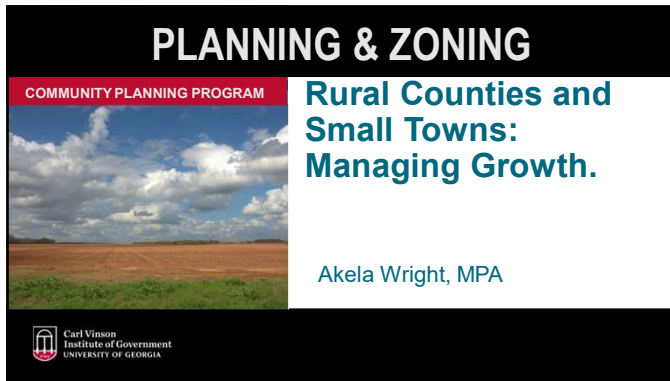




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Highlights

- Identity is not nostalgia—it's a living foundation for sustainable decision-making.
- Good planning grows from a deep sense of place.
- By fostering these connections, a sense of place helps maintain the uniqueness of a community, ensuring they remain vibrant and meaningful to those who live there.
- Empowerment through community involvement leads to stronger, more resilient neighborhoods & communities.
- *The rest of the day is about protecting, supporting, and evolving identity with integrity.*



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Drivers of Change

Georgia Statistics



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Rural to Small-Town Continuum

Rural: An area dominated by open land—farms, forests, and fields—with very few buildings, widely spaced homes, narrow roads, and limited public services



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Rural to Small-Town Continuum

Suburbanizing

Development is steadily increasing: wooded or farming landscapes are transforming into housing subdivisions, commercial strips, and wider roads; open views are becoming fragmented, and traffic is noticeably rising



7

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Rural to Small-Town Continuum

Small-Town

A compact, walkable village or town with a recognizable “center”—often featuring a main street, local shops, civic buildings, and homes all within a short walk. There’s a clear boundary where the town meets surrounding rural areas.



8

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Rural to Small-Town Continuum

Exurban Fringe

Low-density residential areas beyond established suburbs and small towns, often within commuting distance of a city; Large-lot homes, hobby farms, and a semi-rural feel, despite being shaped by development.



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Major Drivers of Change in Rural & Small-Town Georgia

- Population growth & metro spillover (bedroom communities, growth corridors).
- Demographic transitions (aging populations, retirees, culturally different populations).



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Georgia’s growth in 2010s outpaced national average

- Georgia was the 13th fastest growing state.
- Georgia was one of only four states to exhibit a population increase of more than 1 million people.



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Major Drivers of Change in Rural & Small-Town Georgia

- Economic shifts & industrial development causing land use shifts, population influx, housing demands (decline of small-scale farming, digital economy).
- Housing demand & affordability pressures (high demand, low supply).
- Environmental pressures (flooding, drought, storm events challenging infrastructure & farming patterns).
- Loss of farmland & natural resources.



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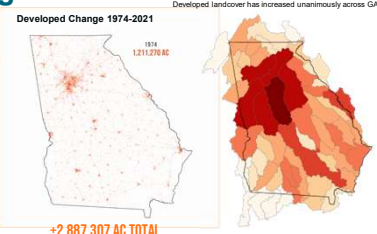
Low intensity development is driving landcover change

Since 1974, Georgia's developed landcover grew by **~2.9 million acres**, most of it low-intensity in character.

A thoughtful approach to housing our growing population is essential to land conservation.

Development Change (by HUC8) 1974-2016
Developed landcover has increased unanimously across GA

Developed Change 1974-2021



1974
1,211,270 AC

+2,887,307 AC TOTAL

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Major Drivers of Change in Rural & Small-Town Georgia

- Infrastructure investment & gaps (broadband, bypasses, growth faster than local capacity).
- State & federal policy changes impact transportation, economic development.
- Tourism & amenity migration (attracts tourists & 2nd-home buyers, pressure on housing, infrastructure, local character).
- Local capacity & governance challenges (staff shortages, limited budgets causing difficulties in guiding growth).

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Highlights

To sustain rural and small-town identity, local governments must actively:

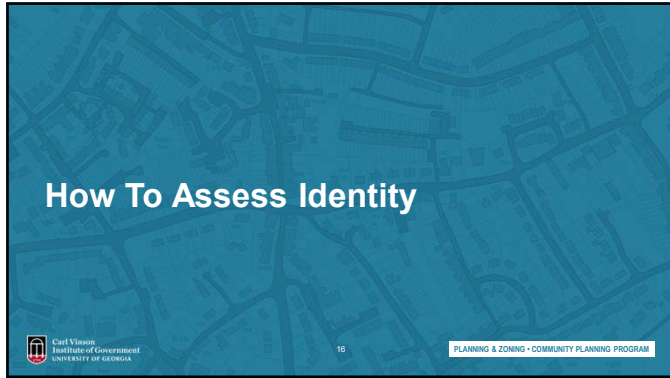
- Recognize these drivers.
- Plan for resilience and intentional growth.
- Engage communities as partners in shaping their own future.

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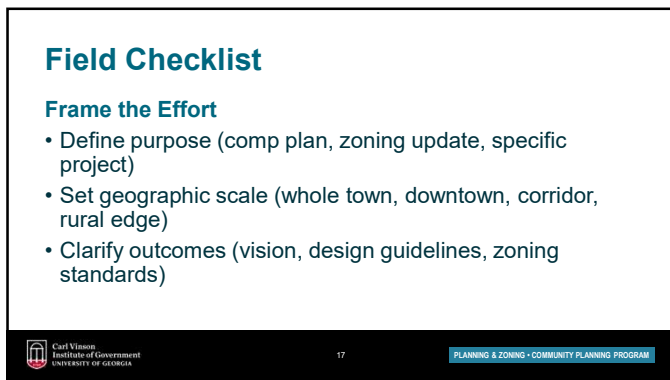
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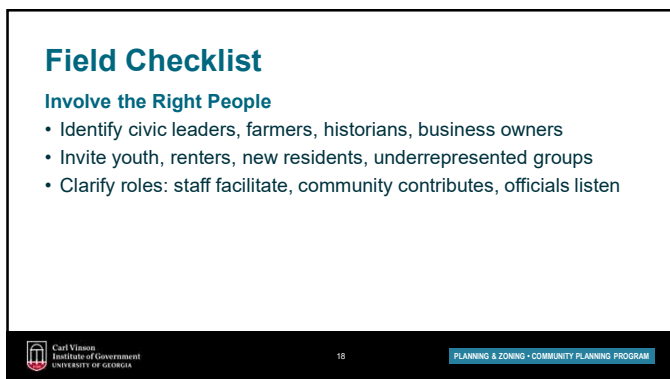
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Field Checklist

Choose Engagement Methods

- Farmers' market or library pop-ups
- Walking/driving tours of key places
- Story-sharing (events, interviews, surveys)
- Maps/photos for residents to mark what matters

Document Character

- Map assets (farmland, main street, historic sites, scenic views)
- Take photos of representative buildings/landscapes
- Note cultural traditions/events/industries
- Record pressures (growth, infrastructure, land loss, sprawl)

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Field Checklist

Validate Findings

- Share draft results at open house/town hall/online survey
- Ask: "Does this reflect our identity? What's missing?"
- Adjust findings to reflect majority + minority perspectives

Translate into Tools

- Insert findings into comp plan goals & vision
- Align zoning/subdivision standards (clustering, open space, design)
- Create design or corridor guidelines (edges, gateways, downtowns)

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Field Checklist

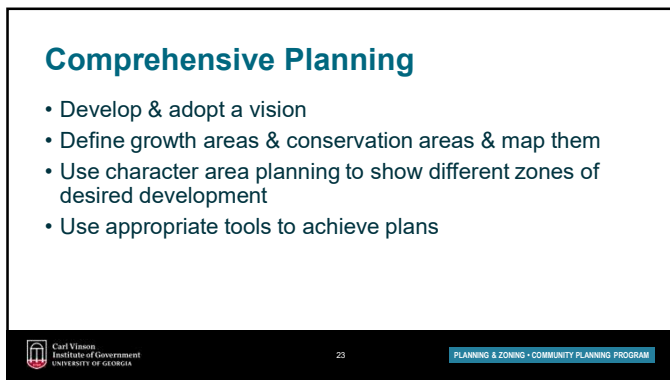
Keep Identity Alive

- Publish results online & in public spaces
- Revisit assessment with each plan update
- Require new development to show how it respects identity

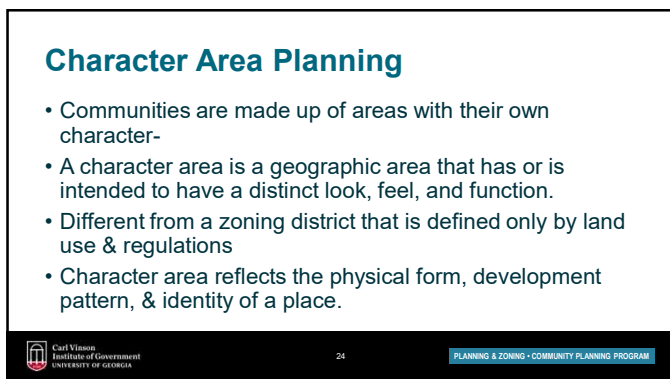
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Character Area Planning

- **Identity-based:** how it looks, feels, architecture, streetscape, open space, density & cultural/historic context.
- **Vision-oriented:** articulates what the desired future for that area is, not solely what it is today.
- **Policy guidance:** each area has recommended land uses, development patterns, design principles.
- **Implementation tools:** help refine zoning, design guidelines, infrastructure priorities, and growth management strategies.

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Considerations: Housing Variety

- Encourage a range of housing types (cottages, townhomes, accessory dwelling units) in small towns to avoid monoculture subdivisions.
- Tie density bonuses to open space protection, historic preservation, or mixed-use development.

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Considerations: Political & Administrative Support

- Educate elected officials on how character-based planning supports tax base, tourism, and community quality of life.
- Build coalitions with farmers, business owners, and civic groups so regulations are seen as **enabling growth with identity**, not just restrictions.
- Provide clear, user-friendly codes — avoid overly technical ordinances that discourage investment in the desired places.

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Stewardship of Community Identity

- **Regional & interjurisdictional coordination**
 - Joint land use planning & unified development ordinances
 - Intergovernmental agreements
 - Annexation & growth agreements
- **Why is this important?**
 - Implications of constitutional authority to plan & zone.
 - Counties cannot do this alone; cities cannot do this alone.

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Growth as Fire (Campfire as Blue Polka Dot)



29

Density

- Density is the number of developed units in a specific area of land.
- Density measures the intensity of a given land use and it is subject to zoning regulations.
- *Not an accurate measure of impact of development.*

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Density as Blunt Instrument

- Density by itself is a blunt, context-free number.
- It doesn't capture:
 - Sense of place or design quality
 - Travel behavior
 - Infrastructure efficiency
 - Environmental footprint
 - Fiscal sustainability



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Density as Efficiency & Choice

- Density doesn't mean high-rises.
- It means allowing more houses on the same land footprint especially near existing services.
- It gives local people more housing options rather than pushing them to neighboring counties.
- **Controlled density** is how a county keeps its rural land rural. You grow compactly in the right places so the rest can stay open.

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Density Pays the Bills

- Cost of services per household drops dramatically in more compact areas.
- American Farmland Trust's "Cost of Community Services" studies consistently show that residential sprawl costs more than it brings in, while farmland and compact development have stronger fiscal returns.
- Higher density near existing infrastructure stretches your capital investment. Every extra house on a sewer line that already exists lowers the per-user cost.

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Density as Stewardship

- It's how we protect farmland, balance our budget, and keep our communities alive.
- When we build the 'campfire' instead of the 'brushfire,' we make sure growth strengthens what's already working-- instead of spreading us too thin.

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Managing Growth with Confidence

- Growth isn't waiting for us to feel ready.
- The choice isn't whether to grow, but how to shape it.
- The framework of your comprehensive plan and the policies and regulations to implement it can give you control and predictability
- —if you use it consistently and trust the process you've built.

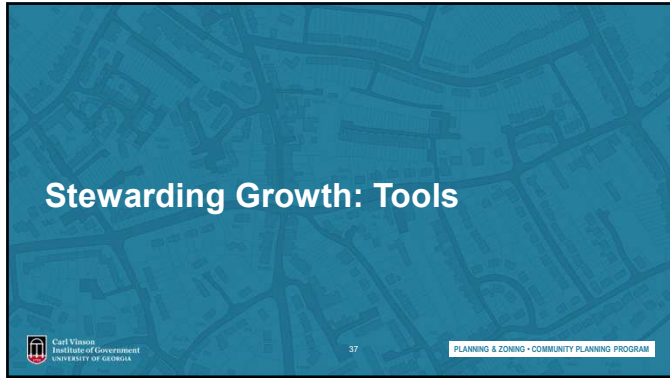


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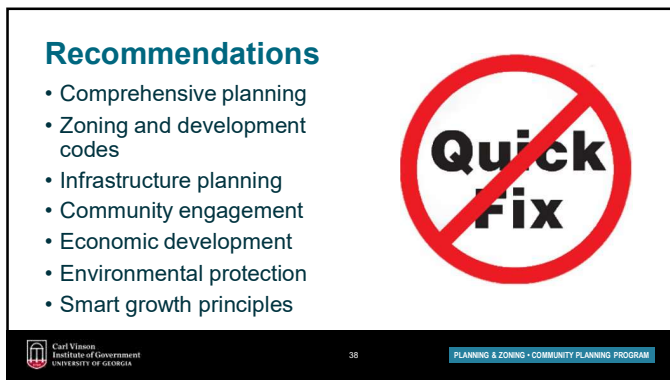
Highlights

- The context of rural to urban matters.
- The tools you use must match local pressure and capacity.
- Protecting rural identity is not anti-growth, but it is anti-spread.

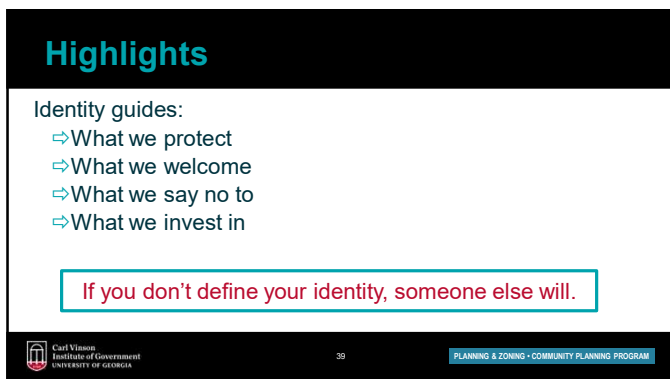
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Highlights

What's at stake?

- Sprawl eating farmland.
- Chain stores replacing downtowns.
- Subdivision patterns erasing rural landscape

Identity is what you stand to lose if you don't plan.

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Highlights

- Good planning grows from a deep sense of place.
- Identity is not about resisting change:
 - It's about shaping it
 - It's about evolving identity with integrity

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THANK YOU!

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