

LAND USE

Introduction

The City of Decatur covers 4.2 square miles of land area, or about 2,700 acres. Decatur lies directly east of the City of Atlanta, approximately 6 miles from Atlanta's central business district. It is the second oldest municipality in the Atlanta region, incorporated in 1823. Due to Decatur's age and proximity to a major metropolitan area, the majority of Decatur's land area has been developed for the last fifty years.

Decatur's general pattern of development can be described as a central business district in the geographic center of the community, surrounded by residential neighborhoods. The town center is characterized by the Old DeKalb County Courthouse, the DeKalb governmental complex, mid-rise office and professional buildings, a retail-entertainment district, and high-density residential buildings. Medium and low-density residential neighborhoods radiate from this central core.

Three MARTA stations are located within the City limits. The Decatur MARTA Station is located in the center of downtown Decatur. MARTA's East Lake and Avondale transit stations lie on west and east boundaries of the city. The historic Georgia Railroad corridor, now owned by CSX, bisects the City east to west.

Other significant land uses include two additional commercial nodes located in the southern portion of the City in Oakhurst Village and along the College Avenue corridor. The campuses of Agnes Scott College and Columbia Theological Seminary anchor the southeastern quadrant of the City.

Through a long history of land use planning and zoning, Decatur has been successful in preserving the character and integrity of its existing historic single-family neighborhoods. The City has been equally successful in redeveloping the downtown area into a compact urban community with high-density residential, non-motorized access to heavy rail transit, a profitable employment center and a vibrant entertainment district.

Inventory of Existing Land Uses

To ensure consistency with the land use standards established by the Department of Community Affairs, land use in the City of Decatur is inventoried according to the categories listed below. This information is also illustrated in table 8.1 and the Existing Land Use Map.

Low-Density Residential

These are properties developed with single and two-family dwellings with densities not exceeding seven (7) dwellings per acre. Low-density residential development is the most common land use in Decatur, covering approximately

1,415 acres or 52% of Decatur's land area.

Medium-Density Residential

Medium-density residential developments include multiple family properties and townhouse communities with up to 18 dwellings per acre. About 181 acres, or 7%, of Decatur's land area is developed with medium density residential dwellings. Most medium-density residential development is located near the downtown area and along major thoroughfares such as Clairemont Avenue, Scott Boulevard and Church Street.

High-Density Residential

Properties in the high-density residential class include multiple-family dwellings of up to 43 units per acre. Presently, most high-density residential dwellings are located in or near downtown Decatur. About 22 acres, or less than 1% of the City's land area, are developed with high-density residential developments.

Commercial

Commercial properties include those where business and trade activities are conducted, and include such uses as office buildings, establishments for the retail sale of goods and services, restaurants, hotels, and entertainment facilities. About 132 acres, or 5% of Decatur's land area is used for commercial development, primarily in the downtown area and commercial districts along College Avenue and in Oakhurst Village. High density residential is a permissible use in any commercially designated area.

Industrial

Industrial properties include facilities for manufacture, distribution and storage of goods and products. Industrial properties make up one of the smallest land uses in Decatur, covering only about 13 acres, less than 1% of the City's land area and could be more properly described as "heavy commercial" uses rather than industrial. This use is generally located in the district south of East College Avenue.

Public/Institutional

About 299 acres or 11% of Decatur's land area is presently used for Public/Institutional purposes. Typical uses in this category include public and private schools, churches and other places of worship, institutions of higher learning such as Agnes Scott College and Columbia Theological Seminary, governmental offices such as the Decatur City Hall and DeKalb County Government Center and similar uses. Institutional uses are located throughout the City.

Parks, Recreation and Conservation

This is land and buildings used for both active and passive recreational activities. Included are public parks, recreational facilities and conservation areas such as Decatur City parks, the Decatur Cemetery and the Woodlands. Approximately

127 acres, 5%, of Decatur's land area is presently devoted to this use. These uses are located throughout the City.

Transportation, Communication, and Utilities

This category includes such uses as the Avondale, Decatur and East Lake MARTA transit stations, power substations, and similar uses. Separately listed within this category are public streets and rights-of-way. About 483 acres or 18% are used primarily for transportation, communications and utility purposes.

Undeveloped/Vacant

This includes land not presently developed for a specific purpose. There are presently only about 28 acres of vacant land in Decatur, or about 2% of the City's total land area.

Agricultural

This category is reserved for land used for farming, livestock, timber production, and similar activities. No land in Decatur is presently included in this classification.

Table 8.1 – City of Decatur 2005 Existing Land Use

Land Use	Area (acres)	Percentage of Total Land Area
Low-Density Residential	1415	52
Medium-Density Residential	181	7
High-Density Residential	22	<1
Commercial	132	5
Industrial	13	<1
Institutional	299	11
Parks, Recreation, and Conservation	126	5
Transportation, Communication, and Utilities	483	18
Vacant	28	2
Total	2700	100

Source: City of Decatur

(Insert Existing Land Use Map)

Existing Land Use Assessment

Historic Factors

Historic land use and zoning policies adopted by the City Commissioners have been designed to protect, preserve and enhance the City's residential neighborhoods and to limit commercial development to existing commercial areas. As a result, Decatur's land use has remained remarkably stable for the last half of the 20th century.

As early as 1925, City ordinances were approved which enacted limited zoning restrictions. Decatur's first general zoning plan was established in April 1937. Comprehensive development plans were developed as early as 1958 and 1972.

The construction of the downtown MARTA heavy rail station in the 1970's disrupted the downtown area and both retail sales and real estate values declined steadily. In the early eighties, business owners, leaders, and residents rallied and developed a groundbreaking revitalization plan. The 1982 Decatur Town Center Plan set in motion a renewed vision for the downtown emphasizing mid-rise office buildings, pedestrian-friendly retail and high-density residential developments. Although it took years to manifest, the overwhelming success of the plan is evident today as Decatur leads the Atlanta Region as a model urban center. The downtown MARTA station is now considered one of the greatest assets of the City.

Land Use Patterns and Densities

As a mature community, the City has not had to "catch up" with rampant rapid growth and haphazard development. Instead, Decatur has focused a large amount of attention on preservation of existing neighborhoods and redevelopment and revitalization of underutilized commercial areas. The City has been successful with matching appropriate development with areas of existing infrastructure. The City has one of the highest densities of single-family residential areas in the state. High-density residential development is located in the downtown area along with commercial and retail properties and transit, providing a pedestrian scale, mixed-use downtown. Underutilized industrial parcels have been redeveloped as medium density facilities with mixed-use commercial and retail space. The result has been the creation of a compact urban community that encourages alternative forms of transportation and efficient delivery of City services.

Redevelopment Areas

The City has identified several areas that are in need of redevelopment. These include:

Downtown Decatur MARTA Redevelopment Plan

In mid-2005, the City will begin implementation of the Downtown Decatur MARTA Plaza Redevelopment Plan. The project includes the redesign of the entrance and plaza of the downtown MARTA station. Specifically the plan calls for the removal of the large planter walls, expansion of stairs and expansion of the sidewalks on either side of the plaza. Streetscape improvements will be extended along the retail sidewalks to add street trees, street lamps and more room for outdoor dining. Handicapped access will be provided to the plaza level from both sides of the station area and the upper brick level will be expanded to allow for more effective use during festivals and special events.

Calloway Building

The City of Decatur is working with DeKalb County on the redevelopment of the Calloway Building. The building is located on approximately 6+ acres in downtown Decatur adjacent to the Decatur High School. The City has prepared several alternatives for the reuse and redevelopment of the site. The City's vision includes a mix of uses – live/work housing, office and retail, consistent with other areas of downtown Decatur. Preliminary plans also include an underground parking deck and a new local road.

Avondale MARTA Station

Through a 2002 Atlanta Regional Commission Livable Centers Initiative grant, plans were designed for the redevelopment of a 40+-acre site on the south side of the station. The Decatur Housing Authority is spearheading the implementation of a mixed-use project that includes apartments, condominiums, 14,000 square feet of ground level retail and the construction of a parking deck for MARTA patrons on a 7.3-acre site. Permitting for Phase I of the project should begin in 2005. Since the site is located adjacent to the Decatur boundary, the City will work with DeKalb County and the City of Avondale Estates to ensure compatibility with adjacent uses.

Other areas noted by the City as ripe for redevelopment include the East Howard Street corridor, the East Trinity block from Church Street to College Avenue, the Selig property on Church Street and the Bank of America site on Commerce Drive. Through the Downtown Development Authority, the City plans increased contact with property owners to create redevelopment concepts and assist in appropriate ways.

Environmentally Sensitive Areas

The City is committed to protection of its greenspace, historic and environmentally sensitive natural resources. The City has a long history of preservation efforts. These efforts are coordinated by the Greenspace and Historic Preservation commissions. A full listing of the resources is located within the Natural and Cultural Resources chapter of this document. The City has a strong policy of directing development away from these areas.

Other Land Use Issues

Annexation Study

In 2003, the Carl Vinson Institute of Government conducted a study for the City examining public policies by which future boundary changes related to annexation might be evaluated. The study not only looked at fiscal issues, but also other areas such as land use, service delivery, infrastructure and quality of life.

The Institute is currently applying those policies in an additional study examining the feasibility of annexing various parcels of land adjacent to the City. The study is anticipated to be complete by the end of 2005. Implementation of the plan's findings could begin as early as 2006.

Infill Design Guidelines

Infill development and recent teardown activity within the City's single-family neighborhoods have created the need for design guidelines. Throughout the public involvement process, dissatisfaction with new construction homes that are out of scale and architectural character of the surrounding neighborhoods was voiced.

Lifecycle Housing Ordinance

As a result of successful planning, property values are up and demand for Decatur residential property is high. The City is trying to provide for workforce and senior housing by encouraging a mix of housing types and by adopting a lifecycle housing ordinance. The ordinance offers density bonuses to developers who set aside a percentage of their residential developments for affordable housing.

Future Land Use Demand

Through the planning year 2025, the Atlanta Regional Commission forecasts an increase of 29% in population and 32% in households for the City of Decatur. Since the City is near 100% build-out, almost all of the forecast growth is expected to be absorbed through redevelopment of existing underutilized properties that are predominantly located in and around the downtown Decatur area. As depicted on the Future Land Use map, high-density residential and commercial are slated for the downtown central business core. Medium density residential corridors have been identified along Clairemont Avenue, Church Street, Scott Boulevard, and East College Avenue.

ARC forecasts a 23% increase in employment growth in Decatur. This growth is expected to be accommodated by redevelopment of existing commercial and office property in the downtown Decatur area and underutilized industrial property along East College Avenue.

No additional land area is expected to be needed for industrial uses in the 2005-2025 planning period. Acreage dedicated for this use has decreased significantly since 1995, with a 68% decrease. If present trends continue, even less land area than present may be needed for these uses.

Throughout the twenty-year horizon of this plan, it will remain a challenge to significantly increase the City's dedicated park and recreation acreage through land acquisition. The City will continue to participate in the Georgia Greenspace Program and purchase additional properties as they become available. The City also intends to continue coordination with private recreational organizations to offer residents a full spectrum of leisure opportunities.

Future Land Use Narrative

As previously stated, land use in Decatur is clearly not the result of haphazard and random development. Development patterns today are the result of plans and policies set in motion decades ago. The City has taken great care in preserving its single family and historic resources while encouraging managed growth in identified areas and corridors. Future land use, as depicted on the accompanying map and narrative, is continuation of these efforts.

Considering Decatur's build-out conditions, the Future Land Use map closely resembles the current Existing Land Use map. As such, future land use policies closely mirror present policies. The City will continue preservation efforts of its existing residential neighborhoods. While small amounts of infill housing will continue to occur, significant opportunities for growth will be directed to the redevelopment of previously identified downtown properties, nearby commercial properties, and surrounding corridors. This is illustrated in the Future Land Use map and in Table 8.2.

Table 8.2 – City of Decatur Future Land Use

Land Use	Area (acres)	Percentage of Total Land Area
Low-Density Residential	1421	53
Medium-Density Residential	199	7
High-Density Residential	32	1+
Commercial	160	6
Industrial	0	0
Institutional	287	11
Parks, Recreation, and Conservation	126	5
Transportation, Communication, and Utilities	447	17
Vacant	28	1
Total	2700	100

Source: City of Decatur

(Insert Future Land Use map)

Land Use Community Vision and Goals

The Land Use Community Vision is to provide for projected limited future development within the City in a manner that enhances and builds on the City of Decatur's existing "small town character."

- Maintain a small town quality of life and small town character while accommodating medium and high-density redevelopment in appropriate areas.
- Maintain and improve the individual character and identity of established neighborhoods and commercial centers.
- Limit future commercial development to the downtown area or to already established neighborhood commercial centers.
- Locate higher density residential developments either in previously identified commercial or transition areas adjacent to other higher density uses or in areas adjacent to rapid transit stations when compatible with existing uses.
- Create residential infill design guidelines to ensure compatibility of new construction with existing resources.