

Needs and Opportunities

Athens-Clarke County has identified fifteen topics for which the needs and opportunities of the community can be divided. Each topic was previously associated with one of the five main categories of People, Prosperity, Place, Vitality, and Foundation on which the Community Goals Element is based. Each specific list of needs and opportunities is meant to assist in achieving desired goals by providing examples of issues that could benefit from proposed policy or be corrected from it. Through SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, the community was able to develop current and future scenarios that can be specifically discussed and addressed over the next 20 years. Furthermore, those needs and opportunities of high priority, typically those that demand attention with the next five years, have been highlighted through associated projects for implementation within the corresponding Community Work Program.

Economic Development

Athens-Clarke County strives to be one of the best places to not only to live or retire, but also work. Through a resilient and diverse economic base, the community should provide a broad range of jobs, including entrepreneurial endeavors that provide an opportunity for anyone to be successful. Already an economic hub for the region, Athens-Clarke County will use its strengths and unique qualities to support existing and new enterprises, all while continuing to foster a strong and capable workforce.

Ideas highlighted by Planning Staff, Public Discussion, Envision Athens

- Increase Public/Private Partnerships (PPP's).
- Secure jobs for high school age children.
- Jobs are needed that pay a living wage.
- Explore Commercial Improvement Districts (CID's).
- Business-friendly perception has become a challenge.
- Encourage an increasing trend of start-up businesses.
- Processes for government approval are needed for development.
- Retention of younger residents after they receive an education.
- It is difficult to maintain a consistent and reliable workforce due to high turnover.
- Review the list of all government-owned land for the purpose of maintaining and increasing the tax base.
- Athens-Clarke County has low unemployment but high poverty which signals a need for higher paying jobs.
- There is an opportunity to expand upon the strong economic base anchored by our regional healthcare activity and higher education institutions.
- Over 40,000 workers are estimated to commute into the community each day.

- The number of utility patents produced with Athens-Clarke County presents an opportunity for continued success, but may require the need for a dedicated research park.
- Athens-Clarke County has dozens of properties totaling over half a million square feet of available commercial and industrial building space.
- Adjust for changes in technology that alter the way we shop or even travel (transportation modes).

Ideas highlighted by the Envision Athens Stakeholder Facilitation Summary

(Themes)

- Losing retail to Oconee County.
- There are too many empty retail spots.
- Allow free studios for artists and musicians.
- Create an “incubator” for business and the arts.
- Existing zoning and a “no growth” attitude have affected Eastside development.
- Retain “locally grown” talent, especially within businesses, government, nonprofits, etc.
- Attracting and retaining middle income jobs for a sustainable economy.
- A need to assist local business and industry with a targeted action plan for engaging the community.
- A need for workforce development that connects qualified talent with the employers’ expectations.
- Provide coordination that leverages the resources available for entrepreneurial and small business support.

(Outcomes)

- The need for a “one-stop shop” for development services.
- Quality of life improves for residents.
- Capitalize and improve upon the “foodie scene”.
- Achieve one of the lower poverty rates in the state.
- Young adults will want to stay here and grow careers.
- Everyone is engaged in the success of everyone else.
- Young people envision a pathway early on for careers that can lift them out of poverty.
- Poverty rates will decrease significantly within the next oldest generation.
- Increase in national company interest due to zoning changes and improvements.
- Increase the number of jobs so that Athens-Clarke County is the career hub for the region, with workers living both in and outside of the county.
- The airport is viewed as part of, not just in addition to, a viable transportation network.

Education

As a community, Athens-Clarke County provides educational opportunities at all levels of learning, from early childhood through high school, to advanced doctoral research. Both public and private institutions provide a foundation for life-long learning, and the following list identifies areas to support and encourage our educational system.

Ideas highlighted by Planning Staff, Public Discussion, Envision Athens

- Well educated community and workforce.
- Additional afterschool organizations and activities are needed.
- Creation of a research park that directly serves the innovation and development of life science and biotechnology programs.
- The concept of schools serving their neighborhoods as focal points for life-long learning, functioning as community centers during afterhours.
- Possibility of new high school at the mall.
- Increase promotion of Athens Tech as an option for skilled labor jobs.
- Look to embrace the needs of college students as opposed to continuous opposition.
- Improve upon K-12 education in an effort to correct any misleading impressions.
- Increased collaboration with colleges.
- Increased technology in schools.
- Increased offerings for Spanish speaking schools.
- Highlight other higher education institutions in the community like Piedmont College and Athens Tech.
- A need for more active and engaged parents.
- More positive marketing of the school system.
- A need for “life skills” education.

Ideas highlighted by the Envision Athens Stakeholder Facilitation Summary

(Themes)

- Education is essential and should be provided throughout a lifetime from birth past retirement.
- School system issues are impacting the community and community issues are impacting the school system.
- A need for 0-3 years early care learning.
- Public perception of the school system is important to Athens-Clarke County’s ability to be a regional economic leader.
- A need for early childhood support and school transitioning.
- Creation of cultural curriculum to address various learning styles.
- Educational opportunities for homeless and incarcerated populations.

(Outcomes)

- Higher retention of quality teachers is achieved.
- One of the best school districts anywhere.
- Every school will have a farm consisting of animals and produce that can be eaten on-site.
- Higher enrollment that also achieves higher graduation rates.

Cultural Resources

Athens-Clarke County has always been rich in cultural resources that contribute to its unique character and increase its reputation in the world. Cultural resources may include art, music, film, and historic preservation, but will not be limited to those interests. In an effort to protect, support, improve, and generate the resources of our unique culture, Athens-Clarke County has identified the following list of needs and opportunities related to this aspect of quality of life.

Ideas highlighted by Planning Staff, Public Discussion, Envision Athens

- Need for an amphitheater.
- The preservation and adaptive reuse of existing structures offers benefits both financially and environmentally.
- Historic structures offer heritage tourism benefits.
- Explore opportunities to increase tourism related to the arts and music.
- Generational differences can be a challenge in understanding the various cultural resources available.
- Music needs to be recognized and embraced for its contribution to the community.
- Possible need for a venue where musicians can concentrate, play, record, or manage business aspects.
- Downtown has seemingly become unaffordable for musicians and accompanying venues.
- Embrace the uniqueness, “special vibe”, or energy of the creative scene.
- Athens has much to offer in the form of existing facilities, like the art museum, theaters, and botanical garden.
- Commitment to the culture of Athens. Define core values and principles and develop outcomes from there.

Ideas highlighted by the Envision Athens Stakeholder Facilitation Summary

(Themes)

- Take a comprehensive view of the arts and culture.

- Need for a large destination arts complex.
- Provide an opportunity for free studios for artists and musicians.
- Preserve the unique culture, history, and environment of the community.
- Build on the success and reputation of Athens-Clarke County as an arts and cultural destination

(Outcomes)

- Communicate and promote the culture of the community effectively.
- Embrace the Athens identity and keep it local.
- Continue to build and promote Athens as a cultural destination
- Attract and develop “creative” jobs.
- Integrate cultural and environment assets into the Greenway.
- Promote a collaborative culture between local college programs and local schools.

Transportation

The community seeks a balanced approach to transportation initiatives that are influenced by a number of factors. Multiple modes of transportation are encouraged for the pedestrian, bicyclist, transit rider, and automotive driver. Incorporating street infrastructure that accommodates all users will not only relieve traffic congestion, but accomplish the movement of goods and services. Through context sensitive street design, health and safety are promoted, and the desired sense of community is maintained.

Ideas highlighted by Planning Staff, Public Discussion, Envision Athens

- Opportunity exists to provide high quality transportation nodes, or transit-oriented developments.
- Align future transportation initiatives with already existing or proposed services.
- Improve upon the efficiency of bus stop times.
- Resolve vehicular congestion throughout the county.
- There is a demand for passenger rail service to Atlanta.
- Provide opportunities in which no person would have to have a vehicle to get from place to place within the county.

Ideas highlighted by the Envision Athens Stakeholder Facilitation Summary

(Themes)

- A pedestrian/bicycle network separate from roadways.
- An airport that provides travel to distance places.

- Mobility, connectivity, and access.
- Increased walkability.
- Improve safety while beautifying gateways.
- Encourage alternative transportation and infrastructure.
- Create incentives for use of park and ride lots.
- Better accommodations for the disabled.

(Outcomes)

- Promote development along underutilized transit routes.
- Increased access to retail establishments by all modes of transportation.
- Repair of streets and sidewalks.
- Flexible work schedules to help with traffic congestion.
- A successful and sustainable carpool program.

Infrastructure

Adequate infrastructure, including all utilities, should be an essential part of our growing, diverse population. Keeping environmental sustainability in mind, emerging utilities should be available to all areas of the county. Emphasis should be placed on technologically advanced initiatives and incorporating those utilities into proposed construction to ensure Athens-Clarke County remains ready to provide the services needed for the future.

Ideas highlighted by Planning Staff, Public Discussion, Envision Athens

- Address deficiencies in water/sewer capacity.
- Examine the quarry for possible reuse as a reservoir and leisure amenity.
- Land use could be directly linked to watersheds.
- Explore the sale of excess sewer capacity to neighboring counties.
- Small lot sizes make storm water compliance challenging.
- Significantly increase sustainable energy practices.

Ideas highlighted by the Envision Athens Stakeholder Facilitation Summary

(Themes)

- Better and smarter utilities including internet and improved mobile access.

(Outcomes)

- Plan for “IT” infrastructure that will benefit the next generation of business.
- Install adequate sewer in the right places.
- A cleaner downtown (smells and sights).
- Cleaner air throughout the county.

Future Land Use

The Future Land Use category focuses on the physical or built environment. Ideas pertaining to how each parcel of land in Athens-Clarke County should be developed and used tend to get the most attention. Still, it is important to keep in mind that land use is influenced by a number of factors, including overall land mass, topography, economics, social aspects, architecture, functionality, accessibility, and density to name a few.

Ideas highlighted by Planning Staff, Public Discussion, Envision Athens

- The Greenbelt has a tendency to focus development inward, which can contribute to infill housing and higher land value.
- Development has an opportunity to locate outside of Athens-Clarke County, just over the county line in an effort to avoid county regulations and land value, but still claim proximity to the county and its populations.
- A need to reexamine the zoning ordinance.
- Examine alternatives to the existing Planned Development process in terms of processing and costs.
- There is a significant amount of untaxable property.
- Opportunities to redevelop gray fields.
- Overall preparation for expected population growth.
- Multi-generational community development.
- Encourage various district themes throughout the county.
- Examine building height maximums.
- A need for contingency plans of the mall.
- Determine appropriate locations for urban design versus areas with suburban design.
- Address the high cost of land.
- Respect for private property rights.
- Examine the Highway 78/316 industrial park or an eastside location for a bio/office park.
- A need for neighborhood size markets.
- Mandatory retail space requirements do not always seem to be in line with market demands.
- Easy, undeveloped land is becoming scarce, meaning the market will turn to redevelopment of parcels soon.
- Evaluate the tiny house trend and possible regulations.
- Reduction in the minimum house size.

Ideas highlighted by the Envision Athens Stakeholder Facilitation Summary

(Themes)

- Proactive planning for the demographics and facilities we have and want.
- A Research/Innovation Park is needed to highlight the work of our local colleges.
- Redevelop Atlanta Highway as technology corridor.
- Expansion of the Firefly Trail Program.
- Vibrant downtown with less vehicles, but more open space, that is clean, walkable, and park-like.
- An opportunity to develop the riverfront with stores, concert venue, and additional nature walks.
- The mall could eventually be used as a movie studio, senior living, or revitalized neighborhood.
- Provide a part of the community that caters to the students unable to go downtown.
- Prevent sprawl into the Greenbelt and instead continue to focus inward where mobility is better.
- Given the county's small geographic area, redevelopment should be prioritized over Greenfield development as plenty of opportunity exists to improve blight along corridors and gateways, strip malls, industrial sites, and aging apartments.
- Tie land development to designated drinking watershed areas while considering water recharge.
- There is an Athens look and feel that new development should adapt to, not vice versa.

(Outcomes)

- Need for a grocery store downtown
- No more identified food deserts.
- Incentives like TDR's, CID's, TAD's, and BID's.
- Need to preserve additional historic buildings.
- Opportunities for sustainable development.
- Creation of a Downtown Parks Program.

Environment

The environment is a topic that citizens hold dear and have highlighted as an important part to of the community's future. The list compiled directly aims to address how Athens-Clarke County will be an environmentally healthy, sustainable, and aesthetically pleasing place. Through protection efforts, air, water, soil, plants and wildlife will be enhanced.

Ideas highlighted by Planning Staff, Public Discussion, Envision Athens

- Examine atypical ways of stream protection besides natural buffers.
- Increase efforts related to greenspace management, including acquisition.
- A need to reduce pollution.

Ideas highlighted by the Envision Athens Stakeholder Facilitation Summary

(Themes)

- A need for more beautification efforts and green space.
- Education about waterways; specifically, the upstream/downstream connection.

(Outcomes)

- Need for a cleaner community.
- Xeriscaping as a means of water conservation.
- Development of an air-quality warning system.
- Partnership opportunities with surrounding counties.
- A Greenbelt that accommodates changes but preserves most areas.
- Need for mandatory recycling and composting (extending the life of the landfill).

Agriculture

Though the smallest geographical land mass in the State of Georgia, Athens-Clarke County boasts an urban population. Still, past efforts have been made and proven successful at preserving agricultural practices. The Greenbelt has fulfilled its purpose of allowing the county to still claim a share of the agricultural economy and highlight sound sustainability initiatives like food production. Increased stewardship will negate harmful impacts, and farming practices will be encouraged, especially those embracing modern trends that result in responsible production.

Ideas highlighted by Planning Staff, Public Discussion, Envision Athens

- Increase opportunities for food trucks to provide affordable meals to underserved areas of the community.

Ideas highlighted by the Envision Athens Stakeholder Facilitation Summary

(Themes)

- Opportunities to support local agriculture and local food.
- Audit the viability and practicality of the AR zone.
- Allow the use of food trucks in low-income, underserved parts of the community to increase fresh food options.

(Outcomes)

- Support for both traditional and urban agriculture.
- Opportunity to be known for pioneering innovative techniques (vertical farms, etc.).

Health

A healthy community is one that is educated about the mind and body, and has the opportunity to pursue lifestyle changes should citizens choose to do so. By partnering with our local and regional health providers, Athens-Clarke County can continue to provide not only basic health needs, but advanced initiatives aimed at securing a holistic approach coupled with state-of-the-art services and technology.

Ideas highlighted by Planning Staff, Public Discussion, Envision Athens

- Access to healthy, fresh food.
- Affordable health care.
- A need for increased options in affordable childcare.
- Drug prevention and treatment programs need support.
- Provide regional opportunities for patients over that of Atlanta.
- Healthcare remains a dominant industry outside of the university.

Ideas highlighted by the Envision Athens Stakeholder Facilitation Summary

(Themes)

- Promote healthcare and a healthy lifestyle.
- Integrate medical offices into schools for services that can directly benefit children.
- Adequate number of providers and services for the population served.
- Improved access to specialists within local healthcare systems.
- Eliminate the stigmas related to behavioral health issues, developmental disabilities, addictive disease, and HIV/AIDS.

- A need for case management coordination to include increasing the public's understanding of the health care issues, coordination between service providers, and translation of services and program requirements for clients.
- Provide incentives to change behavior.
- A need for financial literacy programs.

(Outcomes)

- More adequate services and programs for the homeless to help move toward not having anyone that is homeless in the community.
- Creation of a mental health crisis response team.
- Better linkage to health care in the public school system.
- Expansion of shelters beyond just those available at night.
- Equal distribution of health care facilities throughout the community.
- More health professionals to address senior needs as retirement sector grows.

Safety

Public safety ensures the protection of citizens from physical and financial harm, but also through the promotion of constitutional rights. Our laws and efforts to uphold them will be based in part on community values and expectations. Safety will be provided through a number of methods and techniques in an effort to be fair, transparent, and successful.

Ideas highlighted by Planning Staff, Public Discussion, Envision Athens

- Continuous opportunities for community policing.
- Need for a street light master plan and policy.

Ideas highlighted by the Envision Athens Stakeholder Facilitation Summary

(Themes)

- Pursue crime reduction through non-traditional means.
- Improve public perception of safety.
- Create restorative justice programs.
- Educate about and enforce bicycle passing laws.
- Expand the police academy concept into local schools.
- Expand upon the safety programs offered to include those aimed at women to reduce sexual, financial, emotional abuse.

- Safer environment for children involved in physical activities.
- Reverse the role that family violence has on the community, especially children.
- Weapons are too readily available within the community.

(Outcomes)

- Safe walkability to schools for our children.
- Limit the number of bar and alcohol licenses in Downtown.
- Greater volunteer and mentor base.
- Establish a neighborhood traffic-calming program.

Housing

Athens-Clarke County will foster neighborhoods and housing opportunities that address the following list. Support for and preservation of diversity should be continued as it contributes to our rich history and the overall character of the community. As the population continues to grow, sustainable housing will be key for both new development and revitalization to protect environmental quality and manage costs.

Ideas highlighted by Planning Staff, Public Discussion, Envision Athens

- A need to embrace the rental trend over that of ownership.
- The average income of households does not match-up with the average sales price for homes in terms of affordability.
- A need for both workforce and senior housing options.
- A need for working family housing.
- Provide opportunities for everyone to have a quality place to live.
- Develop plans in advance for the renovation and repurposing of older buildings.
- A need for age in place housing.
- A need for diversification of housing.
- Provide opportunities for the placement of tiny houses.
- Identify ways in which to gain better control over student housing development.
- Affordable or subsidized housing options are too few with long waiting lists.

Ideas highlighted by the Envision Athens Stakeholder Facilitation

Summary

(Themes)

- Senior housing and affordable housing.
- Explore opportunities for property tax relief, especially for the most financially vulnerable populations.

- Examine opportunities to provide affordable option for public servants.

(Outcomes)

- Those who wish to own a home will be able to do so.
- Creation of a renter's bill of rights.

Neighborhoods

Neighborhoods are often identified by a sense of place, but in reality, are more than just a defined geographical boundary. The people who call them home experience a sense of belonging, a location that allows them to live freely, often alongside others who share the same sense of comfort. Neighborhoods can cultivate a shared sense of opinion, one that provides direction for the future and voices concern over perceived or real threats to their quality of life. The following list relates directly to what our neighborhoods face in the future and the goal of keeping them primarily residential.

Ideas highlighted by Planning Staff, Public Discussion, Envision Athens

- A need for inviting city entrances.
- Examine the need for instilling Neighborhood Planning Units.
- Stronger pursuit of a diverse and inclusive community.
- Provide the opportunity for creation of a downtown neighborhood.
- University collaboration can always be strengthened through communication or perhaps more formal agreements.
- Embrace community character, especially at the neighborhood level.
- Increase the opportunities for student involvement in civic engagement.
- Faith-based organizations are a strength in promoting neighborhood engagement or representation.
- Socioeconomically segregated neighborhoods still exist.
- Intergovernmental collaboration is often seen as a weakness due to extenuated timelines, duplication of efforts, or conflicting goals.
- The younger generation is beginning to engage in leadership, and should be commended and continually encouraged.

Ideas highlighted by the Envision Athens Stakeholder Facilitation Summary

(Themes)

- Improvements are needed as to the inclusiveness of downtown.
- More interconnectivity opportunities among cultures.

- Explore opportunities to increase diversity within the government.
- University of Georgia decisions can have an impact on neighborhoods and should be discussed and mitigated accordingly.
- There is a perceived and/or real threat to Athens unique culture and reputation.
- A need for public gathering and meeting spaces that are free and open to all.
- Basic infrastructure should be the standard for all neighborhoods, and a lack thereof threatens prosperity.
- Correct the stigmas that exist about public housing residents and neighborhoods.
- Open street events provide an opportunity for public gathering and promote civic vitality.
- Schools should also be used as centers for civic engagement.
- Allowance of in-law suites or studios for owner-occupied parcels.

(Outcomes)

- Beautification efforts that promote a sense of pride.
- Establish formal associations in minority neighborhoods.
- Create a public database for educating residents on neighborhood issues and zoning items.
- Creation of a neighborhood leaders program.
- Landlord Guide to ensure both owners and renters are educated about property management regulations and expectations.

Social Services

Institutions throughout the county support and sustain services and facilities that respond to the needs of our population, especially social welfare. Services provided assist in the daily quality of life for our residents and visitors, contributing to the community's vibrant live/work mentality.

Ideas highlighted by Planning Staff, Public Discussion, Envision Athens

- There exists a need to address the high levels of poverty for school aged children.
- Homelessness continues to be an issue that can threaten not only human life, but also the character of the community.
- Athens has and continues to provide a high level of urban services.
- Insufficient opportunities for childcare or parental support threaten family welfare.
- A need for more senior programs and services.
- Equalize services between eastside and Westside.
- Poverty and hunger threaten our senior citizens.
- Full, life-cycle coverage for individuals in need, from children through adulthood, to seniors.
- Fund a network manager to coordinate programs, organizations, and services.
- Regional contributions are needed for social safety net support.

Ideas highlighted by the Envision Athens Stakeholder Facilitation Summary

(Themes)

- There should be a focus on equity so that the most vulnerable get necessary resources.
- An opportunity exists to allow the homeless to work throughout the county on tasks such as beautification.

(Outcomes)

- Athens is a vibrant community that is diverse and welcoming to immigrants, as well as caring for the disabled.
- Examine the collaboration of non-profit efforts to avoid duplication.

Civic Engagement

Each and every citizen of Athens-Clarke County is entitled to experience a strong sense of vitality through civic participation. By protecting and practicing those aspects of life held closely by individuals, families, friends, neighborhoods, etc., society as a whole is lifted to an advanced level of invigorating engagement.

Ideas highlighted by Planning Staff, Public Discussion, Envision Athens

- Expansion of the Neighborhood Notification Initiative (NNI) to include information beyond planning and zoning alerts.

Ideas highlighted by the Envision Athens Stakeholder Facilitation Summary

(Themes)

- Support for a Human Rights Festival.
- A need for both indoor and outdoor, accessible gathering spaces that will provide civic engagement opportunities.
- Improvements to government openness and responsiveness, especially with regard to policies that directly impact neighborhoods.
- Allow neighborhood advocacy on government issues.

(Outcomes)

- A community spirit that is inclusive.

- Time to shift from envision to enactment.

Government Operations

The local government plays a crucial and necessary role in setting the foundation for community success and sustainability. Although many initiatives pertaining to the comprehensive plan are the responsibility of the local government, operations within this institution are not immune from examination and improvement. By consistently challenging the traditional norm in public administration, the community will achieve sustainability and a greater future.

Ideas highlighted by Planning Staff, Public Discussion, Envision Athens

- Athens-Clarke County has been, but must maintain and improve upon being an open and responsive government.
- Consolidation of government departments into more strategically located facilities that are modernized to meet growing space constraints and provide improved customer service.
- Examine new public/private partnerships similar to the Washington Street Parking Deck.
- The local government needs to advocate for more community resources as distributed by the state and federal governments.