

Message From Mayor Tom Reed

I wanted to share some thoughts today on the history and intent of our zoning, and how the reality of development pressures and legal realities will impact us in Chattahoochee Hills. South Fulton Parkway was built as an economic development driver; it was lobbied for by members of this community to bring development opportunities here.

Our comprehensive plans and zoning have acknowledged from the beginning that there was no possibility of preventing development from happening in what has since become the City of Chattahoochee Hills. The goal has always been to save as much as possible of the rural landscape, character, and community here, but in the context of the development that is inevitable.

Our Comprehensive Plan says: *“City residents recognize that coming development pressure must be channeled into an acceptable form that fits the city’s vision and enhances the city’s tax base. Therefore, the village, hamlet and AG-1 vision for the city (from the Focus Fulton 2025 Plan) was revised into a Town, Village, Hamlet form integrated with traditional rural/agricultural development...Outside of the intentionally densely developed mixed-use nodes – Village and Hamlets – the city’s rural character will be preserved, with a strong focus on allowing agricultural uses and preservation of the rural public realm and rural vistas that are highly valued by the community.”*

Some may not have been involved or even here yet during those conversations, and some may have forgotten conversations they were involved in or even changed their stance between then and now. None of that changes the reality that development is all around us, and it is coming here. Our best possible outcome is to manage it thoughtfully.

You can look across every border of Chattahoochee Hills and see that development happening. While our success in keeping the wrong sort of development from happening here over the course of the 15 years since we've become a city may make it seem as if we can just prevent change altogether, that's just not true.

The quadrant of the Atlanta region that we are in is the last mostly undeveloped area in all of Atlanta. According to the Atlanta regional Commission, the region is expected to add two million additional residents in the next 25 years. There is no way for us to escape the impacts of all of those new people coming to the region.

Unfortunately, one of the greatest development pressures in our area is for distribution warehouses. You can see that both along South Fulton Parkway and in Palmetto. Between the two, over 30 million square feet of warehouses have been or are in the process of being built. Each one of those is expected to create over 700 semi-truck/trailer trips per day, per million square feet. That's 21,000 semi trips per day, just around us in South Fulton. But there is obviously huge demand for additional housing as well. All of those additional people have to go somewhere. And we hold the closest undeveloped land that's left in metro Atlanta. Investors bought huge tracts of land along South Fulton Parkway in anticipation of the development possibilities that the Parkway was built to encourage.

Jurisdictions around us that don't have our kind of protective zoning have typical residential subdivisions popping up on every single parcel where it is physically possible. A quick drive down Tommy Lee Cook Rd. proves the point. New developments have been permitted on almost every parcel, and many are already under construction. Unlike in Chattahoochee Hills, they are not buffered, they are not required to preserve open space, and they're allowed even on small parcels. In 20 years, there will be nothing rural left between us and Newnan. The same is true to our west in Douglas County. What's happening to our east in the city of South Fulton and in Palmetto is very different from what our plan allows, given the number of hastily built rental-home communities and warehouses that have been permitted, some of which are already under construction.

So, if we're going to have development, what makes it different here in Chattahoochee Hills? Several things:

First and foremost, the fact that 70% of the land will be permanently protected from development, while the development that does occur is compressed into the remaining 30%, is baked into everything we do. The addition of our buffering requirements makes sure that most of that development will barely be visible, so most of the community will continue to look and feel as it does today, regardless of ongoing development.

That's not to say that there won't be an impact; obviously, there will be many impacts. Some of those, like the traffic that new developments bring, will not be pleasant. That's just a fact. But the benefit of the sort of dense, walkable, mixed-use development that we require is that it creates far less traffic. The fact that residents can walk their kids to school, walk to restaurants, walk to work, and walk to services, all internal to the development that they live in, means that there are far fewer trips

outside, and far less impact on the surrounding communities. Serenbe is a great example, with residents averaging somewhere between 3 and 4 vehicle trips per household per day (amazingly, this includes both construction traffic and “tourist traffic”). This compared to an expectation of 10 to 11 trips per household per day in an “typical” suburban subdivision. We expect the same trends in the future hamlets and villages we will use to absorb most development here.

This type of development is also very beneficial to the municipality from an income-to-expense-ratio perspective. Dense building creates a lot of property tax and requires less in infrastructure and service costs. Serenbe is already a great example, having disturbed fewer than 200 acres with development, or about half a percent of our overall land mass, yet Serenbe produces over half of our city’s local taxes, while remaining largely invisible to the rest of the city. By any definition, this is an example of “smart growth.”

The proposed movie studio is another example we must seriously consider. The plan shows that the buildings will not be visible from the road, and the impacts are very low for the amount of revenue it will generate for the City. If approved, it will almost triple our property tax receipts at build out. That money would allow us to do several things. For one, we will be able to reduce property tax rates on everyone as a result. We will be able to pave more of our roads. And we’ll be able to have more public safety personnel to mitigate the impacts of all the people traveling through our city from the development that’s happening all around us. It would require almost 10,000 average homes to create that same tax impact; imagine even half that number of homes and associated cars when you think about this proposed studio.

And we need that tax revenue. We do not have enough money to keep our roads from deteriorating. We do not have enough money to have the number of police officers on duty that we really need to service a town this large in the face of the changes around us (irrespective of the *fact* that we’re doing so much better than we ever could have under Fulton County). While a few people have said to me, “I’m happy to pay more in taxes,” the reality is I get far more complaints that our taxes are too high, and they *are* high compared to many of our peers in Fulton County.

The good news is that we do have developments coming that are designed to fit our zoning. We’re expecting to receive our first Village application soon. This will also feel scary to a lot of people in that it will have dense mixed-use development on a fairly small parcel of land on the Parkway. But it will also create the first funding for our TDR program (about which I will write more next month), which is the other

important component of our whole plan, because the benefits that it creates for non-developing landowners who want to maintain the rural character where they live.

Based on current estimates, this program will pay hundreds of millions of dollars to the people living on the approximately 26,000 acres in our city (of our 38,000) to NOT develop. They can use that money to pay off their mortgage (or for whatever they want), and the resulting conservation easements on their land will permanently reduce their property taxes. We're the only jurisdiction in the region that has even tried to do something so bold. The simple reality is that in most of the Atlanta region, small landowners have been forced off of their land by ever-increasing taxes as development fills in around them. And in most of those towns around us, 90% of the land is eventually developed. There's simply no possibility of any rural community being left in those circumstances.

Nothing is perfect. But the plan crafted by wise generations of thoughtful Chattahoochee Hills residents working with the nation's foremost experts on the subject of land preservation is far and away better than anything ever attempted in the region and is absolutely our best hope at creating an outcome that's different from what is happening in literally *every* community around us. Development that is higher in revenue and lower in impact fits what our community agreed upon years ago, so we aren't compromising or giving anything away to big developers. This has been the plan all along, as anyone can see by looking at our Comprehensive Plans over the years.

We are sticking to our plan while our neighbors let their communities get paved over, because they did not form plans, and are therefore helpless to prevent it. But we are definitely at an inflection point. If we ignore the long-established intent and thus-far successful implementation of our zoning, and instead try to just say "no" to developments that fit the vision we have articulated, some may feel they've won a temporary victory, but we all will lose in the long run. Georgia is a property-rights state. Developers who are prevented from doing what the zoning allows them to do can sue, and they will win, and such victories would strip us of our protective zoning. If we want the warehouses, garbage dumps, and rental subdivisions that are the norm in the rest of South Fulton, then resisting instead of intelligently absorbing development is the best way to be sure that we get them. But I'm committed to working for a better outcome, because I love this City and it is so important to get it right.

With hope for our City's future,
Tom Reed