

IDENTIFICATION OF ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Population

Issues

- Total population is expected to grow by 37.4% to 44.8% from 2000-2025 depending on the projections used. This substantial population growth will place significant demands on current infrastructure to keep up with current levels of service, and will result in significant changes to the existing land use patterns unless policies are implemented to manage and direct this growth.
- Though growth will continue in the unincorporated area during the planning period, it will not see the same dramatic change that it did in the last 20 years. The Cities of Centerville, Perry, and Warner Robins will likely continue their aggressive annexation policies into their respective service areas, thus growing at a more rapid rate than the unincorporated area.
- Houston County will account for almost one-half of the increase in total population that is expected to occur in the Middle Georgia region by 2025.
- The population growth in Houston County is largely contributed to net migration. Houston County had over three times the net migration than the next highest county in the Middle Georgia region. Bibb County, which currently has the largest population in the Middle Georgia region, had significant negative net migration from 1990-2000.
- Though the Houston County population will grow older during the planning period, with significant gains in the 55-64 and 65 & older age groups, the working age groups' (35-44 and 45-54) percentage of the total population is also expected to show gains in the planning period.
- The percentage of whites and African-Americans will likely change little during the planning period, though the percentage of Hispanic origin, which stood at approximately 3 percent in 2000, could see a significant increase over the next 20-25 years.
- Average household income is higher than the state average and compares favorably with the national average. In year 2000, Houston County had the second highest average household income in the middle Georgia region.

- Approximately 55% of the Houston County households in 2000 had annual incomes over \$40,000, which was the largest percentage in the 11-county Middle Georgia region. Houston County also had the lowest percentage of households with annual incomes below \$20,000 per year.
- Houston County had the lowest percentage of individuals and families below the poverty level in 2000 of any Middle Georgia county, and was also well below the state level.

Opportunities

- Growth in population brings with it important side benefits like creating demand for retail and service commercial uses, which in turn establishes opportunities for new businesses, jobs, and an increase in the tax base to help finance the needed infrastructure improvements.
- The projected increase in the working age group population shows that there should be a large number of people residing in the county to fill the new jobs that will be created during the planning period.
- Though the 65+ age group may be rising steadily during the planning period, many of these people will likely be retirees wanting to remain close to a military base, and those who want to enjoy the temperate climate and urban living, but not have the problems faced by the communities further south.
- The higher average household incomes will enable the community to sustain a growing, vibrant commercial economy.

Economic Development

Issues

- The existing economy for Houston County is heavily dependent on government employment, particularly Robins Air Force Base, and the retail trade and service industries necessary for its survival.
- Manufacturing industries make a relatively small contribution to the overall economy of Houston County.
- The average weekly wage in Houston County is lower than the State average largely due to the large number of people employed in the retail trade/service industries that generally have the lowest wage rates of any industry.
- Communities in Houston County will need to continuously expand and upgrade their water/sewer and transportation infrastructure in order to keep pace with the demand for new commercial and industrial development, while at the same time working within the existing tax structure and laws.
- The lack of transportation alternatives provides a potential roadblock to a segment of the population that are looking for work but currently do not have the means to travel to the prospective jobs.
- As new commercial development moves out to the suburban areas of the County, older commercial development will have greater difficulty maintaining tenants, thus creating vacant buildings and blighted conditions which impact the surrounding neighborhoods. Decisions will have to be made in the future on how to handle the growing number of grayfields and whether to make investments to redevelop them.

Opportunities

- Robins Air Force Base is expected to gain additional jobs as a result of the recent BRAC recommendations. This will now allow RAFB to serve as a catalyst for future economic growth in the community, including the development of an aerospace support cluster group.
- Houston County recently completed an Economic Diversification Strategy, that if implemented will enable the Houston County economy to become less dependent on the government and retail trade/service industries, be able to withstand the continuous ups and downs of these two industries, and generate more income to the economy because of the higher wage rates.

- Houston County has an outstanding array of economic development resources, support programs, and educational opportunities to recruit new industries and provide the necessary training for tomorrow's labor force. It is critical that these resources are coordinated to maximize their benefits and usage.
- The use of job fairs and other methods can insure that potential employees are matched with job opportunities.
- Almost 80% of Houston County's workforce resides in Houston County; while 75% of Houston County residents work in Houston County.

Housing

Issues

- The number of housing units in Houston County increased from 27,397 to 44,509 between 1980 and 2000. The 17,112 units that were constructed during this period represent a 38% increase.
- Approximately two-thirds of the housing units in 2000 were single-family detached. Manufactured homes more than doubled from 1980 to 2000 and represented 12.9% of the total housing units in the County.
- Multi-family homes represented only 13.8% of the County's housing stock.
- The housing stock is relatively newer in age and in better condition in Houston County than in the surrounding area and state. Approximately 71% of the occupied units in Houston County have been built between 1970 and 2000. Even more revealing, of the recent housing boom going on in Houston County, 18.6% of the housing units (7,557) were built from 1995-2000.
- Because many housing units have been built recently, housing stock in Houston County is in relatively good condition. There are, however, pockets of substandard housing in the older sections of Warner Robins and Perry.
- Owner-occupied units represented 68.5% of the occupied units in 2000. Owner-occupied units increased by 6,920 units from 1990-2000, while renter-occupied units increased by only 1,558 during that same time period.
- Owner vacancy rate was a low 2.1% in 2000; while the renter vacancy rate was 11.2%. Both rates were higher than the State of Georgia and the nation. This is an indicator of the transient nature of the population due to the large workforce at RAFB.
- 19.3% of the households in 2000 were cost burdened or paying 30% or more of new income on total housing costs; while 7.5% were severely cost-burdened--paying more than 50% or more of net income on total housing costs.
- Retail trade and the service industries employ a large percentage of the Houston County work force. These industries are usually characterized by having some of the lowest average weekly wages. Persons employed in these occupations represent the households most challenged with finding affordable housing.
- Home ownership in 2000 was approximately 5% higher among White householders than African-American householders; the median value for homes

occupied by African Americans was 12% less than the median values of the homes occupied by Whites.

- Existing services within Houston County appear adequate to address the community's current special housing needs. Special needs include: elderly, homeless, victims of domestic violence, migrant farm workers, persons with mental, physical and developmental disabilities, persons with AIDS/HIV, and persons recovering from substance abuse. As the Houston County population grows, so will the demand for special needs housing. It will be critical that the necessary support for the organizations and the programs they sponsor be in place in the future to accommodate this demand.
- The recently completed Joint Land Use Study (JLUS) revealed numerous incompatible uses and encroachment in the Base Environs, primarily residential land use conflicts in the City of Warner Robins, Bibb, and Houston Counties.

Opportunities

- With the exception of the working low/moderate income households, as mentioned above, the county's lower than average housing costs, combined with the higher than average vacancy rates, plus above average household wages indicate sufficient affordable housing is available within Houston County to allow most who work in the county to live there also.
- Houston County and the City of Warner Robins are developing long-term mitigation plans that address the incompatible residential development; with particular attention to identifying and prioritizing properties and program funds for acquiring the designated properties.

Natural and Historic Resources

Issues

- Wetlands along the Ocmulgee River and the major creeks and streams in the area; in addition, a large portion of rural Houston County, south of Perry, is within wetland areas.
- Three major aquifers (groundwater recharge areas) are located in Houston County.
- With the exception of area around Perry, Highway 341, and Highway 26 which has medium or average pollution susceptibility, the remainder of Houston County has high pollution susceptibility. Significant ramifications for Houston County since most of existing and projected growth areas do not have access to public sewer, thus new development in these areas must be connected to septic tanks and subject to the Groundwater Recharge Area Protection requirements.
- Ocmulgee River is designated as a protected river.
- Floodplains are found along the Ocmulgee River and the major creeks and streams.
- Development plans for the Oaky Woods area can potentially eliminate one of the County's best passive recreation areas.
- Portions of the Ocmulgee River and six creeks are identified in the EPA 303 (d) list as not meeting state water quality standards.
- With the exception of the City of Perry, there has not been a recent survey to identify the historic landmarks in the County.
- Litter control and property maintenance should take on greater importance in the future.
- Houston County is losing much of its tree cover without having it replaced.

Opportunities

- All communities in Houston County have adopted a Water Resources Ordinance that includes Wetlands Protection as required by DNR Rules for Part V Environmental Criteria.

- All local governments in Houston County have adopted Groundwater Recharge Area Protection as part of DNR Rules for Part V Environmental Criteria.
- The Water Resource Ordinance adopted by Houston County protects the Ocmulgee River Corridor.
- Floodplains provide excellent opportunities for conservation and passive recreation areas and much needed open space.
- The Water Resource Ordinance adopted by Houston County and the three cities includes flood damage prevention requirements.
- Except for areas near Ocmulgee River and major streams, soils in Houston County are, for the most part, suitable for most types of urban development.
- Potential scenic areas along Ocmulgee River Corridor, Highway 341, and Highway 96.
- State park under construction south of Perry.
- Development of the Bay Gull Creek Greenway; a cooperative effort of Houston County and the Cities of Centerville and Warner Robins.
- Middle Georgia Clean Air Coalition, a cooperative effort formed in 2004 to establish effective regional air quality solutions and to protect the mission of Robins Air Force Base.
- There are numerous structures in the City of Perry that have been identified for possible eligibility for inclusion on the National Register. Six districts in the City of Perry are possible for National Register designation. These resources offer great potential for heritage tourism and to promote the community's rich historical character.

Community Facilities and Services

Issues

- Topographic issues and projected demand for wastewater treatment south of Hwy 96 and area around Hwy 247 South may dictate construction of new treatment plant by the City of Warner Robins.
- Outside of the city limits of Centerville, Perry, and Warner Robins, septic tanks are the wastewater management system used for residences and businesses. Greatest concern with septic tanks is leakage from these systems into the aquifers and contamination of the County's water supply.
- As the newer homes with septic tanks get older, the possibility of leakage from these tanks becomes a greater possibility. Consideration needs to be given to require regular cleaning and inspection of septic systems.
- Septic tank cleaning operators are having difficulty finding a suitable site to dispose of the septage they pump from the various septic systems within the county.
- Fire Protection- residences and businesses are currently well served, but there are concerns in providing an adequate level of service in the projected growth areas.
- Public Safety-
 - The Houston County Sheriff's Department and the Police Departments for the three municipalities are currently providing adequate levels of service and response time.
 - Pressure will be on the Sheriff's Office to maintain this level of service as growth continues in the unincorporated areas.
 - As the three cities continue to annex into the unincorporated areas, the cities will take on greater responsibility for public safety in those areas, thus relieving some of the pressure off of the Sheriff's Department.
 - Future budgets of the cities will need to take into account the added demand in the newly annexed areas in order to meet the expectations of these residents.
- Warner Robins will need to examine recreational facilities needs in its western borders as expands into Peach County.

- Expansion to the northeast and south by the City of Perry will bring with it demand for new recreational facilities and programs.
- The City of Centerville currently needs several small playgrounds, and must give consideration to a new neighborhood facility to serve the projected growth in that section of the county.
- Greatest deficiency at the present time is the growing residential area south of Hwy 96, with a need for a new neighborhood park. With the recreational intergovernmental agreement in place, some means of funding the construction and operation of this facility will need to be identified.
- The possible loss of Oaky Woods as a passive recreation area.
- Stormwater problems in Houston County come from various sources, including: soil erosion from building and construction sites, roads, parking lots and driveways where vehicles have leaked oil and other fluids, trash and litter from roadsides, parking lots and yards, and chemical and pet waste from lawns.
- Enormous residential and commercial growth during the planning period will further exasperate the stormwater runoff problem. More resources will have to be allocated to adequately enforce the existing regulations and others that might be required in the future.

Opportunities

- There is sufficient design capacity in the various water systems to meet the average projected demand. The same can be said for permitted withdrawal capacity with the possible exception of Perry. The issue with Perry's withdrawal capacity is dependent on the growth within its current service area and potential growth in the area now served by Houston County.
- Expansion to Perry's wastewater treatment system will provide great opportunity to expand service to their service area during the planning period.
- Installation of dry sewer in new developments within the unincorporated area offers a long-term solution to the disposal of septage.
- Having existing residences and businesses with septic tanks tapping onto a public sewerage system will be dependent on the expansion of the Perry and Warner Robins wastewater treatment systems.

- Mutual aid agreements that are currently in effect for public fire protection and police services will enable resources to be maximized while insuring that the general public is provided with the best possible level of service.
- Completion of the state park south of Perry will provide Houston County with a regional recreational facility that is much needed.
- Wetland and floodplain areas that are pervasive in Houston County provide excellent opportunities for not only great passive recreation and conservation/open space areas, but would also help protect water quality in the Ocmulgee River and the County's numerous streams.
- The Cities of Warner Robins and Centerville and Houston County participate in the EPA Phase II stormwater management program, and are implementing specific measurable goals to address six major areas. In addition, each of these communities have adopted and are enforcing a stormwater ordinance and regulations.
- City of Perry, though not required at this time to participate in the Phase II program, has set the stormwater management process in place knowing such designation will come sometime in the very near future.
- Recent state law now mandates that all persons involved in land disturbance activities must take certain training courses, pass a written test, and become certified by December, 2006.
- The Water Resource Ordinance adopted by Houston County and the three cities includes requirements for post-construction stormwater runoff and erosion and sedimentation control.

Land Use

Issues

- Areas that were once rural or rural residential in character (between Hwy 96 and Hwy 127) are quickly being transformed to suburban low-density single-family development. The area south of Hwy 127 to Hwy 341 will likely see the same fate within the next 10 years unless changes to local development policies are made.
- Older residential and commercial areas are slowly becoming blighted and need immediate attention to prevent further decline. Will likely spread as retail and services establishments relocate to the suburban areas leaving behind vacant buildings that usually go unoccupied for long periods of time or forever unless some constructive action is taken to reverse the trend.
- Lack of definable downtown area or town center in Warner Robins and Centerville.
- Encroachment of incompatible development in the Robins AFB environs.
- Unattractive strip commercial development characterized by numerous curb cuts, signage, and utility poles and the lack of building design controls is the predominate commercial use in urbanized portion of Houston County.
- Lack of regulations that encourage conservation subdivisions that allow for the clustering of housing units, thus freeing the remaining land for open space and passive recreation areas.
- Agricultural/forestry land is gradually succumbing to urban-type development.
- Separate land development and infrastructure policies and regulations for the four participating jurisdictions creates an enormous roadblock to implementing effective and innovative growth management practices in Houston County.
- The number and quality of the signs in the County is becoming an increasing concern.

Opportunities

- Perry is an excellent example of how a combination of public and private investment can transform a downtown area into an attractive place for people to work and shop and for entrepreneurs to invest in new businesses.
- Establishing redevelopment strategies for the older strip commercial areas that correspond with the overall neighborhood redevelopment plan.
- Establishing a balanced approach for encouraging new commercial developments in the growing urban area, while at the same time making it more attractive for private investment in the older neighborhoods.
- Taking advantage of nodal development of neighborhood commercial centers at certain key intersections on Hwy 96 to encourage a mixture of residential, office, and retail development around them. This is an attempt to prevent a reoccurrence of strip commercial development that has taken place along the major thoroughfares to the north, while at the same time, establishing an attractive living, shopping, and working environment, reducing traffic congestion, and establishing a trend for development along other major thoroughfares facing commercial pressures.
- New regulations for Russell Parkway Extension, if satisfactorily implemented, could become a model for other major thoroughfare overlay regulations.
- Taking advantage of new state program to acquire land to set aside for conservation and open space purposes or for the development of greenways, particularly in major wetland and floodplain areas.
- Focus of future land development management on specific corridors or character areas as described in the WRATS 2030 Land Use Plan and in this joint comprehensive plan.

Intergovernmental Coordination

Issues

- Vision 2020 provides an effective forum to communicate and coordinate land use development and infrastructure policies, but lacks the mechanism to implement its recommendations.
- Though numerous intergovernmental agreements are in place that are going a long-way in maximizing community financial and personnel resources, these agreements should be frequently reviewed and monitored and adjustments made accordingly, so that as the County continues to grow, the residents of Houston County can be assured they are receiving the highest quality services and programs.

Opportunities

- WRATS, an effective process in moving forward highway improvement projects within Houston County, can take on an equally important role in the future by: 1). insuring greater coordination between land development and transportation infrastructure improvements by encouraging its member governments to enact legislation that accomplishes this end, and placing greater emphasis on corridor management ; and 2). insuring the need for reducing traffic congestion is consistent and balanced with the need to protect sensitive natural and cultural resources and improving air and water quality within Houston County. The Cities of Centerville, Perry, and Warner Robins along with Houston County should continue their active involvement in the WRATS process and maintain a strong relationship with WRATS' two important partners: Federal Highway Administration and the Georgia Department of Transportation.
- Protecting the mission of Robins Air Force Base, diversifying the economic base of Houston County, and improving air quality in Houston County and the region are important objectives to be undertaken during the planning period. Organizations such as the Houston County Development Authority, the Middle Georgia Regional Development Authority, Georgia Department of Community Affairs, Robins Air Force Base 21st Century Partnership, Inc., the Middle Georgia Clean Air Coalition, and the Middle Georgia Regional Development Center play a role in meeting one or more of these objectives. It is important that Houston County and the Cities of Centerville, Perry, and Warner Robins actively support

and participate in these organizations, while at the same time, holding them accountable for fulfilling their specific role in implementing these objectives.

Transportation

Issues

- The recently completed 2030 WRATS Long-Range Transportation Plan showed that by 2030, many of the roads and highways in Houston County will exceed satisfactory level of service. To reduce the expected traffic congestion, the Plan recommended a list of short, medium, and long-range improvements that taken together will cost millions of dollars. Continued support from federal, state, and local sources of funding is critical if these projects are to be implemented.
- Though public transportation may not be feasible at this time, WRATS and its member communities should continually examine the need for such a system, in light of the continued growth of the community, as an alternative to reduce traffic congestion and to meet air quality objectives.

Opportunities

- The Perry-Houston County Airport is currently underutilized. It has potential, however, in becoming a larger and more critical component of the community's economic development and transportation programs.
- The expansion of bicycle and pedestrian system in Houston County and the three communities can pay positive dividends in the future from both the transportation and land use perspectives. The City of Perry is taking the lead in bringing these facilities to their community, and it is hoped that the other jurisdictions will follow in their footsteps. The upcoming WRATS Bicycle/Pedestrian Plan that uses the recommendations from the Regional Bicycle/Pedestrian Plan, as well as the SPLOST Improvement Program as a base, will set the stage for the future expansion of this system.
- Establishing a road corridor approach to land use, transportation, and urban design issues similar to those being implemented along the Russell Parkway Extension has the opportunity to create better land development scenarios with less sprawl, to improve the appearance and aesthetics of the area, and to provide alternative forms of transportation with less dependency on the automobile--particularly on shorter trips.

- Various commuter strategy options, including ridesharing and vanpooling could have significant impacts on the future traffic congestion and air quality, thus should be aggressively explored in the future.
- As explained above under Intergovernmental Coordination, WRATS can take on a greater role in coordinating transportation planning with land use and infrastructure development as outlined in the WRATS 2030 Land Use Plan report.