

Focus Group Meetings

Harris County Unified Development Code Update

Summary of Focus Group and Stakeholder Meetings

This document summarizes discussions that took place with a variety of stakeholders who live and/or work in Harris County. Focus Groups are comprised of stakeholders who have experience using or administering Harris County's existing land development codes and can provide technical expertise on certain topics. Over 30 stakeholders were organized into four Focus Groups to enable free exchange of information and ideas in a small group setting. Focus Group meetings took place between late July and early September and included representatives from the Harris County Board of Health, Harris County Development Authority, Harris County Public Works, Harris County Water Works, Columbus Water Works, Harris County Volunteer Fire Department, Harris County School System, Harris County Chamber of Commerce, Harris County Board of Zoning Adjustments, local banks, local landowners, local farmers, local business owners, developers, home builders, land surveyors, and engineers. Discussions focused on emerging zoning issues, specific zoning/development concerns, and desired outcomes for the land development code update. More information on the Focus Groups is provided at the end of this summary.

The information gathered will be used to complement and inform the technical analysis of Harris County codes that will result in recommendations. It should be noted that there were some conflicting perspectives brought up in these discussions, which is to be expected in this type of process. Key discussion topics and comments are organized into different categories (green text) as detailed below.

Category 1: Development Standards & Strategic Development

Groups discussed key issues as they relate to developing land in Harris County, including lot size, building location and height, and regulations for accessory structures. There were some differences of opinion among discussion participants. Primary issues, concerns, and ideas that were identified are listed below:

- Lot size:
 - Larger lot sizes are appropriate in more rural parts of the county, but smaller lot sizes may be appropriate in certain locations, especially where public water/sewer is already available.
 - It is important to consider more diverse options for residential development than the universally applied 2-acre minimum lot size; Harris County needs more options than "one size fits all" lot size requirement.
 - There need to be options and regulations for both larger and smaller lots. Different populations want different types of lots (families vs. senior population, rural vs. suburban living, etc.).
 - The minimum 2-acre lot size requirement across the board increases sprawl and results in inefficient development.
 - From a real estate standpoint, smaller lot sizes do not equate to low-income housing; very high value subdivisions can be constructed with less than 2-acre lots.

- The 2-acre minimum lot size is not always necessary to accommodate septic systems. In certain parts of Harris County, topographic and soil conditions are suitable for development on smaller lots (1 acre or smaller).
- In Harris County, it is not going to be possible to get much smaller than 1 acre lots due to wastewater treatment/septic system options available in Georgia, and soil conditions and perc rates in Harris County. However, it is very rare that a full 2-acres is required in a lot in Harris County in order to meet Health Department standards for septic.
- Even if lot sizes smaller than 2 acres are permitted, average lot size will still be larger than minimum due to topographic and soil conditions, in many cases.
- Current subdivisions that contain 1-acre lots are reported to have had many problems attributed to failed septic systems, soils, etc., which lead to the 2-acre minimum policy.
- If Harris County wants to maintain larger lot sizes, they should be incentivized; allow more rural infrastructure, allow gravel roads, fewer restrictions on barn/agricultural structures (location, etc.), allow less restrictions on larger, rural lots (i.e., min. 5 acres).
- Minor and major subdivisions:
 - Evaluate definitions and standards for major and minor subdivisions in the code.
 - 5+ lots is a considered a major subdivision; opinion that this minimum number should increase.
 - Current codes for minor subdivisions have loopholes allowing development permits to be pulled for multiple adjacent minor subdivisions by the same property owner or developer to avoid going through the development process, resulting in a small major subdivision.
- Lot standards (setbacks, dimensions, types of lots):
 - Consider increasing setback requirements in some districts to maintain rural character and provide more buffer between adjacent properties vs. only requiring larger minimum lot size (which typically ends up with suburban feel front setbacks and huge, deep back yards).
 - Consider differentiating standards for subdivisions vs. standards for single lots in rural/agricultural areas.
 - Harris County has requirements for lot width, minimum road frontage and building line width; need to clarify where these requirements apply. In some cases, it is consistent 50-feet off the right-of way (ROW), in other cases, as set by developer. In some cases, Harris County has been OK with flag lots, in other cases not. The inconsistency of how these requirements are interpreted is a key issue.
 - Allow flexible lot widths when needed due to topographic conditions of site.
 - Lot ratio requirement may not work in Harris County due to topography and soil conditions (as applied to septic system design). Most tracts of land in the county are shaped irregularly to begin with, so requiring a regular lot length to width ratio would be a challenge.
 - Subdividing lots can end up with unusual-shaped lots when trying to meet requirements for road frontage, minimum acreage, and other development standards.
 - Continue to allow flag lots, they are sometimes necessary when subdividing property.

- Evaluate standards for corner lots (see related comments about accessory structures).
- Differentiate larger tracts of land/large family lots from suburban development/neighborhood lots need less or different restrictions. Allow more flexibility as an incentive to retain large rural lots (as opposed to subdividing). Key factors include:
 - Issues with road frontage requirements;
 - Issues with restrictions on development private/family tracts on private roads or easements; and
 - Need of a provision to allow joint use driveways on an easement on family property (must be careful to ensure this would not impact future property owners who may not be related, or a similar situation when the land ownership changes hands).
- Accessory structures:
 - Regulations for accessory structures in agricultural/rural zoning districts of a certain acreage should be different than those meant for subdivision development. Existing regulations for accessory structures appear to be written primarily for the subdivision scenarios.
 - There is a lot of agricultural land in Harris County. Often, agricultural and rural land has different needs and different types of typical structures than lots in a subdivision – these should be treated differently.
 - Consider allowing a less restrictive approach to accessory structures (e.g., agricultural structures, barns, pools, etc.) for larger lots that are not part of a major subdivision.
 - Some barn structures need laundry facilities, restrooms, etc. to accommodate use (e.g., laundry associated with horses; restrooms for agritourism visitors, etc.).
 - Allow exception for placement of accessory structures (sheds, pools, etc.) in side yard of corner lots; this is a common issue due to large/very large parcels that are technically corner lots and consistently leads to variance requests.
- General:
 - Ensure that zoning and development regulations do not take away constitutional private property rights.
 - Protecting property rights includes protecting landowners from adjacent adverse uses as well, which inevitably leads to some restrictions on use of private property.
 - Issues with the definition of “principal structure” cause problems in rural areas, where land is not used for a residence, but may have small structure. Landowners cannot get electricity connected to a building on a property that the county defines as an accessory structure, like a barn, for example. There is a need to specifically and appropriately clarify requirements to get power connection to a building on a property.
- Strategic development:
 - Harris County’s natural beauty and rural nature should be maintained and managed wisely. Currently, it seems that the county is rapidly developing in an unmanaged, sprawl-like fashion, where the natural beauty is being chopped up into 2-acre road frontages throughout the county.
 - Be mindful of the urbanization impact to rural area.

- Higher density development must be managed appropriately and should only occur where it can be supported by existing infrastructure (water/sewer/roads), typically in the southern portion of the county (near Harris/Muscogee county line) where existing utilities are available, and also potentially around incorporated areas with water/sewer (Hamilton, Pine Mountain, Callaway Gardens, etc.).
- Other areas in Harris County can also be leveraged for development/economic development, including the I-185 corridor/interchanges and identified access points into the county
- Harris County needs to guide/steer development (especially more dense development) to areas where it is appropriate, by providing incentives to develop in these areas or allowing certain types of planned unit developments.
- Commercial development (i.e., grocery stores) will not come to Harris County until we have adequate density of housing/population of residents to support desired commercial development. Allowing managed dense development is key to attracting commercial development that can share the tax burden.
- A big drawback for commercial development in Harris County is the lack of available public sewer. Without access to public sewer, commercial development would require enormous amounts of land to accommodate on-site requirements for sewage/septic.
- Currently, the majority of tax burden is on homeowners. There is a need to balance residential and commercial development to diversify the tax base. If development continues as it is now, the tax burden on property owners will continue to increase.
- Evaluate opportunities to incentivize certain types of development in County.
- Need intergovernmental coordination to support and incentivize development.
- Harris County needs an Economic Development Plan to help guide development and attract certain commercial development (grocery stores, etc.); current growth patterns are inefficiently eating up land.
- While schools are not currently overcrowded, there is potential for some schools to reach capacity before others due to development patterns and pace of development in certain areas. The issue of school capacity and funding for school expansion is more complex than just new development.

Category 2: Project Design Standards

Discussion on project design standards was focused on standards for new roads, existing and proposed public water/sewer utilities, buffers and tree preservation, and infrastructure funding. There were some conflicting perspectives in these discussions. Primary issues, concerns, or ideas that were identified are listed below:

- Roads:
 - Curb and gutter road design is appropriate for some types of development in the county, but not everywhere. There is need to incorporate a threshold (# of homes and/or location, etc.) if this becomes a requirement. Curb and gutter design would replace side swales and driveway pipes that have caused maintenance issues and limited available space for utilities in ROW.
 - Need to ensure there is adequate room for all utility providers in ROW of new roads.

- Improve standards for pavement construction, especially for (longer duration) phased development. Current issues result from light duty subdivision roads being subjected to heavy equipment during additional phases of subdivision construction. Top road layer should be the final step, after all phases of development are complete. Also, require a binder in standards for road construction.
- Clarify or add requirements for acceleration/deceleration lanes for new development (i.e., subdivision entrances). These should be required for public safety reasons, in a scenario where a dangerous intersection or similar circumstance is created. Currently, the County can only require accel/decel lanes on state routes. Evaluate best practices in other communities to see how the County could incorporate similar standards to address this issue.
- Consider alternate (less expensive) road standards/requirements for truly rural subdivisions (e.g. 5 acre lots or larger).
- Dead-end roads/cul-de-sac length:
 - Consistent issues meeting the current 500 ft maximum length requirement.
 - Need a process for exceptions/variance to address this common issue.
 - Limiting the length of a dead-end road can be more challenging for roads with larger lots.
- Requirements for number of entrances (ingress/egress) into a subdivision:
 - The current ordinance is unclear on this requirement.
 - The standard for requiring more than one entrance to a subdivision is not clear.
 - The number of lots allowed for one entrance in a subdivision should not be limited.
 - If the County restricts the number of lots permitted on a single entrance in developments, would that also restrict individuals subdividing property on existing streets?
 - There needs to be an appropriately small number of homes allowable on one entrance for public safety reasons to avoid having too many homes where people may be blocked in or restricted from access to utilities for certain duration. A minimum of 2 entrances should be planned for in a way that will work well for public safety. Harris County should consider appropriate limit on the number of homes served by one entrance, requiring adjacent subdivisions to tie into each other (i.e., phased developments), or similar methods to ensure adequate ingress/egress points are provided.
 - Larger developments need emergency access easements.
- Sewer utilities:
 - Need solutions to address the lack of available public sewer, such as a package wastewater system approach. However, in Harris County (and Georgia overall), there are not currently good options for sewer beyond public sewer and standard septic systems.
 - For denser developments, a force main sewer connection allows for commercial development and smaller lots to accommodate residents who want to live in this type of environment.

- Long-range planning for sewer and other utilities should be considered when implementing new infrastructure. Sewer mains should be sized appropriately for excess capacity beyond a single development.
- Sewer infrastructure for new development (especially mixed-use/higher intensity) must be considered in early stages of development process.
- Sewer expansion should be limited and carefully managed by the County to protect the rural character of Harris County.
- Water utilities:
 - Water capacity should be addressed early in the development process to ensure there is adequate capacity to support development.
 - The Harris County water system was not designed/developed to support the kind of development that is happening. Small water lines will have to be upgraded to handle continued development, especially with large new developments. The water department will be required to maintain and upgrade the system with limited financial capacity.
- Buffers and tree preservation:
 - Natural buffers could be required around more dense development so as to not encroach on the neighboring property owners' natural peace and quiet.
 - New development – especially more dense – should focus on retaining existing wooded areas and minimizing large clear cutting for lawns, etc.
 - In order to protect and enhance the rural natural beauty of the county, substantial natural, vegetative buffers should be required along roadways to screen development from public ROW.
 - Consider implementing open space requirements for certain types of developments.
 - More dense development (subdivisions; various types of planned unit development) should be required to have natural buffer/greenbelt and similar standards to protect existing rural character.
- Water quality & conservation:
 - Conservation easements for natural, vegetative buffers along perennial and intermittent streams would be good for protecting water quality of surface waters in the county.
- Infrastructure funding:
 - This is an issue of the burden on developers vs. County finances vs. taxpayers.
 - Infrastructure planning should be long-term focused, and not only encompass a single development; infrastructure should be sized for future capacity.
 - Impact Fees are an issue for Harris County to address. (Note: While impact fees would be primarily addressed outside of the UDC update process, they would be referenced in the UDC if the County chooses to implement impact fees in the future.)
 - Impact fees should be considered for sewer and dense development to offset the County's operation and maintenance and capacity costs.
 - Requiring impact fees in addition to curb/ gutter and similar design standards puts most financial burden on developers vs. distributing burden; could be prohibitive to future development in the county if not properly balanced.

- Financial burden of infrastructure for new development needs to be balanced between developer and County.
- Impact fees are good to promote growth IF done correctly.
- Bonds:
 - Need appropriate bonds in place for road development – the current requirement is too low.
 - Clarify bond requirements and timeframe.

Category 3: Zoning Districts & Planned Development

Discussion about specific Zoning Districts and types of planned development ties directly to other discussion categories in this summary. This section details discussion on specific types of development. Primary issues, concerns, or ideas that were identified are listed below:

- Conservation subdivisions are:
 - Appropriate in Harris County given varying terrain throughout the county;
 - Important to ensure these developments actually result in permanently preserved open space;
 - Cost efficient in terms of providing infrastructure requiring less roads and allows more collective open space; and
 - Proven, like successful examples in Coweta County.
- Senior housing/retirement developments:
 - Accommodate aging population that may want smaller lots;
 - Allow smaller lot sizes that would require less maintenance which is appropriate for this population; and
 - Consider regulations specific to senior housing developments.
- Planned Residential Developments (PRD):
 - Existing PRD regulations need improvements and modifications;
 - PRD or similar types of planned developments should be allowed to have commercial component to serve community; commercial component could be tied to buildout of residential units (i.e., mixed-use development); and
 - Consider allowing developer to use adjacent parcels for commercial, if necessary (or similar alternative).
- Consider outside examples for successful rural subdivision design (Serenbe; Old Town; Palmetto – The Reserve; adjacent municipalities)
- Subdivisions that are more dense should have additional requirements for buffers and conservation areas.

Category 4: Land Use

Discussion around land use and zoning districts primarily focused on identifying issues related to particular land uses. In addition, participants discussed what land uses or topics are not currently addressed in the land development codes that need to be addressed in the update. In addition, the possibility of certain uses to support and attract tourism to the county was discussed. Primary issues, concerns, or ideas that were identified are listed below:

- Uses that are not addressed in current codes (and thereby prohibited) and that should be addressed or considered in the update include the following (regulations could also be added as needed to properly regulate the use):
 - Food Trucks:
 - Need food truck regulations; this use should be allowed in more areas and not only permitted through a special event permit.
 - Short term rentals:
 - Add regulations to accommodate short term rentals (AirBnB, etc.); could benefit Harris County economically.
 - GA Power may prohibit rentals on leased lots.
 - Gaming and hunting:
 - Improve regulations and add flexibility for this type of use. Harris County has high quality hunting opportunities that landowners could capitalize on to potentially increase property values. Need to be able to have simple structures/uses commonly associated with hunting – and without going through special use permitting (or similar) process.
 - Agritourism uses:
 - Agritourism serves the general public and requires certain uses and structures to support (restrooms, snack shops, etc.). Improve current regulations to accommodate agritourism needs – need some level of flexibility in categorizing agritourism uses.
 - Accommodate wineries, breweries, distilleries (manufacturing & taste room components).
 - Allow in agricultural zoning and elsewhere.
 - Timber farming:
 - Current regulations seem too restrictive (when you can/cannot harvest, outdoor burning bans, etc.).
 - Allow accessory uses for timber land (hunting/gaming, etc.).
 - Home Occupations:
 - Evaluate restrictions in rural residential areas vs. subdivisions; rural home occupations should be able to have less restrictions – especially if dwelling cannot be seen from public view.
 - Dog kennels:
 - Current restrictions on number of dogs a landowner is allowed to have restricts use of property.
 - Review and improve standards for dog kennels.
 - Accessory dwelling units:
 - Tiny houses / RV on property.
 - Living spaces in barns (“barn-ominiums”).
 - Recreational facilities (e.g., sports fields) as a commercial use:
 - Need to clarify where use is permitted and associated restrictions (lighting, noise, traffic, etc.).
 - Tattoo parlors

- Current code does not address this use, but there have been several inquiries about if and where tattoo parlors are permitted in the county.
- Issues with “exclusionary zoning”:
 - Currently, if not specifically permitted in the Zoning Ordinance, a use is prohibited. Need to clarify and update permitted uses in a way that is more current, complete and accurate – many new land uses are not in the existing ordinance.
 - Consider alternative ways to address or accommodate land uses that are not mentioned in the code.
- Evaluate uses that are allowed by right, vs. those that require Special Use Permit.

Category 5: Permitting, Procedures, & Public Involvement.

Issues, concerns, and ideas related to permitting and procedures included discussion on zoning and development application requirements, development review process, administrative review process, and the overall timeline for various types of zoning and development applications. Primary issues, concerns, or ideas that were identified are listed below:

- The County needs to improve communication and information sharing with the public about what is going on in zoning and development processes.
- Concern about what appears to be inconsistent process of approving development – the same regulations are interpreted differently by different people.
- Harris County’s development application review process seems extremely long and inefficient compared to other counties (preliminary plat applications, rezoning applications, special use permits, etc.).
- Preliminary Plat review process seem inefficient; the process should be accomplished through administrative review vs. review by Planning Commission. In adjacent counties (Muscogee, Coweta), public meetings (Planning Commission) for plat review are not required.
- Consider outsourcing preliminary plat reviews (similar to how engineer review is outsourced).
- Issues with development review and approval process – a properly permitted development can be held up in the process due to political reasons.
- Review and consider increasing timeframe requirements for preliminary plats (currently must get renewed every year, a timeframe that is not always realistic in development process).
- Permits seem to be required for “every little thing” – the process to use and develop your land has become very cumbersome.
- Clarify variance criteria.
- Need firm guidelines/application checklist for all zoning and development applications that staff, review boards, and developers can follow. Look to other counties for successful examples of review and approval process for zoning and development applications.
- Improve efficiency of the overall development application process; Harris County should allow electronic submittals vs. providing so many hard copies at every stage of review.
- Applicants encounter problems getting some developments approved when there is pushback from the general public, even if the development meets all County criteria.
- Need to improve intergovernmental communication when a development involves multiple jurisdictions. Lack of clarity and communication can lead to additional, unnecessary development costs.

Category 6: UDC Content, Organization, and Interpretation

Primary concerns regarding code content organization and interpretation were related to the need to remove and update vague/conflicting language in the existing land development codes in order to minimize the need for interpretation of the codes by County staff and appointed and elected officials.

Primary issues, concerns, or ideas that were identified are listed below:

- Opinion that there has been inconsistent interpretation and application of land development codes. It is important [for staff and appointed and elected officials] to be fair and equitable in codes implementation; don't just give in to the 'loudest voices.' In the past, pressure from the 'loudest voices' have tended to prevail, whether or not it is what is best for the future of the County.
- Code language should be extremely clear and reliably implemented to minimize the need for interpretation and involvement of opinions from review boards; the inconsistent interpretation/application of regulations is a big issue.
- Regulations should be more objective, remove subjectivity, and facilitate development according to professional standards.
- Address loopholes in standards. Loopholes have been identified throughout the zoning ordinance (e.g., minor/major subdivision regulations, accessory structures/barns, etc.).
- Ensure Harris County development regulations are consistent with Health Department regulations (i.e., subdivision definitions); need clarity and consistency between County regulations and Health Department requirements, and more continuity with state requirements.
- Make the Harris County Zoning Map and similar information available to review online.

Focus Group Participants:

Focus Groups participants represented a range of technical expertise and provided input on specific topics relevant to their areas of expertise. The feedback received from these groups will be balanced with and integrated into feedback received from other engagement efforts, including the community survey and project-related public meetings and workshops. As mentioned previously, participants were organized into four Focus Groups, as described below. The following provides an overview of Focus Groups including participating entities/agencies/organizations.

Group A

Group A included representatives from several local organizations and agencies that regularly review development applications for proposed development in Harris County (preliminary plats, final plats, etc.) and/or have topic familiarity with the land development codes and local trends in current land uses and economic development. In addition to detailed aspects of zoning, strategic growth issues and needs were discussed, including school capacity and the need to balance future growth with preserving rural landscape. Representatives from the following organizations were included in Group A:

- Harris County Board of Health
- Harris County School System
- Harris County Chamber of Commerce
- Peoples First Bank, Commercial Lending

Group B

Representatives from a variety of county departments and related organizations were consulted to provide technical input on implementation and management of infrastructure for existing and new development, including water systems, sewer and septic systems, public safety networks, and transportation systems (roads). In addition, insight was provided on types of variance requests regularly reviewed by the BZA. Representatives from the following departments and organizations were included in Group B:

- Harris County Water Works
- Columbus Water Works
- Harris County Public Works Department
- Harris County Volunteer Fire Department
- Harris County Board of Zoning Adjustments (BZA)
- Harris County Development Authority

Group C

Local landowners, especially farmers and agritourism business owners, were consulted to gain a deeper understanding of local issues impacting farms and agritourism. Discussion explored potential ideas on ways to promote and preserve agricultural uses in a rural county. Participants also provided insight on local land development regulations that impact their business or property.

- Oakhurst Farms
- Mountain Oak Mill
- Four additional large lot landowners and farmers/ranchers

Group D

Group D included representatives from the land development sector: developers, home builders, general contractors, land surveyors, engineers, and land planners. In addition to discussing common technical issues in local land development codes and the local development process, these participants shared experiences based on regular use of the land development codes and participation in the permitting and procedures process. Discussion involved Group D perspective on issues, needs and ideas for improving general usability of the codes. The following companies and organizations were included in in Group D:

- Home Builders' Association Board
- Georgia Power (Southern Company)
- Hughston Homes
- Donald Bowles Inc
- BeeSmart Builders, LLC
- Haralson & Adams, LLC
- Bolt Engineering
- DBE Development
- Moon Meeks & Associates, Inc.
- Bill Hart Inc., General Contractor
- Brock Jones Inc., General Contractor