



Final Report of Findings

Livable Communities Coalition
Assistance to the Cobb County, Georgia

June 18, 2007

LivableCommunitiesCoalition.org

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Executive Summary

The Livable Communities Coalition's study team comprised four consultants, all professionals, volunteering under the direction of the Livable Communities Coalition. The study team recommends that viable mixed-use, higher density development is probably five to 15 years away in most of West Cobb, but there are two steps the county can take now to improve "livability," relieve traffic problems, and prepare for redevelopment.

Livability is a measure of a community's function and appearance, taking into account considerations that include higher density development where appropriate, choices in transportation (transit, walking, and cycling in addition to car travel), choices in housing, housing affordability, and a strong link between development and transportation.

Overall, the team recommends that the county:

- Begin planning for redevelopment in West Cobb by targeting those places where more intense development makes the most sense.
- Take steps to make it easier for residents to get around within West Cobb (Cobb's District 1).

The recommendations are the result of a three-month study undertaken by the Livable Communities Coalition at the request of Cobb County. The central question put to the study team was whether increased density and mixed-use development would benefit the commercial nodes, or centers, that already exist in District 1, an area that includes most of unincorporated Cobb west of Interstate 75 and north of Macland Road. The four-member study team toured the district, conducted independent research and analysis, and reached consensus through a series of three meetings where approaches, issues, and conclusions were discussed as a team.

Team members conclude that, for a variety of factors, higher density, mixed-use development is unlikely for another five to 15 years. When it does occur, such redevelopment is likeliest to occur first:

- Along Cobb Parkway, mostly within the municipalities. The impact of Kennesaw State University is one major reason why.
- Along Powder Springs Road beginning in Marietta and extending outward. This is an area, the team believes, that would benefit from land use retrofitting through redevelopment.
- At or near the intersection of Barrett Parkway and Dallas Highway.

In the meantime, however, the team recommends that Cobb could improve mobility for residents of District 1. It can do that by improving access to retail centers from adjoining and nearby residential developments through a combination of sidewalks, interconnected streets, and walking paths. In addition, the county should consider adding or expanding bike lanes wherever possible.

Team members compliment Cobb County on its proven and disciplined dedication to land use planning, including a clear concentration of retail uses in centers. It also compliments the county on successfully locating some senior housing close to commercial centers, a move that is mutually beneficial for the centers and a fast-growing segment of the population.

Finally, it recommends that the county begin long-term planning for its centers. Life cycles for big box retailers, for example, are getting shorter. Because of that, and because land uses in West Cobb will

certainly evolve as the population continues to grow, it's not too early now to begin deciding which commercial centers are best suited for eventual redevelopment and/or mixed-use.

Report of Findings: Cobb County, Georgia

CHAPTER I: PREFACE AND SCOPE OF SERVICES

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

Name of Project	Livable Communities Coalition Assistance for Cobb County, Georgia
Scope of Services Summary	The Livable Communities Coalition will assist Cobb County with criteria to use in identifying sites for quality mixed use development.
Date Services Begin	February 7, 2007
Date Services Completed	May 21, 2007 The Livable Communities Coalition presented its findings to Cobb County on May 21 st .
County Contact Person	Rob Hosack, AICP, Director, Cobb County Community Development Agency Mailing Address: 119 Lawrence Street Marietta, GA 30060-1689 Phone Number: 770.528.2125 Fax Number: 770.528.2126 Email: rhosack@cobbcounty.org
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2. SCOPE OF SERVICES

Identifying key factors for successful mixed use development in West Cobb County, Commission District 1

The purpose of Coalition assistance in Cobb County is to identify key factors for successful mixed use development in District 1. These factors could include land use recommendations, traffic counts, socioeconomic and market data, existing or future infrastructure improvements, levels of service, etc. In addition, the County has recommended that any key factors presented as a finding should be

consistent with the format of the existing comprehensive plan so that the results might easily be considered as a future amendment to the plan.

Scope of Services Tasks

The scope of services will include the following Coalition activities:

1. Assemble a team of volunteer experts from the member organizations of the Coalition.
2. Study land development patterns, zoning, and the comprehensive plan.
3. Obtain official delineation (map outline) of the study area from Cobb County.
4. Tour the study area with Coalition team members.
5. Meet with key stakeholders including District 1 Commissioner Helen Goreham, Bob Hovey, Planning Commissioner; Rob Hosack, Director, Community Development Agency; and David Welden, resident of Cobb County.
6. Produce a report including key factors for successful mixed use/compact development and potential sites in District 1 that meet these key factors.
7. Present findings.

The Coalition team would be lead by a staff project manager, and volunteer experts would include:

- a developer,
- a development consultant,
- an urban planner, and
- a transportation planner.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE LIVABLE COMMUNITIES COALITION AND ITS SERVICES TO COMMUNITIES

What is the Coalition

The Coalition consists of a diverse network of organizations, companies, and individuals that share a commitment to quality growth and are aligned to help the community address the opportunities and challenges of growth and development.

The organization was formed in 2005 after the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce Quality Growth Task Force recognized the need for a credible coalition of business, environmental, development, civic, neighborhood and academic groups to work on implementation of quality growth and to stimulate a better informed public discussion of growth-related issues. The work of the Livable

Communities Coalition is based on the following quality growth principles for the Atlanta Region:

- Communities should support greater housing choices, higher densities and mixed uses in appropriate areas of our region's centers and transportation corridors.
- Transportation investments should be integrated with land use in the region's centers and corridors.
- Housing choices should be increased by removing barriers that artificially restrict the market. In turn, developers must respond by offering quality housing products which are innovative and consistent with community desires, and the financial community must respond by reducing barriers to development financing.
- Greenfield development must preserve more open space, leverage existing and programmed infrastructure, and provide more market choices.

How the Coalition Works

Coalition members lend their expert assistance and resources to support new development projects in key parts of the region. The Coalition supports communities that have developed quality growth plans but have encountered hindrances or obstacles to implementing these plans. The staff of the Coalition will mobilize resources and information of the Coalition for the benefit of selected communities. The Livable Communities Coalition is an independent non-profit organization; no fees are collected by the Coalition for services provided to communities.

CHAPTER II: OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

The central question

Cobb County presented the Coalition's team with the central question of whether or not increased density and mixed use would be beneficial in District 1 commercial nodes. The team members explored this question over a three month period. Findings were developed through the following approach.

How the project was completed

In December 2006 and January 2007, a team of Coalition volunteers was assembled. The team included the following professionals:

- a developer with experience in mixed use development,
- a development consultant,
- an urban planner, and
- a transportation planner.

On February 7, 2007, the team assembled for the first time and received a tour of District 1 with Commissioner Goreham; Bob Hovey, Planning Commissioner; Dave Welden, Protect Cobb and resident; Rob Hosack, Cobb County Community Development Agency; Dana Johnson, Cobb County Community Development Agency; and Coalition staff members Elizabeth Marie Billis and John Maximuk.

The team met a second time on March 14, 2007, to discuss the central question and to study the district map. The team worked independently until the third and final meeting on April 18, 2007. Between meetings, team members answered six questions from the perspective of their areas of expertise.

1. What are the factors necessary for successful mixed use and increased density and do these factors exist in District 1 currently?
2. What is the best potential site/intersection for major mixed use/increased density, in District 1 if one were desired?
3. What is the next best alternative site/intersection in District 1?
4. What is the location of a possible small-scale mixed-use node? (with limited density in the form of townhouses)?
5. When do you expect the market will demand an increase for mixed use and density and or redevelopment in District 1?
6. How can the County improve the livability of existing nodes without changing land use categories (without allowing greater density and a greater mix of uses)?

Team members were also assigned stakeholder interviews with Commissioner Goreham, Bob Hovey, Dave Welden, and Rob Hosack. On April 18, 2007, the team compared observations and found consensus for the project findings. The discussion centered around the six main questions, and these six topics form the outline of the following team findings.

Specific findings

1. What are the factors necessary for mixed use and increased density and how are these factors missing in District 1 currently?

Traffic: A mixed-use and increased density development will increase traffic on streets within the mixed-use development but at the same time can reduce traffic congestion within the overall system. The team found that adequate road capacity and some form of transit would be necessary for mixed use and increased density. Providing multimodal transportation facilities is a critical element for high density development and such facilities do not exist in District 1.

Population and Employment: An employment core is vitally important for mixed-use development and no such core exists. Furthermore, over the next 20 years, the opportunity to introduce higher densities and mixed uses will exist at these sites due to redevelopment opportunities. However, a critical mass of residents is required to support these changes, but it is not expected to emerge due to the low density-single family nature of housing around each commercial node.

The team found a lack of vacant land (planned/zoned) and suitable for mixed use redevelopment. In addition, the team understands that 32% of the housing units in the district were built in the last eight years. With the knowledge that the built environment is relatively new, opportunities for redevelopment are not imminent and therefore opportunities to build mixed use and increased density are not imminent either. The team agreed that the existence of obsolete buildings would be a factor aiding redevelopment and not enough currently exists in the district to immediately consider mixed use and higher density.

Demand: Will residents eventually demand more housing choices? That is a question that the team considered when looking at housing in the District. While the single family housing in the district is relatively affordable, in the near future, there may be a growing demand for housing that is more affordable. This is because much of the existing housing is large in square footage and relatively expensive for low to middle income residents. With 58% of District 1 households without children and other emerging factors, a demand for smaller, more affordable housing units may emerge.

In addition, team also considered the future demand for mixed-use centers with entertainment components or leisure components. These compact development settings or small business office operations are re-emerging in Livable Centers Initiative communities, but the team finds that the demand does not exist and would not be expected to grow anytime soon in District 1.

Housing and Mixed Use: The team found that mixing housing with commercial uses is not viable at the current time. The situation for mixed use development is split. In this environment, the team notes that commercial uses do not benefit from housing in a mixed-use situation. However, housing interests benefit from commercial uses in a mixed-use situation. One member cautioned that the town home housing delivers value for consumers (though not necessarily quality) as a stand alone product, but not in mixed use situations.

In addition, the team found that factors for mixed use and increased density also include:

- the need for additional wastewater infrastructure in some places,
- the need for incentives for redevelopment,
- well-defined and accessible pedestrian travel ways and transit, and
- social/political willingness to accept higher density development.

The team found that these factors are either partially or fully missing in District 1.

Other Comments: In addition, one team member provided further insights on factors for mixed use and density:

“Density is necessary for mixed use and a destination is necessary for quality density.”
“Critical mass is necessary for quality mixed use development, in that projects must be of a certain minimum size to attract the convenience buyer. Normally, this is at least several hundred units.” Furthermore, “one cannot make a viable mixed use high density development through zoning action alone. What is required is demand and demand is ultimately rational; buyers choose higher density residential products either because of price or convenience. Mixed use residential almost never addresses price conscious or value buyers. Convenience is generally a combination of the nonresidential mixed uses and location. It is rarely viable in a location that does not offer something else such as easy access to work or recreation.”

2. What is the best potential site/intersection for major mixed use/increased density in District 1 if one were desired?

Based on the redevelopment factors which were included above, the consensus view of the group was that Cobb Parkway, mostly within the municipalities, holds the best overall potential for major mixed use and or increased density. The impact of Kennesaw State University activities was one major reason why the team noted Cobb Parkway. For similar reasons, but to a much lesser extent, the group found that Powder Springs Road, within and extending outward from Marietta, would benefit from a land use “retrofitting through redevelopment.”

Within the unincorporated portion of District 1, the team found that the intersection of Barrett Parkway and Dallas Highway would be the best potential site for major mixed use and or increased density.

3. What is the next best alternative site/intersection in District 1?

The team did not reach consensus on the next best alternative site/intersection in District 1. Some team members insisted that the best locations exist on Cobb Parkway only. Others mentioned the intersection of Powder Springs Road and Macland Road. A third intersection that was mentioned was Lost Mountain Road and Dallas Highway.

4. What is the location of a possible small-scale mixed-use node? (with limited density in the form of town homes)?

The team found that small scale mixed use would be very desirable but highly unlikely from an economic feasibility point of view. However, team members agreed that town home development could thrive in a number of locations in District 1. One team member suggested that a possible location could be Due West Road and Acworth Due West Road.

5. When do you expect the market will demand an increase for mixed use and density and or redevelopment in District 1?

Team responses for this question ranged between five years and 15 years. One member suggested that demand will change between "five and seven years along Powder Springs Road" and "between eight and 15 years for retrofitting existing shopping centers." Others generally suggested change in demand will occur in a "five to 15 year" time frame and a time frame "within 10 years."

6. How can the County improve the livability of existing nodes without changing land use categories (without allowing greater density and a greater mix of uses)?

The team produced four recommendations to improve the existing nodes without changing land use. The first concept involves pedestrian improvements to abutting, adjoining and nearby residential developments. The County could focus specific planning efforts to explore the possibility of sidewalk, trail, or street connectivity to the existing nodes. While increasing access to residential areas is commonly and sometimes strongly opposed, resident frustration with congestion at and within the commercial nodes may be equally strong. For this reason, the Coalition strongly suggests that the County explore any and all connectivity and work with the community to illustrate those benefits. The benefits include higher air quality, time savings, improved personal health, and perhaps the continued economic success of the shopping areas.

Similarly, team members expressed concern for the safety and convenience of pedestrian crossings at the major node intersections. The real or perceived difficulty of crossing these streets is considered a detriment to the livability of these nodes.

The third suggestion is to provide more bike lanes where possible in the district. County plans may already include future bike lanes.

The final suggestion is to redouble all County efforts to locate or guide the location of major public institutions (public schools, libraries, etc.) or private institutions (museums, schools, organizations, etc.) to these nodes. These institutions could enhance the economic health of the nodes and potentially reduce trips in the short term. In the long term, given the emergence of critical factors necessary for mixed use and increased density, these institutions will complement efforts to foster interesting, mixed use, livable centers.

Other recommendations

The team unanimously complimented Cobb County on the proven dedication to its land use plan. The existing commercial nodes represent a disciplined approach to land use planning with clear concentration of retail centers. In addition, the County has successfully located some senior housing adjacent to commercial nodes, and that is positive for the livability of these nodes for an ever-growing demographic segment of the population.

The team found that substantial efforts to promote mixed use development and increased density in the commercial nodes are not desirable for the community or the market at this time. However, the team acknowledges that land uses in metropolitan areas do evolve. The team finds that it would be wise for the County to begin long term planning for redevelopment in these commercial nodes. Specifically, the team emphasizes that the cycle for redevelopment by big box retailers is getting shorter. Local government, its planners, and the plans they established, need to be not only receptive to redevelopment, but prepared for it.

For this reason, Cobb County might consider which commercial nodes will be redeveloped differently. The County might also consider incentives for redevelopment in priority areas and in preferred forms such as mixed use and higher density.