

The background features abstract, overlapping green geometric shapes in various shades, creating a modern, layered effect. The shapes are primarily triangles and polygons, some with thin white outlines, set against a white background.

DEKALB TREE ORDINANCE REVISIONS

Challenges, Solutions,
Innovations

Why are our Trees and Urban Forest Special?

Metro Atlanta developed very late, after air-conditioning and new highways

Early farms and development skipped over “unbuildable” steep or rocky slopes, stream corridors

No mass grading for homes until recently -- previously trees were valued for shade



Today's landscape is a patchwork quilt





Post Oak in a
side yard setback 30" dbh





280 years old

Benefits of Trees & Urban Forest

- Trees reduce heat, metro Atlanta is a heat island
 - Heat “cooks” the air, increases pollutants like ozone
 - ATL within one year dropped to “F” in air quality *
- Trees and urban forest greatly reduce stormwater
 - even grass lawns produce 70% stormwater runoff
 - tree canopy over streets & impervious areas is much less effective
 - saves County water and sewer infrastructure costs
- Older trees and soils take exponentially more of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere than young or even mid-aged trees in graded soils

* American Lung Association [report](#), cited levels of air pollution that are “a threat to human health at every stage of life . . . worsening lung and heart disease to shortening lives.”

Shoal Creek



with stormwater >

A study examining Houston region found that each square meter of impervious surface⁸ added to the landscape translates to an average of \$3,602 to \$4,000 in added property damage from floods annually.

Benefits to Human Health

- Researchers “found less death and disease in people who lived near parks or other green space—**even if they didn’t use them.**”
- Trees release compounds into the air that reduce the stress chemical cortisol in the bloodstream, lower blood pressure, pulse rate, and heart rate variability.
- Residents living “on blocks with more trees showed a boost in heart and metabolic health equivalent to what one would experience from a **\$20,000 gain in annual income.**”

High real estate
prices increase
development
pressure -

recent building
trends favor
clearcutting
and mass-
grading



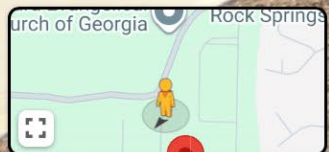
6113 Ruby Falls

Stonecrest, Georgia

Google Street View

Feb 2025

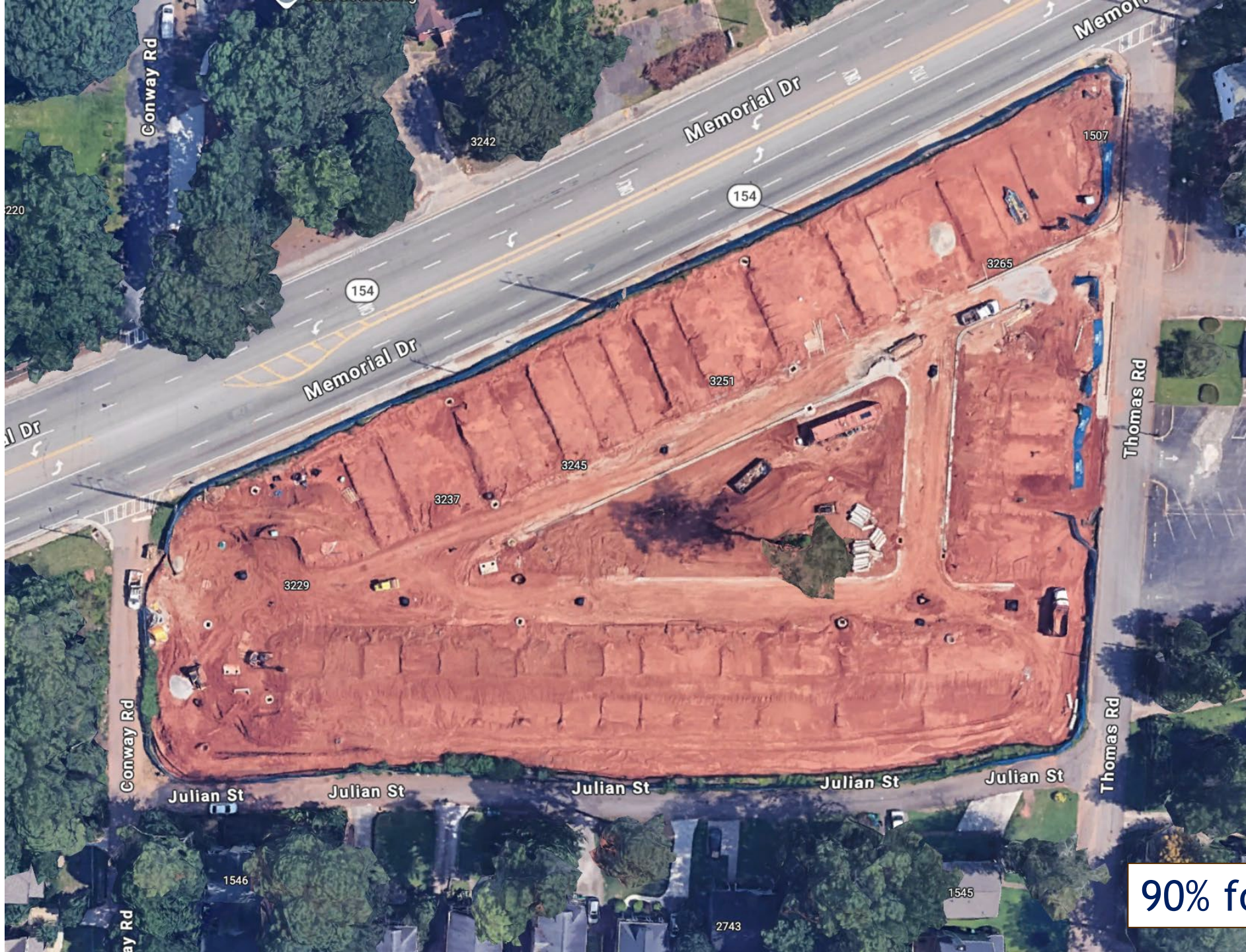
Share



Completely forested in 2019



Completely forested in 2019



90% forested in 2021

Modest-sized houses
are torn down



and replaced by
larger houses

Clearing trees
and grading lot-
line-to-lot-line is
now common



even for
individual
lots



Mature,
healthy
trees and
urban
forest
stands
are cut
to build
detention
ponds

Fully forested in 1999

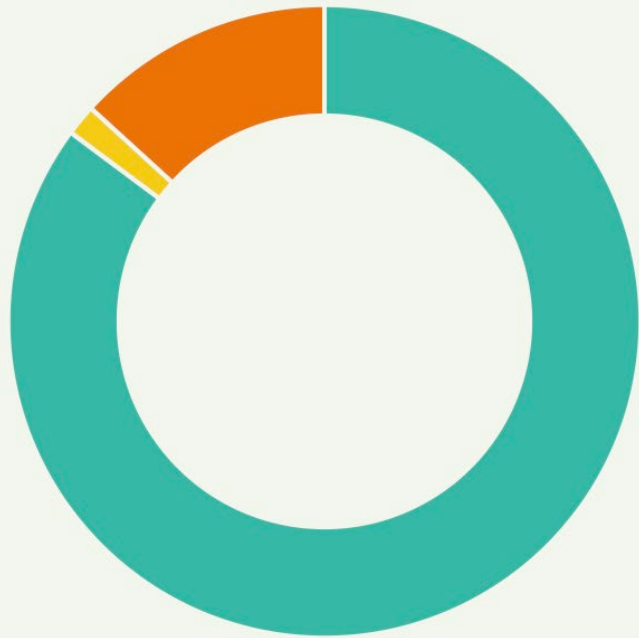


Planted trees, even with years of growth, do not provide the green infrastructure services of mature trees and urban forest



Over 80% tree canopy loss from development Less than 25% gained in re-planting

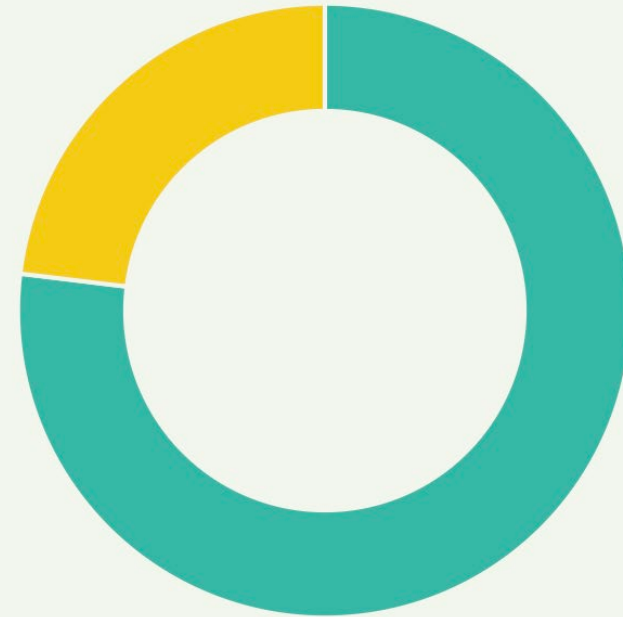
Cause of Canopy Decrease



Recent Development Storms Tree Removal

Cause of Canopy Change in DeKalb's Urban Tree Canopy (Decrease)

Cause of Canopy Increase

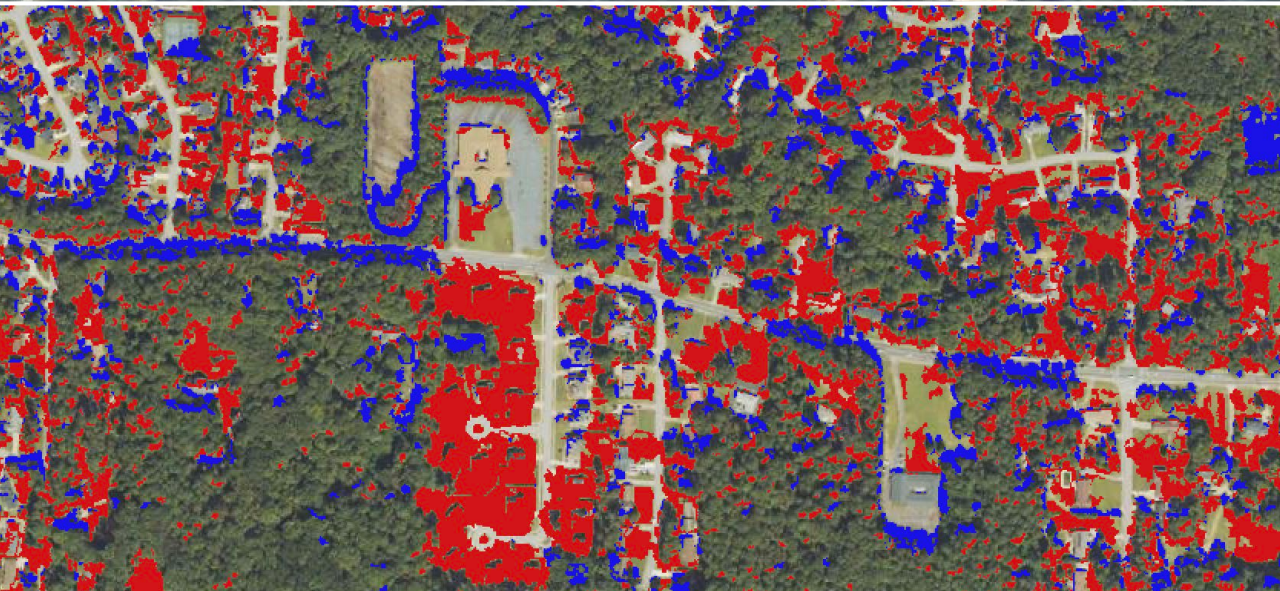


Natural Regeneration New Tree Planting

Cause of Canopy Change in DeKalb's Urban Tree Canopy (Increase)



Blue "canopy gain"
matches shadow areas





**Most of the county's trees
and remaining urban forest
areas are located
on private property,
mostly in single family
residential zoning**

How do we create a **Better Balance**?

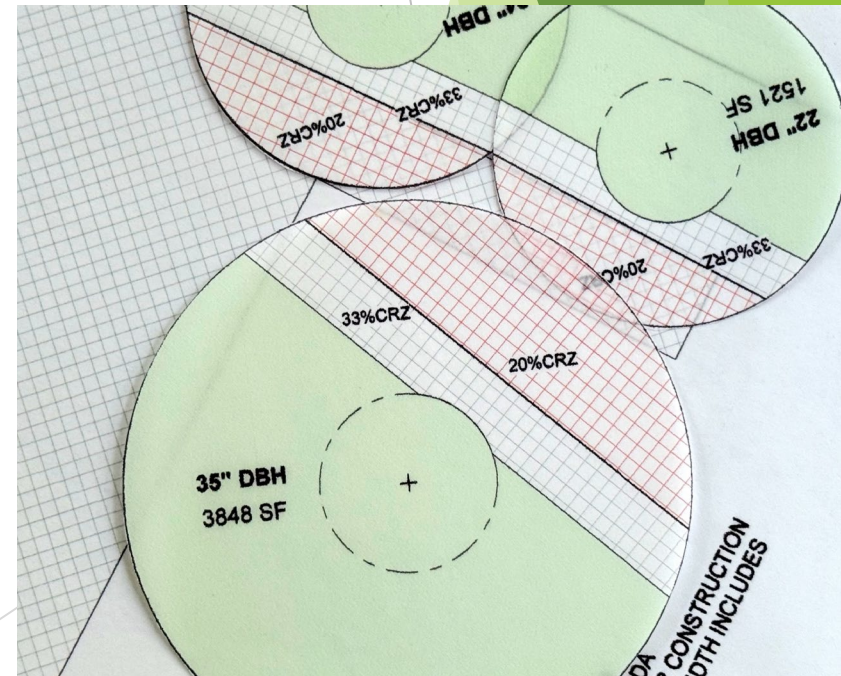
- Plan for trees at earliest stage
- Guarantee areas for building *while* ensuring space for tree protection
- Reduce mass-grading
- Protect highest priority trees first
- Financial incentives to plant more and better trees
- New models for subdivisions



DeKalb staff created the “Sketch Plat”

Approved by County Arborist *before* significant investment in a site plan, revised to include:

- better tree surveys, including priority trees
- show previously graded or impervious areas
- include critical root zones and critical root plate



Priority Trees: of course we can't save all trees, so let's try to protect our best trees

- Healthy, native, long-lived hardwoods
- Older trees and established stands of trees in rich, older soils



Tree Recompense Fees & DeKalb Tree Fund

- planting trees
- purchasing greenspaces
- education and research

* Incentives to plant more and reduce fees



DeKalb County Tree Board

- modeled on City of Atlanta Tree Conservation Commission (since 2004)
- appeals process, with tree/building professionals
- advises DeKalb BOC/staff on state of canopy, greenspace purchases, tree planting strategies
- appointed by BOC, must include: arborists, landscape architects, builders, ecology professionals

Tree Protection

One Size does not fit all

More flexibility:

Single Family

Residential Subdivisions

Less flexibility:

Multifamily, Mixed Use

Commercial, Industrial



Single family residential building *with* trees

1. Save percentage of trees, especially priority trees (dbh)
2. Use Sustainable Footprint, saving trees outside the area of lot coverage (impervious area)



Tree Removal Permits

for trees over 6" diameter

- Imminent Danger
- Dead, Dying, Hazardous
- Demolition and Construction
- County/Public Projects
- Nuisance, Undesirable
- Homeowner exception
- No fees



Homeowner exception

- one healthy non-priority tree *or* 3 pine trees (under 10”) every 2 years
- no permit fee
- no recompense fee
- no replanting required (*unless large number of trees removed*)
- in addition to hazardous and nuisance tree removal

Subdivisions: Innovative Approach “Cluster Design”

- Density neutral at the same time saving significant areas of greenspace while building the same number of units
- Option to allow extra units -- **if affordable**
- Greenspace areas permanently protected “mini parks”



Density Neutral
“Cluster Design”

EAST LAKE COMMONS
A CONSERVATION COMMUNITY

A Cohousing Community, Farm and Wildlife Habitat
(approximately 20 acres with 60% preserved as wildlife habitat)

© 2013 Google



Tree Canopy Study Summary Notes

“DeKalb’s extensive tree canopy and green spaces contribute significantly to the county’s quality of life and appeal as part of a major metropolitan area.”

“This appeal drives ongoing development, which can result in tree loss . . .”

“. . . healthy balance between growth and tree canopy cover will be essential to maintaining DeKalb's long-term livability, environmental resilience, and quality of life for residents.”

Can we save every tree? - no

Can we save more trees *and* still build luxury to affordable homes, and everything in between?

- yes



Win - Win

We don't have to choose between trees and quality homes, we need both.



For More Information

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[dekalbcountyga.gov/
government/board-of commissioners](http://dekalbcountyga.gov/government/board-of-commissioners)

On-line
Questionnaire >

