



CASE STUDIES IN SMART GROWTH IMPLEMENTATION

Newton County, Georgia

About the Community

Located about 35 miles southeast of downtown Atlanta, Newton County was, in terms of percentage, the 8th-fastest-growing county in the nation in 2005. Between 2000 and 2005, Newton County's population increased from 62,000 to 86,700— a rise of about 40%.

Newton County features a predominantly rural landscape dotted with a few historic small cities and sporadic residential development which is characteristic of most of Georgia's transitioning rural counties. The county is about 250 square miles in size, of which only 21% is developed. Almost half the county is still in agricultural land and the majority of the remainder is residential (25%). Less than 5% is zoned for commercial and industrial uses.

Newton County may outpace many other exurban counties in terms of population growth but it lags behind in many areas of economic development. As a newly suburbanizing county beyond the more established DeKalb and Rockdale Counties, Newton has only 0.64 jobs per household – far below the ideal of about 1.4. The County is also significantly underserved by retail development, as many new residents still travel west to shop. With only 1% of land zoned for commercial uses, the county has only 17 square feet of retail space per person while the regional average is 37.

However, Newton County's well-preserved historic cities and towns distinguish it from other ex-urban areas. The residential and commercial core of Newton County is comprised of the historic cities of Covington, Porterdale, and Oxford. Together the three jurisdictions contain approximately 17,000 residents, meaning the vast majority of the County's residents (70,000) live in low-density rural residential settings.



Affordable starter homes on quarter-acre lots attract new residents from counties to the west such as Rockdale and Dekalb, as well as from Northeastern states. Between 2002 and 2005, Newton County awarded close to 2,000 single-family home permits each year, or an average 7% annual increase, outstripping neighboring Rockdale County by over 1,000 permits in 2006.

Relatively cheap land values keep the unincorporated areas of the county attractive to developers, especially in the western part of the county, which is closest to job centers in Atlanta.

State Of Smart Growth Implementation

In 1996, Newton County and its municipalities began conducting public input and visioning sessions to periodically assess quality of life issues. The Newton County Comprehensive Plan articulates this vision for the county and serves to guide future development. Subsequently, in 2000, the Arnold Fund and the City of Covington brought in Duany-Plater Zyberk to conduct an eight-day master planning process for downtown Covington. The Covington Master Plan recommended several of the downtown initiatives subsequently undertaken by the County, Covington, and the Arnold Fund, including Clark's Grove, a southern-style New Urbanist development which serves as a model for smart growth in the Atlanta region.

In 2004, Newton County conducted a comprehensive revision of the County Zoning Ordinance, adopting a variety of growth management techniques, primarily in the form of environmental protection ordinances. The effort included revision and adoption of ordinances such as Watershed Protection, Stormwater Management, and Landscape and Tree Ordinances. An Open Space/Conservation overlay district was also adopted along with 9 additional Overlay Districts primarily intended to protect environmentally sensitive areas.

Three of the districts provide for the mixing of residential and commercial uses, including the Residential Neighborhood Development, Town Center, and Rural Village Overlay Districts. The latter is intended to allow multiple uses outside of designated mixed-use areas while preserving the County's rural and architectural character.

More recently, Covington adopted conservation subdivision and traditional neighborhood development ordinances that permit clustering and higher densities in designated districts.

Newton County references the recommendations for land conservation in an Open Space Plan but it has not been formally adopted by the County and therefore is not official County policy.



In 2006, the City of Covington and Newton County began working to update their future land use plans with the assistance of a local planning firm to ensure that the plans will be compatible and comprehensive. The new plan, which was prepared with extensive public input, will guide the location and intensity of future development process. The Plan is currently pending approval from the Georgia Department of Community Affairs and adoption by the County Council.

Based on the recommendations of the Livable Centers Initiative (LCI) study conducted in 2005, the City of Covington and Newton County are currently conducting traffic studies regarding congestion at the intersection of Highways 278 and 142. Funded through a grant from the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) as part of its Signature Community Program, the Connectivity Study is the first in a series of community improvement programs.

The City of Covington recently passed a model zoning ordinance designed to encourage mixed-use development within the city. The ordinance will enable the implementation of the recommendations of the LCI study and can also be calibrated for other growth areas.

Most of the local Newton County landowners and developers do not have experience in smart growth development. There are relatively few neighborhoods that reflect smart growth principles. Projects that do reflect the principles were developed by out-of-state and regional developers. However, smart-growth style projects are increasing in number and market success throughout the Atlanta region.

East Haven, a recently constructed exclusive housing infill project in the downtown Covington Square, is within walking distance to commercial businesses, professional services, schools, and churches. East Haven offers a variety of housing types that reflect the architectural history of the area, demonstrating opportunities for developing pedestrian-friendly projects close to the existing urban center of the County. However, this knowledge and expertise has not reached the more suburban portions of the county.

Conservation subdivisions are permitted within designated overlay districts and are widely used throughout the county. The reduced construction and infrastructure costs associated with higher densities are an attractive alternative to developers. Similarly, the County has shown interest in implementing a Transferable Development Rights (TDR) program as utilized in Fulton County's Chattahoochee Hill Country.

The Smart Growth agenda in Newton County has been primarily driven by the not-for-profit sector rather than the business or public sectors.

With its well-equipped facility, knowledgeable staff, and contacts throughout the region, the Center for Community Preservation and Planning has acted as a facilitator and mediator between stakeholders from the county, municipalities and community-based organizations since 2002.



The Arnold Fund is a local family non-profit dedicated to preserving the local cultural history of the county and preparing for future population growth by financing growth models. However, the Arnold Fund has limited resources and would benefit from partnerships with entities dedicated to provide new approaches for growth in Newton County.

There are active local citizens groups such as Smart Growth Newton County. The group, which consists mainly of large landowners in the western part of the county, supports greater density in the development nodes and opposed the county's imposition of minimum square footage requirement as a means of controlling growth.

Local developers informally support quality growth principles but currently operate under regulatory and market conditions that permit large-lot residential developments.

At the Newton County Leadership Collaborative held in 2005, County public officials, leaders of public organizations, and experts from the Georgia Conservancy, the Atlanta Regional Commission, among others, came together to discuss issues surrounding county-wide growth. Public officials are also sensitive to the fact that the County is gaining a reputation for providing moderately priced starter homes on spacious lots – but with few amenities. The new housing tracts in the west county sometimes put a strain on roads, water systems, and local schools. However, these concerns have not manifested themselves as “smart growth” activism per se so far.

Lessons Learned

Segment the problem and focus your efforts

Development in Newton County falls into 3 distinct geographies, each driven by its own dynamics. There is rapid residential growth in the western part of the county, a strong, traditional town center in Covington City, and there are wide, agricultural landscapes in the eastern part of the county. Smart growth implementation can achieve more by focusing on achieving specific results distinct for each segment

- *Focus on connectivity in high-growth areas*

Development in the west follows a sprawling development pattern of residential subdivisions consisting of 60 to 100 single-family homes on quarter-acre lots. These neighborhoods are disconnected, increasing congestion on limited local roads. Newton's affordable single-family starter homes and quality schools make it the logical choice for blue-collar workers and young families as well as a bedroom suburb for places like Rockdale and Dekalb Counties. However, the lack of connectivity exacerbates existing traffic congestion created by residents leaving the county to work and shop.

Increasing connectivity by creating more efficient circulation patterns and nodal developments along corridors will enable more orderly growth of future residential neighborhoods and commercial centers. By encouraging developers to build new projects



to provide for better interconnectivity between both new and existing projects, development patterns and traffic conditions will improve. Future growth will also be siphoned towards existing developments and enable more efficient use of available land by promoting growth near highway interchanges and off-ramps.

- *Strengthen identity and sense of place in the core*

One of the biggest assets in Newton County is the existing core comprised primarily of the City of Covington and the smaller towns of Porterdale and Oxford. These popular charming southern destination spots are all contained within a three-mile radius, and are also easily accessible from a number of US, state, and city roadways. Historic Main Streets have been preserved for their historic character and continue to anchor the area's small town appeal. The Covington city center provides opportunities for shopping and entertainment for the 600 students attending and largely living on the Oxford University campus located within a short distance of downtown.

Downtown Covington can effectively become a focal point for future infill development. The development of new roadways can provide alternate routes for local traffic circulation and relieve the traffic burden on US 278, and perhaps can connect these three historic areas more effectively. With quality design, new streets and sidewalks should improve access to retail, commercial and other services without encouraging through traffic or high-speed travel. Opportunities for mixed-use and adaptive reuse such as the Porterdale Mill Lofts exemplify the outcome of good planning and quality growth policymaking.

- *Preserve the landscapes in rural areas by concentrating development*

Current conditions in the east mirror those in the west prior to the arrival of widespread residential development. Newton's policy and advocacy efforts have focused on reducing densities and increasing house and lot sizes to counteract the effects of unplanned, sprawling development in the predominantly rural east. Rather than trying to block growth in the east, Newton County should work to concentrate it.

Maintaining the rural quality of life to the east and south of Covington will require moving beyond simply lowering densities and increasing minimum lot and house sizes. The more new growth can be concentrated around nodes in the eastern part of the county, the more its rural character can be preserved.

Look for allies at the regional level

Regional knowledge about smart growth is increasing rapidly in metropolitan Atlanta. At the same time, the capacity of local organizations in Newton County is limited. Perhaps the most significant effort The Center could undertake would be to connect with regional organizations such as the Department of Community Affairs (DCA), the Livable Communities Coalition, and the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) in leveraging existing smart growth projects and catalyzing new ones.



Newton County has both much to gain and much to offer by associating more closely with regional organizations dealing with growth issues.

Newton County is already home to several smart growth projects or initiatives such as Clark's Grove, the Porterdale Mill Lofts, East Haven, and the Metropolitan Design Studiowhich can become major demonstration projects with the appropriate industry alignment and political support. The quality growth models in Newton are less urban in nature than elsewhere in the region, but these examples can be offered up as the focus of a regional conversation. In return, Newton may benefit from the collective learning process enabled by a regional planning framework.

The Georgia Department of Community Affairs offers technical assistance to local communities specifically in achieving sustainable development through strategic planning and quality growth.

The Livable Communities Coalition is a non-profit organization that promotes quality growth throughout the Atlanta region. The Coalition can lay the foundation for focusing growth around existing centers by developing relationships with key owners of land suitable for quality growth redevelopment. The Coalition can also foster lasting relationships with developers who may be amenable to quality growth development with timely community responsiveness and political backing.

The Atlanta Regional Commission is the regional planning and intergovernmental agency for the ten-county metropolitan area. The ARC's mission is to implement strategies to unify the region's collective resources while preparing for future population and economic growth.

Forge strategic relationships with local institutions and employers

The Center's ability to acquire technical and financial assistance is an important strategy for getting smart growth projects on the ground. The Center should consider forging relationships with institutional and technology-oriented employers that may be interested in partnering on smart growth projects on selected sites. Outside assistance harnessed by The Center will enable Newton County to position itself more strongly in the market place by speaking to new trends in residential designs and more smart growth qualities in new developments. Partnerships between the Arnold Fund and other donors will enable continued investment in growth models and land conservation efforts. New regional relationships will assist in it the uphill battle of reaching out to the region's infill developers and encourage them to find opportunities along Highway 278 between existing centers.



Explore land conservation options in rural areas

Preserving rural land throughout the county requires strategic land conservation efforts.

The County, The Center, the Arnold Fund, and other local organizations should work together to create a cohesive land conservation or open space strategy. Adoption and implementation of a formal guide for development will reduce undesirable growth patterns. Tools such as the conservation subdivision ordinance, Transferable Development Rights (TDRs), and private land conservation efforts can then be used to implement the principles of the plan. This will protect open space in a manner desired by many stakeholders while reinforcing nodal development as described above.

The remaining tracts of rural land in the county are ideal for land conservation strategies such as TDRs and conservation subdivisions. TDRs will provide for long-term land conservation while focusing new growth around existing nodes. Newton County's Open Space Conservation Residential Overlay District permits increased residential densities that minimize the environmental impacts of development. But without linking land conservation options back to an adopted Open Space or Land Conservation Plan, undesirable growth patterns will continue.

The Arnold Fund can also support large-scale conservation efforts.. Future investments can potentially be used to fund the investigation and implementation of a TDR program. By identifying those areas least suitable for residential development and adoption of a formal Open Space Plan, Newton County can provide clearer options for the Arnold Fund and other investors who seek to provide for long-term conservation of rural and forested land.

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Tools used: *Smart Growth Project Scorecard
Smart Growth Strategy Builder*

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About the Case Studies

Communities across the country are facing tremendous opportunities to shape their future and provide solutions to the most pressing local, national and global challenges of our time. Community leaders, serving as stewards of the future, have the power to change previous patterns of unsustainable growth and realize the benefits of smarter growth.

The Case Studies present the key findings and lessons learned about smart growth implementation from the Smart Growth Leadership Institute's four-year technical assistance program that was funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The Case Studies are meant to help communities that are committed to (or are exploring) smart growth but struggle with its implementation. The cases highlight successful strategies in building support, in identifying the most problematic policies and in other issues that typically accompany a major change in development practice. The case studies also showcase the use of the tools included in the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.

Visit www.sgli.org for more information about the Smart Growth Leadership Institute.

Visit www.smartgrowthtoolkit.net for more information about the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.