

Record of Public Meeting on 4.25.07

Jim Durrett opened the meeting by asking people to leave their e-mail addresses so they could receive updates about the project. He thanked everybody who had taken the survey for their participation. Kathie Gannon asked how many people were at the meeting for the first time – the majority of the audience raised their hands.

Alex Garvin then began his presentation by explaining that the first presentation had focused on the public realm – the streets, sidewalks, parks, and public spaces of a neighborhood. He stressed that the public realm includes both public property and privately-owned property that is open to the public.

He then thanked all the people who had taken the survey – a total of 175 people. The survey had revealed both what people liked about the neighborhood and what they did not. One good thing that many respondents stressed was its convenience – 87% could do their basic shopping within a 15-minute drive, and 75% could make their major purchases within 20 minutes. Respondents also emphasized the attractive trees, the schools, the religious institutions, and the friendly neighbors.

The negative aspects of the neighborhood focused largely on traffic and safety. When asked what was their greatest concern about the neighborhood, 90% mentioned traffic congestion, and another 68% mentioned traffic safety. 54% of the respondents said that they or someone they knew had been in a traffic accident in the past year.

The public realm was also a serious problem. 55% cited the lack of public parks, 47% the lack of places to walk, and 27% the lack of places to bike. 70% of people said they walk “a significant distance (over ¼ mile)” several times a week. The reasons they gave were: Exercise/Pleasure (91.3%), religious reasons (37.2%), and to run errands or shop (25.6%). But 53% said they don’t walk more often because they are concerned about safety.

Meanwhile, 87% said they bike less than once a month. Again, exercise and pleasure was the main reason to bike (89%), but 55% said they don’t bike more often because they are concerned about safety.

So, Mr. Garvin explained, he set out to understand why people had given these responses. To do that, he looked at the physical landscape in terms of three factors: i) Circulation, ii) the Public Realm, and iii) the Environment.

He began by looking at the regional context, pointing out that the study area sits at a hub for major destinations and traffic routes in the area. Commuters driving from Stone Mountain Parkway to Buckhead pass along North Druid Hills Road. Commuters driving from I-85 to Emory University come down North Druid Hills Road and Briarcliff Road. And people driving from Emory to Buckhead drive up Briarcliff Road and North Druid Hills road. As a result, this traffic between destinations creates tremendous traffic pressure on the intersection of North Druid Hills Road and Briarcliff Road. In addition, I-85 is a major barrier, and the fact that North Druid Hills Road is one of the few crossings of I-85 in the area creates even more traffic pressure.

Mr. Garvin then pointed out that the bus network passing through the study area offers relatively few direct connections to the major destinations of Buckhead, Lindbergh Station, and Emory University. Getting to most places requires at least one transfer, and the buses don't run very often. As a result, mass transit is an inconvenient way to get around.

Mr. Garvin then turned to the local network. He pointed out that there are only two major through-streets in the study area pass completely through. The rest of the streets are either streets that begin in the study area and lead elsewhere, or dead-end streets. By way of comparison, he showed the neighborhood just west of Piedmont Park and demonstrated that one reason that traffic is not so severe in that area is that the road connections are more extensive – there are five highway crossings, five major through-streets, and virtually all of the subordinate roads connect to each other, creating a complete network that provides multiple ways of access, and alternate routes in the case of an accident or a blockage. By contrast, the study area concentrates all its traffic on only two major routes, so any blockage causes a serious problem.

Mr. Garvin then turned to the local walking and biking network. The sidewalk network in the area, he pointed out, is sparse and discontinuous. In some places, a sidewalk begins on one side of the street, and then stops and restarts on the other side – often with no crosswalk to connect the two. In other places, there is no sidewalk, but there are so many people who wish to walk there that the grass is trampled away, leaving dirt trails.

The bike network is nonexistent – in the study area, there is a single bike lane that starts and stops within a short stretch of Briarcliff Road, and connects to nothing else. And even that one bike lane is not respected, as buses and cars often use the marked lane as extra driving room.

Mr. Garvin then turned his attention to the quality of the public realm. The first point he made was that the public realm largely consists of privately-owned public space – mostly parking lots. In fact, parking lots constitute 140 of the 688 acres of the study area – approximately 20%. In the built-up areas, excluding the single-family houses, parking lots constitute 33% of the land surface.

This has two consequences. The first is that much if not most, of the public realm, is not especially attractive. The other consequence is that the study area, like many of the areas around it, has a tremendous amount of impervious surfaces. During rain storms, these impervious surfaces create a great deal of run-off. As a result, the stream that runs through this area has become seriously eroded. Looking regionally, most of the major waterways that run through this area have been listed as 303D streams by the Georgia Environmental Protection Department, which means that they are considered to be polluted. The main culprit is urban run-off.

One other environmental factor that Mr. Garvin pointed to was the tree cover. The Atlanta area has a tremendous tree cover, but that tree cover can be deceptive – it creates the illusion of a great deal of green open space, when in fact most of those trees are on private property. In addition, the tree cover in the study area is largely concentrated in the southern portion, around the single-family houses and Kittredge Park. The commercially developed areas are mostly devoid of trees.

The one publicly-owned piece of the public realm is Kittredge Park. Mr. Garvin began his examination of park space by looking regionally at Kittredge Park and the other parks in the area, and by pointing out that there are connections between them. A network of walking and bicycling paths being proposed by the PATH foundation would connect many of these together and tie them into a regional network, but that network would not connect to the study area. Nor, for that matter, would the proposed Beltline trail. However, Mr. Garvin did point out that a number of creeks and streams do run through the region, including one in the study area, and that it may be possible to create connecting paths along these streams.

Mr. Garvin said that the recent acquisition of the additional land of Kittredge Park was a wonderful thing for the community, but the park has not been developed in ways that could make it a major, usable asset for the community. The property is currently difficult to reach, has only one small parking lot, and its only circulation trails are two old driveways that fail to connect, or to reach much of the property. In addition, there are signs of invasive species, such as wisteria, in the park, which will not go away unless they are tended to.

Mr. Garvin closed by listing seven conclusions:

1. Additional Development will require
 - Improved Intersection with I-85
 - Additional I-85 crossings
 - New Thru Street to Divert Traffic
 - Street Network to disperse local traffic
2. Pedestrian System is Inadequate
3. There should be regional path connections
4. Bicycle System is non-existent
5. There are currently no direct, convenient mass transit routes
6. Future Development requires a different approach to drainage, tree cover, and roofs
7. Kittredge Park needs to be made usable in terms of access, circulation, visibility

Questions and Responses

What did we miss?

1. Traffic is a problem, but an even bigger problem is that the traffic lights are poorly timed – they always break up traffic, and make it difficult to drive through.
Alex Garvin: True.

2. Appreciate the work that had been done, but thought that the study area was larger – that it would extend to include Clairmont and La Vista.

AG: Both true and untrue. True in the sense that one cannot understand the study area without understanding the broader context around it. But untrue in the sense that the contract designates a very specific study area, and the recommendations from this process must be focused on that smaller area.

3. Why is there a storm fence around Kittredge Park?

AG: I don't know.

Kathie Gannon: It was there when the county bought the property, and it hasn't been taken down yet.

4. If we're concerned about run-off, then the PATH foundation paths could be a problem – they are 12-foot wide bands of concrete, and that can create a lot of run-off.

AG: One thing we need work out, with the commissioners and with you, is a set of good standards that we can apply to this area, and that should include standards for bicycle paths and walking paths.

5. Executive Park seems like it's underused. Why doesn't Sembler build there instead of on the Housing Authority site and the school site?

AG: The reason Sembler doesn't is because they don't own it. But your point is right – the owner of Executive Park may want to redevelop that property. If so, they will present their plans at our fourth meeting.

6. This looks like it is shaping up to be an ambitious plan. If that is the case, we have to think about where we are going to draw the funding from if we are going to implement these ideas.

AG: That's true. One thing we will do as part of our work is to put price tags on the projects that we identify, and we will identify realistic potential funding sources. I think that's an essential step to creating concrete results on the landscape.

7. Kittredge Park has been sitting as it is for a while, and nothing has been done. We're concerned that if it just sits like that, it may get developed by somebody.

AG: I'm glad you mentioned Kittredge Park, because it raises my next question.

What would you like to see done with Kittredge Park?

8. The road back there in Kittredge Park is narrow and scraggly and doesn't feel safe. It's dark at night. Part of the site is a flood plain – it's pretty uninviting. And there isn't enough parking.

AG: OK, so you're saying that you'd like 1) a place for cars to park, 2) to be able to move through the park, and 3) better lighting. Incidentally, if you come to this area from the outside, it's very hard to get to the park, or to even know it's there.

9. (to audience) How many people here know how to get to the park? [About half the people present raise their hands.]

10. Couldn't we just look at Kittredge Park as a green space and just leave it alone as nature?

AG: I think that's a balance we're going to have to figure out. Some people will want to leave the park as untouched as possible, and some will want more active activities there. But I do think it's possible for a park to be green and natural while still being usable by people.

11. I think we need to be thinking about how we can create a healthy living environment. We need to think about trees and foliage, about clean air to breathe and good drainage. And I think we have to talk about ways to get rid of the car.

AG: There are some things I can do, and some things I can't do. One of the things I can't do is change America's love affair with the automobile. And I can't tell you to get rid of your cars – if I came down here and told you to do that, you would send me home. But I think a lot of what you say is things we can do. We can bring in trees, for example. There's no reason a parking lot can't have trees. There's no reason why paths and sidewalks can't have shade. And I think that things like that would make for a much healthier living environment.

12. What you're talking about – with parks and roads – sounds very nice, but do we have the public funds to do this?

AG: If not now, when? In 2020? In 2050?

13. How will we pay for this?

AG: Right now, I don't know – that's something we will have to figure out, and we will come back with a funding plan. There also may be ways to do some of the things we're talking about – relieve traffic, provide more usable park space and sidewalks – that don't require us to buy a ton of new land.

14. I don't think the stability of these streams is an issue except where there is development.

AG: I don't think that's true. If you go out and look at these streams, they are becoming seriously eroded, and they are not being taken care of.

15. I've visited WD Thompson Park, and they have a number of very nice features – tennis courts, dog runs, etc. Could Kittredge Park be like that?

AG: Going back to the earlier question, some people will agree with you, some won't. Also, remember that part of Kittredge Park was bought with restrictions on the type of activity you can have there.

16. Should you do a land use study as part of your analysis?

AG: You're right. We will do that.

17. I am a homeowner whose home backs up to Kittredge Park. I'm concerned about the way that changes to the park could affect us – more sound, more light, increased population flows. I think we should look at creating a buffer between park activities and homes around it. Also, that land was bought with Georgia Greenspace money, which includes restrictions on how the land can be used.

18. What is going to happen to Adams Stadium? That's an important facility for this community.

AG: That's something we have to deal with. The school board presumably has a scheme for replacing it if they sell it, but I don't know what their plans are.

19. Which areas have been bought by developers and will be redeveloped?

AG: Executive Park, as someone has pointed out, is out of date, and I expect that they will come to the fourth meeting and talk about their plans for it. A developer has just bought the hotel tower up by the I-85 interchange. And of course, the Sembler plan you all know about.

20. What about the church at the corner of North Druid Hills Road and Briarcliff Road?

Jeff Rader: That has been bought by a developer, and it's already zoned C-1, general commercial.

21. I've lived in this area for several years, and I didn't know about Kittredge Park until tonight. I'm concerned about bums and hobos in the area – I don't feel safe after dark. But I think it might be good if a developer were to build something higher class. In the area around Atlantic Station, property values went up after the project was built and opened.

22. Who owns the school property and the housing authority property?

JR: The school property is owned by the DeKalb school board, and the housing authority property was controlled by the DeKalb housing board, but I believe it has now been bought by Sembler. The only land that the county commission controls are the public parks and the roads – and even some of the roads belong to Georgia DOT. The power that we do have is the power to entitle development. This property currently has a low entitlement, but some parts of it are entitled for more development than is there now.

23. Is Kittredge Park for sale?

JR: No, the parkland is not up for redevelopment. The Audubon property is restricted to passive use. The part currently called Kittredge Park can be used for active recreation. But it won't be developed or sold.

24. Would it be of benefit to invite the members of the Board of Education to one of these meetings?

Kathie Gannon: We do invite them to these meetings. But maybe you should invite them as well and let them know how important it is to you that they be here.

25. What is MARTA's role in all this?

Marvin Tolliver (of MARTA): MARTA wants to help, but its role has not yet been defined.

26. I don't quite understand how this county works. You've got the county commission saying one thing, and then the school board controls another thing, and the commissioners can't do anything about it. It doesn't make sense.

27. How many developers are attending these meetings? I'm concerned about what these residential developers are doing in this area – they're all building these dead-end developments that are dumping out onto our streets.

JR: A lot of this area has been developed, and a lot of it could be developed better, instead of this death by a thousand cul-de-sacs. We have to make it more conducive for private property owners to do things that are in the public interest.

28. I'd like to encourage people to do more walking. And I think we could make that possibly by creating walking paths between streets. People do that already, taking shortcuts, but I think if we added paths, we could make it much safer.

29. There's a sign out in front of the old church at the corner of North Druid Hills Road and Briarcliff Road advertising for 9000 square feet of retail. But there are large, beautiful old oak trees on that property. Those developers shouldn't be allowed to take down those trees.

30. How did we get into thinking that every corner of every intersection needs to be high-intensity commercial development? The Kittredge Park site is 30 acres, the school board site is another 40 acres. Why not take a positive, proactive approach to this area, and turn this corner into the Parks Central of DeKalb County?

31. I saw two signs up asking for zoning reallocations at Briarcliff and La Vista. I think that while this process is going on, there should be a moratorium on development.

KG: Those signs mean that there is going to be a meeting on the rezoning. It doesn't mean that anything has happened yet.

32. It sounds like it's already been decided that there will be development here – it appears to me that it's a done deal. If we get hi-rise development around here, there's going to be less green space.

JR: We – the county commission – don't own this property. The school board does. And their resources are all legally committed to educating children. They couldn't turn this property into a park if they wanted to. And they've suggested that this

property is a surplus resource. If so, then they will dispose it, take those funds, and plow them back into education.

It appears that this property may be in play, and that the cost is around \$50 million. If the county commission had that money, we could consider buying this property and turning it into a park. The question is, would it be worth it to spend all that money, and to spend it in this part of the county?

The next question is zoning – we do entitle the property. So then, what is a viable, legally defensible zoning? And the courts would have something to say – they might hold that the current zoning is not reasonable, given the development in the area, and require that the property be rezoned.

KG: All these properties around here are being redeveloped – it's already been happening, and it's happening right now. What we're trying to do is to create a context around here for that development. But the people who develop these properties, they don't need to go through this process. They already have the legal right to develop.

Additional Announcements

Jeff Rader announced to the audience that a website for the project was under development, and would soon open at the address

<http://briarcliffnorthdruidhills.org>.