

PLAN EAST GAINESVILLE
Discussion Summary

Economic Development / Real Estate Focus Group
March 1, 2002

What are the positive attributes of East Gainesville that could help form a foundation for real estate investment and economic opportunity?

Proximity to downtown is both an attribute and a liability. Positive – downtown’s strength provides economic spin-off and opportunity for East Gainesville; Negative – downtown captures desirable non-residential uses that might otherwise locate east; market is limited.

Very little traffic congestion; the transportation infrastructure is excellent. There are a lot of utilities in place, particularly closer in to the city. Schools are at 50 percent capacity.

Airport is a positive, but it is not being used to its potential. There is a lack of positive reinforcement supporting it, such as a hotel, restaurants and similar services. Research is needed about why the airport has not been as productive as possible.

Industrial park has strong market appeal with good facilities in place. East Gainesville has good opportunities for “cleaner” development in the biotechnology industry, using the Raleigh, NC Research Triangle as a model.

East Gainesville has well-defined neighborhoods, another strong asset for growth. There are also plenty of opportunities for in-fill development. Conservation land is both an asset and liability: asset – opportunity for recreation, eco-tourism; liability – fragments development and access. But having conservation land makes development of compact mixed-use centers more appropriate.

What do you see as the principal limiting factors for more economic investment in East Gainesville?

Historical conflict between downtown, core area interests and East Gainesville; recent examples include the County Courthouse location. Available land keeps getting bypassed. The attitude toward and perception of East Gainesville is a significant problem. The perception is worse than the reality.

There is a great deal of government ownership of highly developable land (high and dry), particularly in the area of surrounding Tacachale and behind. Infrastructure in the county is lacking.

The County’s comprehensive plan is not conducive – density is too low (1-2 DU/acre). Permitting a new business or changing land use is very cumbersome and overly difficult. Codes make redevelopment very expensive and re-use of existing buildings is, in many cases, prohibitive. The overall business climate is not conducive for economic development (profit motive is ignored).

Alachua County is making it more difficult for retail “big boxes” such as Target, Home Depot or Walmart because of parking constraints in the new ordinance. The definition of “big box” at 20,000 square feet and greater is overly restrictive, affecting neighborhood grocery stores.

What infrastructure does East Gainesville lack to support a shift in the market and more economic investment in the area?

Despite good roads, other infrastructure is also somewhat lacking; drainage, no sewer system outside of the city, landscaping, etc.

Despite main entry routes (SR 20, SR 26, SR 331, SR 24) there is no gateway feature that welcomes travelers into the Gainesville area or provides opportunities for them to stop on the way out. Nothing is offered for people to stop as they leave town to go home after work.

Transit service is lacking, especially its hours of operation.

Only about seven sites in all Alachua County meet the test for office-industrial parks (employment centers). One of those, at NE 39th Avenue and Waldo Road, is in East Gainesville. There are a lot of empty buildings in East Gainesville partly because of the slow absorption rate for industrial land. Investors have difficulty moving forward on few available parcels.

There's been a resurgence in development activity downtown over the last half decade. In what ways might East Gainesville benefit from downtown's revitalization?

Downtown growth is a benefit to East Gainesville because it provides a proximate employment base. Huntsville, AL is an example for Eastside Gainesville of "employment center" land controlled by the government. The government makes initial investment to organize land and make capital investment for development to occur in controlled fashion. Access to services in East Gainesville is more convenient for downtown than West Gainesville.

The buying power of East Gainesville is an untapped market; downtown is the nearest place for a variety of shopping goods, eateries, etc.

Do you see any societal, cultural or even regional changes that are likely to influence the prospect for economic development and investment in East Gainesville?

Lockwood Greene report identified three target industries that reflected a market advantage in Alachua County from a regional perspective: biotechnology, electronics and science/technology.

The power structure needs to have a change in attitude for East Gainesville to benefit. People need to be willing to lend money, make investments and promote the Eastside.

East Gainesville is the most diverse community in the area, both in terms of economic status and demographics. This is something that should be recognized and supported.

People describe E. Gainesville as having an abundance of good roads lacking the traffic congestion that plagues much of West Gainesville. Is this really the case? Does E. Gainesville have the kind of transportation facilities and regional access needed for commercial, office or industrial development?

Yes it does; regional transportation is an asset. Access to the beaches is something often overlooked, but people have to drive through East Gainesville to get to the nearest beach and retail businesses can benefit.

It's not appropriate to focus on transportation first; the economics should drive the plan. What is necessary to make economic investment occur and to what level, and the transportation system will support the market. The market is there to support additional investment.

People say they want more restaurants, services and neighborhood commercial establishments in East Gainesville. What is necessary to attract more investment in these types of activities?

New housing investment will help. Multi-family housing is proposed as first part of a mixed-use development at Hawthorne Road and SE 24th Avenue; possibly including two stories with retail on ground floor and office above. Commercial would face SR 20. Federal tax incentives for affordable housing support mixed-use development, but multi-family must come first.

Satellite office buildings (such as UF College of Engineering taking over the old DOT maintenance yard on Waldo Road) will provide a base of workers needed for supporting service-oriented developments.

What does the county have to offer as an incentive for economic development? It's not given enough resources to be effective. A lack of resources limits potential for incentive programs.

What are the major factors that will drive redevelopment in East Gainesville?

Need to designate East Gainesville (or specific parts of it) as a Special Area for attracting desired levels of development. That type of designation should come first, guiding an array of incentives and programs to support economic development.

An integrated incentive program is what's needed. This should provide a cumulative array of incentives to lure desirable development to Eastside. Using a performance-based system like Austin, TX Smart Housing Program, the government may offer programs like fee waivers to encourage investment that meets community objectives. Access to transit is one key factor in Austin's program.