

# STATE OF GEORGIA ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNING CRITERIA DATABASE

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*REFERENCE:* *Proceedings of the 1995 Georgia Water Resources Conference*, held April 11 and 12, 1995, at The University of Georgia, Kathryn J. Hatcher, Editor, Carl Vinson Institute of Government, The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

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**Abstract.** The Environmental Planning Criteria Database keeps records on those jurisdictions that have had comprehensive plans approved by the Department of Community Affairs (DCA). The database lists the recommended protection measures, as outlined in the Environmental Planning Criteria (Georgia Department of Natural Resources), that the jurisdictions have committed to implement at some point in order to address environmental resource protection.

The results of the database show that only 18 % of all jurisdictions with water supply watersheds, 19% of jurisdictions with groundwater recharge areas and just 9% of those with river corridors have stated that they would implement all of the recommended protection measures. The numbers are larger for those jurisdictions choosing to implement some portion of the measures: 51% of those with water supply watersheds, 38% with groundwater recharge areas, and 65% with river corridors. 10% of those jurisdictions with water supply watersheds, 14% with groundwater recharge areas, and 10% with river corridors have stated that they intend to implement none of the recommended protection measures.

## Introduction

The Environmental Planning Criteria database of the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA) was developed in the Summer of 1994 in an effort to evaluate environmental policies at the local government level. The database provides information on environmental protection policies of local governments as stated in their comprehensive plan prepared in accordance with the Georgia Planning Act of 1989.

Under the Planning Act, in order to receive "Qualified Local Government" (QLG) status, local governments must prepare a comprehensive plan that complies with the Minimum Planning Standards as established by DCA. Included in the Minimum Planning Standards are the Environmental Planning Criteria, which establish a minimum level of consideration for local policy making for the protection of "water supply watersheds," "groundwater recharge areas," "wetlands," and "river corridors." These criteria were established pursuant to Part V of the Georgia Planning Act and the Mountain and River Corridor Protection

Act. The criteria were developed jointly by DCA and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

To satisfy the Environmental Planning Criteria, local governments must identify whether any of these environmentally sensitive areas are located within the local government's jurisdiction and, if so, assess whether all or part of the protection measures identified in the minimum criteria should be implemented locally. One part of the criteria outline the definitions for each of the environmentally sensitive areas so that local governments can make a decision as to whether the resource exists within their jurisdiction. Once it is determined by the local government that any or all of the natural resources are located within their jurisdiction, then statements of policy must be included in the comprehensive plan which address the methods by which the local government will act to protect the identified resource(s).

The Environmental Planning Criteria database documents whether or not a resource has been identified in a given jurisdiction and the proposed protection measures of the jurisdiction as stated in its approved comprehensive plan. The database includes all jurisdictions that had approved plans as of June 1, 1994. There are over 450 local governments included in this group. In addition to identifying whether a resource is located in a given jurisdiction and what the proposed protection measures are, the database also lists the current protection measures that the jurisdiction already has in place.

## History

Governor Joe Frank Harris, in his second term of office, appointed the Growth Strategies Commission to "develop a sound and realistic blueprint for the future of Georgia." The 35-member commission was appointed by Governor Harris in June of 1987. Efforts were made to include over a hundred public and private interest groups, as well as citizens into the process to provide comment on important issues considered by the commission. All meetings of the commission were open to the press and the public.

The Growth Strategies Commission assumed that several conditions would need to be considered when establishing recommendations, including:

- The maintenance of home rule and local autonomy over local matters while also recognizing the need for regional cooperation and planning.

- The importance of maintaining a "pro-business" climate that supports and expands private sector investment in the state.
- That all strategies should accommodate the different economic, geographic, and other variations of a locality by providing flexibility in the system to accommodate these differences.

The Growth Strategies Commission, after eighteen months of meetings, proposed two overall goals for the state and a nine-point strategy for attaining these goals. The two goals that were identified by the commission include:

- To accommodate the inevitable growth of the future without allowing a deterioration in the quality of life
- To upgrade the quality of life in low-growth areas through realistic and innovative economic development programs

The nine-point strategy that was identified to achieve these goals included provisions and action steps to address human needs, to build the capacity for growth, to safeguard the environment, to strengthen local communities, and to coordinate state and local efforts.

One of the points to evolve out of the Growth Strategies Commission was to enhance protection of natural and historic resources by amending erosion control procedures and improving enforcement; and by establishing a database, staffing, and minimum standards to address freshwater wetlands, critical watersheds, groundwater recharge areas; and to support mountain protection.

Another point to come out of the Commission was the establishment of a three-tiered partnership for planning. This was achieved by reconstituting and empowering DCA for state level planning; and by reorganizing regional planning. The recommendations of the Growth Strategies Commission established the framework for which state-level planning occurs today.

As a result of the Governor's Growth Strategies Commission final report, House Bill 215 was introduced by Governor Harris to put the strategies into action. The bill, known as the Georgia Planning Act, passed resoundingly in the state legislature and became law in 1989. The Act essentially put into place the recommendations to come out of the Growth Strategies Commission final report. Basically, the Act affected the way planning was to be conducted in the state in two ways:

- *The creation of the RDC system to replace the APDC system*  
Gave more focused responsibilities to the regional planning agencies; provided stronger links to local governments through boards composed primarily of locally elected officials; required that all local governments be a member of an RDC; and provided additional state funding to supply technical assistance to local governments.
- *The authorization of the Department of Community Affairs's Office of Coordinated Planning to set up the*

*coordinated planning system locally and regionally*  
Including the preparation of Minimum Planning Standards and Procedures for local governments.

### **Georgia's Three-Tiered Planning Process**

The main provision of the Georgia Planning Act was the establishment of a three-tiered "bottom-up" planning process to involve local governments, regional development centers, and the Department of Community Affairs. New responsibilities were created out of the provisions of the act for each of these three levels of government.

The three main responsibilities that evolved out of the Georgia Planning Act required the Department of Community Affairs to: develop, promote, and establish standards and procedures for coordinated and comprehensive planning; assist local governments in participating in an orderly process of planning, and to assist local governments in preparing and implementing their comprehensive plans; and to also serve as the principal department in the executive branch of state government for local government affairs.

Regional Development Centers (RDCs) are directed by the Planning Act to provide technical assistance to local governments in the preparation of comprehensive plans, and to also review and comment on local plans in accordance with the Minimum Planning Standards before the plan is submitted to DCA for approval.

Local governments are encouraged to develop comprehensive plans that conform to the Minimum Planning Standards, and are required to be members of the regional development center which includes the municipality or county.

In order for a local plan to be approved, it must conform to the Minimum Planning Standards and Procedures as they are established by DCA.

The requirements of the Minimum Planning Standards include citizen involvement and submittal procedures. Along with these procedural requirements, local governments must also provide a minimum level of information in their plan that deals with the six planning elements. The method by which plans are reviewed at DCA follow explicit guidelines as to the substance of these elements. The six elements include:

- *Population*
- *Economic Development*
- *Natural and Historic Resources*  
including the Environmental Planning Criteria
- *Community Facilities*
- *Housing*
- *Land Use*

Three basic sections or steps are required for each element, including:

- *An Inventory and Assessment*
- *A Statement of Needs and Goals*
- *The Formulation of an Implementation Strategy*

A delineation of the implementation strategy for each required element must include a "five-year short-term work program" (STWP). The STWP outlines the ways that each decision will be implemented over at least the first five years (after plan approval).

In order for a local plan to be approved by DCA, all of the sections and elements must be included in the plan and these must conform to the Minimum Planning Standards. Once a plan is approved by DCA and adopted by the local governments, the government then is extended Qualified Local Government (QLG) status. QLG status is necessary for the local government to receive certain state funds which are administered by DCA.

### The Environmental Planning Criteria

Local jurisdictions submitting a comprehensive plan are required to state the measures, if any, that will be taken to protect each of the environmentally sensitive areas that are identified within their boundaries. There are recommended protection measures for each type of area identified.

Recommended protection measures for water supply watersheds include:

- Natural vegetative buffers along stream corridors;
- Limits on the amount of impervious surface permitted in development along stream corridors;
- Hazardous waste treatment and disposal facility restrictions.

Recommended protection measures for groundwater recharge areas include:

- Septic tank and septic tank drainfield restrictions;
- Sanitary landfill restrictions;
- Hazardous waste treatment and disposal facility restrictions;
- Stormwater and wastewater treatment infiltration basin restrictions.

Recommended protection measures for river corridors include:

- Restrictions on the densities of residential development along protected rivers;
- Natural vegetative buffer requirements along protected river corridors.

### The Environmental Planning Criteria Database

The Environmental Planning Criteria database was created in the Summer of 1994 by two Georgia Tech, Masters of City Planning students (Newton and Rye, 1994). Their task was to examine every comprehensive plan that had been approved by DCA prior to June 1, 1994. The students searched the plans for policy statements pertaining to the environmentally sensitive areas as defined by the standards. Over 450 jurisdictions are represented in the database.

The methodology used by the students included reviewing the natural and historic resource element, the goals and

objectives section, and the five-year STWP for statements related to protecting the environmentally sensitive areas. Twelve categories were created in the database to group the policy decisions of the local governments:

- *Resource not located in jurisdiction*  
A resource as defined does not exist within the boundaries of the jurisdiction.
- *Resource not threatened*  
Protection measures are not deemed necessary by the jurisdiction.
- *Lack of administrative capacity*  
The jurisdiction feels that it does not have adequate staff to implement protection measures.
- *Existing protection measures adequate*  
The jurisdiction feels that protection measures that are already in place are adequate to protect the resource.
- *Encouraging appropriate practices or educating the public*  
The jurisdiction wants to engage in an educational program to encourage and inform its residents about appropriate practices.
- *Improve enforcement of existing measures*  
The jurisdiction feels that adequate protection measures exist but, that better enforcement can be achieved through alternative means.
- *Directing development elsewhere: land use or infrastructure policy*  
The jurisdiction feels that protection is best achieved by steering development away from resource areas through land use policies.
- *Implementing, as of yet, undefined protection measures*  
The jurisdiction wants to study the problem and implement measures of some kind at a later date.
- *Implementing some part of the protection measures*  
The jurisdiction chooses to implement a portion of the measures.
- *Implementing all of the recommended protection measures*
- *Exceeding recommended protection measures*  
The jurisdiction chooses to implement all of the protection measures in addition to implementing other additional measures.
- *No apparent decision*  
Usually indicates that the plan was approved prior to the current minimum standards taking effect.

Additional information is provided in the database including a description of the protection measures that are currently in place, and the year in which the selected policy measures will be implemented. The results of the database entries can be seen in Table 1.

The results show that most local governments are reluctant to fully implement all of the recommended protection measures. Only 18 % of all jurisdictions with water supply watersheds, 19% of jurisdictions with groundwater recharge areas and just 9% of those with river corridors have stated that they would implement all recommended protection

**Table 1**

**Proposed Environmental Policies Based on "Part 5" State Environmental Criteria As Related To Statements in Approved Local Comprehensive Plans\***

Proposed Decision as Related to Approved Comprehensive Plan	Water Supply Watershed Criteria			Groundwater Recharge Area Criteria			Wetlands Criteria			River Corridor Protection Criteria		
	Counties	Cities	Both	Counties	Cities	Both	Counties	Cities	Both	Counties	Cities	Both
Number Reporting	107	357	464	107	357	464	107	357	464	107	357	464
Resource not located in jurisdiction	47 44%	207 58%	254 55%	7 7%	124 35%	131 28%	0 0%	63 18%	63 14%	22 21%	294 82%	316 68%
Taking no action: resource not threatened	4 0%	11 0%	15 0%	4 0%	17 0%	21 0%	1 0%	16 0%	17 0%	3 4%	7 0%	10 0%
Taking no action: lack of administrative capacity	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	1 0%	7 0%	8 0%	2 0%	8 0%	10 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
Taking no action: existing protection measures adequate	3 0%	3 0%	6 0%	4 0%	15 0%	19 0%	13 0%	37 0%	50 0%	4 5%	1 0%	5 0%
Encouraging appropriate practices / educating public	0 0%	1 0%	1 0%	1 0%	1 0%	2 0%	9 0%	8 0%	17 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
Improving enforcement of existing protection measures	1 0%	3 0%	4 0%	3 0%	7 0%	10 0%	12 0%	35 0%	47 0%	0 0%	2 0%	2 0%
Directing development elsewhere: land use or infrastructure policies	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	3 0%	0 0%	3 0%	4 0%	5 0%	9 0%	2 2%	0 0%	2 0%
Implementing protection measures to be defined later	12 0%	23 0%	35 0%	20 0%	55 0%	75 0%	64 0%	180 0%	244 0%	4 5%	3 0%	7 0%
Implementing some of recommended protection measures	26 0%	82 0%	108 0%	43 0%	84 0%	127 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	53 62%	43 0%	96 0%
Implementing all of recommended protection measures	11 0%	23 0%	34 0%	15 0%	42 0%	57 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	9 11%	4 0%	13 0%
Exceeding recommended protection measures	3 0%	1 0%	4 0%	3 0%	2 0%	5 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
No Apparent Decision	0 0%	3 0%	3 0%	3 0%	3 0%	6 0%	2 0%	5 0%	7 0%	0 0%	13 0%	13 0%

\* Approved as of June 01, 1994

note: for these plans that have identified the existence of the resource in their jurisdiction, percentages have been provided to reflect the policy differences within this group

measures. The numbers are larger for those jurisdictions choosing to implement some portion of the recommended measures: 51% of those with water supply watersheds, 38% with groundwater recharge areas, and 65% with river corridors. 10% of those jurisdictions with water supply watersheds, 14% with groundwater recharge areas, and 10% with river corridors have stated that they intend on doing nothing at all.

**Literature Cited**

Newton, William B., and Tracy Rye, Georgia Tech Masters of City Planning Students, 1994. *The Environmental Planning Criteria Database*, for the Office of Coordinated Planning, Georgia Department of Community Affairs. Summer Co-op Project.