

Atlanta Highway → ← Lexington Road

connect athen

CORRIDOR PLANS

Final Report
August 2019



Athens-Clarke County
Unified Government

Section 1: Introduction

Introduction

What is Connect Athens?

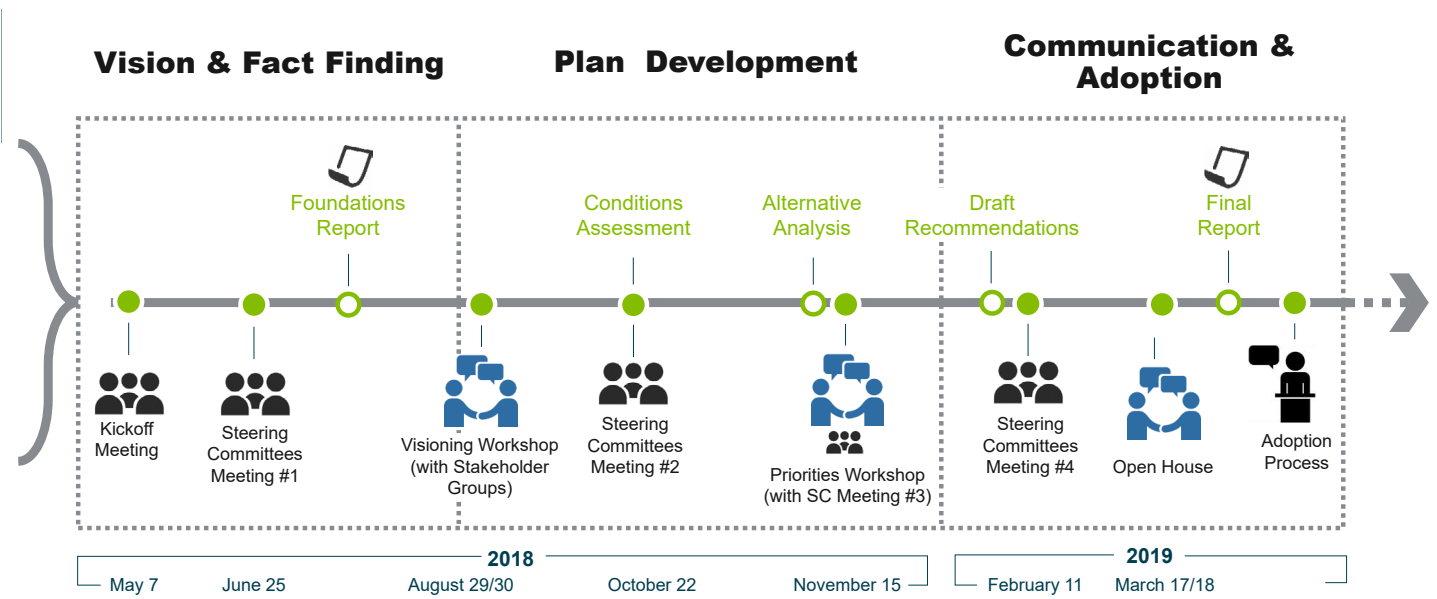
Connect Athens is a single corridor planning process that identified short- and long-term recommendations for two major arterial roadways in Athens—Atlanta Highway and Lexington Road. While these roads face many unique challenges, they also have much in common as commuter routes, retail hubs, and gateways to downtown. Most notably, each corridor has specific assets and future opportunities that will benefit the entire community. The Athens-Clarke County Comprehensive Plan identified the need for a corridor planning process in these areas as one strategy to achieve the city’s long-term vitality goals.

Connect Athens focuses on issues and opportunities within AND outside the right-of-way. The process considered conditions related to transportation, mobility, land use, and economic development. A community-focused process, rooted in the active involvement of staff, elected officials, and corridor committees, helped identify the main challenges affecting each corridor and coordinated opportunities to improve how the corridors will look, function, and contribute to broader community initiatives in the decades to come.

Planning Process

One Process, Two Strategies

Connect Athens engaged the community in an intentional way while evaluating transportation, land use, and design strategies without losing sight of market and economic dynamics. Launching the corridor plans in parallel within a single process recognized several efficiencies and allowed the unique roles and responsibilities of each corridor to be considered in tandem. The corridor planning process included three phases, each of which included targeted community involvement. During the 10-month process, the project team worked with residents, business owners, and other stakeholders throughout public events and online engagement, reviewed and assessed existing and projected conditions, and considered best practices in how to blend the interests of transportation, land use, and economics.



Why now?

Athens-Clarke County is a diverse and dynamic community due to its people, economy, and places. As growth continues, our greatest assets need to be protected and leveraged. And, looming challenges need to be documented and overcome. The urgency for Connect Athens extend well beyond the corridors themselves, as detailed in the Envision Athens process. The conditions and trends affecting the County as a whole puts added pressure on repositioning these vital corridors.

Athens-Clarke County’s population is growing and diversifying...

+22.3% Change in Population	Between 2000 and 2015, the County’s population has increased 22,000.
26.5 Median Age	While half of the County’s population is under the age of 26 because of the student population, the over 65 age cohort is the fastest growing segment of the population.
98.4 % Change in the Hispanic/Latinx Population	Since 2000, more than 6,000 new residents were added to the Hispanic/Latinx community.

Personal prosperity and economic vitality in Athens-Clarke County is becoming more important...

28.4 Adjusted Poverty Rate	The County has the 4th highest poverty rate in the state.
48,000 Private Sector Jobs	The employment base continues to shift from manufacturing to health care.
\$8.1B Economic Output	The quantity of goods and services produced in the County in 2015 continued it’s upward trend.

Conditions and trends related to housing, development, and greenspace in Athens-Clarke County are evolving...

11% Percentage Workforce Housing	Between 2005 and 2015, a small share of workforce housing was constructed putting more pressure on commuting corridors.
\$245M Total Redevelopment Value of Identified Parcels	A 2007 study confirmed that parcels of various sizes will become ripe for redevelopment over the next several years.
40,000+ In Commuters	Each day more than 40,000 workers travel into the County for work.

Relationship to Other Plans

Developing a transformative strategy for Atlanta Highway and Lexington Road required us to consider transportation performance as well as how moving people and goods safely and efficiently can positively influence prosperity and quality of life. More so than other corridors in the Athens-Clarke County, these places struggle to provide local access to significant retail and institutional uses without compromising regional mobility. Connect Athens represented a unique opportunity to consider and integrate community priorities revealed through the Envision Athens process and blend finding and recommendations from other plans and processes.

Envision Athens

Envision Athens establishes a common vision and strategic action plan to guide the County forward. The plan is aspirational and represents the ideas of thousands of citizens and stakeholders. The vision and the strategic Action Agenda it informs are the product of hundreds of hours of intense discussion about the future of the County. These conversations served as a foundation for the Action Agenda, which is a prioritization of discrete projects, policies, and programs selected through the process. Many of the Goals and Priority Actions speak directly to the issues and opportunities present on Atlanta Highway and Lexington Road.

Athens-Clarke County Comprehensive Plan

The Comprehensive Plan sets forth a blueprint to ensure the continued health, safety, and general welfare of the community. The timing of the 2018 Update was strategically scheduled to commence in cooperation with Envision Athens. While Envision Athens took a broader approach to community and economic development, the Comprehensive Plan aligned with specific criteria that must be addressed in hopes of providing a collective outline for achieving initiatives highlighted in the plan. The elements of the Comprehensive Plan, from Goals to the 5-year Community Work Program, have bearing on the priority actions that should be initiated along Atlanta Highway and Lexington Road.

Strategy to Redevelop and Revitalize the Atlanta Highway Corridor (Urban Land Institute)

The Athens-Clarke County Unified Government requested the assistance of the Urban Land Institute (ULI) to advise and make recommendations concerning the vibrancy of the Atlanta Highway Corridor. Through its Technical Assistance Program, ULI convened a multidisciplinary panel of experts for a two-day intensive work session to explore ways to retain current retail businesses, expand the desirability of the corridor, and enhance the appearance and flow along the corridor. Connect Athens carries forward many of the panel's recommendations, which were framed as a “big picture road map” for the corridor.

Transportation Plans

A variety of transportation processes continue to inform the future of corridors such as Atlanta Highway and Lexington Road. Many of these processes are required by state or federal agencies and are updated on a specific cycle. Other processes represent a point in time look at how people and goods move within and through Athens-Clarke County. Some plans consider the entire geography while others focus on specific corridors or subareas. Likewise, some plans cover all modes or zero in on specific types of travel such as the 2018 Athens In Motion Bicycle / Pedestrian Master Plan. Given the critical role the Connect Athens corridors play in the County's transportation network, each of these relevant plans were mined for data, trends, and recommendations.

Meet the Corridors

Connect Athens focuses on two corridors, Atlanta Highway and Lexington Road, both within in Athens-Clarke County, GA. Athens-Clarke County is roughly 120 square miles and is considered a center of employment, culture, and education as the home of the University of Georgia. The county is part of a larger region defined as the Piedmont, the state’s second-largest geographic region and most populated. Overall, the County is recognized for its quality of life and continues to see population and employment growth.

Each corridor serves as major east-west connectors for residents, commuters, and visitors to Athens and surrounding areas as well as gateways to downtown Athens.

Athens By the Numbers



2016 Population

123,000

UP 6+% SINCE 2010



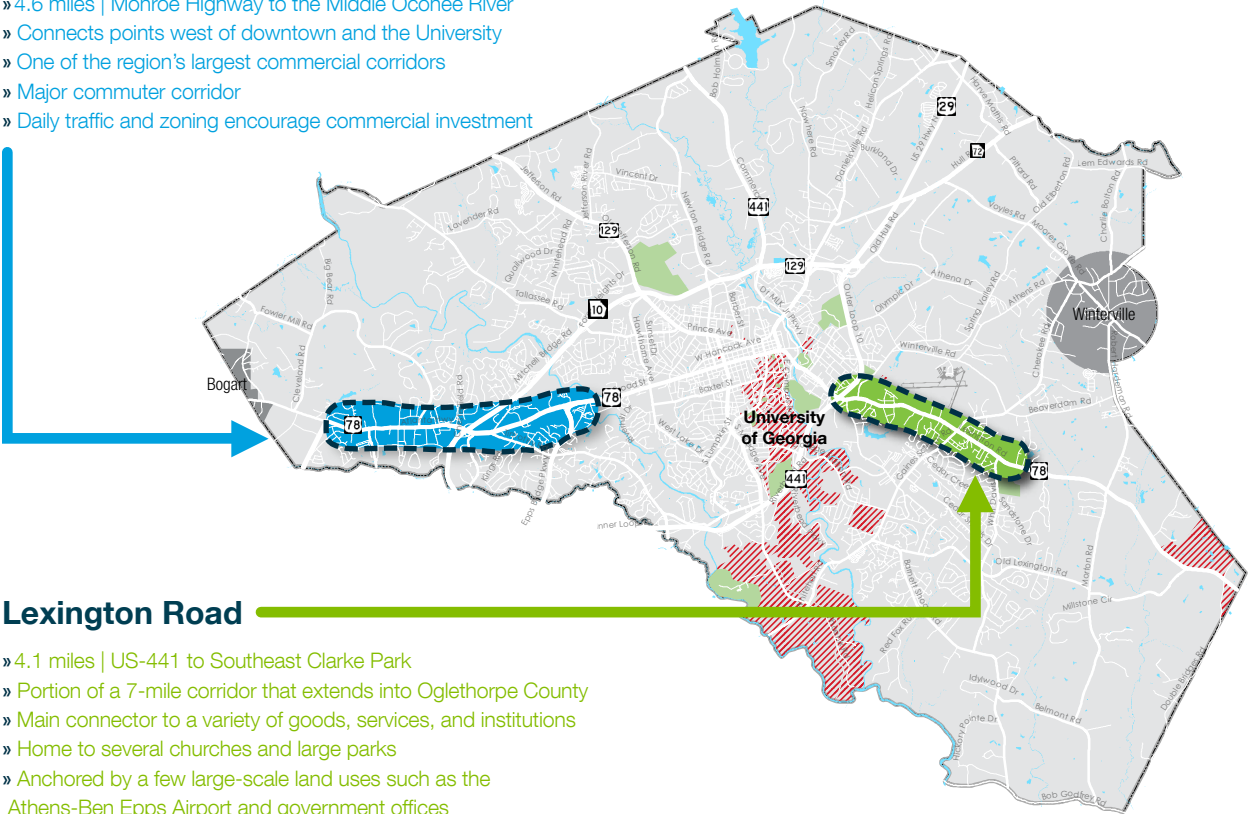
2016 Employment

84,000

UP 10% SINCE 2010

Atlanta Highway

- » 4.6 miles | Monroe Highway to the Middle Oconee River
- » Connects points west of downtown and the University
- » One of the region’s largest commercial corridors
- » Major commuter corridor
- » Daily traffic and zoning encourage commercial investment



Lexington Road

- » 4.1 miles | US-441 to Southeast Clarke Park
- » Portion of a 7-mile corridor that extends into Oglethorpe County
- » Main connector to a variety of goods, services, and institutions
- » Home to several churches and large parks
- » Anchored by a few large-scale land uses such as the Athens-Ben Epps Airport and government offices

Atlanta Highway

The Atlanta Highway study area begins at the intersection with Monroe Highway and extends east to the Middle Oconee River, a distance of roughly 4.6 miles. This corridor is a major retail hub for the County, with large-scale commercial development dominant throughout its length. Established residential neighborhoods surround the corridor to the north and south, with development taking on a suburban character. Atlanta Highway serves as direct commuter connection to Downtown Athens and the University of Georgia campus as well as a connector to US-78 and US-29.

- » 4.6 miles | Monroe Highway to the Middle Oconee River
- » Connects points west of downtown and the University
- » One of the region’s largest commercial corridors
- » Major commuter corridor
- » Daily traffic and zoning encourage commercial investment

Foundations | Key Takeaways

It was critical to establish a basis of understanding early in the planning process. The Foundations Report organized challenges and opportunities for Atlanta Highway around three overlapping themes: Land Use and Community Design, Economics, and Mobility.

Land Use and Community Design

- » The sequencing of growth has occurred sporadically along the corridor over the last 50 years.
- » The diversity of land uses increases as you move away from the corridor. Still, the planning area is predominantly commercial with room for growth.
- » The corridor lacks cohesion and a unique identity that would suggest it has a sense of place.

Economics

- » The corridor accounts for nearly 1-in-5 retail jobs in the county, though the sector continues to see pressure from retail trends and newer developments nearby.
- » Vacancies are high in key shopping centers.
- » Non-retail jobs are growing, including transportation/warehousing and professional services.

Mobility

- » The corridor struggles to balance regional through trips and local destination trips, resulting in ongoing traffic and safety issues particularly near major intersections.
- » The corridor lacks continuity of facilities and connectivity to destinations that would make it more accessible by foot or on bike.
- » Wide travel lanes, uncontrolled access, and poor signage control undermine the corridor’s role as a gateway from the west.

Lexington Road

The Lexington Road study area begins at the intersection with US-441 and extends east to Southeast Clarke Park. The road serves a similar purpose to Atlanta Highway as a major corridor that serves downtown and the University from the east. This corridor is less developed residentially and commercially, and is anchored by a few large-scale land uses such as the Athens-Ben Epps Airport, county government offices, and Southeast Clarke Park.

- » 4.1 miles | US-441 to Southeast Clarke Park
- » Portion of a 7-mile corridor that extends into Oglethorpe County
- » Main connector to a variety of goods, services, and institutions
- » Home to several churches and large parks
- » Anchored by a few large-scale land uses such as the Athens-Ben Epps Airport and government offices

Foundations | Key Takeaways

Like its sister corridor, the Foundations Report organized challenges and opportunities for Lexington Road around the same three overlapping themes of Land Use and Community Design, Economics, and Mobility.

Land Use and Community Design

- » The corridor acts a main connector to a variety of goods, services, and institutions.
- » While a few commercial centers exist, land use along the corridor is dominated by large institutional uses such as the airport, jail, police department, and parks.
- » Lots fronting the corridor are predominantly commercial, though they are shallow and surrounded by established institutional uses and residential neighborhoods.

Economics

- » The corridor is home to a modest number of the county’s total jobs, though recent job growth has occurred.
- » The corridor draws retail patrons from a local market, and data indicates a limited potential for future retail growth.
- » Peaking in 2013, commercial investment has leveled off over the last few years.

Mobility

- » Lexington Road serves as a gateway to downtown and the University from the east, though the current design of the corridor fails to invoke a sense of place or arrival.
- » While a few commercial centers exist, land use along the corridor is dominated by large institutional uses such as the airport, jail, police department, and parks.
- » Traffic safety is worse at the interchange with the loop and at major intersections such as Gaines School Road.

What the Community Said

Engaging stakeholders and the public in meaningful ways as part of a larger effort to transform critical corridors in Athens was critical. Over the course of the planning process, the project team and the corridor steering committees sought ways to reach beyond typical voices and engage the broader interests for each corridor with an eye toward the future. The intent was to allow public processes to be at the heart of how we blend community development elements such as land use, transportation, and design.



Engagement at a Glance

Athens is an energized community with strong neighborhood advocates; diverse interests; and a young, well-educated population. Given a choice, our community will engage with a planning process if their interests are demonstrated. The corridor studies needed a robust community conversation that was informative, transparent, inclusive, and well-facilitated. Once the final numbers were tallied, it was clear that those with interests in Atlanta Highway and Lexington Road let their voice be heard.

Web Presence

- » ~2,000: Hits to the Connect-Athens.org homepage
- » 1,000+: Atlanta Highway website page views
- » 550+: Lexington Road website page views
- » 5,500+: Total website page views

Community Meetings

- » 200+: Participants at community meetings
- » 5,000+: Comments and Ideas

Online Engagement

- » 17: Number of online engagement opportunities
- » 120+: Total online comments

Steering Committee Meetings

To ensure the planning process captured the issues important to the broader community, the steering committees included leaders representing Athens-Clarke County Government, real estate, University of Georgia, small business, churches and the faith community, residents, and advocacy groups. The committees met four times to fulfill the following purpose:

- » Provide ongoing direction
- » Develop key messages about the process
- » Provide an initial step in inclusive engagement
- » Offer the perspective of the larger community and be a liaison to those they represent
- » Evaluate findings, help develop recommendations, and offer input on priorities



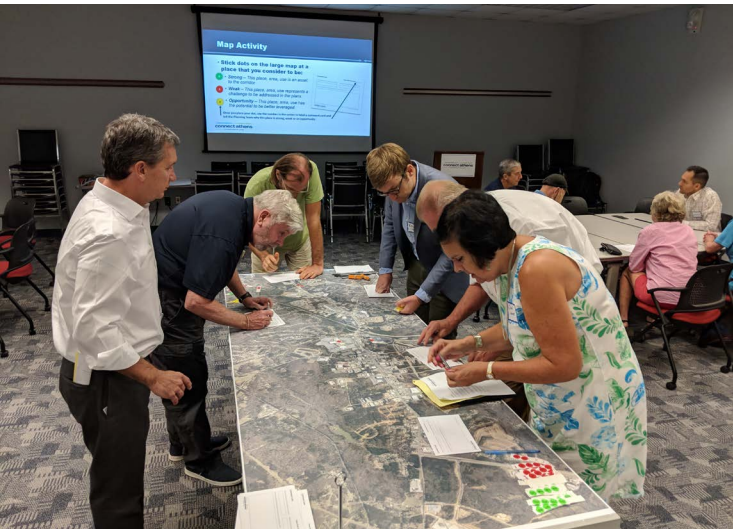
Visioning Workshop (4.29.18 & 4.30.18)

PURPOSE

- Provide background on the Connect Athens process
- Share critical conditions and trends
- Facilitate discussions pertaining to major plan topics

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- » Function & Safety: Address traffic issues; Improve pedestrian mobility; Beautify the corridor and add greenspace.
- » Aesthetics & Amenities: Add greenspace including medians; Create consistent signage and aesthetics; Clean up litter.
- » Business & Economics: Explore options for mixed- use development; Improve sidewalks and lighting; Add greenspace; Create a cohesive identity.
- » Land Use: Encourage more mix of uses; Improve access to Atlanta Highway for non-motorists; Consider needs of senior citizens.
- » Mobility: Improve bicycle and pedestrian mobility; Address congestion and safety issues at key intersections; Create a cohesive identity; Support long-term development efforts through transportation improvements.



Priorities Workshop (11.15.18)

PURPOSE

Present initial findings of the visioning and analysis
Establish values to govern the future of the corridor
Inform design principles and specific strategies

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- »Vision and Value Evaluation:
 - Place more focus and emphasis on quality of place and quality of life.
- » Opportunity Prioritization:
 - Integrate greenspace along the corridor.
 - Lessen the impacts of retail shifts and ensure Atlanta Highway remains productive and attractive.
 - Ensure the mall area remains a vibrant and productive place in Athens.
- » Transportation and Mobility:
 - Coordinate signals, consolidate driveways, and install median segments.
 - Improve existing bus stops and add a transit hub on the corridor.
 - Install plantings at key intersections
 - Improve pedestrian crossings and fill gaps in the side walk network.



Open House (3.17.19 & 3.18.19)

PURPOSE

Educate participants on the planning process, including how community participation has been reflected in the plan
Introduce the corridor recommendations and orient attendees on how the plan will be communicated
Gather feedback to guide the communication of featured short-term recommendations

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- »Atlanta Highway:
 - Future planning for the Georgia Square Mall and creating a targeted greenspace vision emerged as top short-term priorities.
 - Coordinated signal timing and bring greenery into the corridor at key intersections are top Mobility priorities.
- » Lexington Road
 - Empowering the member-based business association and conducting a strategic plan for the airport will be key short-term wins.
 - Mobility priorities include constructing the GDOT interchange improvements and improving the Gaines School Road intersection.



Plan Framework

Results don't happen by accident. Rather, they're garnered through thoughtful planning, diligent work, and unwavering focus by those empowered during the planning process. Connect Athens coupled aspirational planning (*What do we envision these corridors will become?*) with the tradeoffs inherent to the decision-making process (*What steps will be necessary to make progress?*) and an acknowledgment that outcomes must be realistic (*How can we establish a blueprint to achieve measurable results?*).

The process was dynamic and responded incrementally as information was collected from previous plans, stakeholders, and new analysis. The plan rests on four pillars:

- 1. Leverage the work of earlier plans
- 2. Create a holistic understanding of corridor dynamics
- 3. Provide a framework to offer realistic and measurable strategies for land use, design, and transportation
- 4. Communicate the process and a plan of action

The Connect Athens report has been designed to be a readable, functional document to guide corridor design and development in the years to come. As one process/two plans, the plan for each corridor is presented in its entirety in a standalone section. Each corridor section includes four components:

Corridor Characteristics

The Corridor Characteristics sets the stage for the actions and strategies to come. The vision was built with significant input from residents, stakeholders, and staff.

Transportation and Mobility

Transportation and Mobility presents key findings and organizes recommendations within the context of travel mode and corridor aesthetics.

Strategic Opportunities

The Strategic Opportunities relate interconnected actions that, taken together, will help the corridor's vision be realized. The Strategic Opportunities are organized around three topics.

Implementation Plan

The Implementation Plan adds the final layer of detail to the corridor plans. It helps explain specific strategies within the context of cost, partnerships, and likely impact.

Section 2: Atlanta Highway

Introduction

The Atlanta Highway corridor is a critical thoroughfare in Athens. As its name implies, the highway connects Athens and the University of Georgia with Atlanta and points west. In 2017, it carried more than 30,000 vehicles per day (source: GDOT), and over time commercial uses have come to dominate the corridor as a result. For decades, the area has served as a central retail hub—not just for Athens—but the surrounding region. County zoning helped reinforce the area as a commercial-only district and led to a relatively homogenous development pattern. With the area nearly built-out, challenges have begun to emerge.

- » **Atlanta Highway struggles to provide regional mobility with local access to the shops, restaurants, and other uses that line the corridor. Meanwhile, the auto-oriented corridor has limited bicycle and pedestrian amenities and its unpredictable travel times continue to hamper transit service.**
- » **Given the focus on commercial activity and auto-oriented development, the corridor has very little greenspace to break up the hundreds of acres of pavement and asphalt. Retail trends indicate a significant decline in demand for storefronts with activity moving online. Recent closures along Atlanta Highway show the early local effects.**
- » **Retail trends indicate a significant decline in demand for storefronts with activity moving online. Recent closures along Atlanta Highway show the early local effects.**
- » **The focal point for the corridor, Georgia Square Mall, is a very large use that's struggling to survive. With nearly the same land area as downtown Athens, a vacant mall site would pose a significant challenge to the community over time.**

These concerns help frame the opportunities to improve the livability, sustainability, and productivity of the corridor long-term.

Corridor Characteristics

Developing strategies to enhance prosperity and quality of life for the Atlanta Highway corridor required consideration of transportation performance and how people and goods move. The Foundations Report summarized a baseline analysis of the corridor’s existing conditions. Highlights include:

Land Use and Community Design. The sequencing of growth has occurred sporadically along the corridor over the last 50 years. The diversity of land uses increases as you move away from the corridor. Still, the planning area is predominantly commercial with room for growth. The corridor lacks cohesion and a unique identity that would suggest it has a sense of place.

Economics. The corridor accounts for nearly one-in-five retail jobs in the county, though the sector continues to see pressure from retail trends and newer developments nearby. Vacancies are high in key shopping centers. Non-retail jobs are growing, including transportation/warehousing and professional services.

Mobility. The corridor struggles to balance regional through traffic with local destination trips, resulting in ongoing traffic and safety issues particularly near major intersections. The corridor lacks continuity of facilities and connectivity to destinations that would make it more accessible by foot or on bike. Wide travel lanes, uncontrolled access, and poor signage control undermine the corridors role as a gateway from the west.

Main Draws. Atlanta Highway’s primary draw is the numerous resources and commercial centers. The three large shopping centers attract patrons from around the region, and smaller commercial centers draw people to the area. The Caterpillar facility generates jobs and further supports activity along the corridor.

Amenities and Services. Atlanta Highway connects points west with downtown and the University. The corridor extends from west of Fowler Mill Road before turning into West Broad Street as the highway crosses the Middle Oconee River, just before downtown Athens and the University of Georgia. The highway is one of the larger commercial corridors in Athens-Clarke County branching from downtown into the suburban ring. It provides access to three large shopping centers—Athens West Shopping Center, Clarke Crossing Shopping Center, and Georgia Square Mall. Retailers such as Sam’s Club, Publix, and Target are located along the highway, with smaller commercial centers located between these larger shopping areas. The Caterpillar shipping and production center (which employs more than 1,400 workers) is located to the northwest. Meanwhile, cars exit from Athens Perimeter 10 Loop, which splits Atlanta Highway in half. In addition to serving as an important gateway and resource strip, Atlanta Highway is a major commuter corridor. Three bus routes serve the Atlanta Highway and have a total of nine bus stops along the corridor. Approximately 70,000 people commute to Athens on weekday mornings, but only about 40,000 live in Clarke County and the rest commute into Clarke County from elsewhere (source: City-Data, 2017). Daily traffic and zoning encourage commercial uses along the corridor, making the highway a spine for surrounding residential communities. Numerous apartment communities are located along the periphery of the corridor.

Corridor Vision

The Athens-Clarke County Comprehensive Plan and Envision Athens (a community development strategy) formed the foundation for the Connect Athens process by defining the community’s broader long-term goals for growth, development, and mobility. The corridor vision for Atlanta Highway directly addresses these goals in a variety of ways to ensure the design and function of these roadways and the surrounding development they support contribute to the community in the best way possible.



People

Strengthening the lives of citizens and visitors through Health, Safety, and Social Services



Prosperity

Create, sustain, and advance the livelihood of citizens through Education and Economic Development



Place

Making a great place for people to live, work, or enjoy through Housing, Land Use, Neighborhoods, Agriculture, and the Environment



Vitality

Invigorating the community spirit through Arts and Culture as well as Civic Engagement



Foundations

Building and maintaining a solid foundation from which services are rendered to the public through Transportation, Infrastructure, and Government Operations

A vision for Atlanta Highway was created based on identified community needs and stated community preferences.

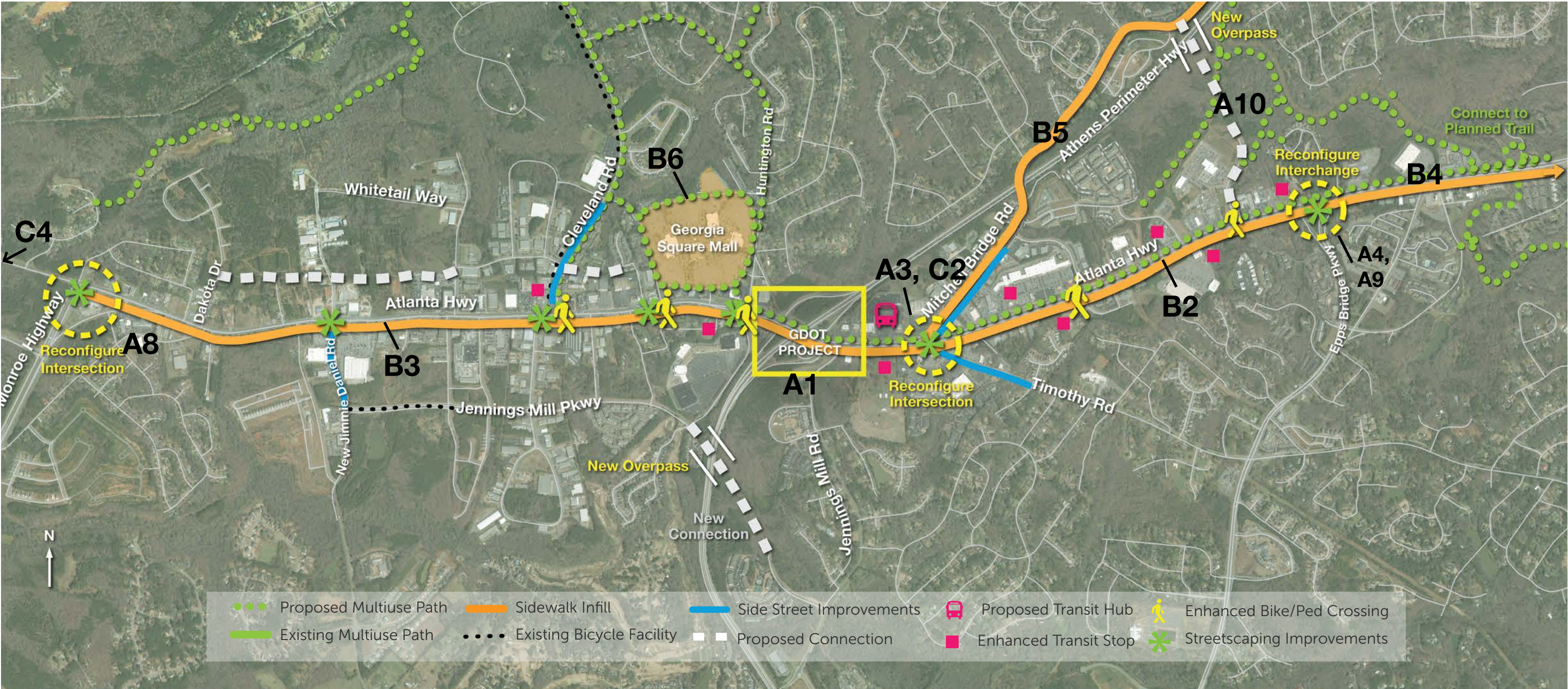
With a development approach that is deliberate and transformational, the vision for Atlanta Highway is a visually attractive and economically productive western gateway for Athens that provides: a variety of community needs, development that is intentional and resilient, and a range of efficient choices for the safe movement of people.

Transportation and Mobility

As designed today, the Atlanta Highway serves primarily to funnel cars from points west into downtown Athens. A wide roadway, high travel speeds, and large parking lots fronting the corridor speak to road’s role as a commercial corridor and commuter route. But as Athens grows and changes, new demands are being placed on its transportation system, and a modern vision for Atlanta Highway is needed to meet changing needs. The Atlanta Highway of tomorrow is a multimodal corridor, one that serves an ever-diversifying mix of uses with bicycle and pedestrian facilities and higher quality transit. As the quality of development evolves, the opportunity for simple aesthetic enhancements will shape Atlanta Highway into a gateway corridor that’s a place in and of itself. The actions that follow build on the challenges and opportunities identified through the planning process and include a range of options from quick interventions to long-term investments. The Athens in Motion Commission should evaluate the proposed on-street and trail network to ensure connections to address the City’s long-term vision for bikeability for this area of Athens.

Transportation and Mobility – An Introduction

The following section outlines proposed improvements within several mobility opportunity areas. Each section includes an introduction to the topic; a summary of key findings; and a set of projects, policies, or programs referred to as actions. The actions are supportive of the overall goal and vision. The action set should not be taken as a step-by-step guide, but rather a menu of community-supported intervention opportunities to improve the corridor in the short- and long-term. The graphic that spans these pages identifies some of the physical projects that will help leverage mobility in a way that contributes to broader initiatives. Where applicable, the actions are referenced by their alphanumeric ID.



Opportunity A | Safety, Operations, & Connectivity

How do we improve overall traffic operations and ensure the safety of all corridor users?

Atlanta Highway operates as a gateway corridor to downtown Athens and the University of Georgia to travelers from the west. It's also one of the region's major retail centers. Over time, the corridor's operations have become strained as commuters and local traffic compete for priority in this multitasking stretch of roadway. Several proposed roadway and intersection investments can help improve traffic operations, smooth conflict zones, and prioritize the safety of bicyclists and pedestrians to create a truly multimodal corridor.

Findings

Atlanta Highway (US-78 Business) is classified as an urban principal arterial. The multilane arterial is divided by a center turn lane or raised median depending on the location. As commuters travel westbound on Atlanta Highway, they can connect to two major highways (US-29 and US-78), which lead travelers to Atlanta. According to the most recent GDOT data (2016), the corridor saw between 24,000 and 34,000 vehicles on average per day.

In total, Atlanta Highway includes 174 intersections and driveways. Every intersection and driveway introduce conflict points that raise the potential for crashes and congestion due to turning vehicles. The most significant intersection (the interchange of Atlanta Highway and the Athens Perimeter 10 Road) processed approximately 25,000 vehicles per day in 2016. This interchange also was the corridor's most frequent crash location, with more than 300 crashes between 2015 and 2017. Other major crash hot spots occurred just to the east and west of this interchange, at Huntington Road and Mitchell Bridge Road, highlighting the safety concerns caused by the high traffic conditions surrounding this location. Crashes occurred throughout the remainder of the corridor with much less frequency.

Many churches and schools are located along the corridor or in the residential areas that rely on the Atlanta Highway for access. These institutional uses place more stress on the roadway network at peak activity times surrounding school dismissal and Sunday services, particularly due to the surrounding development pattern that limits alternative routes. The corridor is a key connection to these community resources, and the reliability of access to these locations is an important consideration for west side community members.

Safety, Operations, & Connectivity | Major Challenges and Opportunities

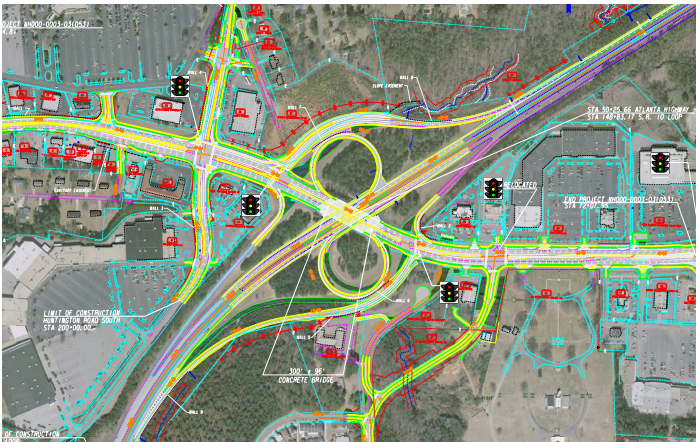
- Atlanta Highway is a major arterial that connects downtown to regional commercial destinations.
- Atlanta Highway is a commercial center for Clarke County and surrounding areas.
- High traffic volumes and high travel speeds contribute to problematic traffic operations.
- A high number of intersections contribute to frequent crashes along the corridor.
- The type of uses on Atlanta Highway create multiple peak periods for traffic during a typical week.
- To support a new vision for land use and development, improvements to Atlanta Highway need to address existing and projected deficiencies related to safety and operations.

Recommendations / Actions

The following actions respond directly to these findings.

Action ATL.TM.A1. Construct the GDOT interchange improvement as currently designed.

GDOT has plans to improve the Atlanta Highway and Athens Perimeter interchange, with construction starting in the next few years. This improvement would improve traffic flow, provide pedestrian amenities, and reduce turning conflicts within the interchange.



Action ATL.TM.A4. Analyze safety concerns at the existing Epps Bridge Parkway flyover.

This interchange allows free-flow travel between Epps Bridge Parkway and Atlanta Highway and is a safety concern due to its geometry and high travel speeds. The city should commission a safety analysis to identify short- and long-term improvements that can improve operations, connectivity, and safety.

Action ATL.TM.A5. Consolidate driveways and install median segments where appropriate to improve safety and traffic flow.

The corridor currently has 174 uncontrolled driveways and intersections over a length of approximately four miles. Each of these points introduces turning conflicts, unpredictability, and general safety concerns. A coordinated access management approach that includes medians, consolidated driveways, and parcel cross-access would improve safety and traffic flow along the corridor.



Action ATL.TM.A2. Coordinate signal timing throughout the corridor to improve traffic flow during peak hours.

During morning and evening rush hours, backups at the corridor's major intersections contribute to congestion and delay as commuters head from the outer edges of the county toward downtown and campus job centers. Coordinating traffic signal timing along Atlanta Highway is a cost-effective way to maximize roadway capacity by reducing traveler stops and delay. Coordinated signals also reduce vehicle emissions and improve safety.

Action ATL.TM.A3. Reconfigure the Mitchell Bridge Road/Timothy Road intersection.

This complex intersection is dangerous for drivers, pedestrians, and bicyclists due to poor visibility and odd geometry. A reconfiguration to straighten approach angles and enhance the pedestrian environment would improve safety and allow for gateway treatments and landscaping to announce this as an important location along the corridor.

Action ATL.TM.A6. Improve side street connections.

Side street improvements can improve connectivity and encourage travelers to take alternative routes and use other travel modes. Improvements such as additional turn lanes, improved bicycle and pedestrian accommodations, and enhanced connections to nearby destinations are proposed at New Jimmie Daniel Road, Cleveland Road, Mitchell Bridge Road, and Timothy Road, where appropriate.

Actions ATL.TM.A8/A9. Reconfigure the Epps Bridge Parkway interchange and the Monroe Highway intersection.

While future engineering studies will determine the ultimate configuration for the interchange at Epps Bridge Parkway and the intersection with Monroe Highway, the designs should realign streets to 90-degree angles, improve safety performance, and modify the street network for better traffic operations and speed control. A conceptual diagram for the reconfiguration of the Monroe Highway interchange is provided to illustrate this notion. Final designs will require additional input and analysis.

Action ATL.TM.A11. Extend Cleveland Road to Geoffrey Way.

The extension of Cleveland Road to Geoffrey Way will help alleviate the offset intersection configuration between Cleveland Road and Commerce Boulevard. As a high frequency crash location, the extension also will support local businesses impacted by the lack of a signal at this location. This improvement requires the acquisition of right-of-way and potentially impacts an existing building.

TSPLOST Options

State legislation allows counties that do not already have a MARTA tax or are not defined as a metropolitan county special district to impose a transportation special purpose local option sales and use tax (TSPLOST). The proceeds of the TSPLOST must be used only for transportation purposes, which includes roads, sidewalks, bicycle paths, bridges, public transit, rails, and airports. The planning, design, and construction of the TSPLOST projects are reviewed and approved by the Mayor and Commission at regularly scheduled meetings. Held at City Hall, these commission meetings are open to the public and televised locally on ACTV.

Several projects from Connect Athens should be considered for inclusion in the upcoming round of TSPLOST projects. For Atlanta Highway, these projects include:

- **Action A2.** Coordinate signal timing throughout the corridor to improve traffic flow during peak hours.
- **Action A3.** Reconfigure the Mitchell Bridge Road/Timothy Road intersection.
- **Action A4.** Analyze safety concerns at the existing Epps Bridge Parkway flyover.
- **Action A7.** Improve vehicular wayfinding to key side street connections such as Commerce Boulevard.
- **Action A11.** Extend Cleveland Road to Geoffrey Way.
- **Action B1.** Enhance pedestrian crossings at Heyward Allen Parkway, Athens West Parkway, Huntington Road, Mall Access Road, and Cleveland Road.

More detail on these projects is provided in the pages that follow.

Opportunity B | Bicycle & Pedestrian

How do we enhance bicycle and pedestrian opportunities along and across Atlanta Highway to encourage the use of active transportation by those of all ages and abilities?

Taking trips by bike or on foot has many benefits to the individual and their community. Cycling and walking improves the environment, promotes good health, saves money, eases the burden on roadways, and enhances the livability of a community. Many people choose to bike or walk for one or more of these reasons. For children, persons with disabilities, many elderly, and those who cannot afford an automobile, transit, bicycling, and walking may be their only option for many daily trips. Others may choose to take off on foot or by bicycle for recreation, to travel to work, or to run errands. Improving the bicycle and pedestrian network along corridors such as Atlanta Highway is a stated goal in numerous planning efforts and is a critical component for a more livable corridor.

Findings

Bicycle facilities are limited. According to the Athens-Clarke County Bicycle Master Plan, no bicycle facilities exist along the study area portion of the Atlanta Highway. BikeAthens, a local non-profit organization, does not recommend that cyclists use Atlanta Highway due to its high traffic volume, high travel speeds, and challenging intersections. Bicycle infrastructure in the surrounding area also is limited, with few suitable connections to surrounding destinations. However, several projects identified in the MACORTS 2040 LRTP would improve bicycling conditions on Atlanta Highway or connecting routes.

Some sidewalks exist, but connectivity is limited. Pedestrian conditions and walkability is limited for the Atlanta Highway corridor. Existing sidewalks are discontinuous and placed to serve some of the larger commercial business on the corridor. The auto-oriented corridor does not serve as a pedestrian connector and in many ways is hostile to those taking to the corridor on foot. Many of the major intersections have pedestrian crossings, but do not connect pedestrians to other facilities along the corridor. Connections do exist on Timothy Road and Epps Bridge Parkway.

Greenways and trails. The Atlanta Highway is currently not connected to any regional trails or greenways, but the 2016 Greenway Network Plan includes plans for the Middle Oconee River Greenway. This plan would connect the corridor to the larger region via a network of river-oriented trails and other greenspaces, neighborhood parks, and community sites within Athens-Clarke County. These greenways and the trails within are as much about conservation and recreation as they are about connectivity for active transportation

Bicycle & Pedestrian | Major Challenges and Opportunities

- The benefits of biking and walking are well documented, and those benefits apply to individuals and the community as a whole.
- The demographics of Athens support active use of bicycle and pedestrian facilities.
- Numerous destinations and amenities along Atlanta Highway would benefit from enhanced connectivity for active transportation modes.
- High traffic volumes and travel speeds create a barrier for bicyclists and pedestrians.
- The corridor currently lacks designated bicycle facilities and significant sidewalk gaps impede the corridor’s walkability.
- Several bicycle projects are identified in the region’s 2040 long-range transportation plan.

Recommendations / Actions

The following actions respond directly to these findings.

Action ATL.TM. B1. Enhance pedestrian crossings at Heyward Allen Parkway, Athens West Parkway, Huntington Road, Mall Access Road, and Cleveland Road.

These intersections represent major crossings of Atlanta Highway and each provides access to important corridor destinations. Though each location currently provides some level of pedestrian access, high traffic volumes, high travel speeds, and the wide roadway highlight the need for improving the safety and comfort of pedestrians. Improvements could include high visibility crossing markings, pedestrian refuge islands, and pedestrian signals, as appropriate.



Action ATL.TM. B2. Construct a continuous sidewalk on the southside of Atlanta Highway east of Athens Perimeter Highway.

Significant gaps exist in the sidewalk network east of Athens Perimeter Highway—and many areas of conflict at driveways and cross streets lack safety enhancements. A concentrated effort to complete the sidewalk network along this stretch would improve safety and comfort for pedestrians and provide improved access to the many businesses along the corridor. These improvements also would support the larger vision for a multimodal corridor.

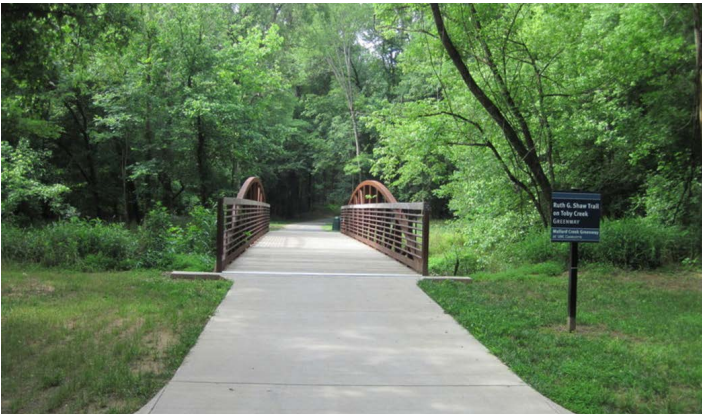
Action ATL.TM. B3. Construct a continuous sidewalk on the southside of Atlanta Highway between Athens Perimeter Highway and US 78 (Monroe Highway).

The sidewalk on Atlanta Highway beyond Athens Perimeter Highway is sporadic at best. Improved pedestrian access would benefit businesses along the corridor as well as residents who rely on transit or use active transportation for recreation or daily trips. A continuous sidewalk would provide an initial step in transforming the corridor from vehicle-dependent to multimodal.



Action ATL.TM. B4. Construct a trail access point and sidepath on the north side of Atlanta Highway connecting the planned Middle Oconee River Greenway with Mitchell Bridge Road.

The 2016 Greenway Plan calls for a greenway to be constructed along the Middle Oconee River, crossing under Atlanta Highway just east of Epps Bridge Parkway. A sidepath extension along Atlanta Highway to connect that trail with corridor businesses can provide increased recreational opportunities and improve access to downtown and corridor businesses.



Action ATL.TM. B5. Complete a sidewalk connection along Mitchell Bridge Road between Atlanta Highway and Tallassee Road.

Building on recent sidewalk improvements, a continuous sidewalk should be constructed along Mitchell Bridge Road, connecting Atlanta Highway with Tallassee Road. This sidewalk would connect residential neighborhoods and planned greenways with corridor businesses and provide for a more complete multimodal network.

Action ATL.TM. B6. In conjunction with a mall redevelopment plan, construct a shared used path to serve a mixed-use regional destination.

As redevelopment occurs, it will be important to provide multimodal access and connections to surrounding neighborhoods. Strategic connections to the existing and future trail network have been proposed as has multimodal access to the site of Georgia Square Mall. Concurrent with redevelopment of the mall site, the multimodal sidepath would encourage mobility and contribute to the activation of the site.



Opportunity C | Transit

How do we improve transit access and operations along this important gateway corridor?

Atlanta Highway is a key part of the Athens transit system. Of the three routes operating on Atlanta Highway today, Route 20 travels the corridor each day and remains one of Athens Transit Service's highest ridership routes. Considerations should be given to how future operations can be more convenient and accessible to a broader range of the population. Most people agree that they would be more likely to use transit if service was fast, frequent, dependable, and easy to use. These criteria require a complete system of roads, sidewalks, and bikeways as well as a higher occurrence of transit-supportive destinations.

Findings

Athens is a multimodal community. Workers in Athens commute to work in a variety of ways, with walk, bike, and transit mode share surpassing state and national averages. These rates are heavily influenced by the presence of a large student population and a walkable downtown, but multimodal activity spreads throughout the community including along Atlanta Highway. As such, the highway must be designed to accommodate a variety of users and encourage connections from surrounding residential neighborhoods to downtown.

Ridership trends fluctuate. In general, ridership on ATS routes in declining. The system reported about 1.5 million trips in 2015, down from a peak of 1.85 million in 2011. However, many factors contribute to minor declines in transit ridership. Within the context of Atlanta Highway, travel times are increasing and becoming less predictable which degrades transit performance.

Atlanta Highway is a transit corridor. Athens Transit Service (ATS) operates three bus routes on Atlanta Highway, all of which provide connections to downtown and the University of Georgia at one-hour intervals. Routes 6 and 20 operate seven days a week, while route 21 operates only Monday through Friday. Route 20 provides service to the Georgia Square Mall and is one of the system's highest-ridership routes. It carried approximately 120,000 riders in 2015.

Transit | Major Challenges and Opportunities

- ATS operates a modified hub-and-spoke route system, with most routes originating from the downtown transit center. This limits the geographic area that can be served.
- ATS continues to invest in existing bus stops.
- Atlanta Highway contains most of the County's retail development and is a hub for employment outside of downtown.
- The framework for Atlanta Highway as a high-quality transit corridor is in place, but improvements to land use and transportation are needed for it to be realized.
- Redevelopment provides opportunities to create a new transit hub and transfer station along the corridor.

Recommendations / Actions

The following actions respond directly to these findings.

Action ATL.TM.C1. Improve existing bus stops to include shelters, benches, and enhanced signage.

The Atlanta Highway corridor is one of the area's highest ridership transit routes. Simple improvements to the existing bus stops can provide comfort to existing passengers, improve familiarity with the system, and enhance the aesthetics of the overall corridor. Many of the bus stops on Atlanta Highway are slated for improvement in the next few years. As resources become available, these improvements should include electronic signage with digital real-time bus arrival displays.

Action ATL.TM.C2. Establish a bus transfer station inside the Loop.

A bus transfer station allows transit riders to switch from route to another. The current design of ATS requires these transfers to occur at a central in downtown Athens. To improve efficiency and enhance the service it can offer, ATS is beginning the process of establishing transfer points outside of downtown. Atlanta Highway and Lexington Road are ideal locations for these transfer points given their geography and establish ridership numbers. On Atlanta Highway, the bus transfer station would ideally be located inside the Loop in the northwest quadrant of the Mitchell Bridge Road intersection. The bus transfer station would include three to five bays in a sawtooth design. Covered (climate controlled, if possible) passenger waiting areas with restrooms and information should be included.

Action ATL.TM.C3. Increase frequency to 30-minute headways.

Increased frequency will provide higher quality service that attracts more riders and potentially help relieve some of the pressure from the congested corridor. Investments in a higher frequency service on existing routes may be seen as the first step toward more premium transit service along the corridor in the future.

Action ATL.TM.C5. Implement queue jumping at major intersections.

Queue jump lanes combine short dedicated transit facilities with either a leading bus interval or active signal priority to allow buses to easily enter traffic flow in a priority position. Applied thoughtfully, queue jump treatments can reduce delay considerably, resulting in run-time savings and increased reliability. The City, in partnership with ATS, should explore queue jump opportunities at major intersections along Atlanta Highway.

Action ATL.TM.C6. Establish premium transit service along Atlanta Highway.

Atlanta Highway is a good candidate for high quality transit service, including possible bus rapid transit service. The corridor connects several regional destinations, provides for fast travel speeds, and the provides enough right-of-way to consider dedicating space to transit improvements as demand and development warrant in the future.



Action ATL.TM.C4. Provide new hourly service to Caterpillar.

Caterpillar, one of the region's major employment centers, sits just outside the ATS coverage area. The creation of a new transfer center and on the City's west side and implementation of a new route to Caterpillar has the potential to connect hundreds of people to new jobs.

Opportunity D | Corridor Aesthetics

How do we create a cohesive corridor identify and improve the look and feel of a major regional corridor?

The character of Athens, its neighborhoods, and places of interest are largely determined by the look and feel of its streets. This is particularly true along gateways and major commuter routes. To protect the quality of existing places and help shape the character as redevelopment occurs, Athens-Clarke County should consider guidelines and standards that inform changes to public spaces and key activity nodes along Atlanta Highway. Actions in the opportunity area will provide a consistent aesthetic to the corridor. Collectively, these actions will enhance the user experience—whether in a car, on a bicycle, or on foot—and better position the corridor to receive investment.

Findings

Many factors influence the design of Atlanta Highway. The look and feel of Atlanta Highway is affected by conditions within the public right-of-way and in the hands of private owners. The design is characterized by changing cross sections, wide travel lanes, overhead utilities, and signs of all shapes, sizes, and designs.

Issues that undermine corridor aesthetics also contribute to poor operations. Hundreds of driveways and numerous intersections create conflict points along Atlanta Highway. Meanwhile, greenspace is intermittent, and sidewalks are sporadic. These characteristics strip the corridor of its identity and suppress street life and activity..

The corridor lacks a sense of place or announcement of arrival. Similar to Lexington Road, a recurring theme during the Connect Athens processes is that Atlanta Highway lacks a clear and unique identity. Participants in the process noted that Atlanta Highway is becoming more of a pass-through corridor and less of a destination. Many of the design flaws along the corridor contribute to this perspective.

Corridor Aesthetics | Major Challenges and Opportunities

- The look and feel of a street significantly affects community interest and investment in a place.
- A lack of consistent wayfinding or branding leaves the corridor without a unique identity.
- Both public and private shortcomings have undermined the corridor, and both public and private participation will be required for improvement to be realized.
- Properly executed, the corridor design could create a sense of place for west Athens and announce one’s arrival into the city as a whole.
- Branding opportunities and gateway monumentation provide opportunities to create a unique corridor identity.
- Improvements to the aesthetics of the corridor also would improve safety, operations, and the multimodal experience. And vice versa.

Recommendations / Actions

The following actions respond directly to these findings.

Action ATL.TM.D1. Install plantings at key intersections (Cleveland Rd, Mall Access Rd, Huntington Rd) to bring greenery into the corridor and provide visual interest.

Landscaping provides greenery, reinforces the corridor identify, and contributes to the gateway role of a corridor. To be most impactful, investments should be made at strategic locations along Atlanta Highway, identified here as the corridor’s intersection with Cleveland Road, Mall Access Road, and Huntington Road.

Action ATL.TM.D2. Install gateway signage.

Atlanta Highway is an important route to downtown Athens and the University of Georgia. Today, the corridor falls short of its potential as a gateway to the characteristics of the city that its people cherish. Improvements such as monumentation and branded signage can help define the City and create a sense of arrival for those traveling from outside the area.



Action ATL.TM.D3. Install landscaping and improve lighting to help distinguish Atlanta Highway as a destination.

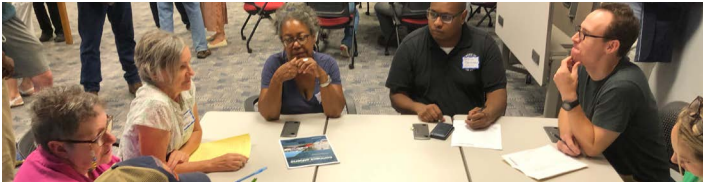
Coordinated improvements, such as streetlights and banners, can create a cohesive corridor identity, improve safety, and provide an impactful streetscape investment. These types of improvements respect the corridor’s role as a key part of the city’s public space and acknowledges the need to for the right-of-way to account for a variety of public needs.

Action ATL.TM.D4. Install landscaping, public art pieces, and other streetscaping enhancements at reconfigured intersections.

Together, better landscaping, introducing public art, and generally improving the streetscape will enhance the look and feel of Atlanta Highway. These improvements should be focused on visible, high-profile locations and key intersections to reinforce the corridor as a a gateway to Athens and its own unique place in the City.

Strategic Opportunities

The strategic opportunities represent three interrelated topics upon for which a series of actions have been developed to help the community achieve a stated vision for Atlanta Highway. The strategic opportunities include two general topics (**Greenspace** and **Retail Shifts**) and one specific topic (Georgia Square Mall). The project team considered hundreds of potential strategies organized around these topics. The projects, policies, and programs presented here have been vetted by the public, steering committee, and staff. These actions are structured to occur in both the short- and long-term and will have a range of impact, from small and incremental to large and transformational.



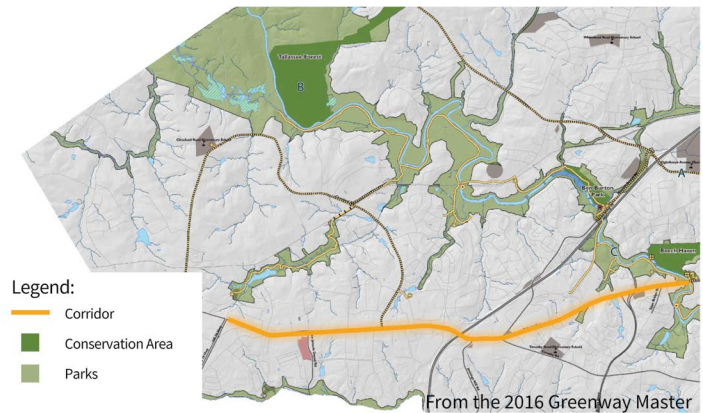
Strategic Opportunities – An Introduction

The following section outlines the proposed intervention strategy within each of the three strategic opportunity areas. Each section includes an introduction to the topic; a summary of key findings; and a set of projects, policies, or programs referred to as actions. The actions are discrete and supportive of the overall goal and vision. Some actions include more specific tactics, or small steps to initiate or achieve the action over time. Best practices show examples from similarly positioned communities. The action set should not be taken as a step-by-step guide, but rather a menu of community-supported intervention opportunities to improve the corridor in the short and long-term.

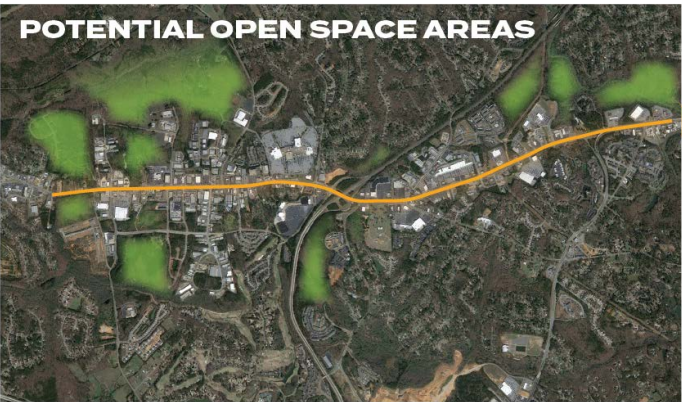
Strategic Opportunity A | Greenspace

How and where do we integrate greenspace along the corridor?

As a commercial corridor, Atlanta Highway developed with few reserved areas for greenspace or parks. Compared with other parts of the County, the corridor’s development pattern is relatively homogenous and dominated by commercial or retail buildings and their supporting parking lots. As the area transitions over time from a single-use corridor to a multiuse district, it will be critical to find opportunities to integrate small and large greenspaces along with connective multiuse trails to improve the area’s livability and quality of place. Improvements would be done coordination with Park Planning and the Office of Sustainability.



Potential open space areas shown in the map may require amendments to Planned Development amendments.



Findings

Most of the corridor area sits above flood zones. It is important to consider that floodplain areas are ideal for greenspaces, as they protect areas for natural hydrological functions. The Middle Oconee River and its Malcolm Branch are at the eastern border of the area, though water is generally contained within the floodway. Only a small portion of land is affected by rising water, even when floods rise to the 500-year level. This and another small portion at the northern boundary total only two percent of the Atlanta Highway study area’s land.

Atlanta Highway currently has one active cleanup, also referred to as a “brownfield.” The EPA encourages cities to assess, safely clean up, and sustainably reuse brownfields. Establishing green spaces is recognized as an important and viable reuse for brownfields. The Atlanta Highway cleanup is located on the corner of Atlanta Highway and Mellwood Drive. The property, formerly Luminous Processes, Inc., is now a McDonalds. The company previously located on the corner was an industrial facility that manufactured luminous watch and clock dials from 1952 to 1978. The site contamination does not currently threaten people living and working near the site.

Some sidewalks exist, but connectivity is mostly limited. Pedestrian conditions and walkability are limited for the Atlanta Highway corridor. Existing sidewalks are discontinuous, and the auto-oriented corridor does not serve as a pedestrian connector. Many of the major intersections have pedestrian crossings but do connect pedestrians to other facilities along the corridor. Perpendicular connections exist on Timothy Road and Epps Bridge Parkway.

The trail network is limited. Atlanta Highway is currently not connected to any regional trails or greenways. However, the 2016 Greenway Network Plan includes plans for the Middle Oconee River Greenway, which would connect the corridor to the larger region via a network of river-oriented trails and other greenspaces, neighborhood parks, and community sites within Athens-Clarke County. These amenities are as much about conservation and recreation as they are about connectivity for active transportation.

Atlanta Highway has two protected environmental areas within the corridor area. The Middle Oconee River, which segments Atlanta Highway into West Broad Street, has a mandatory 100-foot buffer along the river’s edge. A smaller stream extending from Malcolm Branch also passes beneath Atlanta Highway and has a 75-foot required riparian edge.

The corridor lacks a strong, cohesive design. The Atlanta Highway is characterized by wide lanes, varied multilane cross-sections, and a lack of consistent design throughout the corridor. Overhead power lines and standard highway signage dominate, and numerous mostly uncontrolled driveways, intersections, or access points create many conflict points over the length of the study area. Most medians are concrete, and no wayfinding or branding signage creates a unique identity or guides visitors to important destinations. Landscaping standards are inconsistent, and only a few bus stops throughout the corridor are covered and connected to sidewalks.

Limited bicycle facilities. According to the Athens-Clarke County Bicycle Master Plan, no bicycle facilities exist along the study area portion of the Atlanta Highway. BikeAthens, a local non-profit organization, does not recommend that cyclists use Atlanta Highway due to high traffic volume, high speeds, and difficult intersections. Bicycle infrastructure in the surrounding area is limited as well, with limited suitable connections to surrounding destinations. However, several projects identified in the Madison Athens-Clarke Oconee Regional Transportation Study (MACORTS) 2040 LRTP will improve bicycling conditions on Atlanta Highway or connecting routes.

Greenspace | Major Challenges and Opportunities

- The county has little control of the areas outside of the right-of-way and would need to pursue an acquisition or easement process.
- Costs for park and trail development can be high.
- Leisure Services needs to articulate the types of parks appropriate for the area (active vs. passive) by working with the public to determine their needs. This work is currently being addressed in the system-wide master plan.
- Residents have expressed an interest in adding more park spaces and trails throughout the area.
- No parks or trails exist and very few public open spaces are located within the immediate planning area.
- Greenspaces and trails add an amenity value and improve the attractiveness of the corridor.
- Parks and trails have been shown to raise property values.
- Enhancements would help to create a more complete set of spaces on the west side of Athens.
- Parks, and especially trails, can improve health outcomes by raising air quality, limiting urban heat island effect, and creating recreation opportunities /connections.
- Parks can provide environmental infrastructure to improve water quality and control flooding.

Recommendations / Actions

The following actions respond directly to these findings.

Action ATL.SO.A1. Identify locations for pocket parks.

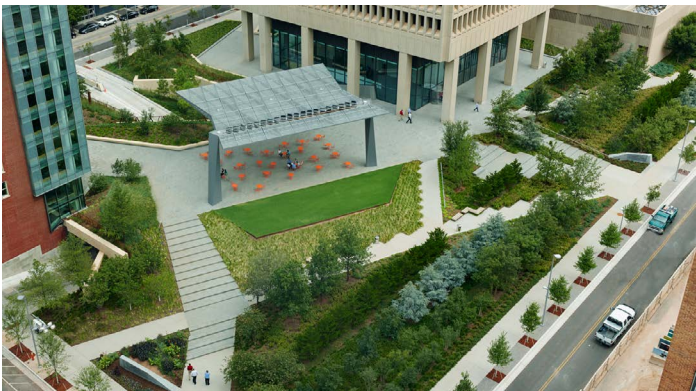
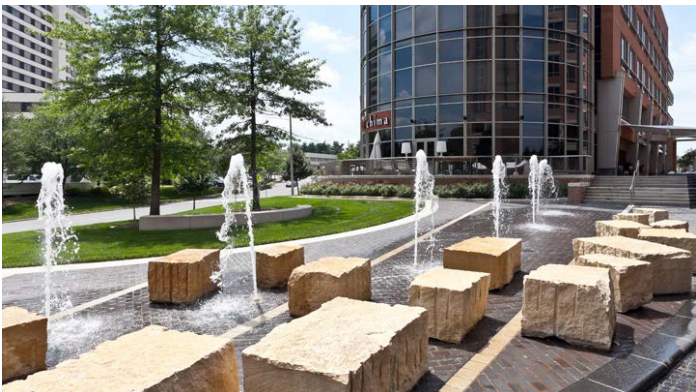
A pocket park is a small (less than one acre), active or passive park space typically tucked within a developed area. These small-scale parks can include playgrounds, benches, and/or other installations. They provide a permanent or temporary area for residents, customers, and workers to use as gathering and resting spaces—which would become an asset to the surrounding businesses. Pocket parks would take advantage of existing foot traffic and capitalize on currently underutilized areas. The current lack of public parks and open spaces in the planning area negatively affects the image of the corridor and its amenity value to workers. While most of the available land has been developed, opportunities exist where land is less suitable for development. These sites should be identified and explored as possible locations for small-scale public parks, and/or gathering spaces.

TACTICS

Pocket Park Priorities: Leisure Services Park Planning in cooperation with Planning Department should narrow down priority location options to areas such as vacant lots and parking lots; spaces along heavily trafficked routes; between housing and local facilities; next to other attractions; where people congregate already such as town centers; and areas where existing landscape or natural features such as trees, views, or topography can be taken advantage of.

BEST PRACTICES

Oklahoma City: A corporate campus in Oklahoma City has capitalized on existing underutilized land, transforming the space into a pedestrian thoroughfare and place to gather. This new space provides nearby employees with an outdoor place to interact and a safe pathway. The mix of linear greenspaces and small park areas breaks up continuous stretches of pavement and provides a green relief in the development pattern. These parks are not typically limited by property lines and can be managed as semi-public or private entities.



Action ATL.SO.A2. Establish a tree planting program for this specific corridor.

An initiative to improve the frequency of street trees lining Atlanta Highway would greatly enhance the aesthetics of the planning area. Street trees help to improve the pedestrian experience, reduce heat island effect of large paved areas, and improve the performance of the stormwater system through the retention of rainwater. Since 2001, Athens has been a member of the Tree City USA and currently manages programs and events that promote and protect the tree canopy. This positive reputation could be further leveraged to access grant funding at the regional, state, and federal level for a tree planting initiative focused on Atlanta Highway. Given the length of the corridor, it may be prudent to cluster planting efforts around development pulse locations with the intention of extending the initiative along the entire corridor over time.

TACTICS

Tree Planting Plan: The Landscape Division should prioritize tree planting opportunities along the Atlanta Highway corridor. With increasing the tree canopy as a goal, the community can build initial momentum through specific actions. ACCUG should identify opportunities to plant trees on vacant lots, around neighborhood gateways, and in parking lots. After identifying locations, the Planning Department and the Geospatial Information Office can develop a priority planting map that uses public health, water quality, and other environmental data to identify and target tree plantings in those areas. This map should then be used by the community and potential partners interested in contributing to this effort.

- The Planning Department can create a list of potential partners (e.g., department, non-profits, neighborhood groups) for implementing and sustaining any tree planting initiatives, as well as work with local organizations to host maintenance events.
- The Community Forester can increase youth programming opportunities and partner with schools to plant trees; host a Tree Tenders Course geared toward business owners; or hold a tree planting event on arbor day.
- The Planning Department can increase the minimum number of trees in parking lots for redevelopment proposals; explore ways to fully leverage Tree City USA membership; and cater to private land owners by creating a program to green “small streets” and subsidize tree planting to encourage homeowners to plant trees on their property.



Action ATL.SO.A3. Develop a targeted greenspace vision and plan.

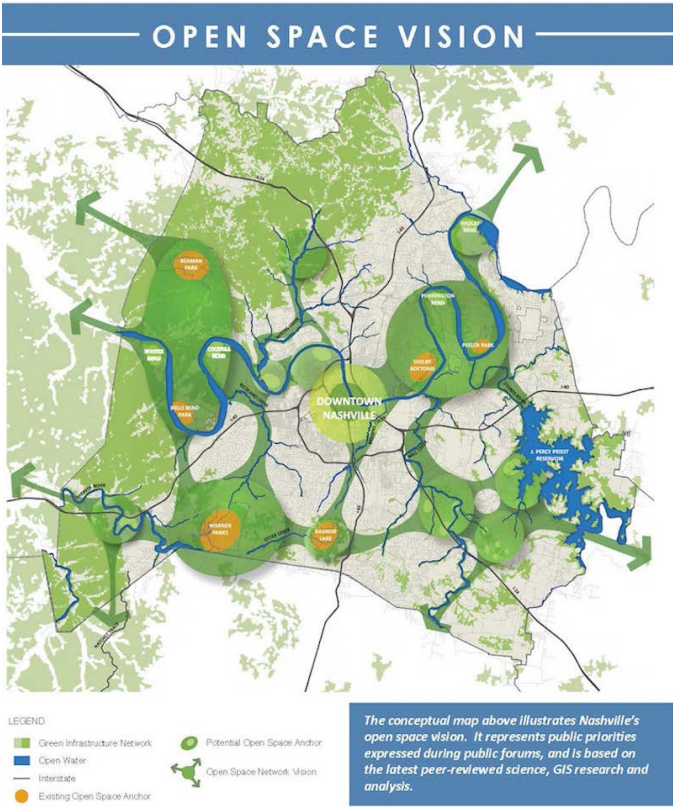
A more in-depth analysis, vision, and planning process of existing and future greenspaces should occur to offer local leaders and investors a guide for enhanced greenspaces. The plan would include a bicycle and trail portion to outline opportunities for connection points, potential trail locations, and funding strategies. The planning process would establish the “west side” geography and consider parcel-specific recommendations to improve access to greenspace in this part of the community. The plan would propose specific projects, identify responsible parties and funding options, and establish a detailed work plan. Actions that could be proposed include: enhance the existing right-of-way, develop a multiuse trail network, identify locations for pocket parks, and create a large greenspace near the corridor.

TACTICS

Greenspace Corridor Plan: The Planning Department, in collaboration with the Leisure Services Department, should establish a geographic planning area and then inventory existing greenspaces (e.g., parks, trails, and community centers) to compare with the larger community. The focus should be on parcels where ACCUG either has control or influence. This will help identify major deficits and physical opportunity areas as an initial stop to buildout a work plan based on priority projects and sites.

BEST PRACTICES

Nashville, TN: *Nashville Naturally*, Davidson County’s first open space plan, charted a clear vision for how to protect and connect the city’s green infrastructure. From 2009 to 2011 public engagement ultimately led to four major themes: Connect people to the green infrastructure network, connect wildlife and water networks, support urban and rural farming, and preserve historic and iconic resources.



Action ATL.SO.A4. Enhance existing right-of-way.

Improving or “greening” the existing right-of-way along Atlanta Highway and connected streets would lead to enhanced options for biking and walking and expanded tree lawns or green areas. These enhancements would offer a recreation and transportation asset for local users by combining an expanded sidewalk network combined with street tree canopy improvements. An added benefit of separating pedestrians from vehicular traffic using street trees would be increased safety and enhanced walkability. Future regulations should require sidewalk improvements as development occurs. Meanwhile, additional routes along the corridor for bicyclists and pedestrians can be offered by expanding existing multiuse trails, shared roads, and other innovative sidewalk programs. Renovations to the right-of-way should integrate medians or curb extensions within the mobility strategy for the corridor. An expansion of the tree canopy would have similar benefits to a tree planting program and would connect to local trails extending the trail network to create alternative greenway routes.

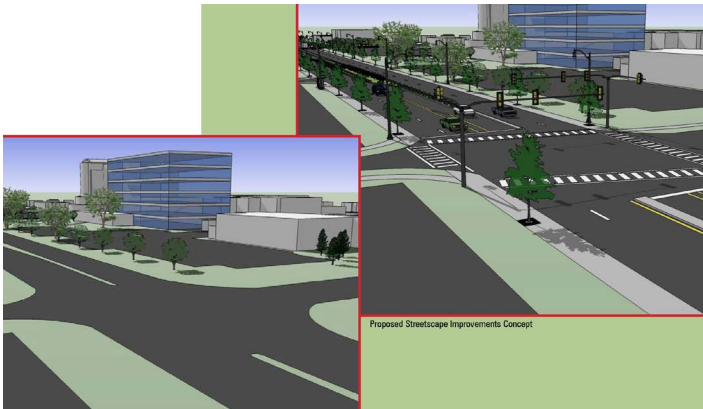
TACTICS

Right-of-Way Guidebook: The Transportation & Public Works Department, in collaboration with the Planning Department, should identify areas of high priority for right of way improvements. To do so, ACCUG can create a survey for residents to fill out to identify specific areas in need of improvement and potential suggestions.

The Transportation & Public Works Department, in collaboration with the Planning Department, can create a comprehensive “best practices” document for internal and external use that includes landscape standards and any additional considerations.

BEST PRACTICES

West Broad Street (Columbus, OH): West Broad Street serves as the main (non-highway) gateway into Downtown. The street is wide—more than seven lanes in certain segments—and dominated by suburban style commercial uses. Through a 2007 planning process and subsequent implementation, the City has steadily improved corridor safety and aesthetics by expanding greenspace and tree plantings, repaving sidewalk infrastructure, introducing bike lanes, adding bus shelters, and regularizing the streetscape treatments.



Action ATL.SO.A5. Create large greenspace near the corridor.

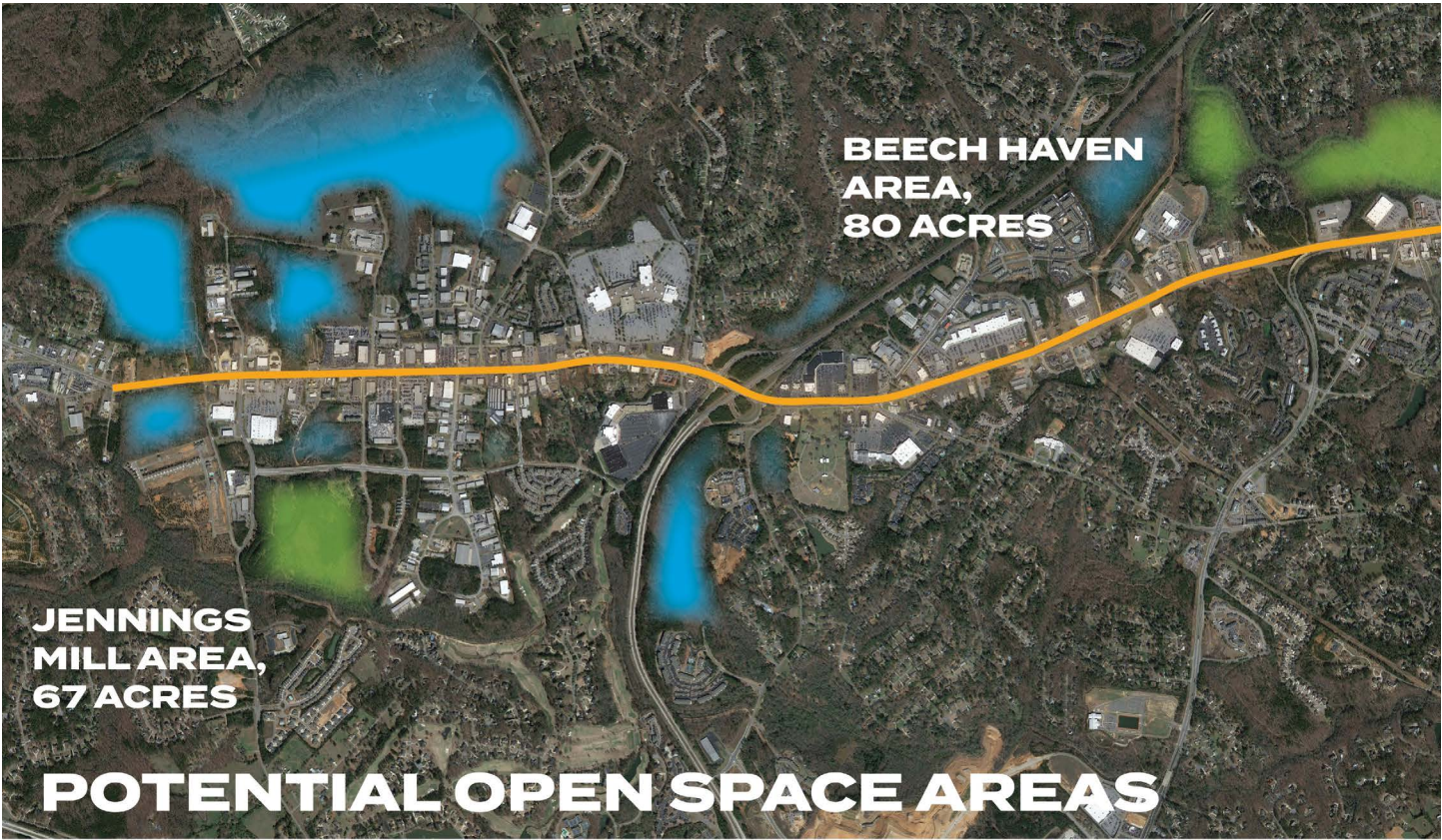
Two key opportunities exist to develop a large park near the corridor that serves the west side of Athens. Each site offers unique opportunities and can be integrated into the expanding greenway system. The **Jennings Mill** opportunity is three parcels totaling 67 acres. The site has frontage along Jennings Mill Parkway and New Jimmie Daniel Road, and is less than a half mile from the corridor. The site, bounded by McNutt Creek to the south, is wooded and includes a small pond. Consolidating ownership will be a challenge as the three parcels are currently held by three LLC's. Roughly one-third of the site is in a flood zone.

Beech Haven has been called “one of the most significant examples of a vernacular Arts and Crafts-style landscape in the southeastern United States.” It is an exceptional natural and cultural enclave and an extraordinary opportunity because of its location among commercial development and residential neighborhoods. Previously a hobby farm and family retreat, the site is beautifully maintained but currently closed to the public. The property is home to the historically significant Rowland Family Summer House (1911) and Camelback Bridge (circa 1915); and the University of Georgia College of Environment and Design is preparing a National Register nomination for the entire enclave. In addition, the Riverview Foundation and Athens Land Trust are working with the Athens-Clarke County (ACC) Sustainability Office to control invasive plant species on the property. The County currently owns 149 acres along Boulder Creek which bisects the site.

The community has shown support for protecting the Beech Haven area as a public park, and the Oconee Rivers Greenway Commission (ORGC), Athens Clarke Heritage Foundation, and ACCUG Leisure Services have been working to submit a Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) 2020 request for \$13 million to develop a master plan, complete a land acquisition, and construct the first phase of facilities necessary to open the site to the public. The ORGC is also promoting an extension of the greenway trail network to tie Beech Haven and Atlanta Highway with Ben Burton Park.

TACTICS

Targeted Outreach: The Oconee Rivers Greenway Commission (ORGC) and partner organizations can develop a public survey to gather input on areas where residents would like to see a park. Based on public input, the organizations can work with the parks department and community stakeholders (e.g., elected officials, community board members, neighborhood user-groups, members of the public) to identify priority elements for the potential park site(s) and promote the initiation of park design, procurement, and construction.

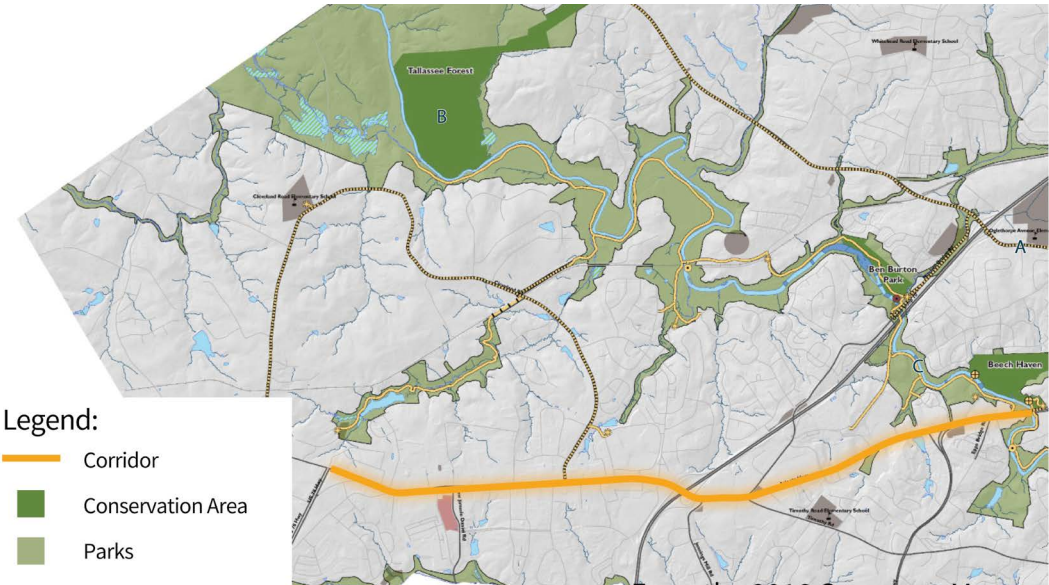
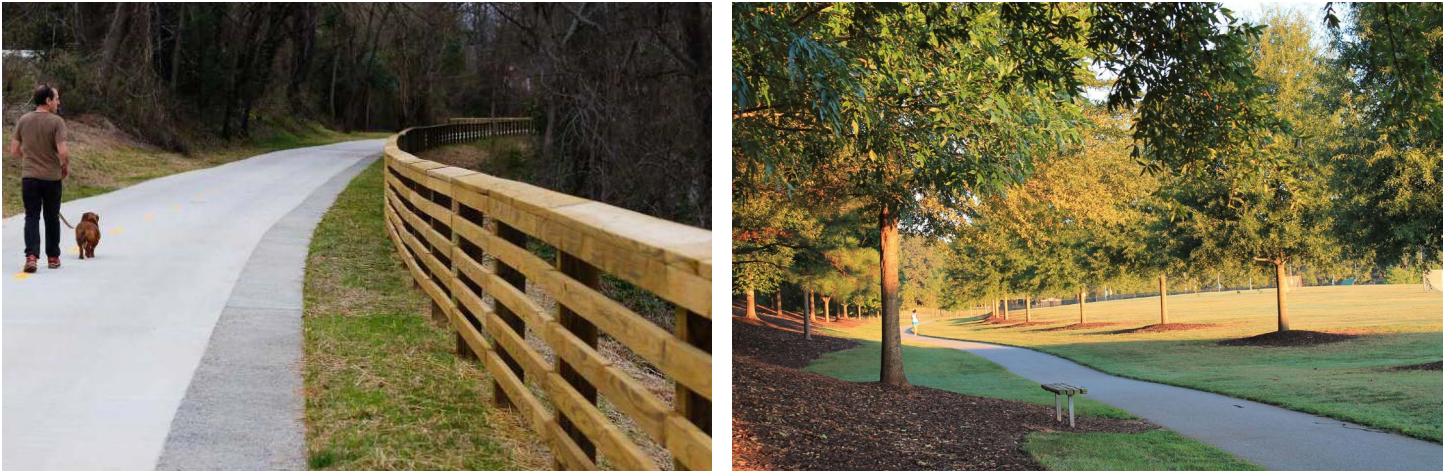


Action ATL.SO.A6. Develop a multiuse trail connection to trail network.

The community's recent investments in its trail system have focused on river corridors and former rail network. Through these projects, the county has added dozens of miles of multiuse trails. The 2016 Greenway Network Plan identifies several opportunities to connect the corridor to the larger, county-wide trail network. Building multiuse trails could connect the mall and commercial corridor with many of the surrounding residential neighborhoods and provide new mobility options for residents. Likewise, the plan established a comprehensive vision for the Oconee Rivers Greenway and recommended a trail to connect the North and Middle Oconee rivers, passing through the Atlanta Highway and the center of Athens. The trail, referred to as the Normaltown Connector, was considered a high priority to link between neighborhoods and to priority greenway trails. A connection with downtown Athens would make the corridor accessible to a larger audience and enhance travel options.

TACTICS

Trail Development: The ORGC, Leisure Services, and partner organizations should collect information and identify available resources to develop and promote community trails. The organizations should identify specific trail locations and by ensuring locations are compatible with the 2016 Greenway Network Plan, reach out to landowners to gauge interest, identify necessary permits, and estimate costs for trail segments. The organizations should engage existing partners and stakeholders to promote trail development, approach public agencies to sponsor the project, and apply for grant funding.



Strategic Opportunity B | Retail Shifts

How do we lessen the impacts of retail shifts and ensure Atlanta Highway remains productive and attractive?

Brick and mortar retail faces a host of challenges from shifts in consumer purchasing preferences (buying items versus having experiences) and in the rise of e-commerce. While physical retailers adapt to a fully-integrated approach to commerce, underperforming retail sites likely will continue to close. Meanwhile, e-commerce retailers increasingly use smaller format physical stores to support brand development and provide an opportunity for potential customers to test products. These trends, along with consolidation and bankruptcy among larger retailers, shows increasing vacancy rates for commercial space nationwide, even in stable or growing markets. Atlanta Highway is a commercial corridor, and its productivity and sustainability are linked to in-person shopping and retail. The corridor’s existing stores face competition online and with neighboring counties, which points toward increased vacancies and less quality shopping experiences. Public realm investments could send an important signal to the market and help slow or stop downward trends for at-risk properties. It also is increasingly important that the corridor diversify its land uses and right-size its retail footprint.

Findings

Atlanta Highway is a commercial corridor based on zoning and existing and future land use. Atlanta Highway’s zoning is primarily commercial with small areas of mixed-density residential in some locations. The current land use designation is majority Commercial-General which provides for commercial activities along major arterials.

Retail faces competition from online sales and newer developments. Using the Georgia Square Mall as a center point, a retail sales gap analysis revealed a limited potential for additional retail with a target market of the immediate Athens-Clarke County area.

The area continues to be an important retail district, but vacancy is rising. Atlanta Highway serves an important retail role in Athens-Clarke County. As of 2015, the corridor accounted for 1,130 retail jobs, approximately 18% of retail jobs in the County. This share is slightly higher compared to 2005 when the corridor represented 15% of retail jobs. For reference, total jobs along the corridor represented 4% of the County’s total jobs in 2015.

Some potential exists for the corridor at a “destination” distance. Atlanta Highway’s potential at a “destination” distance of 30 minutes is based on demand for general merchandise, apparel and accessories, furniture, and other sales categories (GAFO). This means a destination retail development would face substantial competition and need a unique positioning to be successful. Moreover, GAFO retail segments are the most susceptible to online sales competition as well as to newer shopping centers.

Retail Shifts | Major Challenges and Opportunities

- The community has limited control over the decisions of individual property owners.
- The affected area is large and not contiguous.
- Retail trends are affecting consumer spending patterns, vacancies, and potential tax revenue.
- The community is experiencing heavy competition from newer commercial areas in Oconee County that have attracted several former long-term tenants.
- The County’s second largest tax revenue generator is sales tax.
- Atlanta Highway has millions of square feet of leasable retail area that could be susceptible to shifts.
- Reuse of retail buildings can be a challenge given the large footprint and rent demand.
- A large share of jobs in Athens are related to these sites and this model of retail.



Recommendations / Actions

The following actions respond directly to these findings.

Action ATL.SO.B1. Build a living parcel inventory.

Creating and maintaining an inventory of parcels would offer decision makers and potential investors a way to prioritize redevelopment opportunities. Inventory information would include building specifications, ownership, tenant information, vacancy status, land use regulations, and more. By maintaining the inventory on a consistent basis, analysis can be done to benchmark changes and track status over time. This inventory should be an open source tool among ACCUG departments and connected agencies to encourage cross department collaboration. Paired with redevelopment incentives, a study that provides elected officials, department staff, and potential developers easy access to information about commercial and industrial opportunities has proved to be an effective tool in gathering information and aligning community priorities with opportunity areas.

TACTICS

Parcel Analysis and Inventory: The Planning Department should develop a list potential research partners (e.g., University of Georgia, a consulting firm, research company) and pursue these partners to conduct the analysis.

BEST PRACTICES

Chamblee (GA) Downtown Development Authority Vacant Land Inventory: Researchers from Georgia State University’s Public Service Capstone Course conducted a study that resulted in an updated vacant land inventory to provide city officials and potential developers easy access to information about commercial and industrial parcels in Chamblee. This was paired with a redevelopment suitability index based on site factors and community priorities.

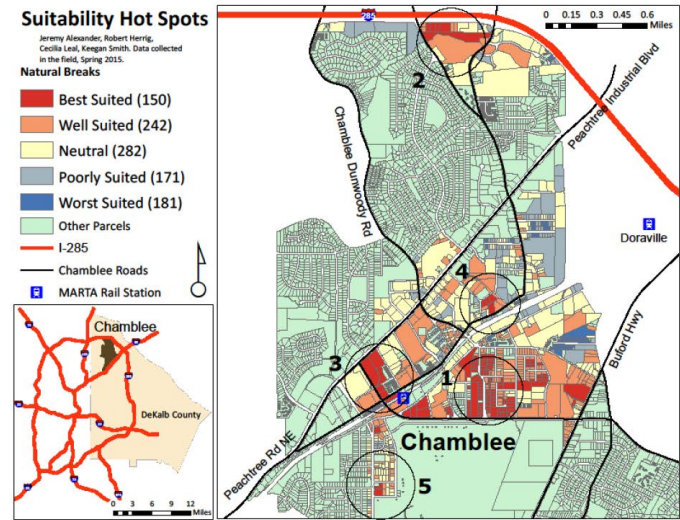


Figure 4: Redevelopment Suitability Hot Spots in Chamblee (Source: Authors)



Action ATL.SO.B2. Establish redevelopment nodes or pulse locations.

Given the length of the corridor and major shifts in commercial development, vacancies (especially among big box retail) are not likely to diminish over the next several decades. However, the opportunity exists to revise portions of the planning area for nodal or pulse multiuse development by encouraging development through new regulatory tools. Redevelopment nodes present the opportunity to create a denser, clustered environment. Successful clustering allows users to see all the retail at once, and the effect can be weakened if retail expands beyond a typical walking distance, extends too far beyond a linear corridor, or lacks continuity and is broken up by large gaps in street front retail activity. A redevelopment node allows customers to park once (vehicle or bicycle) and walk to numerous establishments. Increased walking—and thus increased activity—further activates the street and provides greater exposure to businesses. It also provides more efficient land use because shared parking is easier to implement and stormwater can be managed more cost effectively.

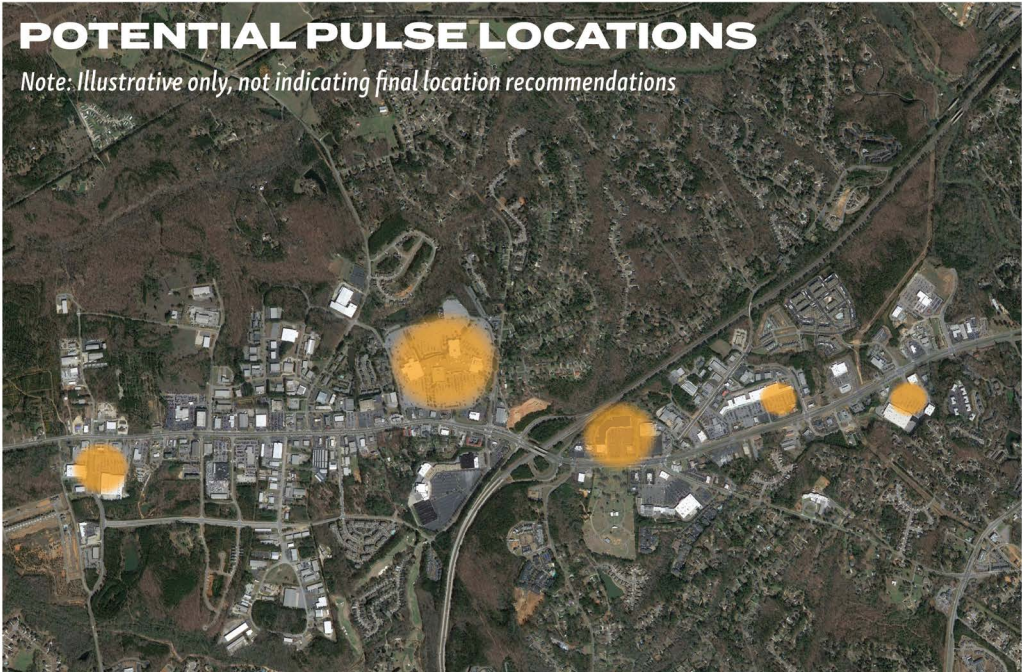
The community will need to identify the most suitable locations for nodal or pulsed development using criteria such as current site configuration, parcel size, proximity to existing or planned transit stops, access to existing or planned multimodal trails, ownership patterns, etc.

TACTICS

Redevelopment Framework: The Planning Department, in collaboration with related departments, could articulate a framework for redevelopment at pulse locations that considers a mix of uses, reconfiguration of parcels, access and parking, and other factors. Next, regulatory tools and incentive packages could be developed to provide guidance for developers and streamline the redevelopment process. Developing criteria for underutilized buildings and properties would provide locations for growth and change along the corridor, and, potentially, limit outward growth by utilizing existing properties. New development incentives for these areas would help promote an infill development pattern.

BEST PRACTICES

MetroWest in Fairfax County, Virginia: Because of suburban demographics becoming less family focused, a single-family home neighborhood in Fairfax County was redeveloped into a transit-oriented community with 2,250 residences. The site, MetroWest, accommodates a dense mix of inward facing urban housing and offices and is sandwiched between two apartment complexes, an interstate, and a local highway in Vienna, Virginia. Because of its location, the development has regional and local interconnectivity. Similarly, redevelopment of commercial areas along the corridor could be encouraged.

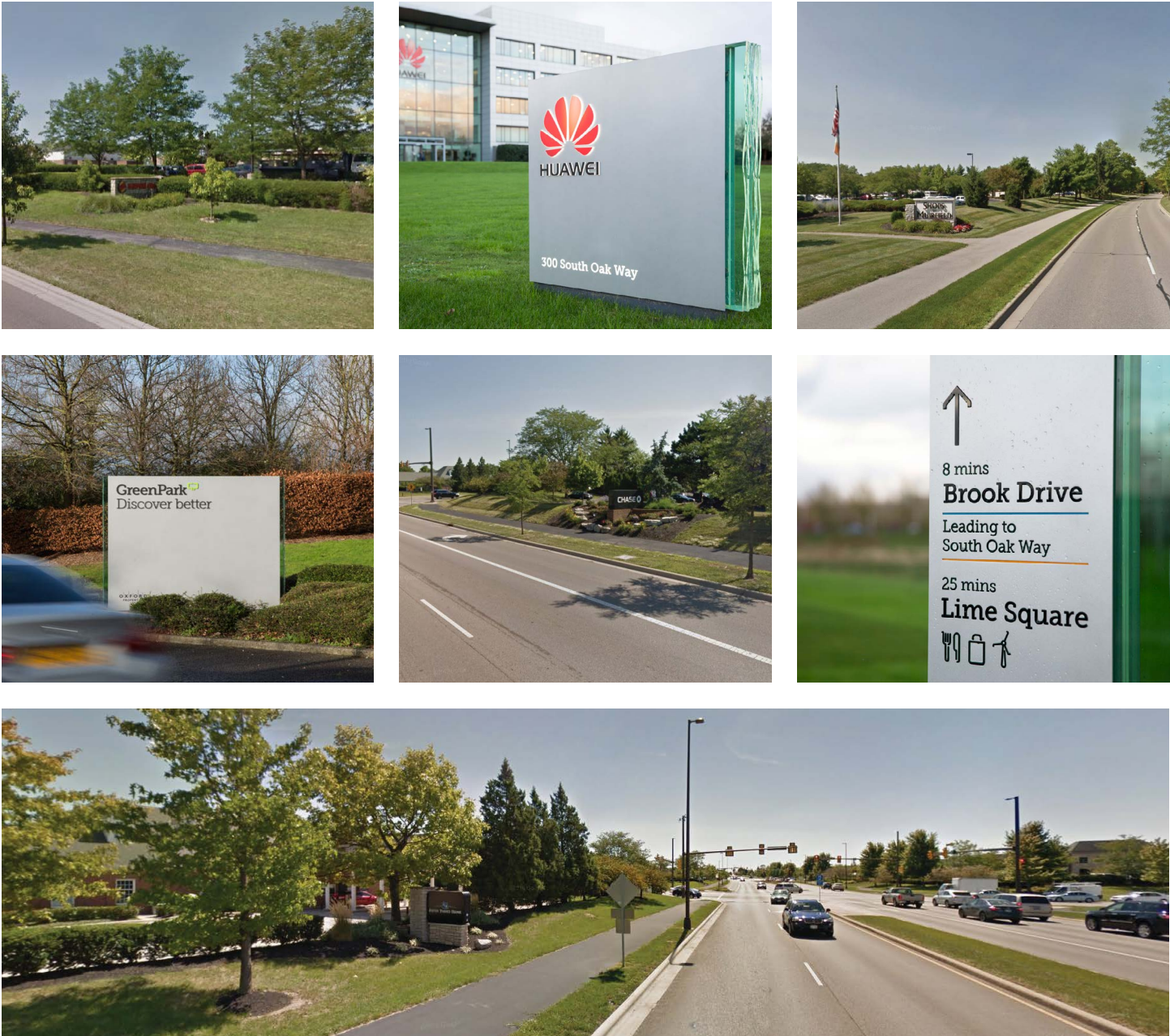


Action ATL.SO.B3. Improve Atlanta Highway corridor identity and signage.

Through a cohesive identity, the area can improve and regularize signage. This would include creating an attractive graphic standard for signage to create a better sense of place and benefit traffic circulation. Developing a recognizable and consistent signage package for streets, gateways, development entries, and business signage helps users navigate the area. Using these standards helps to reduce visual clutter by making these signs similar in size and character.

TACTICS

Corridor Branding: The Planning Department, in collaboration with related departments, should facilitate a discussion about branding the corridor as a district and identify and prioritize areas where the rebranding efforts should be initiated. The Planning Department can then develop signage standards that clearly articulate how business and corridor signage should look, adopt those signage standards into the larger code, and draft and finalize a sign permit application.



Action ATL.SO.B4. Collaborate corridor redevelopment with the Economic Development Department.

The redevelopment program for the Atlanta Highway corridor should be done to align with community goals for economic development. The Economic Development Department team serves as the primary point of contact for industries, larger commercial developments, site location consultants, and state economic development organizations. With a well-articulated vision for the future of pulse redevelopment locations, the department could play a major role in attracting appropriate investments to the sites. There has been a significant shift in site preferences among office users over the past decade. Athens has an opportunity—through redevelopment nodes—to create office, residential, and even flex industrial/ lab/research spaces that match current demand. The economic development team should be fully engaged in all planning activities for corridor.

TACTICS

Economic Development Task Force: The Planning Department, in collaboration with the Economic Development Department, should form a task force of planning officials and economic development department members to help guide the vision for the corridor, and create a unified calendar of meetings and events.

Action ATL.SO.B5. Improve cross parcel access.

Improving access and circulation between parcels will help reduce the number of trips reliant on Atlanta Highway. Currently, most trips require users to cross or travel along the corridor to reach adjacent parcels. Secondary transportation routes should be developed along the corridor to create short trips and relieve traffic pressure along Atlanta Highway. Similarly, future development should emphasize secondary connections between parcels. Opportunities like this should be identified and encouraged through creative incentives in future development and redevelopment efforts. Internal access enhances property value by creating more connections to potential visitors. Expanding secondary routes also creates safer pedestrian walkways and sidewalks along major streets by removing cars from heavier trafficked areas. For businesses that have private surface parking lots located between the front of the building and the street, the creation of shared, rear parking provides the option to convert front-located parking into outdoor plazas or patio space.

TACTICS

Joint Access Agreements: The Transportation & Public Works Department, in collaboration with the Planning Department, should develop a needs report to locate all potential connection options and then approach business/land owners about a joint access agreement.



Action ATL.SO.B6. Allow and provide incentives for housing development at identified nodes along the corridor.

Providing housing options and amenities for young professionals was a recurring theme during the Envision Athens process and the Innovation Initiative. The size and scale of some properties may allow housing forms that are otherwise difficult through infill opportunities available closer to the downtown. Housing also can provide a customer base to spur redevelopment of areas as neighborhood amenities near the corridor. Incorporating a redevelopment node approach (see Action B2) allows for an amenity-rich, walkable, pedestrian-friendly environment to help close the livability gap with Athens young professional community.

With a comprehensive code update, overall development standards related to landscaping, resource protection, parking design, pedestrian orientation, and more could be relied on to supplement a planned development. Without a comprehensive code update, each of the County's planned developments would have to carry the full weight of regulating all aspects of the development. To shape and direct this growth, the community should identify specific areas (defined by criteria such as size, configuration, location, and ownership, etc.) with a high potential for multiuse development. A master plan that considers the mall site should integrate these smaller areas into an overall pulse development plan for the corridor.

TACTICS

Planned Development Districts: The Planning Department also can explore incentivizing development with expedited development approvals, impact fee modifications, waivers, or reimbursement; and tax abatements.



Strategic Opportunity C | Georgia Square Mall

How do we ensure the Georgia Square Mall area remains a vibrant and productive place in Athens?

Since 1981, the Atlanta Highway corridor has been anchored by the Georgia Square Mall. With nearly 700,000 square feet of leasable space, the mall sits on a site roughly the size of downtown Athens. Despite the growth in the community and the regional market, the mall is struggling to adapt (not unlike many traditional malls around the country). Vacancy in 2019 was measured at 27%, ahead of a major closure announcement from one of its anchor tenants. Clarke County is the smallest county in Georgia by land area and has limited opportunities to accommodate future growth. The mall site offers a significant opportunity for redevelopment, due in part to its location, existing utilities (including a planned major stormwater upgrade), connection to downtown Athens via transit. Given these advantages and stated priorities by the community, the site is primed for its next chapter.

Findings

Brick and mortar stores are evolving to survive. According to a recent Business Insider analysis, store closures are at a record high for some retail segments nationally. These closures have occurred mostly at regional malls such as Georgia Square Mall where apparel retailers dominate the store mix. In the past few years, the mall has seen or will soon see closings of Toys R Us, Teavana, Gymboree, and Macy’s. While not all impacted brands have announced store closings in Athens, the list foreshadows the potential for future closings.

Price for the asset has decreased over time. The sale price in 2018 for the site was just over \$30 million compared to nearly \$100 million a decade earlier. This downward trajectory mirrors national trends. The current owners (as of the completion of the plan in quarter one, 2019) own several similar malls around the Southeast.



Vacancy is high when compared to national average. The 2019 vacancy for storefronts was 27% at Georgia Square Mall, well above the national average of 9%. At the time of the analysis, an anchor tenant announced significant closures nationwide. While it’s unclear if the local store will close, initial signs indicate it will and another 100,000 square feet of leasable space would become vacant.

Brick and mortar stores are taking steps to improve their competitive positioning. Physical retail sites are pursuing omnichannel retailing, which blends online shopping across tech platforms and brick and mortar stores into a seamless browsing and purchasing experience. Both Amazon and Google have launched physical retail stores to complement their online presence. The fate of big box retail stores remains unclear. Ninety percent of new Target stores will be less than 50,000 square feet (40% smaller than past Target stores). Other efforts include moving away from simply distributing goods to creating unique in-store experiences or “retailtainment”. Because the customer’s journey starts during the transit to the store, this may have important implications for the surrounding quality of place.

Georgia Square Mall | Major Challenges and Opportunities

- Georgia Square Mall sits on a large site in a small county.
- Athens-Clarke County has limited control over the mall, which is private property.
- The mall is a tax-driver in terms of sales tax and property tax, but this is not guaranteed long-term.
- Major, transformational strategies are expensive and long-term in scope.
- Long-term, large-scale vacancy on the site is a distinct possibility.
- Communities are rethinking the potential of these sites and many best practice examples are starting to emerge.
- Urgent community needs are not being met, some of which could be addressed on the site.
- The opportunity to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome for the community and property owners has been demonstrated by best practice projects from around the country.

Recommendations / Actions

The following actions respond directly to these findings.

Action ATL.SO.C1. Establish a new identity for the mall area.

Updating or developing a new brand and identity for Georgia Square Mall would bring new life to the structure. This branding could be tied to the graphic aesthetics of the corridor signage or be unique uses of the site. Beyond material changes in branding, planning, and economic development leaders should position the mall as an opportunity area for future development. Outlining the assets of the mall and thinking creatively about development will be important when talking with potential investors. A broader branding effort would be contingent on the ownership status of the mall. Given the ACCUG does not control the parcel(s), the community could incentivize this effort by working with ownership on promotional efforts. In this case, the community would want the mall area rebranded to match the broader effort for the corridor.

TACTICS

Creative Leasing: The Planning Department, in collaboration with Mall ownership, should develop a list of creative solutions to fill empty stores (e.g., food halls, rotating pop-up spaces, community gathering places, apartments or co-working spaces) and create a calendar of events to enhance the sense of community and give people a reason to visit the mall. The Planning Department, in collaboration with Mall ownership, also can seek outside help to identify the current brand challenges and audit the current visual identity, evaluation, and redesign as part of a broad rebranding effort.



Action ATL.SO.C2. Evaluate transit options as part of future repositioning of the mall site.

The Athens Transit System currently uses a spoke-hub distribution model, meaning bus routes are organized as a series of spokes that connect outlying points to a central hub in Downtown. This model can cause congestion at the hub and is not convenient for travelers who need to move to and from locations along the edge of the service area. For these reasons, Athens is looking to transition to a more modern configuration. Meanwhile, the west side lacks a park-and-ride facility like the Oconee Street location on the east side. While transit operations may dictate a site closer to downtown, the mall site could be one consideration for a future transit hub, park-and-ride location, or interregional commuter stop.

TACTICS

Targeting opportunities: The Transit Department should continue to evaluate transit options along the full extent of Atlanta Highway, including service enhancements at the Georgia Square Mall site. This evaluation can occur as part of its recurring Transit Development Plan processes.



Action ATL.SO.C3. Conduct a housing market study focusing on the western portion of the county toward Atlanta.

Athens is facing a growing housing deficit, and the opportunity exists to increase the overall pool of housing (including affordable housing) on the mall site. A targeted housing market study would direct local leaders on the quantity and location of housing needed along the corridor and should outline existing quantities, types, and current demand of residential units. The study also should forecast future demand based on regional population growth and economic trends. The analysis would provide a helpful input as planning and economic development decisions are made based on housing projects of specific densities and product types. The study should focus on demand/supply on the west side of Athens with considerations for how the mall site could be leveraged (e.g., adaptation, enhanced utilization, or full-scale redevelopment). Demand numbers will help developers see the opportunity that exists to develop right size projects with added supply. The community also may choose to add density bonuses contingent on a developer providing an increment of affordable housing either on site or through a fee-in-lieu program.

TACTICS

Targeting opportunities: The Housing & Community Development Department should develop a list of potential participants for a Housing Task Force; identify and commit resources to the process; and plan for community awareness and involvement via local media, housing tours, and public hearings. The Housing & Community Development Department can then hold a public hearing to develop local awareness and motivate involvement by both citizens and policymakers.



Action ATL.SO.C4. Integrate small public greenspaces on site.

Today, no public or semi-public greenspace exists within two miles of the mall site. The current lack of public parks and greenspace in the planning area negatively affects the image of the corridor and its amenity value for workers. Meanwhile, communities around the country are looking at alternative uses for redundant, degrading surface parking lots. While most of the available land has been developed, small opportunity areas exist where land is less suitable for development. Sites should be considered as possible locations for small-scale public parks, and the community should work with mall ownership to promote better use of the site for a community purpose while providing enhanced exposure for the mall's remaining tenants. Park space would not need to be permanent or large. Rather, the community may consider this a test area for popup park concepts such as food truck rallies (with seating, games, and temporary trees provided by a local nursery), outdoor gaming areas, and beer gardens.

TACTICS

Greenspace Opportunities: The Planning Department, in collaboration with the Leisure Services Department, should engage the community to assess the use of greenspace and identify where small public greenspaces could be developed. They can also partner with local businesses and organizations to help to fund the establishment of new urban greenspaces and support maintenance.



Action ATL.SO.C5. Enable a Special District Overlay.

A Special District Overlay is a unique zoning district intended to provide design flexibility in combining and mixing uses into a specific area. Given the complexity of a redevelopment program for the current mall site, a Special District Overlay would be an essential tool. With a completed housing study and community vision for the site, a developer would have greater flexibility to design a properly scaled, attractive redevelopment program that makes full use of the site. The master plan would still be subject to significant review and rounds of refinement and negotiation would help the community and private sector make full use of the site. To incentivize its use on the mall site, the community may need to fully demonstrate the potential of the 70-acre site.

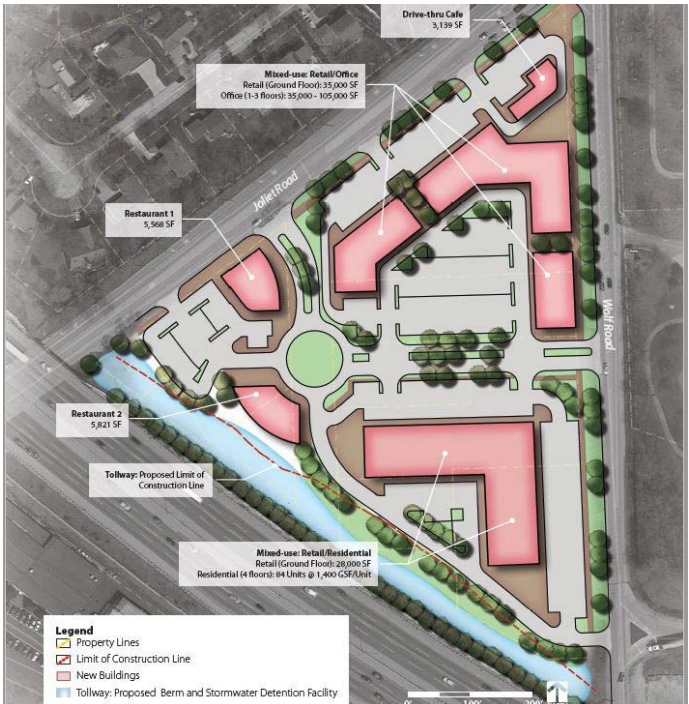
TACTICS

Vision Document: The Planning Department could work with Economic Development to craft a site vision document that clearly outlines site opportunities as well as the path to construction. The community may see value in further incentivizing the project through some other form of subsidization.

BEST PRACTICES

Jennings Mill Golf Course and Subdivision: This site was Oconee County's first Planned Development District. In 1979, a group of investors began acquiring land and developing plans for a golf course and country club on land at the Clarke-Oconee County line. In 1986, Clarke County approved the golf course development and rezoning of 127 acres to a planned residential development. The subdivision includes single family and multifamily homes.

Indian Head Park: In Indian Head Park, Illinois, the "Triangle Area" adjacent to I-294 represented a primary redevelopment opportunity to increase sales tax revenue and create a community gathering space for residents and visitors. The Triangle Area Redevelopment Concept and Planning Unit Development (PUD) Ordinance was designed to articulate the community's vision for the site and to provide property owners, developers, and other stakeholders flexibility and guidance in pursuing development plans. The Village's PUD ordinance allows for light commercial/business uses coupled with residential development to create a "city center." Previously, this area was zoned as a B-3 General Business District—not allowing for these types of land uses.

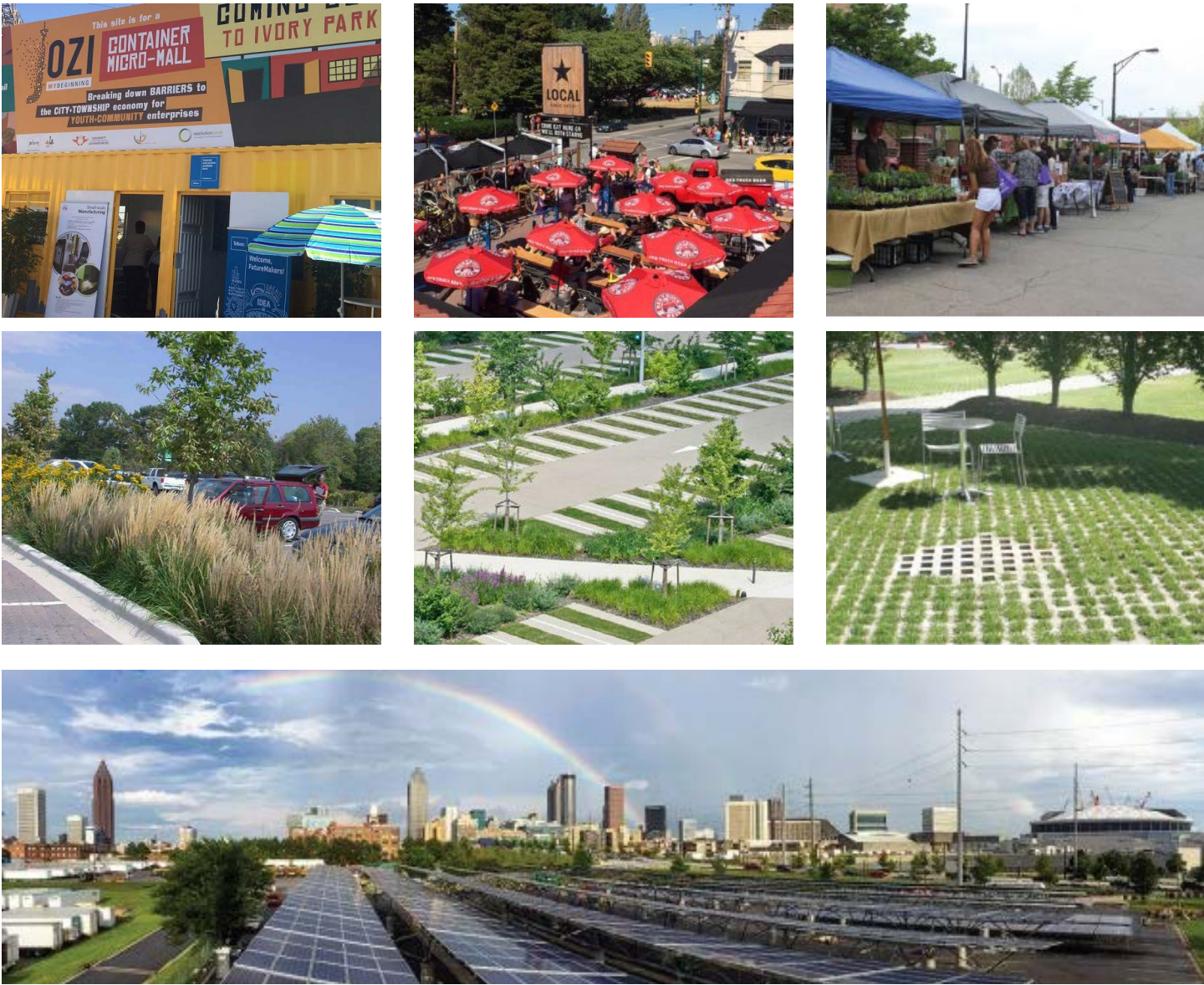


Action ATL.SO.C6. Encourage creative use of existing parking lots.

To better activate the site in the short-term and draw renewed attention to the mall, property owners may consider creative uses for the parking lots. Close to 80% of the site is surface parking. With a 30% vacancy rate and general decrease in consumer traffic, the site is significantly over-parked. Developing partnerships with local proprietors to program underutilized spaces would activate these areas. Many of the existing surface parking lots are unused for much of the year and offer suitable space for public or private activities such as farmer’s markets, concerts, festivals, and more. These activities would generate foot traffic for local businesses and provide additional revenue opportunities for lot owners and managers.

TACTICS

Targeting opportunities: The Planning Department should identify underutilized and abandoned spaces and encourage the use of easements across private property for bike/hike trails and landscaped open spaces. The Planning Department can develop a list of potential temporary activations (e.g., movie screenings, food truck rallies, better block project/parking day) and create a resource bank of precedent reuse strategies.



Action ATL.SO.C7. Create a redevelopment master plan for the full mall site.

Creating a redevelopment master plan can be transformative and lay the foundation for full-scale redevelopment of a site. Once developed, consistent review and proper assessment of implemented strategies would ensure the goals and objectives remain priorities. Redevelopment master plans differ slightly from more generally focused plans. First, these plans need to have support from the private ownership of the space being redeveloped. In this example, the owner or developer of the mall site needs to give support for the process to move forward. At the core of the redevelopment is the understanding that implementation will follow a public/private partnership. The planning process should include public input to establish a vision and help shape the final partnership.

TACTICS

Master Plan: The Planning Department, in collaboration with mall ownership, should identify key stakeholders, determine project area/scope and develop a preliminary vision. They should hold public workshops or distribute a public survey to identify community needs and wants and prepare a master plan based on public input.

BEST PRACTICES

Burlington Town Center: A collaborative process involving the owner of Burlington Town Center, residents, the Development Agreement Public Advisory Committee (DAPAC), and the City planned for the redevelopment of the site of this mall. Over a two-year process and in response to community input and discussions with City boards and commissions, the developer’s initial concepts underwent several design iterations and programming changes before plans were approved. The site ultimately will result in an estimated \$250 million in private improvements that includes 272 housing units, 230,328 square feet of office space, and 126,813 square feet of new retail space.



Action ATL.SO.C8. Improve building utilization and programming through creative projects.

In the short-term, mall ownership may elect to expand its portfolio of internal uses to better activate the space. Malls across the country struggle to maintain occupants and attract consumers, and many are considering non-retail uses such as experiential (e.g., recreational space), placeholder (e.g., office, event, performance spaces), unique (e.g., film or television studios), functional (e.g., storage), and destination. The fiscal productivity of the site must be a consideration even for short-term uses. At 70 acres, the mall is a large site in a very small county. It is important the site to remain fiscally productive in the short and long-term.

TACTICS

Adaptive Reuse Study: The Planning Department can commission a study to investigate adaptive building reuse; review or initiate an information database on current space use to further effectiveness of space management; and then create a document that advertises adaptive reuse and creative reutilization that can be marketed. They can then facilitate tax rebates or other financial incentives to encourage this use.

BEST PRACTICES

Hawthorne Plaza Mall: The site of this former indoor mall with free-standing stores in Hawthorne, California went in to decline in the 1990s. Today, this site is being repurposed as a filming location for large scale feature films down to independent photo shoots. The site includes more than 800,000 square feet of usable space for filming and parking. The interior and exterior of the vacant mall are available, and the rooftop has been made to resemble a freeway.



Action ATL.SO.C9. Work collaboratively with mall ownership to assume control and spur redevelopment.

Establishing consistent and mutually beneficial meetings with current owners would improve communication between public and private entities and help stakeholders understand short- and long-term plans for the site. Community and economic development planners should continue to engage mall ownership regularly and present ideas and strategies for the site. The 70-acre mall site represents a significant opportunity for Athens. If progress by the owner of the site stalls, the community may need to take more direct control over the site. To do so, ACCUG would need to facilitate a deal that ultimately transitions control of the asset via an agreement (in concert with the initial sale) with a developer capable of delivering the community's vision for the site. If ACCUG can gain control of the property, it will be critical to advance a redevelopment concept to send signals to the market about acceptable density, building typologies, and use mix. This concept also should include a financial analysis to identify gaps based on the density and use mix. Undertaking this type of exercise can help shape the regulatory and incentive framework to spur redevelopment. A request for proposals (RFP) should define the development program and outline preferred density, mix of uses, and architectural style. Through an RFP process, the community would retain significant control over the outcomes on the site by defining them in advance. This may also be achieved through a request for qualifications (RFQ) that would lead to working collaboratively with a developer to obtain similar results.

TACTICS

Collaborative Meetings: The Planning Department can identify participants to attend a standing bimonthly meeting with mall ownership to share information and offer support when applicable. Where possible, these meetings should include decision making individuals rather than proxies to encourage direct negotiation regarding the future of the site.

Ownership Option: Should ACCUG seek to take more direct control of the site, the Planning Department and Economic Development Department can develop a plan for facilitating a deal or purchase for new ownership of the site. The departments can then identify and record potential partners to approach about investment and create a package of incentives to attract potential investors. The financial model of ACCUG is driven by sales tax, particularly as it relates to the SPLOST and capital investment. ACCUG should develop an estimate of the value of the mall as it relates to sales and property tax generation to serve as benchmark to measure the impact of redevelopment and reuse plans for the mall. It will be difficult to replicate sales tax generation potential.

Request for Proposal: The Planning Department should secure funding and establish the project's boundaries and goals. They should then identify key stakeholders and advisors to help define project needs, write the RFP, determine scoring criteria, and circulate the RFP.



Action ATL.SO.C10. Encourage integration of housing into the existing site.

Initiating conversations around housing would be critical to moving toward a mixed-use development. Steps need to be taken to allow certain density levels and character types that currently may not be allowed in the zoning code. The specifics of residential density and housing types would be in response to an area housing study (see Action C3) that would outline current and future market demands. This action would occur as an alternative to full-scale redevelopment of the site and open portions of the 70 acres to smaller-scale repurposing. This action also would focus on the land area surrounding the existing buildings and not include repurposing of the mall buildings themselves.

TACTICS

Housing Option: The Planning Department should establish the necessary zoning/land use infrastructure to allow for housing as a redevelopment strategy in the mall site.



Implementation Plan

The Connect Athens process was structured to be visionary without losing touch with the opportunities and constraints that will drive implementation. The actions (projects, policies, and programs) need a framework to spur investment that leads to change over time. The plan also needs to be flexible and allow staff and decision-makers the ability to change course and capitalize on new opportunities as they arise. Ultimately, both public and private investment of time and dollars will be needed to achieve the desired vision for the corridor design, economic diversity, and mobility solutions.

Connect Athens came at an opportune time for Atlanta Highway. As the corridor continues to evolve, economic forces and trends associated with growth, development, and mobility may open the door to address needs associated with transportation and land use. This shift in focus may bring property owners that have been reluctant to invest in the corridor to table with public and private partners to enact real change.

The timing of the implementation plan is subject to factors such as:

- » **The degree of control or influence Athens-Clarke County has relative to its desire to implement changes.**
- » **The availability of time and money to implement improvements.**
- » **The degree to which Athens-Clarke County and GDOT can proactively work with the development community to enhance the quality of development, in both use and design.**
- » **The interdependence of implementation, or the degree to which implementing one action is dependent on the successful completion of another task.**

The action plan that follows represents a flexible approach that doesn't require all improvements to be completed in tandem, and most improvements are not dependent on the sequential completion of other actions. The matrices relate each action to a phased improvement cycle based in part on the anticipated cost and perceived level of impact. The action plan also offers insight into which partners need to lead or be involved in specific tasks.

Action Plan

- 1

 GDOT
- 2

 MPO
- 3

 ACC
- 4

 Private
- 5

 Athens Transit System

Support

Lead

= Low Public Investment

= High Public Investment

= Low Mobility Impact

= High Mobility Impact

SHORT TERM		Action	Cost	Impact	Participation
Safety, Operations & Connectivity	ATL.TM.A1.	Construct the GDOT interchange improvement as currently designed.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.TM.A2.	Coordinate signal timing throughout the corridor to improve traffic flow during peak hours.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.TM.A3.	Reconfigure the Mitchell Bridge Road/Timothy Road intersection.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.TM.A4.	Analyze safety concerns at the existing Epps Bridge Parkway flyover.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
Bicycle & Pedestrian	ATL.TM. B1.	Enhance pedestrian crossings at Heyward Allen Parkway, Athens West Parkway, Huntington Road, Mall Access Road, and Cleveland Road.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.TM. B2.	Construct a continuous sidewalk on the southside of Atlanta Highway east of Athens Perimeter Highway.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
Transit	ATL.TM. C1.	Improve existing bus stops to include shelters, benches, and enhanced signage.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.TM. C2.	Establish a bus transfer station inside the Loops.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.TM. C3.	Increase frequency to 30-minute headways.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.TM. C4.	Provide new hourly service to Caterpillar.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
Corridor Aesthetics	ATL.TM. D1.	Install plantings at key intersections (Cleveland Rd, Mall Access Rd, Huntington Rd) to bring greenery into the corridor and provide visual interest.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
Greenspace	ATL.SO.A2.	Establish a tree planting program for this specific corridor.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.SO.A3.	Develop a targeted greenspace vision and plan.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
Retail Shifts	ATL.SO.B1.	Build a living parcel inventory.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
Georgia Mall	ATL.SO.C1.	Establish a new identity for the mall area.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.SO.C3.	Conduct a housing market study focusing on the western portion of the county toward Atlanta.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5

Action Plan

- 1

 GDOT
- 2

 MPO
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 ACC
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 Private
- 5

 Athens Transit System

Support

Lead

= Low Public Investment

= High Public Investment

= Low Mobility Impact

= High Mobility Impact

MID TERM		Action	Cost	Impact	Participation
Safety, Operations & Connectivity	ATL.TM.A5.	Consolidate driveways and install median segments where appropriate to improve safety and traffic flow.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.TM.A6.	Improve side street connections.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.TM.A7.	Improve vehicular wayfinding to key side street connections such as Commerce Boulevard.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.TM.A11.	Extend Cleveland Road to Geoffrey Way.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
Bicycle & Pedestrian	ATL.TM.B2.	Construct a continuous sidewalk on the southside of Atlanta Highway between Athens Perimeter Highway and US 78 (Monroe Highway).	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.TM.B4.	Construct a trail access point and sidepath on the north side of Atlanta Highway connecting the planned Middle Oconee River Greenway with Mitchell Bridge Road.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
Transit	ATL.TM.C5.	Implement queue jumping at major intersections.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
Corridor Aesthetics	ATL.TM.D2.	Install gateway signage.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.TM.D3.	Install landscaping and improve lighting to help distinguish Atlanta Highway as a destination.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
Retail Shifts	ATL.SO.B3.	Improve Atlanta Highway corridor identity and signage.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.SO.B5.	Improve cross parcel access.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
Georgia Mall	ATL.SO.C2.	Evaluate transit options as part of future repositioning of the mall site.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.SO.C4.	Integrate small public greenspaces on site.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.SO.C6.	Encourage creative use of existing parking lots.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5
	ATL.SO.C7.	Create a redevelopment master plan for the full mall site.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	Support	1 2 3 4 5

Action Plan

\$ \$ \$ \$ \$

\$ \$ \$ \$ \$

=Low Public Investment

=High Public Investment

=Low Mobility Impact

=High Mobility Impact

1 GDOT

2 MPO

3 ACC

4 Private

5 Athens Transit System

Support

Lead

LONG TERM		Action	Cost	Impact	Participation
Safety, Operations & Connectivity		ATL.TM.A8/A9. Reconfigure the Epps Bridge Parkway interchange.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	5 5 5 5 5	1 2 3 4 5
		ATL.TM.A8/A9. Reconfigure the Monroe Highway intersection.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	5 5 5 5 5	1 2 3 4 5
		ATL.TM.A10. Construct the Heyward Allen Parkway extension and a new bridge connection with Athens Perimeter Highway.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	5 5 5 5 5	1 2 3 4 5
Bicycle & Pedestrian		ATL.TM.B5. Complete a sidewalk connection along Mitchell Bridge Road between Atlanta Highway and Tallassee Road.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	5 5 5 5 5	1 2 3 4 5
		ATL.TM.B6. In conjunction with a mall redevelopment plan, construct a shared used path to serve a mixed-use regional destination.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	5 5 5 5 5	1 2 3 4 5
Transit		ATL.TM.C6. Establish premium transit service along Atlanta Highway.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	5 5 5 5 5	1 2 3 4 5
Corridor Aesthetics		In conjunction with a mall redevelopment plan, improve transit service options.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	5 5 5 5 5	1 2 3 4 5
		ATL.TM.D4. Install landscaping, public art pieces, and other streetscaping enhancements at reconfigured intersections.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	5 5 5 5 5	1 2 3 4 5
Greenspace		ATL.SO.A4. Enhance existing right-of-way.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	5 5 5 5 5	1 2 3 4 5
		ATL.SO.A5. Create large greenspace near the corridor.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	5 5 5 5 5	1 2 3 4 5
		ATL.SO.A6. Develop a multi-use trail connection to trail network.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	5 5 5 5 5	1 2 3 4 5
Retail Shifts		ATL.SO.B2. Establish redevelopment nodes or pulse locations.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	5 5 5 5 5	1 2 3 4 5
Georgia Mall Square Mall		ATL.SO.C9. Work collaboratively with mall ownership to assume control and spur redevelopment.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	5 5 5 5 5	1 2 3 4 5
		ATL.SO.C10. Encourage integration of housing into the existing site.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	5 5 5 5 5	1 2 3 4 5

Section 3: Lexington Road

Introduction

The Lexington Road corridor is an important gateway to Athens, as well as a commercial spine for the east side of the County. The corridor hosts a diverse array of uses that serve the surrounding neighborhoods and region. Different from other thoroughfares in the community, Lexington Road is not a purely commercial corridor. Uses along the road include commercial, industrial, residential, civic, and institutional utilizations. This diversity contributes to an inconsistent treatment of the corridor in terms of aesthetics, identity, and overall strategic direction. The area has numerous greenspaces—including one of the largest parks in the County, Southeast Clarke Park—but they are disconnected from the community’s trails network and could be better leveraged overall. Like other commercial corridors, Lexington Road is experiencing increasing vacancy among its retail store fronts. Last, the corridor is home to Ben Epps Airport, but the community has struggled to fully leverage this prime asset.



Corridor Characteristics

Developing strategies to enhance prosperity and quality of life for the Lexington Road corridor required consideration of transportation performance and how people and goods move. The Foundations Report summarized a baseline analysis of the corridor's existing conditions. Highlights include:

Economics. The corridor is home to a modest number of the county's total jobs, though recent job growth has occurred. The corridor draws retail patrons from a local market, and data indicates a limited potential for future retail growth. Commercial investment has leveled off over the last few years.

Mobility. Lexington Road serves as a gateway to downtown and the University from the east, though the current design of the corridor fails to invoke a sense of place or arrival. Despite parks and community assets, the corridor lacks the bicycle and pedestrian accommodations to make travel on foot or by bike safe and efficient. Traffic safety is worse at the interchange with the loop and at major intersections such as Gaines School Road.

Ben Epps Airport. Located on the northern edge of Lexington Road, Ben Epps Airport is a non-primary commercial service facility used primarily by the University. It does not have an access point from Lexington Road, and mainly acts as a divider to the industrial services to the north.

Main Draws. Big box stores, civic services, and religious institutions are the main draws for Lexington Road. The road features big box stores such as Walmart and Lowe's as well as Willowood Square shopping mall. Various institutions such as Athens-Clarke County Jail, Ben Epps Airport, and several religious institutions surround the perimeter of the Lexington Road corridor. Large greenspaces and parks also draw members of the community to this area.

Land Use and Community Design. The corridor acts as a main connector to a variety of goods, services, and institutions. While a few commercial centers exist, land use along the corridor is dominated by large institutional uses such as the airport, county jail, police department, and numerous parks. Lots fronting the corridor are predominantly commercial, though they are shallow and surrounded by established institutional uses and residential neighborhoods.

Amenities and Services. Lexington Road acts as a main connector to a variety of goods, services, and institutions for the surrounding community for the east side of the county. The road gives access to big box stores such as Walmart and Lowe's. Willowood Square shopping mall positions itself on the corner of Lexington and Gaines School Road, another commercial corridor that links into Lexington Road. Several churches are located along the perimeter of Lexington Road. Athens-Clarke County Jail, located next to Ben Epps Airport, is accessed solely through connections on Lexington Road. In addition, large greenspaces such as Satterfield Park and Southeast Clarke Park are important places located along the corridor for the community to gather and organize for various events.

Corridor Vision



People
Strengthening the lives of citizens and visitors through Health, Safety, and Social Services



Prosperity
Create, sustain, and advance the livelihood of citizens through Education and Economic Development



Place
Making a great place for people to live, work, or enjoy through Housing, Land Use, Neighborhoods, Agriculture, and the Environment



Vitality
Invigorating the community spirit through Arts and Culture as well as Civic Engagement



Foundations
Building and maintaining a solid foundation from which services are rendered to the public through Transportation, Infrastructure, and Government Operations

A vision for Atlanta Highway was created based on identified community needs and stated community preferences. The vision for Atlanta Highway distilled through public conversations and engagement activities.

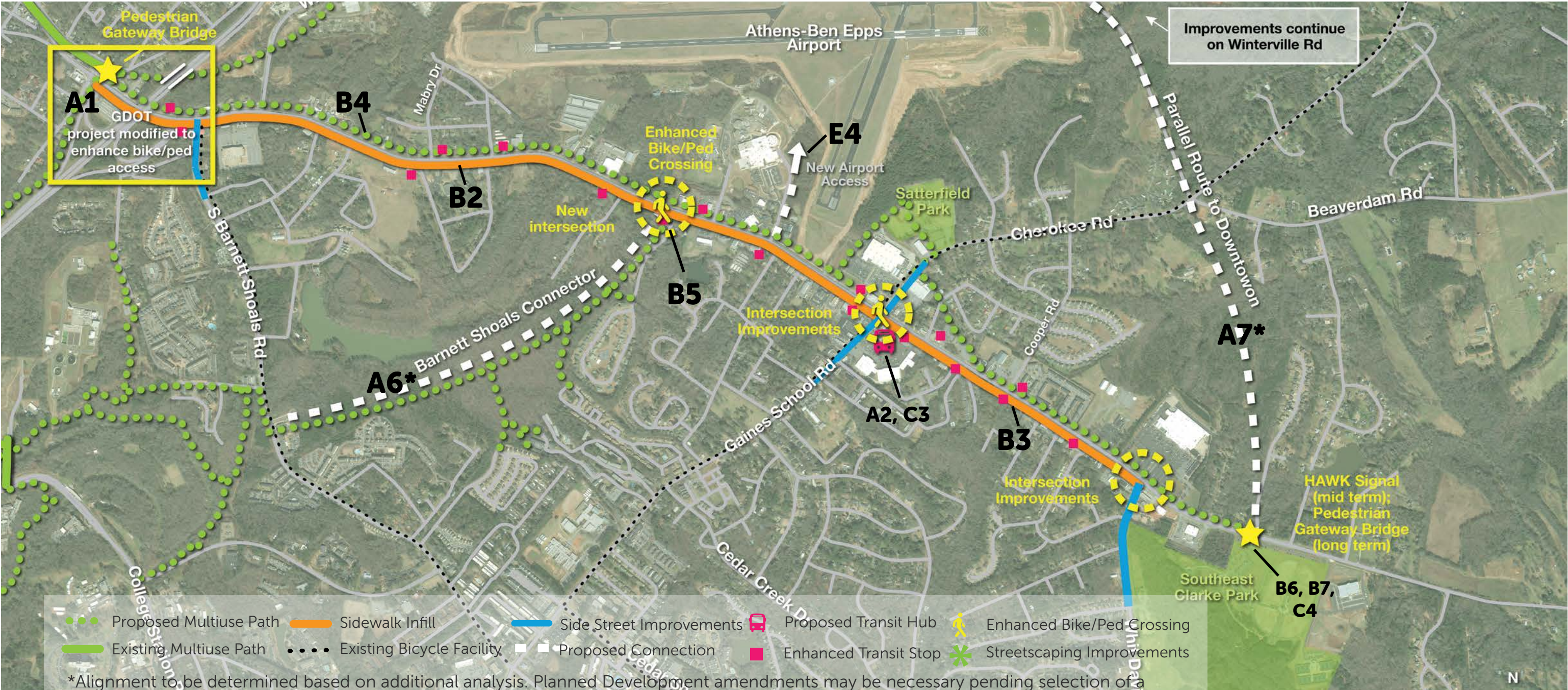
With a development approach of refinement and good stewardship, the vision for Lexington Road is a visually attractive eastern gateway for Athens that provides: supportive surrounding neighborhoods, active amenities and greenspaces, and a range of efficient choices for people's safe movement.

Transportation and Mobility

Transportation and Mobility speaks to how we structure the transportation system and the policies and programs that support it in way that safely and conveniently moves people and goods along the corridor. The challenge is creating this corridor-based multimodal transportation network in a way that supports Lexington Road as a destination and advances broader goals for the area. The Transportation and Mobility actions are organized in five opportunity areas that emerged during an engagement process that balanced the input of staff and stakeholders with those that live within or experience the corridor daily.

Transportation and Mobility – An Introduction

The following section outlines proposed improvements within several mobility opportunity areas. Each section includes a brief introduction to the topic, a summary of key findings, and specific actions. The actions are supportive of the overall goal and vision, and in several cases directly relate to the Strategic Opportunities that follow. While some actions need a previous action to be completed, others are less about a step-by-step guide and more of a menu of community-supported opportunities to enhance the function and aesthetics of the corridor. The graphic that spans these pages identifies some of the physical projects that will help leverage mobility in a way that contributes to broader initiatives. Where applicable, the actions are referenced by their alphanumerical ID.



Action LEX.TM.A6. Construct the Barnett Shoals Connector as a two-lane road with bicycle and pedestrian accommodations; Install a new signal on Lexington Road.

The proposed connector road would connect Barnett Shoals Road with Lexington Road, creating a new intersection between Winterville Road and Gaines School Road. While the final alignment would need to be determined based on ownership interests and environmental features, the road should include a multiuse sidepath as an active transportation connection from nearby neighborhoods the enhanced multimodal network along Lexington Road. This new roadway would create an alternative route for the western portion of the corridor, create a new intersection on Lexington Road to break travel speeds and allow vehicles to platoon, and relieve pressure from the current Barnett Shoals intersection. The enhanced connectivity also would positively impact transit operations.

Action LEX.TM.A7. Reduce the width of travel lanes to 11 feet maximum.

The width of travel lanes is a critical aspect of street design. Ideally, the consideration of lane widths should include how delineating the space can serve all needs, including travel lanes, safety islands, and sidewalks. On Lexington Road, wide travel lanes encourage speeding, which in turn increases the severity of crashes. It also increases the risk of exposure to pedestrians crossing the road. Proper lane width helps improve safety, makes streets more comfortable to all travel modes, and reallocates roadway space equitably to ensure all modes receive a share of public space. Discussions regarding lane widths should be informed by an understanding of the goals for traffic calming as well as making adequate space for larger vehicles, such as trucks and buses.

Action LEX.TM.A8. Create an alternate parallel route north of the airport.

While likely a longer-term solution that will require funding for planning, design, right-of-way acquisition, and design, the construction of a parallel route to Lexington Road would enhance connectivity for eastern Clarke County. Depending on access plans for the airport, the new alternate parallel route would make it easier to get to the airport should access remain on Winterville Road. This new route would include a new roadway connection between Cherokee Road and Lexington Road and improving Beaverdam Road, Buddy Christian Way, and Winterville Road. If constructed, it would provide a new direct connection to relieve some of the traffic currently traveling on Lexington Road.

TSPLOST Options

State legislation allows counties that do not already have a MARTA tax or are not defined as a metropolitan county special district to impose a transportation special purpose local option sales and use tax (TSPLOST). The proceeds of the TSPLOST must be used only for transportation purposes, which includes roads, sidewalks, bicycle paths, bridges, public transit, rails, and airports. The planning, design, and construction of the TSPLOST projects are reviewed and approved by the Mayor and Commission at regularly scheduled meetings. Held at City Hall, these commission meetings are open to the public and televised locally on ACTV.

- Several projects from Connect Athens should be considered for inclusion in the upcoming round of TSPLOST projects. For Lexington Road, these projects include:
- **Action A3.** Lower effective travel speeds west of Gaines School Road.
 - **Action A4.** Coordinate traffic signals.
 - **Action B1.** Improve pedestrian crossings at the Loop Interchange, Gaines School Road, and Whit Davis Road.
 - **Action B6.** Construct a HAWK beacon at Southeast Clarke park.

More detail on these projects is provided in the pages that follow.

Opportunity B | Bicycle & Pedestrian

How do we enhance bicycle and pedestrian opportunites along and across Lexington Road to encourage the use of active transportation by those of all ages and abilities?

The benefits of cycling and walking are well documented. Taking trips by bike or on foot improves the environment, promotes good health, saves money, eases the burden on roadways, and enhances the livability of a community. Many people choose to bike or walk for one or more of these reasons. For children, persons with disabilities, many elderly, and those who cannot afford an automobile, transit, bicycling, and walking may be their only option for many daily trips. Others may choose to take off on foot or by bicycle for recreation, to travel to work, or to run errands. Improving the bicycle and pedestrian network along corridors such as Lexington Road is a state goal in numerous planning efforts. This initiative is a critical component to a more livable corridor.

Findings

Existing bicycle facilities are few and far between. No bicycle facilities currently exist along the study area portion of the Lexington Road. Given high traffic volumes, high travel speeds, and cumbersome intersections, on-street bicycle facilities are not recommended on Lexington Road. The limited bicycle network includes the surrounding area, with narrow bicycle lanes on Barnett Shoals Road one of the few options.

Conditions for pedestrians are a little better, but connectivity is still a barrier. Sidewalk conditions are a little better compared to the bicycle network and other corridors such as Atlanta Highway. While sidewalks exist on portions of Lexington Road, notable gaps exist (e.g., between Whit Davis Road and Southeast Clarke Park). While many of the side street connections include crosswalks, the corridor remains partial to motor vehicle traffic.

While greenways and trails are nearby, the corridor remains disconnected from network. Lexington Road lacks direct connections to regional trails or greenways. While proposed facilities are memorialized in other plans, these projects remain mostly unfunded and likely will be implemented piecemeal as resources become available.

Bicycle & Pedestrian | Major Challenges and Opportunities

- The benefits of biking and walking are well documented, and those benefits apply to individuals and the community as a whole.
- The demographics of Athens support active use of bicycle and pedestrian facilities.
- Numerous destinations and amenities along Lexington Road would benefit from enhanced connectivity for active transportation modes.
- High traffic volumes and travel speeds create a barrier for bicyclists and pedestrians.
- The corridor currently lacks designated bicycle facilities and significant sidewalk gaps impede the corridor’s walkability.
- The 2016 Greenway network plan includes a plan for a multiuse trail connection to Southeast Clarke Park.

Recommendations / Actions

The following actions respond directly to these findings.

Action LEX.TM.B1. Improve pedestrian crossings at the Loop Interchange, Gaines School Road, and Whit Davis Road.

These three intersections represent major crossings along the corridor and each provides access to major corridor destinations. Though each location currently provides some level of pedestrian access, traffic volumes, travel speeds, and a wide roadway require more attention to the safety and comfort of pedestrians. Improvements such as enhanced crosswalks, countdown pedestrian signals, and pedestrian refuge islands should be evaluated. These enhancements also would improve the conditions for those on bicycles.



Action LEX.TM.B2. Construct a continuous sidewalk on the south side of Lexington Road west of Gaines School Road.

Many areas of the corridor west of Gaines School Road have a sidewalk, however some gaps interrupt the network. Where sidewalks exist, numerous conflict points at cross driveways and cross streets lack basic safety enhancements. Filling sidewalk gaps and making minor improvements to existing crossings would improve the pedestrian environment for this important stretch of Lexington Road.

Action LEX.TM.B3. Construct a continuous sidewalk on the south side of Lexington Road between Gaines School Road and Southeast Clarke Park.

Numerous destinations occur on the southside of Lexington Road between Gaines School Road and Southeast Clarke Park. These include Willowood Square, The Oaks Apartments, stores and restaurants, and Southeast Clarke Park. A continuous sidewalk on this side of the road would provide critical connectivity to pedestrians and support other recommended improvements (e.g., nodal development at the Gaines School Road intersection and a transit hub at Willowood Square).

This sidewalk would fill in critical gaps in the sidewalk network to connect pedestrians to a recreational destination and improve safety.

Action LEX.TM.B4. Construct planned greenway segments as well as sidepath on the north side of Lexington Road east of Perimeter Highway.

The 2016 Athens Greenway Network Plan calls for a new multiuse trail on the north side of Lexington Road between Gaines School Road and Southeast Clarke Park. This recommendation expands on that plan by extending the trail as a sidepath along the north side of the roadway to connect with the Firefly trail at the Loop interchange.



Action LEX.TM.B5. Provide an enhanced bicycle and pedestrian crossing at the new intersection of the Barnett Shoals Connector.

The new proposed roadway is recommended to include a multiuse sidepath to create a high quality active transportation connection from Lexington Road to the expanding trail network west of Barnett Shoals Road. The new intersection should provide a safe comfortable for bicyclists and pedestrians of all ages and abilities to make the connection from one trail to another, with special consideration for crossing the high-volume roadway to connect with the recommended trail network on its northside.



Action LEX.TM.B6. Construct a HAWK beacon at Southeast Clarke park.

Southeast Clarke Park is a major recreational destination that lacks connections to the surrounding community via bicycle or pedestrian facilities. As the trail network matures and traffic volumes on Lexington Road increase, creative solutions may be necessary to facilitate safe crossings for pedestrians (and bicyclists). A HAWK beacon (High-Intensity Activated crossWalk beacon) is a traffic control device that stops road traffic to allow pedestrians to safely cross. A HAWK beacon stops traffic only as needed to allow protected pedestrian crossings. It is used in locations where a standard traffic signal may not be warranted. The traffic control devices were developed specifically to enhance pedestrian crossings of major streets. However, several cities have installed modified hybrid beacons that explicitly incorporate bicycle movements.



Action LEX.TM.B7. Construct a pedestrian gateway bridge near Southeast Clarke Park.

Building on action B6, a pedestrian gateway bridge should be considered to provide safe, unimpeded access to the park as well as create a defining gateway architectural feature for the City's east side.



Opportunity C | Transit

How do we improve transit access and operations along this important gateway corridor?

Lexington Road is an important part of the Athens transit system. Of the three routes operating on Lexington Road today, Route 25 travels the corridor each day and remains one of Athens Transit Service’s highest ridership routes. Despite these characteristics, considerations should be given to how future operations can be more convenient and accessible to a broader range of the population. Most people agree that they would be more likely to use transit if service was fast, frequent, dependable, and easy to use. These criteria require a complete system of roads, sidewalks, and bikeways as well as a higher occurrence of transit-supportive destinations.

Findings

Lexington Road is important transit corridor. Athens Transit Service (ATS) operates three bus routes on portions of Lexington Road, all of them operating on one-hour intervals. Route 25 provides the most comprehensive service, traveling the entire corridor seven days a week, terminating at Walmart. This route is one of the system’s highest ridership routes, serving more than 138,000 passengers in 2015. In addition, a Park-and-Ride lot is located just inside the Athens Perimeter 10 Road (but outside the corridor study area).

Lexington Road is home to numerous community resources. Lexington Road is a major access route to many of the churches and schools on the west side of the city, including those found in the residential neighborhoods to the south of the corridor. Meanwhile the strategic opportunities are structured to fully leverage the corridor’s development assets and introduce new investment to the area. Preserving and improving access to these locations—both those that exist today and those that are envisioned for the future—should be a priority.

Ridership trends fluctuate. In general, ridership on ATS routes in declining. The system reported about 1.5 million trips in 2015, down from a peak of 1.85 million in 2011. However, many factors contribute to minor declines in transit ridership. Within the context of Lexington Road, travel times are increasing and becoming less predictable which degrades transit performance.

Transit | Major Challenges and Opportunities

- Lexington Road lacks a compact development pattern and has limited connectivity. These characteristics make it difficult to deliver efficient transit service.
- ATS continues to invest in existing bus stops.
- The existing park-and-ride facility lacks safe and convenient access for bicyclists and pedestrians.
- ATS operates a modified hub-and-spoke route system, with most routes originating from the downtown transit center.
- The current design of the system limits the geographic area that can be served, particularly when travel times degrade due to traffic congestion.
- ATS has begun the process to transition from to a more dispersed network with hub located outside the central area. Lexington Road is an ideal location for an external hub.

Recommendations / Actions

The following actions respond directly to these findings.

Action LEX.TM.C1. Improve existing bus stops to include shelters, benches, and enhanced signage.

Lexington Road is one of the area’s highest ridership transit routes. Simple improvements to the existing bus stops can provide comfort to existing passengers, improve familiarity with the system, and enhance the aesthetics of the overall corridor. Many of the bus stops are slated for improvement in the next few years. As resources become available, these improvements should include electronic signage with digital real-time bus arrival displays.



Action LEX.TM.C2. Enhance access to the park-and-ride facility for bicyclists and pedestrians.

The current Oconee Park-and-Ride facility, located inside a highway loop ramp, is not well connected to the surrounding community. In conjunction with the Firefly Trail expansion, improvements should be made to the site. Short-term improvements include at-grade crossings and enhanced wayfinding. A longer-term solution could include a gateway pedestrian bridge across Lexington Road and the highway ramps to provide improved access to the location.

Action LEX.TM.C3. Establish a bus transfer station at the intersection of Lexington Road and Gaines School Road.

A bus transfer station allows transit riders to switch from route to another. The current design of ATS requires these transfers to occur at a central in downtown Athens. To improve efficiency and enhance the service it can offer, ATS is beginning the process of establishing transfer points outside of downtown. Atlanta Highway and Lexington Road are ideal locations for these transfer points given their geography and establish ridership numbers. On Lexington Road, Willowood Square has been identified as the preferred location. The bus transfer station would include 3 to 5 bays in a sawtooth design. Covered (climate controlled, if possible) passenger waiting areas with restrooms and information should be included.



Action LEX.TM.C4. Install a new traffic signal/access to Southeast Clarke Park by tying into the HAWK beacon at Southeast Clarke Park.

ATS currently does not provide access to Southeast Clarke Park because traffic volumes on Lexington Road make it unsafe for buses to enter and exit the park. Allowing transit vehicles to make use of a dedicated signal at this location provides great value by expanding transit access to a great community resource.



Action LEX.TM.C5. Implement queue jumping at major intersections, including Winterville, Gaines School, and Barnett Shoals Roads.

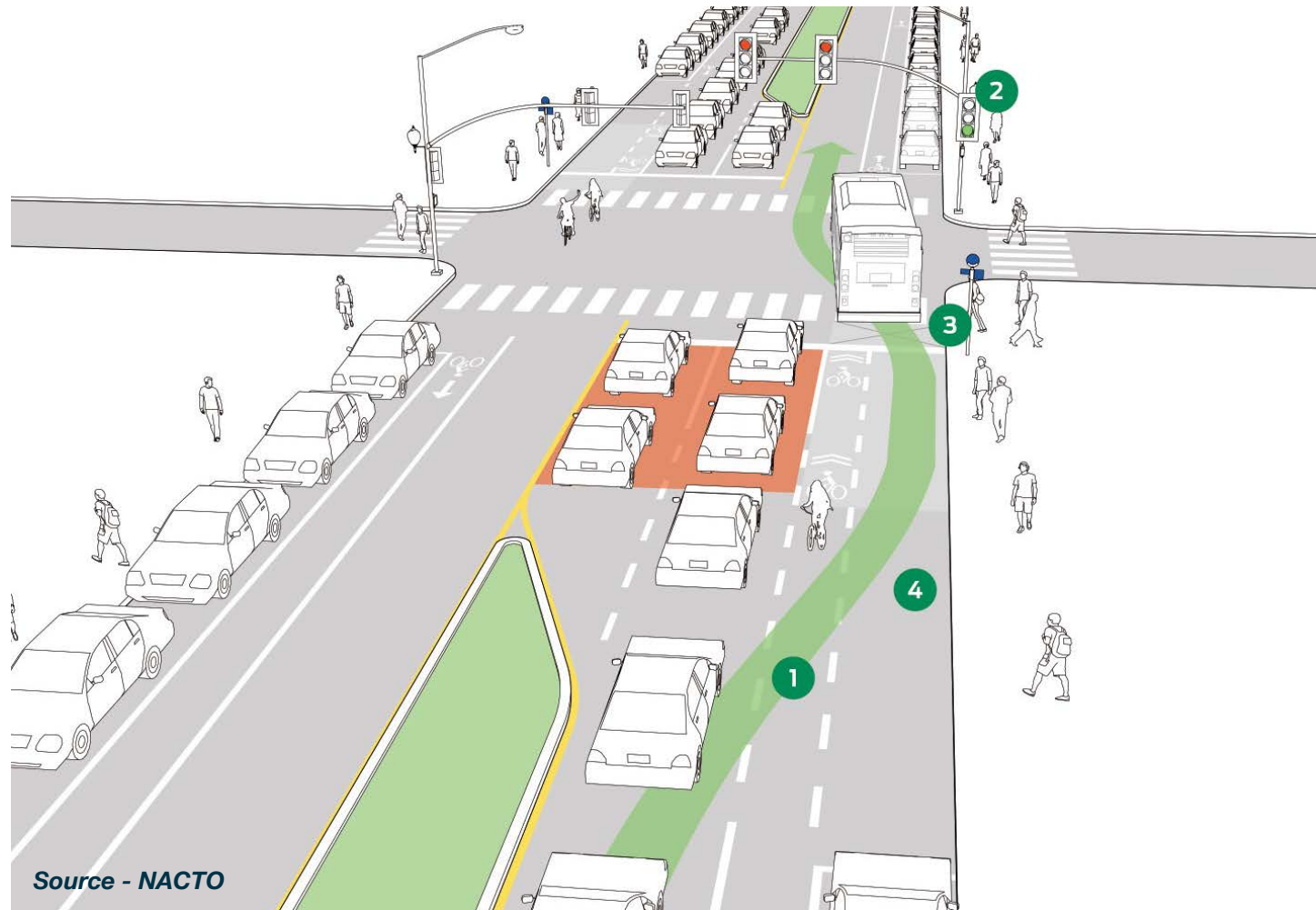
Queue jump lanes combine short dedicated transit facilities with either a leading bus interval or active signal priority to allow buses to easily enter traffic flow in a priority position. Applied thoughtfully, queue jump treatments can reduce delay considerably, resulting in run-time savings and increased reliability. The City, in partnership with ATS, should explore queue jump opportunities at major intersections along Lexington Road.

Action LEX.TM.C6. Add transit service to the airport (when activity at the airport warrants, whether job development sites or commercial air service).

Currently, commercial service at the Athens airport is limited and does not warrant regular transit service. However, as the use and function of the airport changes over time, ATS should evaluate opportunities to provide service to the airport. Improvements could be necessary to provide transit service for students, employees, or residents depending on the future of Ben Epps Airport (see Strategic Opportunity B).

Action LEX.TM.C7. Establish premium transit service along Lexington Road.

Premium transit services should be designed to reduce transit travel times, enhance connectivity, and provide improved transit vehicle and amenities. This type of services typically occurs in conjunction with a shift in land use and development that results in higher densities and a mix of uses that is supportive to the transit service. In the context of Lexington Road, premium transit service should offer bus service that is fast, frequent, reliable and easy to use, with features including simplified boarding and alighting, and increased weekday and weekend service. Characteristics of bus rapid transit should be considered.



Source - NACTO

Opportunity D | Corridor Aesthetics

How do we create a cohesive corridor identity and improve the look and feel of a major regional corridor?

The character of Athens, its neighborhoods, and places of interest are largely determined by the look and feel of its streets. This is particularly true along gateways and major commuter routes. To protect the quality of existing places and help shape the character as redevelopment occurs, Athens-Clarke County should consider guidelines and standards that inform changes to public spaces along Lexington Road. Actions in this opportunity area will provide a consistent aesthetic to the corridor. Collectively, these actions will enhance the user experience, whether in a car, on a bicycle, or on foot, and better position the corridor to receive investment.

Findings

Interest in enhancing the design and character predates the Connect Athens process. Efforts to improve the east side of Athens have taken root over the last several years. From grassroots efforts to formal coalitions such as the East Athens Business Leaders Association, the focus on this area of the County has been on revitalization, investment, design, and mobility. Corridor aesthetics has been a key consideration for these efforts.

The corridor lacks a sense of place or announcement of arrival. A recurring theme during the public processes is that Lexington Road lacks a clear and unique identity. It was often stated that people drive as quickly through the corridor as possible, slowing down only at a red traffic light. Many of the design flaws along the corridor contribute to this perspective.

Many factors influence the design of Lexington Road.

The look and feel of Lexington Road is affected by conditions within the public right-of-way and in the hands of private owners. The design is characterized by wide travel lanes, overhead utilities, and signs of all shapes, sizes, and designs.

Issues that undermine corridor aesthetics also contribute to poor operations. Hundreds of driveways and numerous intersections create conflict points along Lexington Road. Meanwhile, greenspace is intermittent, and sidewalks are sporadic. These characteristics strip the corridor of its identity and suppress street life and activity.

Corridor Aesthetics | Major Challenges and Opportunities

- The look and feel of a street significantly affects community interest and investment in a place.
- The community has long held an interest in improving the aesthetic of Lexington Road.
- A lack of consistent wayfinding or branding leaves the corridor without a unique identity.
- Both public and private shortcomings have undermined the corridor, and both public and private participation will be required for improvement to be realized.
- Properly executed, the corridor design could create a sense of place for east Athens and announce one's arrival into the city as a whole.
- Improvements to the aesthetics of the corridor also would improve safety, operations, and the multimodal experience. And vice versa.

Recommendations / Actions

The following actions respond directly to these findings.

Action LEX.TM.D1. Install streetlights and banners to improve safety, add color, and create a sense of place.

Efforts to enhance the corridor in the last few years have focused on the simple but often effective approach of installing streetlights and banners. This approach can start the process of creating a cohesive corridor identity and help establish broader corridor initiatives. Banners should be simple, readable, and effective for motorists, pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit riders.

Action LEX.TM.D2. Enhance the existing gateway to the airport with improvements to Winterville Road.

Ben Epps Airport is currently accessed at a relatively nondescript access point along Winterville Road. While the future function and use of the airport may evolve over time, Winterville Road likely will remain the connection between the airport and Athens. Improvements such as landscaping, lighting, sidewalks, and wayfinding signage along Winterville Road and at the main entrance should occur.

Action LEX.TM.D3. Add landscaping within the right-of-way within planting strips and at key locations.

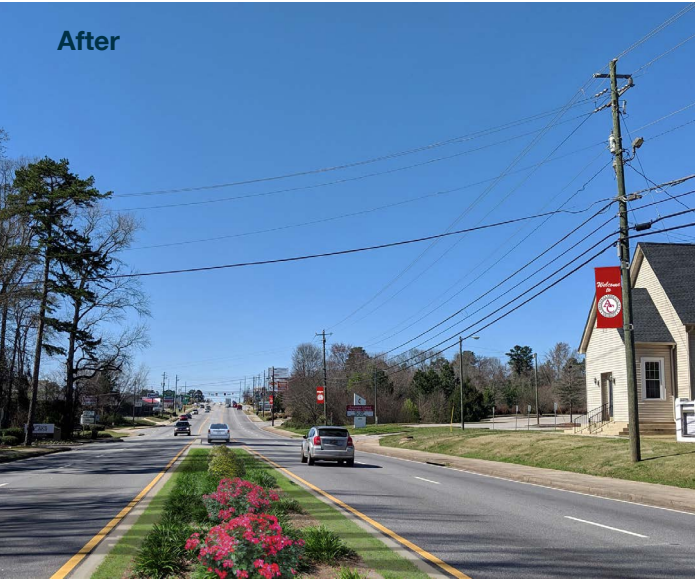
As the largest collection of public space, the right-of-way of our streets needs to account for a variety of public needs. These needs range from movement of people and goods to positive contributions to greenspace. Adding landscaping between the curb and sidewalk would enhance the aesthetics of Lexington Road and improve the pedestrian experience.

Action LEX.TM.D4. Install landscaping and art pieces in highly visible locations and at key intersections to establish a gateway into downtown Athens.

Together, improved landscaping and large public art pieces can enhance the look and feel of the corridor. These improvements should be focused on visible, high-profile locations and key intersections to reinforce Lexington Road as a gateway to Athens and its own place in the city.

Action LEX.TM.D5. Build a landscaped median along the full extent of the corridor.

A landscaped median would increase the safety and improve the experience along Lexington Road by separating opposing vehicle flows, providing space for pedestrians to find refuge, and restricting turning movements to locations with appropriate turn lanes and access opportunities. The construction of a landscaped median requires sufficient median breaks, cross parcel access, and parallel routes (where possible).



Opportunity E | Airport Access

How do we improve access to the Athens Ben Epps Airport to support future service enhancements?

Despite regular passenger service ending in 2014, Ben Epps Airport remains an important benefit to east Athens and the surrounding area. The importance of the airport in the context of Connect Athens is clear, given its status as one of three Opportunity Areas for the corridor (See Opportunity Area B). Improvements to airport access need to account for the airport's use and function at a given time. Today, access improvements could focus on lower cost gateway and wayfinding improvements. It may be necessary to access directly from Lexington Road should the airport reintroduce passenger air service, introduce new industry to the site, or significantly modify landside operations. The actions that follow address the full range of potential uses.

Findings

While Ben Epps Airport sits only a mile from the interchange of Athens Perimeter Highway and Lexington Road, it has limited direct access. Access to the airport is off Winterville Road, a winding two-lane road with limited accommodations. Transit service currently is not provided.

Wayfinding will be more critical in the future as the function and use of the airport evolves. Current wayfinding is very limited. As the use and function of the airport evolves over time, enhanced wayfinding will be necessary.

Airport Access | Major Challenges and Opportunities

- Regular passenger service ended in 2014, which has reduced the number of trips to and from the airport.
- The current route to the airport lacks wayfinding.
- For those arriving in Athens by air, particularly for special events, the Winterville Road route presents a poor image of the city.
- The scale of future access improvements should be based on the current (at the time) and envisioned use and function of the airport.

Recommendations / Actions

The following actions respond directly to these findings.

Action LEX.TM.E1. Enhance signage at the Winterville Road entrance.

As referenced in Action D2, Winterville Road is a gateway to Ben Epps Airport. However, the non-descript entrance fails to convey its importance as a community asset. Gateway signage, landscaping, and lighting improvements would help delineate the airport entrance, provide a final piece of wayfinding, and contribute to local branding.

Action LEX.TM.E2. Improve wayfinding to the airport.

Wayfinding, regardless of travel mode, was consistently cited as a need along Lexington Road. Conversations about wayfinding also indicated a need to make it easier for people to navigate to the airport. As an important destination near Lexington Road, the City should work with the airport to develop branded wayfinding signage to direct traffic onto Winterville Road and to the airport entrance, further enhancing the city's connection with the airport.

Action LEX.TM.E3. Add transit service to the airport (when activity at the airport warrants, whether job development sites or commercial air service).

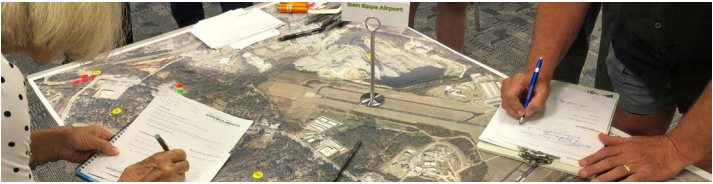
As stated in Action C6, the lack of commercial service at the airport limits the need for regular transit service. As the use and function of the airport evolves, the airport and ATS should evaluate mutually beneficial opportunities to provide transit service to the airport.

Action LEX.TM.E4. Create a new airport access point directly from Lexington Road.

As the airport reintroduces commercial service or draws new industry, it will be important to provide simple and convenient access to the airport. Creating a new access point directly from Lexington Road, in conjunction with expanded airport service, simplifies access to both the passenger terminal and adjacent industries, and enhances the airports connection with the surrounding community. The preferred access point would require additional planning and design with considerations for airport operations and dynamics along Lexington Road.

Strategic Opportunities

The Lexington Road corridor can be enhanced in the near term by focusing on its strategic opportunities. These opportunities blend a series of interconnected actions that, taken together, will the corridor vision. The planning process revealed two general topics (**Retail Shifts** and **Greenspace**) and one specific opportunity area (**Ben Epps Airport**). With these strategic opportunities established, the project team considered and refined hundreds of potential projects, policies, and programs with the public and steering committee. The final set of actions build on the area's assets while introducing new amenities to spark continual reinvestment into the area. The list includes a range of intervention opportunities both in terms of timing (short term to long term) and impact (small to transformational).



Strategic Opportunities – An Introduction

The following section outlines the proposed intervention strategy within each of the three strategic opportunity areas. Each section includes an introduction to the topic, a summary of key findings, and a set of projects, policies, or programs referred to as actions. The actions are discrete and supportive of the overall goal and vision. Some actions include more specific tactics, or small steps to initiate or achieve the action over time. Best practices show examples from similarly positioned communities. The action set should not be taken as a step-by-step guide, but rather a menu of community-supported intervention opportunities to improve the corridor in the short and long-term.

Strategic Opportunity A | Retail Shifts

How do we ensure commercial areas remain vibrant and viable despite shifts in the retail economy?

Until recently, the only tangible threat to brick and mortar retail was the decline of the supporting market that surrounds it. The arrival of online shopping and fulfillment retail, however, has fundamentally changed the way Americans consume. This competition, along with consolidation and bankruptcy of large retailers, has started to manifest in increasing vacancy rates for commercial space, even in stable or growing markets. Lexington Road has millions of square feet of leasable retail area that could be susceptible to growing shifts in the economy. To ensure these areas remain vibrant and viable through this disruption, it will be critical to consider new uses and redevelopment as an option. Given the trends, it is increasingly important that the area diversify its set of uses and “right size” its retail footprint.



Findings

Lexington Road’s zoning is largely commercial with two zoning overlays. The current land use designation is mostly Commercial–General, which provides for commercial activities along major arterials. In addition to the base zoning applied to each parcel of land, many cities and counties use “overlay zones” to further regulate development in areas of special concern. The location of the airport along Lexington Road places portions of the corridor under the Airport Overlay Zone due to incoming and outgoing air traffic. Some residential sections along the corridor fall under the Mixed Density Residential Limited Overlay.

Existing plans highlight Lexington Road’s assets. The corridor’s location, large retail anchors, parks and greenspace, Ben Epps Airport, and a growing senior population are assets.

While Lexington Road has some major retailers, it is not a significant source of retail jobs. While retailers like Walmart and Lowe’s are located on Lexington Road, in general, the corridor does not serve as a major retail employer for the county. In 2015, the corridor’s retail sector accounted for 184 primary jobs (three percent of the county’s retail jobs).

The corridor has limited potential for retail growth. Using Lowe’s as the center point of the corridor, a retail sales gap analysis revealed a limited potential for additional retail with a target market of the immediate Athens-Clarke County area. At a local market distance (5 minutes), some potential exists, particularly in some of the “GAFO” categories that sell goods typically found in departments stores (e.g.. clothes, furniture, sporting goods, etc.). However, GAFO retail segments are the most susceptible to online sales competition and newer shopping centers.

Retail Shifts | Major Challenges and Opportunities

- The community has limited control over the decisions of individual property owners.
- The parcels are large and often non-contiguous.
- Lexington Road has millions of square feet of leasable retail area that could be susceptible to recent shifts in retail.
- The community is experiencing heavy competition from newer commercial areas in Oconee County.
- The second largest tax revenue generator comes from sales tax.
- Reuse of commercial buildings can be a challenge given the large footprint and rent demand.
- These locations could offer an opportunity for new community gathering spaces.
- Nodes providing a range of uses and amenities can help make Lexington Road a more resilient corridor.

Recommendations / Actions

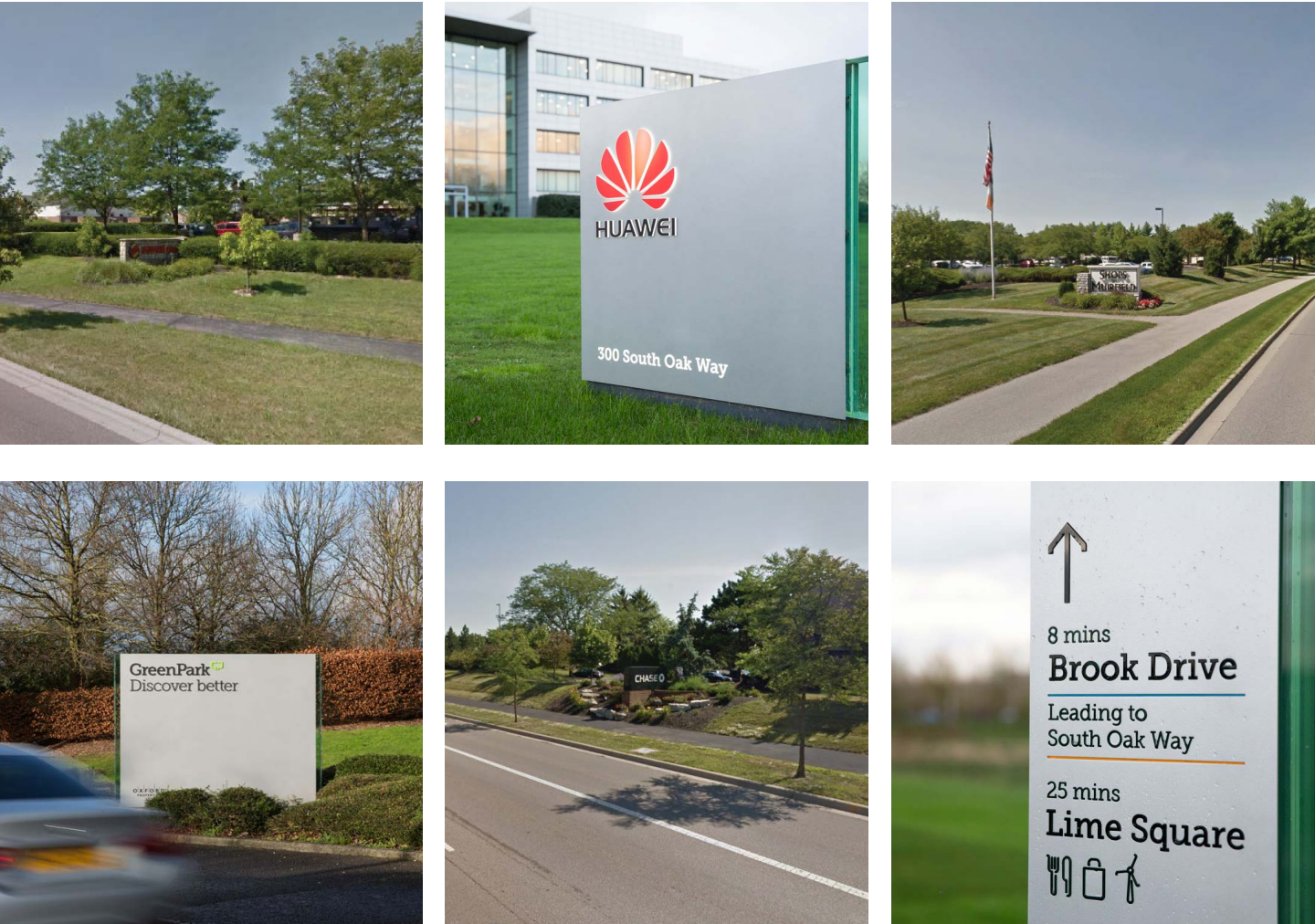
The following actions respond directly to these findings.

Action LEX.SO.A1. Improve Lexington Road corridor identity and signage.

Lexington Road and the east side of Athens have a strong identity that could be better represented and reinforced through attractive and consistent identity and supportive signage. District branding can help reinforce positive assets while also establishing geographic boundaries for inward investment. While not legal boundaries, the area can improve and regularize all graphics through a cohesive identity. This would include creating a unique standard for signage to create a better sense of place and improve traffic circulation. Developing a recognizable and consistent sign package for streets, gateways, and development entries helps users navigate the area. Adopting these standards for business signage as well helps to reduce visual clutter by making these signs similar in size and character.

TACTICS

Rebranding: The Planning Department, in collaboration with related departments, should facilitate a discussion about branding the corridor as a district and identify and prioritize areas where the rebranding efforts should be initiated. The Planning Department can then develop signage standards that clearly articulate how business and corridor signage should look, adopt those signage standards into the larger code, and draft and finalize a sign permit application.



Action LEX.SO.A2. Further empower the member-based business association.

Business associations bring business owners together from a specific area. The east side currently has an active association that could be further empowered to improve the business climate and offer a support system for small enterprises on the east side of Athens. The association could be responsible for coordinating initiatives such as the unified marketing and branding plan (see Action A1) and developing programming and events.

TACTICS

Business Association Expansion: The Economic Development Department should invite additional community leaders and members of other associations to participate to develop credibility and attract new members. The Business Association should develop committees to handle various functions within the group such as recruitment, event planning, fundraising and communications.

Action LEX.SO.A3. Enforce zoning and code regulations.

By continuing to rigorously enforce the code, areas can see increased pressure on property owners to continually maintain buildings and sites and address blight, especially through periods of vacancy. Preserving the identity and aesthetics of the corridor is important to users and potential investors. Incentives could be used to facilitate compliance. Achieving a proactive model of enforcement along Lexington Road would mean moving away from a complaint-driven model and toward an inspection model. This also may include developing a hierarchy of complaints from major to minor based on safety, and aesthetics. Last, enforcement must be consistently applied, and violations pursued equally.

TACTICS

Code Enforcement Plan: The Planning Department—if the master plan and zoning code are acceptable—could develop a code enforcement plan, present the enforcement plan in a public meeting, and accurately enforce the code in perpetuity. The Planning Department also can create a landlord education program so that property owners are aware of rules and regulations.

Action LEX.SO.A4. Collaborate corridor redevelopment with the Economic Development Department.

Investment and redevelopment initiatives for the corridor should be done in concert with all departments within ACCUG and related non-government agencies (Athens Housing Authority, Athens Land Trust, etc.). The redevelopment program for the Lexington Road corridor should align with community goals for economic development (ED). The ED team serves as the primary point of contact for industries, larger commercial developments, site location consultants, and state ED organizations. With a well-articulated vision for the future of pulse redevelopment locations, the department could play a major role in attracting investments in the sites that match the current demand for office, residential, and even flex industrial / lab / research spaces.

TACTICS

Economic Development Task Force: The Planning Department, in collaboration with the Economic Development Department, should form a task force of planning officials and economic development department members to help guide the vision for the corridor, and create a unified calendar of meetings and events.

Action LEX.SO.A5. Improve cross parcel access.

Improving access and circulation between parcels will help to reduce the number of trips reliant on Lexington Road. Currently, most trips require users to cross or travel along the corridor to reach adjacent parcels. Secondary transportation routes along the corridor would shorten trips and relieve traffic pressure along Lexington Road. Similarly, future development should emphasize secondary connections between parcels that are identified and encouraged through creative incentives during development and redevelopment. Internal access enhances property value by creating more connections to potential visitors. Expanding secondary routes also creates safer pedestrian walkways and sidewalks along major streets by removing cars from heavier trafficked areas. For businesses that have private surface parking lots located between the front of the building and the street, the creation of shared, rear parking provides the option of converting front-located parking into outdoor plazas or patio space.

TACTICS

Joint Access Agreements: The Transportation & Public Works Department, in collaboration with the Planning Department, should develop a needs report to locate all potential connection options and then approach business/land owners about joint access agreements.



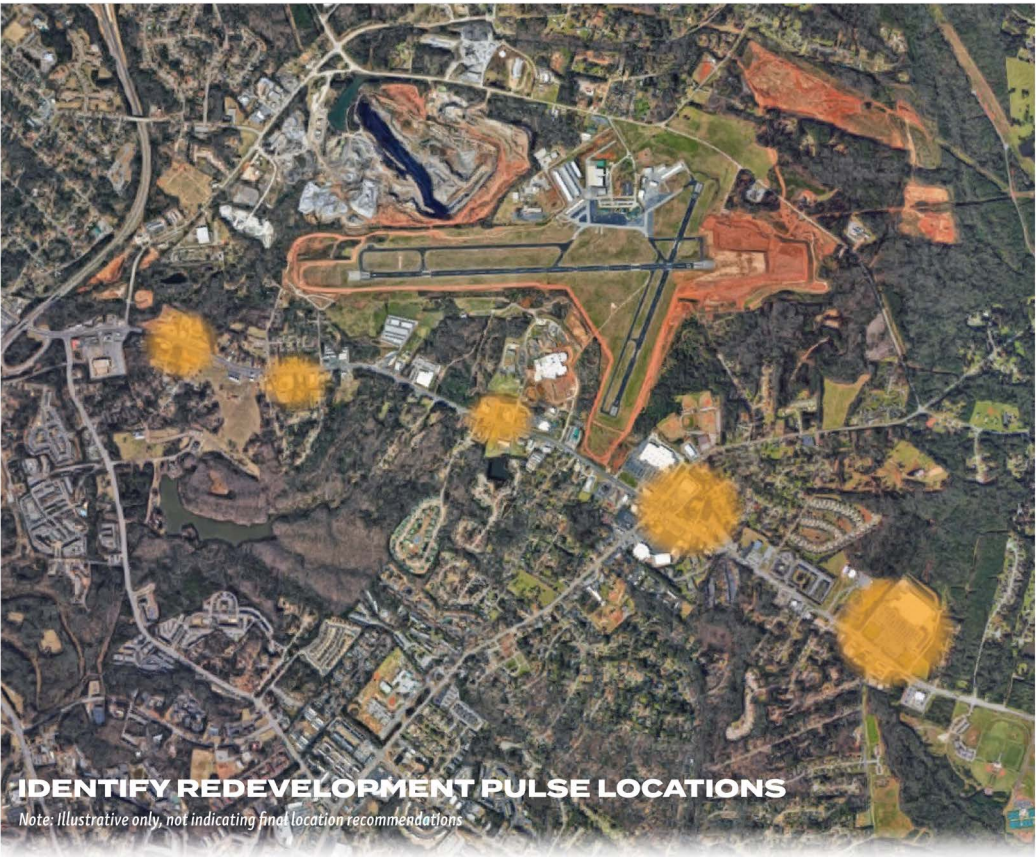
Action LEX.SO.A6. Establish redevelopment nodes or pulse locations.

Identifying locations for redevelopment would guide developers to strategic locations. Developing criteria for underutilized buildings and properties would provide locations to initiate growth and change. These steps potentially could limit unnecessary outward growth by fully using existing underutilized or vacant properties instead of greenfield development. Offering development incentives or outlining grant opportunities in these areas would help promote an infill development pattern. Given the length of the corridor and major shifts in commercial development, it is unlikely to expect vacancy (especially in “big box” retail) to diminish over the next several decades. However, nodal or pulse multiuse development can be encouraged through regulatory tools.

The community will need to identify the most suitable locations for nodal or pulsed development using criteria such as current site configuration, parcel size, proximity to existing or planned transit stops, access to existing or planned multimodal trails, ownership patterns, etc. The Gaines School Road intersection would be one area of interest.

TACTICS

Redevelopment Framework: The Planning Department, in collaboration with related departments, could articulate a framework for redevelopment that considers a mix of uses, reconfigurations of parcels, access and parking, and other factors. This would be coupled with new allowances based on a Planned Development District. Next, regulatory tools and incentive packages could be developed to provide guidance for developers and stream line the redevelopment process.



The highlighted areas are for illustrative purposes only, not indicating final pulse location areas. Properties lying in the Airport Overlay Zone would need special use permits to initiate development.

Action LEX.SO.A7. Create a parcel redevelopment guide to assist developers in site transition.

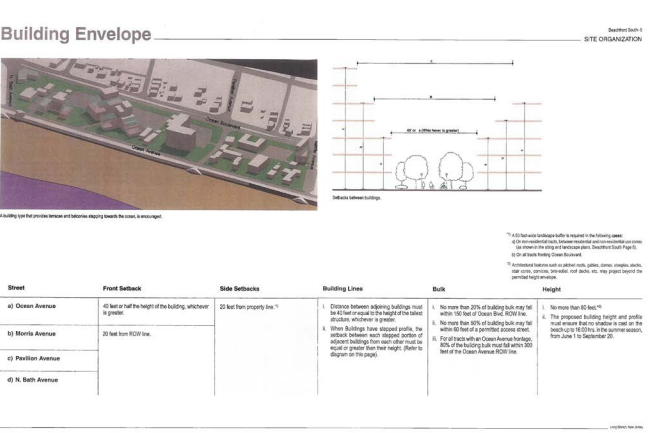
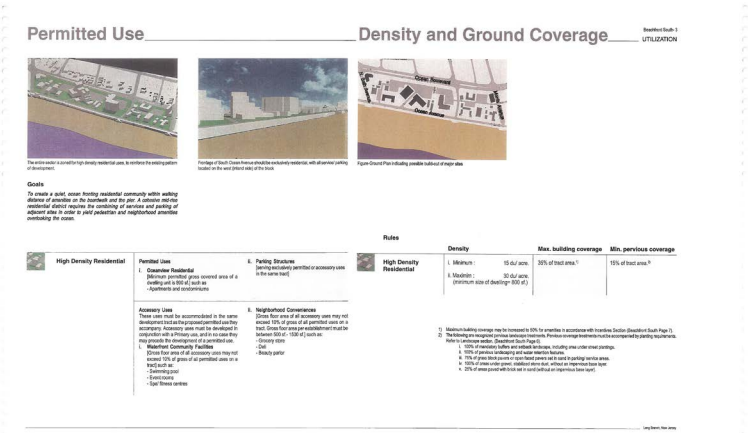
For smaller sites along the corridor that may not be suitable for large-scale pulse redevelopment, guidance on future uses, site utilization, and/or redevelopment best practices should be provided. The Planning Department, in collaboration with Economic Development, should develop a guide for property owners and developers on the best practices for reuse or redevelopment of their site. The guide would consider numerous factors including zoning, building configuration, lot size, access, and proximity to transit. Existing incentives would be clearly listed along with any other community information that would help facilitate the process. Through the guide, community needs could be clearly articulated along with any supporting market studies or data to help secure a developer’s decision making. Several communities have developed such guides to help clarify the building process and ensure redevelopment projects meet community standards and (in some way) address community needs and goals.

TACTICS

Redevelopment Guide: The Planning Department, in collaboration with the Economic Development Department, should identify parcels that would be considered for a redevelopment guide. The guide would include information about each of the parcels, including zoning, building configuration, lot size, access, proximity to transit, and other criteria; list incentives that would be provided for development on certain parcels; and specify community needs or wants for each identified parcel.

BEST PRACTICES

Long Branch Redevelopment Guidelines Handbook: The City of Long Branch is a beachside community 50 miles south of the New York metro area. The City is built out, and given the age and condition of buildings in many of its older districts, the community was experiencing a higher volume of redevelopment proposals. The Design Guidelines Handbook divides the city into context districts and considers community goals, underlying zoning, permitted and conditional uses, and existing incentives to make the redevelopment process and expectations clear.



Action LEX.SO.A8. Pursue strategic acquisition policies for redevelopment nodes or pulse locations.

Strategic acquisition of parcels is essential to facilitate a development pattern different from what exists now. Preassembled sites can accelerate the redevelopment process. How the acquired land is “priced” can help facilitate certain development patterns and types. Strategic acquisition could be used along the corridor to assemble key properties for redevelopment or reuse, with the goal of returning properties to the active tax rolls. Should progress or reutilization efforts by ownership stall, the community may need to take more direct control over strategic site(s). At this point ACCUG needs to engage partners from around the community to facilitate the deal. In the long-term, the community would not want to control the asset and would need a developing partner capable of delivering the community’s vision and needs for the site. This process would occur along with the development of a holistic redevelopment plan for the involved parcel. The handoff between public and private ownership should be expedited. See map on page 3-24 for potential redevelopment pulse locations.

TACTICS

Buy-Out Program: The Planning Department can create a “buy-out” program and process to purchase properties from private owners, as well as facilitate discussions with the land bank about adopting a comprehensive acquisition guide. The Planning Department, in collaboration with the Economic Development Department, can also generate a list of potential developers to contact about the acquired land.

Action LEX.SO.A9. Establish an iconic eastern gateway.

Identifying and implementing an iconic eastern gateway could enhance the identity of the Lexington Road corridor and better establish the corridor as its own place. An iconic art installation would reflect the creativity of the community and could be selected through a community-driven process. The gateway, in this case, would be more than a simple sign. The piece’s proportions should be large in scale, reflect the community, and become part of the character of the area. Iconic signage can have the added advantage of slowing traffic and should be considered in the placement of the piece. In combination with an improved signage and identity package, this would improve aesthetics and create a sense of place.

TACTICS

Gateway Treatments: The Planning Department should identify areas where the gateway installation would go and gather precedent images for an installation unique to Athens. Once drafted, the Planning Department can then present the ideas to the public for community feedback.



Strategic Opportunity B | Ben Epps Airport

How do we preserve Ben Epps Airport as a long-term asset and opportunity?

The Athens-Ben Epps Airport is significant asset for the east side of the county and the region. While regular passenger services ended in 2014, the airport and its adjacent properties must be preserved as an opportunity site for future use and investment. Several factors contribute to future opportunities, including the airspace industry is in a moment of technological disruption; Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International Airport, the busiest airport in the world based on passenger traffic and headquarters of the world’s largest airline, located less than 70 miles away; and Athens being home to the University of Georgia and Athens Technical College. Ben Epps Airport is an important asset to development—it can serve the increasing travel needs of a growing region and e-commerce demands. It also can serve the aerospace manufacturing industry, which may need access to major manufacturers and parts assembly shops located at an airport. Development patterns should limit the ability to leverage the airport’s potential, and deliberate actions are needed to preserve the asset for future uses.



Findings

Restarting passenger air services remains a challenge.

Despite community efforts to bring back passenger service, the airport is not likely to see services in the near term under the current federal subsidy model. Until 2014, the airport used the Essential Air Service subsidy provided through the US Department of Transportation to secure several flights per day. When the routes failed to meet passenger demand requirements, the subsidy was removed, and the flights dissolved. Additionally, the airport’s proximity to Atlanta Hartsfield will make it difficult to compete for other available grants.

Recent investments in infrastructure help to preserve the asset.

In 2018, the airport completed an \$11.4 million rehabilitation project for its main runway that consisted of removing older asphalt and replacing it with a stronger surface. This investment is critical as the cost of this work compounds over time. Additional planned projects would straighten the taxi path and add more space along the airport apron where planes can park, refuel, etc.

Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International Airport is at its capacity. Atlanta is a relatively unique for an American city its size to only have one primary airport. With plans for a sixth (and potentially seventh) runway far off, the airport is operating well beyond capacity today. This presents an opportunity for other mid-size airports in the North Georgia region that are well suited to fill a need for urban testing and hub operation for parcel delivery and autonomous aerial taxis.

The Airport adds restrictions to land development. The airport introduces an additional constraint to development through its zoning overlay. The district is identified in the approach zone to airport’s runway 2 and extends from north to south across the planning area. The overlay places limitations on uses such as restaurants, churches, schools, or other similar places of similar densities; multifamily or single-family attached units; and hospitals and private and public institutions. Certain uses are permitted in the Airport Overlay Zone only as special uses. Approval criteria consists of:

- 1. Whether the proposed use is compatible in view of the use and development of the airport
- 2. Whether the proposed use will adversely affect the airport and whether the airport will adversely affect the proposed use
- 3. Whether permitted uses in the Airport Overlay Zone are available and appropriate for the subject property
- 4. Whether the proposed use will or could cause an excessive or burdensome use of existing streets, transportation facilities, utilities, or schools
- 5. Whether the proposed use is in conformity with the policy and intent of the Comprehensive Plan
- 6. Other factors found to be relevant by the hearing authority for review of the proposed use

Ben Epps Airport | Major Challenges and Opportunities

- Airports can influence economic growth and development of cities and regions.
- The scale and current use of Ben Epps Airport is (relatively) minimal, leaving room for possibilities.
- The airport has a large land area with potential for a variety of supportive uses.
- Planning for airport systems requires a significant coordination of ACCUG and private entities.
- Airport infrastructure projects have limited funding sources and require Federal subsidies.
- Preserving the opportunities that may emerge is an important long-term strategy for the community.
- The growth rate of general aviation (e.g., business and other noncommercial aircraft) is expected to continue to exceed that of commercial.
- Small airports around the country are adapting to new strategies other than passenger aviation service and reaping the benefits.
- This airport is a great opportunity to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome for the community and business investors if similar progressive strategies are demonstrated.

Recommendations / Actions

The following actions respond directly to these findings.

Action LEX.SO.B1. Develop partnership between Clarke County School District and local flight schools.

Creating connections with local flight schools and the Clarke County School District would offer students exposure to the fast-growing aviation industry and potential career options. Opportunities for mentorships, job shadowing, on-site training, or speaking engagements with students and those seeking entry into the industry would exist. Exposure opportunities can have a lasting impact on youth and reveal a career trajectory they may have been unaware of. Ben Epps Airport is especially suitable for such an initiative development given its scale and activity. Students can see many sides of the industry including piloting, air traffic control, and maintenance. This initiative would align well with other community-wide programs to increase STEM exposure and soft skill development. The program could be shared with a broader effort to better connect educational institutions, including the University, with the airport and its activities. The following potential activities were shared through a 2017 paper titled, “Effective Outreach: Preserving General Aviation by putting “Public” in Public-Use Airports: In-School Outreach, Community Outreach, Aviation Science Club, Public Events, Airport Tours, Aviation Education Camps, and Take Flight Workshops.

TACTICS

Pilot Program: The School District can convene discussions between school administration and airport to launch a pilot program and create a plan to implement suggestions from participants.



Action LEX.SO.B2. Develop partnership with University of Georgia and Athens Technical College.

Developing deeper academic connections with the University of Georgia will improve exposure to aviation careers, which are critical to Georgia's economy. Opportunities for mentorships, job shadowing, on-site training, or speaking engagements with students and those seeking entry into the aviation industry exist. Additionally, research and new technology advancement may be possible by collaborating with existing university departments and programs. Only one other university in the state has a flight school and, despite the presence of Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta Airport, there are few entry opportunities into these two critical industries. There is a significant opportunity to develop a feeder program within the Terry College of Business and College of Engineering.

BEST PRACTICES

Don Scott Ohio State University Airport: This commercial airport is home to The Ohio State University flight education program as well as students of other disciplines, including aeronautical engineering, geography, city and regional planning, and civil engineering. Don Scott is also used as a training facility for Ohio State's Department of Public Safety in receiving and protecting dignitaries, and responding to hijackings, drug smuggling and bomb threats. In addition to serving as a learning resource, the airport operates the only full-service, fixed-base operator on the field and enhances economic vitality in the region by partnering with many Fortune 500 companies.



Action LEX.SO.B3. Facilitate a discussion between appropriate University of Georgia departments and drone startup companies.

More information is needed about the appetite between the University of Georgia and startup companies working in the autonomous aerial vehicle or “drone” space. Future discussions should provide clarity on disruptive technologies and find niche opportunities for Ben Epps Airport within this emerging sector. Numerous clusters of sub-industries related to unmanned or autonomous flight are emerging, including aerial photography and video, parcel delivery, and autonomous aerial taxis. Atlanta is home to a cluster of these startups in each sub-industry and given its proximity to Atlanta and its international airport, Ben Epps Airport is well positioned to be a hub for research and development in this space, but it will take coordinated action by ACCUG, the University of Georgia, Airport management and the business community to see through the potential. Identifying and understanding the technology would allow opportunities in the market to be leveraged moving forward. The Economic Development and Planning departments would be critical partners in this discussion as would University of Georgia departments such as Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, Center for Geospatial Research, Office of Research, New Media Institute, Henry W. Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, College of Engineering, Terry College of Business, Athens Technical College and others.

TACTICS

Opportunity Exploration: The University of Georgia can meet with a delegation from the airport and the Economic Development Department; and organizations can attend national UAV conferences such as Avusi Xponential, Commercial UAV Expo, etc. In meetings, interest can be gauged about the potential of utilizing Ben Epps airport for drone technology. The Planning Department can also partner with UGA environmental planning and design to create drone vision plans for Ben Epps Airport.



Action LEX.SO.B4. Develop a new access point into Ben Epps Airport.

Athens can provide a better gateway into the community from Ben Epps Airport and improve ingress and egress to the site by developing a new access point directly on Lexington Road. A new access point directly from Lexington Road would increase airport accessibility and take airport traffic off Winterville Road. An additional entrance may be necessary if the airport is to expand passenger air service as vehicular trips to and from the airport would significantly increase. This action is cross referenced with the Transportation and Mobility section.

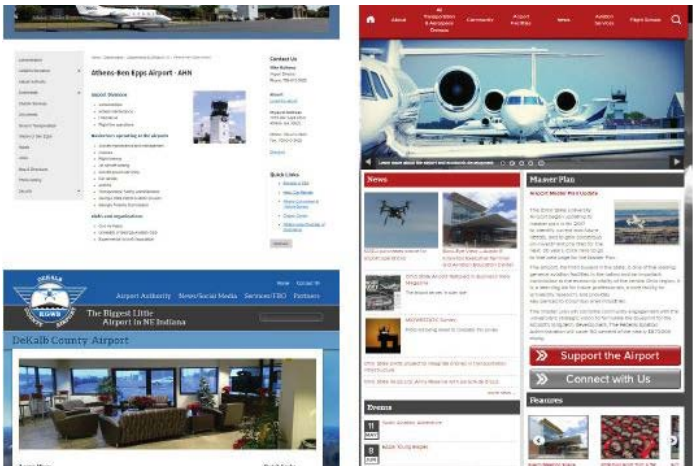


Action LEX.SO.B5. Support the full implementation of the multifaceted marketing package for Ben Epps Airport.

Through the airport's new marketing package, the community will collect numerous (potentially disparate) assets and opportunities presented by the Ben Epps Airport to present a clear and attractive communication package to potential investors and businesses. The package will highlight the opportunities and assets of the airport, further incentivizing investors in multiple industries. In the future, more targeted packages can be produced for different markets including cargo, new technologies, and/or passenger service.

TACTICS

Institutionalization of the Plan: Airport leadership should tour the completed plan around the community to identify synergistic opportunities based on the recommendations.



Action LEX.SO.B6. Explore and expand cargo opportunities.

With distributed logistics and warehousing models as well as emerging e-commerce and fulfillment companies such as Amazon, mid-size airports have more diverse roles to play. The community and airport can better position itself to take advantage of opportunities by anticipated cargo and drone stakeholder needs. Through facilitated discussions with stakeholders from Atlanta and throughout the Southeast, the community can accumulate more information in developing Ben Epps Airport as a cargo transportation hub. Stakeholders could provide institutional knowledge of what physical upgrades would be necessary, policy changes needed, estimated cost impacts, and potential return on investment. Examples of companies to contact include American Drone Industries, FlyWorx Aerial Drone Photography, Cine Drones, and/or others.



Action LEX.SO.B7. Implement the Strategic Plan for Ben Epps Airport.

The Ben Epps Airport Strategic Plan will outline a portfolio of flexible development and growth options that can be modified to changing conditions based on the market. The plan studies the existing airport’s operations and capital to identify strengths and weaknesses providing a list of recommendations that explore future opportunities. Items identified in a strategic plan can range from policy changes, physical improvements, marketing strategies, and more. The plan will look holistically at airport management and operations to reveal short and long-term opportunities for growth. Different from the required “Master Plan,” the Strategic Plan is an opportunity for the airport to look beyond operations and maintenance and consider future positioning based on emerging trends.

Action LEX.SO.B8. Monitor progress of passenger air feasibility.

The feasibility study for passenger air service will allow airport leaders and investors to make more informed decisions about fundamental changes to the airport’s operation model. Additionally, the plan would identify potential passenger airline partners with interest in expanding to the Athens region.

Strategic Opportunity C | Greenspace

How do we fully leverage and/or enhance our greenspaces?

Unlike other commercial thoroughfares in Athens, the Lexington Road corridor includes two major park assets along its four-mile extent. Prime among these, Southeast Clarke Park has become a regional, even national draw, with its collection of amenities. Despite the assets, the corridor remains relatively disconnected from the community trail network and its sidewalk infrastructure is discontinuous. Additionally, as a commercial corridor, the aesthetics and quality of places could be enhanced by increasing the tree canopy cover and landscaping. The corridor can better leverage its assets by improving active connections between them and beautifying the corridor throughout. GDOT’s policy for landscaping and ehancements on right of way states that shrubs exceeding 30 inches in height cannot be planted within the horizontal clearance zone in medians. Trees must meet minimum requirements stated in the “Horizontal Clearances for Trees and Shrubs” in the policy guideline, and trees planted in medians must be limbed up to a minimum of 7 feet from the ground. The larger the posted speed or design speed used determines the horizontal clearance criteria.



Findings

Athens In Motion. The City’s bicycle and pedestrian master plan identifies areas in need of sidewalk connections and enhanced bicycle connections. These improvements include extensive bicycle network connections as well as smaller sidewalk improvements to fill in gaps in the system.

Most of the land sits above flood zones. The North Oconee River runs near the eastern border of the impact area, though water is generally contained within the floodway. Only a small portion of land is affected by rising water, even when floods rise to the 500-year level. In total, only two percent of the corridor impact area’s land is affected by flood hazard areas.

Safety concerns near the Perimeter Highway. The most significant intersection within the study corridor is the interchange of Lexington Road and the Athens Perimeter Highway, which carried up to 40,000 vehicles per day in 2016. This interchange also was the corridor’s most frequent crash location, with more than 400 crashes between 2015 and 2017. Other minor crash hot spots at the intersections of Gaines School Road and Whit Davis Road are likely a result of many turning conflicts and driveways within a short distance and high traffic attempting to access the corridor at peak times of day.

Corridor Design. Lexington Road’s design is characterized by wide lanes, overhead powerlines, and large commercial signs that dominate the view. A lack of wayfinding, gateway features, or consistent landscaping standards leaves the corridor without a unique identity. The uncontrolled access at driveways and intersections create many conflict points over the length of the study area. Pedestrian facilities are inconsistent along the length of the corridor, and few bus stops are covered and connected to sidewalks. These characteristics make the road feel unwelcoming to all but those passing through by car.

Lexington Road crosses over two protected streams. The two streams have a minimum 75-foot buffer that creates a riparian edge. Riparian edges lower pollution from water runoff into streams and are extremely important for wildlife.

Limited bicycle facilities. No existing bicycle facilities exist along the study area portion of the Lexington Road. BikeAthens, a local non-profit organization, does not recommend that cyclists use Lexington Road due to high traffic volume, high speeds, and difficult intersections. Bicycle infrastructure in the surrounding area is limited as well, with narrow bicycle lanes on Barnett Shoals Road. The draft Athens in Motion bicycle and pedestrian plan proposes a connection on Lexington Road as well as a facility on Gaines School Road, creating improved mobility throughout the east side.

Better sidewalks, connectivity still a barrier. Sidewalk conditions and walkability along Lexington Road corridor are slightly better than along its Atlanta Highway counterpart. Portions of the corridor have continuous sidewalk on one or more sides, though significant gaps still exist (including notably, a missing connection to the entrance to Southeast Clarke Park). Three major crossings allow pedestrians to cross the road, leaving the wide road a major barrier to north-south mobility. Currently, the corridor is not designed for heavy pedestrian use, but is oriented as a vehicle and transit thoroughfare.

Greenways and trails. Lexington Road is currently not connected to any regional trails or greenways, but the 2016 Greenway Network Plan includes plans for a multiuse trail, which would connect the University of Georgia campus and the North Oconee River Greenway to Southeast Clarke Park. This trail network is currently unfunded and is not one of the plan’s high priority projects. However, as redevelopment occurs, it is likely that the trail could be developed in stages.

Greenspace | Major Challenges and Opportunities

- The community has significant park and trail assets.
- Greenspaces and trails add an amenity value and improve the attractiveness of the corridor.
- Parks and trails have been shown to raise property values and would help attract people and investment to the east side of Athens.
- Parks, and especially trails, can improve health outcomes by improving air quality, limiting urban heat island effect, and creating recreation opportunities.
- Parks can improve environmental infrastructure to improve water quality and flood control.
- Park and trail development can be costly.
- The community must articulate the types of parks and leverage opportunities appropriate for the area and for existing parks and trails (e.g., active vs. passive parks).

Recommendations / Actions

The following actions respond directly to these findings.

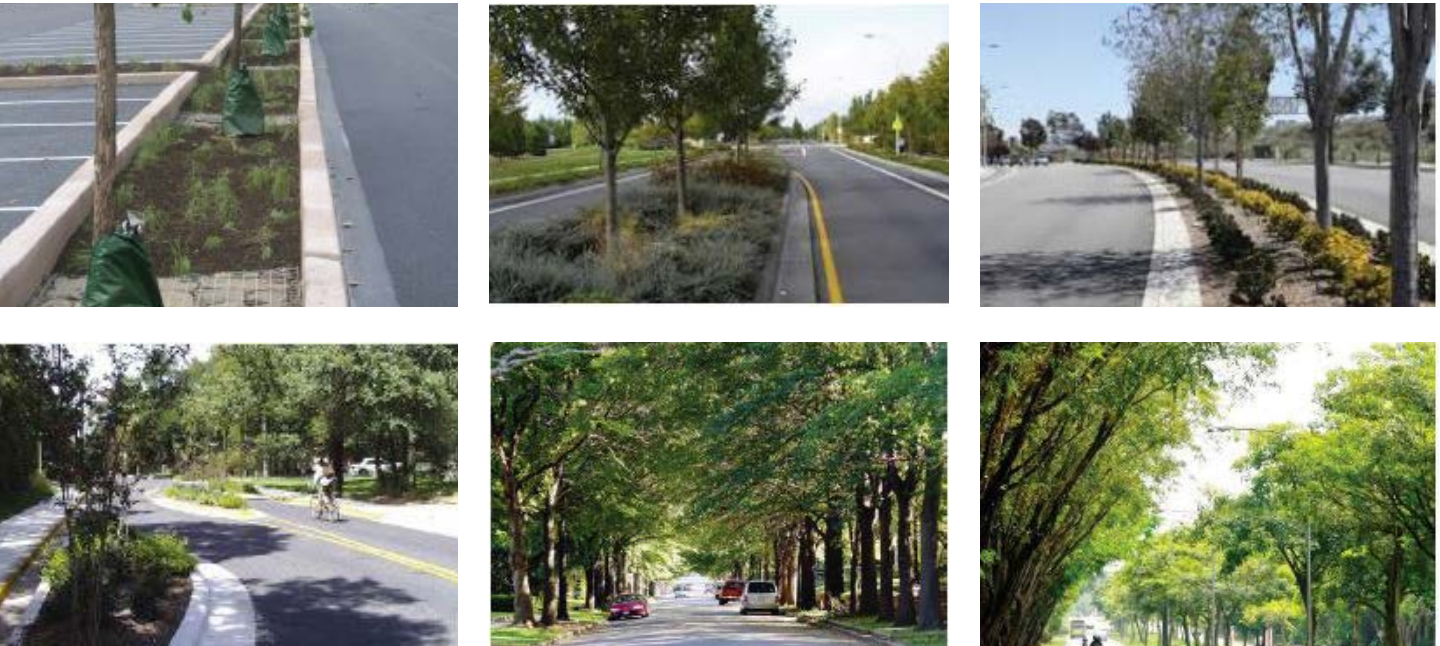
Action LEX.SO.C1. Increase the number of trees along the corridor.

An initiative to improve the number and regularity of street trees lining major thoroughfares would greatly enhance the aesthetics of the planning area. The city has been a member of the Tree City USA organization since 2001 and currently runs several programs and events relating to promoting and protecting tree canopy. This positive reputation could be further leveraged to access grant funding at the regional, state, and federal level for a larger tree planting initiative focused on the Lexington Road corridor. Street trees help to improve the pedestrian experience, reduce heat island effect of large paved areas, and improve the performance of the stormwater system through the retention of rainwater. Given the length of the corridor, it may be prudent to cluster planting efforts around development pulse locations with the intention of extending the initiative along the entire corridor over time. Additional considerations for a tree planting campaign include the species of tree and the long-term maintenance regime. Coordination with GDOT will be necessary when evaluating options for street trees along state-maintained roadways.

TACTICS

Tree Planting Plan: The Planning Department, in collaboration with the Community Forester, should determine where to dig. With increasing canopy cover as a goal, the community can pursue several specific tactics to build initial momentum. ACCUG should identify opportunities to plant trees on vacant lots, around neighborhood gateways, and in parking lots. After identifying locations, the Planning Department and the Geospatial Information Office can develop a priority planting map that uses public health, water quality, and other environmental data to identify and target tree plantings in those areas. This map should then be used by the community and potential partners interested in contributing to this effort.

- » **The Planning Department can create a list of potential partners (e.g., department, non-profits, neighborhood groups) for implementing and sustaining any tree planting initiatives, as well as work with local organizations to host maintenance events. Given the focus on commercial activity and auto-oriented development, the corridor has very little greenspace to break up the hundreds of acres of pavement and asphalt.**
- » **The Community Forester can increase youth programming opportunities and partner with schools to plant trees; host a Tree Tenders Course geared towards business owners; or hold a tree planting event on arbor day. The focal point for the corridor, Georgia Square Mall, is a very large use that’s struggling to survive. With nearly the same land area as downtown Athens, a vacant mall site would pose a significant challenge to the community over time.**
- » **The Planning Department can also increase the minimum number of trees in parking lots for redevelopment proposals, explore ways to fully leverage Tree City USA membership, and cater to private land owners by creating a program to green “small streets” and subsidize tree planting to encourage homeowners to plant trees on their property.**



Action LEX.SO.C2. Develop more partnerships for events within Southeast Clarke Park.

Developing more partnerships for an event series would increase exposure to the east side and encourage community engagement across Athens-Clarke County. A partnership should be forged between the Leisure Services Department and local theater, art, and music groups to orchestrate a play series, film series, art fairs, and the like and make use of the area’s major park assets like the Southeast Clarke Park. Great examples of community performance and engagement already exists in Athens today, and an opportunity to extend these events to the east side should be explored. Spring Fling, started in 2018, was an initial community event that was sponsored by the Keep Athens-Clarke County Beautiful organization.

TACTICS

Event Opportunities: The Leisure Services Department can continue to build the Spring Fling event and seek additional sponsor opportunities to maximize engagement and exposure. They can create an event planning team to discuss budget funding needs, brainstorm potential sponsors or donors, discuss how to market the event, and brainstorm potential event types for the park—market/pop up sale, movie series, concert series, community barbeque, trivia, swap shop, arts and crafts festival, food festival. The department can also leverage existing events like Plantapalooza, West broad farmers market and Athfest arts and music festival. Current examples include:

- » **Eastside Athens Spring Fling.** Initiated in 2018, the Spring Fling offered music, food trucks, and other activities. This event was held in the Southeast Clarke Park.
- » **West Broad Farmers Market.** Farmers host Growing on an old baseball field at the historic West Broad Street School, farmers from the neighborhood surrounding the garden, and employees of the Athens Land Trust host a weekly farmers market of fresh vegetables and flowers.
- » **“Plantapalooza.”** Plant sale organized by State Botanical Garden of Georgia at the University of Georgia, Trial Gardens at UGA, and the UGA Horticulture Club.
- » **Athfest arts and music festival.** The festival takes place in historic downtown Athens, GA, showcasing more than 100 bands on three free outdoors stages and a Club Crawl Friday and Saturday nights spanning 14 Athens music venues.



BEST PRACTICES

Reedy River Concert Series, Greenville, SC: Leveraging the community’s park along the Reedy River, Greenville hosts live music every Wednesday evening in the park space. The concert series is free to the public, family-friendly, and takes places all summer long.



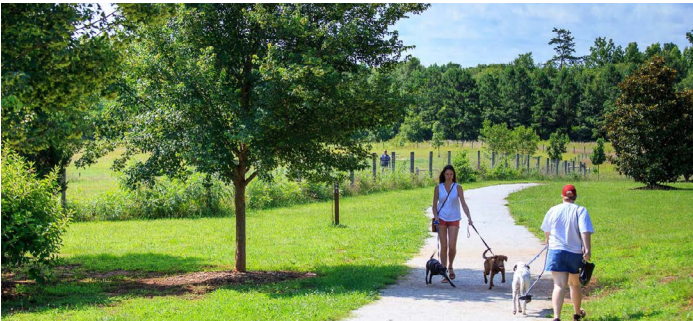
Image credit: Municipal Association of South Carolina, 2019

Action LEX.SO.C3. Design multiuse trails that connect parks to the trail system.

Establishing a broader trail network to Southeast Clarke Park would increase walking and bicycling. Additionally, increasing the number of bicycle parking locations would provide additional opportunities to users and ideally encourage access by bicycle to Southeast Clarke Park. Racks should be located as close as possible to park amenities to increase their impact. Related to this action, the park could expand cycling amenities with pump stations, bike racks, or maintenance vending machines to encourage more users.

TACTICS

Park Improvements: The Leisure Services Department can develop a trail network expansion plan that connects to Southeast Clarke Park, release a survey to the public for input on priority amenities to develop, and identify areas where public amenities could be deployed or constructed, and contact potential sponsors or donors and hold park fundraisers.



Action LEX.SO.C4: Construct a covered multipurpose facility along the corridor.

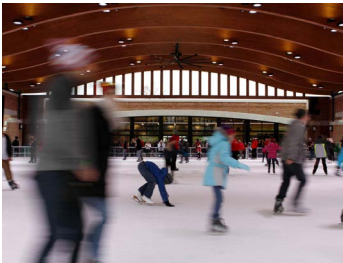
Creating a shared shelter facility along the corridor would offer a place for local events to take place. It could serve as a gathering point for farmers markets, art festivals, music and theater performances, and more. A permanent structure would extend visitor stays, increase user expenditures, create an amenity for attracting residents and businesses, and bring residents to the corridor. The covered shelter should be complementary to a common greenspace, maximizing the benefits of both corridor amenities.

TACTICS

Facility Expansion: A public/private partnership can be formed to develop a collection of precedent shelters along the corridor to model the proposed shelter after, contact potential sponsors or donors, and hold park fundraisers.

BEST PRACTICES

Urschel Pavilion, Valparaiso, IN: Building on the success of the adjacent outdoor amphitheater, local businesses approached the City in help attracting people downtown during foul weather seasons. The Urschel Pavilion in Valparaiso, Indiana features a large gathering space in the summer months and an ice rink in the winter. The \$9 million-dollar project came to fruition through a roughly 50/50 public private partnership. The Urschel family and Indiana Beverage provided private support in addition to state and City funds that were allocated. The pavilion has been the catalyst for several million dollars’ worth of investment into the historic downtown of Valparaiso.

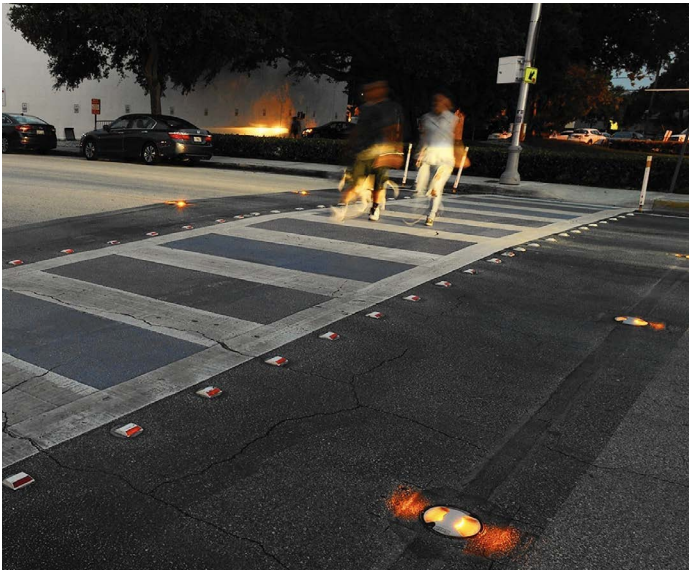


Action LEX.SO.C5. Strengthen pedestrian safety and comfort at crosswalks.

Strengthening pedestrian safety and access along the corridor depends on making better connections between existing sidewalks. While present in spots, today's infrastructure is intermittent and not fully connected across the corridor. This makes walking uncomfortable in some areas and dangerous in others. Cow paths indicate that, despite the lack of infrastructure, pedestrians still walk to bus stops, downtown, or destinations along the corridor. The community should address the intermittent nature of existing sidewalks by fully connecting the system on both sides of Lexington Road where possible and providing marked and lighted crosswalks where two-side coverage is precluded. Improvements at intersections may include curb bump outs, street trees, rectangular rapid flash beacons, painted sidewalk markings, and more.

TACTICS

Pedestrian Priorities: The Transportation & Public Works Department should continue and invest more into the County's sidewalk improvement program, in order to identify areas where there are gaps in sidewalks—survey, aerial image analysis, cow path identification. They should prioritize those identified spots for sidewalk expansion and reduce curb cuts along the corridor. The Transportation & Public Works Department can also release a public survey to see where participants think improvements should be made or where they feel unsafe. Based on this feedback, the department can develop and decide specific tactics to improve pedestrian safety in those areas, such as: curb bump outs, flash beacons, painted sidewalks, pedestrian relief islands, lit sidewalk stripes. They also can enforce traffic calming measures in those areas using speed humps, enforcement, bulbs, chokers, neckdowns, roundabouts, raised medians, diverters, and rumble strips.



Implementation Plan

The Connect Athens process reflected a concerted effort to develop a plan that can be implemented. A well-thought-out course of action provides a framework in which public and private investments and the development of appropriate projects, policies, and programs lead to change. The implementation plan needs to enable decision-makers to track progress and make future year adjustments. It also needs clearly define ways Athens-Clarke County and its partners can leverage public and private investment that foster quality design, economic sustainability, and environmental stewardship through coordinated transportation and land use decision.

Now is the time to plan for the future. Today's conditions on Lexington Road are inconvenient at best, unsafe at worst. Like other corridors struggling under the weight of access and mobility, worsening congestion, mounting safety problems, and unsustainable development patterns cannot be tolerated. Property owners and local business owners have been reluctant to infuse private investment dollars in a corridor abandoned by time. Refocusing on the corridor—in terms of public infrastructure investments and renewed land development oversight—can revive Lexington Road. By design, the plan does not require all improvements to be completed in tandem. Instead, a flexible approach has been created that allows local officials to partner with others to implement the vision in several phases as development occurs and funding surfaces. The plan also protects previous and planned infrastructure investment with careful consideration of how initial phases interact with long-term plans.

The timing of the implementation plan is subject to factors such as:

- » The degree of control or influence Athens-Clarke County has relative to its desire to implement changes.
- » The availability of time and money to implement improvements.
- » The degree to which Athens-Clarke County and GDOT can proactively work with the development community to enhance the quality of development, in both use and design.
- » The interdependence of implementation, or the degree to which implementing one action is dependent on the successful completion of another task.

The action plan that follows identifies next steps for Transportation & Mobility and the Strategic Opportunities. It relates each action to a phased improvement cycle based in part on the anticipated cost and perceived level of impact. The action plan also offers insight into which partners need to lead or be involved in specific tasks.

Action Plan

\$ \$ \$ \$ = Low Public Investment
 \$ \$ \$ \$ \$ = High Public Investment
 = Low Mobility Impact
 = High Mobility Impact

1 GDOT
 2 MPO
 3 ACC
 4 Private
 5 Athens Transit System
 Support
 Lead

SHORT TERM	Action	Cost	Impact	Participation
Safety, Operations & Connectivity	LEX.TMA2. Improve the intersection with Gaines School Road.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$	with slight improvement	1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.TMA3. Lower effective travel speeds west of Gaines School Road.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.TMA4. Coordinate traffic signals.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.TMA5. Improve side streets.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.TM.B1. Improve pedestrian crossings at the Loop Interchange, Gaines School Road, and Whit Davis Road.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
Bicycle & Pedestrian	LEX.TM.B2. Construct a continuous sidewalk on the south side of Lexington Road east of Gaines School Road.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.TM.B3. Construct a continuous sidewalk on the south side of Lexington Road between Gaines School Road and Southeast Clarke Park	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
Transit	LEX.TM.C1. Improve existing bus stops to include shelters, benches, and enhanced signage.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.TM.C2. Enhance access to the Park-and-Ride for bicyclists and pedestrians.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.TM.C3. Establish a bus transfer station at the intersection Lexington Road and Gaines School Road.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
Corridor Aesthetics	LEX.TM.D1. Install streetlights and banners to improve safety, add color, and create a sense of place.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
Airport Access	LEX.TM.E1. Enhance signage at the Winterville Road entrance.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.TM.E2. Improve wayfinding to the airport.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
Retail Shifts	LEX.SO.A1. Improve Lexington Road corridor identity and signage.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.SO.A2. Further empower the member-based business association.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
Ben Epps Airport	LEX.SO.B1. Develop partnership between Clarke County School District and local flight schools.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.SO.B5. Support the full implementation of the multifaceted marketing package for Ben Epps Airport.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.SO.B4. Implement the Strategic Plan for Ben Epps Airport.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
Greenspace	LEX.SO.C2. Develop more partnerships for events within Southeast Clarke Park.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5

Action Plan

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 Support
 Lead

MID TERM	Action	Cost	Impact	Participation
Safety, Operations & Connectivity	LEX.TM.A6. Construct the Barnett Shoals Connector as a two-lane road with bicycle and pedestrian accommodations; Install a new signal on Lexington Road.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.TM.B4. Construct planned greenway segments as well as side path on the north side of Lexington Road east of Perimeter Highway.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
Bicycle & Pedestrian	LEX.TM.B5. Provide an enhanced bike/ped crossing at the new intersection of the Barnett Shoals Connector.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.TM.B6. Construct a HAWK beacon at Southeast Clarke park.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
Transit	LEX.TM.C4. Install a new traffic signal/access to Southeast Clarke Park by tying into the HAWK beacon at Southeast Clarke Park.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.TM.C5. Implement queue jumping at major intersections, including Winterville, Gaines School, and Barnett Shoals.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.TM.C6. Add transit service to the airport (when activity at the airport warrants, whether job development sites or commercial air service).	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
Corridor Aesthetics	LEX.TM.D2. Enhance the existing gateway to the airport with improvements to Winterville Road.			
	LEX.TM.D3. Add landscaping within the right-of-way within planting strips and at key locations			
	LEX.TM.D4. Install landscaping and art pieces in highly visible locations and at key intersectionsto establish a gateway into downtown Athens.			
Airport Access	LEX.TM.E3. Add transit service to the airport (when activity at the airport warrants, whether job development sites or commercial air service)			
Retail Shifts	LEX.SO.A5. Improve cross parcel access.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.SO.A7. Create a parcel redevelopment guide to assist developers in site transition.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
Ben Epps Airport	LEX.SO.B2. Develop partnership with University of Georgia and Athens Technical College.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.SO.B4. Develop a new access point into Ben Epps Airport.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.SO.B6. Explore and expand cargo opportunities.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.SO.B8. Monitor progress of passenger air feasibility.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
Greenspace	LEX.SO.C1. Increase the number of trees along the corridor.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.SO.C4. Construct a covered multipurpose facility along the corridor.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5
	LEX.SO.C5. Strengthen pedestrian safety and comfort at crosswalks.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		1 2 3 4 5

- 1

GDOT
- 2

MPO
- 3

ACC
- 4

Private
- 5

Athens Transit System

●

Support

●

Lead

\$ \$ \$ \$ \$

=Low Public Investment

\$ \$ \$ \$ \$

=High Public Investment

\$ \$ \$ \$ \$

=Low Mobility Impact

\$ \$ \$ \$ \$

=High Mobility Impact

Action Plan

LONG TERM		Action			Cost		Impact		Participation	
Safety, Operations & Connectivity		LEX.TM.A7. Reduce the width of travel lanes to 11 feet maximum.			\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		● ● ● ● ●		1 2 3 4 5	
		LEX.TM.A8. Create an alternative parallel route north of the airport.			\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		● ● ● ● ●		1 2 3 4 5	
Bicycle & Pedestrian		LEX.TM.B7. Construct a pedestrian gateway bridge near Southeast Clarke Park.			\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		● ● ● ● ●		1 2 3 4 5	
		LEX.TM.C7. Establish premium transit service along Lexington Road.			\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		● ● ● ● ●		1 2 3 4 5	
Corridor Aesthetics		LEX.TM.D5. Build a landscaped median along the full extent of the corridor.			\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		● ● ● ● ●		1 2 3 4 5	
Airport Access		LEX.TM.E4. Create a new airport access point directly from Lexington Road.			\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		● ● ● ● ●		1 2 3 4 5	
		LEX.SO.A6. Establish redevelopment nodes or pulse locations.			\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		● ● ● ● ●		1 2 3 4 5	
Retail Shifts		LEX.SO.A8. Pursue strategic acquisition policies for redevelopment nodes or pulse locations.			\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		● ● ● ● ●		1 2 3 4 5	
		LEX.SO.A9. Establish an iconic eastern gateway.			\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		● ● ● ● ●		1 2 3 4 5	
Ben Epps Airport		LEX.SO.B3. Facilitate a discussion between appropriate University of Georgia departments and drone startup companies.			\$ \$ \$ \$ \$		● ● ● ● ●		1 2 3 4 5	

Section 4: Call to Action

Call to Action

The corridor plan recommendations contained herein represent the efforts of community leadership, stakeholders, and citizens. The completion of the Plan will bring about community interest in advancing the identified priority actions as quickly as possible. However, the pace with which change occurs will be dependent on several things, including consistent support for the Plan (during incremental decision-making and through partner agencies), continued strength in the real estate market, and the degree with which efforts are made to promote the plan externally. As the Plan informs future decisions, it's important to consider the following:



These corridors are community assets. Both corridors are more than the sum of their respective parts and features. They're not simply transportation conduits nor are they exclusively places that accommodate development. While individual perspectives will influence how these corridors are perceived, one thing is clear: they are of significant value to Athens-Clarke County. They have the capacity to make positive contributions to a variety of interests, including: housing, quality of life, economic opportunity, mobility, equity, and environment. The cultivation of these assets through incremental decisions and investments to generate enhanced opportunities for the individual and community, should be a principle of universal appeal. However, the recommendations contained within the Plan are designed to safeguard against actions that may limit the productivity and effectiveness of the corridors to advance community priorities.

Connecting people with community assets can benefit a variety of interests. While the planning process focused on the physical planning and design of each corridor, this project really is about connecting people with places in a positive way. How our residents experience our community is largely influenced by: the physical form of commerce, the travel experience and opportunity, and the places we live, work, and play. This philosophy couldn't be more important than in the areas surrounding Atlanta Highway and Lexington Road. Enhancing the connection between people and places through quality design can change the perceptions and the experience. Downtown, the University of Georgia, our trails and greenways are all positive features that when connected to the study corridors will help to unlock unrealized potential and create competitive advantages not experienced elsewhere. However, these connections should be intentional, frequent, and inclusive. As incremental decisions are made, efforts to enhance the connection between our community assets will result in increased vibrancy and the equity with which the benefits of vibrancy are enjoyed.





Success can be non-linear and incremental. Early in the planning process, it was determined that a wholesale redevelopment along both corridors wasn't necessary nor was a comprehensive reconstruction of Atlanta Highway and Lexington Road. In fact, it was widely recognized that IF the Plan were to make this type of "reset" recommendation, progress may be significantly limited and the timeframe for progress significantly elongated. It would be too invasive, too expensive, and require authority beyond the traditional administrative tools. Some may suggest that this is an appeal to embrace imperfection. In reality, it's an acknowledgement that the scale of the study area results in a diversity of needs and presents a diversity of opportunities. There are many stable features (public and private) that with smaller amounts of effort and investment, can lead to a tipping point of positive acceleration towards success. Athens-Clarke County should focus on opportunities where direct influence is most prevalent while simultaneously advocating and promoting the Plan with external agencies and private sector entities. This will create an environment where positive change can begin to occur, now with continued enhancements occurring over time through the actions and investments of public and private entities.