A Master Plan for the City of Lithonia:
The Small Heartbeat of DeKalb
A Livable Centers Initiative

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1.0 BACKGROUND

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Preface

The City of Lithonia in conjunction with the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) is focused on developing a long-range plan for the City of Lithonia and the downtown area. In spring 2003, the City was awarded an ARC Livable Centers Initiative (LCI) planning grant with the assistance of the First African American Community Development Corporation (FACDC), a non profit organization. The LCI grant promotes action plans that spur revitalization efforts, encourages economic growth, and enhances the visual character and mobility of a community.

The team of Urban Collage in collaboration with Robert Charles Lesser & Co, and URS was selected to work with City representatives to develop a strategic action plan for implementation which identifies opportunities, projects and partnerships consistent with the community’s vision and focusing on community improvement and participation.

As part of the Lithonia Master Plan planning process, the planning team has taken the initial steps to gather data and engage the community stakeholders in an effort to get an accurate picture of the existing conditions, and understand the strengths, weakness opportunities and threats of the study area. The Inventory and Assessment Report documents the findings which includes the history of the City of Lithonia, study area context, demographics, existing land use, zoning, historic resources, publicly-owned property, building character and conditions, transportation and circulation issues, existing market conditions, areas that are susceptible to change and issues and opportunities.
History

The City of Lithonia traces its beginnings to the town of Cross Roads which developed in the early 1840s with 100 residents at the intersection of two roads connecting McDonough and Lawrenceville and Augusta and Decatur. By 1850, the community had approximately 250 residents and in 1856 the City of Lithonia was established. The original city limits were established around the Georgia Railroad depot, which ran through the center of town, and extended one half mile in all directions from the depot. During this time, the population of Lithonia was predominately white and mainly of English, Scotch and Irish descent. Early residents were generally farmers or operators of small businesses. In 1860, the Lithonia Methodist Church was established as DeKalb County’s only organized church at the time.

After the period of Reconstruction that followed the Civil War, Lithonia became home to a thriving granite industry. The first quarry opened in 1879 and by 1888 the industry was supporting the larger part of Lithonia’s economy. By the early 1900s, quarrying at Big Ledge, Arabia Mountain, Rock Chapel Mountain and Pine Mountain became one of the leading industries in DeKalb County due to the increased demand for granite. The industry attracted immigrant artisans from Scotland, Wales, England, Italy and Scandinavian countries who shaped and polished granite into slabs with the aid of new and improved tools and craftsmanship. Lithonia shipped tons of granite in various forms across the county in railroad cars daily. As the industry grew and the City of Lithonia prospered, so did the need for schools, housing and churches.

The “Seminary” located at 6886 Main Street (1895) was an early Lithonia school and was later used as a boarding home for Lithonia’s growing population. In 1869, the Antioch Lithonia Baptist Church was established serving as the first Black church in DeKalb County. In 1907 the first public library in DeKalb County was established in the home of Miss Lula Almand and later housed at the Lithonia Woman’s Club clubhouse (1928). The Lithonia Public School system was incorporated in 1938 and the Bruce Street School was established as the first school for the African-American community in DeKalb County.

Lithonia continued to prosper as a granite town with the assistance of the Davidson Granite Company until 1971. Beginning in 1958, the construction of Interstate-20 began south of the Lithonia city limits bringing increased traffic to Lithonia for gas and fast food. Now in the 21st century, the opening of the Mall at StoneCrest south of I-20 begins a new era of development in Lithonia as the city continues to develop as a center of commerce and transportation for the region.

---

1 Excerpts from the City of Lithonia Comprehensive Land use Plan (1995-2015) and the Historic District Nomination Proposal: Georgia State University (May 2003)

Prepared for: The City of Lithonia
Prepared by: Urban Collage, Inc. in collaboration with Robert Charles Lesser & Co. and URS
Study Area Context

For the purposes of the Lithonia Master Plan, the study area is comprised of all properties within the city limits of the City of Lithonia. The City is located in the eastern section of DeKalb County one-mile north of Interstate-20 and 18 miles east of the City of Atlanta. The city is approximately one-mile in diameter, but has recently annexed properties to the south. The total study area includes over 516 acres of land (not including public right of way and the Railroad right of way) and is comprised of approximately 620 parcels.

The Lithonia LCI Study area has a “small town” character and history of being a major economic generator for DeKalb County. It has an underutilized main street retail core, several historic faith-based institutions, a DeKalb County Middle School, two public parks, a recreational center, numerous Lithonia Housing Authority properties, and surrounding single-family residential neighborhoods that also contribute to the historic character of the City.

The CSX Railroad which runs north-south through the center of downtown bisects the study area. The I-20/ Evans Mill interchange is to the south and Evans Mill Road is a major arterial leading into the study area. The new Mall at StoneCrest, new multi-family development and high end single-family subdivisions are immediately to the south. Major industrial parks are located to the east of the area along Lithonia Industrial Boulevard and Covington Highway.

Arabia Mountain Nature Preserve, a DeKalb County Park is located south of I-20 off Klondike Road less than four miles from downtown Lithonia. This preservation area comprised of 570 acres of granite outcrop, wetlands, pine and oak forests, streams, and a lake which provides recreation, environmental education and heritage preservation.
A MASTERY PLAN FOR LITHONIA: The Small Heartbeat of DeKalb

Context Map

Prepared for: The City of Lithonia
Demographics

The City of Lithonia is a very small town with only 807 existing households (which, for demographic purposes, closely matches the LCI boundaries), representing less than 1% of DeKalb County households overall. New household growth is projected to be minimal with only 3-4 new households entering the City annually over the next five years, according to Claritas, Inc., the nation’s largest and most accurate demographer, based on local trends. While very minimal, this represents stability as the City witnessed reductions in households between 1990 and 2000.

The majority of households in the City are defined as single mothers and retirees (defined as those aged 60 and older) with very small concentrations of married couples with children and empty nesters. This suggests lower income households and is diametrically opposite of households in DeKalb County or in the 20-county Atlanta Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), and represents a challenge for household growth within the City. This is shown in the table below.

Lithonia Households Compared to Atlanta MSA and DeKalb County.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Market Segment</th>
<th>City of Lithonia</th>
<th>DeKalb County</th>
<th>Atlanta MSA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married Couples with Children</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty Nesters</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirees (60+)</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Mothers</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not surprisingly, the City of Lithonia has a low median household income of $23,400 (2000 Dollars) as compared to DeKalb County’s $49,200, and $52,000 median household income for the Atlanta metro area. In fact, Lithonia is centered in one of the lowest income areas of the county, and of the entire metro area. These lower incomes also affect the lower commercial buying power and amount of retail space that existing households are able to support.

DeKalb County Median Household Income Distribution
Given the lower incomes, two-thirds of existing households within the City of Lithonia live in rental housing, as compared to only one-third of the Atlanta metro area. Of the one-third that own their homes, only 3% move within a given year, as compared to 14% for the Atlanta metro area. The median home value is very low, at $82,000, compared to $133,000 for the Atlanta metro area. This presents additional challenges for the City in terms of economic development, particularly given the concern about any potential displacement.

City of Lithonia, 3-Mile Ring and DeKalb County Demographic Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lithonia</th>
<th>3-Mile Ring</th>
<th>DeKalb County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population:</td>
<td>2,205</td>
<td>26,214</td>
<td>687,557</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households:</td>
<td>807</td>
<td>9,198</td>
<td>256,889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EST. NEW H’HOLDS ANNUALLY</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>3,803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Housing Value</td>
<td>$82,000</td>
<td>$113,421</td>
<td>$134,777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 &amp; 2-Person Households</td>
<td>67.0%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 or More Person Households</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
<td>71.8%</td>
<td>62.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner Households</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
<td>55.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Household Size</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Householders Under Age 35</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Householders From 35-54 Years Old</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
<td>50.8%</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Householders Over 55 Years Old</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Age</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income</td>
<td>$23,400</td>
<td>$23,397</td>
<td>$49,117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Robert Charles Lesser & Co., LLC, Claritas, Inc.
Existing Land Use

The inventory of existing land use paints a colorful picture of the current utilization of existing properties within the City of Lithonia. This land use data and all other existing conditions categories assessed during this planning process were collected through a series of windshield surveys conducted by the planning team (June 2003).

While the image and identity of the City of Lithonia is characterized as a residential “small town” community, only 39% of the total land area is residential consisting of single-family lots, duplexes owned by the Lithonia Housing Authority, some multi-family developments and a mobile home property. The largest land use in the area is vacant land. As noted on the following land use map, the vacant properties are generally in a concentration of 5 to 6 contiguous parcels of overgrown brush mostly along the periphery of the study area. It is believed that the largest areas of vacant land are granite beds and may not developable.

Like typical “small town” communities, the City of Lithonia has a commercial core along major arterials, specifically Main Street and Max Cleland. This commercial core comprises 6% of the total land area which includes retail/commercial properties such as the Wayfield Foods, automotive service, City Hall, small retail and service store fronts along Main Street, two convenience stores, one restaurant and a bank, to name a few. As for institutional properties, 9% of the land area includes faith-based institutions (most of which are historic), the Lithonia Middle School, post office, and the Bruce Street Recreation Center. In addition, the Lithonia Amphitheater and Park and the Bruce Street Park are the active openspace facilities in the study area.

Existing Land Use Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land Use</th>
<th>Number of Parcels</th>
<th>Acreage</th>
<th>Percentage of Land Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single-Family</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duplex</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Homes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Family</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Space</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface Parking</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant Land</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>183.3</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>620</strong></td>
<td><strong>516.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At 36% of the total land area, the amount of vacant land is astonishing compared to other typical “small town” communities.
Existing Zoning

The City of Lithonia’s zoning ordinance currently regulates the use and development of property within the City limits. On the whole, the ordinance has not been significantly updated in several decades. A review of the current ordinance points out several deficiencies relative to current regulatory best practices:

Allowable Uses

The Lithonia zoning ordinance provides for four discrete districts including Commercial District (C), Industrial District (M), Multiple Residential District (RM-75), and One and Two Family Residential District (R-75). In particular, uses allowable under current zoning have many challenges:

- (C) District: The Commercial district allows almost any type of retail service (including automobile services and sales). While acceptable in certain locations, the mass application of only a single commercial district standard in this way poses a unique challenge to maintaining an historic “storefront” character along Main Street.

- (M) District: Similarly, the Industrial district allows for a wide variety of potentially noxious manufacturing/production uses, particularly if located next to single-family areas. Unlike most zoning ordinances, Lithonia’s does not distinguish between “light” and “heavy” industry.

- (RM-75) District: This district allows both single-family and duplex development. While duplex development may be desirable in certain locations, area stakeholders have expressed that duplex construction is not compatible in historic traditional single-family areas.

Mix of Uses

Contrary to the goals and objectives of the Livable Centers Initiative (and contrary to most currently accepted planning standards), these four districts do not allow for the mixing of land uses within a single development. While this is not necessarily an issue in single-family areas, it will greatly inhibit the development of new mixed-use housing within the core of the study area (a desire commonly expressed by stakeholders).

Density

Density, a common point of contention in many communities, is inconsistently regulated in Lithonia. In the (C) Commercial district, density is not regulated at all thus creating the potential for oversized commercial development relative to Lithonia’s historic character. In the (RM-75) multifamily district however, density is limited to roughly 11 units per acre (for 2-bedroom apartments) or 17 units per acre (for 1-bedroom/efficiency apartments). This density is somewhat low relative to conventional apartment development standards. While this low density may be
appropriate in certain locations (i.e., near single-family housing), higher densities may be appropriate in downtown locations in and near Main Street.

**Lot/Dimensional Standards**

In addition to density challenges, Lithonia may be restricting compatible new development in the way in which lot size/lot layout standards are regulated. While most historic homes in Lithonia are setback 30-40 feet from the centerline of the street, the (R-75) single-family district allows homes to be setback between 60 and 90 foot (or more) from street centerlines (depending upon the type of road). New infill housing development, therefore, is likely to result in new homes that do not line up with the historical pattern of homes in the city. Furthermore, in a few locations, minimum lot frontage width requirements may be too large to support infill construction of homes that are historically compatible.

**Parking**

While parking is loosely regulated, there are several deficiencies that make it difficult to encourage quality new development.

- there are no landscaping requirements for new parking lots
- there are no provisions for shared parking arrangements
- there are no provision for parking reductions for transit accessibility
- there are no provisions for requiring bicycle parking
- parking spaces are required to be at least 10 feet by 20 feet – a size that in some cases is larger than necessary resulting in lots that are too large.

**Design Standards**

A feature that is becoming more common in modern zoning ordinances is design standards. This feature (currently lacking in Lithonia) provides the opportunity to more closely regulate the design of new development to be: historically compatible, provide appropriate pedestrian amenities, create usable open space, provide consistent building setbacks, limit the visual impact of large parking lots, etc.

**Variances/Exceptions**

The Lithonia Zoning Ordinance does provide a mechanism to provide certain exceptions to some of the regulatory challenges cited above (a Board of Adjustments). However, the burden is on developers to request such exceptions thus leaving the City with very little leverage to promote the type of quality, historically compatible, and pedestrian-friendly design that Lithonia stakeholders desire.
Historic Resources

In May 2003 Georgia State University surveyed the existing structures in the City where over 230 site were identified that meet the standard eligibility criteria as contributing historic structures (constructed between 1845 and 1953) for a historic district nomination. These sites and historic resources are comprised of both structures (homes, retail, and churches) and sites (Cemeteries, Lithonia Park and Amphitheater, and the Bruce Street Park) and encompass approximately 152 acres of the 531 total acres in the City of Lithonia (29%). The Historic Properties Map on the following page highlights all these sites and a brief description of the most common community landmarks are described below:

Churches
There are a number of churches in the City of Lithonia that were constructed by locally quarried granite and built between the 1900s and the 1950s. These include Lithonia Methodist Church (1910), Antioch Baptist Church (1911), Union Missionary Church (1911) and St. Paul AME Church (1931).

Library
The City of Lithonia is home to DeKalb County’s first public library which was housed in the Lithonia Women’s Club. Constructed in 1910 from local granite, this community landmark structure still functions as a civic meeting place.

Schools
Although the original 1920 two story granite portion of the Lithonia High School, currently the Lithonia Middle School, was demolished in 1968, the additions constructed during 1939-1965 are of salmon colored brick. The Bruce Street School, the first public school in DeKalb County for African Americans was constructed from local granite. The structures interior and roof were destroyed by fire and several attempts have been made by local community groups to purchase and refurbish the building.

Cemeteries
The City of Lithonia Cemetery dates from approximately 1860 to 1925 with granite markers. The African American Cemetery dates from 1850 with simple granite, brick and concrete memorials.

Parks
Parks in the City date back to late late 1940s and early 1950s. The Lithonia Park contains an amphitheater, granite retaining walls, tennis courts, and a swimming pool. Two other notable parks include Bruce Street Park and Lucious Sanders Park both located on Bruce Street.
LEGEND

- HISTORIC LAND
- HISTORIC STRUCTURES
- STUDY AREA BOUNDARY

Source: Information based on the Historic Resources Historic Preservation Case Study and Map: Georgia State University, May 2003

Figure 1.3 Historic Properties

Prepared for: The City of Lithonia

A MASTER PLAN FOR LITHONIA: The Small Heartbeat of DeKalb
A Livable Centers Initiative (LCI)
Publicly-Owned Property

It is often important to identify those properties that are under “friendly ownership” or publicly owned, for they often represent the greatest opportunity for change in an area. In the Lithonia Master Plan Study Area, there are three public entities owning approximately 18% of the land area. This amount of publicly-owned property is relatively high compared with similar small towns. The City of Lithonia has under its control, 32 acres of land that include City Hall, a portion of the Lithonia Plaza, the Lithonia Amphitheater, Bruce Street Park and the two cemeteries.

DeKalb County has a strong presence in the study area with the Lithonia Middle School, Lithonia Park, Bruce Street East DeKalb Recreation Center and the Water Treatment Facility under its control. DeKalb County owns approximately 39 acres within the study area.

Finally, the Lithonia Housing Authority (LHA) owns approximately 24 acres, or 4.5%, of the land area in the City of Lithonia. The LHA has residential properties scattered throughout the study area mostly comprised of one-story brick duplexes for low-income residents as well as several multi-family housing developments that accept Section 8 vouchers from LHA residents and residents throughout DeKalb County.

The following map highlights those properties described above.
Character and Building Conditions

An assessment of the existing building conditions of structures within the study area is based on an overall observation of the exterior without taking into account interior renovation or unseen problems. Structural components that were considered include roof, exterior walls, door and windows, foundation, porch/balcony and exterior upkeep (paint, yard and fencing).

According to this assessment, generally structures within the study area are in good structural condition. Approximately, 93% of the properties are in “sub-standard” or “standard” condition and require only minor façade improvements or no repairs. The amount of visible deterioration is relatively low and scattered throughout the area (23 “deteriorated” structures requiring significant levels of rehabilitation; 9 “dilapidated” structures which represent a potential public safety hazard.)

In regards to building occupancy, while some properties are in need of improvements, most properties appear to be occupied. The number of unoccupied residential structures is somewhat higher compared to small towns and is scattered throughout the City limits. Of approximately 500 parcels within the study area containing structures, 4% are unoccupied.
A MAST P L A N F O R L I T H O N I A: The Small Heartbeat of DeKalb

Livable Centers Initiative (LCI)

A Livable Centers Initiative (LCI)

Prepared for: The City of Lithonia

Building Condition

Figure 1.5
A MASTER PLAN FOR LITHONIA: The Small Heartbeat of DeKalb

Livable Centers Initiative (LCI)

Figure 1.6

Existing Occupancy

Prepared for: The City of Lithonia
Existing Transportation and Circulation

Commuter Patterns and Travel
DeKalb County residents are employed throughout the metropolitan Atlanta region. According to the latest census, 46% of residents work within the county while 36% work in Fulton County. There are numerous major employment centers, regional attractors and activity centers that act as destination points for Lithonia residents. These include the Perimeter Mall area and the hospital complex around the MARTA Medical Center rail station, downtown Decatur, Emory University and the Centers for Disease Control, Stone Mountain Park, downtown/midtown Atlanta and Buckhead.

Access to and from these major attractors is made possible by a network of freeways, major arterial streets and public transportation facilities. The I-20 freeway and Covington Highway provide east/west connectivity and direct access to I-285. The I-20 freeway is accessible at Evans Mill Road. Via the automobile, downtown Atlanta is approximately 20 miles from Lithonia and the Perimeter area is approximately 30 miles from Lithonia. Decatur is 14 miles and Emory University is 16 miles. The Indian Creek MARTA station is approximately 5 miles away and has a major park and ride facility. These distances all point to Lithonia as a highly viable and attractive residential location for commuters to a wide number of employment destinations in the Atlanta Metropolitan Area.

Existing Transportation & Circulation
The transportation network within the Lithonia LCI Study Area is comprised of a modest street network where the automobile is the dominant mode of travel. Local and sub-regional traffic derives from several locations and is funneled onto three main streets within the City limits: Stone Mountain Street, Max Cleland Boulevard and Main Street/Rock Chapel Road. These roads converge, just south of downtown, into one major facility called Evans Mill Road providing access to Interstate 20, as well as other major roads including Mall Parkway which connects to the Mall at Stonestreet. Main Street/Rock Chapel Road brings in traffic through the center of downtown Lithonia. This street connects with Max Cleland Blvd, a road that does not carry an abundant amount of traffic, but nonetheless serves as a bypass for traffic through downtown Lithonia. Stone Mountain Street comes in from the northern side of town and carries traffic onto Max Cleland Blvd., providing easy access for traffic to Covington Highway.

As with other municipalities within the state, the City of Lithonia has a functional classification system, which is a way of prioritizing streets by the service they are intended to provide. Streets have evolved over many decades and basically provide two major transportation functions: the provision of access to parcels of land and the provision of movement between various origins and
destinations. Generally speaking, three categories of streets have been developed. Local streets typically provide access to adjacent properties. Collector streets provide access, but also allow moderate quantities of traffic to move expeditiously between local streets and the major street network. Major streets or arterial roadways allow for an efficient movement of traffic at reasonably high speeds due to good horizontal and vertical alignment.

The DeKalb county Transportation plan (CTP), recommends that Evans Mill Road, Lithonia Industrial Boulevard and Covington highway be classified as major arterial streets; the I-20 Frontage Road, Lithonia by-pass and Klondike Road should be classified as minor arterial roadways; there are no recommended collector roadways in the CTP designated in Lithonia.

Streets with the highest functional classification are intended to provide the highest throughput traffic volumes with the least accessibility to the uses of property along the route. For example, a two-way arterial roadway that has two lanes and is regularly signalized can carry approximately 15,000 automobiles and maintain an acceptable level of service. Lower functional classifications allow increased access at the expense of mobility. This type of facility is usually a local street and is designed to carry approximately 8,000 vehicles per day in moderate traffic. Collector streets can carry approximately 12,000 vehicles per day and still have acceptable volumes.

Traffic in and around the LCI study area is stable. main Street/Max Cleland Blvd. from Covington Highway to Rock Chapel Road, Klondike Road and Stone Mountain Street carries the highest traffic volumes in the study area and is classified as an arterial roadway. Based upon the latest Georgia Department of Transportation traffic counts (2001) the number of vehicles traveling on Max Cleland between Stone Mountain Street and the connection with Main Street during a 24-hour period is approximately 14,000. This means it still has an acceptable level of service.

Furthermore, south of that intersection at Main St. and Parkway, the number of vehicles traveling on the street during a 24-hour period is 15,800, a volume that is approaching a less desirable level of service. These traffic volumes reflect the movement of traffic to and from Interstate 20, Covington Highway and the limits of Lithonia.

On the remainder of the streets for which there are traffic counts, the volume of traffic does not approach the upper end of acceptable standards for local streets. For example, the number of vehicles traveling on Max Cleland Blvd. north of Center Street during a 24-hour period is approximately 6,000 automobiles. On Klondike Road at Magnolia Street, the number of vehicles that go through this intersection is approximately 2,400.
Traffic on local streets is comprised of through traffic where both trip ends are outside the neighborhood and local traffic whose travel patterns include one trip end within the neighborhood. Based upon the volumes of traffic, it appears that is a small amount of through traffic on local streets in Lithonia. The area north of Conyers/Center Street and Rock Chapel Road, for example, has a traffic volume of approximately 400 vehicles in a 24-hour period. This volume may be due in part to the small amount of homes located along Rock Chapel Road from Max Cleland Blvd. to Conyers/Center Street. At the intersection of Stone Mountain Street, and Ida Street where the post office is located, the number of vehicles traveling during a 24-hour period is approximately 6,000 as well. The remaining streets in the study area are local streets that provide access into downtown Lithonia and to other areas in South DeKalb County.

In summary, and on a positive note, the relative traffic volumes through Lithonia on a daily basis are generally lower than most streets are currently designed for. This suggests that Lithonia’s road infrastructure can accommodate a moderate amount of new growth into the future without requiring significant vehicular upgrades. The downside, as noted in the table below, is that the historic commercial portion of Main Street receives almost no traffic on a daily basis – a condition that is not conducive to supporting retail and economic development in that corridor.

**Existing Traffic Data**
Traffic counts were collected from GDOT for certain roads in the study area. Listed below are traffic counts collected from GDOT’s traffic database.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>North</th>
<th>South</th>
<th>Traffic Counts Total</th>
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<td>Max Cleland north of Main</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/18/2000</td>
<td>Main Street @ Parkway Drive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/18/2000</td>
<td>Klondike Road @ Magnolia Street</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/1/2000</td>
<td>Stone Mountain Street @ Ida Street</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/1/2000</td>
<td>Max Cleland north of Center Street</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/25/2000</td>
<td>Rock Chapel Road/Main north of Center/Conyers Streets</td>
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<td></td>
<td>423</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Traffic Counts from Georgia Department of Transportation
From 2001 Coverage Count Data

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>North</th>
<th>South</th>
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<tr>
<td>average</td>
<td>Max Cleland north of Main</td>
<td>6232</td>
<td>8022</td>
<td>14254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/1/2001</td>
<td>Main Street @ Parkway Drive</td>
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<td></td>
<td>15800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/1/2001</td>
<td>Klondike Road @ Magnolia Street</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2471</td>
</tr>
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<td>1/1/2001</td>
<td>Stone Mountain Street @ Ida Street</td>
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<td>6004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Max Cleland north of Center Street</td>
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<td>6172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/1/2001</td>
<td>Rock Chapel Road/Main north of Center/Conyers Streets</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Problem Intersections
While roadway capacities are generally in acceptable condition, there are a few intersections that create unsafe conditions for either pedestrians, motorists or both. In particular, the short stretch of Main Street between Max Cleland and Parkway Road poses a challenge for pedestrians attempting to access downtown services. Left turn movements from Parkway onto Main Street are extremely difficult given the lack of visibility and the proximity to the Max Cleland/Main Street intersection. Collectively, these two intersections represent the heart of downtown and are a prime gateway opportunity. However, their current challenges prevent this area from realizing its full potential.

Sidewalk and Bicycle Facilities
A major objective of sidewalk and bicycle policies is traditionally aimed at providing a safe pedestrian and bicycle access to every point within a city’s limit. With respect to sidewalks, it is common to find a priority hierarchy for the provision of sidewalks: connecting the existing pedestrian system with major community facilities, expanding the system to connect high density areas and connecting lower density development to the existing system.

With respect to bicycle facilities, some cities place an emphasis on separating bicycle traffic from vehicular traffic, such as placing a bicycle path along an abandoned railroad track. Other cities separate bicycles from motor vehicles on the same roadway by use of designated bicycle lanes.

According to the DeKalb County Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP), bikeways are recommended along sides of streets, rather than separated completely. Signage and striping are also
A Master Plan for Lithonia: The Small Heartbeat of DeKalb
Prepared for: The City of Lithonia
Prepared by: Urban Collage, Inc. in collaboration with Robert Charles Lesser & Co. and URS

A Master Plan for Lithonia Background

recommended. Within the greater Lithonia LCI study area, a bicycle route was designated for Evans Mill Road. There is one existing bicycle facility in the study area. It is located at the Lithonia MARTA transfer station, which is being modified to provide a shade area and bench seating for passengers. Though no other bicycle lanes exist in the LCI study area, based upon workshop comments, citizens of Lithonia would like to see a network of bicycle facilities connecting downtown with Stone Mountain Industrial Boulevard and Lithonia Industrial Boulevard.

Though not specifically mentioned in the CTP, the PATH foundation, founded in 1991, is a non-profit organization dedicated to developing a trail system for metropolitan Atlanta. PATH oversees the planning and development of greenway trails and raises funds to continue building trails. Working with citizens and county officials, PATH has developed a master plan for 124 miles of trails through DeKalb County. PATH has recently broken ground on a multi-purpose trail that will connect the area just south of downtown Lithonia to the Arabia Mountain Nature Preserve, running primarily along Klondike Road. There will be trailhead at the Women’s Club building located on Wiggins Street. The trail jogs from Johnson Street to Main Street to Wiggins Street. The original intent of the trail was to connect downtown Lithonia, but there were difficulties in making this connection.

According to the CTP, sidewalks are recommended as a way to provide access to activity centers and public transportation facilities. The CTP mentions that the funding of sidewalks is envisioned to evolve from three mechanisms: new sidewalks should be funded by developers in all land use categories; sidewalks should be funded and prioritized by the county along arterial roadways and collectors streets; and existing residential neighborhoods should have sidewalks funded by special tax districts. These policy recommendations have not yet been adopted.

There is not a consistent network of pedestrian facilities within the Lithonia LCI study area. Several streets within the study area do not have pedestrian sidewalks and there is a lack of pedestrian connectivity from local neighborhoods to Lithonia Middle School. There are however, sidewalks on the school side of Randall Road. Also, sidewalk access is provided on the right hand side of Bruce Street approaching Bruce Street Park from Conyers Street.

Additionally, there is no pedestrian connectivity from the Lithonia City Park/Amphitheater to downtown. Based upon workshop participation, citizens would like to see sidewalks to all schools, along Ida Street, Klondike Road and continuous connections along Max Cleland Boulevard and Cagle Street.

Currently pedestrian volumes are light, which is clearly attributed to the aforementioned lack of sidewalks likely discouraging walking to and from certain areas around the city. Another factor
that contributes to this situation could be the limited amount and variety of attractions such as retail shops and other amenities in the core area. As a result, many of the places that residents go to that are not located in Lithonia Plaza will require other alternatives such as automobiles or mass transit.

The small local street grid near City Hall and Lithonia Plaza provides few opportunities for pedestrian access to those places. This is in part due to a lack of sidewalks and pedestrian amenities such as shade trees, benches, and pedestrian crossing signs.

Traffic Signals
One major traffic signal is located within the study area. It is located at Stone Mountain Street and Max Cleland Boulevard. The signal is appropriately phased. All other intersections have stop signs that control the flow of traffic. The nearest, high-volume traffic signal from Stone Mountain St and Max Cleland is at Covington Highway and Main Street/Evans Mill Road, outside of the study area.

Parking
Based upon field observations there is adequate parking for the services provided in Lithonia Plaza and other places in Lithonia. An estimate for parking spaces within the study area was not clearly determined but an estimate of 70 to 100 parking spaces was determined to exist in the Lithonia Plaza area which seems adequate for the current land uses available.

Transportation Improvements
With the exception of the split diamond interchange at the I-20 Evans Mill exit, there are no major capital transportation improvements slated for the Lithonia area and none for the LCI study area in the Atlanta Regional Commission’s (ARC) 2030 Aspirations-based Transportation Plan. There is a roadway capacity project in the 2025 Regional Transportation Plan for Lithonia Industrial Boulevard from Stone Mountain – Lithonia Road to Interstate 20.

The I-20/ Evans Mill project, let by the Georgia Department of Transportation, involves the reconstruction of Evans Mill Road and the additional off ingress and egress ramps to Lithonia Industrial Boulevard. There will eastbound and westbound auxiliary lanes constructed between Evans Mill Road and Turner Hill Road with a right lane exit only onto Turner Hill Road, eastbound. There will a crossover lane on I-20 between the frontage roads running from Evans Mill Road to Lithonia Industrial Boulevard. Noise barriers will be constructed on the south side of the freeway and the north side east of Evans Mill Road. The project is planned to take 28 months to construct. The effect of this project is to allow trucks to access the industrial area in Lithonia without having to go through downtown.
Additionally, several improvements are mentioned in the ARC Transportation Improvement Program. Specifically, these are located along Covington Highway and Lithonia Industrial Boulevard, near the city limits; on Covington Highway there are pedestrian facility and roadway capacity projects from Mountain Road to Turner Hill Road.

Public Transportation
Overall, MARTA provides adequate public transportation to the more densely populated areas of DeKalb County and as the southern and eastern section of the county grows, MARTA will need to consider adding additional service. Currently, there is an alternative analysis being undertaken by MARTA that is examining the possibility of some type of fixed guide-way or express bus system that will connect the new Mall at Stonecrest with downtown Atlanta. Possible alignments are the I-20 corridor straight along the freeway until the City of Atlanta limits or the I-20 corridor connecting up with I-285 and eventually the Indian Creek MARTA station. In either case, the closest station for Lithonia residents is a possible station at I-20 and Evans Mill Road. This study will conclude in mid 2004. Should this come to pass, it will further enhance Lithonia’s attractiveness for future residents as a viable commuter suburb.

The current MARTA bus system operates three routes that effect Lithonia. Though no ridership figures are available, these routes provide a high level of service to many people. Route 86L is a Lithonia cross-town route providing service to Decatur, Indian Creek Station or Downtown Atlanta using Main, Swift, Cagle, Johnson and Magnolia Streets to Klondike Road and Main Street. The terminus of the route is located at Swift Street and Main Street (near Lithonia Plaza Shopping Center), where there is a transfer point to routes 115 Covington and 116 Redan Road, the latter allowing access to the Mall at Stonecrest.

Route #115 traverses Covington Highway and dead heads at the Kensington MARTA rail station. The route provides service to downtown Lithonia via Covington Highway, using Evans Mill Road and Max Cleland Boulevard to the end of the line terminus at Swift and Main Streets.

Lastly, route #116, traverses between Redan Road/Mall at Stonecrest and the Indian Creek MARTA rail station. The bus provides service to and from Mall at Stonecrest and Indian Creek Station through downtown Lithonia using Stone Mountain Street, Max Cleland Blvd. and Main Streets.
A Livable Centers Initiative (LCI)

Circulation Issues

Figure 1.7

Prepared for: The City of Lithonia
Existing Market Conditions

The following is a summary of economic and real estate market trends impacting potential development in Lithonia.

Residential Market Overview
Areas of suburban growth and development surround the City of Lithonia. New conventional housing has been occurring in subdivisions north of Lithonia and south along I-20, influenced by the Mall at Stonecrest. For-sale and rental housing are being developed at price alternatives to surrounding areas such as Stone Mountain and Decatur with stronger proximity to employment cores in Atlanta. The majority of this new housing targets singles, young couples and starter families with median household incomes of approximately $40,000 to $80,000.

The opportunity for the City of Lithonia is to create a sense of place and attract households from outside the area. To do this, Lithonia can capitalize on its small town character and build upon its historic charm, and create the infrastructure for walkable neighborhoods. In addition, the housing strategy should focus on specific locations within the City for development and opportunities for traditional housing concepts not offered in the conventional subdivisions. Preventative measures against gentrification should be employed. Location of the housing will be important to not only control additional traffic congestion but also to provide additional support for commercial uses located within the City’s core.

Commercial Market Overview
The majority of existing commercial structures within Lithonia is in neighborhood-serving retail/service uses such as grocery stores, drug stores, convenience stores, nail/beauty salons, day care facilities and restaurants. The retail stores draw the vast majority of their sales from a trade area that includes an approximate three mile radius from the center of the retail concentration found at the existing Lithonia Plaza. Retailers located in and around the Mall at Stonecrest sell different types of goods and products that draw from a much larger trade area. Since these retailers would not locate far from major transportation arteries they were not included in our analysis.

Not including the mall and surrounding power centers there is approximately 350,000 square feet of retail/service uses found within the 3-mile Lithonia Retail Trade Area. Based on neighborhood retail expenditures for the population living within the trade area and historic uses of service oriented industries, approximately 275,000 square feet of commercial space can be supported, this represents an approximate 75,000 square feet oversupply of neighborhood serving retail and service-oriented uses within the Lithonia trade area. It is important to note that most of the retail and services supply found within the trade area...
represent conventional stores. While there does exist an oversupply in these categories there is potential for creative retail uses to be supported by offering different products and/or drawing from a larger trade area. Examples of such retailers include specialty small restaurants, antique stores and other specialty stores. This is illustrated in the graph below.

In every retail category there is more supply than demand. As a result, and confirmed through our interviews, the retailers are experiencing lower than average sales per square foot. The end result is that the retail situation is over-built with little or no additional demand to support any new retail. Therefore, the City of Lithonia really needs to focus on non-competing retail uses. In other words, the majority of the existing retail is within conventional strip centers. No main street retail center exists within the trade area outside of the City of Lithonia. Such main streets have the ability to create a unique, small town character that appeals to certain types of boutique retailers and small restaurants. A commercial strategy should include attracting these types of retail to the existing retail storefronts along Lithonia’s Main Street.

Economic Development
Our situation analysis suggests several things that the City of Lithonia could do to create economic development. These include:

- Consider annexation for higher end housing and non-residential properties
- Increase retail support in the downtown by adding housing, primarily focusing on traditional housing concepts (homes with traditional architecture, built closer to the sidewalk)
- Focus on non-competing retail uses in the downtown
- Improve the attractiveness of the area through sidewalks, signage, green space, street trees, landscaping and architectural guidelines

These conclusions will be expounded upon as we move forward into our market analysis research phase and ultimately in the creation of a redevelopment plan for the city.
Susceptibility to Change

Utilizing information gathered on the existing physical conditions of the study area, a series of interviews with local stakeholders and meetings with the Core Team, An Issues Matrix and a “Susceptibility to Change” map was generated. The matrix on the following page highlights the major issues in the areas of Land Use & Development, Housing, Economic Development, Historic & Natural Resources, Transportation & Circulation, Community Facilities, and Urban Design.

The “Susceptibility to Change” map attempts to identify properties that are most likely to redevelop in light of market pressures. Generally, five types of parcels comprise those that are susceptible to change:

- Vacant land
- Open space/recreational
- Select Publicly owned property
- Deteriorated/Dilapidated structures
- Underutilized land

The areas identified on the map are not necessarily a recommendation for improvement or an instruction that the City of Lithonia may act upon. Identification on the map is solely recognition that the property may be likely to change in the future when faced with market pressure. Rather, the map is a tool that is used to help the Lithonia community in focusing planning and development efforts.

Along the periphery of the study area are large tracts of vacant land that are surrounded by single-family residential. In most cases these areas are difficult to access due to topographic challenges, and limited frontage on public roads.

Several underutilized properties were identified that have an abundance of surface parking and/or undeveloped land surrounding the existing structure, specifically along Main Street.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Land Use and Development</th>
<th>Economic Development</th>
<th>Housing</th>
<th>Historic &amp; Natural Resources</th>
<th>Transportation &amp; Circulation</th>
<th>Community Facilities</th>
<th>Urban Design</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- There is a need to enhance the character and quality of development in Downtown Lithonia along Main Street</td>
<td>- More shops and restaurants are needed to complement existing Main Street businesses and to create a tax base.</td>
<td>- Gentrification and displacement of existing residents is a concern.</td>
<td>- Build on the Lithonia Amphitheater venue to encourage more cultural and arts entertainment.</td>
<td>- Create pedestrian linkages from Main Street to the Lithonia Amphitheater and Lithonia Park.</td>
<td>- Consider a more focus on cultural/arts activities in and around downtown.</td>
<td>- Design standards are encouraged to encourage consistent design and improve the quality and appearance of buildings along Main Street.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- There seems to be community consensus regarding the redevelopment of the Lithonia Plaza for mixed-use development.</td>
<td>- A stronger collection of high-quality businesses is needed to reinforce downtown.</td>
<td>- Lack of home ownership; majority renter occupied.</td>
<td>- Create a greenway trail system to capitalize on Arabia Mountain.</td>
<td>- Connectivity to/from I-20 is critical to the success of Main Street retail.</td>
<td>- Complement existing recreation areas with youth services and activities.</td>
<td>- Roadways into downtown along Main St. should serve more as gateways to the city center.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Spot Zoning encourages incompatibility of uses and needs to be corrected.</td>
<td>- The retail market is perceived as declining.</td>
<td>- Consider a mix of housing types in the City that are affordable for existing residents but also attractive to potential residents.</td>
<td>- Utilize the city’s history of granite quarries and promote “heritage tourism” in the City.</td>
<td>- There seems to be a community consensus that the Evans Mill Interchange project designed to re-route truck traffic will become a bypass to potential patrons of Main Street retail.</td>
<td>- Consider a more direct link between the City and Arabia Mountain.</td>
<td>- Additional structures are needed to frame Main Street.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Downtown lacks a “town center / town green”</td>
<td>- The Mall at Stonecrest is a threat to economic development opportunities in the City of Lithonia.</td>
<td>- More housing is needed in downtown including lofts, townhomes and single family.</td>
<td>- City has a “historic / small town” feel that should be maintained and enhanced</td>
<td>- Increase the capacity of the City administration [related to small existing tax base.]</td>
<td>- Consider a more direct link between the City and Arabia Mountain.</td>
<td>- Consider a façade improvement program to enhance Main Street.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- City’s tax base is too small (annexation?)</td>
<td>- With the new development surrounding the Mall at Stonecrest, take advantage of the apartment market.</td>
<td>- “Urban Renewal” programs of the past resulted in the loss of many historic resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Small business assistance is needed.</td>
<td>- Over concentration of public housing contributes to negative perception of Lithonia.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1.6

Prepared by: Urban Collage, Inc., in cooperation with URS & Robert Charles Lesser & Co. LLC & URS
LEGEND
- DETERIORATED/DILAPIDATED STRUCTURES
- SELECT PUBLICLY OWNED PROPERTY
- OPEN SPACE/RECREATIONAL
- VACANT LAND
- UNDERUTILIZED LAND
- STUDY AREA BOUNDARY
*NOTE: PARCELS SUSCEPTIBLE TO CHANGE THAT ARE OUTLINED IN RED HAVE HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE.

Figure 1.8

Susceptibility to Change

Prepared for: The City of Lithonia
Community Vision

In addition to obtaining existing conditions data, the planning team engaged the community in efforts to get an accurate picture of existing conditions, feedback regarding issues and opportunities facing the City of Lithonia and prevailing attitudes for development.

Lithonia Compass Results

During the first public workshop, held on the evening of August 5, 2003, approximately 90 attendees participated in the “Lithonia Compass.” The Compass included a visual preference survey and a series of short answer questions that discusses important community issues including land use, transportation, sense of place and implementation.

Workshop attendees who participated in the Lithonia Compass made up a wide cross-section of the community. While a vast majority of survey participants were between the ages of 36 and 65 (78%), representatives from every age cohort (from under 21 to over 65) participated in the survey. While females outnumbered males 67% to 33%, survey participants were equally distributed among relative newcomers to Lithonia (54% less than 10 years) and those who have lived or worked in Lithonia 10 years or longer (46%).

The visual preference portion of the Lithonia Compass included a series of 62 images allowing participants to rate 62 commercial, mixed-use, residential, transportation and circulation, parks and open space and signage and imagery images on a scale from 1 to 5 according to their appropriateness for the future of the City of Lithonia and the downtown area. The following images received the highest and lowest mean scores in the categories of commercial, mixed use, residential, transportation and circulation, parks and openspace, and signage and imagery.

Commercial

![Highest Commercial Image](image1)

![Lowest Commercial Image](image2)
Mixed Use

Residential

Transportation & Circulation
A Master Plan for Lithonia: The Small Heartbeat of DeKalb
Prepared for: The City of Lithonia
Prepared by: Urban Collage, Inc., in collaboration with Robert Charles Lesser & Co. and URS

Open Space

Signage & Imagery

The complete results of the Lithonia Compass can be found in the Appendix. From the results of the Lithonia Compass the Planning Team drew several conclusions:

- **COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT:** Very high interest in additional retail development within the downtown area, particularly restaurants and other “storefront” types of retail; no “big-box” retail

- **LITHONIA PLAZA:** Overwhelming desire for the Plaza to be torn down and redeveloped as a mixed-use project (lowest scoring image in entire survey); Plaza area well suited for a new “town green” or “town center.”

- **HOUSING:** Strong interest in new housing as long as its single-family detached or mixed-use lofts (minimal support for apartments or townhomes); desire for a mix of income levels (except very low-incomes)
OPEN SPACES: Interest in additional passive green space; some interest in a new town green;

CIRCULATION/TRANSPORTATION PRIORITIES: Overwhelming support for improving the pedestrian environment (sidewalks, crosswalks, bike routes, greenway trails, etc.); mixed support for transportation improvements; interest in a façade improvement program

GROWTH & DEVELOPMENT: Interest in a balanced and careful growth pattern in which new development is encouraged but controlled; gentrification should be balanced against new growth

ARCHITECTURAL STYLE: “Traditional” architectural style is very important for new development

FOCUS AREAS: Main Street, Lithonia Plaza

SUPPORT FOR LEADERSHIP: While political leadership has been an issue in the past, most did not feel that it was hindrance to future success