

# City of Nicholson

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Jan Webster  
Mayor  
Debra Fontaine  
City Clerk

Council  
Dusty Durst  
Thomas Gary  
Lamar Watkins  
Mike Barfield

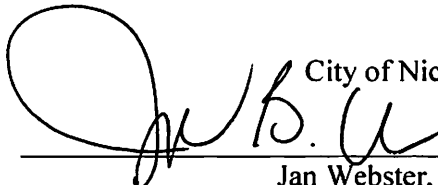
## RESOLUTION

WHEREAS, the 1989 Georgia General Assembly enacted House Bill 215, the Georgia Planning Act, requiring all local governments to prepare a comprehensive plan in accordance with the Minimum Planning Standards and Procedures promulgated by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs; and

WHEREAS, the Comprehensive Plan Update for the **City of Nicholson**, Georgia, was prepared in accordance with the Minimum Planning Standards and Procedures; and

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the **Nicholson City Council** that the Comprehensive Plan Update for the **City of Nicholson**, Georgia dated 2021, as approved by the Georgia Department Community Affairs is hereby adopted, and furthermore, that the Northeast Georgia Regional Commission shall be notified of said adoption within seven (7) days of the adoption of this resolution.

Adopted this 6<sup>th</sup> day of December, 2021.

  
City of Nicholson  
Jan Webster, Mayor

  
Debra Fontaine, Clerk

# City of Nicholson Comprehensive Plan

2021 Update



*Developed by the Planning & Government Services Division  
of the Northeast Georgia Regional Commission*

## Acknowledgements

### Steering Committee

Jan Webster, Business Owner, Mayor  
Linda Goodman, Resident  
Dusty Durst, Councilman  
Greta Ivey, Resident  
Debra Fontaine, Clerk  
Marty Seagraves, Resident, Jackson County Commissioner  
Thomas Gary, Councilman  
Kathy Wilbanks, Resident  
Maxwell Price, Resident

### Identified Stakeholders

Joyce Jones, Business Owner  
Jan Webster, Business Owner  
Linda Goodman, Resident  
Dusty Durst, Councilman  
Greta Ivey, Resident  
Marty Seagraves, Resident, Jackson County Commissioner  
Thomas Gary, Councilman  
Kathy Wilbanks, Resident  
Maxwell Price, Resident  
Jesus Heredia, Business Owner

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### Northeast Georgia Regional Commission

Burke Walker, Executive Director  
Eva Kennedy, Planning & Government Services Director  
Stephen Jaques, Project Specialist (project lead)  
Jon McBrayer, GIS Specialist

# Chapter 1

## Introduction & Overview

### Purpose

This comprehensive plan serves as a decision-making guide for local government officials and community leaders. Based on input from the public, stakeholders, and a steering committee, the plan identifies needs and opportunities, goals and policies, land use practices, and an implementation framework for key elements.

### Process

The comprehensive plan process follows the rules of the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA), Minimum Standards and Procedures for Local Comprehensive Planning, effective 10/1/2018.

### Public Input & Steering Committee

The planning process began with an **initial public hearing** and was followed by a series of **community input sessions** during which residents, stakeholders, and the steering committee were invited to discuss local trends and aspirations, as well as participate in a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analysis. Available input opportunities also included an **online questionnaire** (hard copies were available at the library). **Steering committee members** were also available to take questions and comments throughout the process (as presented at the first public hearing). The City held a **final public hearing** before transmittal of the plan to the DCA for review.

### Northeast Georgia Regional Commission

The Northeast Georgia Regional Commission's (NEGRC) Planning & Government Services Division oversaw the development of this plan, including facilitating input meetings.

# Chapter 2

## Needs & Opportunities

The following list of needs and opportunities results from a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis conducted at the first input meeting with both steering committee and public in attendance, responses to the two questionnaires, and professional analysis of relevant data. (Unless otherwise noted, all data are sourced from Esri's Business Analyst, which is based on US Census and American Community Survey figures.)

*\*Italicized entries indicate high priorities (with STWP project number in parentheses)*

### Population

Nicholson, population 1,854, is a small town in eastern Jackson County. The population has grown from 1,704 in 2010, and is projected to grow 1% annually to 1,954 in 2025 (Esri BAO). The daytime population dips to 1,402, which indicates that residents are likely leaving town for employment opportunities. The City's population is older than the state average and the City saw its median age increase from 35 to 40 years from 2010-2020. Projections indicate this trend will continue with 34% of the population expected to be 55+ by 2025. *The City should consider developing a senior service delivery plan in response to its aging population, particularly partnering with Jackson County to publicize existing services such as transit. (1)*

An aging population often correlates with a population with greater disabilities. Almost 40% of the City's households include a person with a disability, significantly higher than the state average of 25% (Esri BAO). While the percentage of the population below the poverty line (10%) is lower than the state average, the number of households on forms of government transfer payments is in line with the state average. Approximately 15% of the population is on Food Stamps and 30% of the population receives Social Security. At approximately \$66,000, median household income is higher than the state average of \$57,000. Projections indicate this positive gap will continue into 2025. Per capita incomes, however, are in line with the state average of \$30,000.

## Planning, Land Use, and Housing

Nicholson is a proud community with deep roots, and this social capital is the strongest asset of the City. Maintaining and growing these roots is a top priority for residents. The City has quality public spaces such as East Jackson Park and the Benton Center that provide ideal locations for people to meet and connect with neighbors. *As the City emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic, they should review the programming of these spaces to ensure they remain attractive places to gather. (3)*

Due to Nicholson's rural background and lack of sewer infrastructure, the development pattern is defined by scattered residential areas, agricultural/vacant land, and a handful of commercial and civic properties. Nicholson does not have a "downtown" main street, but the rehabbed Benton Center could serve as the community anchor in the future. U.S. Highway 441 bisects the town and serves as a barrier to non-automobile travel between the east and west side of the community. Subdividing family property to build new homes is a common occurrence and the availability of large-lot homes has been a selling point for newcomers. Unless the City upgrades wastewater treatment from septic systems, this pattern of development will likely persist. Given the current development pattern, the City will most likely serve as a bedroom community for Athens, Gainesville, and metro-Atlanta exurbs like Braselton.

Housing in Nicholson is almost exclusively detached single-family houses and mobile/manufactured homes. Approximately 60% of the housing stock is mobile/manufactured homes and the remaining share is single-family (with a few duplexes thrown in). Just over 72% of housing is owner-occupied and the average household spends

\$14,000 on housing. This represents 26% of a household income—below the threshold of 30% that is considered rent-burdened by the Center for Neighborhood Technology's Housing and Transportation Index. Given the high percentage of mobile/manufactured homes, it is not surprising that home values and ages are below state averages. The median home value is \$161,000 in Nicholson and only 13% of homes are over 40 years old. Almost 50% of households in Nicholson have one or two members. These households may benefit from more housing options such as accessory dwelling units, duplexes and fourplexes if infrastructure can support these housing types. *The City should review its zoning and building codes to enable more housing options consistent with available and planned infrastructure. (4)* This should occur after the City has determined whether to add a wastewater treatment system or not.

Nicholson does not have very many businesses and generally serves as a small bedroom community for Athens, Jefferson, and Commerce. The Steering Committee indicated the City's lack of sewer service is a barrier to attracting more businesses. The City is not responsible for the operation or maintenance of local infrastructure. Water is provided by the Nicholson Water Authority. The City has talked about adding sewer service, but has found it prohibitively expensive. *The City should explore wastewater treatment options to see if there is a fiscally sustainable wastewater treatment option besides septic tanks. (5)* If a reasonable option is found, the City should review its land use and zoning codes to allow a higher intensity of development than is currently available to ensure enough revenue is generated to pay for system maintenance.

The main housing challenge for the City is substandard houses owned by absentee landlords. This housing tends to overlap with reports of

illicit drug use that concern the community. While Nicholson is noted for the deep roots of its residents, the households in these substandard houses are far more likely to be transient. The City has pursued code enforcement against non-compliant property owners and has made dumpsters and volunteers available to those who are willing but unable to fix up their properties. *The City should continue to help homeowners clean up properties and pursue code enforcement against non-compliant properties.* (6)

### Transportation

While housing costs are considered affordable, the transportation costs of Nicholson households are far above the Center for Neighborhood Technology’s Housing and Transportation Index. Nicholson households spend an average of \$15,268 on annual transportation costs—29% of household income. This exceeds the 15% threshold that is considered cost-burdened. These costs are driven by residents’ dependence on the automobile for transportation. Approximately 88% of workers drive alone to work, and over 40% of workers drive more than 30 minutes from home to work. About 10% of these workers drive 60+ minutes to work. Approximately two-thirds of workers leave Jackson County for work. Establishing local employment options could help reduce the need for commuting.

As stated previously, U.S. Hwy 441 bisects the community, creating a barrier to non-automobile travel between the east and west sides of town. While there are sidewalks along this road and a crosswalk at the main intersection (Hwy 441 @ Jefferson Drive/Mulberry Street), the typical speed—in excess of 45mph—renders this pedestrian infrastructure too dangerous for consistent use. The Steering Committee noted that speeding on this road is a concern in spite of

the lowered speed limit. *The City should identify any pedestrian and bike infrastructure gaps or shortcomings and add infrastructure or redesign the street where necessary, to ensure people can safely access housing, jobs, and public facilities.* (8)



Housing + Transportation Costs % Income



*Nicholson’s Housing + Transportation profile indicates high transportation costs for residents. (Source: Center for Neighborhood Technology, Housing + Transportation Index)*

## Natural and Cultural Resources

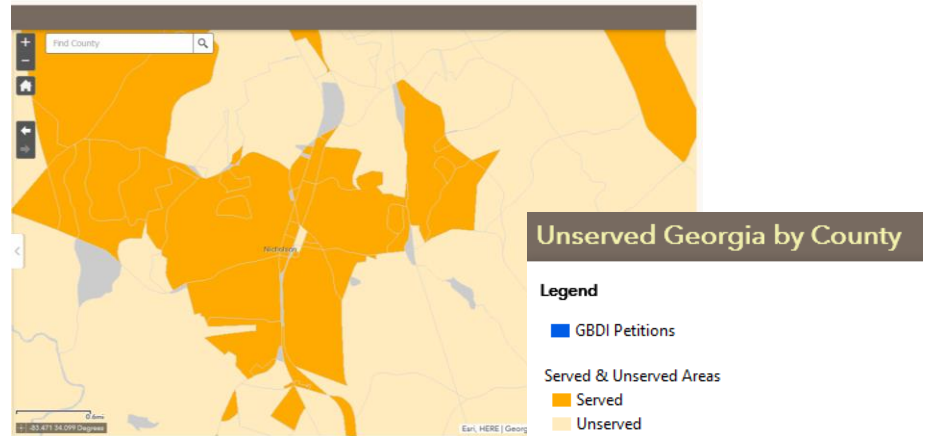
Nicholson has strong recreational assets in the form of the county-owned East Jackson ballfields, the adjacent city park with its amphitheater, and the gym at the Benton Center. These assets are quite popular with residents. The City also hosts festivals and events from time to time. These recreational and cultural resources present a strong opportunity for residents to connect with one another and form the deep community roots that Nicholson is justifiably proud of. The City should continue to maximize the value of these assets through programming, maintenance, and increasing accessibility for residents. *In particular, the City should develop a plan to maximize the value of the Benton Center as a community anchor and resource. (9)*

## Community Facilities and Services

According to the Georgia Department of Community Affairs broadband access map, Nicholson is considered “served.” The definition of “served” is 25 mbps download and 3 mbps upload. These are still fairly slow speeds and may not be sufficient for certain online activities. Stakeholders indicated that the quality of access is not strong. Additionally, 22% of Nicholson households have no broadband access. *The City should develop a plan for improved broadband deployment. (10)*



*Existing park-space is popular and the City should review programming to ensure it continues to be attractive to residents.*



*The Georgia Broadband Availability Map identifies Nicholson as “served” by broadband, but the quality is low.*



## Intergovernmental Coordination

Nicholson relies on Jackson County for many services, including policing, fire/EMS, some road maintenance, and animal control. The Nicholson Water Authority provides drinking water for most City residents. The main thoroughfare, Highway 441, is controlled by the Georgia Department of Transportation. Cooperation among these parties will continue to be essential to the successful delivery of services. The Steering Committee indicated that these relationships are in good order at this time.



*Single-family homes on medium to large lots, accessed via quiet low-traffic streets, are typical of Nicholson's development pattern.*

## Economic Development

Nicholson's primary industries are services, manufacturing, and retail. The primary occupations of Nicholson's residents include professional white collar work and blue collar work like production, and services. At 13%, the unemployment rate in Nicholson is far higher than the state average of 5%. Readers should note that since the unemployment data was taken during the Covid-19 pandemic, these numbers may not be accurate over the five years covered by the plan. Jackson County has had a 3.9% average unemployment rate over the past five years, by comparison. Educational attainment is slightly behind state standards. Approximately 14% of Nicholson residents over the age of 25 do not have a high school diploma, 52% have a high school diploma, G.E.D., or some college, and 34% have a college degree. State averages stand at 12.5%, 48%, and 39% for those categories. *Nicholson should consider working with regional workforce development resources to help residents attain employable skills and find jobs. (11)*

Since the community lacks the wastewater infrastructure to support significant commercial properties, home-based businesses may be the best option for generating local economic opportunity. *The City should review its zoning code to ensure that homeowners have enough flexibility to operate a neighborhood-friendly home-based business. (12)*

The Benton Center will soon make a business incubator space available to the public. *The City should be active in recruiting local residents to test out their ideas and incrementally build out businesses. (13)*

# Chapter 3

## Vision

Nicholson will be a thriving small town where residents can build quality homes and businesses, form deep connections with neighbors, and grow civic pride in the pastoral foothills of Northeast Georgia.



## Goals & Policies

1. Maintain and develop attractive spaces to foster community connection amongst neighbors and economic development.
2. Ensure housing stock is properly maintained.
3. Preserve the pastoral nature of the community.
4. Improve safety on roadways and ensure easy access to local parks and community spaces.
5. Expand broadband access.

# Chapter 4

## Land Use

These future land uses (FLU) correspond to the map that follows. While zoning regulations vary from community to community, FLU represents a standardized approach to envisioning and planning for desired scenarios. As such, inconsistencies between FLU and existing land use or zoning maps may arise because FLU presents a blueprint for what is to come.

### **Agriculture/Forestry**

Rural farms and forestland with predominantly production-based uses; single-family residences may be present, but typically only where agriculture is the predominant use.

### **Parks, Recreation, and Conservation**

This category is similar to the Public/Institutional category except that it covers natural uses like parks and other conservation land.

### **Residential, Single-Family Manufactured**

This use covers existing neighborhoods of single-family manufactured homes, mostly on medium-to-large lots with no sewer access.

### **Residential, Single-Family Stick-Built**

Single-family structures framed on permanent foundations, mostly on medium-to-large lots with no sewer access.

### **Residential, Multi-Family**

Small-scale, multi-unit structures with no sewer access. This multi-family use is on the scale of a duplex rather than a large apartment complex.

### **Public/Institutional**

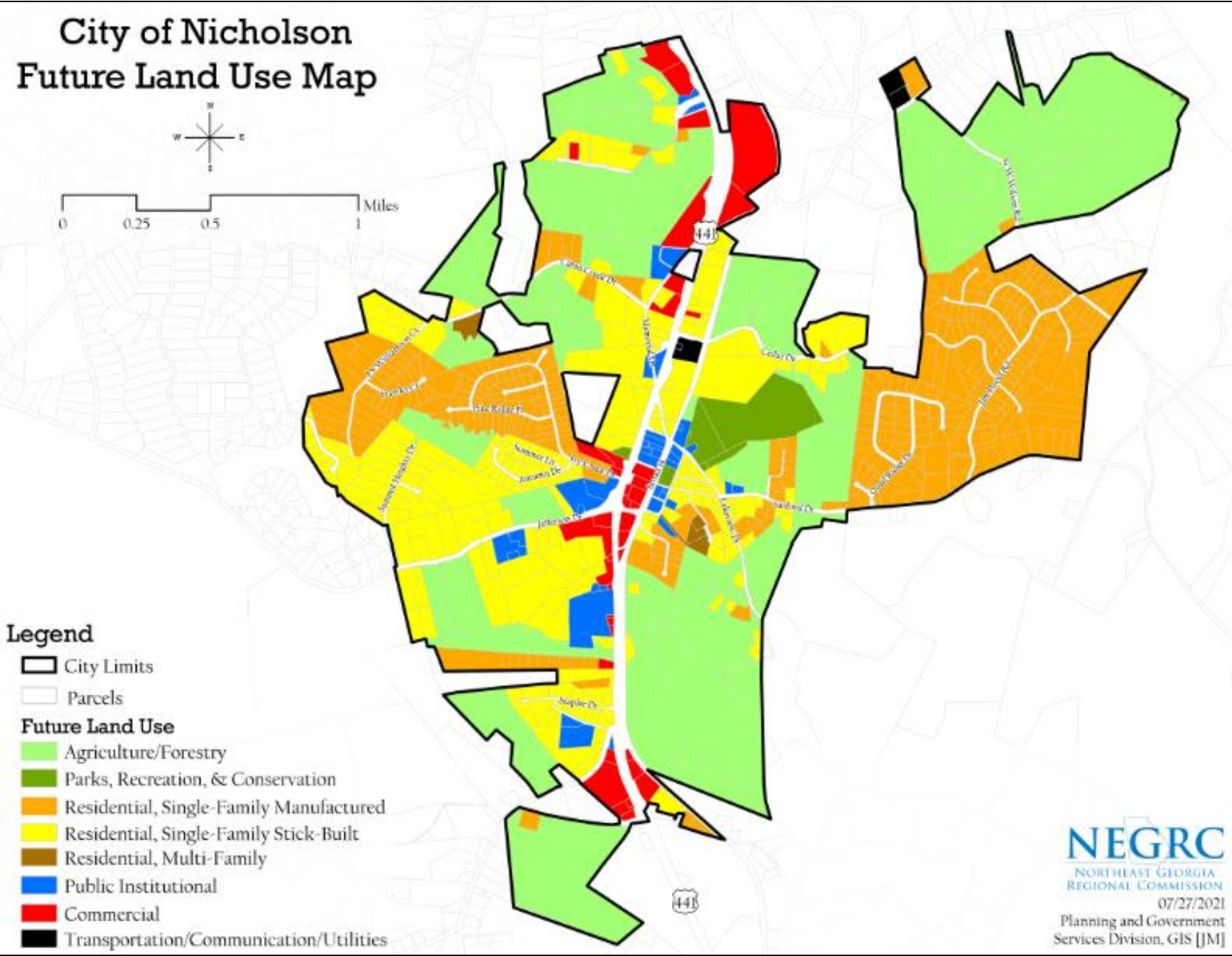
Includes a variety of institutional land uses such as public government buildings and property, as well as private uses such as schools and houses of worship.

### **Commercial**

Business and trade areas. Includes retail stores, privately owned recreation-based activities, dining establishments, and office buildings. In Nicholson, this category can be broken into two zoning classifications: Highway Commercial and Town Center. The Highway Commercial section alongside Hwy 441 is geared toward “big-box” shopping centers and the Town Center is coded to favor smaller “main street” establishments if a sufficient wastewater treatment system is installed.

### **Transportation, Communications, and Utilities**

Covers land used primarily for various kinds of infrastructure such as power stations, and cell towers.



# Chapter 5

## Community Work Program

The Short-Term Work Program (2021-2025), updated every five years, provides a list of specific activities that the community plans to address as immediate priorities. A Report of Plan Accomplishments, which provides status commentary on the previous work program (2016-2020), follows.



*The City of Nicholson hosted a popular community-wide clean-up day*



**Short-Term Work Program, 2021-2025**

(\* entries with an asterisk represent carryover items from the previous STWP)

#	Activity	Timeframe	Responsible Party	Cost Estimate	Funding Source
1	Develop a service delivery plan for seniors and people living with disabilities, including a focus on housing, transportation, and social connection.	2021-2022	Mayor & Council, staff, Jackson County, DPH	\$1,000-\$3,000	City, DCA
2	Conduct a feasibility study for a senior center	2023	Mayor & Council, staff	Minimal	City, Grants
3	Review the programs and events offered in the City's parks and public spaces to ensure that they are attractive and aligned with residents' needs	2022-2025	Mayor & Council, staff	Minimal	City
4	Review building and zoning codes to expand housing choice (consistent with available and planned infrastructure)	2024	Mayor & Council, staff, Jackson County	\$1,000-\$3,000	City
*5	Conduct a wastewater treatment system feasibility study	2023-2024	Mayor & Council, City Engineer	\$20,000	NWA, City, JCWSA, GEFA, ARC, Grants
6	Assist property owners with housing maintenance and pursue code enforcement against non-compliant properties	2021-2025	Mayor & Council, staff	Unknown	City, DCA, Grants, Loans
*7	Institute beautification efforts, including tree planting, landscaping, and gateway improvements along U.S. Hwy 441, railroad right-of-way, and entrances to City	2024-2025	Mayor & Council, City Engineer, GDOT	Unknown	City, GDOT, Grants, Loans
8	Identify pedestrian and bike infrastructure gaps and shortcomings; add infrastructure where necessary to safely access housing, jobs, and public facilities	2024-2025	Mayor & Council, City Engineer, GDOT	Unknown	City, GDOT, Grants, Loans
9	Develop a build-out and programming plan for the Benton Center	2022-2024	Mayor & Council, staff	Minimal	City, Grants, Loans, EDA
10	Develop a plan for broadband service expansion	2022-2024	Mayor & Council, staff	\$1,000-\$3,000	City, Grants, Loans

#	Activity	Timeframe	Responsible Party	Cost Estimate	Funding Source
11	Define a basic workforce development strategy with WorkSource Northeast Georgia (NEGRC)	2022-2023	Mayor & Council, Staff, NEGRC Workforce Division	Minimal	City, DCA
12	Review city ordinances to allow appropriate home-based businesses	2022	Mayor & Council, Staff	Minimal	City
13	Identify and recruit candidates for the Benton Center business incubator	2022-2025	Mayor & Council, Staff	Minimal	City, Grants, Loans



**Report of Plan Accomplishments, 2016-2020**

#	Activity	Status	Notes
1	Adopt a floodplain management ordinance	Complete	
2	Enroll in the National Flood Insurance Program after ordinance adoption	Complete	
3	Amend regulations to implement small water supply watershed protection for the Sandy Creek watershed and other application environmental criteria.	Abandoned	Existing state and county regulations determined to be adequate at this time
4	Codify ordinances into an official city code	Complete	
5	Produce rezoning and land use application forms and make available via the City's website	Complete	
6	Prepare and adopt new sign ordinance	Complete	
7	Investigating engineering feasibility of interim sewer service and longer range sewer service to Nicholson Town Center	Incomplete	Carried over into next STWP #5. The City chose to focus on building out the Benton Center instead of adding sewer.
8	Cemetery maintenance	Ongoing	Not for carryover into next STWP. This activity is part of the City's standard maintenance operations instead of the STWP
9	Participate with Jackson County and the NEGRC in county and regional solid waste management planning	Ongoing	Not for carryover into next STWP. This activity is part of the City's standard maintenance operations instead of the STWP
10	Resurface city and county streets based on pre-determined prioritization program	Ongoing	Not for carryover into next STWP. This activity is part of the City's standard maintenance operations instead of the STWP
11	Institute beautification efforts including tree planting, landscaping, and gateway improvements along U.S. Hwy 441, railroad right-of-way, and entrances to the City	Incomplete	Carried over into next STWP #7. Some of the trees and landscaping were completed, but the City lacked the ROW for gateway signage. Additional beautification efforts are in the planning stage.



#	Activity	Status	Notes
12	Install railroad crossing safety improvements	Complete	
13	Construct sidewalks along Broad St. and Lakeview Dr. to connect U.S. Hwy 441 sidewalks to city hall, post office, and county park entrance	Abandoned	Determined infeasible at this time and unnecessary without Town Center development
14	Complete engineering study of local street traffic control and a traffic management for major events in town; include recommendations for bike lanes and shared-use facilities	Complete	
15	Adopt policy for public acceptance of private streets	Complete	
16	Reconsider and revise intergovernmental agreements as appropriate	Complete	
17	Revise/seek agreement of county-wide service delivery strategy	Complete	
<b>Long-Range Projects</b>			
18	Plan and construct regional bike route through Nicholson (per illustration in plan)	Abandoned	No interest from relevant parties at this time
19	Construct new City Hall as part of the Nicholson-Jackson County government service center complex north of Town Center	Abandoned	The City chose to locate the new City Hall in the renovated Benton Center instead
20	Mulberry Street complete street renovation	Abandoned	Determined infeasible at this time and unnecessary without Town Center development
21	Broad Street improvements	Abandoned	Determined infeasible at this time and unnecessary without Town Center development
22	Gateway signage and landscaping	Incomplete	Carried over into next STWP #7. The City doesn't own the necessary ROW to erect a sign, but it does maintain the landscaping.
23	Town Center Park land acquisition and construction	Complete	

# Appendix

## Appendix: Participation Records

### Public Hearings: 2/25/2021 & 9/7/2021

**PUBLIC HEARING**  
**Nicholson Comprehensive**  
**Plan Update**

The City of Nicholson announces a Public Hearing for the beginning of its comprehensive planning process at 6:30 P.M. on **Thursday - February 25, 2021** at the Nicholson Community Center located at 1129 Lakeview Drive, Nicholson, GA 30565. The purpose of the Public Hearing is to brief the community on the planning process and opportunities for public participation therein.

***PUBLIC HEARING***

*The City of Nicholson announces a Public Hearing for the draft comprehensive plan at 6:30 on Tuesday September 7, 2021 at Nicholson Community Center, 129 Lakeview Drive, Nicholson, GA. The purpose of the Public Hearing is to brief the community on the contents of the plan, provide an opportunity for final suggestions, and notify the public of the submittal and adoption schedule.*

**Input Meetings: 3/2/2021, 4/15/2021, & 7/15/2021**

**GoToMeeting** Hub  
by LogMeIn

**MAR 2** City of Nicholson Steering Committee  
5:57 PM - 45 min | ID: 678847893



**Nicholson Steering Committee/Public Input**  
April 15th, 2021 6:00 pm  
Nicholson Library

NAME	SIGNATURE
Debbie Fontaine	<i>Debbie Fontaine</i>
Dusty Dewar	<i>Dusty Dewar</i>
Jenny King	<i>Jenny King</i>
Irma Robles	<i>Irma Robles</i>
Jean Webster	<i>Jean Webster</i>
Freda Wilbanks	<i>Freda Wilbanks</i>



**Nicholson Steering Committee/Public Input**  
July 15th, 2021 6:00 pm  
Nicholson Library

NAME	SIGNATURE
Debbie Fontaine	<i>Debbie Fontaine</i>
Greta Ivy	<i>Greta Ivy</i>
Thomas Baily	<i>Thomas Baily</i>
Irma Robles	<i>Irma Robles</i>
Dusty Dewar	<i>Dusty Dewar</i>
Marty Seagraves	<i>Marty Seagraves</i>

**Steering Committee Discussion Form**

Questions for the Steering Committee

**SWOT** (BE SPECIFIC; for example if you write "small town lifestyle" or "good neighborhood" tell us what makes it that way)

- (Strengths) My community has these advantages:
  - 
  - 
  -
- (Weaknesses) My community struggles with:
  - 
  - 
  -
- (Opportunities) My community has the potential to:
  - 
  -
- (Threat) My community is vulnerable to:
  - 
  -

**Online Questionnaire Excerpt**

Is the community safe, comfortable, and inviting for people to walk, bike, or take transit (if available) to activities, jobs, school, etc?

Is it safe for children to walk or bike to school and other activities without adult supervision?

Are local recreation facilities popular and well-used by residents? Are there any unmet needs for recreation?