Introduction - A Path to the Future

Introduction

A Path to the Future is a plan. It is not a document intended to take up residence on a shelf and collect dust; it IS an essential tool for guiding Shelby County into the 21st Century. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, defines a plan as "a method for achieving an end", and that is precisely what is intended by this plan. Though Shelby County has been evolving through various stages of traditional planning activities over the better part of the last decade, until now there has not been a clear vision, an end, towards which to focus those planning activities.

American Village - Highway 119, Montvallo - 4th of July

Our vision for Shelby County is as "A Community of Communities". Rather than a shapeless, formless aggregation of unconnected and unrelated subdivisions, strip malls and congested highways, we see Shelby County as a regional community made up of many unique cities, towns, neighborhoods, villages, and hamlets, each place with its own identity. In order to function as a community, such a place must:

✦ be organized around a central activity core, (a traditional town square, courthouse and/or associated commercial services, a neighborhood school or church, a general store at rural crossroads)

✦ provide an inter-connected transportation system by which it's residents can interact with each other and the center by means other than the automobile

✦ engender itself to the development of a sense of place and community, and the consequent formation of close knit communities whose residents live, work, and play in that community.

Shelby County's Comprehensive Plan, A Path to the Future, focuses on a vision of this county as a Community of Communities. Communities of people and ecosystems and their interactions are the fundamental building blocks of A Path to the Future. At the heart of this vision is the concept that a pattern of land development based on the traditional neighborhood -- focused on a neighborhood center providing for the daily needs of its residents internally -- solves many of the problems of growth management facing communities today. It also creates and/or reinforces the "sense of place" necessary for people to feel truly connected to their community.

SportsFirst 1996 Fields Soccer Complex - Highway 280 & County Road 41

The County and its communities are interrelated parts of a whole, dependent upon the prosperity and self sufficiency of each part for optimal performance

by the whole. By redirecting new development into compact "communities of place", following the traditional neighborhood pattern, it is Shelby County's intention that its residents achieve a high quality of life. This plan directs the County down a path to a future comprised of a community of walkable, livable towns, neighborhoods and villages. This traditional neighborhood model provides the most services possible to the greatest number of people, within a practical walking distance. It can be applied in a range of contexts and scales, from rural crossroads or hamlets consisting of a small clusters of residents focused on a square, church or general store, to a denser more urban pattern of neighborhoods integrated via well connected network of streets and blocks.

Background

Over the past several decades, Shelby County has experienced rapid growth as suburban expansion spilled southward from Jefferson County. During this time, Shelby County has seen significant swaths of its historically rural and agricultural landscape converted into subdivisions and highway commercial development. As suburban development continues to sprawl into any and all available land, the problems associated with unplanned and uncontrolled growth mounts. This stresses and strains local governments' ability to provide the necessary services required to support the new growth in a timely and cost effective manor.

1982 Special Enabling Legislation

In 1982, Shelby County successfully pushed special enabling legislation through the State Legislature, providing the County with some unique tools for managing growth. The legislation designated the Shelby County Planning Commission as the decision making body for implementation of subdivision and zoning regulations as adopted by the Shelby County Commission. The enabling legislation only allows for zoning to be initiated in unincorporated voting districts (beats) where a majority vote was received after a referendum was called following a petition process.

1996 Shelby County General Development Plan (GDP)

By the mid-1990s, as the rapid pace of growth continued, problems related to the proliferation of sprawl had reached a sufficient level of concern to develop and adopt, in 1996, the Shelby County General Development Plan (GDP) that outlined a general development strategy in five policy elements. The plan intended to provide policy guidance for day to day decision making, regarding the orderly and efficient growth in Shelby County. While it included some proactive policies, the GDP was generally reactive in nature, focused on managing development.

Overall, it can be said that the GDP was a worthwhile effort. Largely due to the County's limited regulatory authority, little if any effective growth management was achieved, though it is likely that land development conditions would be worse if the County had not adopted the GDP. Higher profile outgrowths of the plan, such as the County's active Park and Recreation facilities development program, and the establishment and successes of the Shelby County Economic & Industrial Development Authority (SCEIDA), the Shelby County Airport, and Shelby West Corporate Park, have raised the credibility of planning, paving the way for this more ambitious plan.

Strengths & Weaknesses of 96 Plan

The 96 Plan is organized into five goal areas: Growth and Development, Industry and Agriculture, Transportation and Utilities, Parks and Recreation, and Environment and Conservation. The following summaries highlight the general disposition of those goal areas.

In the area of Growth and Development, the 96 Plan was largely ineffective. Directives intended to better manage growth were not achieved largely due to the lim-

ited land use controls available to the County. However, the 96 Plan did identify the need to expand the County's growth management and long range planning capability, laying the groundwork for the eventual development and implementation of *Paths to the Future*. In fact, it can be said that the process of critical thinking and goal-setting which resulted in development of the 96 Plan, kindled a greater awareness of the need to plan for growth. As a direct result of this attitude shift towards effective planning, a number of public facilities and projects have been undertaken since adoption of the 96 Plan, including the expansion of the Columbiana Courthouse complex and construction of the Community Services Building in Pelham; the development and construction of several law enforcement related facilities on McDow Road in Columbiana that includes the Sheriff's Training Facility & Firing Range Complex, the new County Jail & Sheriff's Operations Center, as well as new juvenile detention, adult work release, and animal services facilities; the rehabilitation of the County Exhibition Center in Columbiana; and a new water plant currently under development near Wilsonville.

Fun Go Holler Park - Pelham - Racquet Club Parkway, County Road 52

The establishment and development of SCEIDA, and the Shelby West Corporate Park, are notable outgrowths of the 96 Plan. The relative effectiveness of these activities, involving such techniques as incentives and partnering foreshadow many of the tools to be employed in the implementation of this plan. On the agricultural side of this goal area, very little was accomplished.

Transportation and utilities development has also taken a reactive approach to developments' needs, responding to approved development as it comes through the process. Policies intended to address water and sewer as a growth management tool and the development of transportation plans, failed to make much headway. Other policies focusing on development support, traffic management and regional transportation planning get mixed reviews.

Perhaps the GDP's most successful goal area is the Parks and Recreation area. This package of policies and strategies set out an ambitious program for developing a countywide park system, including facilities at every scale from regional to neighborhood. The program has been very successful, and continues to be developed. Again, the high visibility of successes in this area has helped advance the overall credibility of planning as a mechanism to affect change.

Finally, in the area of Environment and Conservation, no significant progress has been made, again, due largely to a lack of local authority and expertise in this area. On the other hand, the continued degradation of ecosystems and resources due to the lack of conservation programs or poorly planned development promises to raise awareness of the need to do something, eventually, and this plan *is* a forum for doing something. More positively, though, the effective planning and management of the County landfill near Columbiana, development of a solid waste management plan and an increasingly greater willingness to restrict land alteration practices, are attributable to the in-

creased planning mind-set that emerged from the development process of the 96 Plan.

Finally, it should be reasserted that the 1996 GDP was a policy plan. It had no connection, intended or otherwise, to any map-based land use plan that could facilitate greater connections and control over the pattern of land development. The lack of such direct connection to land and property must certainly be considered a weakness of this plan.

Cooperative Development Program and the Committee of 19

An outgrowth of the 1996 GDP, was a program called the Cooperative Development Program (CDP). Developed for the Shelby County Commission, the CDP was intended to help better manage and coordinate cooperative public investment capital needs of our growing County. The findings of this program stated that the capital needs identified for unincorporated and incorporated areas far exceeded the County's capability to deal with them. This indicates that a more in-depth strategy is needed to guide decisions affecting the needs and demands of the fastest growing county in the State.

As an outgrowth of the CDP, the Shelby County Commission created the Committee of 19 in 1999. This citizens group was charged with considering issues surrounding growth in the County. A key consideration of the group was the impact of growth on the cost of providing expected levels of public services and facilities. The Committee's report of June, 2000, included a broad range of recommendations, among which was a recommendation that the County update and expand the 1996 GDP in to a new Shelby County Comprehensive Plan. This plan was proposed to be more aggressive in seeking involvement from all municipalities and entities having a stake in the development of Shelby County. It must also be more specific and comprehensive in terms of land development, education, and public facilities and services.

Citizens and Planners working together

The Role of Public Involvement in Defining Community Issues

Citizen participation is a key element in shaping the vision of a plan. Consequently, a great deal of effort was expended to provide all citizens of Shelby County the opportunity to participate in this process of developing *A Path to the Future*.

The concept of citizens participating in public decision making is a fundamental aspect of our democratic system. While government officials are elected to represent the citizens, they also need to be informed by and interact with the public on an ongoing basis if their representation is to be meaningful and relevant.

Public participation ensures that:

- timely, complete and simple information reaches the public;
- those who want to participate are given adequate opportunity, and
- a robust and open debate on public policy issues occurs

Effective citizen participation produces better results by engaging the knowledge, background, and experience of a diverse population and by allocating part of the responsibility for creating and expediting decisions to the citizens. Therefore, to ensure the success of the comprehensive planning process, it was important

that Shelby County initiate steps to involve the public in a meaningful manner.

From the beginning, this planning process has been committed to providing continuing, broad-based opportunities for public participation. As such, it has been designed to engage participants by utilizing their knowledge and understanding of important issues at varying levels of involvement, and will continue to do so as the plan evolves.

Community Building Workshop in Columbiana

Outreach Methods

For the public involvement component to succeed, several things must occur. First, the public should understand the importance of planning, the local planning process, and how their participation can affect local plans and regulations. Secondly, the public needs to know how and when to get involved. Finally, they need to understand how their input will be used.

A Public Participation Plan was created to define how the public would be involved through the entire comprehensive planning effort. From the plan, a variety of methods were developed to involve citizens at varying levels:

- Increased public awareness through the use of media releases, articles, advertisements, print materials and displays that built awareness of the comprehensive planning process and opportunities to participate.
- Education process which provided the public with balanced and objective information for assisting them in understanding issues and alternatives for addressing them. Town hall meetings, publications, and brochures were several approaches to providing education.
- Public input and interaction has been a crucial part of participatory efforts. Public feedback through evaluations, public meetings and focus groups were critical in assessing needs and providing input on alternative scenarios developed to address those concerns and issues.
  - Town hall meetings were held to gather information from the general public. All residents were encouraged to attend these public forums, where people could provide ideas, suggestions and comments.
  - Community Building Workshops followed the town hall meetings to further examine issues and generate a vision statement for the future.
  - Two comprehensive plan workshops were held to identify desirable development patterns and create a strategic development concept for the County.
  - Two implementation committees were created by the Planning Commission, the Implementation Systems Committee and the Action Plan Committee, to identify strategies and actions to implement this plan.

In addition to these outreach methods, since January 2002, Development Services staff have conducted presentations to various community organizations around Shelby County such as Inverness Kiwanis Club, Greater Shelby County Chamber of Commerce Planning and Development Initiative, and Leadership Shelby Alumni.

Vision

Shelby County is focused on community - a community of smaller communities made up of cities, neighborhoods, towns and villages - "Central places" --each with its own distinct history and character. As central places, they are the focal point of citizen activity, providing a sense of place by concentrating housing, parks, retail services, schools and other public buildings, at or near their core. The emphasis of these places is on combining these traditional elements of community into a walkable and livable whole, with the core as the hub around which community life revolves. The core, or downtown, is an essential component of central places along with the elements that connect them together. The road and street network is designed to promote connectivity in a variety of ways that dissipate traffic and avoid congestion. Open spaces and greenways are integrated into these central places and with the natural ecosystems of the adjoining countryside, in order to maintain their sustainability while preserving their beauty and character.

To achieve this vision for the future, we must understand the Plan's several common themes. During the public involvement meetings held in each of the high school districts, people expressed their perceptions about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges of their communities, neighboring communities, and the County. While recognizing the unique issues associated with each area, several common themes emerged. These provide the basis for understanding the priorities of each community, as well as the foundation for strategies for addressing community issues. The following discusses the several common themes.

Population Growth

The primary theme emerging from the public process, involved issues related to population growth. The perception of the level of growth in a community influences attitudes on quality of life issues. Specific issues, such as schools, roads, environment, and public safety have been affected by the level of growth experienced by the various communities of the County. The eight areas where town hall meetings were held can be generally grouped into five stages of growth.

Meadowview Elementary School - Alabaster - County Road 12

- The Montevallo and Columbiana areas have seen modest growth, but serious impacts have not yet been felt.
- The Westover/Harpersville/Vincent/Wilsonville area will soon be an emerging growth area with the impending development of sanitary sewer service.

- The Calera and Chelsea areas are at points along the I-65 and US 280 corridors respectively where growth is occurring at a rapid pace and the patterns of development have not been well established. This is a critical point in the growth stage because the patterns that are set now will determine the shape and direction of future growth and, once these patterns are set, they will be difficult, if not impossible, to change later if they are not in keeping with community desires.
- The Pelham, Helena, and Alabaster areas have been experiencing sustained growth for some time, but still have substantial amounts of land available for future growth.
- The Oak Mountain area of North Shelby (Indian Springs Village, Hoover) has experienced sustained growth for approximately two decades. Although there will continue to be some population growth in the future, it is expected to taper off while commercial growth and establishment of employment centers will be the main focus of coming years.

Secondary Themes

Communication, cooperation and planning

In the age of information, innovative solutions, public-private partnerships and collaborations, communication, cooperation, and planning are essential in maximum efficiency for limited resources. In Shelby County, those limited resources range from recruiting businesses, to funding for schools and roads, to acquiriing and developing accurate data needed to make informed decisions, to open space and land. It is critical that the County, municipalities, schools, other service providers, and the private sector work together to ensure a strong economy, quality schools, an efficient transportation system, and vibrant communities.

A communication and networking strategy is recommended to foster increased communication and coordination among all public and semipublic organizations. This strategy is intended to improve responsiveness and efficiency by facilitating cooperation while lessening competition among local jurisdictions.

Growth management

The recurring theme of population growth affects the communities of Shelby County in varying degrees. The issues that affect quality of life are directly related to the rate of growth in each community. The level of growth of each community will continue to impact daily routines, levels of service of infrastructure, and quality of public services…not just in local communities, but throughout the County as a whole. Shelby County is projected to increase in population by an additional 100,000 people over the next 20 years. The ability to manage the demand placed on public facilities and services by increased population will be crucial to the well-being of all residents and businesses. By managing growth, the County, municipalities, schools, and the private sector have the opportunity to direct the patterns of growth to ensure that we maintain our high quality of life. Other high-growth areas around the country use various innovative tools such as, countywide development regulation, tax sharing, transferable development rights, concurrency (the provision of infrastructure before development is approved), conservation development, performance zoning, and urban containment, must all be considered as decision-makers strive to develop the right strategies. The County should have a full complement of growth management tools available in order to make a difference in how our communities grow.

Organization and governmental structure

Organization and Governmental Structure is a common theme that includes home rule, government leadership, and intergovernmental coordination. Cooperative and coordinated leadership is needed from elected officials to make the right decisions for the future of Shelby County. Most of

the issues facing Shelby County are multi-jurisdictional in nature and will require cooperation and coordination among all elected officials.

Services and service delivery

Roads, schools, public safety, water, sewer, and parks are just a few of the services that local governments provide for the health, safety, and welfare of the residents that live in their service areas. These services should be delivered effectively, efficiently, and responsively to customers in the service area whether it is a school zone, fire district, or a water service district. Strategies can be developed to minimize duplication and competition among local governments and authorities that provide local services, while maintaining the high level of service that residents expect.

Revenue and fiscal need

As expected, there are costs associated with providing services in a high growth area. These costs can be capital, operational, and maintenance. But, costs may take many forms. The costs of growth are not only in the dollars paid for the provision of services but also the intangible costs to the residents that live here. Examples of such costs include provision of extra-curricular activities not offered through schools, time spent on a congested highway, degradation of environmental quality and natural beauty, the loss of livability and a sense of place in our communities, and the uncertainty of rapid community changes.

An understanding of fiscal need is critical to dealing with the costs of past, current, and expected growth. Strategies to deal with the costs of growth include, (1) raising revenue to pay for the additional demand on services and facilities; (2) reducing costs through more efficient operation and economies of scale; and (3) making, sometimes tough, decisions about the appropriate levels of service to be provided which will result in consequently higher or lower costs.

Oak Mountain State Park - Pelham

The Path

From here, the plan is organized into four parts that represent our figurative map for achieving this vision of the future Shelby County. In its most basic form, we can illustrate these parts as: What We Have; Where We're Going; and How We're Going to Get There. Part 1 - WHAT WE HAVE, or The Countywide Overview, describes and illustrates the existing conditions of today's Shelby County in terms of our natural form, our community conditions and our made form. Part 2 and Part 3- WHERE WE'RE GOING, or The Plan, describes the fundamental planning principals underlying The Comprehensive Plan. Part 2, the *Strategic Development Concept* and *Strategic Development Plan Map* articulates the goals and policies for guiding development in a manner intended to achieve the vision. Part 3, the *Community Design Manual* incorporates design principles to illustrate essential elements of community design required to make the vision a reality. Part 4 - HOW WE'RE GOING TO GET THERE, or Implementation, includes an exploration of potential implementation tools and strategies for achieving the vision of the plan, followed by the Action Plan which itemizes and prioritizes particular actions and steps to be taken as we blaze a new trail towards achieving this new vision for Shelby County.