

Paulding County, Georgia's Plan for Jobs, Growth and Environmental Sustainability

By **Pat Crook**

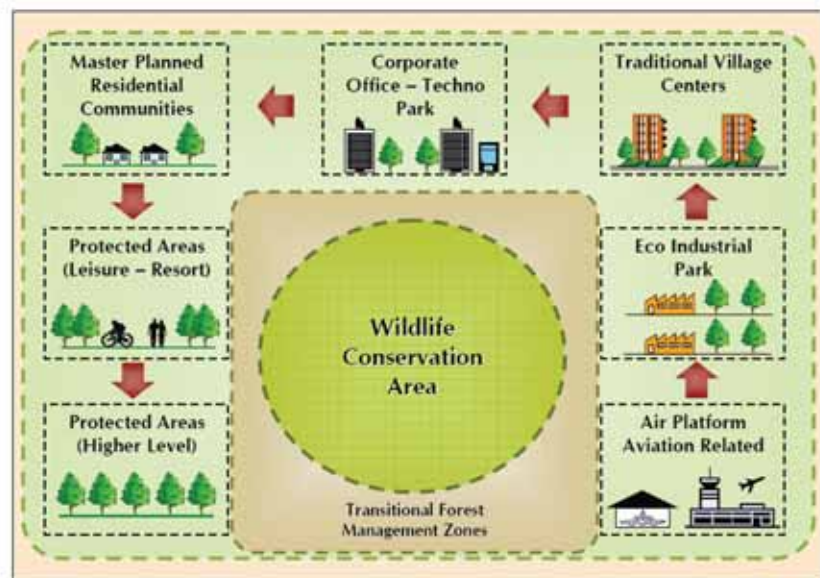
County Administrator,
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Atlanta is Georgia's economic engine. With an increase in the Atlanta metro population of nearly 900,000 between 2000 and 2006, the region also realized the nation's highest increase in commute time and continued its struggle to improve air quality. For several years, state agencies, committees and task force groups have attempted to find solutions to the area's growth-induced transportation and air quality problems. Plans and programs have been developed to discourage sprawl and encourage local governments to implement smart growth and environmentally sensitive initiatives.

Thirty miles northwest of Atlanta lies Paulding County, a bedroom community of 125,000 residents. Since 1990, Paulding has been among the top ten fastest-growing counties in the United States. Each morning, 75 percent of the county's working population navigates congested roadways to jobs in neighboring metro-area counties. In the early 1990s, many of the county's residents worked in neighboring Cobb County, at Lockheed Martin Corporation; employment in the county at that time was limited to local government, the school system and a handful of small manufacturers. While there are more jobs in the county today, the largest employment growth segments are retail and construction.

Planning for jobs

In the late 1990s, Paulding began to explore options for economic development. A major barrier to local economic growth was the county's limited transportation infrastructure, having no interstate highway access and only two major



The project is envisioned as a "green" development, with work, residential and transportation uses clustered around a wildlife conservation area.

four-lane highways. Other barriers included a lack of local post-secondary educational institutions, limited telecommunications options, and land uses primarily focused on residential and retail development.

Paulding undertook the largest obstacle first – transportation – with plans to develop the first new general aviation airport in Georgia in over 25 years. But once the county got site approval for the airport from the Federal Aviation Administration in 2005, it was presented with a new set of challenges.

The site was in the largely undeveloped, northwest section of the county, an area with an abundance of unspoiled forestland, hills, streams and wildlife, divided by the only four-lane highway that runs through the entire county. It's not an area that one might usually consider for an economic development initiative, particularly near a booming metropolitan region such as Atlanta.

Getting this project off the ground would require an innovative master development plan. The county enlisted the expertise of consultant Franco Eleuteri to develop a plan for the 10,000-acre area surrounding the airport, with the objective of creating a self-contained, "green" development that maintains the rural environment while expanding the county's tax base and eliminating much of the out-commute. The result is a new model for economic development: a technologically advanced, eco-friendly community that encompasses working, living and recreation spaces and adjoins an expanded conservation area.

The plan for the 10,000-acre site takes advantage of the undulating terrain, abundance of streams and the existing Goldmine Lake by setting aside about 50 percent of the land as a protected natural area. This complements the adjacent Paulding Forest initiative, in which the county is working with The Nature Conservancy and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources to purchase and preserve over 7,000 acres of forestland. Ultimately, these two projects will provide the largest contiguous forest and wildlife conservation area in the region. Environmentally sensitive solutions are incorporated throughout the rest of the plan as well, in ener-

gy production and water conservation measures, waste handling, and project design and construction.

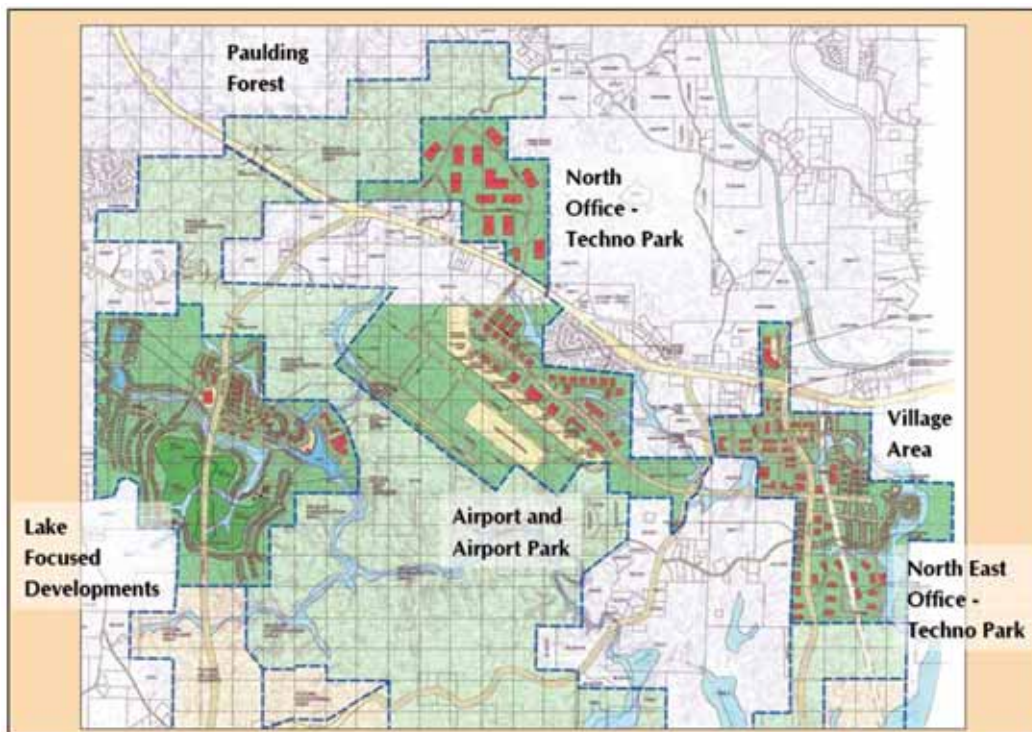
The plan is based on the "technopolis" concept pioneered by the Japanese, in which an integrated living, working and recreation environment is built with the latest techniques and incorporating the latest technologies. Living in harmony with nature, creating flexible work environments through design and technology, and eliminating the estimated one working month per year that the average Atlanta resident spends commuting to work all enable people to be more productive.

In addition, the initiative is designed as a public-private partnership, to be built in phases and to ensure financial and economic feasibility.

The development plan

Initial land use allocations in the plan include the following:

- **Air transportation cluster:** This component includes the air platform for general aviation and very light jet (VLJ) use, plus a mixed-use airport park. The 5,500-foot runway is currently under construction and is expected to open in October 2008. The county is currently seeking proposals from fixed-base operators to construct the terminal and hangars and operate the airport. Based upon early response from the local general aviation community, the county anticipates an immediate need for twenty hangars.
- **Office/research/technology clusters:** The county is accepting proposals from private partners to develop these employment nodes. Three such clusters are included in the master plan. They will take advantage of the latest in networking technology, New Generation Networks, which will be discussed in detail later.
 - **Village centers:** Private partners also are being sought for the development of village centers, which will serve as focal points for retail, service and community activities, using concepts of New Urbanism. The county plans for each village center to have its own unique character.
 - **Education cluster:** In proximity to a village center and adjoining residential areas, the plan includes an education cluster with a focus on higher technical education. The county is actively working toward attracting four-year and graduate degree programs, as well as expanding existing technical education in the education cluster.
- **Lake-focused cluster:** Surrounding Goldmine Lake, the plan calls for a resort, hotel and convention area, together with an active-adult living development specifically focused on enabling work from home.



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- **A master-planned community cluster:** This area is planned for low density, executive-style homes aimed at attracting world-class professionals and academics, also with a focus on enabling work from home.

The plan also includes a variety of transportation options. Principal vehicular roads are complemented by a network of trails for bicycle, pedestrian and equestrian movement, to provide easy access between individual clusters. In the past, the county worked with the PATH Foundation on the Silver Comet Trail, which currently runs from Smyrna, Georgia, through Paulding County and the Paulding Forest on to Alabama. The county will work with the PATH Foundation again to extend a trail spur from the Silver Comet and loop through the development clusters. When Alabama completes its segments, the trail will extend to Anniston and be over 100 miles long.

At full implementation, the development is expected to be home to a total population of 30,000, of which an estimated 60 percent will both live and work in the development area.

Technology

The development approach goes beyond the creation of a master-planned community to enable its inhabitants and those of surrounding counties to participate in an advanced technological environment. This facilitates working from home, within the techno-parks, or within incubators or “hives” – a new kind of clustered workspace – which are part of the program.

Foremost among the development’s technological characteristics is the use of New Generation Networks (NGN), also known as “next generation networking” or “broadband convergence networks.” NGN is a term that is increasingly being used to describe the latest state-of-the-art networking platforms, which bring together mobile and fixed telecommunications to allow a seamless flow of voice, video and data applications over a single network. This network can be accessed from virtually any location – home, office, car, park, village square or coffee shop.

This capability is driven by the use of fiber optics and fiber-to-the-premises (FTTP), as well as the use of distributed systems. Users will be able to access applications on an as-needed basis, rather than downloading them to personal computers, allowing residents to work from home more efficiently. The county is currently receiving proposals for a public-private partnership that will provide the technology infrastructure and operations.

The project’s air service also relies on the latest technology. It capitalizes on the Small Aircraft Transportation System (SATS), a joint research project between the FAA and NASA, along with local airports and aviation authorities. It is designed to facilitate transportation between small general aviation airports using small aircraft as an alternative to traditional airline travel. VJ and air taxis are expected to provide efficient and cost-effective air travel, and DayJet, a per-seat, on-demand jet service, has already committed to providing service.

Technology also is planned to contribute to the project’s environmental sustainability. One way is by creating a num-



The airport’s 5,500-foot runway is currently under construction and is expected to open in October 2008. A mixed-use park also will be built at the airport site.

ber of mini hydroelectric plants using existing streams. These mini hydro plants could create an electrical capacity of approximately two megawatts, helping meet the project’s objective of reducing per capita, non-renewable energy use by 30 percent.

Implementation

The county expects to complete the purchase of the 7,000-acre Paulding Forest within the next twelve months. By the end of 2007, development will begin on the first cluster, a business and technology park immediately adjacent to the airport. The next to be developed is likely to be a mixed-use cluster of approximately 1,000 acres. The county is currently preparing to construct transportation and technology infrastructure for these first two developments.

The plan for this initiative sets a new standard for a regionally driven, globally competitive development by:

- Achieving an integrated living, working and recreation program within an efficient and self-contained habitat;
- Maintaining over 50 percent of the land as a wildlife conservation area adjoining Paulding Forest;
- Providing the most advanced technologies and addressing transportation issues;
- Using “green” building materials and techniques to reduce energy consumption, and
- Providing a structure that enables the private and public sectors to partner to meet financial and economic goals.

Paulding County is optimistic about a future that builds on its natural beauty while creating jobs and improving the quality of life. It may just be a model that eventually contributes to the competitiveness of our country. ★★★

For more information, contact Blake Swafford, Interim Economic Development Director, at (770) 505-7700 or bswafford@paulding.gov.