

MPC-Resources Protection Committee



Status Report to the Metropolitan Planning Commission

May 9, 2006



***MPC-Resources Protection Committee
Statement of Purpose***

The purpose of the MPC-Resources Protection Committee is to apply a broad, interdisciplinary perspective to the identification of environmental resources, focusing on sensitive lands throughout Chatham County for protection, conservation, or rehabilitation of those areas.

History of the MPC-Resources Protection Committee

In the Fall of 2004, the MPC Executive Director asked for volunteers to join a committee as a result of environmental issues raised by the Terra Firma zoning application. The committee, which has since become known as the MPC-Resources Protection Committee, was tasked with the job of identifying other environmentally and/or historically significant lands in the MPC's planning area of unincorporated Chatham County and Savannah, with the goal of preserving those lands before they are proposed for development. The committee held its first meeting in November of 2004, and has held regular monthly meetings ever since. The members of the committee represent a diverse spectrum of individuals associated with the preservation of natural, historical and cultural resources, including: non-profit organizations such as land trusts and conservation groups, for-profit engineering and planning firms, local government staff members, educators, developers, and private citizens.

The MPC-Resources Protection Committee builds upon a long legacy of similar committees that have been associated with the MPC and local government in the past. The current committee traces its origins back to the Open Space Committee, originally appointed by the Chatham County Commission in 1994 for the purpose of identifying and protecting certain areas of the County from development for the public interest. This process eventually led to the use of Open Space funds to acquire and preserve the Demere Tract on Wilmington Island in 2000. Later Committee work on natural resource issues was done in the early stages of the planning process for the Tricentennial Plan. Those recommendations eventually resulted in the Natural Resources component of the strategic plan contained in Chapter 5 of the Comprehensive Plan's Community Agenda Report.

Rather than starting from scratch with its work, the current committee was able to build upon the work that had already been completed by previous committees. This proved to be of great help in expediting the process of identifying unprotected sites of significant historic, cultural, or ecological value.

Site Selection Methodology

The MPC-Resources Protection Committee's approach to site identification has been to apply a broad, interdisciplinary perspective to the identification of environmental resources, focusing on sensitive lands throughout Chatham County for the ultimate protection, conservation, or rehabilitation of those areas.

The site selection process started with a thorough review of the work of the previous natural resources committees. This review resulted in a base list of properties to be considered for protection or acquisition. The results of this review were then combined with suggestions from individual committee members to produce the full list of potential properties. The committee then began focusing on one area of the county at a time, one site at a time, identifying additional sites. At the end of this review process, each site was reviewed a final time, and the committee voted on each site to assign it to one of three categories: Hot List, Watch List, and Removal.

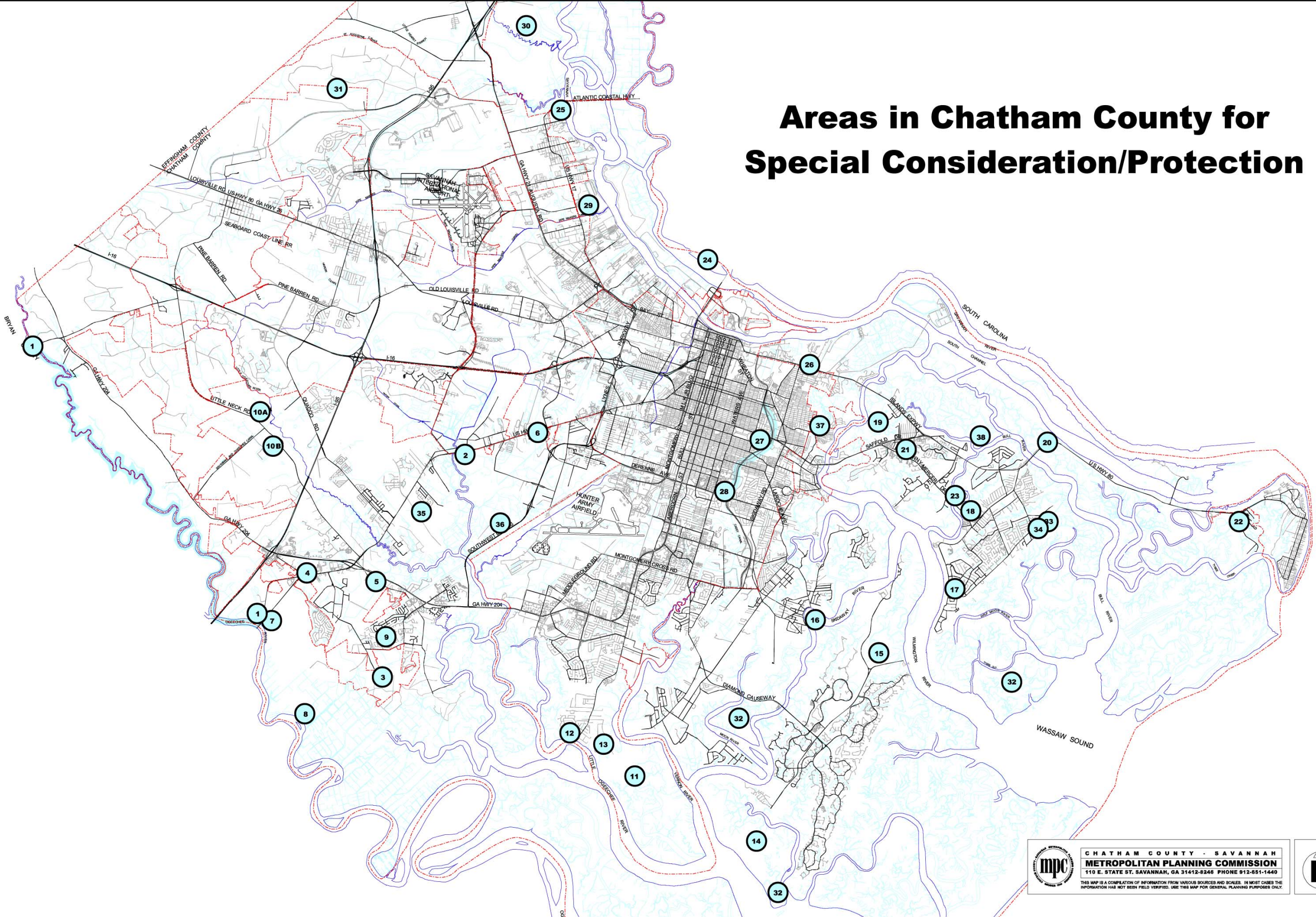
Hot List properties are the properties that are either the most significant, in the most need of protection, or where the application of limited financial resources would have the greatest positive benefit. Watch List properties, although significant, were either not as ecologically significant as Hot List properties, or were not facing as immediate a threat from development. Properties designated for removal were those that were ultimately found to be of limited ecological or historical value, or sites which were found to have already been developed, thereby negating the possibility of their long-term protection.

Site Selection Results

The MPC-Resources Protection Committee has identified 171 properties on 38 sites in Savannah and Unincorporated Chatham County that are in need of protection. Site numbers referenced in Table 1 refers to the map on page 4.

TABLE 1: PROPERTIES IN NEED OF PROTECTION MEASURES			
	Site Name		Site Name
1	Hwy 17/Ogeechee River Recreational Corridor & Morgan's Bridge	20	McQueen's Island and Trail
2	Oakland Plantation	21	Demere Tract and Associated Hammocks
3	Vallambrosa Plantation	22	Battery Halleck
4	Coastal Gardens/Bamboo Farms	23	Turner's Rock Fishing/Shrimping Site
5	Grove Point Road Area	24	Pennyworth Island
6	Redgate Farms Area	25	Houlihan Bridge Park and Boat Ramp
7	Hwy. 17 Near Ogeechee River	26	President Street Property
8	Mitigation Area Near Chevis Road	27	51 st Street Tract
9	Wild Heron Property	28	Memorial Health/Jenkins High School Swampy Area
10A	S&O Canal and Adjacent Property	29	Whitehall Plantation Area at Ga. Ports Entrance
10B	L. Scott Stell Park	30	Mulberry Grove
11	Rose Dhu Island	31	Highlands Wetland Area
12	Little Ogeechee Property	32	Hammocks
13	Schley Avenue and Back Street Area of Coffee Bluff	33	Brevard Point Tract #1
14	Green Island	34	Brevard Point Tract #2
15	Skidaway Island property	35	Lebanon Plantation
16	Burnt Pot Island	36	Rockingham Farms
17	Wilmington Island Park Lift Station Area	37	Unincorporated Chatham Dairy Area
18	Terra Firma	38	Whitemarsh Island Battery
19	Oatland Island Education Center		

Areas in Chatham County for Special Consideration/Protection



CHATHAM COUNTY - SAVANNAH
METROPOLITAN PLANNING COMMISSION
110 E. STATE ST. SAVANNAH, GA 31412-8246 PHONE 912-851-1440
THIS MAP IS A COMPILATION OF INFORMATION FROM VARIOUS SOURCES AND SCALES. IN MOST CASES THE INFORMATION HAS NOT BEEN FIELD VERIFIED. USE THIS MAP FOR GENERAL PLANNING PURPOSES ONLY.



Next Steps: Conservation of Identified Properties

Now that environmentally-sensitive properties have been identified, the next step is to begin the process of actually protecting the properties. Conservation of land can take one of several forms, as discussed below.

Fee Simple Ownership

Fee simple ownership is the most common form of land ownership, whereby a single owner or entity purchases the land and has clear title to it. In the case of conservation, the government would purchase the land and become the legal owner. The government could then use the property for any public purpose, including dedicating it to conservation by leaving it undeveloped.

Purchase of Development Rights (PDR)

The government can negotiate to purchase only the landowner's right to develop the land, but not the land itself, thereby leaving the land in private ownership. Land owners can preserve non-development uses of their own choosing (camping, hunting, etc.) as part of the agreement. Because ownership of the land remains in private hands, purchasing development rights is less expensive than purchasing land outright. PDR has the added benefit that the land remains productive on the tax rolls, albeit typically at a lower rate to reflect its reduced development potential.

Transfer of Development Rights (TDR)

TDR programs work similar to PDR programs, but with the exception that the government doesn't directly purchase a landowner's development rights. Rather, the development rights of the property are transferred to a different property that doesn't have conservation restraints. This can be accomplished either by transferring the development rights from one of the landowner's properties to another property owned by the same person, or placing the development rights on the free market for others to purchase.

For example, let's say that a landowner in an environmentally-sensitive area has zoning that would allow him to construct a one-story office building. There is another landowner downtown who has commercial zoning that allows a five-story office building. Using TDR, the owner of the conservation property could sell his development rights to the downtown landowner, who could now build a six-story office building. In this way, the development density is effectively transferred from one property to the other. For this reason, TDR programs work best when the local government designates specific sending and receiving areas. This helps to ensure that the additional density granted to receiving properties by TDR is funneled into a particular area where it is desired, rather than being distributed randomly throughout the community.

Conservation Donation

Landowners who wish to preserve their land in a state of conservation can choose to donate their development rights to a conservation organization, such as the Georgia Conservancy or the Georgia Land Trust. There are often substantial federal tax benefits associated with such a donation. As with PDR, land owners can preserve certain uses of

their own choosing as part of the deal.

Land Development Regulations

Zoning can be used to regulate uses, densities, and development characteristics of land in environmentally-sensitive areas. An example of this in our own community is the Environmental Overlay (EO) zoning district. This overlay district was created as part of the Islands Land Use Plan in 2001, and was also included in the Southeast Chatham Community Plan in 2003. The EO district helps to protect the marsh habitat by applying more stringent development standards (such as setbacks and buffers) to properties that are adjacent, or in close proximity, to the marsh.

The Tricentennial Plan's zoning update program presents an opportunity to use land use regulations to further promote the principles of Conservation Design. Conservation Design allows development to be rearranged so that half (or more) of the total acreage of a site can be set aside as permanent open space. It allows the same number of homes as conventional subdivision design, but in a manner that consumes less land, allowing the balance of the property to be permanently protected and added to an interconnected network of community green spaces. This "density-neutral" approach provides a fair and equitable way to balance conservation and development objectives. By incorporating this thought process into a municipality's zoning and subdivision ordinances, the jurisdiction then actively and legally encourages subdivisions to set aside a greater percentage of their land as permanently-protected open space.

Next Steps: Leveraging Additional Funding for Land Conservation

Whether Chatham County chooses to move forward with fee simple ownership or purchase of development rights, money will be required to fund the effort.

Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST)

SPLOST is a 1% sales tax that counties in Georgia have the option to levy (via public referendum) to support of certain types of expenditures. Although the tax is most closely associated with funding capital improvements projects, SPLOST funds have also proven to be a valuable tool in Chatham County for the protection of natural resources.

Two previous SPLOST programs (1998-2003, 2003-2008) dedicated funds for greenspace and open space. Securing additional SPLOST funding for future greenspace programs will be an integral part of any future attempts to preserve Chatham County's natural resources. Given the importance of greenspace and open space to the community, and given the magnitude of the needs, without SPLOST these needs would probably remain unfunded, and the opportunity to use the funds to leverage state and private foundation dollars would be lost. The MPC-Resources Protection Committee is requesting that the County set-aside funds for greenspace, open space, and bikeways in the next SPLOST cycle (2008-2013).

In the current SPLOST cycle, Chatham County has approximately \$2.3 million set aside for the protection of natural resources. This money will be targeted at the conservation of properties identified by the MPC-Resources Protection Committee. The fair market

value of the properties identified by the committee has not yet been determined, but certainly exceeds \$2.3 million. The primary challenge facing the County is in making the \$2.3 million of available funding go as far as possible in meeting the identified need.

Georgia Land Conservation Program (GLCP)

GLCP is Georgia's state-level greenspace program. Approximately \$5 million in grants and \$55 million in low-interest loans are available statewide on a competitive basis. Local governments apply for funding on a first-come first-served basis, and once funding runs out, it is gone for the remainder of the year. The program seeks to match \$1 in grant money for every \$3 dollars in local funding towards approved greenspace projects. The GLCP therefore presents an opportunity for Chatham County to use its \$2.3 million in SPLOST greenspace funds to leverage an additional \$750,000 in state grants. Because funding is both competitive and finite, it is in Chatham County's best interest to move forward with the application process as quickly as possible.

Other Grants and Loans

Numerous other grants and loans are available on a competitive basis for the purpose of conserving historical and cultural resources, greenspace, wetlands, wildlife habitats, and other natural areas. Most of these programs are associated with various agencies within the Federal Government. Examples include the National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Targeted Watershed Grants Program (available through the Environmental Protection Agency), the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation, and the Forests/Habitat Grant (available through the Turner Foundation). Further research on these and other programs will need to be conducted in the future to determine which of the many available funds should be pursued in support of our local conservation efforts.

Next Steps: Identifying Additional Properties for Conservation

Up until this point, the MPC-Resource Protection Committee's work has been focused only on land in Savannah and Unincorporated Chatham County. Opportunities for resource conservation also exist in Chatham County's other municipalities, and should not be overlooked. This will mean inviting individuals from these other municipalities into the Resource Protection Committee, and going through a process of identification and prioritization that is similar to the work that has already been done for Savannah and Unincorporated Chatham County. At the same time, the committee can continue to identify additional sites in Savannah and the Unincorporated County to move the process forward. This will likely be a continuous process, with new properties and funding sources being identified, and working with local governments and conservation agencies to protect the properties that have been identified.

This approach will make the committee's work an iterative process with the following steps: identifying properties, setting acquisition priorities, securing funding, and acquiring properties or development rights. In the end, the ultimate goal will be for all parties to work together to create an effective, unified greenspace protection program that serves all of Chatham County.

Appendix A:
MPC-Resource Protection Committee Members

Ms. Deb Barreiro- Georgia Coastal Resources Division
Dr. Charles Belin – Armstrong Atlantic State University
Mr. Will Berson- The Georgia Conservancy
Mr. Mark Bouy- The Home Builders Association of Savannah/Bouy Brothers Builders
Ms. Mary A. Elfner- Georgia Department of Natural Resources
Dr. Kimberly Geideman- Savannah State University
Mr. Harvey Gilbert – Gilbert Realty
Ms. Marianne Heimes- Island Citizens for Logical Growth
Dr. Dionne Hoskins- Savannah State University/ NOAA
Ms. Judy Jennings- Coastal Group of the Sierra Club
Miss Melissa Jest- Metropolitan Planning Commission
Mr. Timothy Mackey- Metropolitan Planning Commission
Dr. Mildred McClain- Citizens for Environmental Justice
Mr. Frank McIntosh – Georgia Land Trust
Ms. Patty McIntosh- The Georgia Conservancy
Ms. Gwen McKee – Savannah State University
Mr. Pat Monahan- Chatham County
Ms. Lauree San Juan- Ogeechee Audobon Society
Mr. Michael Ruth- USACOE-Savannah District Regulatory Branch
Ms. Courtney Power- Integrated Science and Engineering
Mr. Bob Scanlon- City of Savannah Environmental Affairs
Mr. Joe Shearouse- City of Savannah Leisure Services
Ms. Dale Thorpe- Savannah Tree Foundation
Ms. Sonja Wallen- Georgia Land Trust
Ms. Amanda Wrona- The Nature Conservancy
Ms. Jeanne Valentine- Island Citizens for Logical Growth
Mr. Mike Vaquer- The Vaquer Firm

Staff to the Committee:

Mr. Dennis Hutton- Metropolitan Planning Commission
Mr. Courtland Hyser- Metropolitan Planning Commission
Ms. Jackie Jackson- Metropolitan Planning Commission
Mrs. Beth Reiter - Metropolitan Planning Commission
Mr. Tom Thomson - Metropolitan Planning Commission

***Appendix B:
MPC-Resources Protection Committee
Historic and Projected Timeline***

November 2004

- Kick off / Organizational Meeting

December 2004

- Organizational Meeting/Call for Data and Maps

January 2005

- Call for Data and Maps

February 2005

- Call for Data and Maps

March 2005

- Call for Data and Maps

April 2005

- Protection Area 1: Unincorporated Chatham County West of I-95

May 2005

- Protection Area 2: Unincorporated Chatham County East of I-95

June 2005

- Protection Area 5: Savannah / South

July 2005

- Protection Area 3: Southeast Chatham County

August 2005

- Protection Area 6: Islands Area

September 2005

- Protection Area 4: Downtown Savannah / Savannah River Vicinity/Hutchinson Island

October 2005

- Protection Area 7: City of Savannah – Airport Area

December 2005

- Review List of Findings
- Prioritize the Group of Sites According to Previously Established Criteria

January 2006

- Develop a List of All Available/Possible Funding Sources, Protection Measures
- Organize the List Into Related Means of Protection

February 2006

- Conduct Site Visits to Top Priority Areas

March 2006

- Finalize the Committee's List of Top Sites for Inclusion Into the Final Report

April 2006

- Staff and Committee Write-Up of Findings

May 2006

- Internal Review and Comment on Draft Report

June 2006

- Review and Finalize Report for Distribution / Comment to MPC

July 2006

- Present Report to Government Agencies for Comment
- Present Report to Public for Comment

August 2006

- Review Outside Comments and Incorporate Into Final Document

September 2006

- Present Final Document to Public

October 2006

- Invite Other Municipalities Into the Process - As Applicable