
INTRODUCING SUSTAINABLE CHOICES INTO SUBURBS: THE PATH FROM AUTO-CHOKED ROADS TO WALKABLE STREETS IN ATLANTA'S DRUID HILLS

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INTRODUCTION

Like many suburban communities around the country, Druid Hills—a community near Atlanta, home to Emory University and other major institutions—discovered in the past two decades that prosperity was beginning to erode its cherished quality of life. Its overwhelmingly auto-oriented transportation system is clogged to the point that mobility is declining, traffic devalues historic neighborhoods, and walking conditions are some of the nation's deadliest. Arteries lined with strip development have cut broad swaths through the community's signature tree canopy, and left the community without true centers of identity or services. Stormwater dirtied and intensified by development threatens some of the most unique biological habitat in metro Atlanta. At the same time, the workforce needed to maintain and grow the community's 40,000 jobs as an international center of innovation and economic growth is having trouble finding an acceptable set of housing, transportation, and lifestyle options there. A unique university-community partnership tackled these challenges by pursuing design guidelines for its primary corridor, Clifton Road. This spurred a process and plan that laid the groundwork for an enduring legacy of benefits for the larger community:

- *A cultural shift from a mid-20th-century automobile-centered suburb into a 21st-century walkable community appealing to the "Creative Class."*¹
- *A community-wide sense of commitment to environmental, cultural, and economic sustainability.*
- *A vision shaped by preservation, restoration, change, and innovation alike.*

This case study reveals how coupling broad-based community leadership with smart growth concepts can heal and improve suburban quality of life and environment with new housing, transportation, workplace, and amenity choices, offering positive lessons for communities facing similar challenges.

BACKGROUND

When Frederick Law Olmsted laid out a plan for Druid Hills—graced by a network of parks that lined pleasure drives and by streets whose curves celebrated the area's hills and streams—he evoked the spirit of the City Beautiful movement. Reacting to unhealthful and dehumanizing conditions in America's late-19th- and early-20th-century industrial cities, Olmsted and fellow City Beautiful advocates sought to introduce parks, public squares, and grand promenades that would restore a sense of grace to cities. They also explored the possibilities of idealized suburban environments as escapes from foul urban air and congestion. Druid Hills, just five miles from downtown Atlanta in neighboring DeKalb County,

was just such a retreat. Olmsted spoke of the kind of community spirit found in villages in which people of different generations lived and nature nourished humans. The wisdom of his plan was borne out as trees matured, attractive houses were built on streets, a village center emerged, and a handsome university—Emory—grew to national stature.

Three trends that Olmsted had foreseen and that supported his vision—the attraction of suburban living, increased availability of automobiles, and creation of new wealth—grew wildly in the 20th century, far beyond his or anyone's ability to predict. At the time Olmsted's office delivered his plan, DeKalb County held fewer than 30,000 residents and probably well under 1,000 cars. By contrast,

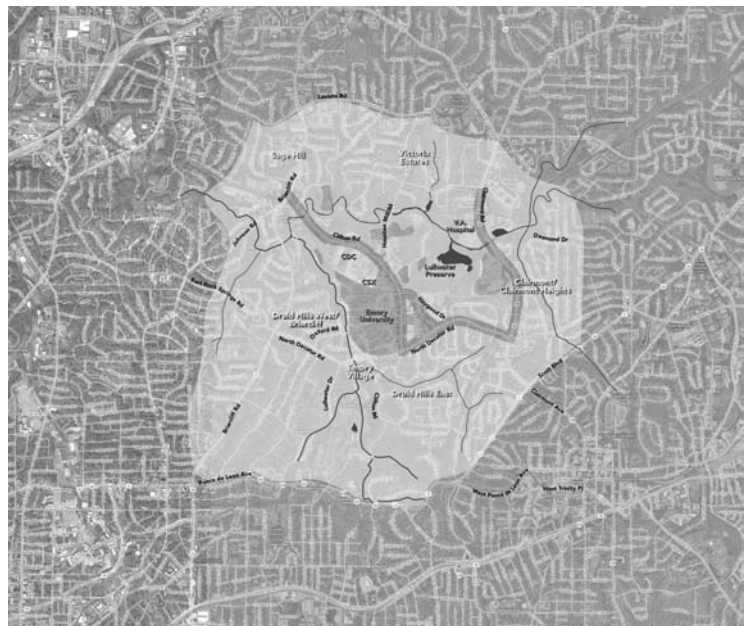
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FIGURE 1. Druid Hills is five miles from downtown Atlanta.



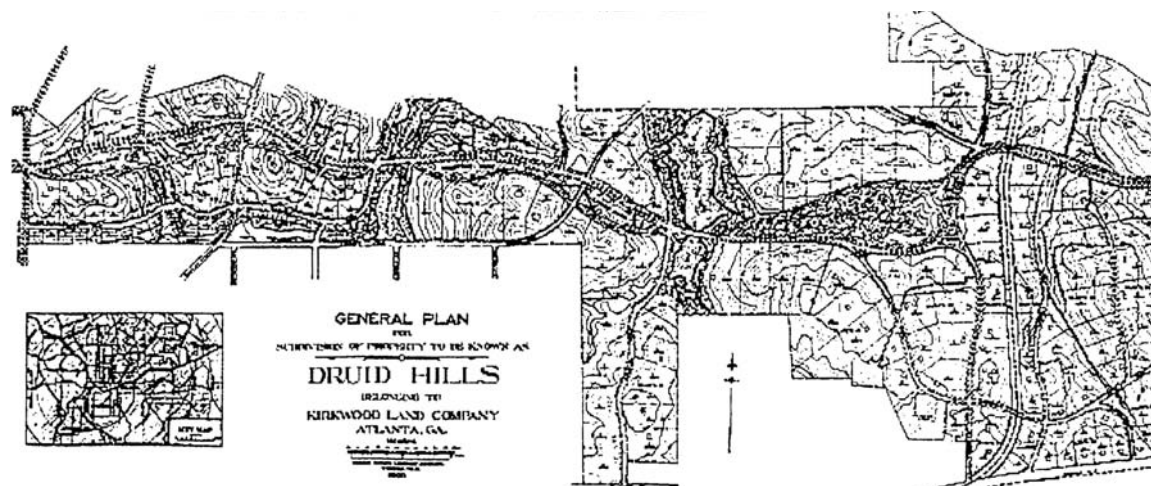
FIGURE 2. The design guidelines primarily address the corridor areas, but are informed by conditions throughout the context area, covering the traditional neighborhoods of Druid Hills, adjacent neighborhoods, multiple institutional campuses, and commercial areas.



in the years 1990–2005 alone the county added roughly 170,000 residents.² Metropolitan Atlanta is expected to add another 1.5 million people by 2025,³ roughly one-tenth of whom are expected to settle in DeKalb County.⁴ The number of cars on local roads and the number of hours lost to congestion have grown even faster than population has. At the same time, increasing affluence—average household income in Druid Hills exceeded \$66,000 in 2007, 35% higher than Georgia's average⁵—and rising land values have drawn investment toward this part of the rapidly growing region.

Burgeoning population, traffic, and wealth together created a sort of perfect storm that began to strengthen in the mid-1980s and grow steadily since then. Druid Hills became a major workforce destination by this period with the growth of Emory's campus, including Emory Hospital, plus the addition of other major institutions forming a substantial healthcare and research cluster: the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) headquarters, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta's Egleston Hospital campus, and the Atlanta VA Medical Center. While the physical framework that Olmsted imagined largely weathered this storm and remains

FIGURE 3. Historic Druid Hills and adjacent neighborhoods, designed by the office of Frederick Law Olmsted in the early 20th century, harbor a powerful sense of place, rooted in landscape design and residential scale that integrates them with the woods, hills, and creeks in which they are set.



visible and treasured, the quality of life he hoped to foster faces serious threat. Neighborhood residents complain that clogged streets and anonymous strip shopping centers create a sense of isolation rather than community. Roughly half of Emory and CDC employees drive to lunch regularly—because they lack lunch options they can walk to—further exacerbating congestion. Students find much less of a “college town” than one might expect around a major university because many retail and restaurant options are dispersed in shopping centers. Both

younger faculty/staff seeking to live near Emory or the CDC and older residents seeking to retire in their neighborhood complain that they lack suitable housing choices. Divided by a series of auto-oriented corridors, the area lacks the walkability that supports personal health and puts people in touch with nature and their neighbors. The tree canopy, woodlands, and streams so loved by everyone in the community suffer from the polluted runoff sluicing off the acres of surface parking that have spread across the landscape.

The Clifton Community Partnership

Clifton’s neighborhoods and Emory chose not to surrender to this cycle of worsening growth impacts. In 2006 they created the Clifton Community Partnership⁶ (CCP) as a vehicle for managing growth and transforming its impacts into opportunities for community building. The Partnership, largely funded and originated by Emory, describes its mission as “to bring neighbors, businesses, institutions, and civic partners to develop a vision for the future and work together on implementation.” Its work focuses around four themes with very direct applications to local neighborhoods,

transportation, and their planning: *Live Locally, Walk Anywhere, Commute Creatively, and Enhance Vibrant Neighborhoods*.

The Partnership sought immediately to develop guidelines to foster a more walkable community and promote a wider range of housing and transportation options. Hundreds of residents joined Emory faculty, staff, and students, representatives of other institutions, county officials, and other stakeholders in energetically supporting the process of developing the guidelines. Their active involvement—including participation in a broadly representative advisory committee, community workshops, a visioning charrette, community meetings, and a page-by-page review of the guidelines—revealed a depth of commitment and mutual goodwill that fostered a strong vision and the ability to realize it.

FIGURE 4. Public meetings included small group discussion and report-backs.



An Uncharted Course

The product that emerged from this broad and inclusive process—the Clifton Corridor Design Guidelines—represents far more than the title implies. The guidelines offer specific direction for shaping a more livable future for Druid Hills's Clifton, Briarcliff, North Decatur, and Clairmont Road corridors and adjacent neighborhoods and institutions, but they also represent a dramatic step beyond that. They:

- *Recognize the need for a far more robust response to the corrosive impacts of suburban growth*—one in which all members of the community benefit from working together. While neighborhoods and universities in numerous older urban neighborhoods have joined forces to address decades of disinvestment, these guidelines represent a groundbreaking collaboration between suburban neighborhoods and a university to create such a tangible vision for the community they share. Equally notable, participants recognized the futility of trying to isolate the community from the impacts of regional growth and chose instead to focus on how to work together to amplify the benefits and limit the costs that growth can bring.
- *Establish the value of a shared vision, inspired by diverse perspectives.* Clifton boasts a rich history of visions, from Olmsted's plans for a regional park system and for the Druid Hills neighborhood to recent plans drawn up by individual neighborhoods, Emory, the CDC, and others. This process represents the first time, however, that widely diverse stakeholders sat at the same table, month after month, to lay out a shared vision that reflected the needs and aspirations of the entire area.
- *Explore non-traditional strategies.* In place of generic suburban approaches to accommodating growth—wider roadways that attempt to handle increased traffic but inevitably invite more, and down-zoning that pushes growth to other areas but inevitably brings more through traffic—the stakeholders investigated other strategies designed to create a more livable community. The guidelines call for incentives that encourage

people who work along the corridor to live in new housing nearby (and walk to work), concentrate growth in places that can foster expanded transit, and link development to the creation of new public parks and other steps that produce a greener community.

By taking the risk of charting a new course—setting aside differences and experimenting with collaboration—Clifton’s neighborhoods, institutions, and other stakeholders moved to take charge of their shared future. Through the resulting design guidelines and future products of this collaboration, they are building a model for other communities across the country and laying the groundwork for benefits in their own community that will represent an enduring legacy.

FORCES SHAPING GROWTH AND CHANGE

Demographic, economic, transportation, and other forces—not just in Atlanta but across the U.S.—present different growth challenges and opportunities than existed for much of the period from the 1950s to the present. The Clifton Corridor Design Guidelines process revealed the following background factors that sparked a community conversation and fundamentally shaped the ultimate design guidelines.

Demographics

- *DeKalb County’s population is growing significantly.* Population is expected to rise by 26% between 2005 and 2025, following 37% growth during the period 1980–2000.⁷ These increases arise from several long-term trends.

First, the Atlanta region continues to see strong population growth, thanks to its mild climate, strong economic base, moderate cost of living, and immigration. Author Richard Florida notes that Atlanta consistently ranks among the top destinations for the group he named the Creative Class—young, educated, innovative people who comprise a workforce segment considered crucial to future economic growth.⁸ According to the Atlanta Regional Commission, the metropolitan area is currently gaining nearly 100,000

new residents per year, and overall population growth of two million is foreseen by 2030.⁹ This in turn creates strong demand for development, with Atlanta figuring prominently in the substantial share of building construction expected to occur in the southeastern United States in coming decades.

Second, more of this growth—confined to the edges of an expanding metropolitan area over the past generation—will take place in the metropolitan core, including DeKalb County. For instance, Atlanta has reversed a long-term decline—the city lost 80,000 residents between 1970 and 2000—with a gain of nearly 50,000 new residents since 2000. This rise included a gain of 9,500 between April 2005 and April 2006, and an increase of 12,600 (a 30-year record) between April 2006 and April 2007. According to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the city issued 10,779 housing permits in 2006, outpacing all ten surrounding counties¹⁰ Driving this trend, in Atlanta and across the United States, is increasing frustration with the time and cost of long commutes from the urban periphery; increased interest in the amenities of urban living—and the increased sophistication of planners and developers in providing this sort of environment; and declining numbers of households with children, lessening (although not removing) the impact that access to quality public schools has on location decisions. The presence of significant numbers of jobs and well-regarded schools in the Clifton Corridor make it a natural magnet for additional housing.

A third factor in county population growth is strong immigration, especially in southern districts.

- *Population growth among diverse age groups, and a decline in the proportion of households with children, has generated a need for more varied housing types.* The conventional single-family home—which served a market dominated by families with children for generations and defined most Americans’ image of home—now appeals only to a minority of the housing market. The diagrams in figure 7 suggest how national housing demand has changed in the last 15 years. More

diverse, and typically more urban unit types such as townhouses, lofts, rental and ownership apartments, and live-work units, each has an increasingly important place in a housing market once dominated by nuclear families. Over the next 20 to 30 years, a variety of groups will increase their share of the housing market:

- “Empty nesters” of the baby boom generation who are interested in leaving larger family homes and/or seeking a more urban lifestyle.
- The children of the baby boomers, or “millennials,” who increasingly choose to postpone having children until they have completed post-secondary education and established a career, and who are often seeking a more urban environment than the suburbs of their youth.
- “Non-traditional” households, including unmarried partners, gay and lesbian partners, divorcees, and other groupings.¹¹
- DeKalb County expects particularly strong growth between 2000 and 2025 in three age groups: 0–13 (millennials), 25–54, and 65+ (baby boomers).¹²
- *Expanding housing choice will enhance value in traditional single-family neighborhoods.* The U.S. has as many single-family homes today as it will

FIGURE 5.

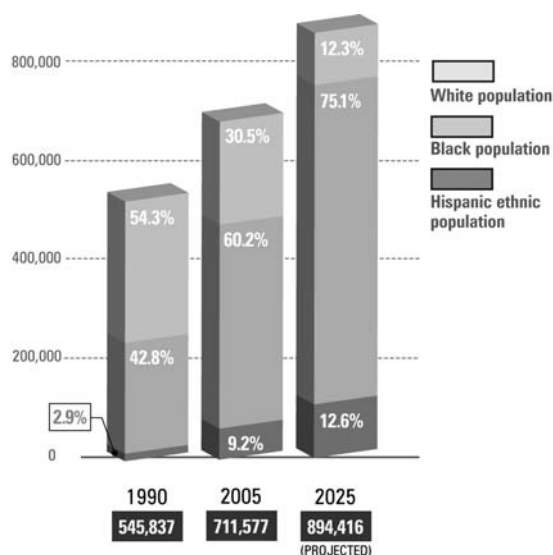
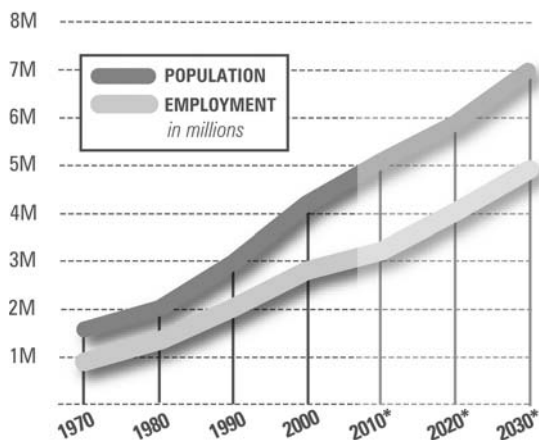


FIGURE 6.



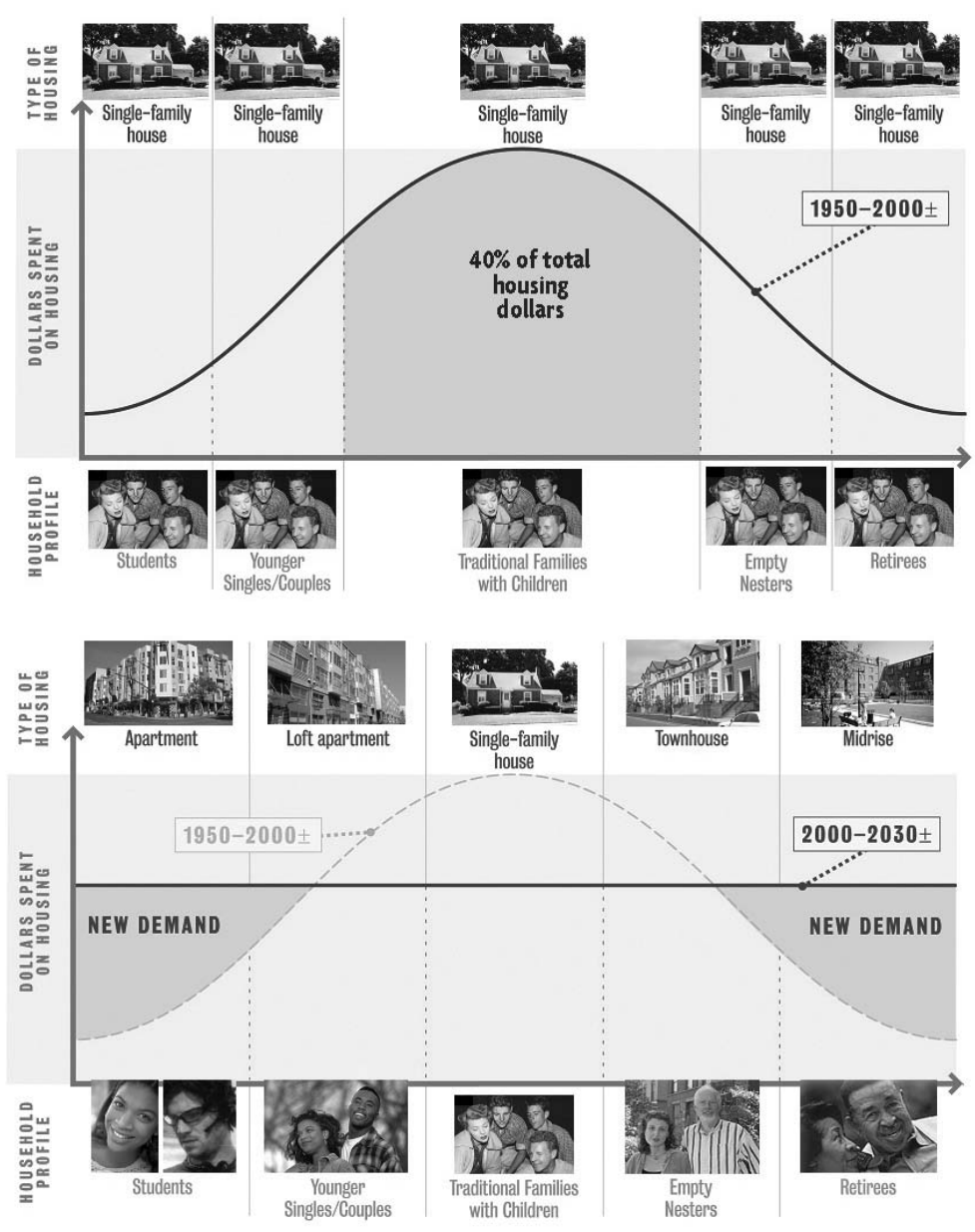
need through 2035, according to Chris Leinberger at the Brookings Institution. This poses some risk to the long-term value of single-family homes. As more new households are able to set roots in Druid Hills in more compact, affordable housing types, the local market for single-family homes will be supported as some of these households gain affluence, start families, and seek larger, more private settings in their community. Hence property owners in traditional single-family neighborhoods have an interest in having compact, affordable housing choices in their community.

- *Fast-growing racial and ethnic diversity* in the county will also require the Clifton community to incorporate greater choice in housing options. Choices need to be suitable for a greater variety of cultural preferences.

Household Affluence

- *The affluence of the average DeKalb household has increased relatively rapidly*—by 37% between 1990 and 2000, or 15% above the state average¹³—putting upward pressure on housing prices and increasing demand for retail and other services. During the same period, limited growth in housing supply within the Clifton community placed further pressure on prices. Housing affordability has failed to keep pace with rising affluence, producing a highly ironic result: most members

FIGURE 7. These diagrams demonstrate an historic shift in the housing market that will change patterns of development for at least a generation. From about 1950 to about 2000 (upper diagram), roughly 40% of the housing market demand came from traditional families with children who wanted a single-family detached house in a suburban setting. Although demand for other housing types existed, the size of this particular demand segment led most developers to focus on the single-family detached house as a generic product suitable for every household, regardless of structure. Since 2000 (lower diagram), demand from traditional families has significantly slackened as younger and older households, often without children, have become more significant segments of the market. The resulting evenness of demand among different age groups and kinds of households seeking a variety of types of housing has led developers to intensify efforts to produce a more diverse range of housing types. A key effect of this change is increased production of more urban housing types of greater quality.



of the humanities faculty can no longer afford to buy a house in a neighborhood developed largely for Emory faculty and staff (many other potential residents find themselves in the same boat). Increasing housing supply and offering an appropriate variety of unit types at affordable prices would find strong support in the market, and that new housing would bring with it strong support for neighborhood retail and other supportive services.

Land Use and Transportation

- DeKalb's "jobs/housing balance"—the relationship between locations of homes and workplaces—is in fact quite out of balance. According to DeKalb County, 77% of the people working in the county commute in from other counties, while many residents commute out.¹⁴ This imbalance adds to the pressures on transportation infrastructure and erodes quality of life by increasing travel time for commuters and non-commuters alike. A greater variety of quality housing opportunities closer to jobs and reachable via transport modes other than a car would help correct this condition.

More broadly, *both the county and Druid Hills contain combinations of land use and transportation infrastructure that exacerbate traffic loads and erode the sense of community.* The locations of most existing businesses, homes, retail areas, and other significant uses were chosen on the assumption that automobiles would provide the primary means of access. For decades, this assumption worked well enough, giving all sorts of land uses great flexibility in choosing location. Within the relatively loose constraints of zoning law, this allowed most uses to locate where land cost the least—in some cases on infill sites within the community, and in some cases on cheaper undeveloped land at the edge of metropolitan Atlanta. In recent years, however, high trip-generation rates (that is, the frequency with which automobile trips are taken to and from a site) inherent in this pattern have revealed themselves to be a great strain on the area's roads and quality of life.

The assumption that most activities would be reachable by car meant that little attention

was paid to making non-automobile transportation workable—say, allowing children to walk to school or workers to walk to lunch—or to clustering uses at sufficient densities along major travel routes to support convenient transit service. In the Clifton Corridor, the CDC reports that up to half of its staff leaves campus to get lunch daily and drives to do it; a CCP survey in September 2006 found that 58% of people in the corridor who leave their workplace for lunch drive to a restaurant nearby.¹⁵ Likewise, it is not unusual for people to drive 1/4 mile from work to a gym or from home to work, owing in part to unwelcoming sidewalk and crosswalk conditions in between, and in part to a culture that treats the automobile as the default means of transportation. Nationally, children walk less due to the obstacles present in the Clifton community: “. . . fewer than one in seven children walk or bicycle to school, compared to nearly 50 percent in 1965. . . . Distance was the biggest obstacle at 55 percent, followed by traffic dangers at 40 percent.”¹⁶ Correlations have been found between this trend and childhood obesity: “Approximately one in ten preschoolers and one in seven school-age children are overweight; more than triple that in the 1960s.”¹⁷

While the automobile will remain an important means of transportation in Druid Hills for the foreseeable future, many benefits would come from planning land use and transportation infrastructure to support a variety of transportation options, so that people begin to think of walking as a default means of getting around. Uses with inherently high rates of automobile trips—particularly “big box” and other large-format stores—should be located in places where their traffic will not crowd neighborhood streets or overburdened arterial roads. Combinations of uses that reduce vehicle trips—by integrating housing, retail, jobs, and/or other uses within walking distance of each other—should be promoted, and they should be sited to take advantage of existing transit services and to build a market for new ones. For instance, one proposed project in the Clifton Corridor, Emory Point, is projected to produce 44% fewer automobile trips as planned than if it followed conventional

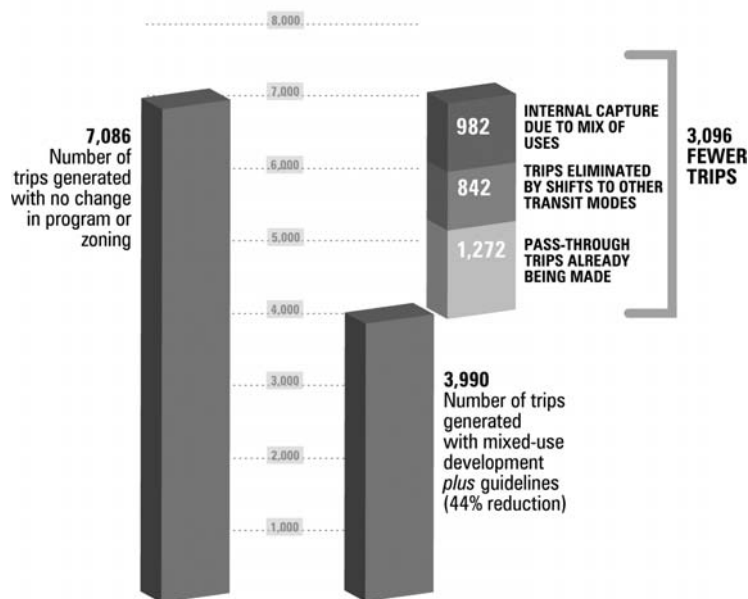


FIGURE 8.

development patterns—that is, if its components were scattered in areas further from supportive uses and transit (see figure 8).¹⁸

- *Projected regional and countywide employment growth will come in sectors with a major presence in the Clifton community*, particularly education, health, and social services. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the VA Hospital, Children’s Hospital at Egleston, and Emory Hospital form one of the most significant centers of medical research, clinical services, and training in the southeastern U.S. Indeed, the CDC campus is the national headquarters of the agency as well as the site of significant research facilities. These institutions find great value in their proximity to one another, both through formal collaborations, as between the CDC and Emory’s Rollins School of Public Health, and through informal synergies, principally the concentration of skilled medical staff and faculty in the area. Each institution already makes use of satellite locations to carry out some of its medical work, but the high value of proximity—especially proximity within easy walking distance enjoyed by all but the VA Hospital—will continue to generate pressure to locate significant operations in the Clifton community. The grow-

ing importance to public health and the regional economy of the biomedical sector generally, and of the Clifton community’s concentration of it, will amplify this pressure. While this growth poses real challenges in terms of transportation, urban design, and related issues, it holds equal potential to overcome them, offering an intensity of use and value that can support the improved transit services, walking environment, and efficient groupings of uses that offer the most promising tools for reducing traffic congestion and other threats to quality of life.

- *Significant ongoing outside investment in DeKalb County businesses will have an impact on job profiles*. Decreasing levels of local control over local economic sectors—increasingly being acquired by multinational corporations—make it all the more important that local planning around those sectors be more intentional and preemptive.

Institutional Growth and Scale

Institutions in the Clifton Corridor have played major direct and indirect roles in the corridor’s development, supporting growth in jobs, property value, and cultural life while also contributing to community concerns around traffic, architectural

scale, and limited public input on campus initiatives. Emory University, the CDC, Children's Hospital at Egleston, and the VA Hospital figure most prominently among these institutions, but other important ones include Druid Hills High School and a private school, the Ben Franklin Academy. While each of these institutions has grown over the years, nearly all are also contemplating further physical and program expansions to meet mission-driven goals.

For instance, Emory's health sciences aim to continue to increase the cutting-edge research they conduct, meaning additional research facilities are needed. Emory Hospital occupies aging facilities needing redevelopment and anticipates a steady increase in patient visits over the coming decade. The CDC has seen major expansion since the 1990s, driven by and driving a nationwide increase in investments and discovery in the biosciences, and anticipates further redevelopment of older campus buildings with new, higher-capacity facilities. Children's Hospital at Egleston has plans to continue to improve facilities on portions of its campus. Even Druid Hills High School is undergoing a significant renovation and addition to address a growing student body and outdated facilities designed originally for elementary-level students. DeKalb County sees the cluster of life-sciences institutions in the area, and related private-sector businesses, as a central driver of countywide economic performance.

The major area institutions often face strong internal pressures to meet their mission-driven goals. Historically, these pressures have sometimes diminished consideration of their growth on the community. However, the institutions have demonstrated an increasing awareness of community interests as inseparable from their own. Community concerns around traffic, housing costs, environmental protection, and historic preservation have become institutional concerns as well when negative impacts on quality of life hinder staff recruitment, program operations, and adherence to core principles. Institutions further realize that the talented new staff they need will not come automatically, but will weigh lifestyle options in the larger community as heavily as specific career opportunities. Institutions thus have a vested interest in helping foster the broader range of housing, transportation, and lifestyle op-

tions sought by their target workforce than Druid Hills currently provides.

The formation of the Clifton Community Partnership and this design-guidelines effort represent two examples of institutions responding preemptively to community growth concerns, from the perspective that future growth needs to mitigate its own impacts, remediate some of the impacts of previous growth, and introduce new choices into the community. Other local examples of institutions' pursuing enlightened self-interest through a broad community-based approach include the Clifton Corridor Traffic Management Association and partnerships between Druid Hills High School and Emory University. Intensified use of these partnerships and new ones—including a stronger county role—will be essential as area institutions make plans for their own and their community's future.

Transportation Challenges

- *Druid Hills was originally conceived as a streetcar suburb:* The office of Frederick Law Olmsted included streetcar tracks to Emory Village and along Ponce De Leon Avenue in its neighborhood plan, as well as a network of connecting sidewalks. The streetcars are long gone, replaced by MARTA¹⁹ bus service that fails to serve many in the community. Regional rail service was also available at Emory Station, on the Emory campus at Clifton Road, through the 1950s.

The shift to automobiles since the 1960s has reached its limits in terms of road capacity and negative effects on neighborhood quality of life. Traffic congestion would continue to increase even with a halt to development in the Clifton Corridor. Nationally, the increase in distances driven annually—vehicle miles traveled, or VMT—has significantly outpaced other growth indicators. According to Ewing and Kreutzer, “in recent decades, VMT has increased at three times the rate of population growth. VMT has similarly outpaced employment and economic growth.”²⁰ Atlanta's VMT per capita increased at a lower rate during this period, peaking in 1998 and making a notable decline in years since, but overall VMT increased to a peak in 2005, with

obvious effects across the strained regional road network.²¹ Recent traffic studies recommended easing congestion by adding more turn lanes at intersections, but residents resisted this step at a number of locations because the wider rights-of-way required would dramatically affect many adjacent properties.

High traffic volume and speeds on major roads (during non-rush-hour periods when some multilane roads are lightly traveled) degrade the character and value of street-side homes. Cut-through traffic seeking to avoid congested arterial roads crowds onto residential streets not planned or laid out for such volumes. Simple traffic-calming measures like speed humps and narrowed lanes can be very effective in addressing these impacts in specific locations. Preventing traffic congestion will also depend heavily on strategies at the county and regional levels, since up to 60% of traffic in the Clifton Corridor is on its way to or from somewhere else, according to recent studies. Providing good alternatives to clogged roads within the Clifton community is essential and readily achievable; it must, however, be part of a larger, more comprehensive approach developed with transportation and land use officials in surrounding areas in order to achieve satisfactory results.

While MARTA and, increasingly, the Emory-operated Cliff® service provide important bus services, their reach and ridership potential could be much improved with strategies for more convenient service, restoring transit as a major part of the transportation balance in Druid Hills. Success with ongoing initiatives to bring regional rail service to the area—particularly Georgia Brain Train—would significantly reinforce this. But because rail is such a long-term prospect, near- and mid-term development needs to be coordinated with more incremental transit improvements such as priority bus signaling and improved transit branding.

- *Lack of suitable pedestrian, bike, and transit infrastructure poses hazards, limits choice, and exacerbates traffic impacts.* DeKalb County has the highest pedestrian fatality rate in Georgia and one of the highest in the country, for reasons

that are evident in the Clifton community.²²

Many roads and streets lack sidewalks. In some instances, a decent sidewalk network in a residential neighborhood runs into a major arterial road that lacks sidewalks or crosswalks at key points, forcing people to walk where vehicles do not expect them. Some bus stops lack paved or wheelchair-accessible sidewalk access. Ironically, the evidence of real potential for decreased reliance on automobiles includes the fact that so many people walk, bike, and take transit in the area despite the frequent inconvenience and hazard of doing so.

- *Lack of a coordinated approach among transit providers and parking policies combine with limited walking opportunities at service stops to constrain*

FIGURE 9. Typical evening rush hour on a Druid Hills road.



FIGURE 10. Poor pedestrian conditions make it unpleasant and unsafe to get around much of Druid Hills by any means but car.



the effectiveness of services. Easy access to transit schedules and passes, coordinated timing of connecting transit services, and the ease of getting from transit stop to destination, often dismissed as “details,” actually play a major role in deter-

mining whether or not transit is an appealing choice for people. For transit service to have a real and measurable impact on traffic reduction, such details need to be addressed so that transit becomes a first choice, not the choice of

last resort. In addition, policies that impose at least some cost for parking can provide a very important incentive for transit use, while reflecting the costs that automobile use imposes on the community. For instance, when Emory approximately doubled its annual parking fee to \$600 in February 2007, it saw a 20% drop in demand for parking passes over the next three months as commuters chose other transportation modes or carpooled.²³ Other area institutions that now provide free parking could help reduce automobile traffic—as well as their own dollar and land costs for providing parking—by instituting similar policies.

- *Conventional engineering approaches need to be changed if corridors are to accommodate pedestrians, bikes, and transit as well as cars.* As implied by their designations as “roads,” the major arterials in Druid Hills—Clifton, Briarcliff, North Decatur and Clairmont Roads—were designed over the past 50 years with traffic flow and convenience as priorities and accommodations for pedestrians, cyclists, transit, landscape, and cultural history as afterthoughts, if they were considered at all. As one pertinent example, GDOT guidelines for roads like Clifton with speeds of up to 35 miles per hour call for trees greater than four inches in diameter to be located eight feet or more from the curb, to reduce the likelihood of auto-tree collisions.²⁴ Research has shown, however, that locating trees and other vertical elements closer to the curb in settings like the Clifton Corridor effectively reduces auto collisions by making drivers more attentive to obstacles, pedestrians, and other things around them. Such an approach would also support landscape, pedestrian safety, and land use goals. Successful accommodation of multiple goals on a road requires a paradigm shift that treats roads as streets designed to serve multiple functions. The concept of seeking “context-sensitive solutions” in road engineering emerged in recent years to address this need to balance traffic flow with other priorities. The Federal Highway Administration and Institute of Transportation Engineers have developed guidelines that exemplify good policies for GDOT and DeKalb County to apply in the Clifton Corridor.²⁵

FIGURE 11. A bus stop and shelter (upper photo) lack paved access or a curb cut. Emory’s Cliff® bus service (lower photo), significantly expanded and promoted since 2006, has increased transit usage in the Clifton Corridor and drawn requests from area residents for service to their neighborhoods.



CREATING A VISION

The Community Dialogue

A comprehensive community engagement process brought the issues described above to the attention of people throughout Druid Hills. Key elements of this process included:

Establishing an advisory group reflecting diverse community perspectives. The 28-member CCP Advisory Group has met bi-monthly since its inception in 2006, focusing first on the Design Guidelines process, and since then on its implementation as well as other community issues. Group representation includes homeowners’ associations, business and property owners, Emory faculty, other institutions, and regional Atlanta planning, transit, and ULI leadership.

Speaking with stakeholders one-on-one. The process included interviews with Advisory Group members as well as county officials, developers with projects in the study area, students, and others.

Fostering dialogue at public meetings. A series of six public meetings offered extensive opportunity for community members to share and debate ideas in small-group settings. Forums included:

- An initial meeting identifying priority opportunities and challenges.
- Presentations by guest speakers, including Atlanta ULI head Jeff Dufresne, MARTA transit planner Paul Grether, Atlanta Parks Department planner Dee Merriam, and urban designer David Dixon, explaining the forces of growth and change discussed above, and identifying good local and national precedents that address them effectively.
- A full-day community charrette, attended by county elected leadership, for community members to list and sketch vision concepts in small working groups.
- Additional public meetings hosting discussion of emerging design guidelines concepts and implementation steps.

This process opened the eyes of many to interconnected factors they hadn't appreciated before, and elicited a variety of original ideas addressing local conditions. Perhaps most importantly, neighborhood leaders who had found past success in *fighting* growth and change realized that *managing* growth and change for community benefit is now a more effective approach to uphold community values. Local neighborhood associations are justifiably proud they stopped a 1970s plan to run a highway through the park corridor at the south edge of Druid Hills. Past development practices of Emory also taught neighborhoods they needed to assiduously prevent erection of insensitive new campus buildings near them. Today, however, saying "No" to development means pushing it toward the metropolitan periphery, where it will still contribute to worsening regional traffic passing through Druid Hills, while offering no local benefits like jobs or neighborhood amenities. Druid Hills neighborhoods now understand the relevant question is not *whether* to develop, but *how*. They see that steering compact, transit-oriented development to grayfield and infill corridor sites can offer

real returns to their own economic, community, and environmental situation.

The Vision and Guidelines

Six core planning principles, embracing broadly held community values, emerged from this dialogue:

1. *Create places of greater civic value.* Channel growth to sites that need it and away from those needing protection. Create new development that builds community by drawing diverse people together.

FIGURE 12.



2. *Promote environmental sustainability and historic preservation.* Protect and enhance natural areas and traditional neighborhoods. Ensure that new development employs sustainable planning and design methods.

FIGURE 13.



3. *Expand choices.* Serve diverse lifestyles with more options for housing, transportation, recreation, and retail.

FIGURE 14.



4. *Improve accessibility and connectivity.* Expand transit services, improve walking and biking networks, and concentrate development where all these are available.

FIGURE 15.



5. *Enhance personal well-being.* Promote personal health with more opportunities to walk safely and to learn. Keep people and their environment in a sustainable balance.

FIGURE 16.



6. *Foster community-wide engagement.* Ensure that community members have an ongoing voice in helping shape growth and change for community benefit.

FIGURE 17.



These principles, in turn, led to a vision that addressed three principal categories of community land in distinct ways.

Natural Environment Restoration Areas possess particular ecological sensitivity and value that have been or should be protected from development. Restoration areas typically show degradation resulting from nearby development and require focused efforts to reduce and reverse these impacts on top of ongoing protection efforts.

FIGURE 18. Where land in the Clifton Corridor falls among three major classifications—Natural Environment Restoration Area, Neighborhood Preservation Area, and Corridor Enhancement Area—should determine its treatment. Some portions of the major institutional campuses offer opportunities for redevelopment in tandem with adjacent Corridor Enhancement Area.



Neighborhood Preservation Areas, predominantly single-family residential neighborhoods, play a central role in defining the character of the Clifton community and should receive protection from new development. They include the neighborhoods laid out by the office of Frederick Law Olmsted and incorporated in the Druid Hills Historic District. They also include other, mostly single-family neighborhoods built more recently.

Corridor Enhancement Areas are linear corridors along major streets that represent the most appropri-

ate areas—and most compelling opportunities—for significant change in the Clifton community. The streets that define these areas constitute a significant public setting that defines the character of the Clifton community. Many suffer from heavy traffic, outdated land uses, and buildings and landscape that do not relate to their very public setting. They could instead provide the walkable neighborhoods, community gathering places, and workplaces that current residents and the future regional workforce desire alike. The Corridor Enhancement areas together include about five miles of major road corridor, 200 acres of potential development area, and the vast majority of likely new development within the overall study area of approximately 2,400 acres.

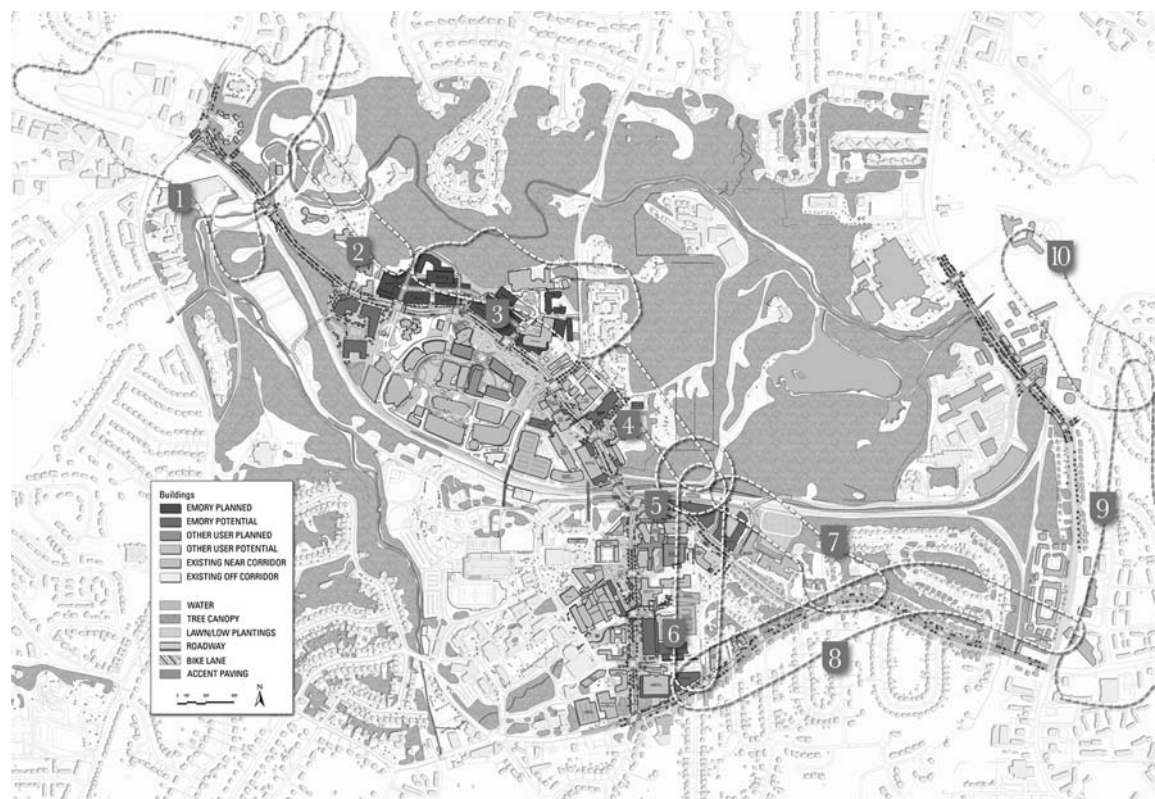
Different portions of the Corridor Enhancement Areas clearly merit very different levels of change. Residents and property owners agree that the retail grayfields dominating two major portions of the

study area should eventually see significant redevelopment. Corridor areas passing through the sensitive Druid Hills Historic District and Wesley Woods natural preserve require a different type of change, one that repairs the negative impacts on their context of traffic and development but involves little or no redevelopment. In all cases, the kinds of changes and their extent must take into account a given parcel's relationship to its context, be that natural, historic, campus, commercial, or some combination of these.

For these reasons, the design guidelines identify *ten distinct districts* within the Corridor Enhancement Areas.

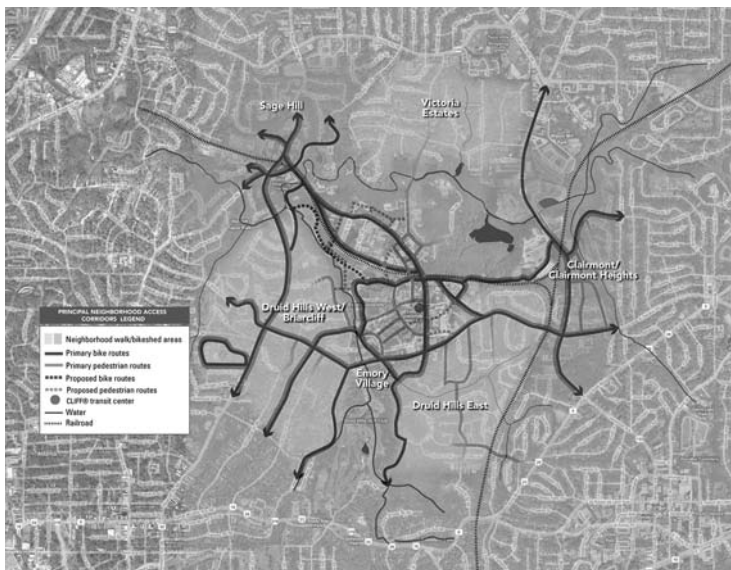
- Two districts, with extensive retail grayfields, offer the greatest potential magnitude of transit-oriented redevelopment. Together they could offer 25–30 blocks around a compact street network, accommodating more than 2,700

FIGURE 19. This illustrative plan presents a conceptual idea of improvements to the public and built realm that serve community goals. The ten numbered districts represent areas of distinct character, use, and geography.



- housing units, 600,000 sf of office and research space, and significant pedestrian-oriented retail.
- One district accommodates a transit hub—with regional and local bus service and bike facilities in the near term, adding commuter rail over the long term—central to the major university and health sector campuses.
- One district accommodates a new community green anchored by an expanded Druid Hills High School, a thriving institution at the core of community life.
- One district accommodates Emory Point, an approved mixed-use development (and pilot LEED-ND participant) ready for construction, with more than 900 housing units specially dedicated to the local workforce, plus pedestrian-oriented retail and lifelong learning programming.
- Two districts emphasize Emory campus identity and activity, and their overlap with the broader community.
- One district transforms a busy arterial into a parkway through an historic neighborhood, with new sidewalks, a bike path, street trees, and shrubs.
- One district highlights perception of the surrounding natural preserve with pedestrian-oriented interpretive signage.

FIGURE 20. This diagram indicates existing and proposed bike and pedestrian routes in the Clifton Corridor that deserve priority attention for improvements and wayfinding signage.



Complementing the ten districts, a set of general design guidelines sets standards for transforming Clifton Road and other arterial corridors into “complete streets” with bike lanes, prominent transit stops, a restored tree canopy, improved crosswalks, planted medians, and a consistent frame of buildings containing pedestrian-oriented ground floor uses. The general guidelines also address public park design and sensitive building scale and use transitions to adjacent neighborhoods.

The vision enhances *connectivity* by outlining convenient, safe, and extensive pedestrian, transit, and bike networks that reduce reliance on automobiles. Good connectivity will depend both on making each network complete in and of itself—filling gaps in sidewalks, transit routes, and bike lanes—and on tying the networks together to expand travel options.

The CCP posted the final design guidelines document on its web site to promote broad community awareness and understanding of its goals: (http://cliftoncommunitypartnership.org/learn/urban_design_guidelines.html).

The Results

Completed little more than a year ago, the Clifton Corridor Design Guidelines have already had a tangible impact on their community, and are setting the stage for more improvements to come.

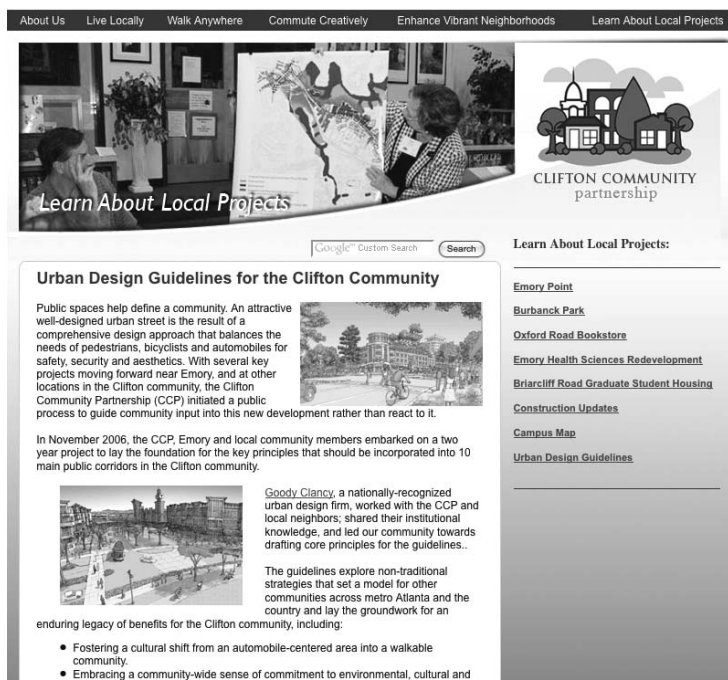


FIGURE 21. Design guidelines are posted on the Clifton Community Partnership Web site

- The CCP and Emory are in the process of creating a new bike and pedestrian path that will link core campus areas and new on-street bike lanes with major retail services, neighborhoods, and Druid Hills High School. A community design workshop led to landscape design and right-of-way acquisition efforts now in process.

- The \$250 million LEED-ND mixed-use Emory Point development received zoning approval in part through its observance of the Design Guidelines and support for their larger principles.
- A new tree-lined sidewalk now links the Emory and CDC campuses with a major graduate housing development and future TOD node.

FIGURE 22.



FIGURE 23.



- The ongoing revision process for DeKalb County's zoning ordinance addresses the Design Guidelines.
- A current planning effort by the Atlanta Regional Commission's Livable Centers Initiative for an area near but outside the Clifton study area is using the Design Guidelines as a precedent.
- The Design Guidelines are helping shape Emory's several new buildings in process, incorporating pedestrian-friendly, street-oriented design absent from past design of campus buildings and open spaces.
- The Emory, CCP, and its Advisory Group remain active in discussing and implementing

complementary initiatives, such as creating new park space and making progress advocating for rail transit at state and federal levels.

CONCLUSIONS: MANAGING GROWTH AND CHANGE TO TRANSFORM SUBURBS INTO SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

A Journey Marked by Discovery

The guidelines are very different in spirit, scope, and detail, from the document that the Partnership originally envisioned. In many ways the process of creating the guidelines represented a journey that

FIGURE 24. A new transit hub serving buses and eventually commuter rail would form an important new transit and activity node for the community, with welcoming pedestrian connections to jobs, housing, academic functions, and recreation resources in multiple directions.



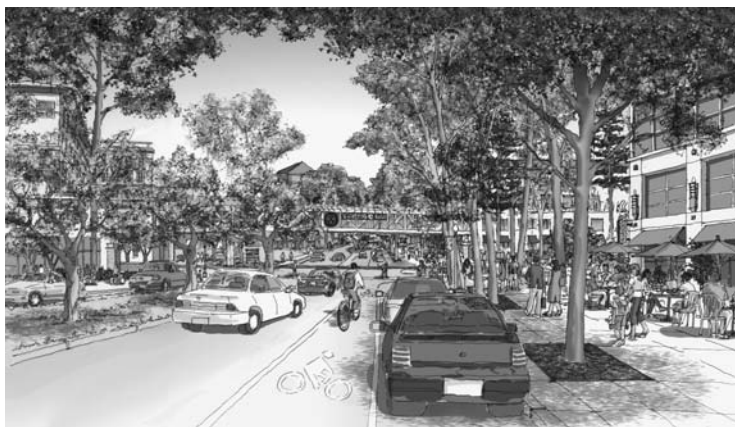


FIGURE 25. This stretch of Clifton Road could become one of America's signature boulevards linking university and community. Key changes include median and street tree plantings that extend the Emory campus across Clifton and diminish the presence of traffic; bike lanes; and sidewalks that appeal to a diverse community with engaging campus buildings, accessory campus- and neighborhood-oriented retail, public art, plantings, and protection from traffic.



led its participants into unanticipated territory and produced unexpected discoveries:

- *A vision shaped by preservation, restoration, and innovation.* As originally conceived, the vision and guidelines would have focused on enhancing walkability and expanding housing and transportation choices along existing auto-dominated corridors. Instead, the process produced a far broader vision that embraced this initial approach, but broadened its focus to include the value of preserving the character of historic and traditional residential neighborhoods, of restoring the quality of natural habitats, and of the fit between people and nature across the area.
- *A cultural shift from a mid-20th-century automobile-centered suburb into a 21st-century walkable community.* The process began with a widespread sense that the goal of moving traffic efficiently (already impossible, given congestion levels) took precedence over the aspiration for increased walkability. As tradeoffs became more apparent between facilitating traffic on the one hand, and enhancing overall quality of life and prosperity on the other, stakeholders came down strongly in favor of planning, programming, and design decisions that would enhance walkability.
- *A new community-wide sense of responsibility for sustainability.* While many stakeholders reported taking increasing *personal* responsibility for

better environmental practices, the process of collaboration built a *shared* sense of area-wide responsibility. This translated directly into an invitation for Emory, through its Office of Sustainability and other resources, to form new partnerships aimed at preserving tree canopy, managing groundwater, and providing environmental education across the area. The sense of shared responsibility extended to enhancing the entire area's "performance" in a range of sustainability measures—for example, locating housing, jobs, and other activities within walking distance of each other and creating new connections that invite walking.

A Desire to Continue the Journey

Perhaps more important than the guidelines themselves is a widespread interest in an enduring partnership through which stakeholders of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints can continue to collaborate on managing growth for mutual benefit—even though this holds no guarantee of solving the challenges that lie ahead for the area. Articulate neighborhoods remain committed to enhancing quality of life. Environmental advocates remain focused on protecting and restoring natural habitats. Emory, as a world-leading university and a health center, remains committed to excellence in a fast-changing world—a goal its colleagues at the CDC, VA Hospital, and Children's Healthcare at Egleston share. Shopping centers developed in an earlier era remain significant and tempting investment opportunities. These varying stakeholder interests and conditions represent a potentially incompatible mix that could undermine the goals of all stakeholders. But managed by the collective efforts of stakeholders committed to partnership and mutual win-wins, these same interests and conditions could lead to a very different future. They offer almost unparalleled opportunities for community revitalization marked by greater livability, mold-breaking innovation, and sustainability.

Transferable Lessons for Other Communities

- Engaging a representative variety of core stakeholders early on, and giving them meaningful roles in the process, draws their buy-in and their follow-up commitment to implementation.

- Connecting smart growth issues to the individual interests of all stakeholders can bring divergent perspectives to agreement around key issues.
- Saying "No" isn't a successful way for neighborhoods to address suburban change any more. But having a say in *how* change happens can produce real benefits for communities.
- Targeting where change belongs and where it doesn't belong reassures existing traditional neighborhoods and promotes the density and value needed in auto-dominated corridors to support improved transit service, redevelopment feasibility, and community benefits like parks and pedestrian-friendly streetscapes.
- In suburban environments lacking the densities needed for efficient transit, development and transit improvements should proceed incrementally, hand-in-hand to avoid a "chicken and egg" standoff. Bus and shuttle services offer an increasing array of incremental improvement opportunities incorporating technology, branding, and service expansion. Major pedestrian-oriented mixed-use developments can be justified in advance of major transit improvements due to their inherently lower trip-generation rates and the fact that new traffic tends to displace through traffic to alternative routes.

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ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

1. "Creative Class" is the term described by Richard Florida in his 2002 book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, and developed further in his 2008 book, *Who's Your City*, describing an emerging demographic group considered crucial to fostering continued economic prosperity. Creative Class members are defined as well-educated people who spawn creativity and innovation in a variety of fields. Florida's assertion that the Creative Class flocks to places exhibiting characteristics

- like diversity and significant high-tech industry has spurred a number of cities to actively court the Creative Class to boost their economic future. More information can be found at <http://www.creativeclass.com/>.
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 22. DeKalb County Comprehensive Plan, Community Agenda, p. 44.
 23. Clifton Community Partnership.
 24. Georgia Department of Transportation Design Manual, Chapter 5, Roadside Safety and Horizontal Clearance, 5/11/2006.
 25. Refer to FHA-ITE context sensitive standards.