

Appendix B – Growth and Development Trends

I. 2025 Greater Ben Hill County Comprehensive Plan Executive Summary

Ben Hill County is located in south-central Georgia and has a land area of 163,200 acres, or about 255 square miles. Current 2005 population is 18,294 persons and is projected to be 21,732 persons by 2025. There is one incorporated city, Fitzgerald, and the population density (persons per square mile) will rise from 70 persons per square mile in 2000 to 86 persons per square mile by 2025. Most of the land is well drained and thirty-two percent is used for agriculture and sixty-five percent for forestry uses. The physical landscape is fairly homogenous with two rivers, the Ocmulgee River on the northeastern edge and the Alapaha River along the northwestern border of the county.

The county and city have adopted zoning and land development regulations that govern the construction of buildings, division of land, and include water resource protection provisions for wetlands, floodplains, groundwater recharge areas and river corridor protection. The future land use plan provides provisions for in-fill within the incorporated city and provides space for future development within the urban service area as the infrastructure (water and sanitary sewer) is constructed.

Part III of the 2025 Greater Ben Hill County Comprehensive Plan (see Appendix B-II) provides a succinct summary of the future projected growth and development of Ben Hill County and the City of Fitzgerald:

FUTURE LAND USE PLANS

A future land use plan reflects the consensus of community and county values that are inherent in goal and policy statements. It is designed to provide a summary of recommended growth patterns, which are depicted on the respective future land use maps. For Ben Hill County and the City of Fitzgerald, the recommendations are designed to reflect goals and policies with strong emphasis on local government's provision of basic services; water, sewer and transportation. (The land use goals and policies are detailed in "Part II - Where Do We Want To Be?"). These plan concepts propose land use patterns which take advantage of existing and planned infrastructure. This prevents undue hardship on local governments to provide unnecessary infrastructure improvements or additions. When growth is planned in a logical and straightforward manner and takes advantage of public investments, there will be positive benefits for all with an increase in long-term economic stability.

GREATER BEN HILL FUTURE LAND USE (IN GENERAL)

The concepts discussed in this section will apply to the future land use plans of Ben Hill County. The Goals and Policies define and emphasize a distinct separation between an Urban Service Area (USA) and a Rural Service Area (RSA). Greater Ben Hill, for future land use purposes, is divided into these two major service areas and they are graphically depicted on Maps III-1 and III-2. The USA represents the centralized growth center (Fitzgerald area) where there is already existing infrastructure and concentrated urban services to accommodate urban style development. All future urban development should locate in this area. The RSA comprises all of the remaining portions of the unincorporated county. This area should retain a dominantly rural character.

Within the major service areas there also exists subareas for the various Activity Centers and a special Commercial Agriculture Area; all of which are described in the Goals and Policies. In general from a countywide perspective, the Urban Service Area (USA) and its activity centers represent three levels of existing or proposed urban density. The Downtown Activity Center (DAC) will maintain the highest density, followed by the Urban Activity Center (UAC) and then the remaining portion of USA. Within the Rural Service Area (RSA) there are special Commercial Agriculture Areas (CAA), which is based on the presence of concentrated prime farmland and prime forestland soils. Exclusive agriculture, agribusiness, and commercial forestry uses will be promoted in these areas.

The RSA also contains Neighborhood Activity Centers (NAC), which represents small clusters of urbanized development, centrally located within a generally rural area. Any additional urban development in the rural area will be encouraged to locate in the NACs.

Greater Ben Hill has an abundance of existing undeveloped/unused, vacant uses and subdivided lands inside its existing utility service area. Additional lands lie adjacent to this utility service core, and with minimum effort, these services can be logically extended to serve areas contiguous to the urban core. Because of this availability of underutilized properties and lands, a coordinated infill development policy needs to be implemented and regarded as a priority for both city and county governments.

Many areas within Greater Ben Hill contain environmentally sensitive features, which must be considered when making development decisions. Therefore, all new development or redevelopment shall be subject to the following development constraints: floodplains, wetlands, soil suitability, and groundwater recharge areas. These constraints shall be reviewed on a site-by-site basis and shall take precedence when making development or land use approvals/decisions. The future land use maps should be consulted when reviewing land use changes or proposed development and redevelopment. However, land use designations on the future land use map are for general purposes and will be considered secondary to these development constraints.

BEN HILL COUNTY (Unincorporated) FUTURE LAND USE

In general, Ben Hill County contains a dominant pattern of active agriculture/forestry uses, which will continue through the 20-year planning period. The city of Fitzgerald, lying in the south central portion of the county, represents the county's center of urban activity. There is an abundance of vacant land in all parts of the county (both urban and rural areas) and those lands located in urban areas should be developed first since infrastructure improvements already exist to serve them. Therefore, future land use designations for unincorporated portions of Ben Hill County are generally the same as existing with most vacant lands given a future land use designation appropriate to their surroundings. Map III-1 depicts future land use designations as well as USA, RSA, and CAA boundaries for Ben Hill County.

The Urban Service Area (USA) portion of unincorporated Ben Hill County is located around the perimeter of water and sewer service areas. Many of these areas are county enclaves completely surrounded by the city limits, in most cases partially surrounded by annexed rights-of-way. Most of unincorporated Ben Hill County will fall into a Rural Service Area (RSA) since there are no existing public water and sewer services outside the Fitzgerald urban area.

Within the Rural Service Area outside of the Fitzgerald urban area, two Neighborhood Activity Centers (NACs) are found, one at Queensland off Ga. 129 in the north central portion of the county, and one at BOWENS MILL, located at the extreme northern edge of the county adjacent to the Ocmulgee River. One special Urban Activity Center (UACs) is found in the county outside of the USA. The UAC is located off Perry House Road in the southern portion of the county and is the site of the Ben Hill-Irwin Technical Institute. This educational facility plays a major role in the county's future growth, and should be protected from incompatible land use encroachment.

Also within the RSA there are large areas designated as Commercial Agricultural Area (CAA). With prime agricultural soils located predominately in the southwestern third of the county, the City of Fitzgerald Urban Service Area falls almost completely within a prime soils area. While it is inevitable that some of these areas will be converted to urban uses, great care should be taken to encourage compact urban growth in order to protect this valuable resource.

There are some residential subdivisions within the rural area, far from any designated or planned services. Further development of these should be secondary to development of forestry and agricultural uses. Some are not suitable for development due to poor soils, wetlands, or groundwater recharge areas, and these should revert back to their original agriculture/forest usage.

Future Commercial, Industrial, and Public/Institutional uses in particular should locate in either a USA. Consequently there are no additional uses in these categories shown on the future land use map outside the Fitzgerald USA.

Future Parks/Recreation/Conservation uses include existing uses, plus a conservation corridor along the Ocmulgee River. The federal Emergency Management Agency has completed a flood plain study for the Ocmulgee River Corridor in northern Ben Hill County, and this same area is identified as a conservation corridor pursuant to the Georgia Mountain and River Corridor Protection Act of 1992. This designated conservation corridor is designed to maintain water quality, provide habitat for wildlife, and preserve the floodplain. County officials have indicated a desire to identify the county's remaining flood prone areas, and upon completion of the study, the identified floodplains will be added as conservation areas.

Future Transportation/Communication/Utilities uses will remain the same as existing. Due to projected slow growth and encouraged concentration of new development in the designated USA, no other significant expansions of the road system are anticipated in the unincorporated area through the 20-year planning period. Existing public right-of-ways within the county USA should be paved in accordance with proper urban standards and all public right-of-ways will continue to be maintained.

FITZGERALD FUTURE LAND USE

In general, the City of Fitzgerald's future land use pattern will be similar to its existing pattern with vacant lands being shown as developed generally in accordance with surrounding existing uses. Fitzgerald and its urban fringe will be the major focal point for all major residential, commercial, industrial and governmental growth in Ben Hill County. The city's historic grid pattern and its perimeter road system will continue to exert strong impacts on future growth and development. Map III-2 depicts future land use designations, service areas and Activity Center boundaries for Fitzgerald and the adjacent unincorporated urban fringe areas of Ben Hill County.

Fitzgerald's Urban Service Area (USA) corresponds with that of its existing water and sewer service areas. Fitzgerald's Downtown Activity Center (DAC) corresponds with the locally designated and visually recognizable downtown district, which has served as the commercial and governmental center of Greater Ben Hill since its formation. The DAC will continue to be the urban core of the city and with the highest density of uses.

Fitzgerald also contains two Urban Activity Centers (UACs), which also contain a high density of land uses. One lies east of the city and largely corresponds with the Colony City Industrial Park, and the second UAC surrounds the Fitzgerald Municipal Airport and its associated uses.

Within Fitzgerald's USA, there are more than sufficient acreages of undeveloped/unused land or abandoned uses to accommodate projected growth during the 20-year planning period. These vacant lands are in all parts of the city and are generally adjacent to all land use categories. Therefore, these vacant lands will receive first priority for new development in any of the land use categories. The recommended pattern for infill development is depicted on the future land use map.

The Plan recommends two major residential growth areas within Fitzgerald and Ben Hill County. The first area lies south and southwest of the Fitzgerald city limits and is bounded by Perry House Road on the east, the Industrial Perimeter Road to the south, and Willacoochee Creek to the west. The second major residential growth area lies to the north of the city limits and is bounded by U.S. 129 on the east, Adams Road on the west and the Industrial Perimeter Road on the north. In addition to these two major residential growth areas, it is recommended that the infilling of existing platted lots within the City of Fitzgerald and its urban fringe area be encouraged in order to promote the most cost efficient use of available public services.

In general, Fitzgerald's Water, Light and Bond Commission has developed an extensive water and sewer infrastructure to the above referenced developing areas. Strong efforts should be made to require utilization of the existing public utility systems and avoid the leapfrog development patterns currently evident on both the city's southwest and northern urban fringe areas.

The future land use maps indicate limited commercial expansion for the twenty-year planning period. Extensive commercial areas already exist within the Fitzgerald and Ben Hill County urban area and are primarily located in the city's historic central business district (Downtown Activity Center), and adjacent to U.S. 129 (the north/south one-way pair of Grant Street and Sherman Street). A number of older historic buildings, formerly utilized for industrial purposes, are becoming available in the city's downtown and their conversion to retail office and associated used should be strongly encouraged and will support the plan concept of a strong and vibrant downtown area.

The second major shopping district in Fitzgerald and Ben Hill County is found along U.S. 129 south, immediately north of the Industrial Perimeter Road. Infilling of this area should be strongly encouraged and should any properties currently utilized for industrial purposes become vacant, their conversion to commercial use should be encouraged.

Properties designed for neighborhood oriented shopping should be limited, and all such development should be properly located, screened and buffered from adjacent residential use areas.

Industrial land uses recommended in the future land use plan maps are depicted as the infilling of available properties lying east and southeast of the Industrial Perimeter Road and are largely contained within the existing Forward Fitzgerald and Colony City industrial tracts located off Rip Wiley Road and Glen Bass Road. The city and county have made tremendous investments in public water and sewer into this area and the entire thoroughfare system is designed to service these industrial tracts. Should additional industrial lands be required, they should be extensions of these existing parks.

Public/Institutional land uses in particular should locate inside the Fitzgerald USA, and consequently no additional uses in this category are depicted outside the USA.

Future Transportation/Communication/Utilities land uses will remain significantly the same as existing, with the exception of new streets developed in residential subdivisions. Due to the encouraged concentration of new development in the USA, no other significant expansions of the road systems are anticipated through the planning period. Existing public rights-of-way within the Urban Service Area should be paved in accordance with proper urban standards and all public rights-of-way will continue to be maintained. Upgrading of the Industrial Perimeter Road system will remain a priority for both Fitzgerald and Ben Hill County.

Future Parks/Recreation/Conservation uses include existing park uses, and planned expansions and upgrades. In addition the city's identified flood plains are included in this category to encourage the maintenance of water quality, to provide habitat for wildlife and preserve the natural processes associated with the city's natural drainage system. Uses other than passive recreation will be prohibited in these conservation corridors.

Greater Ben Hill contains an abundance of existing vacant uses and subdivided lands, so there are ample acreages for development throughout the 20-year planning period. This means a coordinated infill development policy needs to be implemented and services extended into the county to open up lands adjacent to existing serviced development.

FY 2006 - FY 2010 SHORT-TERM WORK PROGRAMS

The purpose of the Short-Term Work Program is to provide a detailed listing of the various projects and programs recommended by Ben Hill County and the City of Fitzgerald for implementation during the first five years covered in the 2025 Fitzgerald/Ben Hill County Comprehensive Plan. By scheduling major county and city initiatives and capital expenditures in advance over a period of years, the five-year work program will assist the county and city in undertaking activities to implement their individual plans and achieve their goals.

The Short-Term Work Program should be linked to and coordinated with the county and city annual operating budgets. The majority of the elements of the work program require direct county and city expenditures or indirect costs through allocation of county and city employees. Therefore, implementation of the Plan's goals, policies, and recommendations are tied to each annual budget. Attempts to implement the Plan should: (1) review recommendations in the Short-Term Work Program for the upcoming year; (2) revise the recommendations based on current information; and (3) transfer the recommended items that require local funding to the respective annual operating budget. With this approach, Greater Ben Hill will be able to systematically implement their comprehensive plan.