

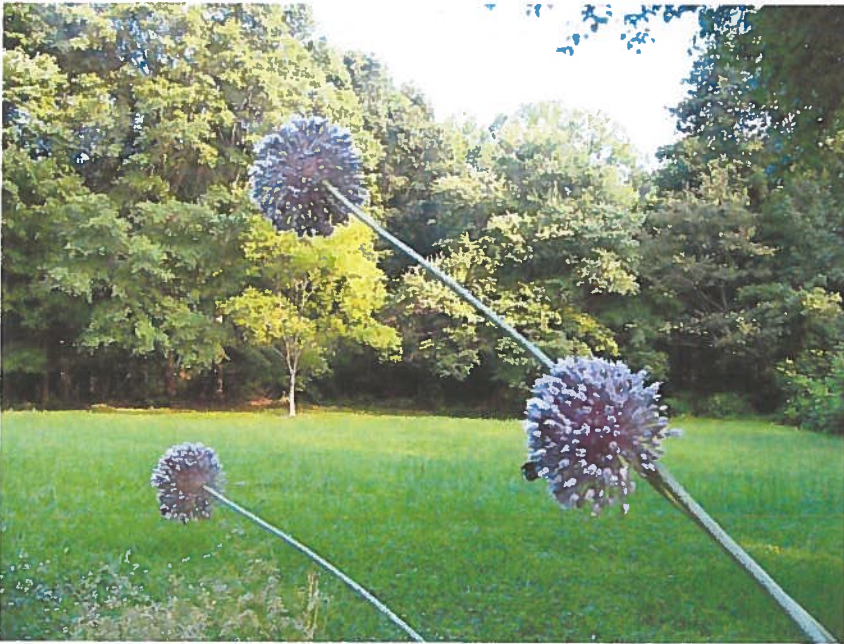
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FEATURED

## Brookhaven shows commitment to preserving city greenspace with land deal

Brent Barron Feb 23, 2017



Ken Yates

A meadow located within the 33-acres of the greenspace near Peachtree DeKalb Airport recently purchased by the city of Brookhaven for preservation.

With the signing of an agreement to purchase 33-acres near the Peachtree DeKalb Airport, the city of Brookhaven is fulfilling a promise to residents to preserve local greenspace.

The city council's Jan. 24 vote followed a unanimous vote by the DeKalb County Commission to authorize the sale of the land to Brookhaven for \$5.7 million to help preserve one of the largest remaining tracts of urban forest in Metro Atlanta.

"The City of Brookhaven is fulfilling its promise to keep Brookhaven green and vibrant," said Brookhaven Mayor John Ernst. "At 33 acres, this purchase represents one of the largest continuous green space

acquisitions inside the Perimeter.”

Brookhaven was awarded the funds to finance the property acquisition through a 20-year loan at .89 percent interest provided by the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority, or GEFA.

The greenspace, located west of Clairmont Road at the intersection with Tobey Road, was once designated as a “crash zone” for a since-decommissioned airport runway.

The property contains a variety of mature trees, a stream, native plants and wildlife.

As part of the agreement, the city will preserve the land for greenspace and cannot sell it for future development, according to a city release.

John Park, city council member for district two where the purchased greenspace is situated, said the long-term vision for the property is to keep it as natural as possible.

So far, the city has planned a permeable surface parking lot, a pavilion and a restroom facility in the two front acres of the property previously cleared out. Park said he envisions the natural trails being maintained and invasive non-native plants being removed.

Park said the purchase and preservation is a public health issue for him personally.

“Study after study has shown that the ability to spend time in a quiet place surrounded by nature is beneficial to individual health as well as our health as a community,” Park said. “I envision children of all ages exploring and playing in a forested area that is normally not available inside the perimeter. As development continues throughout Brookhaven, this green oasis in the concrete jungle will be even more special a generation from now.”

According to Park, other benefits of preserving the property include maintaining a natural buffer to Ashford Park for sound, air and water pollution from the nearby airport and an added storm water benefit.

Ernst said the purchasing of the space aligns with goals laid out in the city’s comprehensive plan and parks master plan. The current parks master plan states a goal of increasing park land from five acres per

thousand residents to eight acres per thousand — increasing total park land by ten percent.

“But most importantly we heard loud and clear from a dedicated, large group of citizens that have been lobbying for years to have this land preserved,” he said.

Ken Yates with the North DeKalb Greenspace Alliance, a nonprofit environmental preservation group, is one of those individuals invested in the property’s future.

Along with a group of concerned citizens, Yates said he has been working to keep commercial development off the land since the mid 90s. Since that time and as recent as four years ago, Yates worked with others to draw attention to attempts at commercializing the property and to find ways to secure its long-term future as a protected greenspace.

“We are now transitioning for this particular tract from championing the securing of the property to more of a “Friends of” organization,” Yates said. “We are licensed to solicit funds for fun things like children’s educational programs, rental of goats and sheep — things that are a lot more fun than dealing with attorneys.”

Yates said he and members of the alliance pushed hard for an access point at the front of the property, which would allow for school buses and other groups to enter, park and enjoy the land.

“We want to open it for people to come and enjoy the property [...] and give an outdoor classroom to anybody — not just people in Brookhaven,” he said.

The alliance has hosted several neighborhood workdays for removal of trash and invasive species on the property, Yates said.

Park said the deal has been a true community effort on all sides.

“Without the support of the community and DeKalb county — in particular Commissioner Jeff Rader — willing to work with us, this would not have been possible,” he said. “The low interest rate and grant is saving the city \$1.9 million over the life of the loan over borrowing in the bond market.”

The property is also a point of interest connected by paths and greenways, Park said. The goal is to connect a path connecting Murphey Candler Park to BlackBurn Park with Keswick Park, in collaboration with Chamblee.

That path would continue along the airport, through the newly acquired greenspace and then on through the new John Lewis Elementary school, Skyland Park and eventually continue on to the planned Peachtree Creek Greenway and the Atlanta Beltline, Park said.

The city passed a draft master plan last September for the greenway to begin working on the 2.8 miles of the total 12-mile path located within Brookhaven. The greenway is envisioned as a series of multi purpose trails and park space flanked by residences, offices and commercial development.



A concept drawing of a completed portion of the Peachtree Creek Greenway, showing a tier of trails, with a paved, multi-use trail at the top, a nature trail in the center and a creek trail running in and directly beside Peachtree Creek.

Special Photo

Brookhaven recently requested legislative approval of a local act authorizing the city to increase its hotel/motel tax rate from five percent to eight percent to help fund the greenway.

According to a city release, an increase in the tax to eight percent would bring in an estimated additional \$650,000 to be used in construction of key segments of the greenway between North Druid Hills Road and Briarwood Road.