

**HABERSHAM COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS &
HABERSHAM COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION
JOINT WORK SESSION MINUTES
2:00 P.M., TUESDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2025
HABERSHAM COUNTY ADMINISTRATIVE BUILDING
EXECUTIVE CONFERENCE ROOM
130 JACOB'S WAY, CLARKESVILLE, GA 30523**

A quorum of the Habersham County Board of Commissioners held a joint work session with a quorum of the Habersham County Planning Commission on Tuesday, December 9th at 2:00 p.m. in the Executive Conference Room of the Habersham County Administrative Building located at 130 Jacob's Way, Clarkesville, GA 30523.

Present from the Habersham County Board of Commissioners was Chairman Jimmy Tench, Commissioner Ty Akins and Commissioner Kelly Woodall.

Absent from the Board of Commissioners was Vice Chairman Bruce Harkness and Commissioner Dustin Mealor due to prior work obligations.

Present from the Habersham County Planning Commission was Chairman D. Higgins, Vice Chairman Jim Kiger, Jessie Owensby, Jason Smith, Greg Hill and Larry Phillips.

Absent from Planning Commission was member Richard Thornton due to resignation prior to this work session occurring.

County Manager Tim Sims, Planning Director Mike Beecham, County Clerk Brandalin Carnes, additional staff, media and members of the public were present.

Habersham County Board of Commissioners Chairman Jimmy Tench called the meeting to order on behalf of the Board of Commissioners at 2:03 p.m.

Habersham County Planning Commission Vice Chairman Jim Kiger called the meeting to order on behalf of the Planning Commission at 2:03 p.m.

TOPICS OF DISCUSSIONS

a. Unified Development Ordinance

The purpose of this work session was to coordinate goals and establish guiding principles for revising the Comprehensive Plan and the county zoning ordinance. Planning Director Mike Beecham explained that the Comprehensive Plan serves as the county's twenty-year roadmap for growth, land use, and infrastructure investment. It provides a policy framework for how development should occur and forms the foundation for zoning and subdivision decisions.

He reported that during recent community engagement sessions, residents expressed strong support for maintaining the county's rural and agricultural identity, particularly in the northern and western parts of the county, including areas bordering the Chattahoochee River.

Members of both Commissions agreed that future growth should be directed toward existing transportation corridors and areas near incorporated municipalities. This approach would protect the county's rural character, limit suburban sprawl, and allow more efficient use of existing infrastructure. Several participants observed that while the county cannot legally prohibit new development, it can guide the pace and form of growth through thoughtful land use policy and zoning updates.

Infrastructure and Financial Capacity

A significant portion of the discussion focused on the county's limited financial resources. Habersham County is one of around eight counties in the state of Georgia that doesn't receive revenue from the 1% local option sales tax (LOST). This is due to the fact that it was decided years ago to give the LOST to the school system. This means that Habersham County relies primarily on property taxes to fund public services. This structure limits the county's ability to expand or improve roads, fire protection, and other essential infrastructure.

Several participants expressed concern that continued high-density growth would place additional strain on these systems. One commissioner noted that current services are already near capacity. Members emphasized that the county must balance growth with its financial limitations and plan proactively rather than reactively. The consensus was that new development should be aligned with available resources and supported by sound fiscal planning.

Rural Density and Lot Size Standards

The group discussed maintaining low-density development in rural parts of the county. Members expressed support for increasing minimum lot sizes in the northern and western zones to ten acres in order to preserve agricultural land and open space.

It was agreed that property owners should retain the ability to subdivide land for immediate family members under limited exceptions. Participants stressed that this flexibility should serve family needs rather than encourage speculative development. One member summarized the goal by stating that the county should protect open space while allowing families to remain on their land.

Road and Infrastructure Standards

Planning staff presented proposed changes to road construction standards for new developments. The new requirements would include an eight-inch base, a two-inch asphalt layer, and a one-and-a-half-inch topcoat. Developers would also be required to post an eighteen-month maintenance bond to ensure the quality of subdivision roads after completion.

Several members agreed that the county should no longer accept subdivision roads into the county-maintained system. Instead, new neighborhoods would be required to establish homeowners' associations responsible for maintaining internal roads and other common areas. This policy would make future subdivisions self-sustaining and prevent the creation of long-term maintenance obligations for taxpayers.

Impact Fees and Development Studies

The planning director informed both boards that the county plans to conduct an impact fee study in 2026. The purpose of the study is to determine fair and appropriate fees for developers whose projects create additional demand for public infrastructure and services.

It was also agreed that large developments should be required to complete detailed impact and traffic studies. These studies would evaluate the effects of proposed developments on surrounding roads, schools, utilities, and emergency services within approximately one mile of the project site. Members supported this requirement as a way to ensure that development contributes proportionately to the costs it generates.

Housing Affordability and Density

The boards discussed the challenge of maintaining housing affordability while preserving rural character. Members acknowledged that large lot requirements can make new homes more expensive and less accessible.

to young families. However, it was generally agreed that higher-density or affordable housing options are better suited for municipalities, where infrastructure and services already exist.

The county's goal is to focus on low-density, high-quality residential development in unincorporated areas while allowing the cities to accommodate denser, more affordable housing options.

Conservation Subdivisions

The concept of conservation subdivisions was reviewed. This design approach allows smaller individual lots in exchange for dedicated open space within a development. While participants acknowledged that conservation subdivisions can have environmental and aesthetic benefits, several noted that they are practical only in areas with access to public sewer service.

The consensus was to continue allowing conservation subdivisions in the ordinance but not to promote them as the standard model for rural development.

Landscaping and Tree Preservation Ordinance

Members discussed the forthcoming landscaping and tree preservation ordinance. The proposed policy will restrict clear-cutting, require replanting of trees, and establish standards for preserving mature vegetation. Developers will be required to provide landscaping in new subdivisions, including the planting of at least two or three trees per yard with a minimum trunk caliper of three inches.

Responsibility for enforcement will rest with homeowners' associations once developments are completed. The group viewed these standards as important for maintaining the county's natural character and visual appeal.

Homeowners' Associations and Neighborhood Standards

All new subdivisions will be required to form mandatory homeowners' associations. These associations will be responsible for maintaining roads, enforcing aesthetic and maintenance standards, and overseeing shared green spaces. Members expressed strong support for this policy, noting that it ensures developments remain well maintained without adding long-term responsibilities for county departments.

Participants also discussed requiring open space and recreation areas in all new subdivisions. One member summarized this position by stating that neighborhoods built in the unincorporated county should be attractive, durable, and self-sustaining.

Commercial Development Standards

The boards next discussed the location and appearance of future commercial development. Members agreed that new commercial projects should be limited to major state highway corridors such as Highways 115, 17, and 105.

Commercial developments will be subject to enhanced design and landscaping requirements, including paved parking areas, architectural facades using brick or stone materials, and consistent landscape buffers. These standards are intended to improve the appearance of commercial corridors and maintain the county's overall aesthetic quality.

Special Uses and Event Venues

The boards reviewed the increasing number of special-use applications for retreat centers, campgrounds, and event venues in rural areas. It was agreed that these types of uses require stricter oversight. The new

ordinance will likely include enhanced permitting requirements and conditions to address potential issues such as noise, traffic, and environmental impact.

Adult entertainment uses were also discussed briefly. While the county cannot prohibit these businesses entirely, members agreed that they should be limited to specific zoning districts and subject to strict operational standards.

Manufactured and Modular Housing Policies

The meeting included discussion of policies governing manufactured and modular homes. It was proposed that manufactured homes older than seven years should not be allowed for installation in the county. Members also agreed that new mobile home parks should not be approved in the foreseeable future.

Modular homes constructed to state building codes would remain permitted. For new subdivisions, minimum home sizes would be set at 1,800 square feet for single-story residences and 1,500 square feet for the first floor of two-story homes.

Water Supply and Resource Capacity

Concerns were raised about the county's dependence on nearby cities for water service. Municipal providers such as Cornelia, Baldwin, and Demorest are approaching capacity, creating potential limitations for future growth.

The boards agreed that water availability should play a key role in determining the location and scale of future development, particularly for industrial and large residential projects.

Development Moratorium and Next Steps

The group discussed the current moratorium on new development, which is in effect through February 2026. The goal is to finalize the new zoning ordinance and related planning policies before the moratorium expires. Members acknowledged that an extension may be necessary if additional time is required to complete the revisions.

Closing Discussion and Consensus

The meeting concluded with general agreement on the direction of county growth policy. Members emphasized the importance of preserving the county's rural landscape, maintaining high development standards, and directing higher-density growth toward incorporated cities where infrastructure and services can support it.

Several participants stressed the need to focus on long-term sustainability rather than short-term expansion. One member summarized the shared sentiment by noting that the county does not have the resources to support unchecked subdivision development, particularly in the northern part of the county.

The meeting adjourned with consensus that these principles will guide the drafting of updated planning and zoning regulations in early 2026.

ADJOURN

Motion by Habersham County Planning Commission Chairman D. Higgins, seconded by Planning Commission member Jason Smith, and voted unanimously (6-0) to adjourn the work session on behalf of the Planning Commission at 3:47 p.m.

Motion by Habersham County Commissioner Kelly Woodall, seconded by Commissioner Ty Akins, and voted unanimously (3-0) to adjourn the work session on behalf of the Habersham County Board of Commissioners at 3:47 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

By: _____
Jimmy Tench, Commission Chairman

Attest: _____
Brandalin Carnes, County Clerk