

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### CHARACTERISTICS OF A HIGH QUALITY PLAN

Academic researchers have begun to articulate what makes a high-quality plan (Berke and Godschalk 2009).<sup>1</sup> One of those components of a good plan is the **identification of issues**. Berke and Godschalk state that “if issues are clearly articulated early in the plan document, then subsequent plan elements are more apt to squarely address issues deemed important by the community” (p. 232). A second important component is **goals, facts and policies**. “Goals identify what the community wants to become.” “A weak direction-setting framework means that a community is less likely to exert control over its planning agenda and ensure that long-range public interests supersede short-range interests and private concerns. This also means that plans will not provide a clear, relevant basis for the implementation and monitoring and evaluation elements.” (p. 233). A third important component is **implementation and monitoring**. “If plans score high on all elements except implementation and monitoring and evaluation, then plans may become paper documents that are not carried out and regularly evaluated and improved” (p. 234).



### Local Comprehensive Planning Documents Required by Georgia Rules

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<sup>1</sup> Berke, Philip, and David Godschalk. 2009. Searching for the Good Plan: A Meta-Analysis of Plan Quality Studies. *Journal of Planning Literature* 23, 3: 337-240.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN**

Flowery Branch's comprehensive plan was first prepared in 2005 and adopted in 2006, following state administrative rules effective May 1, 2005. A comprehensive plan consists of at least three parts, as summarized in the figure below. The community assessment is a multi-chapter document that consists of many tables of data and various inventories and analyses; it was prepared between May and August 2005 and presented as a single document (as opposed to separating data into an appendix). Second, a community participation strategy was drafted, reviewed and approved by the Georgia Mountains Regional Development Center (now Regional Commission) and the Georgia Department of Community Affairs. This document is the Community Agenda and contains the "plan" portion of the comprehensive plan. The Community Agenda was adopted in 2006 and amended in 2008 in order to keep the plan document current.

## **CHANGES TO THE COMMUNITY AGENDA IN 2011**

Local governments are required to, at minimum, update the short-term work program portion of the Community Agenda approximately five years after initial plan adoption. The City of Flowery Branch elected to pursue a more substantive amendment to the Community Agenda instead of a minimal effort to update the short-term work program. The city chose a more substantive amendment to the plan for the following reasons, among others, in addition to the basic need to update the five-year short-term work program:

- The population, housing, and employment estimates and projections needed updating again in light of a slowdown in homebuilding and the economy.
- The city sought to refine its character area (future development) map and future land use plan map as a result of recent annexations.
- The transportation element of the Community Agenda needed updating in light of the findings and recommendations of a downtown (Old Town) transportation study.

In addition to these significant updates, the city considered the feasibility of preparing a capital improvements element (CIE) in support of a possible development impact fee program. As noted under "participation" below, the Flowery Branch City Council elected not to pursue a CIE as part of this updated Community Agenda.

A considerable amount of background research, analysis, and inventory of data was completed in support of this update of the Community Agenda. According to the directives of the local planning requirements, data and detailed assessments are not supposed to be included in the Community Agenda document, so as to keep that part of the plan concise and for it to better serve as a decision-making document. Accordingly, the city elected to provide a 2010 "addendum" to the Community Assessment. Also, some of the information provided in the initial Community Agenda document was considered non-essential to decision-making and was therefore moved to the addendum to the Community Assessment.

A number of changes to the Community Agenda document, in addition to those summarized above, have been made in this update. Those changes include but are not limited to the following:

1. Organizationally, the “introduction” was completely updated and given a chapter number (1). The population and housing elements which were two separate chapters (2 and 3) in the adopted Community Agenda were combined into a single chapter (2) in the 2010 update.
2. The citywide vision statement (in this chapter) was modified slightly to change the time frame for when certain public facilities would be completed.
3. The list of issues and opportunities (in this chapter) was expanded in several instances and certain issues no longer relevant or sufficiently addressed were dropped from the list.

### **SUMMARY OF PARTICIPATION**

The initial public participation program in 2005 included three visioning forums, during which issues and opportunities and preliminary character areas were identified and discussed, along with a citywide vision statement. To ensure adequate notice and participation, the city mailed to all property owners in the city notices of the first visioning forum, displayed two banners at gateways into the city announcing the visioning forums, and arranged to have public notice ads run on local cable television about the planning effort. Drafts of the community assessment, community participation strategy, and community agenda were made available via the city’s web page and in hard copy upon request to all interested individuals.

A questionnaire was completed during the September 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> (2005) visioning forums, and the results were tabulated and presented to the community at the final (September 27<sup>th</sup>) visioning forum. A steering committee met three times to discuss the comprehensive planning project and provide guidance and input. Consultants and planning staff interviewed stakeholders in connection with the planning effort.

Initial participation with regard to the plan update centered on the issue of whether Flowery Branch should pursue a development impact fee program. The city advertised and held a public hearing on August 12, 2010, during which a presentation about impact fees was made and the council discussed the merits of planning for an impact fee program. The public hearing also provided an opportunity for public discussion of the major update of the Community Agenda, as required by rules of the Georgia Department of Community Affairs for major updates to the comprehensive plan. The Flowery Branch City Council subsequently elected not to pursue a Capital Improvement Element (CIE) of the comprehensive plan which would support preparation and adoption of impact fee ordinances. With regard to other changes to the Community Agenda, it was determined that the vision, goals and general direction of the plan document would not change and that, therefore, it was not necessary to undertake additional participation venues beyond what had already taken place and what was required per state rules.

### **CITYWIDE VISION STATEMENT**

The following overall vision statement is adopted for the City of Flowery Branch. The vision statement has been modified slightly in this update, primarily to change dates of milestones from 2010 to 2015 where appropriate.

*Flowers Branch will preserve its small town feel, which is generated by Old Town with its historic district and skinny streets. We are a community aside Lake Lanier, and we are proud to be home of the Atlanta Falcons football team. We acknowledge our role in protecting our environment and maintaining water quality in the Lake Lanier watershed, and we identify with the rest of the Georgia Mountains region north and west of us.*

*We envision modest increases in the city's boundaries over time, some of which will be master-planned residential communities, but only after considering the need to have a balanced property tax base and all the while retaining the city's small-town atmosphere. As the I-985 corridor develops, we envision healthy retail and mixed use activity centers evolving that will be distinguishable from other places. We will not be "swallowed whole" into the metropolitan Atlanta area, but rather, carefully assimilated into the metro area while retaining distinctiveness and charm. The mixtures of housing available in Flowers Branch will provide for diversity and affordability, while ensuring that the mix is not overrun with apartments and incompatible manufactured homes. We will expand housing opportunities for seniors, and they will be welcome and find comfortable living.*

*City leaders will play a large role in revitalizing Old Town as a major prong of its economic development efforts. In Old Town, residential properties will transition in use and obsolete buildings will be redeveloped, all guided by a responsive urban redevelopment strategy and a redevelopment plan that has the backing of the citizenry and property owners, and all the while being sensitive to its historic resources. We envision Old Town will be free from truck and boat traffic by facilitating direct access from McEver Road to Spouts Springs Road, to be accomplished in the city's transportation plans. Industrial establishments north of the city and in other locations will provide employment areas, and more facilities for small-scale operations and professional offices will be added to the city's mix.*

*Flowers Branch will by 2015 or 2020 have a new city hall that meets the needs for city office space and that stimulates redevelopment prospects in Old Town. Flowers Branch will encourage small parks and pocket open spaces in Old Town and elsewhere in the city. Old Town will retain its historic qualities and new development will respect historic characteristics short of artificially imitating them. The city, particularly Old Town, will become more pedestrian friendly with the addition of safe sidewalks and multi-use trails in appropriate locations. We envision being able to walk or bike safely from the peace and quiet of the city's suburban and traditional neighborhoods to neighborhood commercial facilities.*

*We envision a city that soundly overcomes its prior reputation as "sleepy," or unable to aspire to great things. Our residents will respect the city's laws, which will be enhanced to address property maintenance, housing upkeep, and development design guidelines. Enforcement of codes will not be needed or at least not become political issues. The city will master plan its water and sewer facilities, extend them as economic development priorities dictate, and become a leader in water conservation efforts. Though there will be growing pains resulting from development, the city government will expand facilities as needed to serve the new people, businesses, and institutions. We will work cooperatively with Hall County to continue receiving countywide services, maintain fire protection, and provide additional parks and*

*recreation opportunities. We will protect residents and businesses with enhanced public safety facilities when needed.*

*Flowery Branch's Old Town, with its grid pattern of skinny streets and authentic historic character along the railroad, upon revitalization with a vibrant mix of retail, restaurants, civic uses and housing and the installation of sidewalks and streetscapes, will be the gem of South Hall, the premier destination place for residents in the greater South Hall area.*

## **VISION FOR CHARACTER AREAS**

Although the citywide vision statement guides future development in all parts of Flowery Branch, we envision distinctive areas of the city that give definable meaning to its neighborhoods, activity centers, employment places, and natural areas. Vision statements are provided for each of the "character areas" described in Chapter 9 of this Community Agenda. Character area visions are intended to provide sound guidance in reviewing and approving new developments in the city.

## **QUALITY COMMUNITY OBJECTIVES**

Quality Community Objectives, as recommended by the state in its local planning requirements, are incorporated as appropriate in Chapter 11, Policies. The City may cite those as its own policies and will evaluate annexation and land use decisions in the context of these objectives and other policies, as appropriate. Where a land use decision would be inconsistent with one or more of these objectives, the City Planner and the governing body should consider the extent to which development and land use proposals can be revised so as to be consistent with the quality community objectives.

## **LIST OF ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Issues and opportunities were first identified in 2005 and articulated in the Community Assessment part of the comprehensive plan (adopted in 2006). During the visioning process in 2005 (see summary of participation above), participants had an opportunity to describe in a questionnaire whether various statements of concern were really issues or opportunities to be addressed in the comprehensive plan. The public participation process resulted in a fewer number of issues than initially proposed to be included in the plan. Also, issues that were not directly identified by the Consultant but stated during participation exercises, were included in the list of issues and opportunities and addressed in the Community Agenda as initially adopted. Following is a list of issues and opportunities that was initially approved by the comprehensive plan steering committee after input from citizens in visioning forums in 2005 but since modified as appropriate in this 2010 update; generally the list has been expanded considerably and a few of the issues were deleted as no longer applicable or relevant. Each of these issues and opportunities are addressed in the appropriate element of this updated Community Agenda (or within the addendum to the Community Assessment, as appropriate):

### **Population and Housing (Chapter 2)**

- Educational attainment
- Diversity of housing types
- Housing unit mix and tenure mix
- Age and condition of housing

- Housing alternatives for seniors
- Housing affordability

### **Economic Development (Chapter 3)**

- Diversification beyond manufacturing
- Lake Lanier tourism potential
- Home of the Atlanta Falcons
- Heritage tourism
- Urban redevelopment
- Incentives for business development
- Under-utilization of area colleges and universities
- Infrastructure planning and provision
- Nurturing small businesses
- Economic Development Council (EDC)

### **Community Facilities and Services (Chapter 4)**

- Administrative (City Hall) and police space
- Water
- Grey water system
- Sanitary sewer
- Stormwater management
- Recreation and parks

### **Intergovernmental Coordination (Chapter 5)**

- Service Delivery Strategy
- Gainesville-Hall County Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Hall County Joint Municipal Association (JMA)
- Economic Development Council (EDC)
- Development impact fees
- Geographic Information Systems (GIS)
- Annexation planning
- Special area and corridor planning
- Regional Wastewater Management Plan
- Regional Water Supply and Water Conservation Management Plan
- Regional Watershed Management Plan

### **Transportation (Chapter 6)**

- Downtown transportation study – problems and issues
- Connectivity recommendations for downtown
- Other downtown study area recommendations
- Downtown streetscape enhancement
- Road improvements outside downtown

### **Natural Resources (Chapter 7)**

- Gateway improvements
- Greenway development/stream buffer protection

### **Historic Resources (Chapter 8)**

- Creation of a citywide local landmark program
- Expansion of the existing National Register of Historic Places District

### **Character and Land Use (Chapter 9; see also 2010 addendum to Community Assessment)**

- Revisions and updates to the character area map
- Refinement of character assessment by planning subareas
- Residential and non-residential buildable lands inventories
- Jobs-housing balances over time
- Protection of existing residential neighborhoods
- Potential substandard neighborhood conditions
- Potential conversion of residential neighborhoods to other uses
- Appropriateness of mixed housing types in selected areas of the city
- Potential for residential infill in certain areas
- “Greenfield” and Planned Unit Development
- Neighborhood versus regional scales for commercial developments
- Vehicle and truck domination versus pedestrian orientation in non-residential areas
- Prospects for preparing specific area or refinement plans

### **Redevelopment in Old Town (Chapter 10)**

- Potential conflict between historic preservation and redevelopment activities
- Consistency of future redevelopment with streetscape improvements on Main Street
- Acquisition of land for construction of a city hall and police headquarters
- Tying redevelopment planning and regulation together
- Boundaries of the redevelopment area and phasing of development within the area
- Floor to area ratios (FARs) and building heights appropriate to the context
- Transportation improvements and additional infrastructure for redevelopment
- Potential redevelopment of existing city-owned properties along Main Street
- Architectural and site design guidelines for redevelopment, especially along Railroad Avenue