

CITY OF NICHOLSON, GEORGIA

COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Planning is important on its own merits. Without looking ahead 20 years or more and articulating what it will need and what residents want the city to become, it is difficult to foresee how a community can reach its goals. Cities need to be proactive in planning for their future. Planning takes on added importance in the state of Georgia, since the Georgia Planning Act of 1989 basically requires local governments to prepare comprehensive plans. Technically, local governments have a choice not to plan, but if they do not prepare and adopt a local comprehensive plan meeting state standards, they do not achieve “qualified local government status” and are therefore ineligible to receive certain state grants and loans. Therefore, a strong disincentive is placed on local governments that choose not to prepare comprehensive plans.

The City of Nicholson’s initial comprehensive plan was adopted in 1998 as a part of the comprehensive plan for Jackson County and all other municipalities in the county except for Maysville. This planning effort follows the preparation of a partial plan update which was adopted by the City Council in January 2010. This document constitutes the community assessment summary report which is a part of the 2030 comprehensive plan. A technical appendix accompanies this summary report.

This summary report is organized simply with three chapters. Chapter 1 addresses the required analysis of consistency with Quality Community Objectives (QCOs). Chapter 2 presents an analysis of existing land use, an evaluation and delineation of “areas requiring special attention,” and describes and maps “preliminary character areas” for further consideration in the public participation process. Chapter 3 provides a list of “issues and opportunities” which need to be addressed in the process of implementing the Community Participation Program and in the Community Agenda (plan) document.

CHAPTER 1 ASSESSMENT OF QUALITY COMMUNITY OBJECTIVES

In 1999 the Board of the Department of Community Affairs adopted the Quality Community Objectives (QCOs) as a statement of the development patterns and options that will help Georgia preserve its unique cultural, natural and historic resources while looking to the future and developing to its fullest potential. The Office of Planning and Quality Growth in turn created an assessment tool meant to give communities an idea of how they are progressing toward reaching these objectives set by the Department. The assessment is much like a demographic analysis or a land use map, showing a community that “you are here.” Use of the assessment tool is recommended but not required in order to meet the minimum planning standards.

This chapter provides an assessment of the QCOs in the context of the City of Nicholson. This assessment draws on specific questions provided in DCA’s assessment tool, to the extent they apply. The assessment provided here is not in a checklist form, with yes or no answers (nor must it be presented that way). Because many of the QCOs have limited applicability in Nicholson, a different format was used. Also, the assessment groups together similar QCOs for a more succinct discussion and format. While not required, this chapter also presents some empirical data which help inform the assessment.

GROWTH PREPAREDNESS

“Growth Preparedness Objective: Each community should identify and put in place the prerequisites for the type of growth it seeks to achieve. These may include housing and infrastructure (roads, water, sewer and telecommunications) to support new growth, appropriate training of the workforce, ordinances to direct growth as desired, or leadership capable of responding to growth opportunities.”

Growth Preparedness: Water and Sewer

The City of Nicholson is served by the Nicholson Water Authority with water lines through much if not all of the current city limits. The Nicholson Water Authority has completed projects to replace two-inch water pipes in the City with four-inch and six-inch pipes for fire protection and future growth opportunities. The city’s Fire ISO rating was reduced from 9 to 5 as a result of these improvements. Thus, the city has planned adequately to meet future water distribution needs.

A huge limitation on Nicholson’s future growth is the lack of sanitary sewer service. The implications of continuing to increase population and add new development without the benefit of sanitary sewer service are apparent – Nicholson will continue to add dwelling units on lots served by on-site sewage management systems (septic tanks). This can have negative effects on the environment, if septic tanks leach into groundwater. To the extent that water is taken privately and publicly from groundwater in the area, the potential risks are apparent.

In order to ensure environmentally sound urban growth, the city will need to be served by sanitary sewer. However, Nicholson does not (nor do any other service providers) have concrete plans at the present time to provide sanitary sewer service within Nicholson. Clearly, planning for future sanitary sewer service is fundamental to preparing for growth. Again, if sewer is not provided, Nicholson will continue to rely on individual septic tanks, which will significantly restrict the attainable housing unit types and densities in the city. Furthermore, any efforts to

attract business will likely be shortchanged or severely limited by the lack of sanitary sewer service.

For these reasons, one of the highest priorities of this partial plan update is to immediately pursue options for getting sanitary service to at least a small part of the city (i.e., the downtown area). Permitting for such a facility could take years, even after the city explores the feasibility of options and develops firm plans for sewer. Nicholson should immediately pursue prospects for a land application (spray) system or other appropriate arrangement with enough capacity to develop with sewer service in the downtown area.

Growth Preparedness: Transportation

From a transportation standpoint, Nicholson is well served by a fully improved U.S. Highway 441, which bisects the city (runs through the middle of it) in a north-south direction. The other principal means of travel into and out of Nicholson is SR 335, which leads west to the City of Jefferson. SR 335 is not presently overburdened with traffic but is experiencing increasing traffic volumes, raising the issue in the countywide roads planning process whether SR 335 will need widening in the longer-term future.

SR 334 starts well below Nicholson proper at U.S. Highway 441 and extends north to Commerce through an agricultural preservation portion of unincorporated Jackson County. It is considerably east of Nicholson, but some roads in Nicholson connect to that highway. SR 334 does not experience significant traffic volumes, since the travel time on U.S. Highway 441 between Nicholson and Commerce is faster. SR 334 does not and is not expected to serve an important traffic capacity function in terms of Nicholson's growth, given that it is considerably east of Nicholson proper, serves predominantly agricultural lands, and provides a much less direct travel route north-south between Nicholson and Commerce than U.S. Highway 441 does.

Two other routes (county roads) also provide significant access into and out of Nicholson: Waterworks Road begins west of the city and provides a direct north-south travel route all the way into Commerce. Old Kings Bridge Road runs southwest and connects with New Kings Bridge Road, thus providing access to U.S. Highway 129 south of Arcade. This route is not overburdened with traffic flows, and while it may be impacted in terms of future growth in unincorporated Jackson County, it is not expected to need improvement in the short term or perhaps longer.

From a road standpoint, Nicholson is therefore pretty well situated to handle the projected population increase. However, as noted in another section of this Chapter (see transportation alternatives), Nicholson for the most part lacks alternative transportation infrastructure.

Growth Potential Vis-à-vis Annexation

Nicholson's growth preparedness also relies on relationships between the city government and the Nicholson Water Authority. In cities that control their own water system, like Jefferson and Commerce in Jackson County, extension of water service is generally a prerequisite for annexation. The same is not true for Nicholson. People are going to get water service through the Nicholson Water Authority, whether inside the city or not. As noted above, there is no sewer service offered in the city or surrounding unincorporated part of Jackson County. When water system planning and extension policies are implemented by an authority separate from the city (i.e., by the Nicholson Water Authority), there is more likely to be a coordination gap in terms of development and development policies which are controlled by the municipality. Also, as

described later, annexation into Nicholson in the past may have been motivated by some of the wrong reasons – that is, to escape land use regulation which has been absent in Nicholson until recently.

A review of the land uses and tax records of properties surrounding Nicholson reveals that almost all of the surrounding properties are agricultural, and many of those large parcels are within Jackson County's preferential tax assessment program (current use valuation for conservation). The significance of this is important – the surrounding agricultural lands will not transition to suburban or urban uses in the short term, and therefore, there is little reason for the city to consider much annexation. Furthermore, Nicholson already has substantial development potential within the current city limits. Interim policies suggest that Nicholson be cautious with additional annexations given the lack of need, and an inability to serve new lands with new municipal services.

Other Public Facilities and Services

As noted below, the city recently took on the task of zoning and land use regulation. Nicholson has in the recent past considered but decided not to initiate its own municipal police force. Nicholson has a library, a city hall, a community center, a post office, and a fire and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) station. There is one school (Benton Elementary) inside the city limits. Nicholson is served by Jackson County's East Jackson Park, which is also within the city limits. Generally, there are no other significant community facilities in Nicholson.



Aerial View, Benton Elementary School

Furthermore, the southeast part of Jackson County including Nicholson is somewhat distant from many countywide facilities and services. The 1998 comprehensive plan alludes to evolving needs in southeast Jackson County with regard to future services. In particular, it was suggested in the 1998 comprehensive plan that Nicholson and southeast Jackson County need to be better served by county public health facilities; presently residents of the area must go about ten miles to Jefferson or Commerce to visit the county health centers. It is good planning for the county to consider those future needs, and it is in Nicholson's interests to facilitate the eventual location of new county services within the city limits.

Land Use Regulation and Administration

Nicholson did not adopt a city zoning ordinance until November 2008, and other development-related regulations were not put in place until 2009. It is important to note that all recent annexations by Nicholson (some 490 acres in the last five years, as noted above) have meant that property owners were going from some regulation in unincorporated Jackson County to no regulations in Nicholson. Such a situation does not tend to promote quality growth and, in fact, may be an incentive for development that otherwise cannot meet the county's regulations.

Nicholson made an important, bold step to institute zoning and land use regulations. Without such regulations, Nicholson invited land use conflicts and as noted above provided a perverse incentive for attracting the kinds of development no other jurisdictions will permit. Adopting zoning was a controversial political issue for Nicholson, however, and some property owners may remain disenchanting with the imposition of land use regulations.

With adoption of land use regulations comes the considerable task of actually administering the land use regulations. Nicholson must make good, early steps toward administering land use regulations in a fair and balanced way. Nicholson is becoming more prepared to administer the zoning regulations, with the temporary assistance of a consulting city planner. However, there are additional steps to be taken, to ensure administration of zoning and development regulations in a proper, efficient fashion.

The city's zoning and land use regulations were put in place rather hastily, though the substantial need for such regulation tends in itself to justify prior swift action on the city's part. This means, however, that the regulations are not fine-tuned fully to the needs of the City of Nicholson, and certain amendments or even rewrites are advisable. Comprehensive reviews of all adopted land use regulatory ordinances are needed (the analysis provided in this document is not comprehensive, since it is limited to an assessment for consistency with the Quality Community Objectives).

In summary, Nicholson has put in place land use regulations but needs to fine-tune and rewrite portions of them for two reasons: to implement the quality community objectives, and to clarify, correct, and supplement interpretations of the ordinances which were hastily written and adopted. Given the political considerations surrounding adoption of zoning the first time, and disenchantment with new zoning rules on the part of some of the population, it is not an inviting thought to have elected officials resume controversial discussions about land use. That is something, however, that the city council will need to be bold about and to initiate. The city must also put in place the proper administrative machinery to implement the regulations in a fair, consistent, and professional manner.

Understanding of Land Development Processes

Because Nicholson is in its infancy in terms of implementing and enforcing zoning and land use regulations, it is understandable if the current elected officials of the city do not have a complete understanding of the new zoning and development requirements recently put in place in Nicholson. As alluded to above, Nicholson was justified in rapidly moving to adopt zoning and land development regulations, but it may not have fully understood all of the implications of some of the regulations adopted. There may not have been sufficient debate and visioning regarding what types of regulations were most important for Nicholson, when the recent regulations were adopted.

Some cities establish city planning commissions in order to help fill the need for citizen understanding of zoning and land use regulations. Nicholson has so far elected not to appoint a planning commission. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult in small towns to get volunteers to serve in unpaid positions on the planning commission, and to take a certain amount of political flak in doing their volunteer duties. It is worthwhile to pursue education on the part of the city council members with regard to the adopted land use regulations and the need for their amendment. Some consideration needs to be given to establishing a planning commission in order to supplement the public's understanding of comprehensive planning, zoning, and land development regulations.

Leadership Capable of Responding to Growth Opportunities

As alluded to above, leadership needs to be coordinated between the Nicholson City Council and the Nicholson Water Authority. Furthermore, to attain any quality growth, Nicholson will need to work with the Jackson Area Chamber of Commerce, Nicholson Water Authority and perhaps even the Jackson County Water and Sewerage Authority to plan out future water and sanitary sewer service and decide what Nicholson will provide to attract future quality growth, especially some non-residential and institutional development that will provide job opportunities. Because the constraints are large, and utility systems take years if not a decade or more to plan and bring to construction, Nicholson needs leadership now to begin the tough journey of overcoming these constraints. Effective leadership will begin this task immediately, as again it will take some time before the city sees results. It may very well be that leaders initiating efforts now will not see the fruits of their labor, given the extended time frame involved in pursuing these long-range goals.

EMPLOYMENT, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

Three Quality Community Objectives are related to economic development and education. They are listed below:

“Appropriate Business Objective: The businesses and industries encouraged to develop or expand in a community should be suitable for the community in terms of job skills required, linkages to other economic activities in the region, impact on the resources of the area, and future prospects for expansion and creation of higher-skill job opportunities.”

“Employment Options Objective: A range of job types should be provided in each community to meet the diverse needs of the local workforce.”

“Educational Opportunities Objective: Educational and training opportunities should be readily available in each community – to permit community residents to improve their job skills, adapt to technological advances, or to pursue entrepreneurial ambitions.”

Because there is a very limited economic base within the City of Nicholson, these Quality Community Objectives lack current relevance in the city’s context alone. Nicholson’s commercial land use totals less than two dozen acres in 2009, and it has no land uses classified as industrial (see existing land use data later in this chapter). Nicholson has about 42 acres of public-institutional development, but that includes a school, city hall, and post office and thus does not account for major institutional employment. Put simply, Nicholson does not have a non-residential base of development which would generate significant employment opportunities. Nicholson is, by and large, a bedroom center with a small economic base.

These observations are made with the intent of simply identifying the context (and limitations) within which Nicholson can be expected to attain these QCOs. They do not imply these objectives are unimportant or unattainable. In fact, the opposite is intended – this discussion should lead city officials to think about the types of opportunities they have (and the obstacles to overcome) for increasing economic activity within the city limits. This partial plan calls for a downtown place-making effort in the city’s comprehensive planning process. In the interim, this partial plan update provides a suggested focus area within which plans to develop a downtown area should be refined.

Nicholson generally does not meet the employment options Quality Community Objective (QCO) because it generally lacks employment opportunities of all kinds. Therefore, it would be beneficial for Nicholson to recruit all types of employers. However, without sanitary sewer, no prior recruitment plan, and no designated industrial zone, it is unlikely that Nicholson would attempt to recruit manufacturing establishments, and manufacturing is the industry most closely associated with the labor force in Nicholson as of 2000. Also, there is very little retail trade conducted in Nicholson, but since a significant share (13.7 percent) of the year 2000 labor force was employed in that industry, it would be beneficial to recruit some retail stores to Nicholson. And, that is particularly appropriate given that Nicholson appears to be under-served by retail trade and food services establishments.

With Nicholson's growing population, it appears that the city is on the cusp of meeting minimum market area conditions to support some retail trade and perhaps some services and restaurants. Also, since Nicholson had no finance and insurance establishments in 2006, it would be beneficial to get a local or regional branch bank to locate in Nicholson. The presence of one bank alone is likely to provide some local lending opportunities and may spearhead some additional non-residential development. Furthermore, it is suggested in this plan update that some county administrative facilities ultimately be built in Nicholson. Again, however, expectations should be modest initially, since commercial development should generally be served by sanitary sewer which is not presently available.

Limited Land Zoned for Nonresidential Development

When Nicholson prepared and adopted its official zoning map, only a limited amount of property was placed in the city's commercial zoning district, which is for the most part the only category that will allow for economic development. A part of the downtown area (intersection of SR 335 and U.S. Highway 441 is zoned commercial, but most of this land is already developed. There is some land in the south part of the city zoned commercial, but it does not present much opportunity for "build by right" commercial development. Also, when the zoning map was prepared and adopted, it did not commercially zone some existing commercial developments.

While it is recognized Nicholson took an important step in adopting zoning, it may present a delay in pursuing new commercial development if future development proposals have to go through the rezoning process to gain the proper zoning permissions to develop and build. Nicholson's zoning permissions are not prepared to accommodate economic development objectives of attracting new nonresidential development. It appears that Nicholson needs to quickly consider some changes to how commercial zoning is applied in the city. If existing commercial sites are not zoned C-1, they will have to be rezoned before they can be built upon. The city may want to proactively zone for future commercial use in some instances, to ensure the zoning ordinance is not an obstacle or delay to future economic development efforts.

Educational Opportunities

Nicholson is located reasonably close to a number of technical schools and universities. These include the University of Georgia and Athens Technical College (both located in Athens-Clarke County), Brenau University (Gainesville), Gainesville State College (Oakwood), and Lanier Technical College (which has a satellite location in Commerce), Gwinnett Technical College, and Georgia Gwinnett College. Therefore, there are adequate opportunities for workers to increase their job skills and for people to pursue advanced education.

HOUSING AND DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS

“Housing Opportunities Objective: Quality housing and a range of housing size, cost, and density should be provided in each community, to make it possible for all who work in the community to also live in the community.”

“Traditional Neighborhood Objective: Traditional neighborhood development patterns should be encouraged, including use of more human scale development, mixing of uses within easy walking distance of one another, and facilitating pedestrian activity.”

“Infill Development Objective: Communities should maximize the use of existing infrastructure and minimize the conversion of undeveloped land at the urban periphery by encouraging development or redevelopment of sites closer to the downtown or traditional urban core of the community.”

Analysis of Housing Availability and Options

Nicholson’s housing stock provides choices in terms of affordability at the lower end of the housing value spectrum. The city does not contain any multi-family dwelling units (due principally to a lack of sanitary sewer), but it does have some duplexes and mobile home park acreage, according to the 2009 inventory.

Nicholson has some manufactured homes that are not in very good shape. The Pace Drive neighborhood is identified as an area requiring special attention due to the poor housing conditions along that street. The housing opportunities QCO is met in Nicholson only in terms of affordability, and that again is attributed to a large percentage of manufactured homes. The housing opportunities QCO stresses quality housing, and Nicholson’s housing stock to some degree lacks quality, although Nicholson has a higher median value of manufactured homes as of 2000 than the county as a whole. Hence, one should not necessarily be quick to pin that problem on manufactured homes exclusively.

There is also not a lot of choice in Nicholson in terms of housing density. Due to the lack of a sanitary sewer system, housing must remain at low enough densities (large enough lot sizes) to be served with on-site septic tanks according to the county’s environmental health regulations. This means that lots currently cannot be less than about 0.6 acre when served by public water, in order to have enough land for a septic tank drainfield and potentially a replacement drainfield. Thus, without sewer, no higher density housing development can be built in Nicholson.

Nicholson has a small employment base within the city limits. It is apparent that for those few people who work inside the city limits, they have an opportunity to (and can afford to) live in Nicholson. This is a positive finding with regard to the housing opportunities QCO.

With regard to the size of housing units, through the new zoning ordinance Nicholson has generally put in place a requirement that homes be at least 1,600 square feet in size. While that minimum size is lower than what general national market trends have supported, it may be still be restrictive with regard to households that would like to live in smaller homes. That minimum house size also has the practical effect of excluding single-wide manufactured homes. Whether that was intentional, or debated as public policy in Nicholson, is not known. However, the comprehensive plan will need to consider whether such a minimum, and its practical exclusion of single-wide manufactured homes, is justifiable and consistent with local desires and policies.

Nicholson's Land Use Regulations

Nicholson adopted a zoning ordinance for the first time in November 2008, then followed that adoption with a number of other regulations. The zoning ordinance establishes four zoning districts: R-1 (single family residences excluding manufactured homes), R-2 (single-family residences including manufactured homes), ARR-1 (agricultural and rural residential), and C-1 (general commercial business). The residential districts limit residential uses to single-family dwellings but also allow for home occupations and churches. The ARR-1 district allows for single-family dwellings, agriculture, and some agriculturally related businesses such as kennels, veterinary clinics and riding academies. The C-1 zoning district allows for retail and service uses but does allow a single-family dwelling accessory to a commercial use. Therefore, mixtures of residential and commercial uses are not facilitated, other than home occupations.

Prospects for Traditional Neighborhood Development

While mixed uses are not facilitated in Nicholson's zoning ordinance, neither is the so-called "traditional neighborhood development." The traditional neighborhood development QCO suggests that local governments should encourage more human scale development, the mixing of uses within easy walking distance of one another, and facilitate pedestrian activity. As noted later in the discussion under the transportation alternatives QCO, there is only a small part of the city that is supported adequately with pedestrian facilities that will promote walking. Mixed land uses are generally not provided for in Nicholson's zoning ordinance, as it sets out zones which cater mostly to single-function uses (i.e., conventional zoning). Furthermore, development that economically allows mixed uses in close proximity for walking requires a density that is not attainable in Nicholson without sanitary sewer. Therefore the traditional neighborhood QCO is largely not applicable in Nicholson presently, or at least not likely to be attainable in the short term time frame. However, this partial plan update called for immediate consideration of a downtown place-making effort, which should include a mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly downtown, and densification of neighborhoods adjacent to it, once sewer is available.

Infill Development

The Infill Development QCO states that "communities should maximize the use of existing infrastructure and minimize the conversion of undeveloped land at the urban periphery by encouraging development or redevelopment of sites closer to the downtown or traditional urban core of the community." For Nicholson, this QCO has limited applicability, because the city lacks a downtown or a traditional urban core to the community. As noted earlier with regard to existing land use, agricultural and vacant lands make up a majority of the land area in the city; hence there are numerous opportunities to develop within Nicholson, both residentially and for non-residential uses. The next chapter, on "Areas Requiring Special Attention," has a map that shows the extent of vacant lots and properties inside the city limits which are considered to have good potential for residential infill development.

The infill development consideration will become more important as the city tries to tie its development patterns to relate to water and sewer availability. Generally, water is available to most if not all of the city limits, and therefore, there is not really an issue with regard to attaining economy of scale for water service. Once sewer is planned, however, it will be important that the city seek a concentrated development pattern within the areas served by sewer.

Finally, it should be noted that any future annexations by Nicholson would probably not be consistent with the infill development QCO, especially since surrounding lands are almost entirely agricultural and not anticipated to be needed for development in the near term.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND OPEN SPACE

“Environmental Protection Objective: Air quality and environmentally sensitive areas should be protected from negative impacts of development. Environmentally sensitive areas deserve special protection, particularly when they are important for maintaining traditional character or quality of life of the community or region. Whenever possible, the natural terrain, drainage, and vegetation of an area should be preserved.”

“Open Space Preservation Objective: New development should be designed to minimize the amount of land consumed, and open space should be set aside from development for use as public parks or as greenbelts/wildlife corridors.”

Environmental Protection

Currently, there are no issues with regard to air quality in Nicholson. Jackson County is not within a nonattainment area which causes air quality to be elevated in terms of concerns and regulations. There are few if any areas that pose environmental limitations on development in Nicholson, as summarized below; however, there are some activities with regard to flood plain and potential soil erosion regulation that need the city’s attention in the immediate future.

Certain soils (mapped in the technical appendix) pose significant environmental limitations on development such as septic tank absorption fields. Nicholson also has some prime agricultural soils (also mapped in the technical appendix), but they are in scattered locations except for that area in the center of the city along U.S. Highway 441 which is unlikely to be used for crop production. More importantly, most of the surrounding agricultural properties are in the county’s current use assessment (conservation valuation) program and not available currently for development. All told, there surprisingly few locations in Nicholson that are suitable for development (without sewer) if one considers conservation (agricultural assessment) objectives.

There are some streams but no major rivers that run through the city limits of Nicholson. There are no scenic views or corridors identified in the 1998 comprehensive plan within the city limits of Nicholson. Wetlands exist in the extreme western part of Nicholson, along a tributary of the North Oconee River, and along a stream in the southeastern part of the city (mapped in the technical appendix).

Areas of flood hazard are limited in Nicholson to the extreme western edge of the city along SR 335, along a tributary of the North Oconee River, and along a stream in the southeastern part of Nicholson. It is important that the city initiate participation in the National Flood Insurance Program.

The eastern half of the city limits of Nicholson lies within the Sandy Creek small water supply watershed. That watershed provides a supply of public drinking water for Athens/Clarke County. The city does not have in place any regulations to implement the environmental planning criteria for small water supply watersheds, as required by the state of Georgia.

Nicholson has adopted development regulations which call for various environmental protection measures such as enforcing best management practices for soil erosion control. Since these

regulations are basically brand new, and so far the city has largely not had the opportunity to administer them given a general lack of development (other than single-lot residential uses) during the recession, more time needs to evolve before one can assess the results of development regulation “on the ground.” As noted earlier, given that the city’s zoning and development regulations were rather hastily put in place, it would be beneficial to reassess the regulations in light of all quality community objectives, especially environmental protection. Nicholson is not currently a “local issuing authority” for soil erosion and sedimentation control. Presently, review of development plans for soil erosion is relegated to the state.

Open Space Preservation

Like in other parts of Jackson County, there is a tendency to look at the vast acreage of agricultural, forest, and vacant lands in the city and assume that it has abundant open space. There are several large tracts in and around Nicholson which qualify for and are currently enjoying the “current use assessment” or “preferential agricultural assessment” provisions allowable in Jackson County. Such conservation use assessment designations are voluntary on the part of property owners, and can be considered temporary in the sense that they extend for many years (renewable), yet the property owner can opt out of the program at any time, with tax penalties. So long as market conditions do not support extensive suburbanization in the area, these agricultural lands under the current use assessment program are probably safe, and indeed will continue to remain in an agricultural use or, more or less, remain as open space.

The lands in the conservation use assessment program are not the same thing as open space protected in perpetuity, however. In that sense, Nicholson does not have any lands that are permanently set aside as open space or green space (East Jackson Park is developed recreation, rather than open space). While putting in place a major conservation program does not appear to be a priority in Nicholson, now is the best time to identify potential open space lands that can be permanently protected. In that sense, the city’s community agenda will need to treat seriously the question of whether over the long term Nicholson will preserve and protect sufficient areas for open space and passive recreation. As noted elsewhere, the opportunity to participate in an evolving strategy for a greenway (and connections from the city thereto) along the North Oconee River should be integrated into Nicholson’s future plans. Furthermore, with large agricultural tracts remaining in the city, it would be beneficial if the city incorporated the idea of promoting conservation easements on large areas likely to remain in farm or forest land for the next two decades and beyond.

SENSE OF PLACE, COMMUNITY CHARACTER AND AESTHETICS

“Heritage Preservation Objective: The traditional character of the community should be maintained through preserving and revitalizing historic areas of the community, encouraging new development that is compatible with the traditional features of the community, and protecting other scenic or natural features that are important to defining the community’s character.”

“Sense of Place Objective: Traditional downtown areas should be maintained as the focal point of the community or, for newer areas where this is not possible, the development of activity centers that serve as community focal points should be encouraged. These community focal points should be attractive, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly places where people choose to gather for shopping, dining, socializing, and entertainment.”

History of Nicholson

Little has been written about the history of Nicholson, although the City of Nicholson's official website provides a good summary account of the city's history. It was initially established as the town of "Cooper," named after the owner of a large farm in the area. Cooper was officially named "Nicholson" in 1882. The city was incorporated in 1907.

Historic Resources

There are no sites or districts listed on the National Register of Historic Places in Nicholson. The 1998 comprehensive plan lists only two historic landmarks, sites, and historic resources in Nicholson, though it maps the locations of three historic resources. The "Freeman House" is one of the oldest houses in Jackson County and was built of hand-hewn logs. The comprehensive plan also notes that the "Jackson Trail," an old Indian trail, crossed through Jackson County in the area. There is also an old cemetery that is maintained by the city. Given the general lack of historic resources in Nicholson, it does not have an established historic, natural, or scenic character that needs to be maintained. For this reason, the heritage preservation objective is largely inapplicable in Nicholson (this is subject to further study in the comprehensive plan).

Visioning for a City Center

Presently, the comprehensive plan for Nicholson does not provide an overall vision statement for the city. Therefore, the city has not articulated what "sense of place" means in the local context. Nicholson does not currently have a traditional downtown area. Given the lack of non-residential development in the city, or an identifiable city center, the city does not have areas that could be termed "mixed use, pedestrian-friendly places where people choose to gather for shopping, dining, socializing, and entertainment." For this reason, the sense of place QCO is considered largely inapplicable at this time. However, this partial plan update suggests that Nicholson can (and should) proactively work to create a sense of place and to promote development of a mixed-use, pedestrian friendly city center.

Controls and Guidelines for Aesthetic Improvement

Nicholson has adopted a sign ordinance. The development regulations for the C-1 zoning district have some provisions that contribute to improved development aesthetics. For instance, the district establishes: (1) a minimum height of 16 feet for one-story building facades facing streets; (2) requires street tree plantings and reservation of a street furniture zone of five feet along streets; and (3) requires that parking lots with ten spaces or more have interior landscape islands. There is also a set of development regulations and a separate buffer, landscape, and tree ordinance. Together, these regulations are intended to ensure that future development in Nicholson will be subjected to higher quality development standards. However, these regulations are basically brand new, and as noted previously, there is little understanding of the content of the regulations. Furthermore, the city presently does not have adequate administrative capabilities in house. The city's regulations were put in place rather hastily, and there may be significant conflicts and inconsistencies between and among the various regulations adopted.

MULTI-MODAL TRANSPORTATION

“Transportation Alternatives Objective: Alternatives to transportation by automobile, including mass transit, bicycle routes and pedestrian facilities, should be made available. Greater use of alternative transportation should be encouraged.”

Use of Alternative Transportation to Work

Nicholson does not have public transportation, with the exception of Jackson County’s Section 5311 Rural Transportation Program. Census sample statistics for workers 16 years and older residing in Nicholson in 2000 (SF 3, Table P30) indicate that of 539 workers, none rode a bicycle to work, only two walked to work, and two used public transportation. Though no more up-to-date statistics are available, the lack of use of alternative transportation modes in Nicholson is probably still true today, since the facilities and services for transportation alternative are largely absent in Nicholson (see further discussion below).

Sidewalks

As noted in the technical appendix, Nicholson has a very limited sidewalk network. Sec. 6.13 of the city’s newly adopted development regulations requires sidewalks to be installed by developers along all road frontages, whether residential or non-residential. Internal subdivision streets must also have sidewalks constructed along one side of the street. Consistent with the goal or vision to eventually develop a mixed-use, pedestrian friendly downtown in Nicholson, this plan update provides suggestions for about one-half mile of sidewalks to be constructed in what is likely to be the city’s central downtown area.

Bicycle Facilities

There are no bicycle trails, lanes or paths in Nicholson. The Northeast Georgia Regional Bike and Pedestrian Plan (2005) suggests several routes suitable for bicycle facilities, and identifies several corridors that could potentially support shared use paths, on a county-by-county basis. Within Nicholson in Jackson County, the plan indicates that SR 335 to Nicholson from the west may be an appropriate location for a bike shoulder project. The regional plan map also shows an extension of the SR 335 bike shoulder project east through Nicholson and connecting to SR 334 northeast of Nicholson. That proposed project should be articulated in the transportation component of Nicholson’s community agenda, once prepared.

Potential Greenways and Bike Routes

The Northeast Georgia Regional Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan (2005) recommends a greenway in Jackson County along the North Oconee River, from the Athens-Clarke County line northward to Deadwyler Road, thus running west of Nicholson. This project, if formally adopted as a recommended project in Jackson County’s comprehensive plan, presents opportunities for Nicholson to plan a system that will tie into the future potential greenway.

In addition to adding the project described above, and even connecting it to a future greenway west of the city along the North Oconee River, there are great prospects for formally providing a bike route connecting Nicholson to Commerce via SR 334. Since SR 334 has relatively low traffic volumes and many scenic rural resources, a bike route makes good sense. And, such a bike route could potentially be an important economic development niche for Nicholson.

REGIONALISM AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL COORDINATION

“Regional Identity Objective: Regions should promote and preserve an “identity,” defined in terms of traditional regional architecture, common economic linkages that bind the region together, or other shared characteristics.”

“Regional Cooperation Objective: Regional cooperation should be encouraged in setting priorities, identifying shared needs, and finding collaborative solutions, particularly where it is critical to success of a venture, such as protection of shared natural resources.”

“Regional Solutions Objective: Regional solutions to needs shared by more than one local jurisdiction are preferable to separate local approaches, particularly where this will result in greater efficiency and less cost to the taxpayer.”

Lack of Regional Identity

Nicholson does not share a common identity with the larger region, other than an appreciation for a rural way of life and a predominantly agricultural economy. Because the city lacks any appreciable amounts of non-residential development, there is no theme of traditional regional architecture. Nicholson is like much of unincorporated Jackson County in the sense that it has similar economic linkages to manufacturing and agriculture. For these reasons, the regional identity QCO is considered largely inapplicable in Nicholson.

Regional Cooperation Currently

There are at least three ongoing ways in which Nicholson stays connected with Jackson County and other municipalities. First, there is a Municipal Association of Jackson County which meets every month. The mayor of Nicholson and those of all municipalities in the County meet to discuss current issues in the county. A second regional cooperation effort is the Jackson County Government Roundtable, which is a regular activity intended to improve intergovernmental coordination. The Roundtable meets quarterly and includes all the government entities of the county, including the Water and Sewer Authority, municipalities, in addition to the county itself. Third, Nicholson stays abreast of economic development initiatives, since the Mayor of Nicholson serves on the Board of Directors of the Jackson County Area Chamber of Commerce.

Opportunities for Regional Cooperation and Solutions

There are a number of opportunities for Nicholson to participate in broader countywide and regional planning efforts and project initiatives. These are identified in the technical appendix.

**CHAPTER 2
LAND USE, AREAS OF SPECIAL ATTENTION
AND PRELIMINARY CHARACTER AREAS**

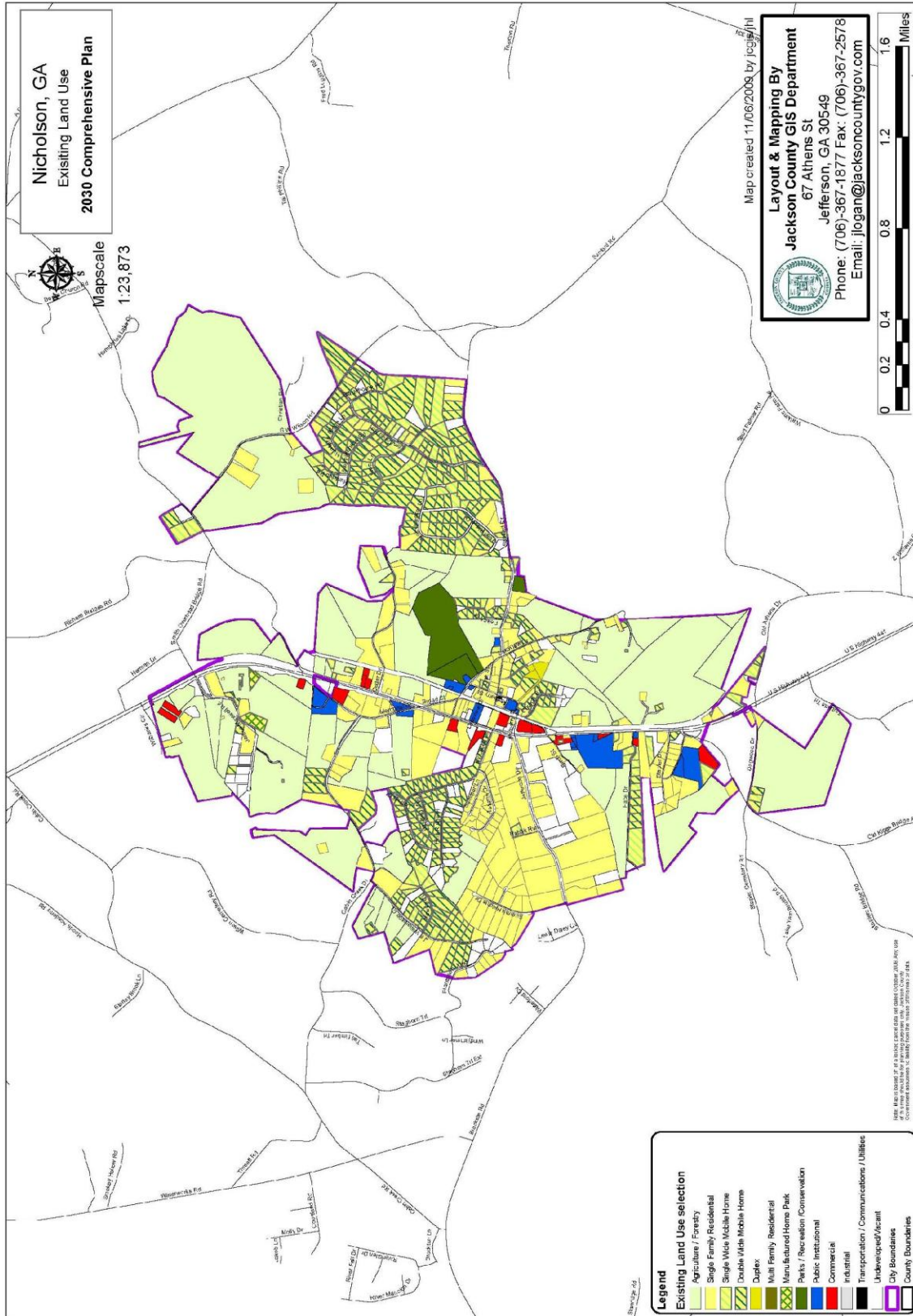
EXISTING LAND USE

Nicholson’s development patterns are already described to a large extent in the discussion of Quality Community Objectives (see Chapter 1). Existing land use acreages by category of land use are shown in Table 1 below, and an existing land use map is also provided here. Nicholson’s residential uses are divided almost equally among site-built (or stick-built) homes and manufactured homes, in terms of acreage.

**Table 1
Existing Land Use, 2009
City of Nicholson**

Land Use	Acres	Percent
Agriculture and Forestry	1,145.8	45.1
Single-family residential total	963.2	38.0
--Single-family residential, site built	493.1	
--Manufactured home, single-wide	115.0	
--Manufactured home, double-wide	355.1	
Multi-family residential total	7.8	0.3
--Two-family residential (duplex)	4.3	
--Multi-family residential	0	
--Manufactured home park	5.5	
Public/Institutional	41.3	1.6
Commercial	22.1	0.9
Industrial	0	--
Transportation/Communication/Utilities	0.2	0.1
Park/Recreation/Conservation	49.8	2.0
Undeveloped/Vacant	172.0	6.8
Right of Way	133.2	5.2
All Land Uses Calculated	2,537.4	100%

Note: The total for all land uses calculated is less than total city limits area because public right of ways are excluded.
Source: Jackson County GIS, August 2009. Revised November 2009



AREAS REQUIRING SPECIAL ATTENTION

Areas Likely to be Annexed

There are a few unincorporated islands within the current city limits, and these are shown on the map of Areas Requiring Special Attention. It is proposed that Nicholson annex these unincorporated islands. If annexed, the service requirements with regard to Nicholson will not change appreciably.

Significant Natural or Cultural Resources

Nicholson has few environmental conditions that will limit its development potential, and it has few if any natural resources such as flood plains or river corridors that need to be singled out as requiring special attention. Similarly, there are few if any historic resources left in Nicholson that would warrant additional public regulation or programs.

However, soils pose significant limitations on septic tank drain fields in Nicholson. Since there are no immediate plans for sanitary sewer service, the City of Nicholson should be careful about where it plans additional residential development. Soils that pose severe limitations on septic tank absorption fields are shown in the technical appendix. While not identified as an area requiring special attention, Nicholson should use the map of soils with severe limitations on septic tank absorption fields in reviewing development proposals to be sure that proposed development that is reliant on septic tanks will be steered into the most suitable locations.

Areas Where Rapid Development or Change in Land Uses Is Likely to Occur

Due to a lack of sanitary sewer and sluggish market conditions, there are no immediate concerns that Nicholson's development patterns will change substantially any time soon. However, this chapter identifies the U.S. Highway 441 corridor as an area that is likely to witness development changes from residential and agricultural to commercial. The U.S. Highway 441 corridor is therefore shown as the map of areas requiring special attention as an area of potentially rapid land use change. That corridor is also labeled as a "development corridor" on the preliminary character areas map.

Areas Outpacing Availability of Community Facilities and Services

As noted in chapter one under "growth preparedness," transportation facilities in Nicholson have sufficient capacity for growth. The chief limitation is a lack of sanitary sewer service. To emphasize the immediate need to plan for sanitary sewer service, the map of areas requiring special attention shows a target area for studying the feasibility of a small land application or other type of small sewer system that would serve the city's downtown area.

Areas in Need of Redevelopment or Significant Aesthetic Improvement

The U.S. Highway 441 corridor is shown on the map of areas requiring special attention, primarily because it is likely to undergo significant land use transition from residential and agricultural to commercial uses. However, that corridor also has some significance in that C-1 zoning district provisions call for enhanced quality of development.

Nicholson does not have a “downtown” in the traditional meaning of the term, but the preliminary character area map and the adopted Partial Plan Update call for Nicholson to engage the community in “place making.” The map of areas requiring special attention identifies a preliminary area within which Nicholson should strive to identify, nurture, and ultimately develop a small central core or downtown area for business and community activity. The boundary for the proposed downtown is preliminary and subject to further refinement based on public participation. The downtown area concept does not necessarily require “redevelopment,” although a few land uses may change as a result of downtown development.

Large Abandoned Sites or Structures

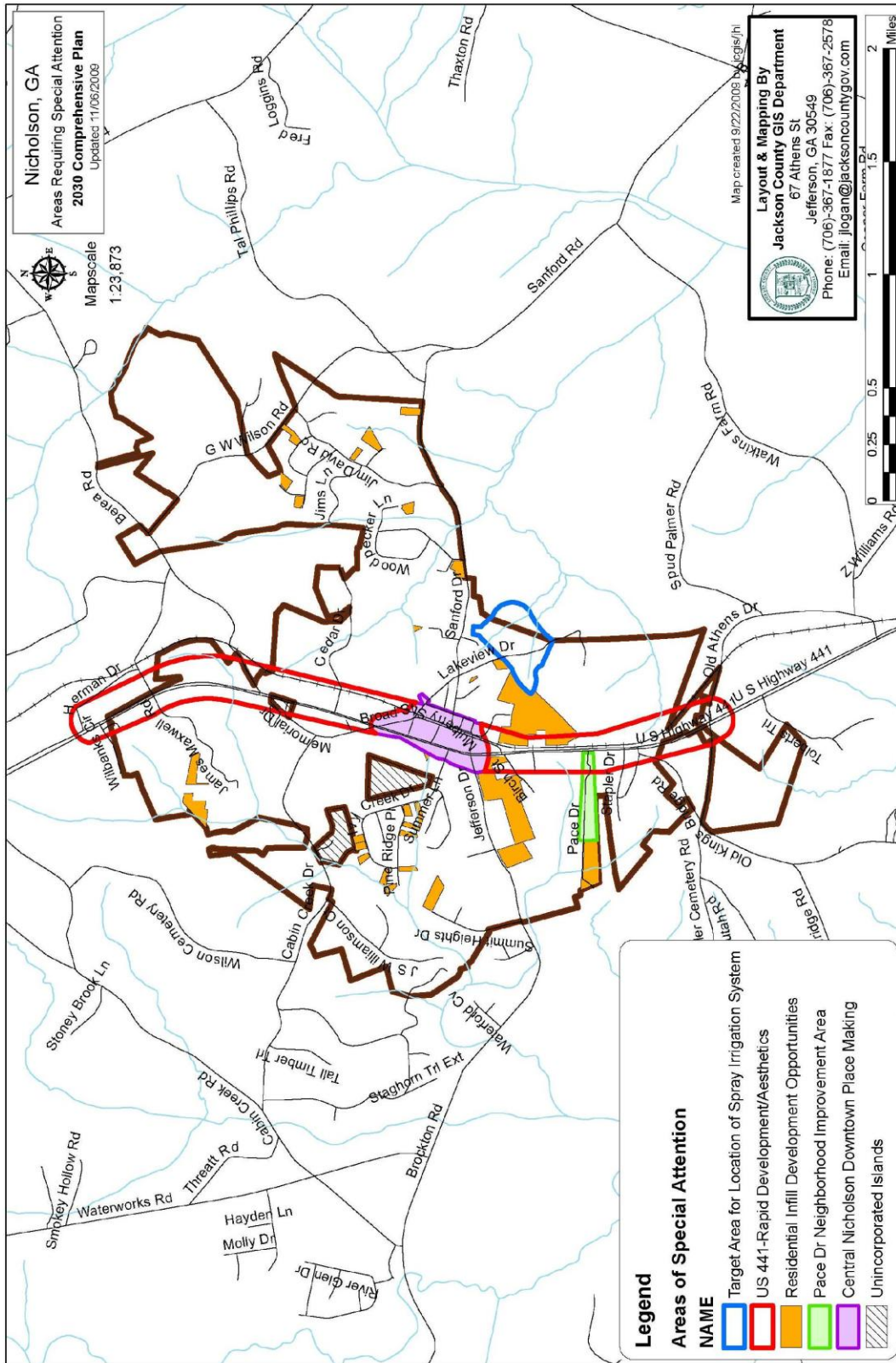
Nicholson does not have any large sites or structures that have been abandoned. There are one or more sites that were previously operated as commercial uses which have been abandoned or discontinued, but these do not constitute large areas of concern. Therefore, there are no such sites or structures identified on the map of areas requiring special attention.

Areas with Significant Infill Development Potential

The map of areas requiring special attention indicates several residential lots and other more sizable land holdings which are vacant and available for residential development. These areas indicate where residential dwellings can be added to the city’s housing stock, simply through the issuance of building permits.

Areas of Significant Disinvestment, Levels of Poverty, or Unemployment

There are no statistics reasonably available for small cities like Nicholson which would further inform this analysis. Although such data are limited, the map of areas requiring special attention shows one neighborhood (Pace Drive) that is considered locally to be a neighborhood needing attention. This area should be targeted for community development block grants or other programs that will assist with the upgrading of housing and neighborhood conditions.



PRELIMINARY CHARACTER AREAS

The state rules for local planning specify that the community assessment must include a preliminary map of character areas. Accordingly, a map has been prepared of preliminary character areas and is included in this community assessment. The categories are described below. After review and refinement during the community participation process, the descriptions of character areas will be expanded to include reference to Quality Community Objectives (QCOs) implemented, as well as zoning districts and other implementation measures needed.

Agricultural Preservation

This category corresponds with large properties on the outlying fringes of the city limits which are vacant and/or used for agricultural purposes. While some of these areas may ultimately develop for housing, it is more likely that they will remain vacant or agricultural.

Park Complex

This category corresponds with East Jackson Park, which contains ballfields. This area is master planned in part by the Jackson County Parks and Recreation. It also includes the city hall and community center complex owned by the City of Nicholson.

Suburban Residential

This category corresponds with areas that are mostly developed (but with some infill potential) with single-family, detached, site-built (or “stick built”) housing. Manufactured homes are not located in these areas.

In-Town Neighborhood

This category corresponds with an older neighborhood east of U.S. Highway 441 near the central part of Nicholson. This area has a different character from the rest of Nicholson because it is within easy walking distance to the downtown area and the park complex. Pedestrian access will be emphasized in this character area. It is expected to remain mostly if not exclusively single-family residential.

Manufactured Home Subdivision Community

This category corresponds with areas that are mostly developed (but with some infill potential) with single-family, detached, manufactured homes.

Planned Unit Development

This category corresponds with mostly undeveloped lands on the east side of U.S. Highway 441. There may be some housing existing in these areas, but they are targeted for master-planned residential development. Since they are close to the U.S. Highway 441 “development corridor” character area, they should accommodate pedestrian access to any services and stores in the development corridor. It is anticipated that development in this character area will be predominantly detached, single-family, site-built homes, but certain civic, institutional, recreational, and even limited commercial uses may be included in the master plan. At present, the density of development is anticipated to be relatively low since sanitary sewer service is not

available. However, these future development areas may be master planned in a way that utilized community sewerage systems thus enabling higher density.

Public Institutional

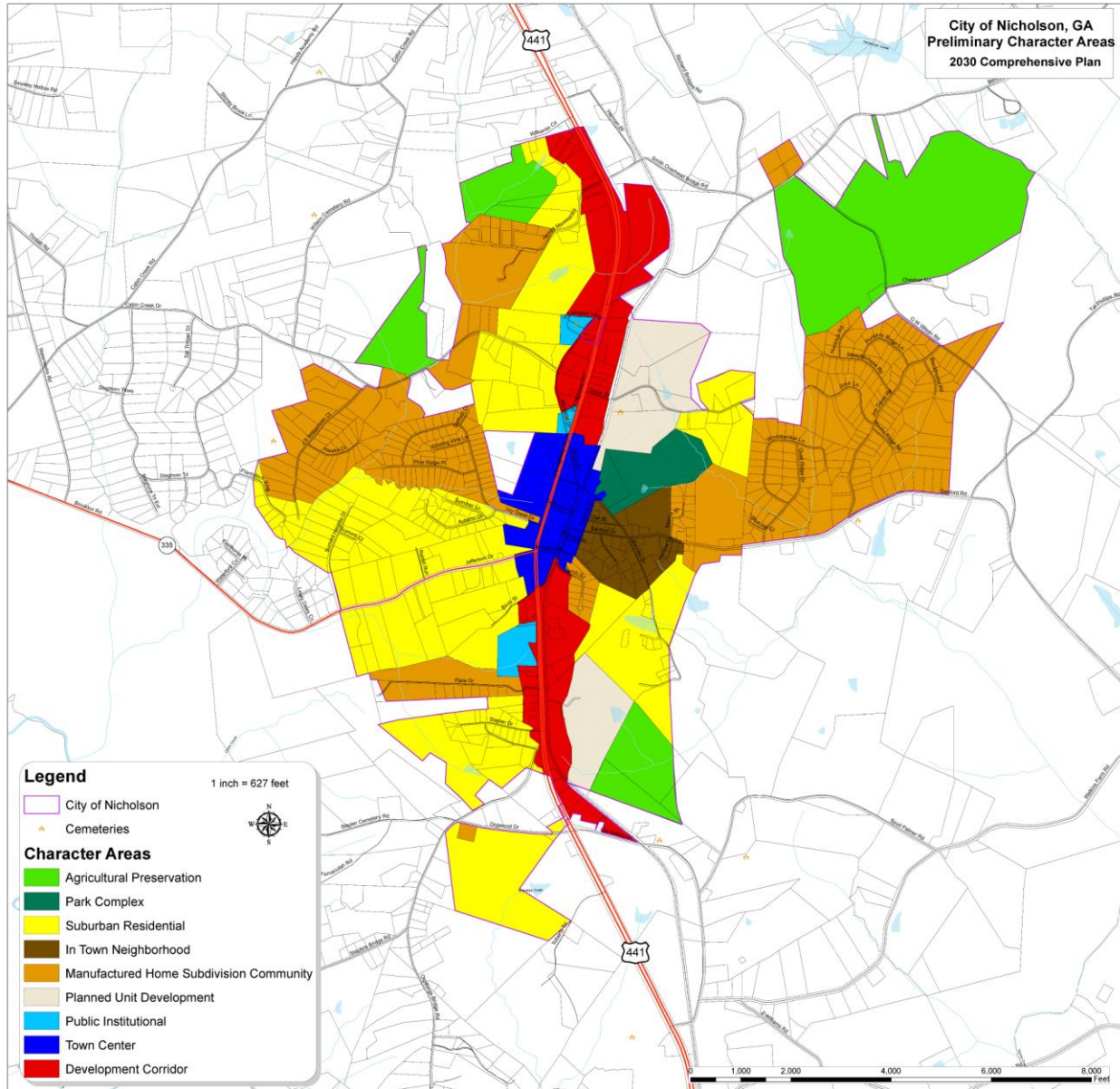
This category corresponds with schools, churches, cemeteries, and other public facilities.

Town Center

This area corresponds with the central part of Nicholson along U.S. Highway 441 but also including Broad Street which parallels U.S. Highway 441. This is the preliminary boundary within which Nicholson should plan for a concentration of commercial uses, including retail and services. Within this area, once boundaries are refined and agreed to, Nicholson will define a central place, which may be called a “downtown” or a “town center.” Particular attention will be paid to keeping the scale of the town center consistent with the low density of the city, and all new development will be “pedestrian friendly.” For the most part, auto-oriented commercial uses should be excluded. Special guidelines for scale, architecture, and site design will be needed to properly implement the vision for the town center.

Development Corridor

There are two areas in Nicholson which designate properties fronting on U.S. Highway 441 as a “development corridor.” In short, this means that a broad range of commercial uses may be appropriate, and this will be the target location for any highway-oriented commercial uses in Nicholson. While expected to be predominantly commercial, the development corridor is also anticipated to include a variety of other possible uses, including institutional uses and housing. Site development regulations will be needed to ensure that these areas do not take on a “strip” like appearance upon full development.



CHAPTER 3 ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

This chapter summarizes the various issues and opportunities that can be drawn from those preceding analyses.

COMMUNITY FACILITIES AND SERVICES

Sanitary Sewer Service

Nicholson needs to begin immediately, probably with assistance from the Jackson County Water and Sewerage Authority, to plan for providing sanitary sewer service to part of the city limits, in order to facilitate economic development and downtown place making.

Planning for Future Water Supplies

This partial plan update recommends that Nicholson participate in discussions with the Jackson County Water and Sewerage Authority with regard to early planning of a new reservoir in Jackson County. Nicholson's Water Authority will need to take the lead in that regard.

County Service Facilities

Nicholson should discuss future prospects for Jackson County locating a government service center in Nicholson. This idea may not be feasible in the short-term, but discussions should begin in the short-term. The highest identified priority for future county government facilities in Nicholson is a health center. The city should partnering with the county to secure building space in the downtown area, as a part of specific plans for the downtown.

Intergovernmental Agreements

A variety of intergovernmental agreements with Jackson County for services should be periodically revisited and updated as required. In some cases, informal arrangements for county services will need to be formalized via intergovernmental agreement.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Heightened Efforts With Regard to Economic Development

There is an immediate need to secure sanitary sewer service as a precursor to economic development efforts. However, Nicholson should begin discussions now with the Jackson County Area Chamber of Commerce, in order to be included in its economic development planning efforts and to see what types of interim activities can be conducted to spur economic development in Nicholson. Also, as previously mentioned, Nicholson should review its official zoning map with an eye toward providing additional commercial development opportunities, which are quite limited presently due to limited application of commercial (C-1 district) zoning in the city.

Downtown Place Making

Nicholson needs to develop more detailed conceptual plans for building and constructing a central place – a downtown. The planning process will specifically include a visioning process for the future city center.

GROWTH PREPAREDNESS AND LAND USE REGULATION

Annexation

Like with the Partial Plan Update, Nicholson's comprehensive plan should establish policies for annexation, and the short-term work program should call for the annexation of unincorporated islands.

Revision of Land Use Regulations

It is recommended that Nicholson revise zoning and other regulations.

Arrangement for Administration of Land Use Regulations

Nicholson has a temporary arrangement for a consulting city planner to assist with administration of the zoning and land use regulations. A longer-term solution will be needed. Options that may be considered include joining the Jefferson-Talmo Planning Commission, asking Jackson County to administer regulations for the city, hiring a staff planner, or continuing a contractual arrangement with a consulting city planner.

Improve Understanding of Land Development Processes

There needs to be some additional training of elected officials in the area of zoning and land use regulations. Strong consideration needs to be given to establishing a Planning Commission (or joining another area planning commission), in order to elevate understanding in the community about zoning and land development requirements.

Aesthetic Controls and Guidelines

While the Nicholson zoning ordinance contains some aesthetic controls, and even though the city has adopted a sign ordinance, those regulations need to be more closely integrated and tied to citywide policies for what types of quality development Nicholson would like to attract.

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Reconsideration of Housing Unit Minimum Floor Area Requirements

As a part of reconsidering the city's land use regulations, Nicholson should be aware that it may limit future housing choices with the requirement that new homes be 1,600 square feet or larger. As noted previously, this prevents the building of smaller homes and the installation of single-wide manufactured homes.

Pace Drive Community Improvement

The Pace Drive neighborhood has been targeted as an area requiring improvement, due to deteriorating housing conditions. Nicholson should seek community development block grant funds to help improve the housing, road, and community conditions in this neighborhood.

OPEN SPACE AND ENVIRONMENT

Environmental Protection Regulations

While Nicholson has put into place some significant regulations that will help ensure the environment is protected, there are some protection measures that are lacking or which need updating. As noted in the foregoing analysis, Nicholson needs to adopt regulations implementing the state's environmental planning criteria. It also will need to adopt a floodplain management ordinance to incorporate new flood plain maps which will be adopted in 2010, and it should participate in the National Flood Insurance Program. Some consideration needs to be given to becoming a "local issuing authority" under the state's soil erosion and sedimentation control act, or joining an existing local issuing authority for proper enforcement of land development activities.

Long-Term Acquisition or Protection of Open Space

Nicholson should identify in its comprehensive plan key areas that it should acquire for municipal and/or regional open space, or establish a program that will encourage donation of open spaces or land set-asides for open space, such as within conservation subdivisions.

ALTERNATIVE TRANSPORTATION

Sidewalk Improvements

The Partial Plan Update suggests a sidewalk extension program to improve pedestrian movement in the evolving downtown area. Nicholson should pursue grants in order to secure funds to construct sidewalk improvements in conjunction with downtown development.

Future Bike Route

Nicholson should identify a future bike route from the North Oconee River along SR 335, into the downtown area and to East Jackson Park, then northeast connecting with SR 334, which is conceptually proposed as a scenic highway corridor that would also include a bike route to Commerce.