

NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

Natural Resources

The natural environment places certain opportunities and constraints on the way land is used. Factors such as soil characteristics, topography and flooding frequency affect where development can safely and feasibly occur. Other areas, such as stream buffers, are particularly vulnerable to developmental impact and must receive appropriate measures of protection. In this section, Decatur's natural features and environmentally sensitive areas are described and discussed.

Natural Features

Topography, Physiography and Drainage

The City of Decatur lies entirely within Georgia's Piedmont Province. Topography in the City consists mostly of very gently sloping and gently sloping soils on broad to narrow ridgetops, and some small areas of steeper sloping soils on hillsides adjacent to small drainageways. The ridgetops commonly are smooth and convex and the hillsides commonly are irregular. Nearly level land is found along the various tributaries of Peachtree Creek and the South River. The flood plains are generally narrow.

Decatur is bisected by a major east-west ridgeline that generally follows the CSX Railroad corridor. This ridgeline forms the boundary between the Chattahoochee River Basin and the South River Basin. Peavine Creek and the South Fork of Peachtree Creek drain the northern half of the City and Shoal Creek and Sugar Creek drain the southern half. Rain that falls in the northern half of Decatur eventually flows into the Gulf of Mexico and rain that falls south of the Georgia Railroad eventually enters the Atlantic Ocean.

Soils

In general, most of the land within Decatur falls within one of the three soil groupings described below.

- Cecil: Urban land – These are deep, well-drained soils that have a loamy surface layer and clay subsoil. These soils are very gently sloping or gently sloping and are typically found along ridgetops. Slope ranges from 2 to 10 percent.
- Pacolet: Urban land – These are deep, well drained soils that also have a loamy surface layer and clayey subsoil. These soils have steeper slopes than do Cecil soils and are typically found on hillsides. Slope ranges from 10 to 25 percent.
- Urban land – These very gently sloping to strongly sloping urban land

areas are found on both ridgetops and hillsides associated with drainageways and flood plains. Slope ranges from 1 to 25 percent.

The soils in the urban land areas have typically been modified by cutting, filling, shaping, and smoothing. Most soil areas designated as urban land areas contain higher density uses such as commercial centers, schools, parking lots, and housing developments.

Generally, the soils found within the City of Decatur are very suitable for the type of development that Decatur has experienced in the past and the limited amount of development expected to occur during the planning period. While there are some isolated areas of steep slopes within the City, such areas are already developed and no special needs are required at this time.

Environmentally Sensitive and Ecologically Significant Areas

The natural environment includes areas and resources which are vulnerable to the impacts of development and which require protection by the community. The conservation of environmentally sensitive and ecologically significant resources is becoming increasingly important, as their values to communities become better understood. In recognizing the importance of land and water resources, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has developed minimum standards for local governments to follow for the protection of water supply watersheds, wetlands and groundwater recharge areas. Additionally, Decatur must address the value and protection of other vital and fragile resources such as floodplains. These are discussed in the sections which follow. Other major categories of naturally or ecologically significant areas, including prime agricultural and forest land, major plant and animal habitats, protected mountain and river corridors, major parks and recreation areas, and significant scenic views and sites, are not found within the City of Decatur and are consequently not addressed in this plan.

Water Supply Watersheds

Water supply watersheds are defined by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources as the areas of land upstream of a public drinking water intake.

In the case of the City of Decatur, the area north of the CSX Railroad drains into the Chattahoochee River via Peachtree Creek at a point below both the DeKalb County and City of Atlanta water intakes, and the area south of the CSX Railroad drains to the South River which is not used as a water supply source. Thus, the City is not required to develop water supply watershed protection regulations.

Wetlands

Federal law defines freshwater wetlands as those areas that are inundated or saturated by surface or groundwater at a frequency and duration sufficient to support, and that under normal circumstances do support, a prevalence of vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soil conditions. Wetlands

generally include swamps, marshes, bogs and similar areas. Under natural conditions, wetlands help to maintain and enhance water quality by filtering out sediments and associated non-point source pollutants from adjacent land uses. They also store water, thereby stabilizing dry weather stream flows and flood hazards. In addition, wetlands serve important functions as fish, wildlife and plant habitats.

The U.S. Department of the Interior, as part of its National Wetlands Inventory, has published a Wetlands Map for Northeast Atlanta (1990) which includes the City of Decatur. The Wetlands Map identifies only one wetland area located within the City of Decatur – a small pond located in the middle of Decatur Cemetery.

Section 404 of the Clean Water Act of 1977 prohibits the discharge of dredge or fill materials into the water bodies or wetlands of the United States unless a permit is granted. Because Decatur's only wetland is located in the center of a cemetery, the use of which is not likely to change, it is very unlikely that the City will ever become involved in wetland development and permitting issues, and no specific regulatory actions are being recommended at this time.

Groundwater Recharge Areas

Recharge is the process by which precipitation infiltrates soil and rock to add to the volume of water stored in pores and other openings within them. Aquifers are soils or rocks that yield water to wells. While recharge takes place throughout practically all of Georgia's land area, the rate or amount of recharge reaching underwater aquifers varies from place to place depending on geologic conditions.

The Georgia DNR has mapped all of the recharge areas in the State which are likely to have the greatest vulnerability to pollution of groundwater from surface and near surface activities of man. Because groundwater systems and the factors controlling recharge vary with geology, different approaches to identification are required for different areas of the State. Significant recharge areas in the crystalline rock terrain of northern Georgia are found in areas that have thick soils or *saprolite*--deposits of clay and disintegrating rock--and relatively low (less than eight percent) slopes. These conditions are present in the City of Decatur and the entire City has been identified by DNR as a possible significant recharge area in a map titled "Most Significant Ground-Water Recharge Areas of Georgia." In an accompanying map titled the "Georgia Pollution Susceptibility Map," the possible Decatur recharge area has been identified as having low pollution susceptibility.

The Georgia Department of Community Affairs Criteria for Protection of Groundwater Recharge Areas mandates a regulatory program for possible groundwater recharge areas with low pollution susceptibility that includes regulating: 1) waste disposal sites; 2) the handling of hazardous materials; and 3)

the installation of septic tanks. Decatur does not contain any sanitary landfills or any hazardous waste disposal sites, therefore is no need to develop regulations for the control of such facilities. However, there is a need to control the handling and storage of hazardous materials.

The Department of Natural Resources' Environmental Protection Division (EPD) is responsible for issuing permits for all new facilities that treat, store or dispose of hazardous wastes. Hazardous waste handling and storage operations must be conducted on an impermeable pad having a spill and leak collection system. The City of Decatur has a role to play in this permitting process. A possible local process for consideration by City of Decatur officials is described below.

- 1) Establish a mechanism for identifying new facilities that typically handle or store hazardous materials. This could be done by simply adding a question to the respective applications for building permits and new business licenses to determine if the new facility will handle or store hazardous wastes.

Types of facilities that typically handle or store hazardous wastes include:

- Building Cleaning and Maintenance Companies
 - Chemical Manufacturing
 - Cleaning Agent and Cosmetics Manufacturing
 - Construction Companies
 - Equipment Repair Shops
 - Freight Terminals/Railroads
 - Funeral Service Companies
 - Furniture Manufacturing
 - Laboratories
 - Laundries and Dry Cleaners
 - Metal Manufacturing
 - Printing Industries
 - Pesticide Application Companies
 - Plastics Manufacturing
 - Textiles and Leather Manufacturing
 - Vehicle Maintenance Facilities
 - Vocational School Shops
 - Wood Preserving and Refinishing
- 2) The City could then refer all prospective hazardous waste handlers to Georgia EPD for permitting.
 - 3) The issuance of City building permits or new business licenses for prospective hazardous waste storage and handling facilities could be withheld until either evidence of having obtained required EPD permits is provided, or a determination is made by the City that the proposed facility will not handle

or store hazardous wastes necessitating an EPD permit.

In addition to the process for the control of hazardous materials described above, the City of Decatur needs to also develop a program for requiring secondary containment for above ground chemical and petroleum storage tanks that have a capacity of at least 660 gallons. To satisfy State requirements, Decatur, as part of its development regulations, must require that all such new tanks have secondary containment for 110 percent of tank volume, or 110 percent of the volume of the largest tank in a cluster of tanks.

Finally, the City of Decatur must regulate the size of new single-family lots where septic tanks are utilized. Because sewer service is available throughout the City, it is a rare occurrence for a septic tank disposal system to be utilized for a new residence. However, when the use of a septic system is proposed, the City of Decatur can meet DNR's regulatory criteria by requiring the minimum lot size to be 49,500 square feet, which is 110 percent of the single-family minimum lot size for septic tank use contained in the DNR Manual for On-Site Sewerage Management Systems. The DeKalb County Health Department is presently responsible for permitting the use of septic tanks in the City of Decatur.

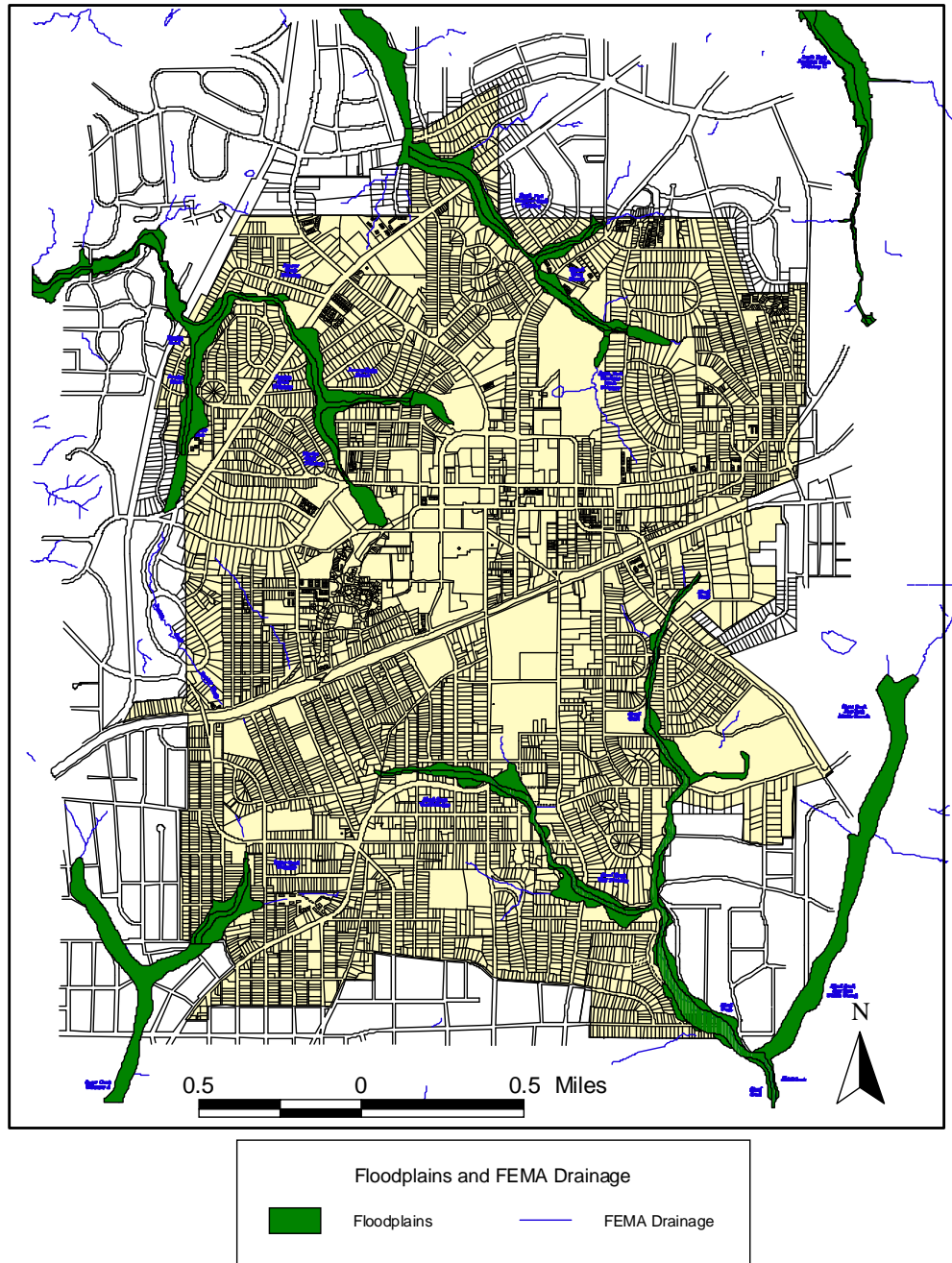
Floodplains

Flooding is the temporary covering of soil with water from overflowing streams and by runoff from adjacent slopes. Water standing for short periods after rainfalls is not considered flooding, nor is water in swamps.

Floodplains in their natural or relatively undisturbed state are important water resource areas. They serve three major purposes: natural water storage and conveyance, water quality maintenance, and groundwater recharge. Unsuitable development can destroy their value. For example, any fill material placed in the floodplain eliminates essential water storage capacity causing water elevation to rise and resulting in the flooding of previously dry land.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has identified and mapped areas in the City of Decatur which are prone to flooding in a Flood Insurance Rates Map (FIRM) dated May 7, 2001. This map identifies rather narrow floodplain areas located along Peavine Creek, the South Fork of Peachtree Creek, Shoal Creek, and Sugar Creek. Development in areas identified as being flood prone is already regulated by the City of Decatur by its Floodplain Management/Flood Damage Prevention Ordinance. Additionally, the City is an active participant in FEMA's Community Rating system which has resulted in lower flood insurance rates for property owners whose houses are located in flood hazard areas. No additional regulatory measures are recommended at this time.

Map 5.1 – Decatur Floodplains and FEMA Drainage Map



Assessment of Current and Future Needs

Information on natural features, such as topography and soils, is typically utilized in urban planning to guide development to areas where it is most suitable. In the case of the City of Decatur, which is already fully urbanized, there are no large undeveloped tracts in their natural state. Consequently, the emphasis in Decatur's planning program will be on protecting the natural environment through:

- 1) Continuing regulation of development in flood prone areas.
- 2) New regulatory controls of hazardous wastes and above ground petroleum and chemical storage tanks in order to protect seepage into possible groundwater recharge areas.

Historic Resources

Overview

As the first city in DeKalb County and one of the earliest in metro Atlanta, Decatur is home to some of the oldest buildings in the region with many of local or national significance. The old DeKalb County Courthouse serves as the focal point of the downtown with the adjoining square and bandstand used extensively for community festivals and special events. In the neighborhoods that surround the downtown, examples of notable architectural styles can be found with many homes dating from the early 1900s.

Historic Preservation Commission

Decatur recognizes its historical, cultural, and aesthetic heritage and the need to preserve its neighborhoods and commercial areas. In May of 1989 the Decatur City Commission created the Decatur Historic Preservation Task Force. Simultaneously, the City conducted a comprehensive historical and architectural survey to identify residential, commercial, industrial, institutional, and rural resources, archaeological and cultural sites, as well as unique landscape features. The following section “Decatur’s Landmark Properties” details those resources currently eligible for national or local protection.

To effectively manage and protect the City’s resources, the Task Force recommended that a local program be implemented that would include enforceable regulations and a strong, on-going education program. The Decatur City Commission responded by adopting the ordinance creating the Decatur Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) in May 1990. The responsibilities of the Commission include:

- **Inventory** – The HPC maintains an extensive inventory of the City’s historical and architectural resources and completes updates on a regular basis.
- **Community Awareness** – The HPC provides educational programs, publications, information and assistance about the City’s resources and how to preserve them. It also sponsors the annual Decatur Design Awards, which recognizes developments in the city that contribute to good design.
- **Local Historic Designation** – The HPC oversees the process of local designation. Local designation may be proposed by the City Commission, HPC, historical societies, neighborhood associations or property owners. The HPC is responsible for holding a public hearing. Any recommendations made by the HPC are considered by the City Commission, which enacts an ordinance designating the approved properties.

- **Project Review** – After the designation by the City Commission of an historic district or property, no material change in the exterior appearance of that property may be made unless the owner obtains a Certificate of Appropriateness from the HPC.

Decatur's Landmark Properties

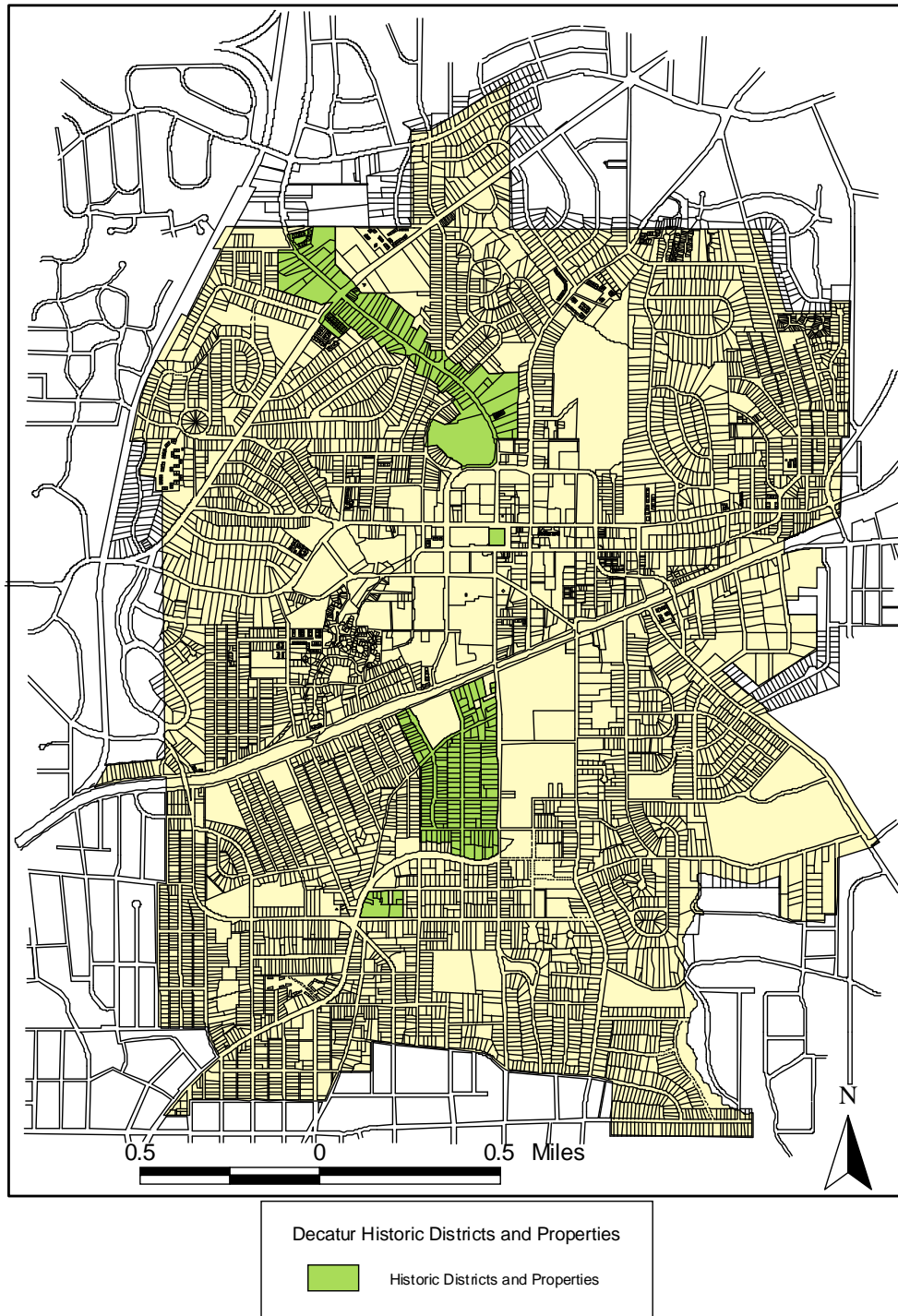
The National Register of Historic Places is the Nation's official list of cultural resources worthy of preservation. Properties listed in the National Register can include districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects. In evaluating properties for inclusion, such factors as age, historical, architectural, and cultural significance, and integrity of location, design and workmanship are considered. The National Register is administered by the National Park Service, a division of the U.S. Department of the Interior. City of Decatur properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places include:

- Old DeKalb County Courthouse
101 E. Court Square
- Scottish Rite Hospital for Crippled Children
321 W. Hill Street
- Pythagoras Masonic Temple
108 E. Ponce de Leon Avenue
- Swanton House
720 Swanton Way
- Mary Gay House
716 W. Trinity Place
- High House
Corner of N. Candler Street and Sycamore Street
- Decatur Cemetery
229 Bell Street
- South Candler Street/Agnes Scott College Historic District
Roughly bounded by E. College, S. McDonough, S. Candler, E. Hill and E. Davis Streets
- Agnes Lee Chapter House United Daughters of the Confederacy
120 Avery Street
- Blair-Rutland Building
215 Church Street
- Winnona Park Neighborhood
Roughly bounded by E. College Avenue, Avery Street, S. Columbia Drive, and Mimosa Drive
- Cora Beck Hampton Schoolhouse and Home
213 Hillyer Place
- United States Post Office
141 East Trinity Place
- A Lustron House
513 Drexel Avenue

A local historic district is a geographically designated area that contains buildings, structures, sites, objects, landscape features and works of art that have 1) special character, historic and/or aesthetic value or interest; 2) represent periods, styles or types of architecture typical of the history of the municipality, county, state or region; and 3) constitute a visibly perceptible section of the municipality or county. Properties in the districts must adhere to design guidelines and a design review process for changes to exterior features. Decatur has two such locally designated historic districts and two local landmarks:

- The M.A.K. Local Historic District
Named for the three main streets it encompasses (McDonough, Adams and Kings Highway), the MAK Local Historic District includes ten city blocks of varying sizes and is Decatur's first locally designated historic district.
- Clairemont Historic District
This district runs the length of Clairemont Avenue from Commerce Drive and Hunter Street in the south to Maediris Drive in the north.
- Old DeKalb County Courthouse
101 E. Court Square
- Scottish Rite Hospital for Crippled Children
321 W. Hill Street

Map 5.2 – Decatur Historic Districts and Properties Map



The following properties are currently not included on either the National Register or in locally designated districts but are still considered significant for their historic and cultural relevance to the City:

- Decatur City Hall
509 N. McDonough Street
- Columbia Theological Seminary
701 Columbia Drive
- Fraser House
Corner of Church Street and Bell Street
- The Chapel at Decatur First United Methodist Church
Corner of Sycamore Street. and Commerce Drive
- Sharian, Inc.
368 W. Ponce de Leon Avenue
- Decatur Railroad Depot
301 E. Howard Street
- Avary-Fulton House
205 South Columbia Drive

Decatur Preservation Alliance

The Decatur Preservation Alliance is a nonprofit charitable organization that focuses on preserving Decatur's historic structures and green spaces. Incorporated in 2000, the DPA has over 200 members and has worked closely with the City on several projects such as the relocation and stabilization of the Decatur Depot and Fraser House, the establishment of a Preservation Corridor Committee and 2004 Preservation Corridor Master Plan (discussed under the Community Facilities Element), and the Decatur Cemetery tree-planting program.

Assessment of Current and Future Needs

The City of Decatur is considered to have a model historic preservation program. Throughout the twenty-year planning period, of this document, the City is committed to its dedication of the protection and preservation of its rich heritage.

Natural and Cultural Resources Vision and Goals

The Natural and Cultural Resources community vision is for the City of Decatur to conserve and protect the natural and historical environment that contributes to the City's unique character.

- Preserve and protect Decatur historic resources for the education and enjoyment of current and future City residents and visitors.
- Protect natural resources from development which would create significant negative environmental or economic impacts.
- Continue to plant 50 trees each year in the City.

- Preserve stream buffers and floodplains as permanent open space whenever feasible.
- Protect and improve air quality in the City of Decatur.
- Continue to promote compact land development that allows for walking and other non-vehicular transportation.
- Begin implementation of the Preservation Corridor Master Plan