

## Smart Growth Audit

### What is it?

The smart growth audit is designed to identify local land use requirements that may be presenting barriers to quality growth type development. By comprehensively comparing your community's existing land use requirements with commonly recognized best practices for quality growth, the audit will help point out local requirements that should be changed to ensure that your community is receptive to quality growth development.

### How to do it

1. **Choose an auditor.** The audit should be conducted by independent outside experts, since local planning staff is unlikely to see the limitations of requirements they work with on a day-to-day basis. Issues to consider when choosing an auditor include:
  - Experience and qualifications. Ideally, the auditor should be a planner who is certified by the AICP (American Institute of Certified Planners).
  - Ability to conduct an objective evaluation.
  - Level of familiarity with unique needs of your community.
2. **Conduct the audit.** Before initiating the audit, negotiate a detailed agreement with the auditor that specifies the process to be followed and the deliverables to result from the audit. At minimum, the audit should included the following:
  - Catalogue of all local land use requirements, including plans, policies, regulations, programs, and review processes.
  - Assessment of the permitting process to determine where it is a barrier to quality growth.
  - Identification of specific goals and quality growth best practices the community wishes to promote.
  - Identification of any regional or state planning requirements or goals that must be addressed in the local land use requirements.
  - Comprehensive listing of inconsistencies or problems found in the current land use requirements, design regulations, and permitting requirements.
  - Evaluation of alternative remedies for identified problems.
  - Recommended strategy for amending local land use requirements to address audit findings.

#### What the Audit May Reveal

Common outcomes identified in an smart growth audit include:

*Over-reliance on large lots* - Large lot requirements encourage sprawl development and block many creative solutions for preserving open space, such as conservation subdivisions. It also makes it difficult for developers to offer affordable housing options. Refer to GQGP quality growth tool: Flexible

Subdivision Regulations for help in addressing this problem.

*Over-reliance on use restrictions* - Relying on single use districts (as with conventional zoning) to manage local land uses will prevent developers from implementing creative design ideas that involve mix of land uses. An alternative approach is to add provisions for planned unit developments (refer to GQGP quality growth tool: Planned Unit Developments) or mixed-use districts (refer to GQGP quality growth tool: Mixed-Use Zoning) to your local land use regulations.

*Prohibition of accessory uses* - Many zoning ordinances allow only one single family home per lot in most areas zoned for housing. This impedes practical and affordable accessory housing options such as granny flats, in-law suites, carriage houses, and other non-obtrusive styles.

*Inappropriate street design standards* - Most street design standards are intended to maximize the speed and convenience of automobile travel. Unfortunately, streets designed with this goal in mind are dangerous to pedestrian and bicycle travelers. Unnecessarily wide streets have a negative impact on water quality by increasing the amount of impervious surface. These problems can be addressed through flexible street design standards (refer to GQGP quality growth tool: Flexible Street Design Standards). For example, standards can be based on a certain level of activity such as a narrow standard for streets accessing fewer than 10 homes.

*Excessive parking requirements* - Excessive minimum parking requirements result in too many large parking lots that are almost never fully utilized. These large lots also increase storm water runoff, further damaging water quality. There are a number of creative alternatives (refer to GQGP quality growth tool: Flexible Parking Standards) for reducing the amount of land dedicated to parking without inconveniencing automobile users.

*Imbalance in supply and demand* - There may be far too much land zoned for commercial and industrial uses for the market to absorb.

*Unclear requirements* - Existing regulations may be vague and difficult to understand by anyone except the local planning staff. If this is the case, your local government may wish to adopt measures to clarify its land use regulations (refer to GQGP quality growth tool: Streamlined Development Permitting).

- 3. Implement audit recommendations.** Consider the audit results in identifying needed changes to local land use requirements. Be sure to involve key stakeholders, following the requirements of the Zoning Procedures Law (O.C.G.A. 36-66-4) before adoption of any new or amended development regulations.

4. **Spread the word.** Develop a brochure or use other media to inform the public about the new land use requirements and how to take advantage of them.

**Things to consider before using this tool**

- The smart growth audit should not be a one-time exercise. Ideally, it could be conducted in conjunction with major comprehensive plan updates, required every ten years under the Georgia Planning Act (O.C.G.A. 50-8-1). The audit would prove useful in identifying revisions of local land use requirements needed to guarantee consistency with the comprehensive plan.
- Be sure to adhere to any relevant procurement laws when selecting the auditor.
- Involve the development community upfront. Developers can help identify barriers to quality growth and can help you publicize any new development options.

## Additional Information on Reducing Barriers to Quality Growth

### Background

- Could the interesting older neighborhoods or districts in your community have been built under your current development regulations?
- Do developers in your community complain about unnecessary regulatory barriers and hurdles when attempting to implement alternative types of development projects?
- Does your community desire, but has yet to attract, "new urbanism" style development like mixed use projects, walkable commercial centers, and traditional neighborhood developments?
- Is the new development in your community less attractive than what was built a few generations ago?

If your community is like the typical Georgia city or county, outdated or inflexible local land use regulations may inadvertently be preventing high quality, innovative new development projects from locating in your area. There are good reasons why this situation is not desirable:

- **Loss of community character.** Chances are good that your local development regulations do not permit (or encourage) traditional development patterns of your community to be emulated in new developments. The traditional charm of your community - the type of place where people walked to work, met their neighbors at the corner drugstore, or bicycled to the nearest park - will continue to disappear as each new development project is approved.
- **Excessive land consumption.** Typical land use regulations specify minimum lot sizes, street width and parking requirements that inadvertently put more distance between neighbors and cause excessive amounts of land to be paved over for automobiles. These spread-out development patterns, commonly referred to as "urban sprawl," tend to be more expensive for your local government to serve with public facilities such as water and sewer lines. Large lot sizes also prevent developers from providing affordable, higher-density housing options in your community and can also increase the purchase prices of homes.
- **Changing development markets.** Populations are changing as citizens live longer, as single parent households increase, as fewer married couples have children, and as more people live alone. These changes are fueling a demand for a greater range of choices in where people live and locate businesses. More people these days want to live and work in traditional style neighborhoods or commercial centers. If your local development codes limit

the range of development options in your community, developers will not be able to respond effectively to these market changes.