormwater run-off, illegal dumping and wastewater system defects are compromising the quality of surface and underground water resources, as well as damaging properties adjacent to and/or downstream from tracts of land being developed. Continuing drought conditions and excessive use of water threaten our water resources.

Opportunities: Stricter enforcement of erosion and sedimentation laws, increased restrictions on mass grading, better monitoring and regulation of wastewater systems, use of additional vegetation to limit erosion and stormwater run-off, increased use of permeable surfaces, and development of water conservation education and incentives.

Policies:

Improve the erosion and sedimentation ordinance by:

- Hiring more inspection personnel;
- Training and certification of all personnel involved with E&S control;
- Increasing frequency of inspections and monitoring;
- Education of the judiciary about the seriousness of E&S violations;
- Increasing use of stop-work orders when obvious and avoidable water-quality violations have occurred;
- Improving inter-departmental coordination to avoid issuance of certificates of occupancy until sites are stabilized;
- Maintaining clean lines of responsibility between Transportation and Public Works, Building Inspections, Community Protection Division, County's Attorney Office, and Municipal Court.

Develop, adopt and implement a comprehensive mass grading ordinance, applicable to all zoning categories, to:

- Minimize allowable cut and fill by requiring that the natural contours of the site be maintained and by establishing a maximum slope that can be developed;
- Require minimization of site disturbance
- Require phasing of developments;
- Require stabilization of each phase before next phase can begin.
- Require compliance with such provisions as turbidity limits and soil stabilization.

Implement measure to improve on-site stormwater detention and treatment:

- Make the following changes to the stormwater ordinance;
 - Require the notification of neighbors if a developer applies for a variance;
 - Apply more stringent regulations on the total volume and flow profile, not just the peak-flow rate, of stormwater that may leave the site post development.
- Make changes to Zoning and Development Standards based upon the Center for Watershed Protection's "Better Site Design" standards to improve stormwater management.
- Educate the public on the importance of vegetative cover on their home sites, and the effect that trees and shrubs can have in diminishing stormwater run-off. Provide educational materials and funds for

volunteer organizations that will take on this work for the county.

- Discourage improper use of storm drains. Enhance programs that encourage appropriate disposal of waste to keep it out of storm drains.

Implement measures to improve wastewater treatment systems

- Educate the public on the proper use and maintenance of onsite wastewater management (i.e. septic) systems.
- Explore the feasibility of a maintenance and monitoring ordinance for onsite wastewater management systems.
- Adopt a grease trap ordinance to ensure the proper maintenance of grease traps and proper disposal of grease trap contents.
- Stiffen penalties for industrial/commercial leakage of contaminants.

Implement policies to increase water conservation

- Explore tax incentives for homeowners and developers to pursue development that is more water wise/conservation minded.
- Adopt a conservation rate pricing structure for water.
- Encourage xeriscaping.

3. Natural Areas

Issue: Natural areas such as forests, open spaces, river and lake buffers and wildlife habitats are being reduced or eliminated by residential and commercial construction, transportation corridors and other human impacts.

Opportunities: Develop effective mechanisms for the intentional acquisition and/or preservation of environmentally sensitive or important natural areas (greenspace) to attain Athens Clarke County's goal of 20% protected space. Take proactive steps to limit development in designated natural areas, develop mechanisms for the stronger enforcement of zoning and stream buffer limitations, regulate outdoor lighting so as to minimize negative impact on flora, fauna, and visual observation of celestial bodies, address invasive species issues, develop incentives for the reuse or re-adaptation of vacant residential and commercial properties and brownfields.

Policies:

Develop mechanisms for improving greenspace acquisition and/or preservation:

- ♦ Develop an overlay zone, similar to the existing Historic Zoning Overlay, for all corridors identified on the Greenway Network Plan that would establish design standards for any adjacent developments so that the viewshed and natural resources of the corridor are preserved.

- ♦ Build/integrate road crossings for corridors for wildlife and pedestrian corridors
- ♦ Add pedestrian easements on utility corridors to new development
- ♦ Develop and adopt a Transferable Development Rights (TDR) program
- ♦ Protect working agricultural lands through zoning, tax policies, easements, acquisition, and promotion of small-scale sustainable local farming.
- ♦ Provide resources to Planning Dept. to research methods for encouraging private landowners to conserve greenspace. Suggested methods:
 - Easements
 - Fee Simple
 - Tax incentives
 - Set asides

Provide resources and directives to Planning Staff to allow them to create tools for good planning, and provide education for developers and the community.

- ♦ ARC/GIS projections showing effect of parcel development on macro system
- ♦ Extend design standards that require identification and protection of ALL sensitive environmental areas (e.g. streams; ponds; lakes; wetlands; riparian buffers; 100-year flood plains; groundwater recharge areas; steep slopes; healthy native woodlands, forests, or fields in early stage of succession of at least ½ acre; individual healthy trees with caliper of 15 inches or more dbh; populations of rare, endangered, or threatened animal and plant species, or habitat for such species; wildlife corridors and habitat; archaeological sites; cemeteries; burial grounds; ridgelines; geological formations such as rock outcrops and cliffs) and scenic viewsheds, to all zones. Include incentives for developers to protect to higher standards and stronger penalties for non-compliance.
- ♦ Direct Environmental Coordinator to participate in Plan Review Process

Implement a GIS assessment program that is of an appropriate scale and is updated/maintained on a regular basis. The following areas should be assessed:

- ♦ wildlife habitat
- ♦ natural areas

- ♦ wetlands
- ♦ trees
- ♦ scenic viewsheds

Require full-cutoff lighting fixtures which direct nighttime lighting downward, and which minimize lighting levels to those no greater than recommended by the Illuminating Engineering Society of North America.

Develop an invasive plant species removal program on public lands. Encourage removal of invasive plant species on private property. Encourage the use of native plant species.

Amend existing ordinance regarding buffer requirements to insure waterway buffers are able to function effectively in keeping sediment, pesticides, fertilizers and other pollutants out of wetlands, ponds, streams, and rivers to include:

- ♦ vegetation removal and replacement standards
- ♦ definition of allowable structures
- ♦ creation of an education program

Regional planning

- ♦ Work with surrounding counties towards sharing/accessing/protecting recreational, water air, and other natural resources

Research the use of development impact fees. (Free research assistance may be available from the UGA River Basin Center through an EPD water quality grant).

4. Solid Waste

Issue: Population growth, increased consumerism, apathy and disinterest are resulting in larger amounts of solid waste from residential and commercial sources that are more rapidly filling the landfill and shortening its life.

Opportunities: Ban or limit certain items from the landfill, raise tipping fees, promote recycling and reuse, transfer waste management responsibility to producers

Policies:

- Mandatory recycling for all government offices
- Implementation of a community composting system for downtown Athens, and possibly other areas.

- Mandatory recycling ordinance for multifamily subdivisions. Requirement for cement pads large enough to accommodate recycling bins at all dumpsters.
- Establishment of a permanent (year-round) household hazardous waste recycling center, perhaps on a regional scale.
- Education of reduction and reuse. Establishment of swapshops at landfill.
- Require mandatory recycling of cardboard, fluorescent bulbs, and electronics.
- Establish program holding producers responsible for product and packaging recycling
- Restrict availability of plastic bags at points of sale

5. (Community) Environmental Education

Issue: Need more public understanding and appreciation of our natural resources and systems, and the ordinances and regulations regarding their protection, and those measures, such as recycling, that are not regulations but should be promoted.

Opportunities: Create a comprehensive community education program that reaches all residents, including area schools and adults, and creates an understanding of basic natural science as well as an understanding of major environmental issues facing the community.

Policies:

- Develop outreach programs that engage citizens - Mayor and Commission should commit to attendance.
- Continue to enhance the basic and natural science education with the intent of creating an environmental ethic.
- Increase the support of the existing environmental educational programs such as those through Sandy Creek Nature Center.
- Create a citizen volunteer watchdog program that enables citizens to help A-CC staff enforce existing ordinances.

- Create and publicize a single point of contact for citizens to call and pose questions.
- Implement an education program to let citizens know about ordinance regulations, such as the E&S, stormwater, and environmental areas ordinances. Employ tools such as newspaper columns, radio, flyers in water bills, creation of a citizen's academy to teach residents how local government works, how to become involved, and what they can do to improve environmental quality.
- Encourage greater government support of NPDES programs to educate the public on ways to reduce water pollution.