

# Remembering the Efforts 20 Years Ago to Save the Rural Character of the Area (Now known as Chattahoochee Hills)



By Steve Nygren

Permission granted to reprint for Chatt Hills History  
[www.chatthillshistory.com](http://www.chatthillshistory.com)

# Table of Contents

## Forward by Laurie Searle

The following remembrances were written by Steve Nygren and posted to his Facebook in 2002. Nygren, and the story that follows, is a prominent part of the history of Chattahoochee Hills. It is with gratitude that we thank him for his community-wide effort, and for documenting the story and giving permission to share it as part of the History of Chattahoochee Hills. See: [www.chatthillshistory.com](http://www.chatthillshistory.com)

1.	Remembering the efforts 20 years ago to save the rural character of the area .....	2
2.	The beginning.....	3
3.	Organizing the land owners .....	4
4.	The formation of the Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance.....	6
5.	Naming the area.....	8
6.	Finding Phill Tabb .....	10
7.	Bringing focus and agreement among the large landowners.....	12
8.	Exploring tools for balanced growth.....	14
9.	Adding staff .....	16
10.	Community engagement.....	17
11.	The first grant.....	19
12.	Earth Day 2004.....	20
13.	Elected officials .....	21
14.	The addition of the professional planners .....	22
15.	The first public meeting .....	23
16.	The view of a generational landowner .....	24
17.	The second public Meeting.....	26
18.	The third public meeting.....	28
19.	The voice of a consultant, Robert Reed, member of Village Habitat and the ECOS Team, at the time .....	29
20.	The fourth public meeting.....	31
21.	The fifth and final public meeting .....	32
22.	Remembering the efforts 20 years ago to save the rural character of the area. ....	34
23.	Working with the County .....	35
24.	The vote.....	37

# 1. Remembering the efforts 20 years ago to save the rural character of the area

Remembering twenty years ago we were in the middle of the public process that would lead to the formation of the Fulton County zoning overlay for the most southern 40,000-acre tip of Fulton County and the branding of the 60,000-acre Chattahoochee Hill Country. This led to Serenbe and later to the formation of the City of Chattahoochee Hills. The years have dashed by in a flash and the decades are starting to flip by which is evidenced by our young daughters who now have children of their own playing in the woods of their childhood. When I glance in the mirror, the lines in my face are a non-deniable stamp that time is indeed passing.

During my seven years of retirement in the 1990s, I spent time with our neighbors and heard the stories of the open vistas of rolling agricultural land in this area. In the early nineteen hundreds, the only trees in the area were around the houses and everything else was fields or pastures. There is a long history about our area that stretches back decades and centuries that needs to be researched and documented. We have some of the stories but I fear others have been lost as some of the old-timers have passed on.

Accepting the fact that I am stepping into elder-hood, it was suggested that I share the evolution of the last 30 years since we bought the farm on a whim during an afternoon drive back in 1991. We were charmed by the rolling countryside, and the people who lived here and Palmetto, which seemed frozen in time. We got our gas at Pulliam's services station where Supermercado La Bendician now operates the restaurant and store. Mr. Huffmaster would pump our gas, wash the windshield, and give the girls each a Double Bubble gum. One of the best cat fish restaurants was down the street where 613 Main Restaurant is today. Lambert's Pharmacy was on Main Street and although the soda fountain was no longer operating, it remained in the front corner of the store as a reminder of another era.

Main Street Palmetto remains physically unchanged to the eye, but the northern edge has dramatically changed. Where the Chevron and strip mall sits was a historic home and grounds lost to development. The rural roads are nearly unchanged which is a result of the 2002 overlay. The overlay was the largest zoning change in recent history for metro Atlanta and unique for the United States as a whole, balancing development with agriculture preservation. The passage of this zoning overlay led to editorials, local and national stories, local awards, and a National Planning Association award for Fulton County.

I have had a front row seat to the last 20 years and feel the responsibility to share the history with the many people who have joined us in the last few years. Over the course of the next few months leading to the 20th anniversary of the 40,000-acre Chattahoochee Hill Country Overlay adoption in August of 2002, I will attempt to remember and share those recollections with you.

## 2. The beginning

In the sixth year of my comfortable retirement, I was alarmed one morning during our sunrise jog when my daughter Garnie and I came over the hill to see the trees in the forest adjoining our property to the east being leveled. I ran out to stop the equipment operator to find out what was going on. His reply, "We have been hired to clear the land, I guess houses are going here, that's what always happens."

I ran back to the house and called the retired doctor land owner who lived in Fayetteville. He owned this land speculating on future growth; thus, I feared the equipment operator was correct in his assessment. Weeks later, when Dr. Thompson returned from his vacation, I learned he had sold the land to a neighbor on Hutcheson Ferry Road who was putting in a pasture airstrip. The immediate threat of houses taking the place of the trees was over but we still lost the forest for an airstrip. As they dug the stumps and flattened the land for the landing strip, I kept fantasizing about the open gap in the forest becoming a wildflower meadow. (How the land eventually became a wildflower meadow is a story for another day. The disruption of the current waste water drip field expansion is mild compared to regarding the earth for the landing strip. Plus, we know the wildflowers will be restored.)

The vanishing forest on our eastern edge was an eruption to my daydreaming pastime in retirement and served as a wake-up call that development could head our way at any time.

Following the bulldozer encounter, the conversation about protecting our rural area started one morning in early 2000 with Rodney Peek and his parents Janice and Ned Peek at their kitchen table. Concern in the broader community about the future of our area was prompted by the leveling of trees on the west side of Palmetto changing the forest along Carlton Road into a barren view of stripped red clay. Fueling our fear even more was news that a 100-acre tract on Hutcheson Ferry between our homes and Palmetto was under contract with a builder planning to put 150 homes on the site. (This is now Hutcheson Ferry Park but that is also another story to tell.)

Following the conversation in the Peek's kitchen, I called the various preservation groups for help, but their funds were all being deployed in front of bulldozers in the northern part of Metro Atlanta. I wondered who the large land owners were in our general area and what their plans were. One family, the Bouckaerts, owned 8,500 acres just north of us. Thus, Marie and I invited them to dinner. We discovered we had shared interests including seven teenage children between the two families. New friendships were started and conversations on the future of the area deepened. Mieke is a lover of the land and we had her support by the time we finished the first glass of wine. Carl agreed during following dinners that land values could increase if we found a way to balance preservation and development. With their support, I had hope. Our friendships continue to this day and all seven members of the next generation have families of their own. I never guessed that our interest in saving the land for future generations would lead to my actual grandchildren growing up on this land. While the Bouckarets are scattered across the globe, Marie and I are so lucky that our daughters brought their upstate New York husband's home and our grandchildren can play in the same fields, splash in the water fall and dig in the sandy stream bed just as their mothers did in their youth.

As we studied maps thinking about who else owned land in the area, we saw the defined area in the southwest corner of Fulton County that is bordered by Highway 154 on the east, the Fulton/Coweta County line on the south, and the Chattahoochee River on the northwest side of the area creating a triangle shape of 40,000 acres. This area became our focus. Next, I will remember more about how we organized a conversation with almost 500 neighbors.

### 3. Organizing the land owners

Twenty years ago, Fulton County started making tax information available on floppy disks which could be purchased. I secured a disk for our area and started to learn how to use excel. I discovered there were about 500 landowners who owned a range of acre parcels. The sort function became magic as groups could be organized by a defined field.

I am thankful for my experience years before in helping organize landowners in Midtown Atlanta to talk about what makes a walkable community. The clout generated by having an organized community was important as we presented new ideas to government leaders and worked to convince Georgia Department of Transportation to remove traffic lanes and replace them with parking and bike lanes. Because the community was united, we passed a major zoning change with an emphasis on street life vs cars during the period of urban sprawl of the 1980s. The controversial zoning change is what led to creating the walkable urban area of Midtown Atlanta today.

The Midtown experience also made me aware of the wisdom in discussing issues with like sized landowners. To my surprise, half of the forty thousand acres in the 40,000-acre southern tip of Fulton County were owned by just 36 families or holding groups. Each of those 36 owned 180 acres or more so that became the sort number for large landowners' group. Of the nearly 500 individuals or families owning the other half of the area with parcels of half an acre to 179 acres, we divided the list into seven groups, each with about 75 land owners per group.

In the nine years we had owned the Farmhouse property and as full-time residents in retirement for six years, we became acquainted with many neighbors up and down Hutcheson Ferry Road. The conversations at the Peek's kitchen table led to other kitchens, barns and full-time backyards. When it was time to organize, neighbors stepped forward to lead the various groups. It sorted out like this with these neighbors leading each group:

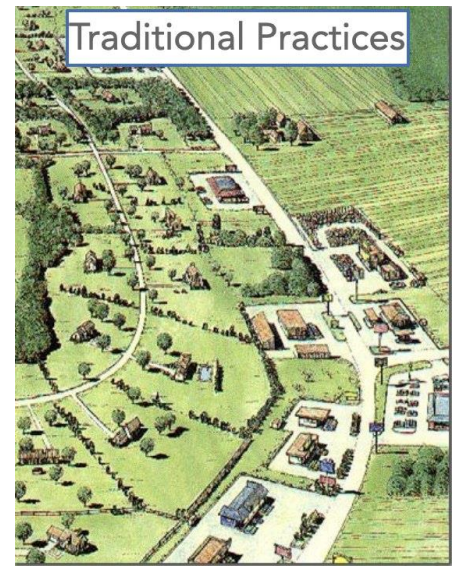
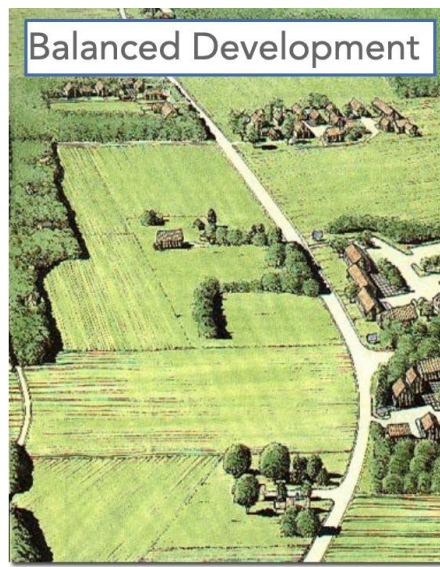
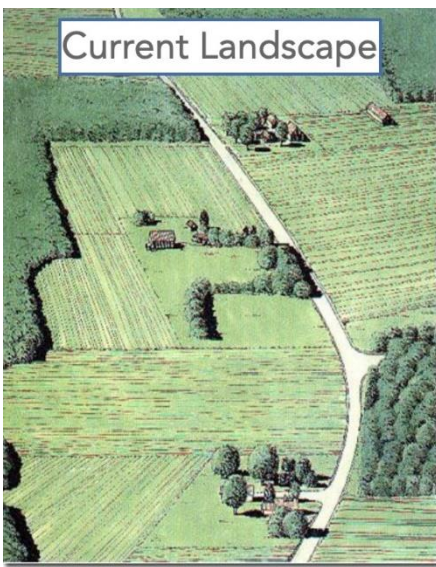
- 2.5 acres or less: Larry Keith lived on Hutcheson Ferry with his wife Monica where they raised two sons. Larry passed away several years ago and Monica eventually moved.
- 2.5-5 acres: Elizabeth Dean & Gene Griffith, who owned Wilkerson Mill Gardens.
- 5-8 acre: Bettina Brown, who now serves as the attorney for many home closings in Serenbe and who lives on Vernon Grove with her medical doctor/cattle farmer husband George where they raised their three children.
- 8-15 acres: Ned & Janice Peek & and their son Rodney who are next door neighbors to Serenbe and their family has been on this land for generations. In the years that followed, Rodney was elected to the first Chattahoochee Hills city council and now serves on the planning board.
- 15-50 acres: Maggie Stokes who planted all the blueberry bushes on the farm now owned by the Aldridge family following the Stokes move to Florida
- 50-180 acres: Dave McMurray lives east of Serenbe off of Hutcheson Ferry & Capps Ferry with his wife Deana
- 180 acres +: Steve Nygren

Meetings were held in homes and church community rooms. Fresh baked goods and hot coffee were part of the host responsibilities. This was the day before PowerPoint so we had slides to prompt discussions regarding the sprawl that had been replacing the rolling hills, forests, and fields with asphalt and traffic jams in the seventeen-county area of metro Atlanta. In those areas, the generational land owners were generally forced out by high taxes or the disappointing loss of the rural area they had known. Did we have options was the question?

I shared images of the rural English country side where the majority of the population lives in dense hamlets, villages and towns thus keeping the country, country. This clustering, and the regulation that buildings cannot follow the road out of town, are the result of good land law regulation following World War II to prevent sprawl in England –the island was only so big and they foresaw the threat that the automobile would bring.

Randall Arendt’s work and publication, “Rural by Design” provided wonderful thought-provoking images of what might be. In the images below, there are the same number of houses in the traditional practices of development image and the balanced development possibility image. This pointed out the value of clustering and is exactly how towns were formed 100 years ago. Arendt’s second book published years later has a full section on Serenbe as an example of what can be.

Some thought nothing would happen here, because as metro Atlanta grew, the southern tip of Fulton County stood still for decades. The gathering of neighbors for conversations over coffee and home baked goodies were the foundation that led to future public meetings. Next, I will share the challenge of coordinating the 36 landowner who owned 180 acres or more.



## 4. The formation of the Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance

The majority of the landowners who held under 180 acres were pro preservation but the threat of traditional green field sprawl development rested with the larger landowners who held parcels over 180 acres. During the sorting of land ownership, it was discovered that half of the 40,000-acre area was held by this group of only 36 families or entities. Feeling confident with the support of the Bouckaerts, we invited the 36 to meet at our home. This was a mix of people who had inherited the land, land speculators from Atlanta, and people like us who had found the country respite on the edge of Atlanta.

What is now the Hawthorne Room at the Inn was our in-house movie theater but doubled as a great gathering spot. Marie prepared an array of desserts which we later discovered was a key to our eventual success.

That first meeting of the group was successful in the fact that 31 of the land owners attended, but in the end turned out to be a disaster. The inherited landowners were vocal in their opposing views. Half of this group had been waiting for development to find its way to the area and they said "bring on the bulldozers." Another group who had lived here their whole life wanted no change, desiring for their grandkids to grow up in the idyllic woods of their childhood. After ninety minutes, I called the meeting to an end when it seemed we had dissolved into name calling reminiscent of sixth grade taunts. One woman said, half under her breath but audible to the room, "You have always been greedy" after a comment by a pro development resident whose family had lived here for generations. The rather loud response came back, "You stupid tree hugger."

Following the meeting, I noticed the pro bulldozer group talking with the land speculator group who did not live in the area and the preservation group was talking with the Atlanta escapees. Like minded folks gravitated to one another. Could we ever find common ground?

Feeling hopeless after that meeting, I knew we could not give up. We needed research to back up our assumption that we could have both preservation and higher economic value of the land without mass grading for development.

The Urban Land Institute had recently completed a study of the high value of golf course lots being tied to the open space rather than the golf course. The 1980s and 90s produced an ever-increasing number of golf course communities. This was the result of the financial reports showing the high value of lots facing a golf course thus it was easier for a developer to fund a community with a golf course. The ULI study showed that 92% of the people who owned these high value lots played golf twice or less a year, thus proving the value was due to the open space and had nothing to do with golf.

With that and other facts, I was ready to call the next meeting. It was clear we needed the support of some of the leadership voices. I called Mr. Thompson to ask if he would return. His response, "No one is going to tell me what to do with my land." And I said, "But if your neighbors start selling to suburban developers, your silence will lead to others defining the future of your land. Look what has happened in most of the farm land around Atlanta." His response after a long pause of thought was, "Are you going to have the peach cobbler, best I ever had." I said yes and we called the next meeting. Marie kept baking and I kept calling meetings. Part of the group showed up for the desserts and the other part interested in planning for the future. The conversation was engaging in the meetings that followed and became much more civil.

We eventually started monthly meetings of large landowners which led to the creation of an alliance organization. The unnamed Alliance was formed in April of 2001. Membership was two dollars per acre owned. The officers elected in that first meeting were:

President: Steve Nygren, Serenbe

Vice President: Tom Williams, Bouckaert Holdings

Secretary: Joe Harris, Minerva Land Management

Now that we had an organization, what should it be called? What should we call this 40,000-acre area? Rural Palmetto? Rico? Goodes? Campbell? Parts of the area were referred to by these handles and there is so much history around each of these names, but none seemed to represent the 40,000 acres we were focusing on. Next week I will remember more.

## 5. Naming the area

The 40,000-acre area in the southern tip of Fulton County was sometimes referred to as rural Palmetto, but that didn't seem to fit the vision we were starting to dream into reality. The land preservation effort we were mounting had little to do with Palmetto other than the mailing address. The address tag also added confusion thus there was a desire to define the difference between the historic town of Palmetto and the rural farmland between Palmetto and the Chattahoochee River. South Fulton was another common reference but that referred to a much larger area.



If there was something news worthy, the area was generally referred to as Rico because a reporter could always find someone to quote at Smith's Grocery. The most southern area was sometimes referred to as Goodes in reference to the mostly vanished community at the intersection of Hutcheson Ferry Road, Rico Road, and Atlanta Newnan Road where the sign remains and is lovingly maintained by Maria & Dave Hanson who own the land and the one remaining building from a bygone era. The northern part of the area was referred to as Campbell in reference to the remnants of the village of Campbell which served as the county seat on the banks of the Chattahoochee River. The skeleton of the streets remain with a few buildings still standing.

The varied names referred to parts of the 40,000 acres, but none seemed the proper tag for the whole area or the newly formed alliance. Was there a name? Labeling the area loomed large in our minds, but also seemed too complicated to think about. Little thought had been given to an actual name but there was general agreement that we could improve on the historic handles that referred to parts but not the whole. South Fulton was too broad and Rico not encompassing enough.

Documents were prepared to be signed at the second large landowner meeting and "No Name Alliance" which was on the drat documents did not seem like a good option. Thus, a name was the first thing on that second meeting agenda of the group.

We had a white board exercise to help us think about a name that could also define the area. Some of the points listed were:

- The Chattahoochee River runs 30 miles along one of our edges.
- The hills throughout the countryside provides a landscape that is more rolling than most people think the land south of Atlanta is. People who venture south of I-20 are generally heading to the east coast of the state around Savannah traveling south on I-75 and I-16 where the land is indeed flat.
- The fact that this area, so close the city, is still country is unique for Atlanta and most urban centers.

I found an image that captured clusters of development in nature which is the direction we felt solved the desired balance between saving the land and increasing land value. I attached a copy of that image to the whiteboard to help frame the discussion regarding the brand we wanted to depict with a name. After playing with several combinations of words during the meeting, we landed on "Chattahoochee Hill Country".

When the city was formed years later, the name of the city was changed to Chattahoochee Hills. The larger, 65,000-acre, four-county area is still defined by the Chattahoochee Hill Country name including the 98-mile proposed trail system conceived by the PATH foundation. But the inclusion of four counties and the PATH study is a story for later. For reference on size, 65,000 acres equals half of the land inside I-285 surrounding metro Atlanta. Serenbe is the first development within that area and under the new overlay where development triggers regulation requiring 70% of the land to remain in agriculture zoning without housing development. This is the zoning overlay that was adopted 20 years ago this coming August and I will be posting remembrances weekly leading up to that anniversary.

## 6. Finding Phill Tabb

The greatest challenge was finding common ground among the larger land owner group. Value of the land was important and there were varied ideas on how to reach the greatest value for the land. In fact, there was discussion on what value meant. Was it monetary, quality of life, or historical significance that created value? Some land owners were pure investors and for others, especially those who had inherited the land, the land equated to their life savings. For many who grew up in the area, the value was the open vistas and fresh air. For those of us from Atlanta, we marveled at the advantages of open country so close to a metro area. Most were passionate about whatever their opinion was regarding the future of the land.



It was like trying to balance 36 tennis balls on a flat board without edges. If we tilted the conversation one way or another too much, we could lose some over the edge. The balancing act was actually among the opinions of thirty-two landowners as four would not attend any meeting or join in the conversation. Of the four who would not attend: one was a land speculator and didn't take the effort seriously (you will hear more about his couple later), the title on a second land parcel was in an estate held by an out of state bank, the third was someone who held a dislike for me and thus would not attend (took years to learn why), and a fourth was an out-of-state land holder. We needed a container to help magnetize the group that was showing up for meetings. How could people visualize our area developed in a different way from Cobb or Alpharetta or suburban America?

A map with a visual representation of what we might create seemed like the best option. Land planners have a process called a charrette which is a concentrated gathering of people over a few days to focus on a specific land area to conceive a plan for development around specific goals. We decided this was a good option to help crystallize a vision among the larger land-owning group. Now, we needed to create an agenda and decide who could lead such an event.

During my years of retirement, we visited a friend in the English countryside and become enchanted with the hamlets and villages that dotted the rolling hilled countryside housing large number of the English population. Buildings are not allowed to follow the road out of town and each settlement had at least one pub, coffee house or restaurant and some had all three plus an inn. The common footpaths, narrow passages and attention to detail through the centuries was captivating. For me, the country side of England was a model I thought we could aspire to. How on earth could we emulate this through a zoning law that would result in a non-disturbed countryside dotted with hamlets and villages in a property rights southern US state like Georgia?

A few months earlier I started accepting the idea that we may need to develop our own farm to demonstrate a possible way to achieve the balance between development and preservation. I started asking people I knew about who might help think about the aspects of thoughtful community development. The landscape architect and best-known environmental land planner of the day in the Southeast, Robert Marvin, was engaged. For our meetings we invited knowledgeable people in the arts, agriculture, education and health. We learned about sacred geometry during our

visits to England therefore we wanted to find someone in America who was trained with this insight of nature's mathematical structuring. The Rocky Mountain Institute put me in touch with Phill Tabb who completed his doctorate on the English Village system and while in England also became trained in sacred geometry through his studies with Keith Critchlow.

When I first caught up with Phil, he was in Boulder Colorado where he had raised his family after returning to the US from England. There was instant connection as two main branches of my Swedish family were early settlers of Boulder County during the mid-1800s. I grew up on a generational family farm 15 miles from Boulder and cousins continue to dot the front range of Colorado. Plus, I attended the University of Colorado in Boulder where Phill had taught and Kara and Quinn would attend in the years to come. The coincidence was even greater when I learned that Phill had worked with an environmental and planning firm, Rocky Mountain Consultants, in Longmont, Colorado, the town where I was born and have literally known my entire life. I had found our land planner. However, during the first conversation I didn't consider him a professional planner as he was referred to me as an architecture academic and we already had someone advising us on a possible land plan. How he became Serenbe's land planner is another story to be told in the history of Serenbe's evolution.

Phill did visit Serenbe to advise us on the principles of sacred geometry. Within weeks he returned with a group of students for a charrette on Serenbe's then 900 acres. We were delighted with the results from that three-day event and the structure of Selborne and Grange that was devised then is basically what you see today.

When we discussed the need for a charrette to develop a map with the newly formed Chattahoochee Hill Country (CHC) board, I suggested bringing Phill back to lead this effort for the larger 40,000 acres. Next week I will remember that event and share the map that was produced.

## 7. Bringing focus and agreement among the large landowners

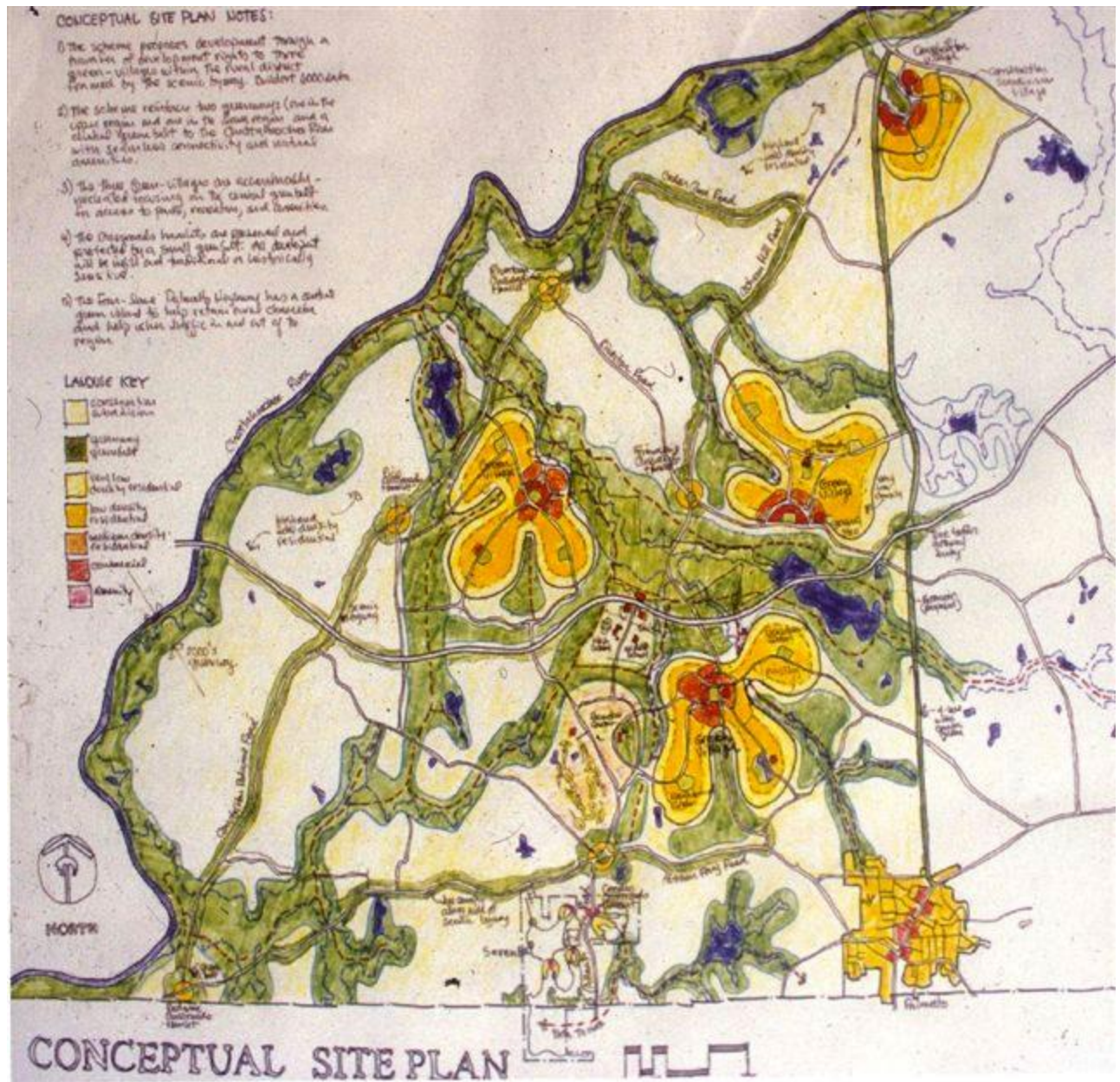
In April of 2001, Phill Tabb along with Jennifer Vecchi, a land planner from Colorado, plus a student from Texas A&M University to draw, came to Serenbe to lead a charrette to engage the large landowner group with the goal of organizing options and translate these varied ideas into a visual image to depict the united vision of what might be possible on 40,000 acres in the southern tip of Fulton County. Over 30 attendees spent two days in this planning process. Participants included landowners, metro developers, planning staff from Fulton County Environment and Community Development, The Nature Conservancy, the Georgia Conservancy, Georgia Tech, the National Park Service, Urban Land Institute (ULI), Oglethorpe Power, and Georgia Power. The result of this process was a consensus of ideas for the development of a master plan. Current Serenbe home owner, Jim Durrett represented ULI in those days and participated in some of the early charrettes.

The consensus from the meeting was that high value could be obtained by clustering future housing in high density clusters called villages on the larger land assemblies and lower density clusters called hamlets could be approved in any land assemblage of 250 acres or more. We determined this approach would allow up to 70% of the land to be conserved for any agriculture activity allowed in the current rural zoning districts. Because of the dwelling unit clustering, there would be no reductions in the number of houses built in the future. This could be a true balanced growth approach.

As a planner in the Front Range of Colorado, Jennifer had experience with Transfers of Development Rights (TDRs). This is a tool I was very familiar with as my cousin, Charlie Nygren, was one of the first to sell development rights from his farm to Boulder County. Some Serenbe folks may know Charlie and his wife Melanie, from the time they had a second home in Swann Ridge. Phill and Jennifer suggested TDRs as a method for the Chattahoochee Hill Country to accomplish the plan that had been conceived during the charrette. Through this tool, the right to develop housing would remain at one house (a development unit) per acre but development could be clustered in dense pockets by moving the approved density of one unit an acre to any other acre in the defined area. The real appeal was the opportunity for small landowners to yield value from their land without selling the land for assemblages of large sprawl development.

Phill and his team helped the group conceive of a land use plan that created three prime village sites designated for higher density, plus the idea of a lower density hamlet that could be created on any 250 + acre parcel leaving a great deal of open space for agriculture, forestry or recreation. Phill used his ideas for Serenbe to show how such a hamlet might be incorporated into the landscape.

Below is the map Phill created to represent the consensus vision.



## 8. Exploring tools for balanced growth

An initial donation of \$16,000 by a major landowner plus the \$2 an acre dues funded our first planning activities. We were embarking on so many ideas that were new to planners, regulators and elected officials and we realized the challenge ahead. Transfer Development Rights (TDRs) was a new concept in the South where people were not accustomed to severing rights from the dirt. Land owners in places like Colorado are accustomed to selling mineral and water rights so the ideas of severing a development right simply added another layer to the staked values within a parcel of land. However, those commodities were not traded in the South and thus the idea of severing value was a new idea. We realized that our government leaders would be more receptive to ideas if they heard from their counterpart in other parts of the country.

In June 2001, the Fulton County Office of Environment and Community Affairs, The Nature Conservancy, and the Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance collaborated in scheduling a one-day seminar on “Tools for Sustainable Development.” We engaged government and community leaders from Boulder County, Colorado and Howard County, Maryland to share how they guide growth including through the use of TDRs.

Someone suggested we contact Laurie Fowler who was a professor of law at the University of Georgia. Her courses were described as a guide that wove together law, ecology, environmental design, economics and other disciplines in service-learning projects to protect critical natural resources. Wow, that sounded like someone we needed on our team. And join our team she did. Laurie brought along professor Jamie Baker Roskie who specialized in land use law and the two Georgia professors lent leadership and credibility in planning our first information sharing on new tools for land planning.

For this meeting involving local and state leaders, there was participation from Fulton County staff, the Georgia Conservancy, South Fulton landowners and developers, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the Atlanta Regional Commission, Oglethorpe Power, the National Park Service, the Southern Company, the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority and the Association of County Commissioners in Georgia.

As a result of this gathering, the University of Georgia law department conducted research regarding TDRs and wrote legislation that was introduced in the 2003 Georgia legislative session and passed in the closing hours of that session. The Association of County Commissioners of Georgia carried this legislation for us helping educate leaders in the state Senate and House on the advantage to this tool for all of Georgia. More on this at a later time. Blow is a slide from the deck we developed to familiarize people with the concept.

# Why use TDRs

---

## →Landowners

- Retain land and continue traditional uses
- Are compensated for lost development potential
- All landowners can participate

## →Communities

- Preserve greenspace without paying for or maintaining land
- Infrastructure cost savings



CHATTAHOOCHEE HILL COUNTRY

## 9. Adding staff

In addition to the education sessions we conducted, the donations and membership dues allowed us to bring on a staff person to help coordinate the growing list of activities and meetings. In the early days of operating the (Serenbe) Guest House barn and the Mimosa Cottage as a B&B, Sandra Storrar visited us in search of time away from a hectic life in the city. On one visit she shared that the demands of corporate life prompted her to step off the big business grind due to burnout. I suggested she join our effort as the part time Executive Director for the new Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance. She agreed. What is now room #5 at the Inn was the family art area and we converted it into an office for the Chattahoochee Hill Country.



After a time, the land pulled Sandra in as it has many of us. She didn't want to go back to the city to sleep, so she rented the house at the corner of Hutcheson Ferry Road and Atlanta Newnan Road. In the following years when we moved forward to develop Serenbe the community, Sandra was in the first group to reserve a proposed home at a time when there were only stakes in the forest. Sandra's home was one of the first completed in 2005 and she became the first resident to move into Selborne at a time when the cows still wandered the streets and our dogs, Georgia and Pudge, had to learn to stop canvassing the houses for left over lunch scraps from the construction crews.

I ask Sandra to help me think back to that time twenty plus years ago and remember what it was like as we embarked on the improbable idea of rezoning 40,000 acres in Metro Atlanta.

Sandra shared:

"I left a management position in corporate America where I had been doing 90% business travel for four years. It was more than a breath of fresh air when Steve and Marie approached me about working with them to help form the Chattahoochee Hills Country Alliance.

My office was the art room at the Inn on the top floor so I had a wide view of the grounds of the Inn, the flowers, the pastures and the animals. Sometimes at lunch, I would help Steve feed twin baby goats that were rejected by the mother. What a different way to do lunch! I would send photos to my corporate friends sharing my fun lunch hours.

I helped Steve organize the neighbors and form teams so we could keep everyone well-informed. I drove back to my home in Roswell at night with the sunroof open so I could see the stars in the Hill County. I realized how much I enjoyed all the rural aspects of this land, the amazing people in this area and made the decision to move to Chatt Hills—and did so in 2004."

## 10. Community engagement

In an earlier post, I mentioned the team leaders who organized to connect with all landowners in our 40,000-acre areas. There was about 500 individuals, families or companies to communicate with.

The tax files were sorted by the size of the parcel ownership. This was also challenging as some of the land owned by one entity was held in various names. Many times, the mailing address for the tax bill was our clue.

In the fall and winter of 2001, we started meeting. E-mail and Facebook were not available to us way back then for communication, so we relied on mailed letters and phone banks. How things have changed in twenty years.

The meetings brought people together who had never connected. Most gatherings in the past were organized by church groups, the Farm Bureau, Brickworks or other interest groups. The Fulton County meetings that were held now and then in the Rico Community room (now city hall) were generally attended by 20 or so people.

Each team leader hosted the group in their home or one of the local church community rooms. The host provided home-made sweets and fresh brewed coffee. I arrived with a slide deck and facilitated the discussion. A couple of those slides are attached. Our coffee chat meetings had great energy compared to the county meetings of the time.

The goal of these gatherings was to talk about the threat of urban sprawl and the reality of two developments that we were aware of. We wanted to talk about options short of simply fighting any development at the county zoning hearings. Preservation groups were busy in north metro Atlanta where there was urgency so preservation money was not an option. The threat to this area didn't seem real or urgent to many. We talked about options, but most importantly we wanted to understand how people viewed the future for this area and what their wishes were. We wanted to instill a sense of empowerment to plan our future by coming together as a community rather than let remote developers and the county zoning board determine our future.

The groups were led by the following people:

- 2.5 acres or less: Larry Keith lived on Hutcheson Ferry with his wife Monica where they raised two sons. Larry passed away several years ago and Monica eventually moved.
- 2.5-5 acres: Elizabeth Dean & Gene Griffith, who owned Wilkerson Mill Gardens.
- 5-8 acre: Bettina Brown, who now serves as the attorney for many home closings in Serenbe and who lives on Vernon Grove with her medical doctor/cattle farmer husband George where they raised their three children.
- 8-15 acres: Ned & Janice Peek & and their son Rodney who are next door neighbors to Serenbe and their family has been on this land for generations. In the years that followed, Rodney was elected to the first Chattahoochee Hills city council and now serves on the planning board.
- 15-50 acres: Maggie Stokes who planted all the blueberry bushes on the farm now owned by the Aldridge family following the Stokes move to Florida
- 50-180 acres: Dave McMurrain lives east of Serenbe off of Hutcheson Ferry & Capps Ferry with his wife Deana
- 180 acres +: Steve Nygren

As these smaller meetings concluded, we started the public meetings with all landowners invite to come together. I will remember these meetings in the weeks ahead.

---

## This land will never be more available.

- The land is our foundation and our future.
- We have the opportunity to set a new standard.
- It's worth saving.
- [www.chatthillcountry.org](http://www.chatthillcountry.org)



CHATTAHOOCHEE HILL COUNTRY

Page 25

---

## Together, we can save it.



CHATTAHOOCHEE HILL COUNTRY

Page 24

# 11. The first grant

By the fall of 2001, we had awakened a rural community with the idea of guiding our own destiny. That was a broad idea that had been discussed at our coffee talk gatherings. Each group, depending on the size of land holdings in the group, had differing ideas on what should happen. The groups were united that we did not want to follow the pattern of Alpharetta, Cobb County, Clayton County or any of the areas the same distance as South Fulton from the center of Atlanta. Urban sprawl generally had a bad name among the majority of the land owners in this area.

Remember the larger landowners had already agreed to the idea of a new vision, provided it increased the value of the land. Larger landowners, in this case anyone with 180 acres or more, normally participate in sprawl development because that is traditionally the only way to capitalize on rural land near an urban area. While the large land owner group owned 50% of the land, they represented 7% of the total land owners. This is the equation that generally leads to zoning battles and lawsuits. We had to find a way to bring these two groups that generally have opposing goals together for one vision yielding what each was most interested in.

We needed a focused vision, a plan that visually showed the vision and then regulations to assure the vision would become reality. Our dues and donations could not support the kind of planning support we needed.

With the help and support of the Nature Conservancy, we applied for grants. Because the Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance was younger than two years old, we did not have the track record to qualify for most grants and thus the Nature Conservancy, understanding the importance of our unique approach, agreed to be our sponsor.

In October, 2001, a \$78,000 (the equivalent of \$125,000 in today's dollars) grant was awarded by the Fulton County Office of Economic Development to The Nature Conservancy and the Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance. Funds for land planning, creating design standards, engineering and further community outreach were part of this award. This grant by a development authority, to a community sponsored by an environmental organization was the beginning of the broad base support that was brought together to create a vision of balance. A vision most people in government and professional developers thought naive.

Along with writing the grants, we developed an RFP (request for proposal) to lead a community wide public effort among landowners and interested parties to develop a vision and plan for these 40,000 acres of Fulton County. To our surprise, we received interest from national as well as local planning organizations.

Now it gets interesting. Do I still have your attention or are these posts too much detail?

## 12. Earth Day 2004

Going through old files to remember what was happening 20 years ago, I ran across reminders of long forgotten events. With Earth Day 2022 upon us, I was reminded of an earlier Earth Day in the early days of Chattahoochee Hill Country and Serenbe.

In the Spring of 2004, the story I am now sharing in my remembrance posts was being celebrated locally and nationally as a unique opportunity for the future of green-field development. The zoning laws had been passed, the first Transfer Development Rights for the southern US had been passed for Georgia and Serenbe had just broken ground. The editorial pages had run a few stories and local and national awards were headed our way.



For Earth Day 2004, US Congressman David Scott chose to celebrate the day and deliver his Earth Day message from Serenbe. To celebrate, we presented Congressman Scott with a picture of a rural landscape of the Chattahoochee Hill Country. This open pasture was an example of how the new zoning overlay would protect pastures such as this in urban Atlanta.

Congressman Scott was in his first term representing Georgia's newly formed 13th congressional district. Congressman Scott continues to represent this district and is the only person to do so in the 20 years since the district was formed. Last year, he ascended to Chair the US House Agriculture Committee. He is the first person of color to hold this chair.

Pictured from the left in the picture are Kasim Reed, who at the time was the Georgia State Senator representing our area; a younger me serving as Chair of the Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance; Congressman Scott; Bill Edwards, who at the time was the Fulton County Commissioner representing our South Fulton district; and Tom Williams, Vic President of the Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance & Land manager for Bouckaert Holdings.

Each of the elected officials pictured here would go on to play important rolls in the story of the Chattahoochee Hill Country, the formation of the city of Chattahoochee Hills, and the four-county, 98-mile proposed PATH system.

So much more to tell, and it is also fun to look back at the files and remember the journey we have been on for 20 years to reach this point.

## 13. Elected officials

The grant from the Fulton County Office of Economic Development got the attention of our Fulton County Commissioner, Bill Edwards. Bill called me. When I answered, his first words were “Steve, what kind of trouble are you stirring up down in South Fulton?”

I responded, “Bill, this is going to be a great effort for something new. I think you will like it.”

“It sounds like something those folks in North Fulton proposed about six months ago” he replied. He went on with an agitated voice, “Do you know what happened? The Commission chamber was full of people upset about ideas like this. The proposal from North Fulton generated about 200 people with tee shirts supporting those ideas and another 200 with ball caps opposing the same ideas. Steve, don’t you dare stir up something that will push me into a corner to vote against half of my constituents no matter how I vote.”

I asked for a meeting. I proposed that if we anticipated more than 30% opposition to the efforts at the time we were ready to propose something to the Fulton County Board of Commissioners, we would pull the proposal. I explained the formation of the Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance and the effort to bring both pro development and pro preservation groups together. The preservation tag does not correctly define most of the group – a better tag would be “Just Don’t Change Anything Group.” In any case, I suggested membership into this organization would be a guide to gage the support we would have.

To move forward with this agreement, I asked for his full public support and for him to request the Fulton County Department of Planning to work with us during the public meeting process and any legislation that might result from this effort. We shook hands and Bill moved from a pessimist to a true supporter over the months ahead.

## 14. The addition of the professional planners

We were flattered with the number of national and local planning groups who submitted proposals to lead our public outreach effort. After great deliberation, we chose ECOS Environmental Design, a small Atlanta based group whom we felt had a passion to help challenge stale concepts and we suspected they could join us in imagining what we could accomplish with what seemed like an impossible task.

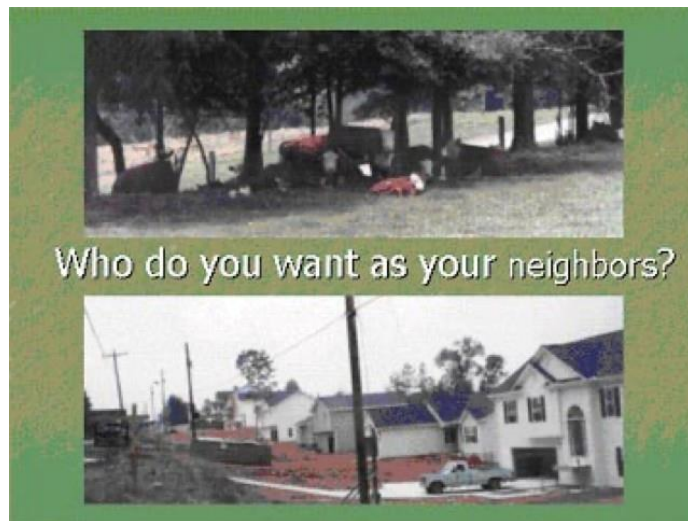
Shannon Kettering was assigned as the ECOS project manager for the Chattahoochee Hill Country effort. Shannon was in her first year with ECOS, fresh from the academic world after completing her Master's degree in Urban and Environmental Planning the year before at the University of Virginia. Shannon was fresh and optimistic. She had not been beaten down by the regulators and financial analysts who steadily squeeze the optimism of new ideas out of the bright people entering the professional planning and design world.

With ECOS by our side, we started. The first community wide public meeting was scheduled for February 12, 2002. We made arrangements to send a post card to every property address in the Fulton County tax records for this area in an effort to connect with all decision makers in the 40,000-acre rural countryside.

The big question was, can we get people to show up to a public meeting? Historically, people in this area did not attend Fulton County meetings, or meetings of any kind in meaningful numbers. We discussed for some time if we should send a letter or post card. Remember, this is before the internet was widely used and Facebook had not entered the scene. Facebook would debut three years later on Ivy League campuses. Realizing this, reminds us how fast somethings have changed. Reflections like this while writing the history does make me feel old, I must admit.

The communication we were designing needed to confirm that the threat we had been talking about in our coffee talks was upon us. The possibility of our fields and forests being graded bare for endless loops of houses was a real threat. But at the same time, we wanted to offer hope and empowerment. Many people were talking about the forest along Carlton Road in Palmetto that had been stripped bare exposing the red clay field. Sprouting out of the baron earth were the frames for a simple housing development. There was great fear this cookie cutter, treeless form of development would spread like kudzu down Hutcheson Ferry Road and across what we now know as Chattahoochee Hills.

We decided to simply share two images – one of what we didn't want to lose and one that we didn't want to allow. Below is a snapshot of that card with a picture of a local pasture with cows grazing and the other of the emerging treeless rows of houses being built on Carlton Road. The back of the card read simply, "Community meeting to determine our future" February 12, 6:00pm, Rico Community Center.



# 15. The first public meeting

On a cold February night, an overwhelming crowd filled the community room in what is now city hall. The doors and windows were opened so the overflowing crowd who could not fit inside could push against the open space to hear what was being said.

We introduced the team leaders who had been having coffee talks with their respective groups organized by amount of land owned. We shared their phone numbers to develop a network of neighbors talking with neighbors.

We shared that the recent grant to the Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance would allow us to schedule a series of public meetings. We introduced Shannon Kettering from ECOS who would lead the public effort. Robert Reed of Village Habitat, the group providing research assistance to ECOS, presented some facts on what the area's fate might be if we followed the time, pattern of growth that had occurred in the past two decades in the 17 county Metro Atlanta area. We were happy to announce that Fulton County would be a partner in the public meetings and we introduced Steve Cover, Director of The Fulton County Office of Environment and Community Affairs.

We had awakened a community. The process had begun. The success of the turnout was inspiring and daunting at the same time when we considered the reality of the responsibility our group now had to make something happen. At our coffee talk gatherings and front porch chats, we talked about the need to have a voice in the future rezoning of the area. The door was now open to do just that.



## 16. The view of a generational landowner

As I pondered how we could protect the greater area around Serenbe, my first conversation was with our neighbors, Janise and Ned Peek. Their son Rodney joined us at his parent's kitchen table as we discussed the concerns of urban sprawl altering the landscape and lifestyle of the area. As we set about to engage the larger community of 500 landowners, the Peeks were very involved and reliable partners in the Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance. In the pictures I shared in the last post, the person to my right on the stage for that first community meeting is Rodney Peek.

Following are Rodney's reflections:

"Life is full of surprises.

I never imagined that I could live such a rural lifestyle and walk to restaurants, events and shops. My name is Rodney Peek. I have never been happier living where I live, right now in 2022. I am the 7th generation to grow-up and live in Chattahoochee Hills. I grew-up at address: 10680 Hutcheson Ferry and now live at 10685 Hutcheson Ferry. I love my community. My parents still live at 10680 Hutcheson Ferry and have great-grandchildren that love coming out to the country to play at their house.

Growing up in this rural setting was like living in paradise. You knew all of your neighbors and they were like family. We shared lots of visits on front porches, swam in the ponds and shared life. To this day there is still a no-knock policy with some of my neighbors. Always welcome anytime. Relationships with neighbors are an important part of this community.

My great-great Uncle used to run Cochran Mill. Another great-great Uncle built what is now The Farmhouse at Serenbe. The land that I live on currently was once my Great Grandfathers. My parents moved into the house they now live in when I was 3 months old. My neighbors have known me all of my life...The Kearns, The Kordowskis and 2 sets of Aunts & Uncles. Unfortunately, in 2019 I had three neighbors pass and for the first time in my life, I had new neighbors.

One day a friend came down for a visit, we went to Bradley's Grocery (now Piggly Wiggly) for a few items and there was a power outage, no one could check-out. The manager just walked over and said have a good day & pay me later. He never looked in our basket and was nonchalant. My friend looked at me with surprise and said, "He doesn't even know what you have in there. How does he know you will be back?" I told him in the small towns that you build trust. He knows that I will pay for everything and that's how it works. He looked at me and said, "I didn't know people still did business like that anymore."

Back in the early 90s, I met Steve Nygren and his family. I would ask his permission to go to the waterfalls with the tractor and hay-rides, etc. We became fast friends. His daughters would watch my young children on occasion too.

One day, my next-door neighbor (Kordowski) had cleared land for an additional grass air-strip for his newer airplane. Most were not aware of what he was doing and thought, "Oh-no, is this a development coming to our backyard?" That got lots of attention from neighbors as to what "could" happen to this area. Bad development was highly visible in sections of neighboring cities and we would drive by those bad developments & clear-cut areas, as we had daily commutes to/from school or work.

Steve noticed the clearing, because it was adjacent to his property. That led to neighborhood meetings to discuss this area and the future. As previously described in an earlier post... I remember having several landowner meetings. Asking landowners what their goals were: To sell to the highest bidder, to keep the land in the family, etc. My Dad & I went to lots of meetings to talk about our community, the zoning overlay and then

cityhood. We talked to neighbors publicly and privately. Occasionally it felt as if we had a bulls-eye target on our back. Overall, the feedback was positive and in the end we all recognized what we all had in common...Love for this land and community.

Looking back over the past 20 years, I am proud of what we have become and where we are going. I hope that this area remains a great place to live and raise a family. I hear some people talk about how much change there has been, traffic, growth etc. And I agree, there is a lot of change all around us. However, Hutcheson Ferry Road has changed very little. It is very much like it was when I was just a boy.”

## 17. The second public Meeting

I didn't plan on taking a summer break from posting remembrances on the movement that led to the Fulton County Overlay 20 years ago with new zoning that followed. The break just happened with weekly procrastination. I will pick up with remembrances of the second public meeting and will try to post regularly leading up to a celebration toast this fall.

As a reminder, this overlay and zoning established the 40,000-acre Chattahoochee Hill County as one of the most progressive areas for balanced growth in a US metro area. The overlay led to Serenbe's groundbreaking in 2004 and the establishment of the City of Chattahoochee Hills in 2007.

The purpose of the second meeting was to better understand our land owner groups and their respective visions for the future of the area. By this time, we knew we had divided landowners. Half thought the best way to reap the value from the land was to allow and encourage the development patterns of metro Atlanta. On the other hand, the idea of our pastures, forests and hills being turned into cul-de-sac subdivisions and strip malls horrified the other half of the land owner group. Our task was to explore how to bring these two diverse groups together and find a new vision that addressed both concerns versus the norm that many times took lawyers to negotiate a compromise between the two visions.

ECOS, our land planning & public engagement firm, suggested using both a written survey and a visual survey to test what people said they wanted vs what they emotionally responded to. The written survey suggested people wanted one house per 10 acres while the visual survey responded to clustered development resulting in four units to an acre with open fields.

These differing results produced by two surveys on the same evening by the same group of people was very revealing. When we shared the results, it opened people's minds to rethink their respective positions regarding development. We discovered the pro-development group thought traditional development was the only way to receive value from the land that they had either inherited or bought on speculation as an investment. Our task was to find ways to maximize value while saving as much land as possible.

During our family visits to England, we were enchanted by the rural landscape dotted with the villages and hamlets. Our dear friend Alice lived in a hamlet southwest of London called Selborne. We visited her often during this period and I began inquiring about English land law that had produced this tranquil pattern of land development. England's post World War II pattern of development contrasted dramatically from the US pattern of sprawl and it seemed the English version was a model we should learn more about and share with the group.

In America, we found that others were exploring ways to preserve land and increase the values through development models that were different from the suburban sprawl pattern that metro Atlanta and most urban areas were repeatedly approving and building. Randel Arrent published, "Rural by Design" in 1994 which looked at alternative development models for green field development. This book shared images of rural areas with urban sprawl and then examples of how clustered development patterns can accommodate the same number of dwelling units and commercial buildings by clustering the development. Clustering was the natural pattern of development before 1940 and exploring versions of this seemed like our path forward.

With the survey results and clustered models of development in hand, we began preparing for the third public meeting.



## 18. The third public meeting

The crowds at the first two public meetings were so large that we realized we had to find a larger space for the next meeting. The Palmetto Baptist Church graciously offered their large community room for the third meeting. The room was set with 14 large round tables with a few chairs for those who wanted to sit but many stood gathered around the tables.

Each table had 15 to 18 participants. On each table was a large base map of the 40,000-acre area we were now calling the Chattahoochee Hill Country along with pencils and color markers. We ask each table to act as a team and mark up the map with green lines to circle things they wanted saved. Stream buffers already showed on the map so the group focused mostly on historic buildings, markers and view sheds.

Our consultants, ECOS and Village Habitat, researched metro Atlanta's development patterns and determined that development projects that were approved in the seventeen-county metro area during the 1980s and 1990s produced an average density of 480 dwelling units per square mile. This meant that if the Chattahoochee Hill Country area followed the same pattern of entitling 200, 500 or 1,000 acres at a time, the area would most likely follow the same pattern of sprawl and disturb 80% of the land for 30,000 houses.

During the many coffees hosted by the team leader groups, we talked about development options that could occur in the area. We were now ready to put that knowledge to work. We asked the groups to spend the next 45 minutes of this third meeting deciding where to put 30,000 housing units. Our consultants had prepared templets that represented various development patterns from one house per 5 acres to 30 units to an acre.

Two hours later, we called a halt to the active discussion and shifting of templets as each table calculated and recalculated their totals from the templets. I walked from table to table helping our consultant team answer questions. One table conversation that captivated me included two matriarchs. One woman who is a descendent from generational wealth in Atlanta and the other woman descended from slaves who were some of the first independent farmers and land owners in this area following the civil war. They bonded over a love for the beauty of the natural land and were excited about the possibility of saving the rolling hills from traditional development. They had each seen great changes to the landscape of the area over the years and feared what the next evolution could bring.

At the close of the meeting, the consultant group collected the various maps and announced they would attempt to see if there was a consensus or pattern to the markings for each group. In that one evening, citizens became land planners with a voice for the future. The meeting concluded with a great sense of hope and anticipation for the next meeting.

## 19. The voice of a consultant, Robert Reed, member of Village Habitat and the ECOS Team, at the time

As the ECOS/Village Habitat planning team continued community engagement, we learned how attached the community was to the rural landscape, and it became evident how incompatible the current zoning allowance of 1 acre lots was with the community's vision. The community believed the inaptly named Agriculture-1 zoning (AG-1) would protect them. The area had only seen one subdivision in 20 years thanks to South Fulton Parkway remaining unfinished. With South Fulton Parkway completion imminent, the improved access it provided would mean open land was available for conversion to discordant sub-divisions for developers needing only minimal infrastructure investments under the current development rules.

As the Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance leadership learned more about the potential of Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) and the rural preservation potential TDRs offered, it became apparent that it was critical to broadly communicate the difference between a business-as-usual approach and a new, preferred community vision. The ECOS/Village Habitat team set about calculating build out scenarios for the planning area. The team analyzed typical AG-1 subdivisions. The health department requirements for septic tanks were the only limiting factor. Wetlands, stream buffers, forested areas and steep slopes could all be included in 1 acre lots as long as there was sufficient remaining area for a septic tank and drain field. The negative impacts on the rural character, watersheds and road infrastructure would be enormous, which is why the Nature Conservancy, and the Department of Natural Resources became involved.

The ECOS/Village Habitat team analysis recognized that conventional development could transform 75% of Chattahoochee Hills into business-as-usual subdivisions. This approach left only marginal environmental lands, existing parks and the Atlanta Regional Commission mandated buffer of the Chattahoochee River-potentially compromising 30,000 acres to environmental degradation. Since the team was experienced in village and conservation development, they set about with an analysis of potential village development. Atlanta's most beloved neighborhoods are developed with single family homes at 5 units to the acre. Add in Townhomes at 8-16 homes per acre and you can count on single family homes in 75% of a traditional village at 8 units per acre. Add a denser core with multifamily above retail at relatively modest 18 homes to the acre and a 640-acre village supports 6,700 units compared to 8,900 acres at AG-1.

The team set about conceptually communicating the value of what is historically beloved versus what current zoning demands using the map of Chattahoochee Hills. In the days before widespread use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) the team used the combination of CAD and graphic capability of Apple computers to generate the diagrams. The impact was significant, both on the land and the community. The community could now see that AG-1 would not protect their rural heritage and that TDRs could.

The digital original of the diagram is lost to time, so all we have today are the lower resolution .pdf copies but the value to the community engagement process is not lost. We are thankful for all the planning team members that made the Chattahoochee Hills Land Use Plan possible!

Because the number of people attending grew at each meeting, we moved the fourth session to the gym at the Palmetto Elementary school. The growing attendance demonstrated the developing community hope that we could become united and create a different reality than the expected sprawl that had spread over the hills around Atlanta in the previous decades.

For the fourth meeting, the ECOS team had taken the fourteen working maps from the previous session and summarized the key ideas in each. They sorted these ideas and found there were three basic approaches to creating a balanced growth area. They prepared maps showing what each of these three approaches might look like.

Each map was placed in the middle of the gym on an easel with an ECOS facilitator standing next to each map to answer any questions about that plan. When the attendees arrived, they were each handed a pack of red and green stickers. Everyone was asked to mingle and visit each map, engage with the map host and express their thoughts by posting green dots for the map and ideas they most liked and red for the ideas they did not want to see applied to the area.

People came and went over the two hours, mingling with discussions as small groups formed and pulsated back and forth pensively viewing the maps. Once most people had come and gone, the ECOS team rolled up the sticker laden maps, one more dotted than the others, and set off to prepare for the fifth and final public meeting.

## 20. The fourth public meeting

Because the number of people attending grew at each meeting, we moved the fourth session to the gym at the Palmetto Elementary School. The growing attendance demonstrated the developing community hope that we could become united and create a different reality than the expected sprawl that had spread over the hills around Atlanta in the previous decades.

For the fourth meeting, the ECOS team had taken the fourteen working maps from the previous session and summarized the key ideas in each. They sorted these ideas and found there were three basic approaches to creating a balanced growth area. They prepared maps showing what each of these three approaches might look like.

Each map was placed in the middle of the gym on an easel with an ECOS facilitator standing next to each map to answer any questions about that plan. When the attendees arrived, they were each handed a pack of red and green stickers. Everyone was asked to mingle and visit each map, engage with the map host and express their thoughts by posting green dots for the map and ideas they most liked and red for the ideas they did not want to see applied to the area.

People came and went over the two hours, mingling with discussions as small groups formed and pulsated back and forth pensively viewing the maps. Once most people had come and gone, the ECOS team rolled up the sticker laden maps, one more dotted than the others, and set off to prepare for the fifth and final public meeting.

## 21. The fifth and final public meeting

With great anticipation we prepared for the fifth and final public meeting. We anticipated an even larger crowd so we returned to the Palmetto Elementary School gym and pulled the full wall of gym bleachers out for everyone to sit and hear the presentation. ECOS took the map with the most positive stickers and redrew it, adding popular features from the other maps. The map was printed on a large foam board and placed on an easel with a cloth draped over it for the great unveiling.

Shannon, the ECOS lead, opened the meeting with remarks to prepare the audience for the map they were about to see. She reviewed the process that had gotten us to this point with what seemed like a consensus of ideas.



Before Shannon finished her remarks, a very well-dressed woman in her 70s whom none of us recognized, stood and said this whole approach amounted to a taking of their land. She said we were a bunch of communists. With that, another man on the other side of the room stood to say he agreed, and then a third sitting down front. We did not recognize any of them from previous meetings.

This outbreak left Shannon speechless. I walked to the front of the room to stand next to Shannon trying to find my own words. My mind was racing. What was happening? All I could think to do was state the obvious. I said, "There appears to be a change in momentum on the ideas we have been discussing over the last few weeks." I paused trying to think of what to say next. There was a quiet pause that fell over the room of some 200 people for an awkward period of time which seemed much longer than I am sure it was. At last, one woman stood. She said the discussion over the last several months had given her and her family hope that the rural character of the area would be in place for her grandchildren when they were grown. The full room broke into an applause. Shannon and I started breathing again.

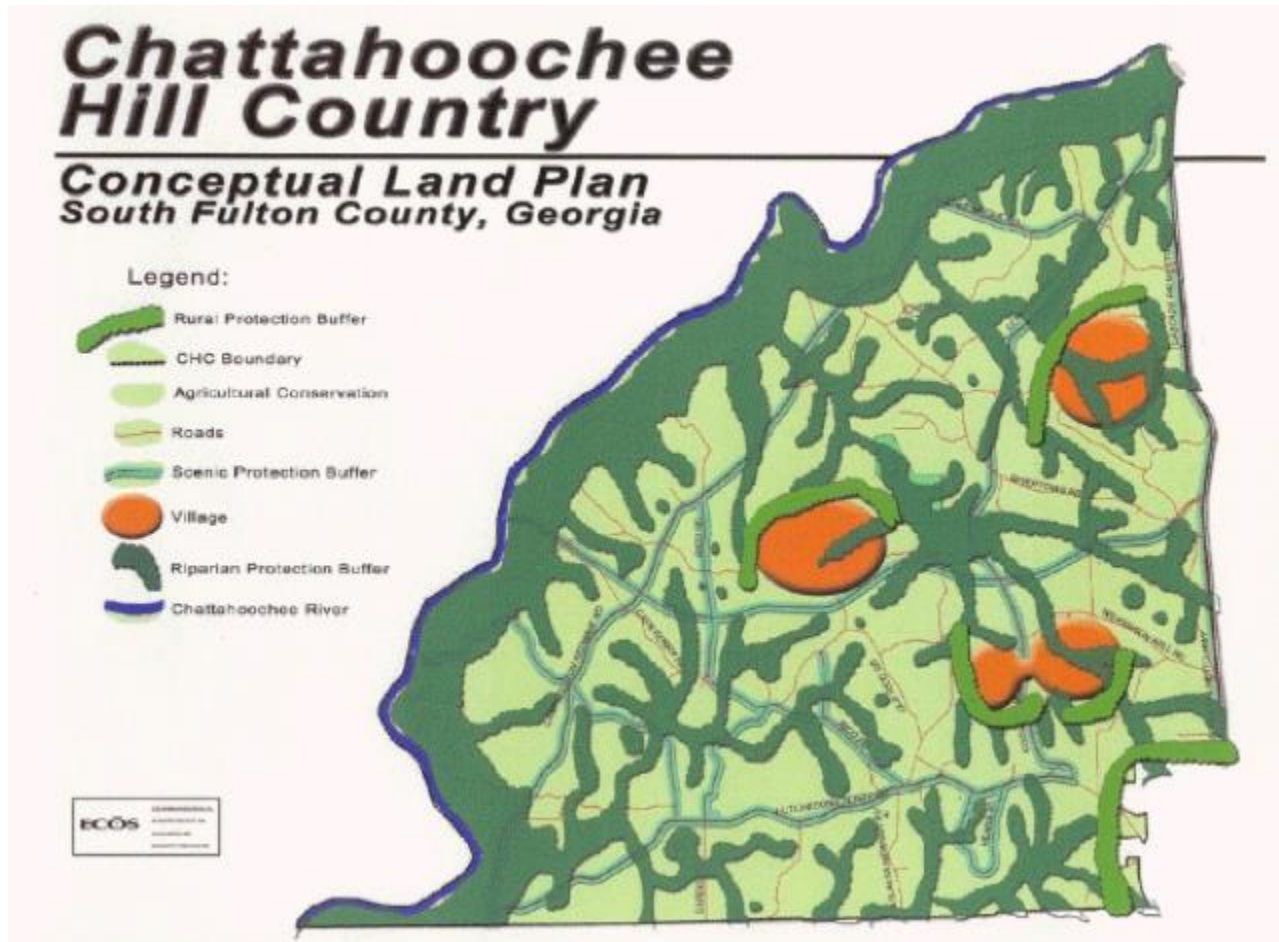
With relief, Shannon found her voice and continued. The map was unveiled and following the presentation there was festive conversations as people mingled around the map for a closer look. I noticed that the people who had sat separately in the audience were clustered in a corner talking. I approached them curious to find the identity of each. It turns out they were a couple who speculated on land around Georgia and the third was their lawyer. They had chosen to sit separately to appear as though there was larger dissent than the reality. They had done this before in other places I later found out.

Five landowners with more than 180 acres had never attended a meeting or responded to the invitations. One was an out of state bank, one was land held in an unsettled estate, one was an individual who would not respond but made it known he opposed these efforts and would not participate (we later found he was assembling land for expected traditional development) that left two landowners whom we had no profile on.

This couple was one of the landowners we had been trying to engage with. They hadn't paid much attention to our previous invitations. They learned we had momentum and minimal information but heard we wanted to limit how land

could be developed. They were concerned our ideas would negatively affect the value of the land. Seeing their public stunt had not worked, Mrs. Stubbs invited me to lunch at their country club. They later became one of the three landowners to match the \$250,000 Woodruff Foundation challenge grant, but that is another story for another time.

With a map representing a public consensus, we were ready for the next step to begin the process of government approvals. Attached is the map that was unveiled that historic night and a picture of the crowd that evening.



## 22. Remembering the efforts 20 years ago to save the rural character of the area.

Steve Cover is currently the planning director of the city of Sarasota. Twenty years ago, when we began the process to think about our 40,000 acres, Steve Cover had just been named head of planning for Fulton County. The stars seemed aligned for our effort as Steve had previously been in Maryland and was well aware of the success in Montgomery County Maryland where TDRs had most successfully been used to help create balanced growth.

I ask Steve to reflect on what it was like 20 years ago as we prepared to work with the county for a unique overlay and zoning regulation for the most southern tip of Fulton County.

"I remember sitting in that meeting and saying to myself, "We can do this. We can really do this!"

When I went back to my staff and explained what was being proposed, they said, "Steve, you've only been here 2 weeks. We don't want you to lose your job!" I said that I know, but we can do this.

"But Steve, we'll have to change our Comprehensive Plan!"

"That's right!"

"But Steve, we'll have to rewrite our zoning ordinance!"

"That's right!"

"But Steve, we'll have to rewrite our subdivision regulations!"

"That's right!"

"But Steve, this has never been done before!"

"That's right! Are you guys up to it? We can do this!"

"Sure, Steve! We can do it!"

Fun exchange with staff. Will never forget it.

When I proposed this to Tom Andrews and other Dept heads, Tom just laughed and said to the other Dept heads, "You have to know Steve. He loves this kind of thing, and having worked with him in Maryland, he can probably pull this off!"

When we first met with Bill Edwards, the local Commissioner at the time, he asked me a lot of questions. Even though it was something that had never been done before, he asked questions that were quite insightful and showed me he got what I was talking about. His last question was, "Okay, Steve, does this have a real chance to make it?" I replied, "Yes, not only does it have a chance to make it, but I think this project will get national recognition." Bill then said, "Okay, Steve, I'm with ya!"

On the day the Commission voted, I was at the Georgia Planning Conference. I drove 5 hours back to Atlanta for the hearings. I walked into the Commission Chamber and literally, in about 90 seconds, the Commission approved everything. I turned to Steve (Nygren) and said, "I drove 5 hours for 90 seconds?" Steve replied, "Yes, but you needed to be here."

## 23. Working with the County

In past posts, I have shared the concern our County Commissioner had with our efforts and his eventual support of the plan. Steve Cover was able to bring the Fulton County Planning Department around to the idea that the overlay we were suggesting was possible and a positive approach to this green field section of Fulton County.

While we had the support of our district Commissioner and the Planning Department, there were 39 other departments that would weigh in on our possible overlay. Public works was almost our undoing. We learned that the recent bond for the expansion of the Camp Creek Waste Water Treatment Center included a map showing our 40,000 acres with a grid of sewer lines for traditional sprawl development. To prevent sprawl, our proposed overlay prohibited the use of traditional sewer structure. We had multiple meetings with various people within the department whom we understood had to approve our overlay language regarding waste water. We would get agreements from one group only to find they didn't have the final say. We could not figure out who could really sign off. It felt like we were in some sort of a shell game but in fact the department as a whole had to agree to this major change in waste water treatment planning. We ended up scheduling a meeting with 16 people, everyone who could possibly have a say, in one room at one time. We reluctantly got an agreement that they would not block our overlay and zoning request. (For clarity, the waste water line that is now under construction is a high-pressure line that only commercial or developments of scale can connect to by installing a pump station. The proposed plan of 20 years ago allowed a single house or small subdivision to connect.)

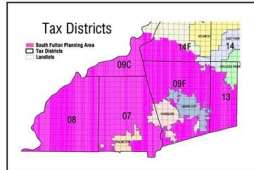
With this approval, the Planning Department was ready to file the recommendation to amend the South Fulton Land Use plan which in turn would trigger new zoning for our 40,000-acre southern section of Fulton County.

In the weeks leading up to the Commission Vote, Tom Williams and I scheduled personal visits with each county commissioner to answer any questions they might have. With anticipation, we waited for the commission meeting where the attached map would be voted on.

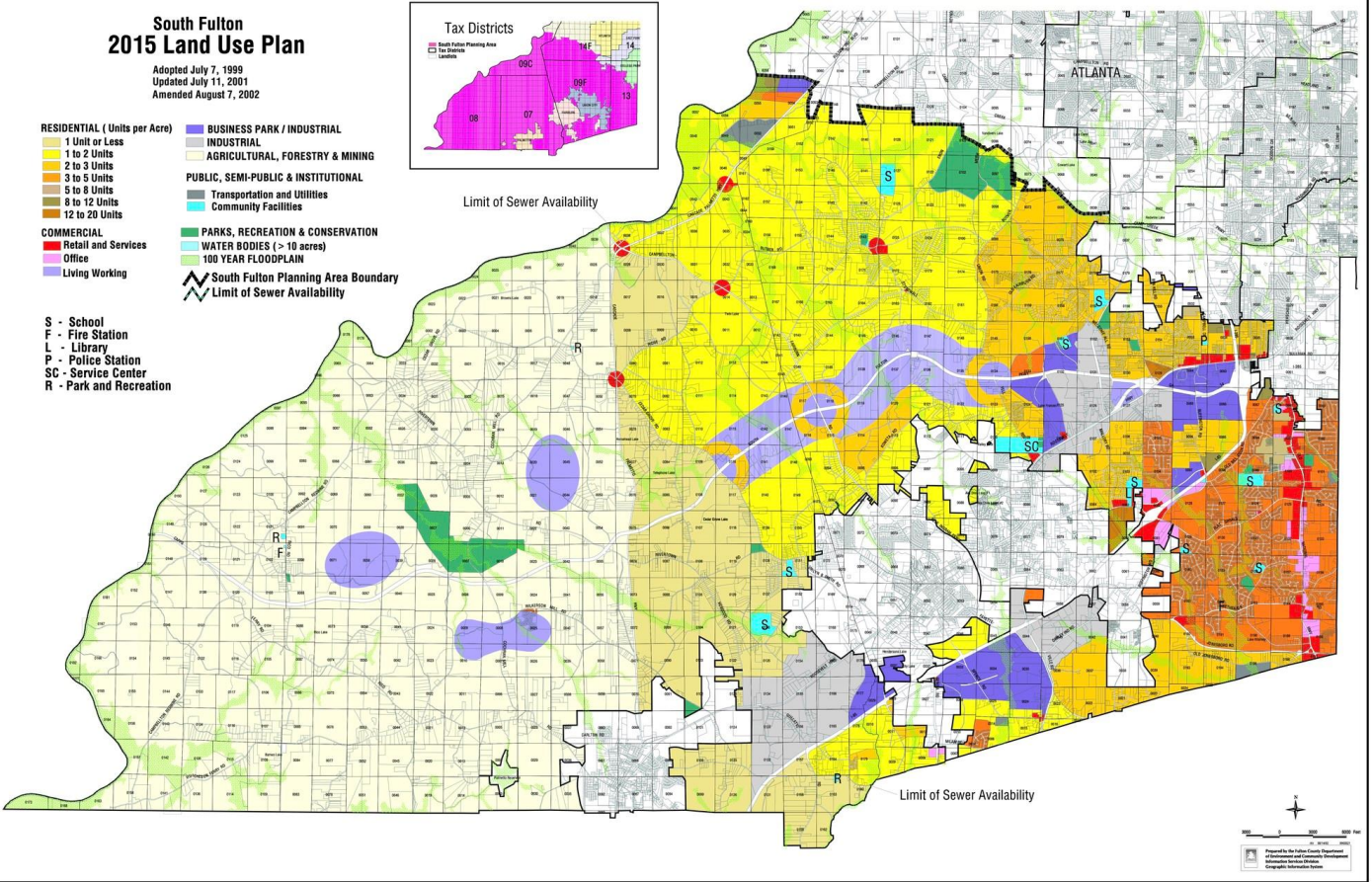
Attached is the map they would propose. It has been noted that the three proposed villages in blue seemed like two eyes and a mouth and the green area showing the outline of Cochran Mill Park represented a nose creating a smiley face.

# South Fulton 2015 Land Use Plan

Adopted July 7, 1999  
Updated July 11, 2001  
Amended August 7, 2002



- RESIDENTIAL (Units per Acre)**
    - 1 Unit or Less
    - 1 to 2 Units
    - 2 to 3 Units
    - 3 to 5 Units
    - 5 to 8 Units
    - 8 to 12 Units
    - 12 to 20 Units
  - COMMERCIAL**
    - Retail and Services
    - Office
    - Living Working
  - BUSINESS PARK / INDUSTRIAL**
    - INDUSTRIAL
    - AGRICULTURAL, FORESTRY & MINING
  - PUBLIC, SEMI-PUBLIC & INSTITUTIONAL**
    - Transportation and Utilities
    - Community Facilities
  - PARKS, RECREATION & CONSERVATION**
    - WATER BODIES (> 10 acres)
    - 100 YEAR FLOODPLAIN
- S - School  
 F - Fire Station  
 L - Library  
 P - Police Station  
 SC - Service Center  
 R - Park and Recreation



## 24. The vote

With great anticipation, we prepared for the vote by the Fulton County Board of Commissioners. Steve Cover drove back from a meeting on the Georgia coast for the discussion and vote. Although we knew of no opposition, one never knows. We had met with each Commission member and they all seemed to support the overlay legislation. I have seen votes change in the 24 hours leading up to a zoning vote so we approached the day with positive caution.

The Chattahoochee Hill Country Overlay was deep into to agenda and we were well into the second hour of the meeting when they were ready to discuss and act on our legislation. The bill was introduced. Bill Edwards, the commissioner representing South Fulton County made a motion to approve, it was seconded. There was no discussion and the legislation passed 7 - 0 in favor. And they moved on to the next item of business,

A number of people drove to Fulton County headquarters in downtown Atlanta to hear this debate, of which there was none, and to witness the vote. Following the vote, we departed the chambers and gathered on the steps for a picture to commemorate the day.

[Note: The Fulton County Commission adopted the Chattahoochee Hill Country Overlay on October 2, 2002.]



*The delegation who traveled to Fulton County to witness the discussion by the Fulton County Board of Commissioners and the passing of the largest land use change in metro Atlanta for decades. 3. Shannon Kettering 4. Steve Nygren 5. Marie Nygren 6. Jamer Turner 7. Mrs. Eaton 8. Maggie Goodman 9. Mark Goodman 10. Tom Williams 11. Bob Koehl 12. Mr. Eaton 13. Claudette Tyre 14. Wayne Stradling 16. Buddy Jarrard 18. Linda Peek Harris 19. Sallye Koehl 20. Bettie Turner 21. Rodney Peek 22. Al Blount 23. Hugh Tire 24. Ned Peek 25. Laura Williamson 27. Tonya Peek 28. Ann Beegle 29. Carter Williamson 30. Billy Peek 31. Chester Richardson 33. Dave McMurrin 34. Charlotte Gillis 35. Robert Reed 36. Steven Kopelman*