



Lithia Springs Small Area Plan

An amendment to the Douglas County Comprehensive Plan

February 2021

Overview

Highway 78 is Douglas County's Main Street. It travels through the communities of Lithia Springs, Douglasville and Winston as it moves east to west across the county. The story of this corridor reflects key milestones in America's history.

At the request of the Douglas County Board of Commissioners, staff is developing a small area plan for key points along the Highway 78/ Veterans Memorial Highway corridor. The Lithia Springs area was the first community plan developed as a part of this initiative. Lithia Springs has been a community center of Douglas County for about as long as any place has been.

This document includes a broad outline of the development patterns that have resulted in the existing conditions in the area. It includes recommendations for land use map amendments and policy changes for the Douglas County Comprehensive Plan. And it includes implementation actions to bring about the vision the community has articulated for its future.

This plan was completed at the request of the Douglas County Board of Commissioners with input from citizen planners appointed to the Douglas County Planning and Zoning Board. Technical recommendations were drafted at the direction a Steering Committee that included citizen stakeholders, Planning and Zoning Board Members and County Staff.

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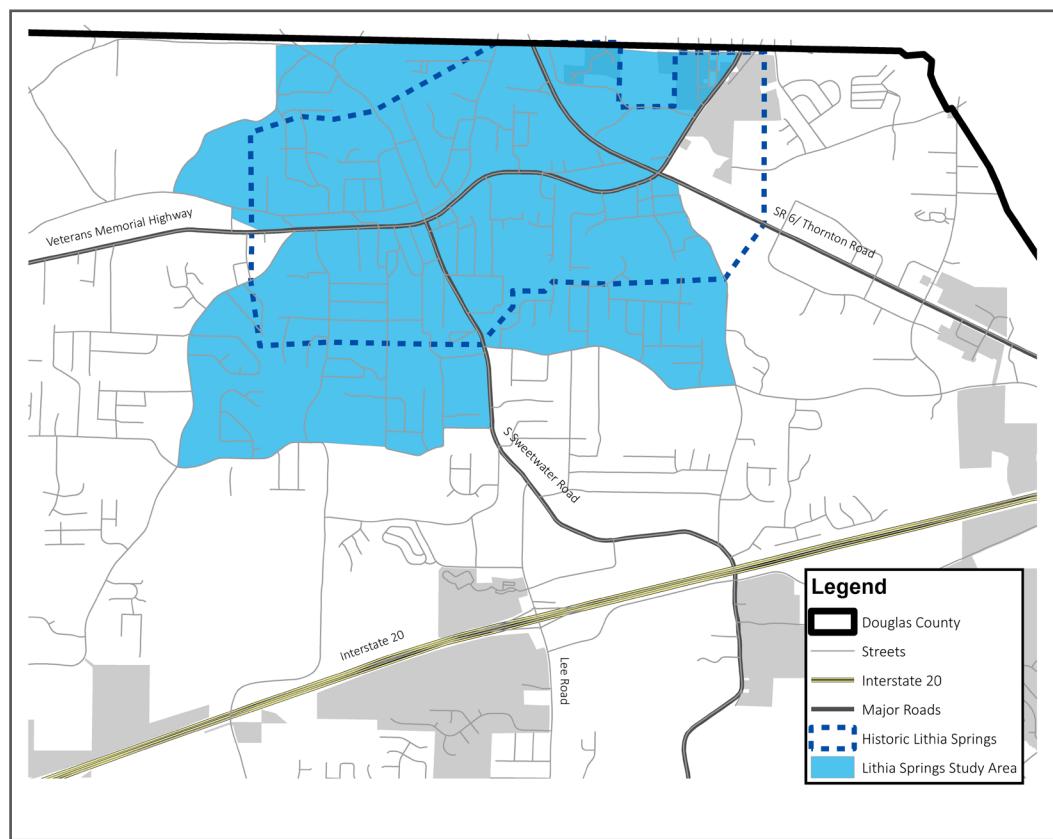
All images are from Douglas County public records, unless otherwise indicated.

Cover Images: Lithia Springs Tea Room (top); Garrett Doctor's Office (second); Kindergarten School House (third); and D.W. Bennett Grocery (fourth); from the Douglas County Historic Resources Survey, 1990.

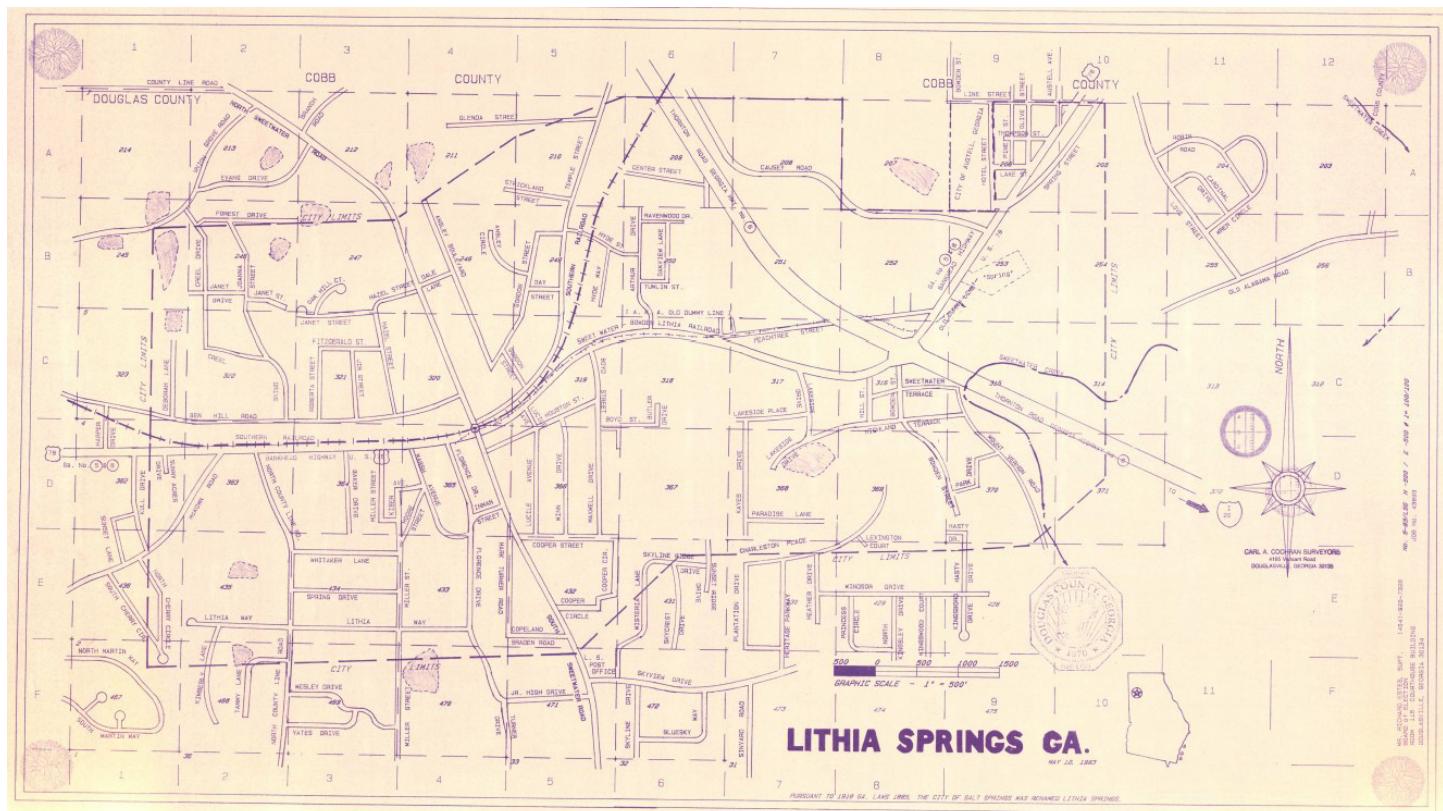


Project Boundary

The map of the city of Lithia Springs created jointly by the city and Douglas County in the late 1990s is the starting point of the analysis for this area. Based on stakeholder feedback and the logical boundaries offered by existing streets, the project boundary was expanded. This area is contemplated as the “Historic Lithia Springs” Character Area. Recommendations for an expanded “Greater Lithia Springs” Character Area are also included as a part of this report.



Detail of Historic Lithia Springs in the context of the Study Area Boundary



Map of Lithia Springs, c. 1990

Demographic Profile

Based on the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) Estimates, the Lithia Springs Census Designated Place (CDP) has some distinct characteristics. It has a greater percentage of citizens that classify their race as Black/African American or Other (66%) than Douglas County (56%). It has a greater percentage of citizens identifying with Hispanic or Latino ethnicity (18%) than Douglas County (10%). The percent of owner-occupied houses is 44.5% as opposed to 71% in Douglas County, and the median value of owner-occupied housing units in the Lithia Springs CDP is \$130,000, as opposed to \$182,000 for Douglas County. The median household income is \$48,988, as opposed to \$62,669 for Douglas County, and 18.5% of the population is identified as living in poverty, as opposed to 10.8% for Douglas County.

The Table of Demographic Indicators below provides additional detail for the Lithia Springs CDP and Douglas County overall. As concerns issues of equity and resiliency, this is an area of the community that would benefit from renewed investment.

Table of Demographic Indicators

Indicator	Lithia Springs CDP	Douglas County
Population	18,054	146,343
Race and Hispanic Origin		
White alone	34%	44%
Black or African American alone	54.1%	48%
Hispanic or Latino	18.2%	10%
Housing		
Owner-occupied housing unit rate, 2015-2019	44.5%	71%
Median value of owner-occupied housing units, 2015-2019	\$130,800	\$182,000
Households	6,435	48,899
Education		
High school graduate or higher, % of persons aged 25+, 2015-2019	85%	90.8%
Income		
Median household income (in 2019 dollars), 2015-2019	\$48,988	\$62,669
Persons in poverty, %	18.5%	10.8%

Historical Timeline

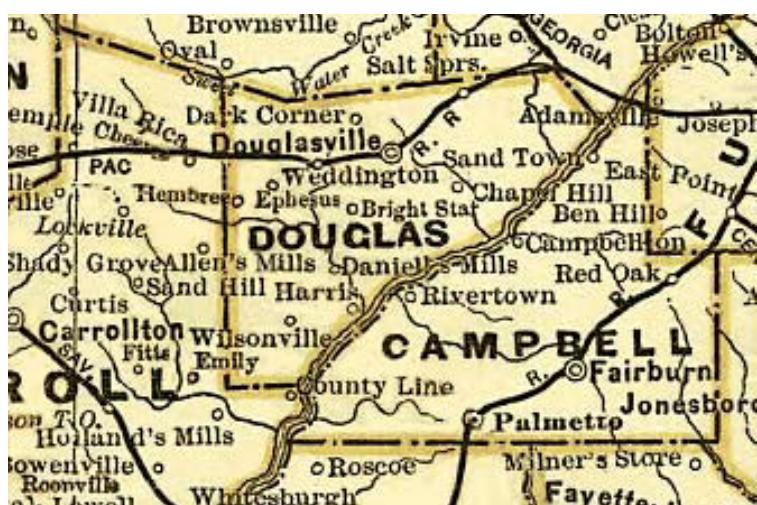
Lithia Springs has been a community center of Douglas County for about as long as any place has been. Salt Springs had a designated post office by 1849 and shows up on historical maps as early as 1863 when the area was still a part of old Campbell County. An act to incorporate the Town of Salt Springs in Douglas County was approved by the Georgia Legislature in 1882, and the location is identified on an 1883 map of Douglas County. As with other Georgia cities, it was initially chartered to be one mile long and one mile wide adjacent to the railroad.

By 1895, the area had come to be identified with Lithia Springs, and it is identified on an 1899 map of Douglas County with many other community places. The name of Salt Springs was amended to Lithia Springs by Act of the General Assembly in 1918.

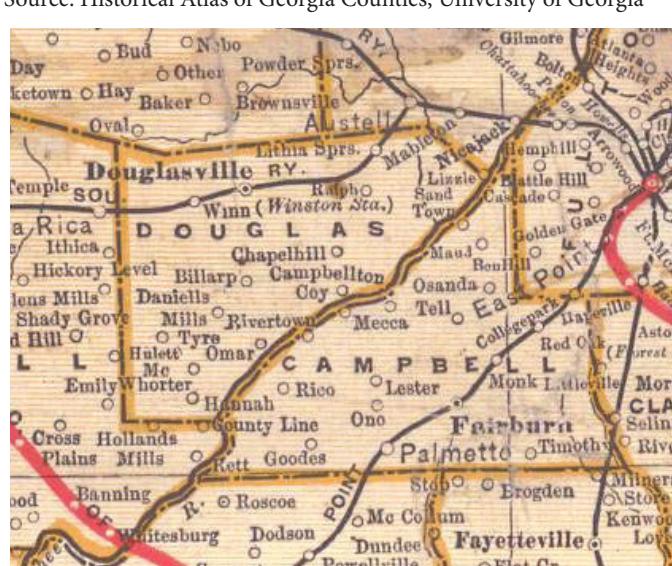
Lithia Springs emerged again as a city in the 1990s. A map of the delineating the municipal boundaries was created jointly by Lithia Springs and Douglas County. The Lithia Springs City Council voted to cease operations as a city in the early 2000s. Land use and development planning, along with other government functions, were assumed by the Douglas County Board of Commissioners.



Map of Campbell County, showing the location of Salt Springs, 1863
Source: Historical Atlas of Georgia Counties, University of Georgia



Map of Douglas County, recently created from a portion of Campbell County, and showing the location of Salt Springs, 1883
Source: Historical Atlas of Georgia Counties, University of Georgia



Map of Douglas County, showing the location of Lithia Springs, 1899.
Source: Historical Atlas of Georgia Counties, University of Georgia.

Development Milestones

The Highway 78 Corridor is a timeline of changes in community development trends for the last 200 years. Many tangible reminders of that history are embodied in the physical infrastructure and built environment along the Corridor. The next phase in corridor development is best understood by the considering the trends that have brought us to this moment today. Six drivers of change were identified.

The Post Offices (1850s to 1900s)

The US Postal System was established in 1775. The presence of a community post office was a marker of place. Wherever there was a post office there was a presence – a community that needed to be connected to the greater country. The Salt Springs Post Office was established in 1849 where a community had already formed. Salt Springs would eventually become the city of Lithia Springs.

The Railroads (1870s to 1920s)

The railroad roughly parallels the roadway of Highway 78. The right of way for the Georgia Western Railroad was acquired in the 1860s. This corridor became part of the Georgia Pacific Railroad, and track was laid through Douglas County in the 1880s, with access to the community of Salt Springs, and later, Lithia Springs. The railroad was essentially to providing access to the emerging complex of springs-oriented resort hotels coming about in the late 19th and early 20th century in Douglas County and elsewhere in Georgia.

The Automobiles (1910s to 1970s)

By the early 20th century, the rise of motoring was on the ascendancy as a form of transport as well as a recreational pastime. In 1916 the Bankhead Highway Association established the Bankhead Highway National Auto Trail. Similar to the more famous Dixie Highway, the Bankhead Highway pieced together segments of the early road network into a direct route to the West Coast of the United States. In the 1920s, US 78 was designated under the new federal roadway network. And by the 1930s, the entire US 78 Corridor was paved through Douglas County.



The Sweetwater Park Hotel drew people to Lithia Springs from across the country in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Source: Digital Library of Georgia, University of Georgia.



A bridge collapse in the early days of the Bankhead Highway.
Source: Georgia State University Library

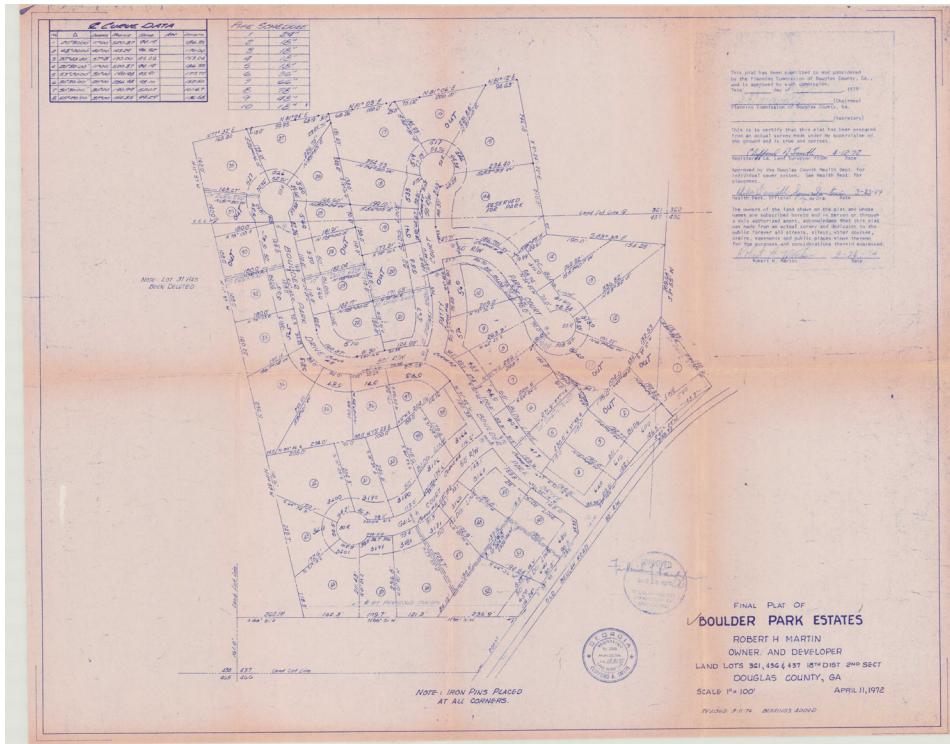
Development Milestones

The Infrastructure Transformation (1930s to 1970s)

Through a New Deal Era Electrification Administration Grant, the Douglas County Electric Membership Cooperative was created in 1936. Bell Telephone Company used the EMC poles to phone service to the area in 1952. The Lithia Springs Fire Department was created in 1953 around the same time a municipal water line was run from Cobb County and into the area. In 1965, Interstate 20 runs through Douglas County, roughly parallel to US 78 but further south. This was also when State Route 6/ Thornton Road was built connecting I-20 and US 78.

The Suburbs (1940s to 1980s)

Highway 78 was a principle route for the development of the first generation suburbs in Douglas County. Post World War II new residential neighborhoods rolled out over former farms, and these were typified by mid-century housing types such as the Minimal Traditional (about 1935-1950) and the Ranch (about 1935-1975). Iconic neighborhoods of this era include Anna Bella Estates, Oak Hill, and Whitaker Hills. Factory Shoals was acquired by the State of Georgia in 1972, becoming Sweetwater Creek State Park and providing a recreational amenity for all of these neighborhoods. The Westfork commercial and industrial development was approved on Thornton Road in 1973, as was the Atlanta West Hospital, as a part of the greater Lithia Springs area.



Plat of Boulder Park Estates, 1972

After 1990, new development and redevelopment slowed along Highway 78. The footprint of development in Lithia Springs reflects the height of first generation suburban development expanded out from a 19th century footprint. The advantages to this area include human-scaled, pedestrian-oriented development in proximity to a modified street grid. Smaller residential houses typical of their era lend themselves to more affordable housing, and shopping, schools and civic institutions are in close proximity to residential areas.

However, if not understood in its proper context, some may see disadvantages from these very same elements. Traffic patterns may move at a more mid-century pace. People may expect residential and commercial buildings to have larger square footage and excess parking more typical of late 20th century land development patterns. The future of this area will embrace the best of each of these eras to deliver upon the modern expectations of residents and businesses.

Assets

- The Rich History of the Area
 - The Bowden-Lithia Springs
 - The Sweetwater Park Hotel and other springs-oriented resort amenities
 - The Piedmont Chataqua and associated buildings
 - Extant historic buildings that form the core of historic Lithia Springs
 - Factory Shoals Park/ Sweetwater Creek State Park
 - Frog Rock and the Lithia Springs Bottling Company
 - The former Lithia Springs Golf Course and Louise Suggs, founding member of the LPGA
 - The Bankhead Highway
- Historic residential buildings, including iconic mid-century neighborhoods
- The commercial core at the center of the community
- Schools in close proximity to residential neighborhoods
- Civic investment in community buildings, including the Lithia Springs Library and new Douglas County Senior Center
- Local religious institutions of various denominations
- Pedestrian scale development
- Proximity to suburban commercial amenities include grocery, restaurant and retail opportunities along SR 6/ Thornton Road
- Easy access to Interstate 20
- Strong community identity and pride



Entrance to Factory Shoals Park, today's Sweetwater Creek State Park

Source: Atlanta History Center

Challenges

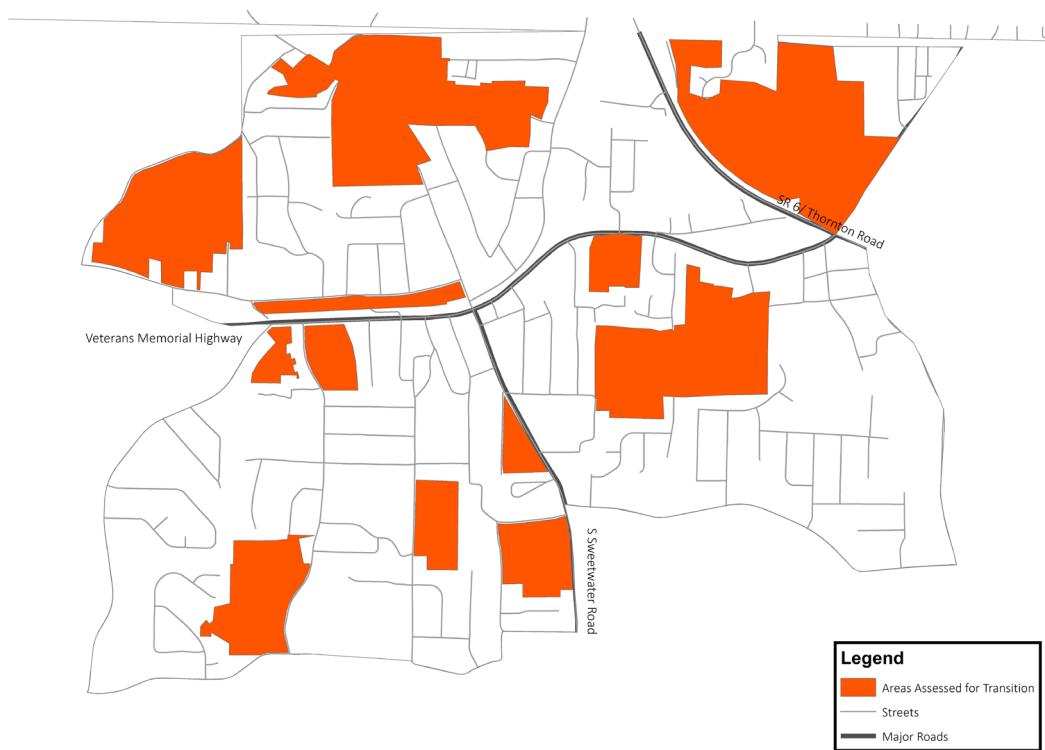
- Traffic along Highway 78/ Veterans Memorial Highway
- A planned widening of Highway 78 that has been slow to materialize
- Congestion at the Intersection of Highway 78 and SR 6/ Thornton Road
- An active railroad line bisects the community
- Older commercial buildings could benefit from refreshed facades
- The design overlay for commercial development along Highway 78 has been slow to improve the appearance and streetscape on the corridor due to lack of redevelopment
- The community is pedestrian-scaled, but lacks pedestrian infrastructure that would allow for easier walking and biking
- The need for appropriately scaled residential and commercial infill development
- A lack of diversity in businesses that would meet a variety of consumer needs

Land Use Narrative

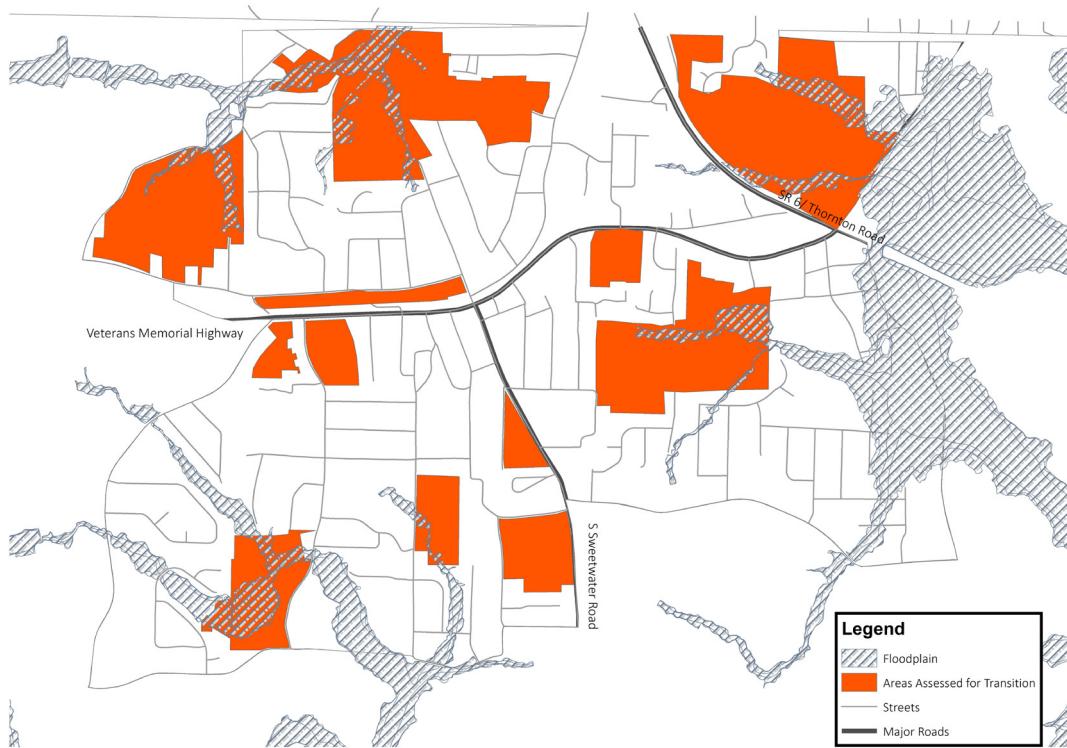
Existing Development Patterns

At the heart of this assessment is a parcel-by-parcel evaluation of the existing built footprint of the Lithia Springs area. The historic Lithia Springs boundary was the starting point for our analysis. The boundary of the study area was expanded to logical termini based on road boundaries. The study area includes approximately 1,919 acres and 2,085 parcels. Douglas County overall is 128,640 acres and 54,553 parcels.

The first review of existing land use identified the following areas where land use may have the potential to change. These areas were selected due to the fact that they comprised larger tracts of vacant or underdeveloped land, often in proximity to other large tracts of vacant land. For purposes of this analysis, large tracts generally were comprised of areas that were 2 acres or greater, and any underdeveloped land adjacent.



Upon further assessment, it was identified that most of the areas evaluated for potential changes in land use corresponded to a different variable. Analysis of environmental considerations showed substantial overlap with areas in the floodplain. Douglas County prohibits construction in the floodplain. The County further imposes buffers around streams or creeks that often feed those areas of floodplain. The study boundary is located in the Sweetwater Creek Drainage Basin, which would impose an additional 150' buffer from any channels or water bodies deemed to be State Waters.



As a result, many of the areas identified for potential land use change are recommended as low- to medium-density housing categories. The prevalence of environmentally sensitive areas likely would preclude more intensive development.

Future infrastructure considerations were also given evaluated. There is a long-range plan for the widening of Highway 78, which is currently without funding resources to move forward its implementation. However, GDOT has designed a corner-quad intersection to connect Thornton Road and Highway 78 at their northeast intersection. \$1M in preliminary engineering funds had already been allocated to the design of the intersection with an expected construction date of 2026. As a result, the potential future land use of this area was also reconsidered.

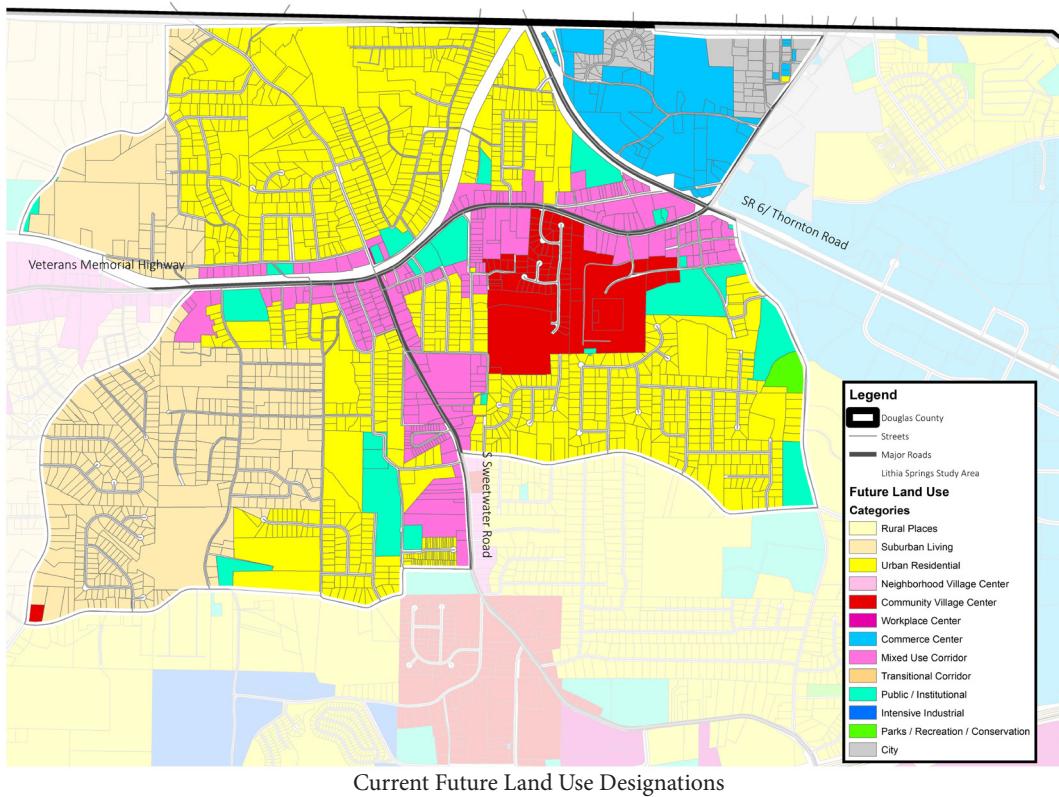


Land Use Narrative

Future Land Use

The Lithia Springs area is typical of a community village model of development. There is an identifiable commercial core at the intersection of Highway 78/ Veterans Memorial Highway and North and South Sweetwater Road. The railroad runs parallel to Highway 78 and limits connectivity north and south of Highway 78. Residential development flanks all sides of the commercial crossroads, and house types are typical of development in the south between 1940 and 1980. Some limited infill development has occurred in the 1990s and 2000s. House types typical of Lithia Springs include American Small House, Ranch, and an assortment of vernacular house types of modest footprint and no academic style typical of the American South of this time period.

During previous periods of development, some more intensive industrial-oriented uses were limited along Highway 78, and the area has become a thoroughfare for tractor trailer traffic accessing industrial locations in proximity to the city of Douglasville. The heavy truck and vehicular traffic along the corridor has had a toll on residential and commercial development that front directly on the highway. But neighborhoods removed from the highway retain the look and feel of an earlier era in a densely wooded landscape.



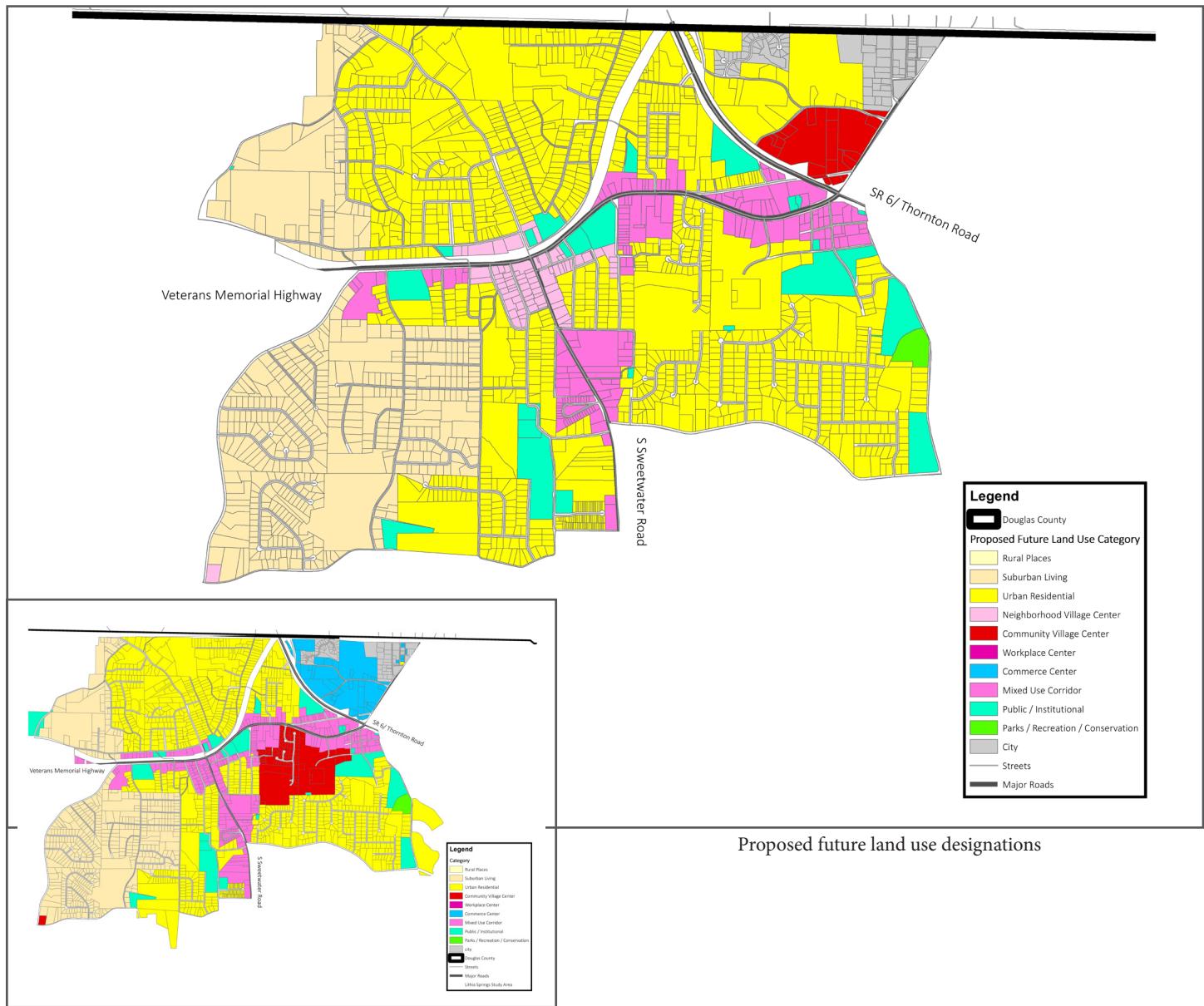
The adopted future land use map for this area assumes a scale of development that is outsized for the village footprint of the area. Additionally, the constraints on existing transportation infrastructure limit the implementation of the future land use vision. Areas identified for more intensive commercial development as a part of the Commerce Center and Community Village Center designations are limited by not only infrastructure capacity, but also environmental challenges. Sweetwater Creek and its many tributaries lie in close proximity to these areas and floodplain limits development capacity. Areas projected for Community Village Development have generally been developed for residential purposes. The Mixed Use Corridor designation has resulting in a sprawling mix of office, general commercial, heavy commercial and light industrial uses. Many areas designated under this classification contain viable residential development of older, affordable housing.

Land Use Narrative

Proposed Future Land Use Amendments

Recommended changes to the Future Land Use are appropriate to the village scale development of Lithia Springs.

- The Commerce Center designation is removed from the study.
- The Community Village Center designation is removed from areas of predominantly stable residential development and applied to an undeveloped corner at the intersection of Veterans Memorial Highway and Thornton Road. Existing environmental limitations and proposed future intersection improvements preclude Commerce Center scale development.
- The Neighborhood Village Center designation is applied to the downtown core of historic Lithia Springs. This designation encourages a traditional neighborhood development of pedestrian-scaled retail and residential uses.
- The Mixed Use Corridor designation is scaled back to mitigate patterns of unbroken sprawl along the major corridors of the study boundary.



Land Use Narrative

Future Land Use Descriptions

The future land use descriptions are included in the Douglas County Comprehensive Plan.

Suburban Living: Areas located outside identified centers that are experiencing a high volume of residential growth, primarily single-family houses. All non-residential development will be within designated corridors or master planned developments.

Urban Residential: Urbanized and growth-oriented areas experiencing growth pressures and possible compatibility issues. This area is a transition from potential commercial and high-density pressure from growth in activity centers.

Neighborhood Village Center: Neighborhood Village Centers are places where small-scaled commercial uses, such as a bank, grocery store, drug store, cleaner and gas station, are arranged in a village-like setting that might include a neighborhood park, pedestrian circulation and public spaces. The neighborhood village center is envisioned as a compact assortment of convenience-oriented retail stores and services to address the demand of nearby residents. This designation is located at key crossroad intersections, and intended to include small-scaled neighborhood commercial with access and size restrictions. It is recommended that this designation be applied at the intersection of Veterans Memorial Highway and North/ South Sweetwater Road.

Community Village Center: Typically located at the convergence of major transportation corridors, Commercial Village Centers are envisioned as places where a compatible mixture of higher intensity uses are located, such as larger scaled shopping centers, professional offices and services. Mixed use development that combine residential, commercial, service and recreational uses integrated and linked together by a comprehensive circulation system are encouraged in these nodes. This designation encourages a higher intensity of commercial activity intended to serve more than one neighborhood. Appropriate uses include retail, office, and services. It is recommended that this designation be applied at the northeast intersection of Veterans Memorial and Thornton Road, but otherwise removed from areas of single-family development.

Mixed Use Corridor: This designation is for a redevelopment corridor for existing commercial corridors. Light industrial and heavy commercial uses should be restricted to the Bankhead Highway Redevelopment Area. It is recommended that this designation be scaled back in the study area to mitigate sprawling development patterns.

Commerce Center: This designation is for industrial/ office park development, employment generators and interstate-oriented commercial development. It is recommended that this designation be removed from the study area.

Implementation Actions

Based on feedback from the project Steering Committee, the following implementation items have been identified. These implementation items further the goals of the revised character area and the Douglas County Comprehensive Plan.

Activity	Timeline		
	Near Term	Mid-Range	Long-Range
Planning and Policy			
Apply for additional technical assistance to implement plan recommendations	X		
Implement zoning changes that align with the future land use recommendations	X	X	
Incorporate the recommendations of the small area plan into the County Comprehensive Plan	X	X	
Create a character area for the Greater Lithia Springs Area to encourage land use patterns that support thriving development for Historic Lithia Springs	X	X	
Review the impact of the Urban Redevelopment Areas along Thornton Road and Veterans Memorial Highway and make recommendations for any needed changes		X	
Streetscape and Placemaking			
Implement streetscape improvements to the clock, the sign, and existing landscaping in downtown Lithia Springs		X	X
Implement a branding/ signage program for Historic Lithia Springs		X	X
Update the Douglas County Historic Resources Survey for the Lithia Springs area, with a particular eye to assessing the changes since the 1990 survey and to better document the history behind landmark historic buildings in the area		X	
Implement an oral history project for the Lithia Springs area	X		
Identify opportunities to support arts in the community, including coordination with the Douglasville-Douglas County Cultural Arts Center		X	X
Implement a façade improvement grant program for the commercial core		X	X
Explore the possibilities for multi-use trail connectivity between Historic Lithia Springs and a greenway along Sweetwater Creek			X
Workforce and Economic Development			
Coordinate a meeting of professionals working in the faith community to make them aware of plan recommendations and identify additional community needs and challenges	X		
Coordinate with the Douglas County tourism program and Sweetwater Creek State Park to maximize the connection between Historic Lithia Springs and visitors to the Park	X	X	X
Support a merchant's association for Lithia Springs area businesses	X	X	X
Evaluate the possibility of a Special Tax District to support revitalization of the commercial core		X	X

Implementation Actions

Activity	Timeline		
	Near Term	Mid-Range	Long-Range
Housing			
Identify areas suitable for development of medium density infill housing, include opportunities for senior housing and other types of visitable housing		X	
Undertake a conditions assessment of existing housing/ neighborhoods to ascertain any challenges that may indicate reasons for lower values identified in the Demographic Profile		X	X
Based on the conditions assessment of existing housing/ neighborhoods, identify strategies (if needed) to stabilize existing neighborhoods		X	X
Based on the conditions assessment of existing housing/ neighborhoods, identify opportunities to preserve the smaller footprint of existing housing to encourage ongoing affordability		X	X