

ATHENS-CLARKE COUNTY INFILL HOUSING STUDY



FEBRUARY 2008

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

| | |
|------------------------|-----|
| Project Overview..... | 5 |
| What Is Infill?..... | 6 |
| Why Study Infill?..... | 7-9 |

BACKGROUND

| | |
|---|-------|
| Earlier Projects Affecting Infill..... | 10-12 |
| Historic Districts | 10 |
| Model Infill Housing Plans | 11 |
| Adoption of New Zoning Code | 12 |
| Text Amendments Since 2000 | 13-17 |
| Flag Lots | 13 |
| Manufactured Homes | 14 |
| Final Plat Sequencing | 15 |
| Continuous Linear Street Frontage | 16 |
| Residential in Commercial Zones | 17 |
| Related, Ongoing Policy Considerations..... | 18-19 |
| Comprehensive Plan Workshop | 18 |
| Accessory Dwelling Units | 19 |

INFILL TRENDS

| | |
|----------------------------------|-------|
| Amount & Location of Infill..... | 21 |
| Common Compatibility Issues..... | 22-33 |
| Scale & Massing | 22 |
| Height | 23 |
| Setbacks & Orientation | 24 |
| Fenestration | 25 |
| Driveways & Parking Areas | 26-27 |
| Details & Materials | 28 |
| Grading & Stormwater Runoff | 29 |

INFILL TRENDS (continued)

| | |
|--|-------|
| Common Compatibility Issues | 22-33 |
| Landscaping & Tree Protection | 30-31 |
| Teardowns & Subdivisions | 32-33 |
| Existing Design Standards | 34 |
| Condominium "Single-Family Residential"..... | 35 |

INFILL STRATEGIES

| | |
|---|-------|
| Modified Zoning Standards..... | 36 |
| Additional Zoning Standards..... | 36-37 |
| Universal Architectural Design Standards..... | 38 |
| Conservation Overlay Districts..... | 39 |
| Historic Districts..... | 40 |
| Incentives & Education..... | 41 |

RECOMMENDATIONS

| | |
|------------------------------------|-------|
| Mayor & Commission Comments | 42 |
| Planning Commission Comments | 43 |
| Regulatory Approaches | 44-46 |
| Near-Term Implementation | 44 |
| Potential Future Implementation | 45 |
| Review & Permitting | 47 |
| Incentives & Education | 48 |

APPENDIX

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Bibliography | |
| Source Documents Summary | |

Project Overview

The purpose of this study is to examine infill housing trends in Athens-Clarke County to better understand issues related to new construction in existing neighborhoods. This effort begins by defining the infill focus area, clarifying reasons for an infill examination and revisiting current policies and ordinances that influence infill construction. While new construction and other reinvestment in established areas inevitably affects the stability of property values and may raise questions about affordability and gentrification, the focus of this study will be primarily limited to the “physical environment,” highlighting design and construction issues.

Next, the study reviews recent infill construction trends in Athens-Clarke County, noting infill’s role in the larger A-CC residential market. Addressing specific design and construction issues, the study provides examples of both compatible and incompatible elements evident in new construction. To provide a point of comparison, the study also highlights a few examples of new construction within major subdivisions, to which architectural design standards were applied during the permitting process.

The study then reviews strategies employed by other communities to facilitate compatible new residential construction. These varied approaches range from modifications to base zoning regulations to establishing conservation overlay districts. Finally, the study concludes with recommendations for next steps.

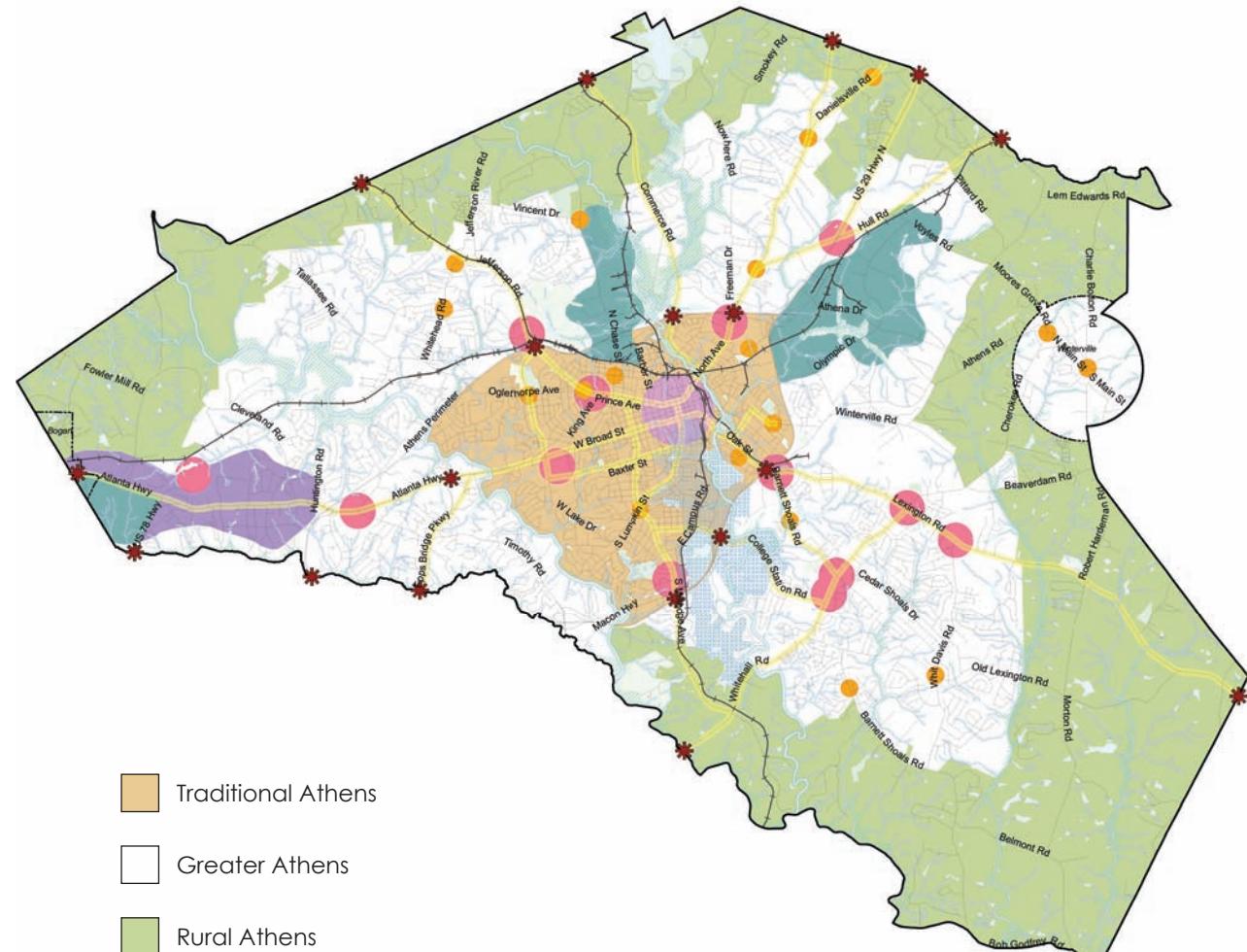


Figure 1 - The Growth Concept Map divides Athens-Clarke County among three general future growth areas: Rural, Greater Athens, and Traditional Athens. Traditional Athens is the primary focus area of the Infill Housing Study.

INTRODUCTION

What is Infill?

Various Infill Definitions...

- State of Massachusetts-Developing on empty lots of land within an urban area rather than on new undeveloped land outside the city or town. (commpres.env.state.ma.us/content/glossary.asp)
- WCEL, British Columbia-Building housing or other buildings on a site already containing existing buildings, some or all of which are retained. (www.wcel.org/issues/urban/sbg/glossary/)
- Las Cruces, NM-Infill is the concept of utilizing for building or similar development purposes, those lots and small parcels of land within the developed areas of the City. In all instances, infill addresses those lots which already have sufficient City services immediately available to them. (www.las-cruces.org/comm_dev/development/comprehensive/Comp_Plan/glossary.shtml)
- Burlington, CA-Development on vacant lots or through redevelopment to create additional new residential units. (www.burlington.ca/Planning/Official%20Plan/Part_VII/)
- Hillsborough, NH-Refers to the construction of a building that fills a void between two existing structures or a vacant space in the core downtown. (www.hillsboroughpride.org/guidelines/GlossaryofTerms.html)
- Cape Cod, MA-Is the development of new housing, commercial or other buildings on scattered vacant or underutilized sites within existing substantially built-up areas. (www.capecodcommission.org/bylaws/feedefine.html)
- Canberra, Australia-The construction of new buildings on previously undeveloped sites within established areas but not on public open space. (www.actpla.act.gov.au/spatial-plan/6_glossary/)
- Cascade, OR-Infill development is the construction on scattered vacant lots in developed neighborhoods as opposed to building on large parcels of vacant land in relatively undeveloped areas. (www.cascadelink.org/neigh/ghfl/pcpAppendixB.html)

INFILL HOUSING STUDY

February 2008

What is Infill?

Before embarking on an analysis of recent trends in infill housing, it behooves us to first establish what "infill" is in Athens-Clarke County. There is no singular definition of infill, and numerous communities have defined the concept by terms that fit their own set of developmental characteristics. Broadly understood, infill is development on vacant or underutilized parcels within previously developed areas that already have access to community infrastructure and services. Infill is not limited by use; it may serve residential, commercial, institutional, or other users.

For the purposes of this study, Planning Staff have identified single-family residential infill examples that are primarily located within the *Traditional* area of the Growth Concept Map (an area that roughly corresponds to the Urban Service District). The rationale for this emphasis is twofold:

- Comprehensive plan goals call for infill and increased density in the *Traditional* area, and
- The infrastructure and services available within the *Traditional* area best approximate the developmental characteristics associated with infill locations nationally.

Nonetheless, some examples are drawn from what may be termed suburban infill, or new construction in older suburban areas. Excluded from the infill analysis is construction within new, "major" subdivisions of land over 5 acres in size as this land size is a reasonable threshold over which we may consider the

development to be of a “greenfield” nature, or development on previously undeveloped lands. While major renovations and additions are often characterized as infill construction, this overview omits these projects from analysis.

Why Study Infill?

In recent years, Athens-Clarke County has experienced a substantial amount of infill development in existing neighborhood areas. Figure 3 illustrates the percentages of single-family residential new construction from 2004 to early 2007 occurring in suburban versus urban areas as well as the amount occurring in subdivision developments versus infill lots. This type of residential construction activity has responded to past and current Comprehensive Plan goals calling for higher densities in intown areas in order to reduce housing pressures on undeveloped, “greenbelt” areas.

These higher “prescribed” densities are reflected by zoning, as Figure 2 highlights parcels within the urban growth concept area that are at least twice the minimum lot size for their zoning designation. While the mapping exercise does not account for existing uses or densities on the parcels or other regulations such as minimum lot width, the image nevertheless draws attention to areas of potential subdivision and infill.

Despite infill’s general role in advancing local growth objectives, concerns have been frequently raised that individual projects may at times be at odds with other Comprehensive

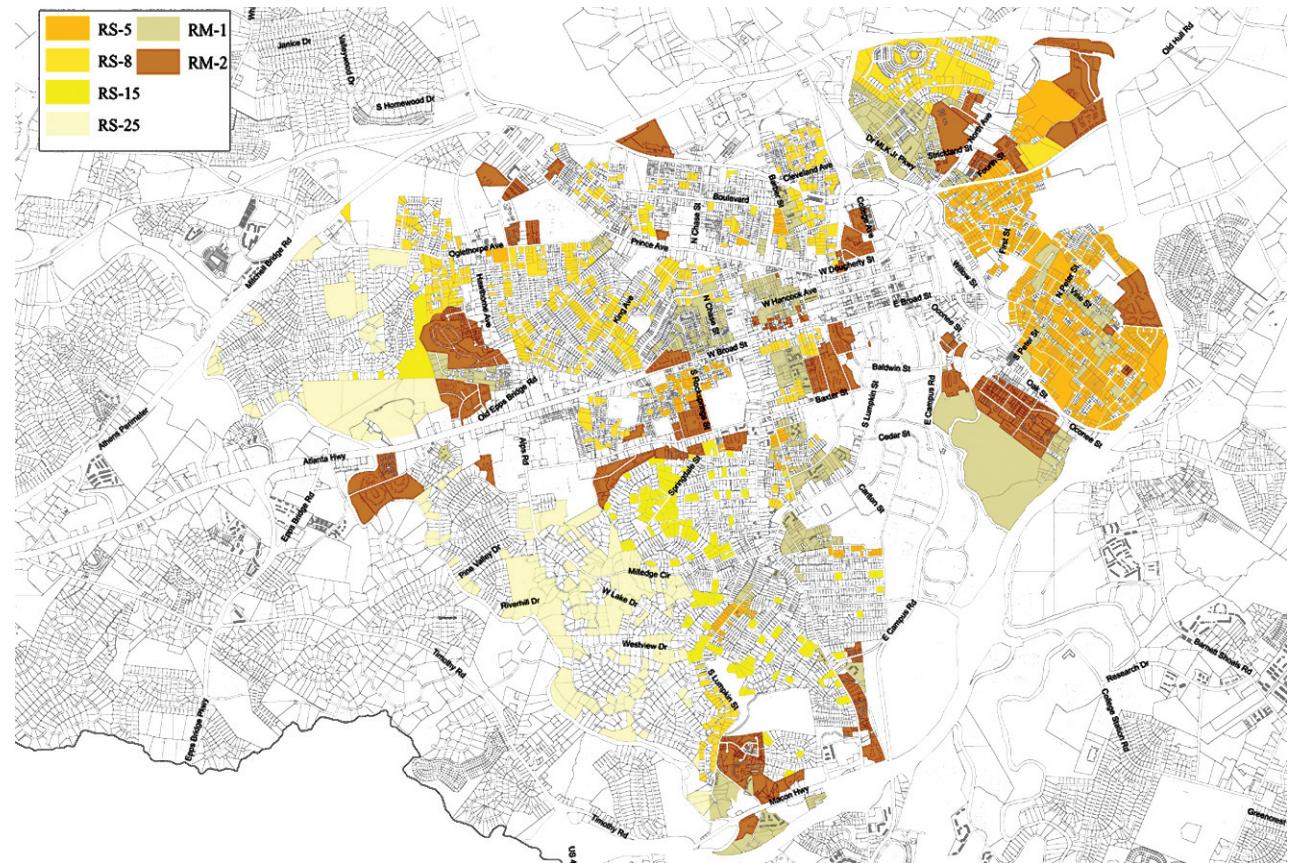


Figure 2 - In the map above, the parcels that are highlighted by their respective zoning classification colors are at least twice the minimum lot size for their district, an indication of infill potential.

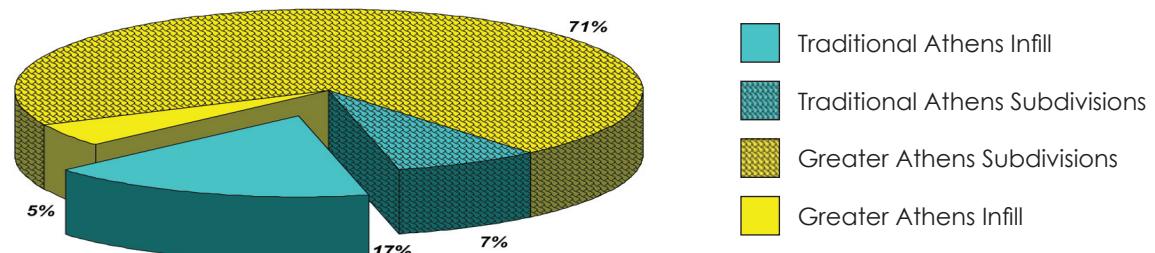


Figure 3 - The pie chart illustrates the proportional amount of new single-family residential construction occurring between 2004 and 2007 in infill locations vs. new subdivisions, as well as within Traditional vs. Greater areas of Athens-Clarke County. (Source: Athens-Clarke County zoning permit data)

INTRODUCTION

Why Study Infill?

INFILL HOUSING STUDY

February 2008

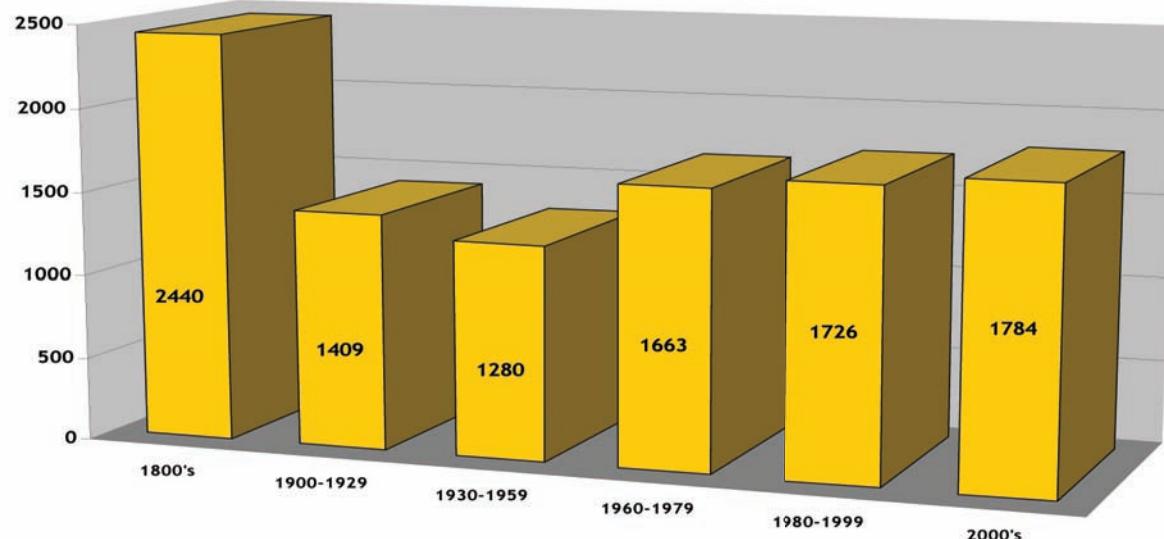


Figure 4 - Comparing the average square feet of Athens-Clarke County's existing housing stock, homes built have been steadily increasing in size since the period between 1930-1959. (Source: ACC Tax Assessor data)

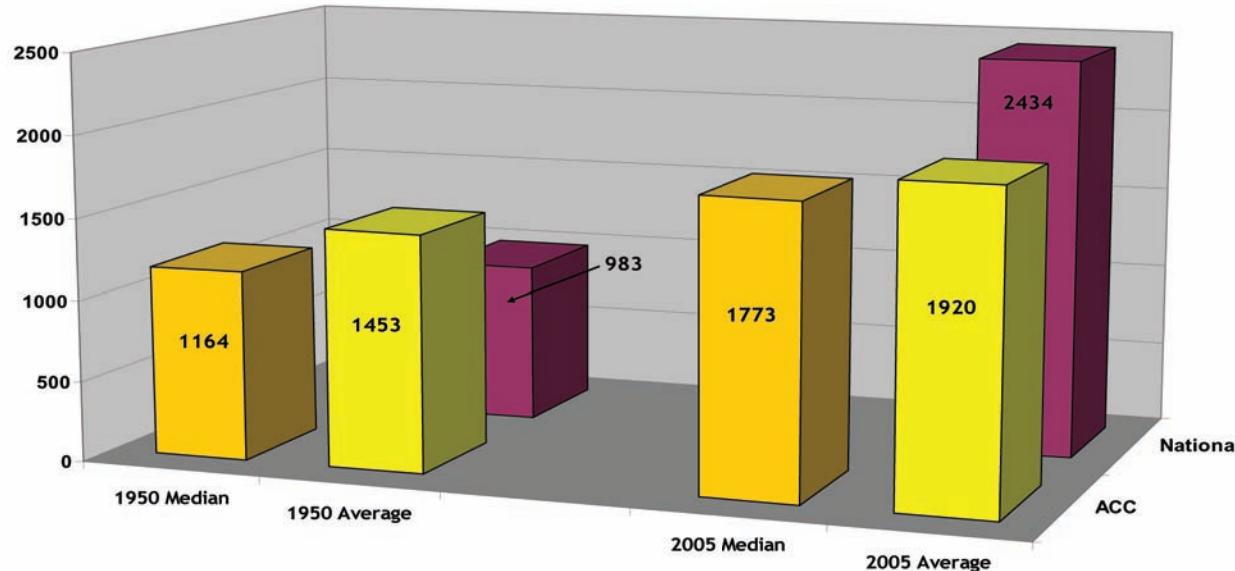


Figure 5 - The increase in average home size locally does not appear as dramatic as the national increase. Local figures, though, are based on the existing housing stock, including homes that have been expanded since their original construction date in 1950. (Source: ACC Tax Assessor data and Nat. Assoc. of Homebuilders)

Plan goals to preserve neighborhood character. An often universal challenge for infill compatibility is the sheer contrast between typical home sizes that were built during a neighborhood's initial development and those that are built for the modern market. Figures 4 and 5 depict the growth of home sizes over the decades.

Incompatible scales are among a variety of infill issues that have been voiced by participants in the Comprehensive Plan workshops, by neighbors of new infill, by citizens at public hearings, and by members of the Athens-Clarke County Commission. Specific issues and opportunities related to infill cited by subcommittees of the Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee are:

- Some infill development—both residential and non-residential—adversely impacts the character of existing neighborhoods.
- Infill development can drive up property taxes/values and gentrify a neighborhood.
- We will support opportunities for residential and non-residential infill development that positively impacts the character of existing neighborhoods.
- Encourage redevelopment and infill over development of new property on the periphery of the urban area.

- Inappropriate infill development threatens the character of both urban and rural areas of ACC both in scale of the construction and through the creation of inappropriate parcels.

- Integrate planning for the protection of cultural resources with other protective measures such as environmental, open space, recreation, and infill character areas through more comprehensive reviews of proposed development / construction.

- Sensitive areas, both urban and rural, need to be identified and protected from inappropriate infill development through the use of historic districts, conservation districts, or other measures.

Infill issues are not new to the Athens-Clarke County Mayor & Commission, who have addressed a number of specific concerns related to intown growth over the years. The Background section that follows will highlight a variety of both long-standing and recent policies and ordinances that directly affect local infill construction. The section will conclude by drawing attention to current infill considerations raised during the development of the draft 2008 Comprehensive Plan.

Summary of Infill Housing Study Sections

Introduction

The introduction section provides an overview of the study, explaining its purpose and focus areas.

Background

The background section delves into earlier policies, projects and zoning ordinance changes that have had an influence over the past decade on the development of infill in Athens-Clarke County. These influences are still exerting a role in current construction trends, and their impact merits exploration before considering further actions.

Infill Trends

The trends section documents the amount and location of current residential infill construction; then the section turns to the range of issues that affect the compatibility of individual infill projects with their neighborhood context. Infill Trends includes a brief summary of emerging how ACC's existing architectural design standards are applied to major subdivisions that are sometimes found amid traditional infill areas.

Infill Strategies

The strategies section highlights the various tools and techniques that communities utilize to achieve compatible residential infill. These range from regulatory approaches like additional zoning requirements or special districts to incentives and educational approaches.

Recommendations

The concluding recommendations summarize Mayor & Commission comments as well as Planning Commission feedback about the Infill Housing Study's initial outline. Recommendations draw from several promising strategies outlined in the preceding section as well as from a number of issues noted in the Trends section.

Appendix

The appendix includes a bibliography of resources as well as a summary of several infill design and compatibility documents.

Figure 6 - Summary of Infill Housing Study sections

BACKGROUND

Local Historic District Designations

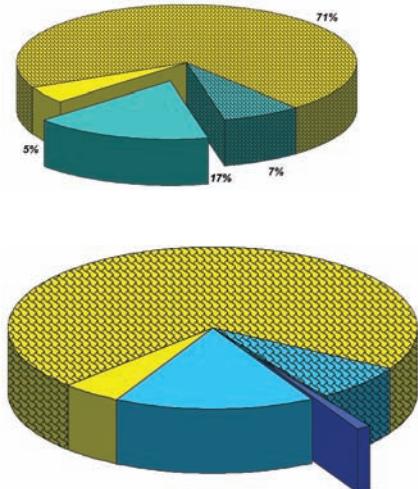


Figure 3 (from page 7) & Figure 7- Historic districts were home to 1% of all new single-family permits from 2004-2007, or 6.5% of all urban infill.



Figure 9 (on left) - The fourth house (rooftop visible) is the contributing historic dwelling in the Boulevard Historic District. The three in the foreground are new infill construction. Figure 10 (on right) - Contemporary infill design in the Cobbham Historic District.

INFILL HOUSING STUDY

February 2008

Earlier Projects Affecting Infill

1988- Local Historic District designations

In 1988 the first local historic districts were established in four Athens intown neighborhoods, including Bloomfield, Boulevard, Cobbham, and Woodlawn. The number of designated local residential districts has since grown to eight with Dearing, Henderson, Rocksprings, and Cloverhurst-Springdale added in subsequent years.

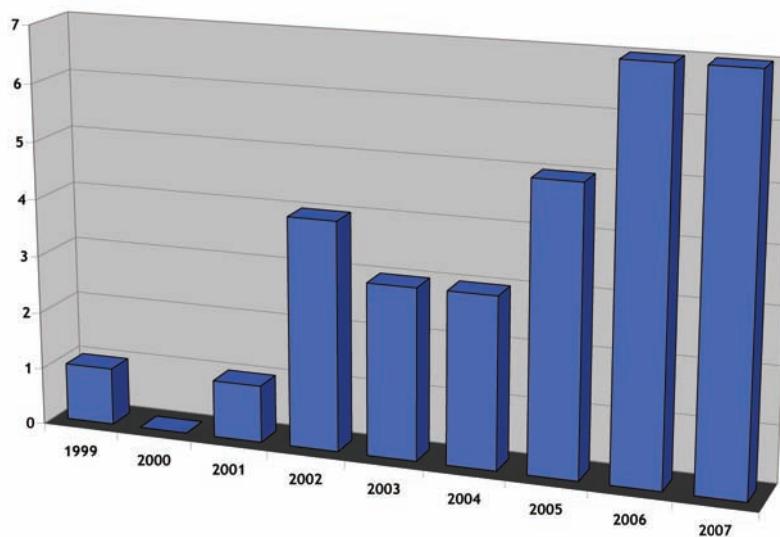


Figure 8 - The number of new construction permits in historic districts has been steadily increasing.



Properties within locally designated historic districts require a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) for construction to insure that infill is compatible with historic buildings and development patterns. The architectural review process is administered by the Historic Preservation Planner and the Athens-Clarke County Historic Preservation Commission, who apply a set of guidelines that evaluate compatibility in light of placement, orientation, massing, scale, façade elements, materials and ornamentation.

Despite the limited geographic area of locally designated historic districts, the number of new infill homes permitted each year in historic districts has been increasing. Infill in local historic districts accounts for 1% of all new residential construction and for 6.5% of the urban residential infill construction since early 2004.

Earlier Projects Affecting Infill

1996- Model Infill Housing Plans

Athens-Clarke County commissioned architectural drawings for one-, two-, three- and four-bedroom/duplex infill houses as part of a Certified Local Government grant received from the Historic Preservation Division of the Department of Natural Resources. The project's premise was to demonstrate that three goals (infill development, affordable housing and historic preservation) can be combined to the benefit of both individual neighborhoods and the community. The project's product, a variety of housing plan sets, continues to facilitate the construction of compatible infill.

Local designers/builders, Van Strickland Residential Design Services and D.O.C. Unlimited (Carl Martin and Dennis Harper) produced the plans in collaboration with a committee of representatives from the Historic Preservation Commission, Human and Economic Development Department, Planning Department and the Athens Housing Authority.



Figure 11 - Four-bedroom model infill house plan.



Figure 12 - An example of 2003 infill construction in Newtown that utilized the four-bedroom model plan.

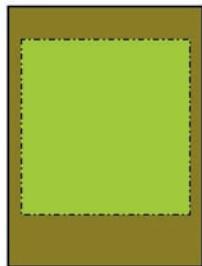


Figures 13 & 14 - Two-bedroom model infill house plan (on left) and an example (on right) of 2002 infill construction in Normaltown that utilized the plan.

BACKGROUND

Adoption of New Zoning Ordinance

THEN: RG- 6



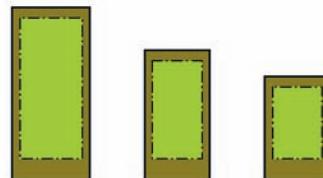
Arterial Road/ Major Collector:

30,000 min. lot area
150' min. lot width
40' front yard setback
25' rear yard setback
10' side yard setback

Local:

6,000 min. lot area
60' min. lot width
30' front yard setback
25' rear yard setback
10' side yard setback

NOW: RS-8 & RS-5 & RM-1



All Streets:

8,000, 5,000, & 4,000 min. lot area
60' & 50' min. lot width
80' min. depth
15' front yard setback
10' rear yard setback
6' side yard setback

Figure 15 - In order to illustrate the changes implemented with the comprehensive rezone of Athens-Clarke County in 2000, this diagram provides the minimum lot sizes and maximum buildable areas within those lots permitted by comparable zoning categories prior to and after the new code's adoption.



Figures 16 & 17- The map image in Figure 16 includes several adjacent subdivisions off Timothy Road. Towns Walk (bottom right), with small clustered lots and common open space (in olive), is developing following post-2000 regulations. McNutts Creek (top right) and Georgian Hills have lower density and no open space.

INFILL HOUSING STUDY

February 2008

Earlier Projects Affecting Infill

2000- Adoption of New Zoning Ordinance

After the completion of the 1999 Comprehensive Plan, Athens-Clarke County adopted a new zoning code to help implement the goals and objectives outlined in the Plan. The revised standards encouraged infill development with more flexible minimum setback distances and an elimination of the larger lot size requirements for parcels on arterial or collector streets. The new code's introduction of flexible lot sizes and density bonuses also made larger infill parcels (over 2 acres) more attractive for development.

A series of zoning amendments were passed between 2003 and 2007 in response to development trends that emerged upon implementation of the new development code. A summary of these amendments follows on the proceeding pages.

Zoning Amendments Affecting Infill

2003- Flag Lots

Concerns with the incompatibility of new "flag lots" within the context of existing neighborhoods compelled the adoption of an amendment to the code in July of 2003. Under the revised code, minimum lot width is measured at the front lot line and maintained to the required minimum front setback for all new lots in subdivisions of land creating less than 20 lots. The "less than 20 lots" provision focuses the prohibition of flag lots to small, often infill, subdivision circumstances. While this amendment was intended to preserve streetscape and setback patterns within established residential areas, it also limited the ability to maximize housing opportunities in areas designated for greater densities.



Figure 18 & 19 - The flag lots shown in these images were created in 2003 as a part of a small, "major" subdivision of 9 lots in traditional East Athens. Only major subdivisions of 20 or more lots are now permitted to utilize flag lot configurations, and only then for up to 10% of the lots.



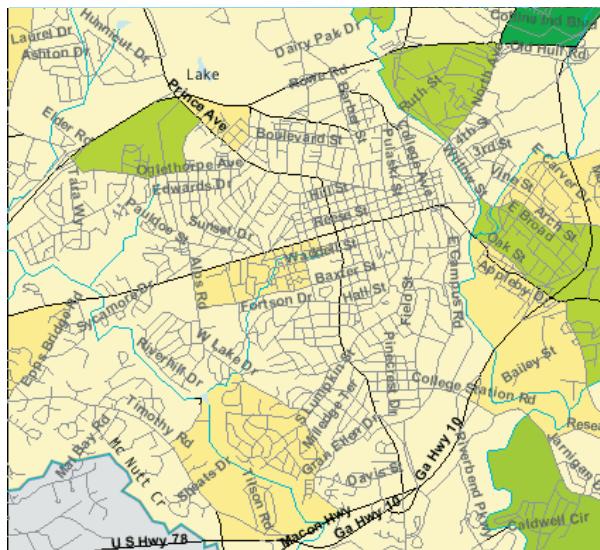
Figures 20 & 21 - This four-lot "minor" subdivision was also created in 2003. The three restored historic dwellings located on the properties were relocated from nearby locations where they were scheduled for demolitions.

BACKGROUND

Manufactured Homes



Figure 22 - A stick-built home (1966) and a manufactured home (1998) share ranch-style massing but differ in materials and detailing in one west side neighborhood.



Figures 24 & 25 - This map illustrates the percentage of dwellings that are manufactured homes in A-CC census blocks. The darkest shade represents 67-76%, then 26-44%, 11-22%, 4-8% and 0-3% in the lightest (Source: US Census 2000). At right, another contextual image of a new manufactured home in an older stick-built subdivision.

INFILL HOUSING STUDY

February 2008

Zoning Amendments Affecting Infill

2003- Manufactured Homes



Figure 23 - The manufactured home (on left) within the street context of this single-family zoned subdivision.



The often tenuous relationship between infill, affordability, and compatibility was perhaps most evident in the debate surrounding manufactured homes. The permitting of manufactured homes in residential subdivisions primarily comprised of stick built homes raised concerns about the compatibility of this form of residential infill. These concerns were compounded by the expiration of subdivision covenants that had previously dictated construction standards and styles in a number of older subdivisions. Weighing apprehension about the loss of affordable housing options with the goal to insure compatible new residential construction, the Mayor & Commission adopted amendments in December 2003 to prohibit manufactured housing in single-family zones, except in those subdivisions in which 60% or more of the existing homes are manufactured.

Zoning Amendments Affecting Infill

2005- Final Plat Sequencing

Prior to the final platting stage, subdivisions of five or more lots require the additional review and approval of a preliminary plat in all cases and of site construction plans meeting minimum design standards in most cases. Subdivisions of four or fewer lots are exempt from the application of these more detailed reviews and standards. The intent of the threshold is to not overburden minor projects while establishing minimum standards such as sidewalks and street trees where new density is concentrated.

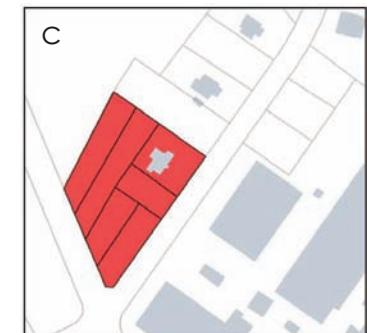
In order to circumvent these residential subdivision design standards, a trend emerged in which infill properties would be first subdivided into four lots and, immediately upon approval, be subdivided again. In October 2005, the Mayor & Commission adopted a text amendment that restricts subsequent subdivisions of the same property for a minimum period of one year.



Figure 26 - These 12 lots were created in a series of four subdivisions to avoid basic site construction standards.



Figure 27 - Architectural variation, sidewalks, and landscaping are among the unapplied standards.



Figures 28 & 29 - The final plat sequencing above shows the pre-existing lot (a), the first subdivision (b), and the second subdivision (c). This practice to avoid development requirements created jumbled, incompatible building orientations, setbacks and heights.

BACKGROUND

Continuous Linear Street Frontage



Figure 30 - Three 2005 single-family lots are stacked behind one another and served from a common, private drive. Owing largely to their compatible scale and retained landscaping, this infill has little visual impact on neighboring properties.



Figure 31 - Two 2005 single-family structures on rear lots with no street frontage. Unlike the above example, this infill construction was not built with sensitivity to the neighborhood context. Incompatible scale and parking design as well as a dearth of retained mature landscaping contribute to the incongruous new homes.

INFILL HOUSING STUDY

February 2008

Zoning Amendments Affecting Infill

2007- Continuous Linear Street Frontage

After the restriction on flag lots was established in 2003, a new trend of "easement lots" emerged that effectively duplicated the streetscape pattern previously indicative of flag lots. Because all new lots were required to have "frontage" only for water and sewer main access, developers willing to pay for the extension of water and sewer mains in utility easements were still able to create new lots at the rear of existing lots. Due to the considerable expense of main extensions, easement lots carried higher land development costs and were somewhat less frequent than flag lots.

The same concerns of incompatibility raised with respect to flag lots compelled the adoption of another amendment in February of 2007. The revised code now requires continuous linear street frontage for all subdivisions of land less than 2 acres in size and for all but 10% of the lots within a subdivision greater than 2 acres in size. Again, the maintenance of historic lot patterns and consistent setbacks are prioritized over density goals by recent code updates.

Zoning Amendments Affecting Infill

2007- Residential in Commercial Zones

Several commercially zoned intown properties have recently been developed with multiple single-family residential structures on one lot, marketed individually as condominium units. This type of development posed an unusual "use" scenario. Although multiple dwellings on the same lot are often interpreted as multi-family for the purposes of zoning, in the A-CC zoning code multi-family is not defined in terms of use but instead as a structure type that includes three or more attached dwelling units.

Multi-family uses on the ground or primary floor are permitted only as Special Uses in the commercial zones in order to preserve or encourage more active streetscapes in these areas. These particular developments were permitted outright as single-family uses because the individual buildings were single-family structures and state law prohibits discriminating between real property and condominium ownership forms.

In February of 2007, the Mayor and Commission adopted an amendment to the zoning code to require a Special Use permit for single-family developments in the commercial zones. While this amendment may limit residential infill opportunities in commercial zones, it preserves the intent of the commercial designations to compel the development of businesses and other more active uses.



Figure 32 - Seven single-family structures occupy this Commercial-Office zoned lot adjacent to a concrete manufacturing site. Utilizing condominium platting, these dwellings share improvements like the parking lot on common area space.



Figure 33 - This condominium development of single-family structures is also located within the Commercial Office zone. Sales and leases for developments such as these are marketed to the university population, an indication of the growing popularity of single-family type housing for investment-minded students and parents.

BACKGROUND

Comprehensive Plan: Workshops



Figures 34 & 35 - Participants at the Comprehensive Plan land use workshops examine future growth and zoning maps while discussing a set of priorities for the land use and development in their neighborhoods.

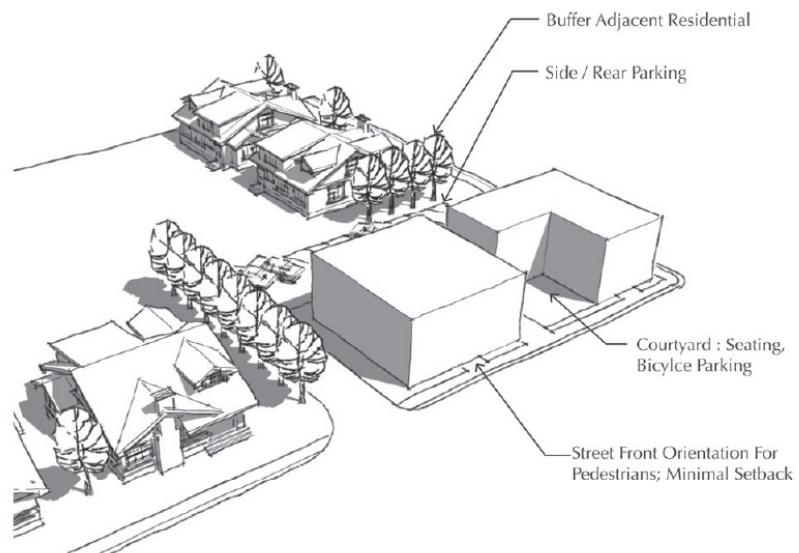


Figure 36 - This image from The Jaeger Company report on the Comprehensive Plan Workshops shows how neighborhood-oriented commercial uses should be designed to sensitively relate to nearby dwellings.
(Source: Comprehensive Plan Workshops Report, The Jaeger Company)

INFILL HOUSING STUDY

February 2008

Related, Ongoing Policy Considerations Affecting Infill

Comprehensive Plan 2008: Workshops

In conjunction with the Community Agenda portion of the 2008 Comprehensive Plan, a series of community workshops were conducted to focus future land use discussion on a variety of areas. The final workshop studied urban neighborhoods and sought to elicit input from residents, civic groups, and businesses about future growth in these areas. The focus of this workshop in particular may aid the public decision-making process with respect to infill housing issues.

Several important intown neighborhood priorities that are summarized in the Jaeger Workshop Report include protecting home ownership by long term residents and the character of traditional residential neighborhoods through a combination of the following:

1. Encourage senior citizens to take advantage of existing tax benefits with an informational/educational program. Consider any potential local tax options that may benefit seniors.
2. Establish an overlay district to promote compatible architecture and design. The requirements should address size and scale of new construction as well as location and extent of parking areas.
3. Consider historic district designation for some areas (it was noted that regulations may be challenging for some residents to negotiate).

Related, Ongoing Policy Considerations
Affecting Infill

Accessory Dwelling Units

Both the 1999 Comprehensive Plan and the draft 2008 Comprehensive Plan have favorably identified the potential of accessory dwelling units (also referred to as granny flats, in-law suites or garage apartments) to provide affordable housing opportunities as well as to increase urban densities. Both documents added the caveat that when these types of units are introduced in single-family zones, they should be limited to only owner-occupied properties.

As Athens-Clarke County struggles with often-competing goals to provide affordable, diverse housing options, to reduce housing pressures in rural areas, and to achieve compatibility between old and new development, accessory dwelling units may provide another proactive opportunity to address the community's needs. If guided carefully, this may be a particularly relevant housing option as we restrict the capacity to develop at permitted densities due to other constraints such as limited road frontage.

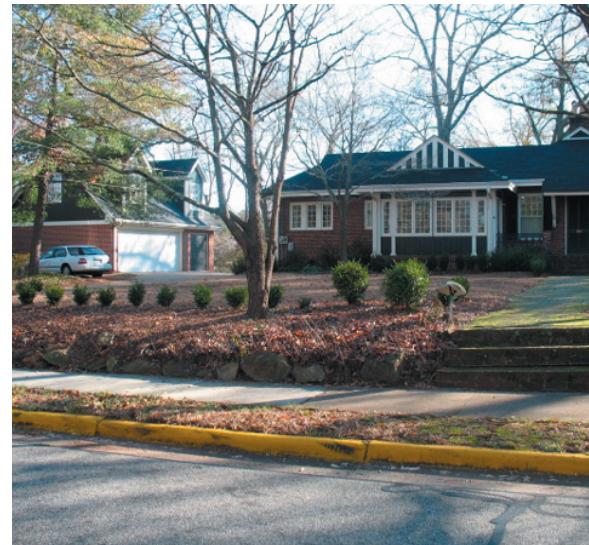


Figure 37 - An existing legal, non-conforming accessory dwelling unit above a detached garage in Five Points.



Figure 38 - Maintaining a legal, non-conforming accessory dwelling unit in the historic district prevents this property from being able to utilize the tax assessment freeze.



Figure 39 - This infill dwelling is located on its own lot but its deep setback reads as if it were an in-law suite, accessory to either adjacent older home with traditional street setbacks.

The purpose of allowing ADUs is to:

1. *Provide homeowners with a means of obtaining, through tenants in either the ADU or the principal unit, rental income, companionship, security, and services.*
2. *Add affordable units to the existing housing.*
3. *Make housing units available to moderate-income people who might otherwise have difficulty finding homes within the (city/county).*
4. *Develop housing units in single-family neighborhoods that are appropriate for people at a variety of stages in the life cycle.*

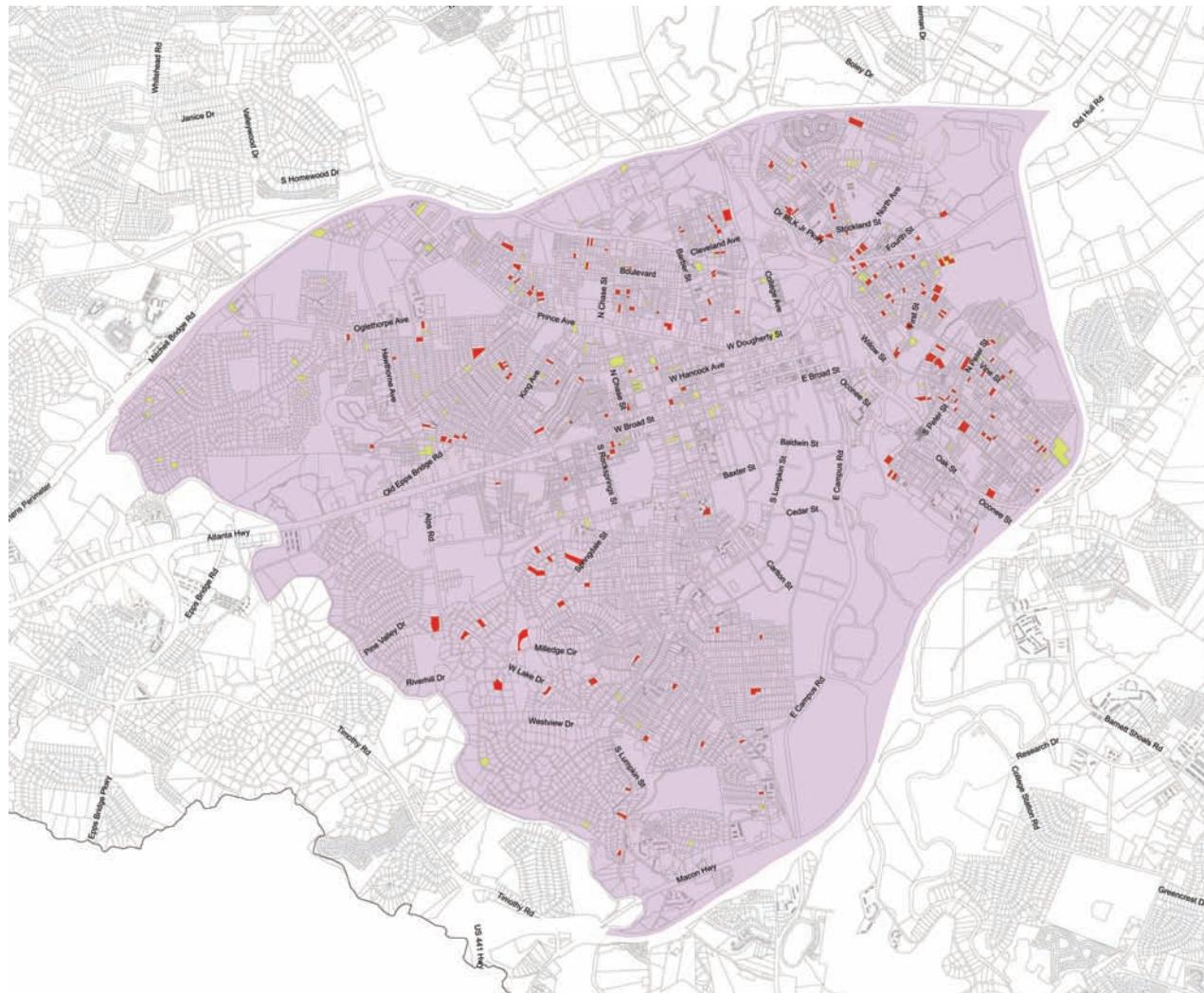
(Source: Model Accessory Dwelling Unit Ordinance, Washington State Dept. of Community, Trade, and Economic Development)

BACKGROUND

Summary of Actions Affecting Infill

INFILL HOUSING STUDY

February 2008



Summary of Actions Affecting Infill

Planning Staff stresses the importance of highlighting past policies and ordinances affecting infill development as our community explores additional opportunities to guide this type of growth. Athens-Clarke County has repeatedly recognized the role that infill residential construction should play in reducing growth pressures in more rural areas of the county; in providing affordable housing options; and in contributing to the vibrancy and health of intown neighborhoods. Actions in recent years have nevertheless [consistently] limited infill opportunities largely due to compatibility concerns. Establishing a clearer picture of how new residential development in existing neighborhoods might achieve this elusive compatibility, without overly taxing the community's other goals of urban density and affordable options, is the primary goal of this study.