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Five years later, Oakwood 2030's pace is slow, but deliberate

Recession delayed development, but city moving forward with plans



OAKWOOD — Cars hum along Thurmon Tanner Parkway, and what was once a quiet community building on Railroad Street is filled with sounds of Zumba and other YMCA activities.

Otherwise, the look of downtown Oakwood hasn't changed much since October 2008, when the South Hall city rolled out its 2030 plan, a vision of how some 250 acres surrounding the city's downtown center might look 16 years from now.

"The reality is we were thinking this thing would take off," City Manager Stan Brown said. "And it's been put on hold a little bit."

Some of that it is because of timing, as the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression was taking root when officials announced the plan. However, also fulfilling the city's vision has required much behind-the-scenes work.

The city moved to buy about 30 acres between Main Street and Flat Creek Road, "which gives the ability to really make something happen here," Brown said.

It also owns land south of Railroad Street, "so we have some land control, not just with zoning but in having title to the land, which, I think, is a big step toward being able to make the

Oakwood 2030 vision come to fruition," he said.

The plan, first introduced at a meeting of the Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce's South Hall Business Coalition, foresees construction of multiuse and commercial buildings on large chunks of now-vacant land through the city, as well as redevelopment of other, older parts of town.

Highlights of the plan include an amphitheater, a new multistory City Hall and a commuter rail station that would sit along the railroad tracks that run through the heart of town.

At the time, city officials expected the plan would involve \$150 million to \$250 million of private investment and about \$50 million in public investment through 2030, including infrastructure and “key land acquisition pieces,” Brown said.

Along with the plan, the city also unveiled a logo featuring strokes of hunter and bright green along with the motto, “The shape of life to come,” and a website, oakwood2030.com.

The plan puts names on certain areas throughout town — Government Town Center, Town Commons, Main Street Village, Historic Neighborhood, Neighborhood Village and Commercial Center.

It also features 3 miles of connecting trails, parks and green spaces.

Since the plan’s rollout, much of Oakwood’s focus has been on completing Thurmon Tanner, a four-lane road that runs from Ga. 13/Atlanta Highway in Oakwood to Phil Niekro Boulevard in Flowery Branch.

The last link, which runs between Mundy Mill Road and Plainview Road, features distinctive light poles the city would like to see as part of Oakwood 2030, Brown said.

Camping World at 4696 Smithson Blvd. has expanded with access to Thurmon Tanner, and Kenworth Trucking has shown interest in 7 acres on Thurmon Tanner near Plainview.

Oakwood has land close to Oakwood Elementary School, which overlooks Thurmon Tanner, and the city has done some clearing “to where it’s more visible.”

“We haven’t put (the land) on the real estate market,” Brown said. “What we’re really seeking out is a private partner. We have the land; we’re looking for developers interested in participating with us.”

In general, “we’re trying to prep everything where we’ve got a platform so that as we grow and develop — and we’re seeing a lot of activity — we can see (Oakwood 2030) come to fruition,” he said. “I think the land development will occur as the market continues to pick up.

“Having this infrastructure in place and having utilities there, I think we’re sitting in a prime spot.”

Development is starting to bustle on Mundy Mill Road, which is outside Oakwood’s downtown but serves as the city’s main commercial parkway with roads leading into downtown. There, new restaurants have been built and some redevelopment is taking place.

Some minor changes are taking place downtown, including Oakwood’s public works department moving out of downtown and the police department moving into City Hall, which sits off Main at 4035 Walnut Circle. A block on Railroad Street between Main and Allen Street now is occupied largely by the Georgia Mountains YMCA’s Oakwood branch operations, including a swimming pool.

A big boost could come to the area, if Oakwood Soccer League follows through on plans to build a \$2 million complex in an area south of McClure Drive and railroad tracks that run through town, parallel to Railroad Street.

“That will help get some recreation space in a destination area in our downtown,” Brown said.

Chris Corado, a spokesman for the soccer league, said he hoped to have more information about the complex in a couple of weeks, including when construction could begin.

From a special purpose local option sales tax program approved by voters in 2009, Oakwood had budgeted \$800,000 for downtown sewer improvements to complement Oakwood 2030 efforts.

A poor economy also affected those revenues, with governments collecting only about two-thirds of what they had projected.

The sewer project would have been an extensive effort, geared “as if the downtown project would have taken off,” Brown said. “Since that need is not there yet, the development hasn’t moved forward, and we’ll just ... do some sewer work that’s needed.”

He added, “We’ll start spending some dollars for (sewer work) this year, but it won’t be \$800,000.”

Tim Evans, the chamber’s vice president of economic development, said he believes parts of the Oakwood 2030 plan have succeeded, including completion of Thurmon Tanner, which provides “a much better retail connection.”

“In other parts, the business or market and free enterprise just haven’t caught up with the concepts,” he said. “When you start to see private investment taking over, I think you’ll see that part of the plan pick up velocity.”