

Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The (GA)

February 26, 2007

Section: Metro News

Edition: Main; The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Page: D1



Village fast track New rules break old barriers to mixed-use development

CHRISTOPHER QUINN
Staff

Vince Merolla wants to build a 30-acre village -- retail shops, restaurants, doctors' offices, homes and an assisted-living facility -- in Cherokee County.

"I want it to be a kind of place where people want to hang out," Merolla said.

But a developer's grand vision for creating a mixed-use community often is tempered by a hard dose of reality: a myriad of zoning requirements to meet.

Not long ago in Cherokee County, Merolla's modest 30-acre parcel would have required separate zoning designations for shops, offices and residences to co-exist. In addition, each zoning had restrictions, such as green buffers to separate it from other areas, which would have broken up his plan.

Putting together a mixed-use community would have caused Merolla to seek numerous variances to the zoning code from county commissioners.

But it's a new day in Cherokee and other municipalities across metro Atlanta.

Last year Cherokee rewrote ordinances to encourage the type of development Merolla seeks.

The 51-page Traditional Neighborhood Development ordinance has been called one of the best in metro Atlanta, where counties and cities have been revising zoning in recent years to encourage a return to village-type developments.

"I think people were sick of the basic type of zoning we were doing. Sick of the same old strip shopping centers with the big parking lots and the same old way we've always done it," said Cherokee Commissioner Karen Mahurin, who encouraged rewriting the codes.

Merolla's Village at Sixes Ridge will be the first built under the new category. It will have retail shops on tree-lined sidewalks like a town.

Parking will be on a grid of streets -- spread out and tucked behind and between buildings -- rather than out front as a sea of asphalt. The development will transition from high-traffic areas, such as restaurants, four-story offices and shops, to office condos to living areas.

Cherokee County's ordinance looks to be the best in the region, said John Maximuk, a former city planner and program director for Atlanta's Livable Communities Coalition.

The coalition is a nonprofit agency that works with governments and developers on planning and land use. Thirteen metro Atlanta counties have adopted ordinances to encourage what is referred to as smart growth principles.

"But none have come close to something like this," Maximuk said.

The ordinance is outstanding for its comprehensiveness, he said. It creates a walkable community built to the scale of people on the street, not the car. It calls for street grids, rather than cul-de-sacs that concentrate traffic at choke points. It requires public spaces, such as squares, green space and parks. It limits the developments to appropriate areas of the county and uses a scale to fix the amount of space to be given to living, retail or office space.

"To make sure it is a true mixed-use community," said Jeff Watkins, the county planning director.

Merolla will begin construction this summer and is tweaking his plan.

"We are both kind of learning as we go, since this is the first one," Watkins said.

Across metro Atlanta, counties and cities have added, or rewritten, similar zoning codes to allow for "neo-traditional" development. They are meant to mimic historic town centers, which have been refilling with residents and springing back to life across metro Atlanta. The irony is that the historic towns would never have been built under the strict district zoning segregation required by regulations written during the growth of suburbia, Malamuk said.

The Atlanta Regional Commission recognizes and encourages the trend to construct "neo-traditional" communities. It has a special team of consultants that helps governments rewrite such codes. It also has boosted the trend with its Livable Centers Initiative, which has given more than \$5 million in grants to cities and counties for planning that encourages smart growth.

Kathy Brannon, the city manager of Chamblee, which got a grant, oversaw the rewriting of ordinances that began nearly 10 years ago and are remaking the city. There has been a burst of new construction of homes, offices and businesses in the past four years. The city of 11,000 has nearly 1,000 new homes permitted or under construction, and three proposed mixed-use communities coming soon before the City Council.

The change, she said, is market-driven. People want to live in a community where they can walk to a store or restaurant, or make one car stop for a variety of shopping. They want offices nearby so they don't have to drive 40 miles to work.

"I think that maybe this generation is smarter than the ones before them," she said. "They finally decided they don't want to spend their life in a car."

The Village at Sixes Ridge

- 30 acres
- 60 to 90 townhomes
- A 25- to 40-bed assisted living home
- A 25-bed constant care home
- 7 restaurant sites
- 25,000 to 30,000 square feet of office condos
- 100,000 square feet of commercial/retail space
- 70,000 square feet of medical offices

Copyright 2007 The Atlanta Journal-Constitution



Village
at Sixes Ridge
M VINCE MEROLLA DEVELOPMENT



VINCE MEROLLA DEVELOPMENT

VINCE MEROLLA ENTERPRISES, INC. • 770-720-8630

WWW.VME-US.COM