

Walking the Talk

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***'Plans are worthless.
Planning is essential.'***

Dwight David Eisenhower (1890 - 1969), US Army General and President of the United States

UNDERSTANDING PLANNING AND ZONING

On a recent episode of "Clearly" I met with Douglas County Planning Director Tracy Rye and the Chairman of the Planning and Zoning Board, Larry Lewallen, to get a better idea of the process of planning and zoning as it pertains to Douglas County.

The first question I asked was "Why not let everyone do what they want to do with their own property? Why do we have a Planning and Zoning Department, and why do we have zoning rules, regulations and laws?" First, planning and zoning promotes the health, safety, aesthetics and general welfare of the County. The Department promotes orderly and beneficial development and expansion of the County while ensuring the protection of individual property rights through the enforcement of the Unified Development Code. In addition, through the Comprehensive Planning process, the Planning and Zoning Department, under the direction of the Planning and Zoning Board, develops the blueprint for the growth of the County.

This information led to several other questions. "What is the Comprehensive Plan, and how is it developed?" The answer is very interesting. The Comprehensive Plan represents the 25-year growth and development plan for the County. The Comprehensive Plan is updated every 10 years. The State of Georgia is a "bottom to top" State which means that locally developed plans are used to develop regional plans which then go towards developing the State's planning initiatives. Therefore, local plans are tremendously important in terms of developing growth policies and procedures. Locally, plans are developed in cooperation with a stakeholder group appointed by the Board of Commissioners, and the plan moves forward with the approval of the BOC. This becomes the "Road Map" of how the County will grow over the planning period.

If the Comprehensive Plan is our road map of where we want to go, the Unified Development Code is the vehicle that drives us down the road. It is the set of rules and regulations of how properties can be developed. It addresses building setbacks, landscaping requirements, building materials, roadway development specifications, and where certain uses are allowed ranging from residential to industrial. It also determines whether or not a property may need to be rezoned to fit a particular use.

"What is the process for rezoning, if it is needed?" Rezoning is based on an application process and can include Special Use Permits and Future Land Use Map amendments, where necessary. The first of several items analyzed include whether or not the proposed rezoning request is in conformity with the County's adopted Comprehensive Plan. If not, a Future Land Use Map amendment request would come in to play. Another aspect that is looked at is whether or not the applicant's request fits into the fabric of the area where the request is made. Are there similar uses in the surrounding area? What impact will the proposed use have on the area in general? Zoning occurs in the public realm, and involves a public hearing where both the applicant and those in opposition to a request have a voice.

The Planning and Zoning Board runs the public hearing process in a joint meeting with the Board of Commissioners. The Chairman of the Planning and Zoning Board provides guidance for the P&Z Board members, convenes the P&Z Board in both their capacity as a zoning board and as a variance board. The P&Z Board is responsible for the preparation of the Comprehensive Plan with Department Staff as well as being responsible for the interpretation of the Unified Development Code when the Staff's interpretation is called in to question.

The Board of Commissioners, as elected officials answerable to the public, have the ultimate decision-making authority on all zoning matters.

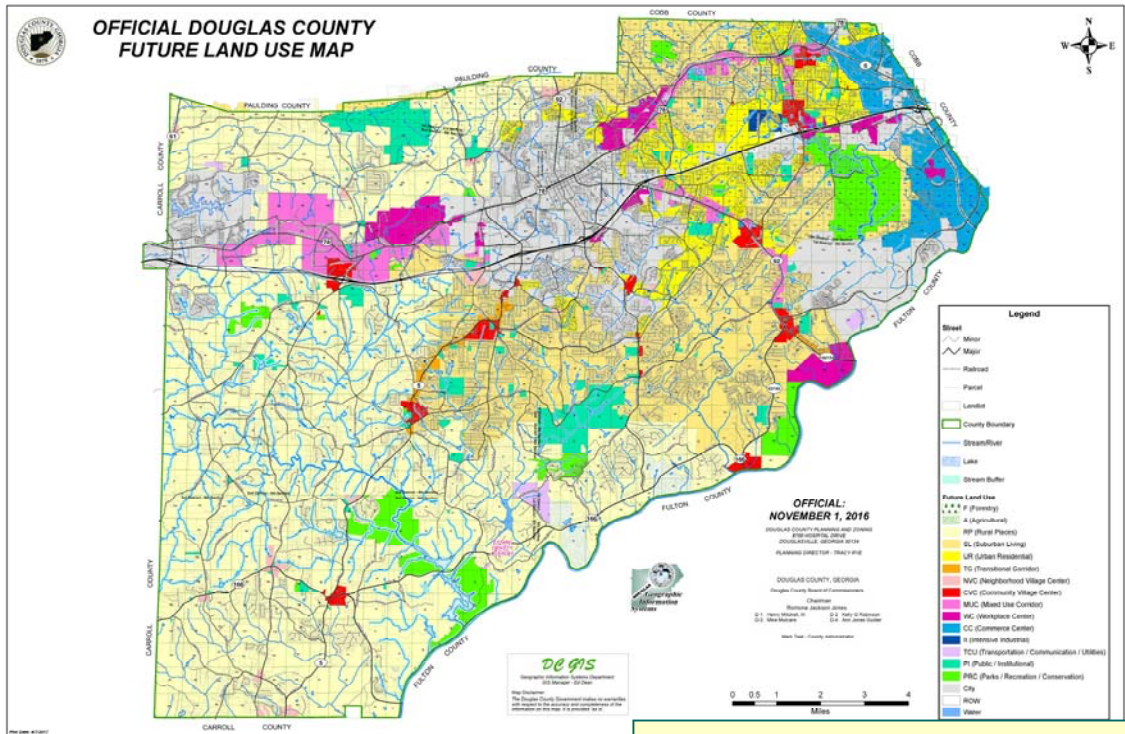


The Planning and Zoning Department has many other responsibilities including the enforcement of the sign ordinance, watershed protection, the Neighborhood Stabilization Program, and code enforcement, and I will be telling you more about these subjects as time goes on.

Ms. Tracy Rye is the Planning and Zoning Director, and she can be contacted at 770.920.7241 or trye@co.douglas.ga.us. The Planning and Zoning Department page of the County web site at www.CelebrateDouglasCounty.com has a lot of information and forms.

Please remember to tune into 'Clearly', the program I host on dctv23 that features interviews and information about County departments and programs, and other subjects of interest, such as planning and zoning. The show airs at 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. daily, with a new show each month. All episodes are also on-demand from www.dctv23.com, so stay informed about your County government. My May show is a ride-along with Code Enforcement!

Walking the Talk with you,
Romona



These maps are viewable/downloadable from the Planning & Zoning Department page of the County web site, www.CelebrateDouglasCounty.com.

