

ATHENS RISING

What's Up in New Development

originally published September 5, 2007

This column's [last installment](#) looked at what has occurred in-town in Athens since the last update of the Comprehensive Plan. This week, we'll look a bit further out, where the seeds of new "Main Streets" are growing in different neighborhoods around Athens. Normaltown and Five Points are the two older traditional neighborhoods which these newbies aspire to emulate.

Changing Corridors: Baxter Street and Gaines School Road are the two corridors that really stand out as candidates to become as great as Five Points. Both of these areas are experiencing growth of a more urban form which in a few years could create a walkable shopping and living experience. Unfortunately, presented with the opportunity to rebuild schools (Alps and Gaines School) in these two blossoming areas, the **Clarke County School District** really dropped the ball



and produced two bland suburban schools with parking lots out front. It was a golden opportunity, and in the future, I hope the school district does a better job when they build new schools. Something more like Chase Street Elementary or the lost College Avenue building would have been more appropriate. Still, public investment really paid off for **Baxter Street**; streetscape work and a police station have helped draw new investment to the area. The new **Baxter Street Lofts** are under construction, joining several smaller stores along Baxter's western end.

On the **Gaines School Road** corridor (from Lexington Highway down almost to Whitehall Road), there are several projects creating a new main-street feel, including Ansonborough, Tower Place, Cedar Pointe, and the under-construction commercial structures at Pinecrest. Another proposed project with a similar vibe is La Puerta De Sol on Cedar Shoals Road. Not far from that corridor is the Lakewood development that's been started off Barnett Shoals Road. The rebuilding of the **Georgetown Shopping Center** presented an opportunity for something exciting, but we'll have to wait another 20 years before they tear it down again to ask for a more creative and pedestrian-oriented shopping center there. (As for that shopping-oriented stretch of Barnett Shoals between Gaines School and College Station roads, there was widespread disappointment when the city reworked it several years ago, leaving it very pedestrian-unfriendly.) In the meantime, the former Winn Dixie site near Lexington Road could make a great gateway to a walkable Gaines School Corridor.

At the moment it might not look like much, and it's easy to see projects as unsuccessful when they stand alone or are the first in a changing area (like the oft-cited **Ansonborough**). But these pioneers will soon be joined by more. Not overnight, but maybe in a decade or two, these areas could be equally as cherished as Five Points or Normaltown.

Elsewhere: One more interesting node of development is at Timothy Road and Epps Bridge Parkway. **The Village Park at Timothy** is the second mixed-use community there, joining the **Terraces**. These include offices and residential development. While the two examples above are areas that are primarily commercial, Timothy is a mainly residential area. Whether more projects will follow and bring retail remains to be seen.

Keep it in Mind: **Transferable Development Rights** are going to finally get on the table in the near future, and these types of mixed-use developments are the kind that might be brought to areas receiving density under such a program. North Avenue and South Milledge Avenue are two possible receiving zones, among many that have been discussed. It's hard to say what will happen with a TDRs program, but more than likely it would accelerate the process of establishing a mixed-use center by making it more profitable. South Milledge recently got some new retail, and infill housing is sprouting up along Davis Street.

What's the Plan?: The goals of the current **Comprehensive Plan** emphasize denser mixed-use development at in-town commercial centers (and in conservation subdivisions) while preserving a greenbelt and greenways, and that's certainly what we're getting now. The Comprehensive Plan is not light reading (400 pages!), but comparing what's happening now with the maps in that document, it looks like the plan works. I recommend reading the sections related to the "Guiding Principles" and strategies for implementing them. Those have been followed pretty well, and as we either reaffirm, adjust or alter these principles, it's good to know that they do have tangible effects, and we really can shape the way Athens grows.

Upcoming: On the agenda for the **Planning Commission** meeting on Thursday, Sept. 6 is 1360 Newton Bridge Rd., a 264-acre development which would include 425 single-family homes and approximately 51,000 square feet of commercial space. This project was already proposed once, back in July, but was pulled before the Planning Commission meeting at that time. (The plans have been resubmitted unchanged.) The site is currently zoned AR, and the developer has requested it be rezoned to CN (PD) and RS-8 (PD), with 144 acres left as open space. Utility easements and stream buffers constitute much of the land set aside, but it does seem as though effort has been made to thoughtfully preserve the land, rather than simply meeting the legal requirements. This area is currently designated in the Comprehensive Plan as part of the greenbelt.

Also on the agenda that night is North Creek Village (655 Freeman Dr.). The proposal there includes a 20-bed assisted living facility as well as 20 attached and detached units. Interestingly, this project includes a small mixed-use element and room for classrooms. With Athens ranked as a **good place to retire** by magazines like *Fortune* and *Money*, we may see more projects of this nature proposed in the future. In addition to its New Urbanist design with a small main street, the project (which abuts Cook's Trail) also

includes approximately five acres of open space to be either donated to the county or contained within a conservation easement.

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