

A Master Plan for the
**Decatur Preservation
Corridor**
Decatur, Georgia

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Prepared for:
The City of Decatur

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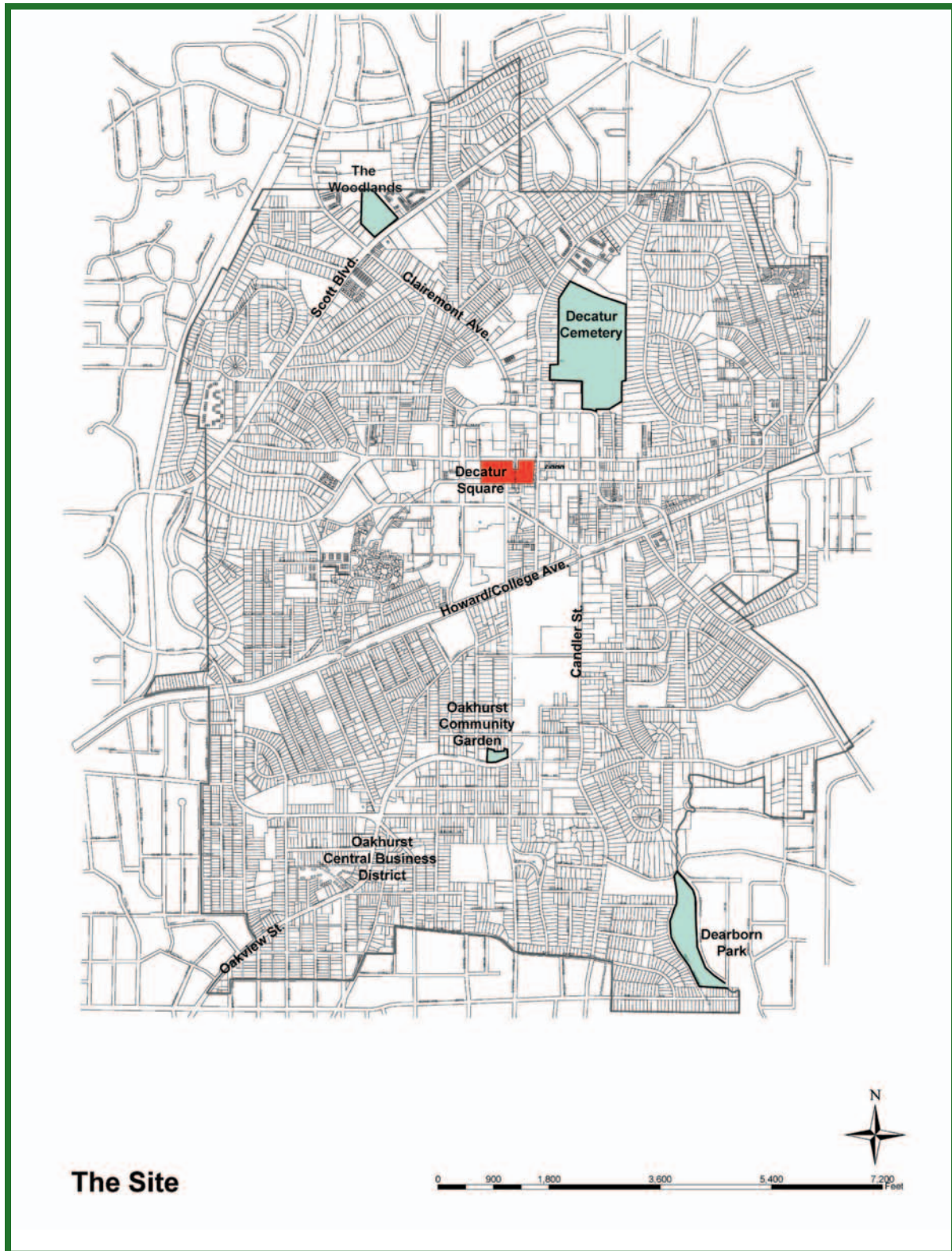


Figure iv.1: The City of Decatur: Decatur Preservation Corridor Study Area

I. INVENTORY & ANALYSIS



The historic Courthouse in Decatur Square is a city landmark.

I.A Overview

The initial goal of the Decatur Preservation Corridor was to promote greenspace support, accessibility and preservation through the creation of a north-south historic preservation/greenspace corridor linking four major city environmental resources - The Woodlands, Decatur Cemetery, Oakhurst Community Gardens, and Dearborn Park. By providing a structured link and access to these sites, this first phase trail corridor would serve as a “demonstration project” to support greenspace and historic preservation efforts in the city by promoting the use and visibility of existing assets.

During the community input process for this project, several modifications were made to the original project goal and scope. In addition to greenspace access, residents requested improved pedestrian accessibility to the city’s prime commercial areas. Thus, two additional sites, Decatur Square (Downtown Decatur) and the Oakhurst Business District Node were added to the priority “connectivity” list. (For purposes of this report, the six identified key connectivity sites will be referred to as the “anchor nodes”.) Community participants also expressed a strong desire for a city-wide, system approach to the overall master plan. The result is a study that now strategically assesses and recommends a network of connectivity throughout Decatur, providing neighborhood gateways, pedestrian and bicycle streetscape improvement recommendations, linkage with most major civic and park spaces as well as historic landmarks, and identification of potential preservation sites.

I.B Project History and Context

The Decatur Preservation Corridor Master Plan is the culmination of findings generated from the creation of the City’s 2000 Strategic Plan. Community input during that process identified ten goals, including “enhance mobility in and through Decatur”, and “continue the commitment to environmental quality”. In response, the Decatur City Commission created a citizen-based Greenspace Task Force. Its March 2002 report included the recommendation to establish a physical connection between north and south sections of the city and join the City’s rich historical elements with the preservation of greenspace. A permanent Greenspace Commission was established, which adopted the corridor concept as a guiding vision for the City’s greenspace program.

The Greenspace Task Force identified many of the historical and greenspace resources and facilities in Decatur prior to commencement of the project, and provided this important information to the Consultant for use in this study. Greenspace Commission members actively participated in the Stakeholder meetings, providing valuable insights and comments in order to support the goals of the project.

I.C Project Process

The process involved four phases of work:

1. Inventory and analysis of existing conditions
2. Stakeholder and community input
3. Development and testing of concepts
4. Final master plan creation and presentation

A Steering Committee, consisting of seven stakeholders and city representatives, worked with the Consultant throughout the process, providing first stage guidance and comments on ideas and concepts. In addition, two stakeholder and three public-at-large meetings were held during various phases of the project. Based on community and stakeholder input, a modification to the scope was approved by the Decatur City Commission during the project's second phase.

I.D Existing Conditions

An inventory of existing conditions covered several attributes relevant to the goals of the project:

- natural systems, including streams, creeks and floodplains, and topographical characteristics; and designed greenspace sites including parks and recreational areas;
- vehicular and non-vehicular circulation, historical and existing trails, walking distances, road typology, street character and right-of-ways;
- density of building placement, undeveloped properties, and overall land use;
- schools and other civic buildings, historic landmarks and neighborhoods, religious institutions, and major commercial nodes.

I.D.1 Physical and Cultural Overview

Decatur is an historic city whose past and future has been linked to the dynamics of growth of the City of Atlanta. Atlanta was founded on the crossroads of the major Indian trails that crossed the state and linked the Southeast. Most of these paths followed the ridges between watersheds, which minimized the need for crossing rivers and large bodies of water. The geological cause of these ridges was the collision of tectonic plates and erosion million of years ago. That tectonic plate interface is today recognized as the Upper Piedmont Plateau to the south and the Appalachian Mountain region to the north. Within the metropolitan area, the Chattahoochee River follows the fault line and serves as the demarcation between the two regions.

The first railroads built in the eastern United States followed this same path of least resistance along the ridge trails. The physiography of Atlanta was one of the reasons for the relocation of the state capital from Milledgeville to Atlanta. The regional scale of these ridges and watersheds is demonstrated by the fact that Peachtree Ridge is the watershed divide between the Gulf of Mexico to the west and the Atlantic Ocean to the east. Today, Interstate 75 follows this ridge from Florida to Tennessee. Interstate 20, which bisects Atlanta on an east/west axis, follows secondary ridges from Alabama to South Carolina.

As the transportation of goods and materials shifted from foot - to horse - to horse and wagon - to railroad - to automobiles, historic paths have served as the primary driver in the economic development

of Atlanta as well as the City of Decatur. Decatur sits on a secondary north-south ridge, delineated today by Clairemont Avenue. Ponce de Leon Avenue follows the primary east-west ridge leaving Atlanta.

As Atlanta became the largest city in the state, Decatur became a bedroom community as well as the county seat of DeKalb County. The commute employed mass transit in the pre-Civil War era in the form of horse drawn trolleys, and in the 20th Century, by electric trolleys operated by the Georgia Power public transit company. Both of these early transit systems followed similar paths.

Decatur today is experiencing a renaissance urban redevelopment and incorporating infill mixed use developments. The success of the redevelopment of the Downtown over the past two decades coupled with a desire in the housing market for urban live/work environments has been the engine for this growth. The relationship of the Downtown to the established and new neighborhoods and the growth in pedestrian and bicycle uses for work and leisure has become the impetus for evaluating a City wide system that reinforces and builds upon the City's cultural and physical history.

I.D.2 Natural Systems, Parks and Greenspace (Figure I.1)

Places are first defined by natural systems such as waterways and drainage patterns, topography and natural vegetation. The highest elevations in Decatur are generally found in the southwest (Oakhurst area), with the lowest elevations found in the far north and northwest (beyond Scott Blvd.) and southeast (Dearborn Park). Decatur's elevations range from approximately 920' to 1060' above sea level, but concentrated, steeply sloped sites exist throughout the City. One example is the sharp drop from west to east in the East Hill Street area. Decatur's east/west ridgeline also coincides with the natural watershed in Georgia. Water north of the railroad tracks flows eventually to the Gulf of Mexico, while water falling south of College Avenue eventually enters the Atlantic Ocean.

Four creeks - Peavine, South Fork, Sugar, and Shoal - flow in Decatur and impact all sectors of the City. Regulations involving the permitted construction in floodplains and streambanks were enacted by the state after significant residential development occurred in many of Decatur's floodplain areas. However, some of these sites may still offer potential for conservation easements for trails or preservation.

The Woodlands, a 7-acre parcel donated to the Decatur Preservation Alliance, is a planned botanical and educational respite for Decatur residents. The city owned Decatur Cemetery, at 43 acres, is the largest greenspace in the city, and could provide a contemplative amenity for a broader constituency. Oakhurst Community Gardens is a nonprofit community garden providing environmental education activities. The fourth anchor node, Dearborn Park, is an underutilized 8.5 acre DeKalb County park filled with hardwood forests and the headwaters of Shoal Creek. Decatur also hosts numerous neighborhood parks, each providing varying levels of active and passive recreation.

I.D.3 Vehicular and Non-Vehicular Circulation (Figures I.2, I.3, I.4, 1.5)

Background

Long before streets dominated transportation patterns in Decatur, Indian trails provided the basis for these same circulation routes of importance today. Keying off the natural topography, particularly ridgelines and waterways, native footpaths formed where Clairemont Avenue/McDonough Street, South Columbia Drive, Sycamore Street and portions of Adair Street, Trinity Place, and College Avenue now exist. In fact, Sycamore Street was the major east-west route from Augusta until the train

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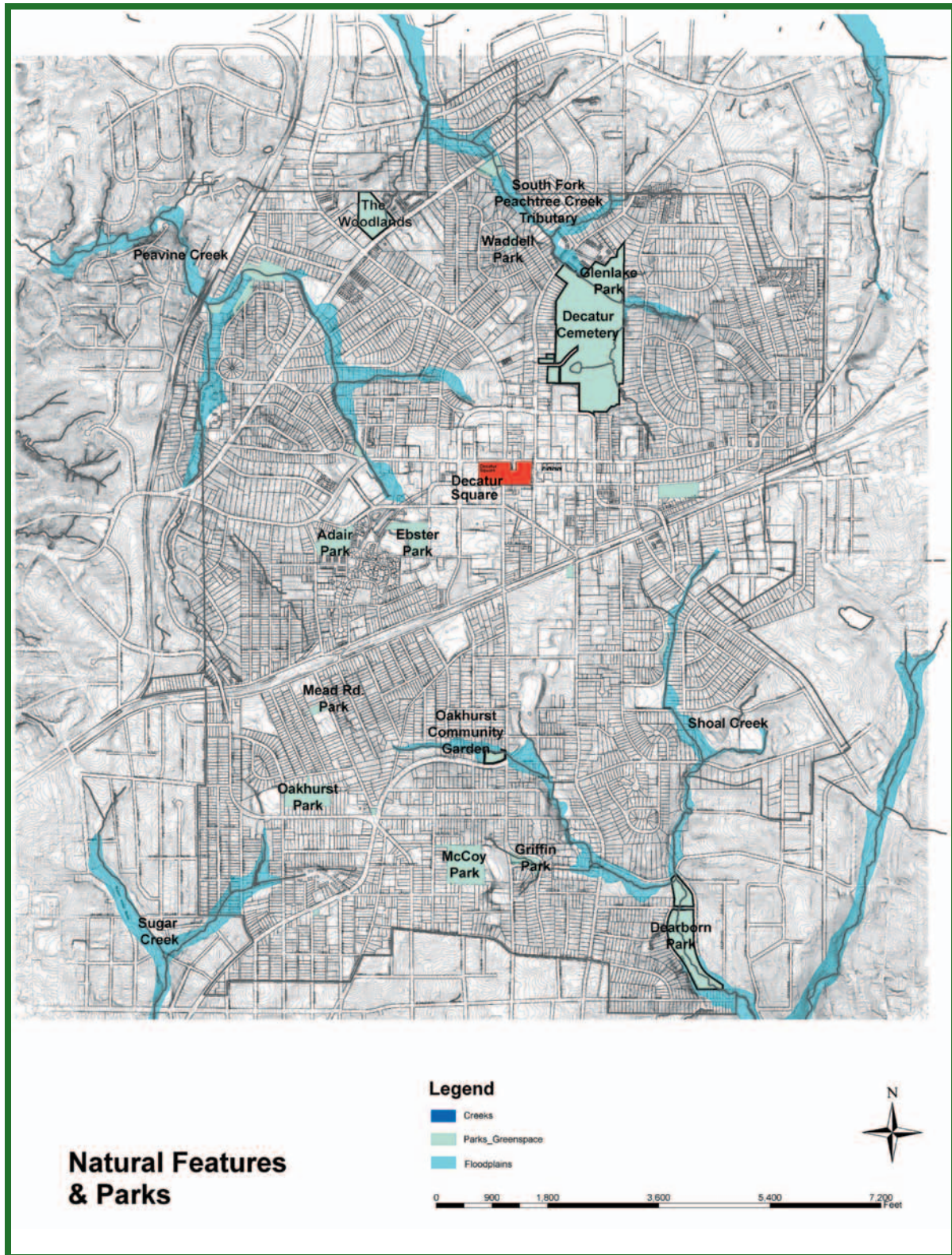


Figure I.1: Existing Conditions: Natural Systems and Parks/Greenspace

came to town in 1845. Downtown Decatur represents an intersection of these historic trails. For their track placement, railroad companies later adopted similar locations along ridgelines.

Trolleys then shaped Decatur, particularly in the southwest quadrant. While neighboring subdivisions often took on a rectilinear street pattern, the route of the trolley entailed necessary curving. Oakview Drive, a former trolley route, displays this pattern well.

Vehicular Circulation - General

Vehicular use and traffic congestion in Decatur is heaviest on the primary east-west state arterial roads of Scott Boulevard and College Avenue, and along the north-south Clairemont, Church and Candler roads. Additional key vehicular routes include Ponce de Leon Avenue, McDonough Street, Trinity Place, South Columbia Drive, East Lake Drive, and Oakview Road. Decatur does not host any interstate highways. It does have an extensive network of two lane residential streets. Traffic congestion is a notable issue in and around downtown Decatur, and particularly along Clairemont Avenue, Church Street, Ponce de Leon Avenue and Scott Boulevard during rush hours. Vehicular speed is of concern for pedestrians and bicyclists, and traffic calming speed humps are prevalent on many city through streets.

Decatur's collector and arterial streets vary in their attributes, creating levels of opportunities and constraints regarding pedestrian and bicycle lane enhancements. A matrix listing characteristics such as curb-to-curb width and number of lanes is shown in Appendix V-C. Existing right-of-ways for Decatur's major streets are shown in Figure I.3.

The City of Decatur is currently studying potential intersection improvements at the following locations:

- Church Street @ Commerce Drive
- College/Howard Avenues @ Candler Street
- Commerce Drive @ Clairemont Avenue
- College/Howard Avenues @ McDonough Street

Vehicular Circulation - Road Hierarchy (Figure I.4)

In recognition of the relationship of the physiographic environment to the transportation network of the city, a road system hierarchy has been identified. This hierarchy is not intended to be defined relative to peak volumes, but to show how the primary and secondary street system contributes to a defacto division of the City into four quadrants.

In general, the methodology of evaluating the City is based on a vernacular developed by Kevin Lynch in the 1960's. Districts are first identified by cultural or natural barriers such as arterial streets, railroads or bodies of water. Districts are then subdivided by secondary streets into neighborhoods. The Consultant has used this framework in conjunction with the natural land form to divide the City into quadrants relative to the Central Business District and Decatur Square.

Regional Arterial Streets

Scott Boulevard is the northernmost of the two regional arterial streets in the limits of this study and links Downtown Atlanta to Stone Mountain and other cities to the east. It also serves as a District Edge. It incurs the highest traffic counts of any road in Decatur.

College Avenue is a Regional Arterial Street and District Edge by its proximity to the railroad and

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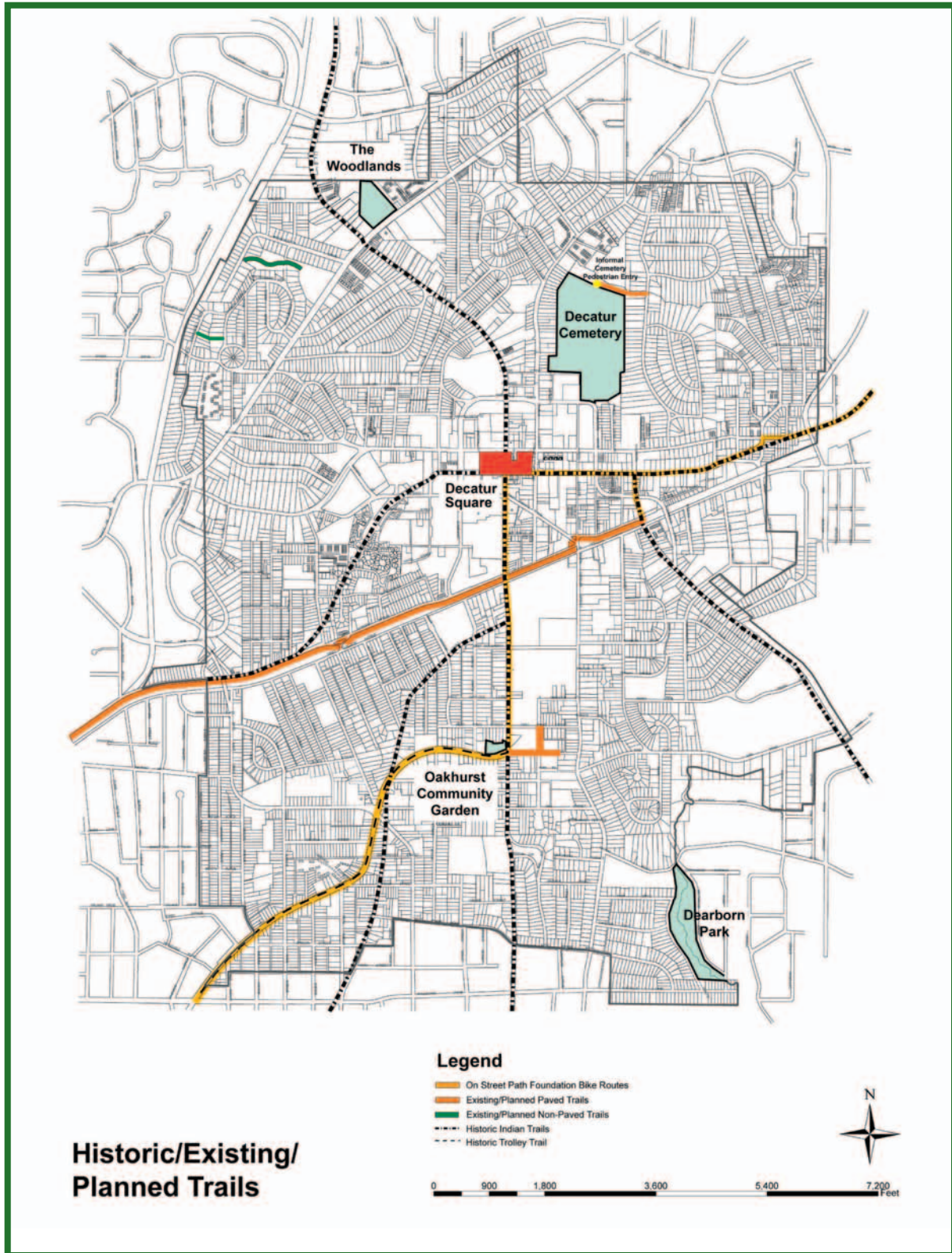


Figure I.2: Existing Conditions: Existing/Historic/Planned Trails

its alignment relative to following the east/west ridge that divides the city's watersheds. It parallels the main line of the CSX railroad and divides the northern and southern portions of the city.

Primary City Arteries

Clairemont Avenue, north of the Central Business District (CBD) is the north/south primary route that divides the northern half of the City.

Candler Street is the east/west demarcation of the southern half of the city. Its route leaves the CBD in a southeastern direction for approximately a quarter of a mile before turning south at the College Avenue intersection. It runs parallel to McDonough Street and frames the Agnes Scott College Campus. While McDonough Street is the geometric axis leaving the CBD, Candler Street is more heavily used because it is a state route and the historic primary artery to the south.

Commerce Drive is a perimeter route around the northern half of the CBD that extends around the eastern side to the intersection of South Columbia Drive south of College Avenue.

West and East Ponce De Leon Avenue is the historic and current primary east/west artery into Downtown Decatur.

West Trinity Place is a primary street that separates east bound traffic from West Ponce De Leon and defines the southern edge of the historic CBD.

Secondary Streets

Secondary streets are defined for these purposes as crossing streets within a quadrant that connect to Primary or other Secondary Streets. Typically in the urban fabric, Secondary streets divide Districts into neighborhoods.

Quadrant

Northwest	Northeast	Southwest	Southeast
Lamont Drive	Willow Lane	East Lake Drive	Avery Street
Coventry Road	Sycamore Drive	Second Avenue	Kirk Road
West Parkwood Road	Sycamore Street	Mead Road	Midway Road
East Lake Road		West Hill Street	
		Oakview Road	

Transit

Decatur is home to three Marta transit stations: Avondale to the east, Decatur (on the Square) and East Lake to the west. Improved pedestrian and bicycle connectivity to these facilities may provide Decatur residents with more incentive to use transit for transportation beyond city limits.

Pedestrian Circulation

Virtually all streets in Decatur include a sidewalk on at least one side of the street. However, these are often narrow (four feet or less) and in poor condition. Minimal landscape buffering (typically two feet), usually incorporating utility poles, is provided between the sidewalk and roadway, offering little protection for pedestrians in high speed corridors. More problematic for pedestrians is the rail-line

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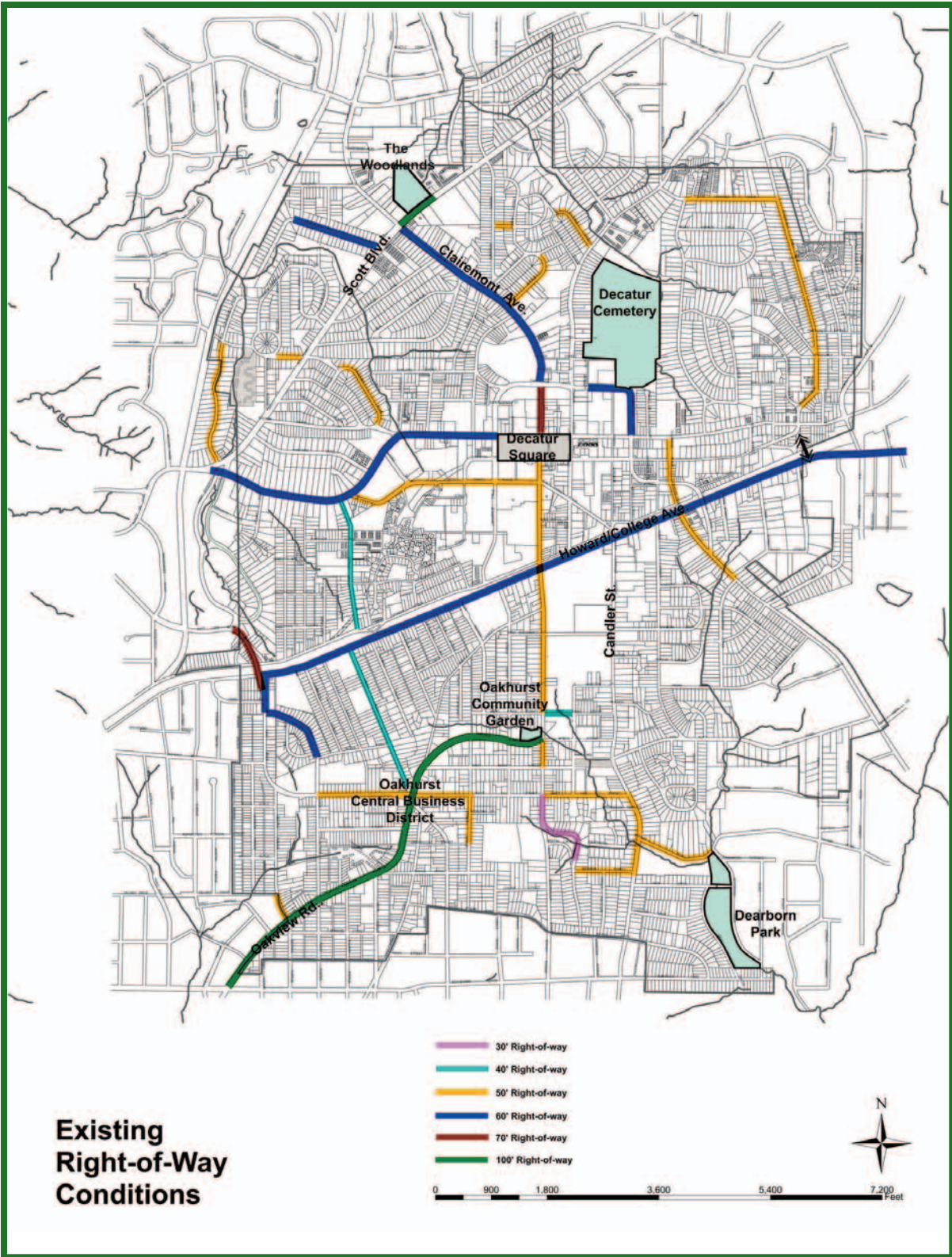


Figure I.3: Existing Conditions: Right-of-Way Samples

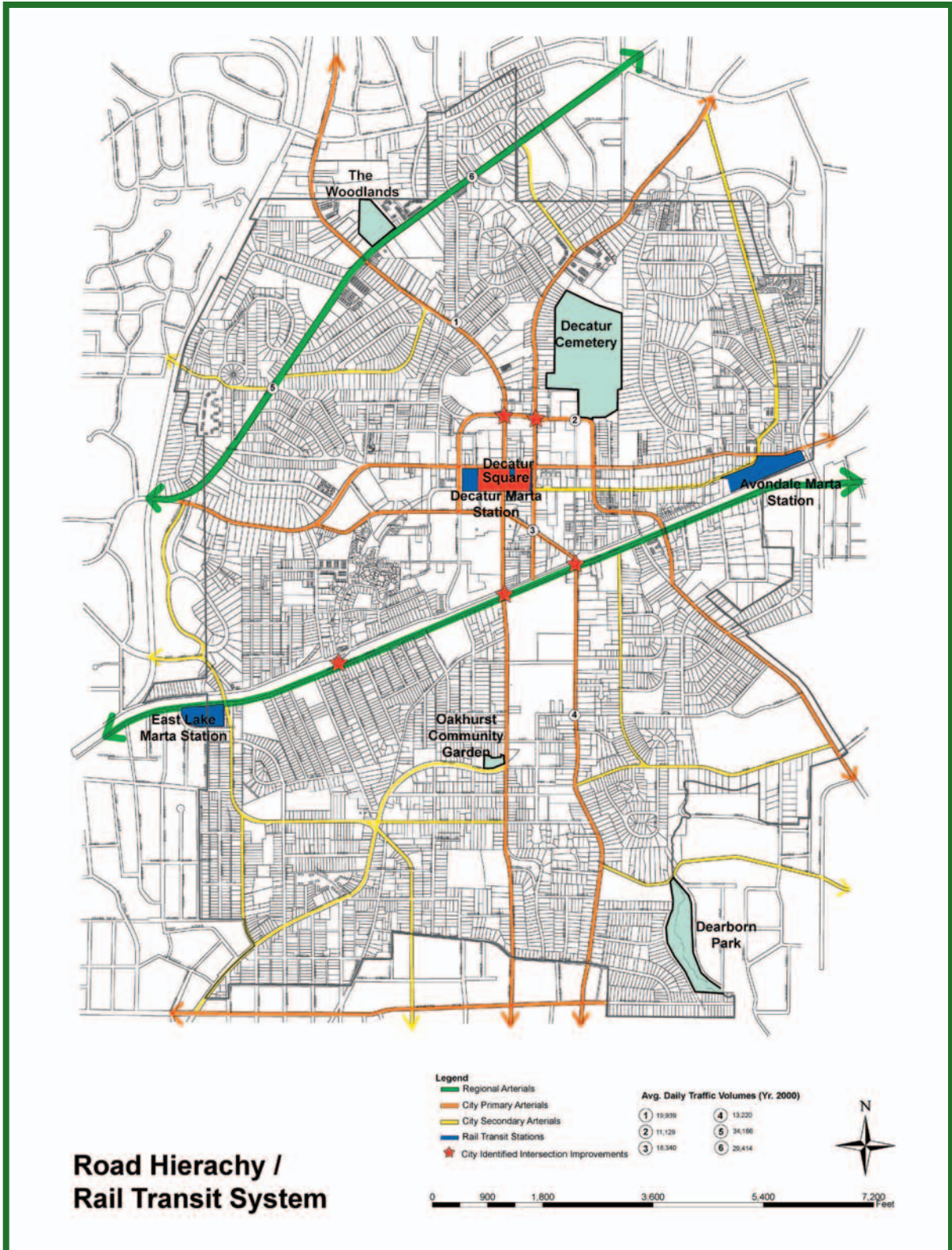


Figure I.4: Existing Conditions: Road Hierarchy/Rail Transit System

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impediment along College/Howard Avenues, as well as intersection crossings in other locations. The train tracks have resulted in limited vehicular access points connecting north and south Decatur, along with extremely scarce pedestrian options. Other major road intersections, such as Scott Boulevard at Clairemont Avenue and Clairemont Avenue at Commerce Drive, are pedestrian unfriendly due to their scale and auto focus.

Sidewalk information found along many of Decatur's major streets is found in Appendix V-C.

The City of Decatur has completed or is planning streetscape enhancements for pedestrian and bicycle use along Ponce de Leon Avenue, Church Street, Trinity Place, Candler Street and the Sycamore Street area. North McDonough Street, while not yet funded, is also planned for improvements, and a gateway is proposed at its intersection with College Avenue.

Pedestrian activity is influenced by distances, particularly when conducted as a transportation mode to a destination. Linear distance, measured for the radius around the six anchor nodes, is shown in Figure I.5. Thus, the diameter of each small circle is 1/2 mile, while the larger circles represent one mile. Studies have shown 1/4 mile to be an optimal distance for destination based walking. The distance between the northern most anchor node, The Woodlands, and the most southern anchor node, Dearborn Park, is approximately three miles.

Bicycle

The Atlanta regional PATH Foundation has several existing on-street bicycle routes that connect Decatur to its eastern and southwestern neighbors. The route winds from Oakview Road north to McDonough Street and east along Sycamore Street. In addition, a currently under construction 12' wide paved multi-use path along the south side of Howard Avenue (north side of railroad tracks) will be an invaluable resource for the DPC corridor. While connection within Decatur is a prime goal of this project, connectivity to environs outside the city limits is an additional benefit.

Other Paths

An inventory of existing paths shows several paved and natural trails of varying lengths. The PATH Foundation constructed a short paved multi-use trail through a woodlands area that ties East Davis Street with Green Street. Glenlake Park, adjacent to the north side of Decatur Cemetery, includes a paved pathway that connects to Glendale Avenue in the Glendale Estates residential neighborhood. Westchester Elementary School (now planned to become an administration building), has a natural woodland path winding along a portion of Peavine Creek.

I.D.4 Building Density and Land Use (Figures I.6 and I.7)

Comprised of 4.2 square miles and about 18,000 residents, Decatur is the most densely populated city in Georgia. This density is accomplished, surprisingly, with predominately single family residences. Lot size is generally 1/4 acre in size. As stated earlier, residential development has occurred in all floodplain areas. Few undeveloped properties exist in the city.

Land Use generally consists of a commercial and governmental core around the Decatur Square, with single family residential developments filling out the city. The only other commercial node of note is the Oakhurst Central Business District at the junction of Oakview Road, East Lake Drive and West Hill Street. Civic and religious uses are scattered throughout most sectors, although they also tend to be clustered around Decatur's Downtown business district.

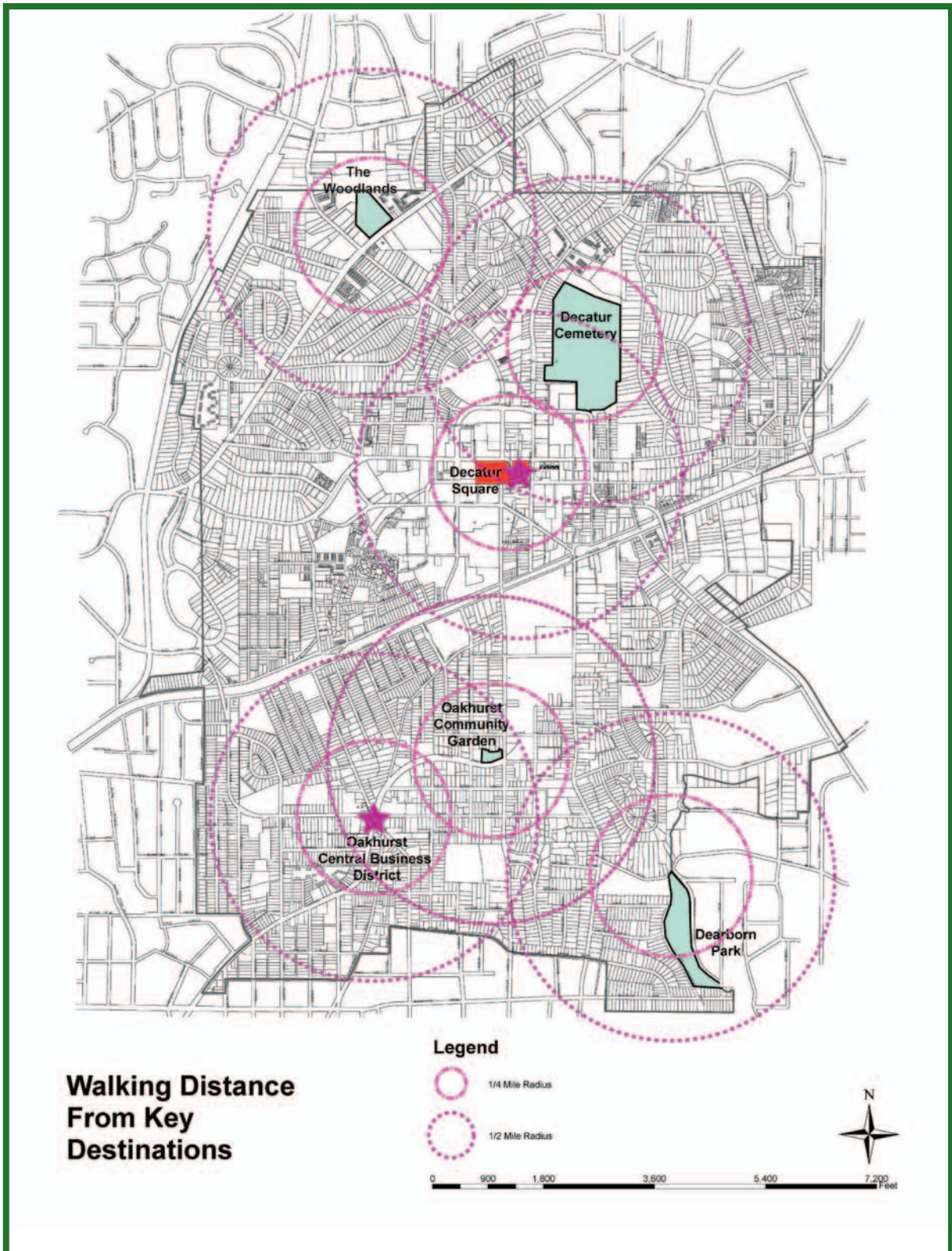


Figure I.5: Existing Conditions: Walking Distances from Anchor Nodes

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Figure I.6: Existing Conditions: Structures and Undeveloped Lots

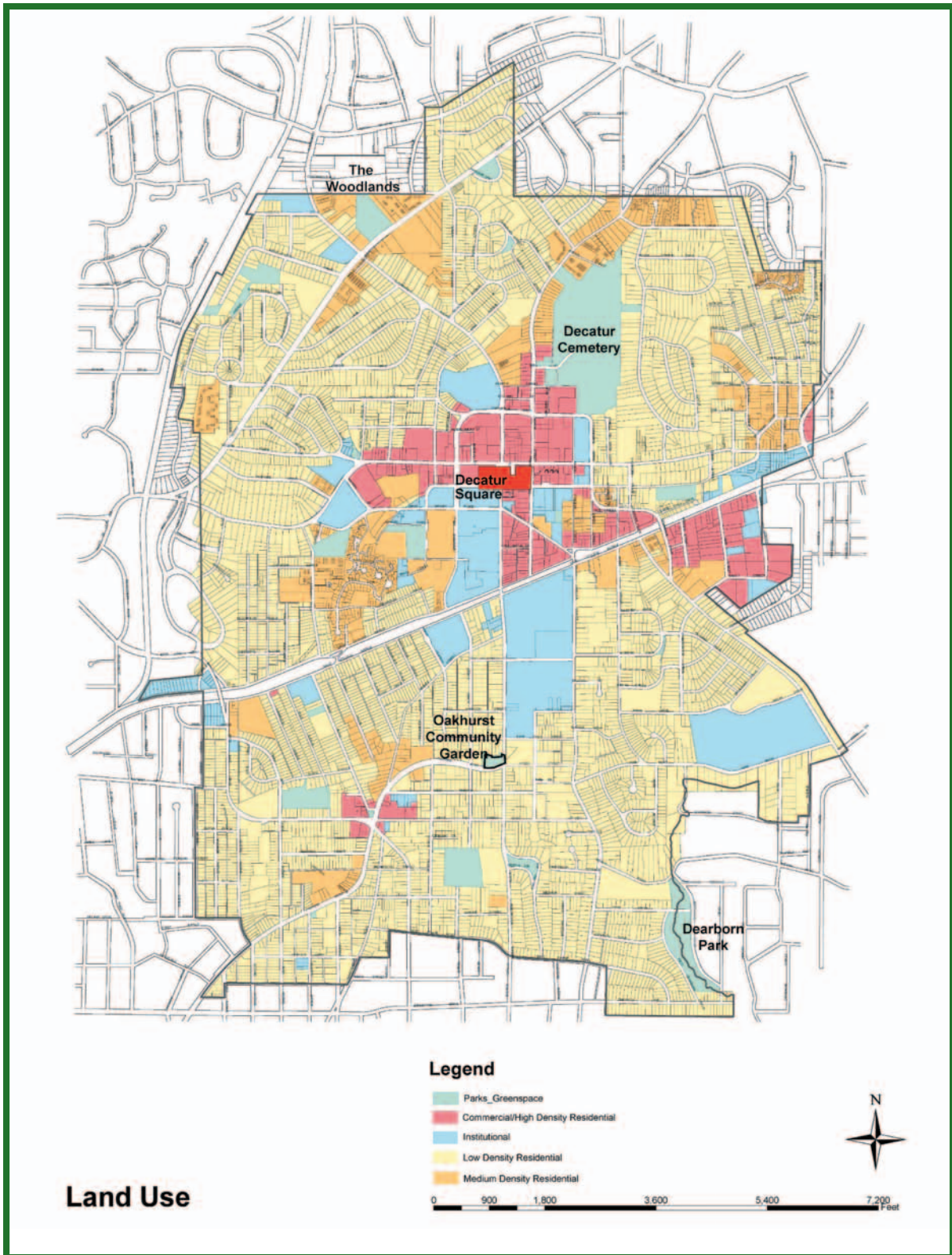


Figure I.7: Existing Conditions: Land Use

I.D.5 Key Civic and Historic Sites, Landmarks and Districts (Figure I.8)

The Decatur Preservation Corridor’s goal of linking important natural resources can be extended to a broader context of connecting the city’s prime community gathering locations. These sites range from schools to churches to commercial hubs, and can serve as important destinations and “rest stops” in the overall network. Schools and churches also tend to have surrounding greenspace that may be conducive to the addition of a DPC trail portion.

Decatur’s historic neighborhoods and Districts, as well as individual historic or landmark buildings, are also essential assets worthy of increased access and preservation. The City promotes these structures and neighborhoods through identified walking tour routes. The Clairemont Historic District and M.A.K. Historic District are locally registered, while Winnona Park is a nationally registered Historic District.

Other neighborhoods of distinctive architectural character include The Great Lakes Neighborhood, Glenwood Estates, The Lord Subdivision, Emory Acres, Clairemont Estates, Ponce de Leon Heights, Ponce de Leon Terrace, Mimosa, Womak Subdivision, Old Decatur, Lenox Park, College View and the Oakhurst Subdivision.

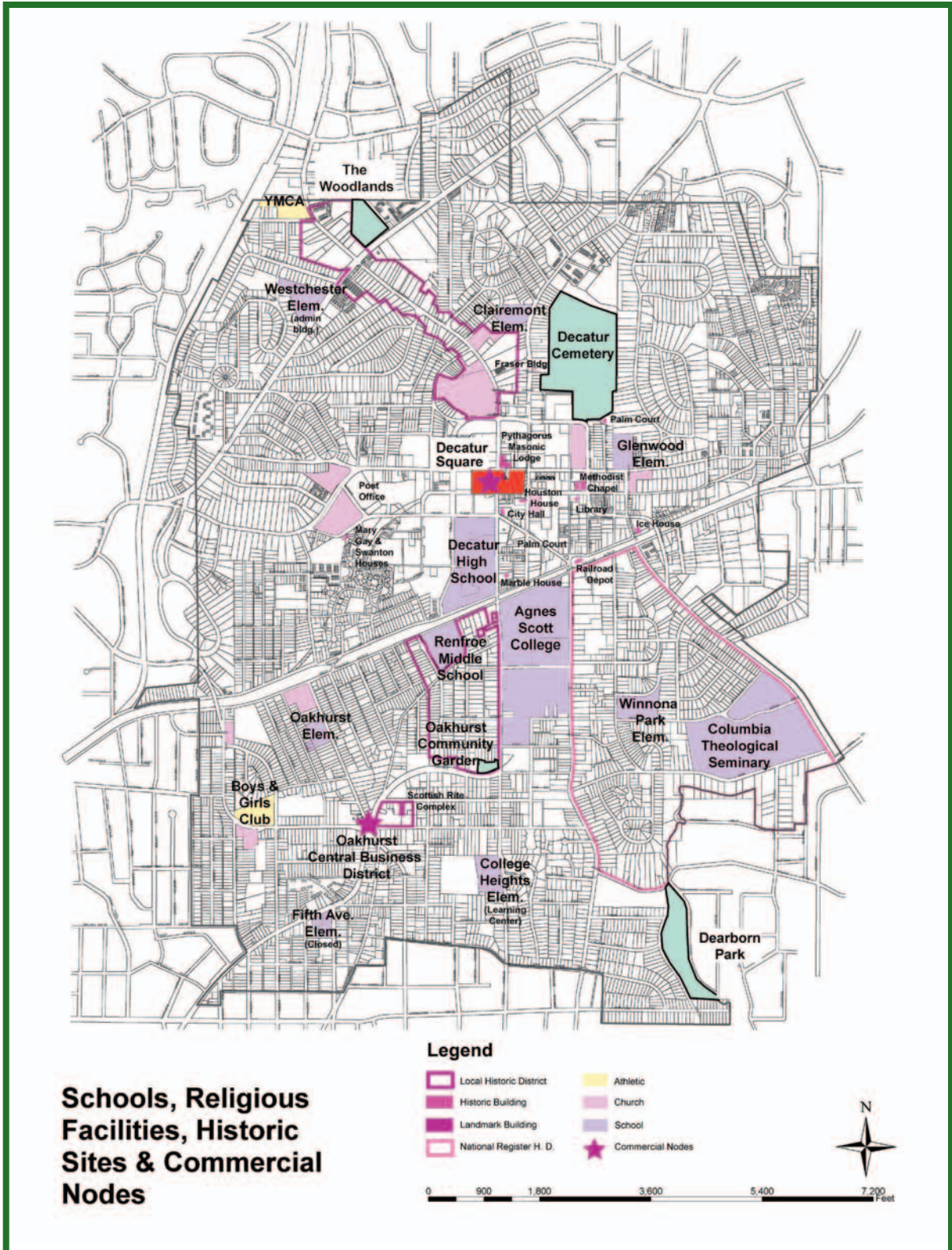


Figure I.8: Existing Conditions: Civic, Historic, Religious and Commercial Nodes and Landmarks

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