




**Natural progression:** Richard McLeod, Woodstock's director of planning and economic development, says LCI grants laid the foundation for privately funded projects such as Hedgewood Properties' \$100 million Woodstock Downtown, which offers retail, office and residential space



# In Search Of Livability

Whether they call it “smart growth,” “new urbanism” or “mixed-use development,” communities are encouraging greenspace, walkability and convenience. An innovative grant program is helping make all that a reality.

By Katheryn Hayes Tucker  
Photos by Wayne Parham

As cities, suburbs and even small towns become more crowded, congested and polluted, real estate developers, urban planners, corporate leaders and elected officials – not to mention the rest of us – are increasingly preoccupied with the nearly magical combination of qualities that makes a community livable.

Ask a dozen people what livability is and you’ll likely get a dozen answers. Jobs, shorter commutes, clean air, less traffic would no doubt be on the list, as would availability of services – educational, medical, retail. Greenspace, sidewalks, beauty, recreational opportunities all factor in as well. Then there’s the all important and hard to define sense of community.

“Everybody wants space,” says Dean Schwanke of the Urban Land Institute, “but they also want community.”

Much attention is paid – nationally, regionally and locally – to thoughtful, planned development that incorporates these qualities in areas that have infrastructure to provide support without creating more sprawl. Phrases that describe this kind of development – smart growth, new urbanism, live-work-play environment, city-within-a-city – have become a familiar part of our language. Communities across the country are changing as development begins to reflect these livability values. And Atlanta, previously better known for traffic nightmares, has emerged as a leader of the movement.



**Repurposing:** City Manager Ken Elsberry says Dallas will use LCI funds to preserve its stately – but soon to be unused – courthouse and boost downtown retail and residential development

Schwanke, who is vice president for development trends and analysis at the Urban Land Institute in Washington, D.C., cites Atlantic Station, the new city-within-a-city development in Midtown Atlanta, as an example of the new urbanism spreading across the country. By placing high-density housing, jobs, stores and restaurants together in a pedestrian environment, such developments are addressing basic human needs for social interaction as well as shelter, food and services.

Increasingly, the Metro Atlanta area is finding a way to improve livability – not just in the city center but in smaller towns and suburbs as well. The bond uniting these scattered places is also drawing national and even international attention, chipping away at Atlanta's reputation for sprawl and smog and scoring critical points for smarter growth and cleaner air.

It's the Atlanta Regional Commission's Livable Centers Initiative, an ongoing 10-year, \$500 million grant program that uses federal funds to encourage communities to plan and develop higher-density, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly streetscapes that have the ability to lessen the length and frequency of car trips and thus reduce air pollution as well as traffic congestion.

With the addition of seven new communities this year, the total number of grants awarded since the Livable Communities Initiative (LCI) began in 2000 has risen to 75. A baker's dozen are in the city of Atlanta. The rest are spread around the surrounding 14 counties. Some are extremely urban, such as the City Center project in downtown Atlanta; others are suburban, such as projects in Acworth, Conyers and Griffin. All are slowly but surely emerging with improve-

ments ranging from simple streetscape and sidewalk renovations to city-within-a-city redevelopments.

"All of these are places where you could live, work and play," says Thomas L. Weyandt, Jr., ARC's director of comprehensive planning. "People are still using their car, but maybe less. Anything we can do to limit trips helps."

## Good Air Days

Although the LCI program has grown to embrace just about every urban quality of life issue – beautification, shortening commute time, adding green space, improving health through exercise – it started out all about the air. In the 1990s, Atlanta was getting skewered by federal environmental regulators and the national press for its traffic congestion, sprawl and smog. That's when the Atlanta Regional Commission's 39-member board got on the same page.

"If it hadn't been for the air quality crisis of the late 1990s, I'm not sure they would have agreed to it," says Weyandt, who has been with the ARC for six years and previously was the city of Atlanta's planning director. "People were just desperate to get out of that crisis."

## What Makes A Livable Community?

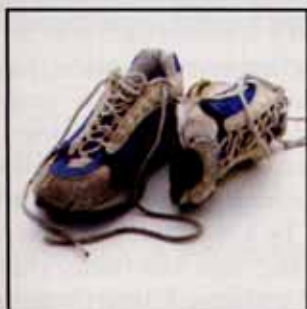
*According to the Atlanta Regional Commission, three main factors help create livability.*

**Multiple options:** Opportunities to do more than one thing in the community, such as live and work or live and shop or live and play – thus the term mixed use development. "It's not that you will never leave," says Rob LeBeau, an ARC principal planner who works with the Livable Communities Initiative. "It's just that you can do more than one thing there."

**Walkability:** Sidewalks, paths, cafes, coffee houses, parks, anything that gets people moving around on foot. "A place where you can actually get out and walk," LeBeau says, "allows people to have more interpersonal interaction." This single quality creates a sense of community and benefits personal health and air quality.

**Community involvement:** The ARC required local input, approval and support for planning and development. This helps ensure the effort's success and helped build a stronger sense of community. – *Katheryn Hayes Tucker*

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## ARC Livable Centers Initiative Grant Locations

**City of Atlanta:** Bankhead Station, Bolton Road, Buckhead, City Center, Greenbriar, Holmes Station, JSA McGill, Memorial, Midtown Alliance, Oakland/Lakewood, Upper Westside, West End, West Lake MARTA

**Cherokee County:** Bells Ferry, Canton, Holly Springs, Woodstock

**Clayton County:** Forest Park, Jonesboro, Morrow, Northwest Clayton, Riverdale

**Cobb County:** Acworth, Austell Road, Austell, Cumberland, Delk Road, Kennesaw, Mableton, Marietta, Powder Springs, Smyrna, Town Center

**DeKalb County:** Avondale Station, Brookhaven, Candler-Flat Shoals, Chamblee, Clarkston, Decatur, Doraville, Emory Village, Kensington, Lithonia, Northlake, Perimeter Center, Stone Mountain, Tucker

**Douglas County:** Douglasville

**Fayette County:** Fayetteville, Peachtree City

**Forsyth County:** McFarland

**Fulton County:** Chattahoochee Hill Country, East Point, Hapeville-Virginia Avenue, Hapeville-Main Street, Old National Highway, Roswell, Sandtown, Sandy Springs, Union City

**Gwinnett County:** Buford, Duluth, Gwinnett County Highway 78, Indian Trail-Lilburn, Lilburn, Norcross, Snellville, Suwanee

**Henry County:** McDonough, Stockbridge

**Newton County:** Highway 278

**Paulding County:** Dallas

**Rockdale County:** Conyers

**Spalding County:** Griffin

Source: Atlanta Regional Commission

The idea behind the Livable Communities Initiative was to fund grants for studies that would lead to plans for making improvements. Initially, the board committed to five years and \$5 million for studies. These communities would be required to match 20 percent of the grants with local investments. But the key was to use the plan as a requirement for earning much larger amounts of money in federal transportation funds.

ARC also approved \$350 million in priority funding for transportation projects. So while initial grants typically have been no more than \$100,000, recipients have used them to leverage millions in federal transportation funds.

The Midtown Alliance project in the city of Atlanta, for example, initially received a \$30,000 study grant in 2002. But that led to more than \$8 million in federal transportation funding. Likewise, the city of Duluth in Gwinnett County started with a grant for \$87,500 in 2000 that led to nearly \$5 million in federal transportation funds. And of course, with all this public planning and investment, the privately funded development logically follows in kind.

"The key link here is that in order to get the transportation funds, the community has to do the LCI plan and demonstrate that it has acted on its plan," Weyandt says.

And in one fell swoop, the ARC refuted years of criticism that its objectives fell too much on the voluntary side and that it lacked enforcement.

"It's an incentive based program," says ARC principal planner Rob LeBeau.

But, as another ARC planner, Julie Kovach, succinctly notes, "Money is a good incentive."

This exchange took place in a

conference room at the ARC's Courtland Street headquarters during a Power Point presentation of the LCI program that the planners developed to address requests for information from cities across the nation and even other countries. Atlanta's LCI has received national awards and, more impressively, has been copied by other cities.

Real validation came in 2004 when the ARC board voted to extend the LCI program for another five years with another \$5 million for studies and an additional \$150 million for priority transportation funding. The total commitment exceeds \$500 million and will run over a decade.

Weyandt recalls the ARC's decision to extend the project: "I thought we'd have to convince them. They said, 'This is a no-brainer because it's working. And by the way, add \$150 million.' For what began as sort of an iffy proposition, the demand has far outstripped the resources."

## Growing Demand

That means the ARC receives many more applications than the 10 or so it approves each year. And in areas where studies have been done and improvements made, again, demand is overwhelming.

"Creating this new urbanization is something that is very much desired by a significant portion of the public," says Sam Olens, chairman of both the Atlanta Regional Commission and the Cobb County Commission. "It's much better to put the development where the infrastructure can handle it. And people are coming. Our experience has been that the developers can sell the projects as fast as they can build them. The demand far exceeds supply."

Olens recalls one project in his own county, a mixed-use retail, office and housing development in

the Cumberland-Galleria area, where people were clamoring to buy the condos sight unseen. "Before the developer could open a sales office, people were knocking on the door of the construction trailer and asking to buy," Olens says. "Of course, consequently, they raised their prices."

Besides giving certain people the kind of development they want, the LCI program also has the advantage of bringing citizens together. "One of the biggest successful components of the program is the public involvement process," Olens says. "It brings the communities together. You cannot underestimate the value of it. If you do a really good job, then you eliminate opposition."

He recalls another Cobb County LCI for Franklin Road in Marietta where historically warring sides made peace. "For the first time in a long time, it got the business community and the home owners united in the process of how to improve their community."

Olens says he and his wife are talking about the possibility of moving out of their East Cobb subdivision to a new-urban style development once their children are out of school.

Even some families with school age children are attracted to the new style of development. Jo Marchildon is a real estate agent in the sales office of the new 32-acre, \$100 million retail, office and residential new urban development called Woodstock Downtown, which is under construction now across Main Street from City Hall and the strip of structures from the 1950s.

Marchildon has become so sold on the project herself that she is moving her family there – two teenage daughters included – out of their "nice, traditional neighborhood." She says her kids are excited about being able to walk to restaurants, shops, parks and friends' homes. "It's neat not to have to drive," Marchildon says. "This just kind of affords you a different lifestyle."

Woodstock Downtown is a privately funded project being built by Hedgewood Properties, the developer of the Vickery community in Forsyth County's Cumming, much praised for its environmentally respectful, green style of design.

"Not a single penny of a public dollar has been spent on the Woodstock Downtown project," says Richard McLeod, Woodstock's director of planning and economic

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**Up and running:** Jim Smith, executive director of Stone Mountain's Main Street program, shows plans for a LCI-funded streetscape project

development. But the crucial first step was the city of Woodstock's LCI study grant, \$93,750 approved in 2002. The city used that grant to make a plan and leverage \$1.25 million in transportation funds. Then the private development followed.

The LCI program was the critical step. "The grant allowed us to go through the planning process that resulted in a vibrant, downtown mixed use project," McLeod says.

Like Woodstock and plenty of other towns around Atlanta, Canton continues to grow. The trick is channeling the growth. So Canton is using its LCI grant to capitalize on its already successful downtown street improvements to spread the prosperity into an adjacent area that was once industrial.

"We're fortunate to be north of Atlanta. We are really not struggling to get people here. It's just getting the right kind of development," says Melanie Whitt, Canton's director of economic development. "It's just very difficult to work in an older part of the city – especially in a mill town. It's a difficult area, but it's the one that needed it most."

West of Atlanta in Paulding County, Dallas has already made streetscape improvements, including wider sidewalks with brickwork, benches, lamp posts and spaces that invite people to get out of their cars and stroll to shops and restaurants. Again, Dallas is using the LCI to advance its progress.

"We're right proud of the streetscape," says Ken Elsberry, who has been city manager in Dallas since 1979. What worries city officials is Paulding County's plans to move its offices out of the historic, red-brick, white-trimmed clock tower building in the center of downtown Dallas. So the city will use the LCI grant it won this year to create a plan to fill the void left by the county, re-use the courthouse and encourage retail and residential development downtown.

Already there are signs that the once rural town of Dallas is ready for new urban development. In addition to the new traditional subdivisions that cover the former farmland around the city, new intown neighborhoods are coming out of the ground. Not half a mile from Main Street is a new subdivision called McBee Street advertising "simple living in downtown Dallas." The wood, stone

and brick homes – with garages – are priced from the \$150s.

Elsberry says the LCI grant is "going to be very important" in enhancing the \$1.5 million worth of improvements that have already been made to downtown Dallas. No one expects Dallas to stop being a commuter town, but it is beginning to offer more options. "People cannot give up their commutes to work because they have to have employment," Elsberry says. "But we might be able to shorten their recreational trips."

## Attractive Alternative

Olens and others involved with the LCI program make a point of noting that most people are not going to move to new urban style developments, and that most new housing in Atlanta and Georgia will continue to be in traditional neighborhoods, subdivisions and even rural areas. But, they say, the LCI program offers a growing number of people an alternative.

"Not everyone wants that environment, and we recognize that," says Olens. "What we're doing is providing more choice."

The program is also providing a chance for town centers to evolve into more attractive and inviting spaces for everyone who comes in.


"I just think it's wonderful," says Jim Smith, executive director of Stone Mountain's Main Street program. "What they are providing is going to make a big difference in our community."

After winning an LCI grant in 2003, Stone Mountain got off to a slow start but is now "up and run-

ning" on a new streetscape project and planning to break ground by January, Smith says.

"We're making our downtown more livable." The plan includes new shrubbery, street lamps, brickwork, sidewalk pavers, benches and green space. "It couldn't have been done without the grant."

One thing planners and community leaders alike say repeatedly is that change takes time. So they are encouraged by the visible improvements happening all around the Atlanta metropolitan area.

The real impact of the livability movement won't be seen for many years, and will likely matter most to our children and grandchildren. If the effort truly succeeds, they will have cleaner air to breathe. 

### In A Nutshell

#### What, exactly, does the LCI program do?

- Encourages local governments to plan and implement strategies that link transportation improvements with land use development strategies.
- Provides planning grants to local governments and nonprofit organizations to prepare studies.
- Links local actions to transportation project funding.
- Takes advantage of existing infrastructure in centers and corridors to promote more dense mixed use development.  
– *Katheryn Hayes Tucker*