

Urban Growth Boundaries

What is it?

An urban growth boundary is a line drawn between urban and rural lands defining the limits to which the urban area will grow. Within the urban growth boundary the local government will support new development at urban densities. This will encourage higher density and infill development within the urban growth boundary, while helping to maintain the rural character of areas lying outside the boundary. Regulatory techniques such as zoning are used to prevent urbanization of the rural lands outside the growth boundary.

How to do it?

1. **Involve key stakeholders.** Decide which groups or individuals in your community are most likely to be affected by (or might oppose) adoption of an urban growth boundary and invite them to participate in the process of developing the boundary. It is particularly important to seek the involvement and cooperation of any separate agencies or authorities that provide critical public facilities and services within your jurisdiction. An effective approach would be to appoint an advisory committee of these key stakeholders to guide development and ongoing implementation of the local urban growth boundary.
2. **Establish desired development patterns.** Review the future land use section of your community's comprehensive plan to identify the development patterns (types and locations of development) that your community is seeking to achieve. Also review the plan to identify land areas that should be set aside from development in order to protect critical environmental resources such as scenic areas, historic properties or prime agricultural lands. If you feel that the comprehensive plan does not provide enough guidance on future development patterns, you may want to utilize a community involvement process and amend the plan to reflect preferred development patterns.
3. **Project expected population growth and development.** Based on market trends and population projections for your community, project the amount of land that will be required to accommodate growth over the next 5 to 7 years.
4. **Delineate the urban growth boundary.** Factor desired development patterns, likely service areas and projected land requirements into drawing an urban growth boundary for your community. Determine how many acres of vacant land are needed to accommodate future population and growth. Draw the boundary so that urban/high density development will not be extended into areas that have been set aside from development.
5. **Officially adopt the boundary.** Be sure to hold the required public hearings (see O.C.G.A 36-66-4) before adoption. Include the boundary on the maps

used for land use and development decisions. This will give the boundary official legal status and, for development review purposes, will make it easy to determine whether any proposed new developments are located outside the urban growth boundary.

6. **Periodically re-evaluate the boundary.** Since the urban growth boundary is drawn to accommodate development over a 5 to 7-year period, it will be necessary to periodically re-evaluate and expand the boundary as necessary to permit ongoing gradual expansion of the urbanized area.

Things to consider before using this tool

- Care must be taken in drawing the urban growth boundary. If the urban growth area is too small, the lack of adequate land for new development will push up the cost of new housing and other developments. This will put your community at a disadvantage in attracting new development and could shift development to neighboring cities or counties. On the other hand, if the urban growth boundary is drawn too large, the boundary may not have the desired effect of discouraging leapfrog developments.
- Ensure that your local comprehensive plan is updated to reflect the urban growth boundary and to include strong policy statements supporting use of the boundary. This will strengthen the legal status of your urban growth boundary, since Georgia courts will typically uphold regulations that can be shown to implement community objectives detailed in the officially adopted local comprehensive plan. It is also important to check that your urban growth and development projections do not conflict with neighboring jurisdictions and local governments in the area.
- Be sure to update your land use regulations to accommodate the new infill development that will result from implementation of the urban growth boundary. If land use codes are not adjusted to permit greater densities and mix of uses, your regulations will be working at cross-purposes and will not be effective in guiding local development patterns as desired.
- When other local governments control areas outside the urban growth boundary, their land use regulations may not support maintenance of the boundary. In such cases you will want to negotiate with them to promote consistency of land use policies.

Additional Information of Farmland Protection

Background

- Is farmland disappearing in your community as development moves further out?
- Does agriculture support your community's economy?
- Do the farmlands in your community serve as a tourist attraction?
- Is your community character at risk due to a loss of farmland to encroaching development?

Georgia farmlands are disappearing at an alarming rate. Prime agricultural lands are constantly gobbled up by new development. In 1997 a study "Farming on the Edge: Sprawling Development Threatens Our Best Farmland" conducted by the American Farmland Trust www.farmland.org found that the state of Georgia paved over 184,000 acres of high quality farmland, ranking third nationally in prime acres lost to development. The loss of these lands is felt statewide, even in rural areas outside of smaller cities. "The problem has spread to some of the more economically depressed areas of the state that you wouldn't normally think of as suffering from runaway growth." (Gerry Cohn, American Farmland Trust) http://www.farmland.org/farmingontheedge/map_georgia.htm

Georgia's loss of farmland is more than just a loss of undeveloped acreage. These agricultural lands offer a variety of public benefits:

- Open Space
- Scenic vistas
- Wildlife habitat
- Food and crop production
- Agriculture related industries, jobs, and tourism
- Protection of environmentally sensitive areas (such as ground water recharge areas)

Farmland protection programs direct growth to areas with existing infrastructure such as paved roads, water, and sewer and away from areas used in farming operations. A variety of methods may be used singly or in combination to preserve agricultural lands. Some of the most important are addressed in this toolkit. The most important consideration in developing any program is the specific needs of the farmers in your area. Before any program can be successful, it must start with the support of those it is intended to benefit. Farmers should, therefore, be participants in developing any farmland protection program from the inception.