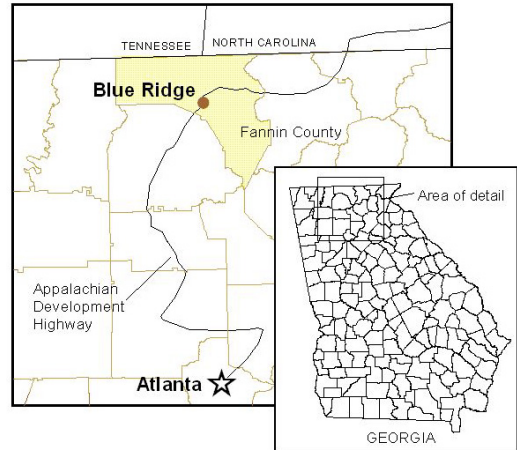


## Success Story

### Improved Development Regulations for the City of Blue Ridge, Georgia

*Blue Ridge, Georgia, is where Appalachia begins. Not far from the southern terminus of the famed Appalachian Trail, the town of 1,200 thrives on an economy driven by tourism and second home development. But rapidly expanding commercial areas and haphazard development on State Route 515 (Appalachian Development Highway) threaten to spoil the small town's rustic mountain beauty.*

*The goal of the implemented development regulations is to maintain the community's character by improving the pattern, design, and aesthetics in the rapidly growing area along the Highway.*



### The problem

*Steep slopes.* Development of the steep slopes, prominent ridges, and valleys requires substantial clearing, grading, cutting, and excavating. Extensive hillside scarring is often the unfortunate result. Insensitivity to the topography is most prominent in areas of intensive development adjacent to the Highway, as in one instance where recent massive excavation created a level pad for commercial development, but placed a hilltop home in peril (see photo). A major commercial big-box retailer has also recently purchased land at the town's busiest highway intersection, where land levelers paid little attention to the natural features of the topography, leaving behind steeply canted and possibly unsafe embankments.

*Landscaping.* Developing land for private use usually also entails the removal of trees, most of which are not replaced post-construction. Treeless sun-baked parking lots and property absent quality landscaping are the result. In any case, attempts to landscape are often furtive and are not necessarily concerned with a connection to the community's natural assets.

*Haphazard development.* Without subdivision regulations, development lacks uniformity. Insuring quality community character becomes increasingly difficult when a review process is absent. Streets are constructed of varying widths and to varying specifications. Infrastructure quality needs to be assured.

*Mixed uses.* Traditional zoning is not typically friendly to mixing of uses. In a small town driven by a tourist economy and with an aging population, providing for a pedestrian friendly mix of office, residential, and commercial uses is highly desirable. Certain areas in the town also require special flexibility that was not addressed in the town's zoning code.



### Community participation

Steep slopes, landscaping, subdivision regulations, and allowance for mixed uses are some of the land development issues that came to light in the course of a comprehensive plan update undertaken by Blue Ridge and the County. The plan—required of local governments every ten years by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs and formally adopted in October 2004—is the product of an extensive public participation process.

Over the course of half a year, eleven public meetings engaging hundreds of people were held. The process involved classic flip-chart brainstorming, data gathering, and public presentations, including power point presentations that helped community participants refine the ideas that eventually adopted as part of the so-

called Short Term Work Program, the community action plan for the next five years. The Short Term Work Program calls for adoption of land use ordinances.

A unique feature of the process was the use of PhotoShop to help participants visualize the impact of change. Street scenes were rendered as they would appear after adoption of proposed land use ordinances (see photos right and below).



## Ordinance adoption

The Blue Ridge City Council adopted all proposed land development ordinances and proposed amendments to existing ordinances.

*Grading and Excavation Ordinance.* The ordinance provides for delegation of authority and sets thresholds for applicability, especially for potentially dangerous situations. The ordinance features both permissive general guidelines and mandatory detailed standards. Maximum slopes, drainage, and terracing are addressed.



*Landscaping Ordinance.* The ordinance requires street frontage landscaping, side yard landscaping, and buffers. Guidelines for parking lot landscaping are also included (see graphic below). A table of native vegetation is included in the appendix.

*Subdivision Ordinance.* Included is the subdivision approval procedure, along with the platting process. Design and improvement standards include lot and street standards. Street features such as signs sidewalks, lights, underground utilities are addressed. The City Council also adopted a separate document detailing infrastructure standards.

*Mixed-Used Development Amendments.* Amendments to the existing zoning ordinance included provision for mixed-use development, in the form of Planned Unit Development. Special consideration for the transitional area between the Central Business District and surrounding residential uses resulted in the adoption of a novel "Special Limited Commercial" zone.

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