



August-September 2015 Stakeholder Meeting Takeaways

On August 10-12, 2015 and September 21, 2015, the Next Ten team met with numerous key stakeholders in Sandy Springs to understand the range of goals for The Next Ten planning process and to identify challenges and opportunities to be addressed as part of the Comprehensive Plan and Small Area Plans. Stakeholder meeting participants included the Mayor, City Manager and City Council members; members of the Planning Commission; the Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee; HOA leaders; members of the Economic Development Advisory Committee; the Sandy Springs Conservancy; the Perimeter Community Improvement Districts; Art Sandy Springs; Sandy Springs Education Force; and the Community Assistance Center.

The following is a summary of major themes that emerged during these conversations, organized by categories of comments.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Meeting participants offered the following general observations regarding needs and goals for the future:

- General goals for the planning process and the future of Sandy Springs include:
 - Maintenance of existing “small town”/village character.
 - Maintenance of neighborhood character and quality of life.
 - A Sandy Springs that is balanced (high/low income, older/younger populations), green, connected, and livable.
 - Addressing traffic congestion issues, development, and the quality of schools.
 - Protecting quality of life (green space, mobility, magnificent neighborhoods) in an area that is urbanizing, with the balance tilting toward preserving neighborhoods.
 - Defining the city’s character in the future, incorporating the existing small-town, residential feel of much of the city.
 - Policies that address traffic, density, and connectivity, as well as finding the proper balance between single-family and multifamily residential.

- A stronger unification of purpose and a knitting together of Sandy Springs.
- A greater sense of place, given that the city feels like a cut-through to many.
- Sustainability, congestion relief, and connectivity.
- Diversity.
- Helping the community understand traffic dynamics and density.
- Coordination between Sandy Springs and Dunwoody, as both are working on Comprehensive Plans.
- A plan that looks into the future – the farther the better.
- More citywide demand management.
- Residents love the location of Sandy Springs and the convenience it provides.
- People come to Sandy Springs because of schools, safety and MARTA rail accessibility.

NEIGHBORHOOD CHARACTER AND HOUSING

- There are concerns about the number of apartments in Sandy Springs.
- The city's housing challenge is bad for the long-term health of the community.
- There is a lot of low-income housing and high-end housing, but a hole in the middle of the housing stock.
- The city lacks generational diversity and opportunities to live close to work.
- There is a need for middle-class housing stock, including small single-family lots.
- Teachers, policemen, firemen need to be able to live here.
- Encourage more people to live near their work.
- There is a need for more owner-occupied housing, and a better diversity of housing options.
- There are opportunities for new infill residential development in the Perimeter Center that will reflect a larger demographic shift (e.g., large numbers of people have elected to move to rental housing, including millennials who prefer to live near mass transit and people looking to downsize)
- Pill Hill is seen as an independent node where affordable housing for staff is critical to the success of the hospital.
- Poverty will keep growing, even if there are fewer low-income apartments.
- It is better to be a mixed city than one with extremes. The City should encourage mixed housing – by age, disability, and income.
- The loss of low-income apartments affects schools and rents.
- The old apartments need to be fixed, but replacements need to be mixed. We need opportunities for everyone, not just the rich.
- There should be a dispersal of low-income housing, particularly in the north of the city.
- The only way to redevelop the apartments is to increase density.

LAND USE AND ZONING

- There is a wave of growth coming, and Sandy Springs will look dramatically different in the future; however, it is likely that District 1 and two-thirds of the city will not change significantly.
- There is too much density, too many apartments, too much office space: some areas have hit their thresholds and there is a need to determine how to responsibly manage growth.
- Reduce the number of zoning variances and increase code enforcement. There has been a bad pattern of “land use decisions by zoning,” variances, and decision-making on a case-by-case basis.
- Place a control on the level and quality of growth, avoiding “growth for growth’s sake.”
- Explore code flexibility that allows for innovative practices.
- Identify strategies to manage teardowns without destroying property values.
- Identify catalysts for redevelopment, where needed (e.g., north end of Roswell Road)
- Provide more opportunities for people to live near where they work.
- Consider phased implementation of recommendations to ensure quality of life.
- Explore opportunities for high-rise development around MARTA stations.

TRANSPORTATION

- Stated transportation goals include:
 - Address traffic congestion (including flow to/from Cobb County) and the “pass-through” nature of the city.
 - Improve transit connections:
 - Manage the current car focus and become more transit-centric.
 - Encourage more use of, and connectivity to, MARTA.
 - Focus on transit and multimodal options to get to/from City Springs, including opportunities for free shuttle service and trolleys.
 - Provide incentives to use the transit/multimodal system, including office and hotel shuttles as well as the Perimeter Connects program.
 - Increase interconnectivity – perhaps a City-run transit system.
 - Improve last-mile connectivity to MARTA stations
 - A regional focus on creating attractive mass transit is required. Conduct conversations on transportation with other jurisdictions to explore opportunities.
 - Consider dedicated bus lanes as one potential solution.
 - Improve the pedestrian realm.
 - Upgrade bike facilities.
 - Improve multimodal connectivity, including traffic management, walkability, and bikeability.
 - Address parking concerns, including ensuring that the City’s expectations are consistent with the rest of the market.

- Improve transportation infrastructure (e.g., at the south end of Roswell Road)

ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

- There is a need to retain existing business:
 - As most businesses rent and came from somewhere else, they have no connection to the community and can go elsewhere if mobility and quality of life suffer.
 - If there is a lack of available space in the future, the companies that want to grow will choose to grow elsewhere.
- Support local and independent small businesses.
- The city is oversaturated with employment, and there is a need to understand the number of new employment bodies relative to the number of new housing units.
- Identified areas with active development include Roswell Road, Perimeter Center, Pill Hill, North Springs, Power's Ferry, the river corridor between Morgan Falls and the bridge to Roswell, and the Powers Ferry Landing area.
- The north end of Roswell Road is seen as an opportunity for new development, consisting primarily of single-family homes, with some mixed use.
- The Powers Ferry area will be positively impacted by the Braves Stadium, potentially providing an opportunity for high-rise development.
- The south end of Roswell Road has a variety of development and business conditions. One of the primary concerns is east-west connectivity.
- There are many ongoing projects in and near PCID. In 10-20 years, this area will look like Midtown; this is where the market is headed.
- Focus on economic benefits and benefits from sales tax dollars: there is a need to tell people that congestion and a full parking lot is not necessarily a bad thing, even though some residents think the city is at a breaking point (due to traffic, etc).
- Explain how the City will pay for proposed future improvements.
- The "Sandy Springs syndrome" is the presence of large single-family lots, obsolete apartments and obsolete retail, with nothing in the middle.
- "Live-work-play" does not work when 90% of the population leaves Sandy Springs for work. If people are coming to work here but don't feel like they belong, there's not a sense of pride.
- The current public process lacks certainty from a developer point of view.

PARKS, OPEN SPACE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

- Stated goals for parks and open space include:
 - Greater access to parks and open space.
 - More green spaces and recreational facilities.
 - More social and recreational opportunities (e.g., festivals, parks programming).
 - Safe, accessible recreational trails.
 - Infusing green space into a connectivity system of trails and sidewalks.

- A policy framework for stream corridor protection and connectivity.
- A list of priorities and opportunities for open space, as well as a stated City commitment to green space.
- Protect and enhance the city’s tree canopy.
- Street trees along Roswell Road and other major corridors.
- Low-cost, high-impact park projects, such as pocket parks.
- Sandy Springs residents currently have to go to other jurisdictions for bike trails and cycle tracks.
- Planning should consider the wealth of open space just outside Sandy Springs’ borders.
- Historically, challenges to creating additional green spaces have included concerns about impacts on private property and a belief that the City should not spend money on green space.
- Although the city has more river frontage than any other jurisdiction in Georgia, it is underappreciated and untouchable due to the large-lot single-family residences along the Chattahoochee and restrictions on the use of land by the river.

COMMUNITY FACILITIES AND SERVICES

- There is a need to improve the quality of local public schools:
 - This is key to retaining and attracting families.
 - There is a perception problem: we need good public schools to have a thriving city.
 - School quality affects people’s desire to live in Sandy Springs and near their work.
 - The schools have a large mobility rate: for example, 30% of the students change over each year, either coming in or leaving the district because they have moved.
 - Encourage diverse schools (Heards Ferry is a good example).
 - The entire city needs to embrace the schools: there is a need for better PR and for resident volunteers (e.g., reading programs)
- The City should explore the feasibility of taking over some County functions (e.g., libraries, schools).
- The City could implement educational programs and work-study programs (e.g., welding,) with scholarships for workforce training.
- Incorporate training and collaborations with local organizations.

ARTS AND CULTURE

- Arts-related opportunities include:
 - A public art plan or a maintenance plan/budget.
 - The arts can spur economic development, and should be considered mission critical for the Comprehensive Plan.
 - Replace planters with pedestals that are purchased from existing artists inventories.
 - Installation of community pianos, with donors.
 - Create an “art path,” with a phone tour.
 - Gateway art installations to create a sense of place.

- Downtown art gallery.
- There is a need for greater rallying around the arts in Sandy Springs, including general operating funds from the city.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

- The name/brand for the planning process should emphasize the future.
- Outreach should clearly state the purpose of events/activities and the next steps.
- Education, and helping to separate fact from myth, will be important (e.g., explaining the pros and cons of a no-growth policy; what is within the City's control in terms of addressing traffic)
- Many people do not come to public meetings due to issues of access, income, or power. There is a need to involve people in resolving these problems, and to give people a reason to stop and give input.
- Give people a reason to stop and give input: give them something (e.g., goodie bags) because they are giving their time; give them name tags.