

## How Georgia Helped A Fast Growth County Capture Pristine Forest Land While Creating a Model for Other Communities

Fast growing communities face at least two major challenges: ensuring that infrastructure keeps pace with development and capturing quality green space before it disappears. Solving both challenges require significant amounts of money that rapidly growing areas rarely have.

However, thanks to a new state program, one high-growth Georgia county is permanently locking up almost 7,000 acres of pristine forest and one of the Southeast's most environmentally sensitive settings.

Paulding County not only ranks among Georgia's fastest growing counties, it consistently scores within the top growth American communities, too.

According to the local chamber of commerce, Paulding has witnessed an explosive 96 percent growth rate over the last ten years and more than 60 percent of its 112,411 residents have migrated there from elsewhere. Growth shows no sign of abating, either.

With undeveloped land rapidly evaporating, the county is capitalizing on the state's new Georgia Land Conservation Program to acquire the 6,909-acre Paulding Forest. Located in the county's northwest corner, Paulding Forest reeks with environmental, scenic, recreational and historic implications.

First, it contains one of the world's rarest and most endangered ecosystems – the mountain longleaf pine ecosystem. Amid some of the area's highest peaks, it is also home to four endangered species – the *Gray myotis* bat, the Etowah darter, green breasted darter and Cherokee darter fish.

Equally important, the tract is situated along the Silver Comet Trail, among the state's most popular hiking, biking and recreational areas and it offers a critical wildlife corridor and buffer to the nearby 3,300-acre, state-owned Sheffield Wildlife Management area.

Finally, the area served as a staging area and Civil War campground for both Union and Confederate forces during General Sherman's final push during the decisive Battle of Atlanta.

“Paulding County sits on the western edge of Atlanta's urban sprawl,” said Curt Soper, executive director, Georgia Land Conservation Program. “The county is largely zoned

for half-acre residential lots, which means the future land use of nearby parcels would be high density housing unless these steps were taken to conserve this parcel.”

This acquisition brings to approximately 10,400 contiguous acres of preserved, protected land in an area touched by more than four million people, with more arriving daily.

This cooperative effort is a rare instance where a rapidly growing county has taken the initiative to preserve vast tracts before development. The project also epitomizes what a public/private partnership can achieve when a group focuses on a common goal.

In announcing the large land conservation project, Governor Sonny Perdue heralded the multiple partners who donated funds for the green space. He referred to the involvement of all the public agencies and private partners as “putting skin in the game”.

Approximately \$7.5 million in private donations toward the \$45 million project were contingent upon the State of Georgia providing at least one-third of the acquisition costs. Another \$15 million came from Paulding County thanks to a bond program for land preservation that county voters overwhelmingly supported.

The remaining funds come from several sources, including the Georgia Forestry Commission, the U.S. Forest Service, the Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Conservation Fund, the Association of County Commissioners of Georgia, Polk County, the Doris Duke Foundation, the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation and the property owners, the Jones family.

“Paulding County saw the difficulty most metro Atlanta jurisdictions faced preserving land and the challenges they confronted in re-capturing green space once development occurred,” said (Name), (Title), Paulding County. “The growth projections for Paulding County mean we either plan for land preservation now or lose that opportunity forever. Fortunately, our citizens recognized the need and authorized the funds needed to buy key parcels before they were gobbled up.”

Paulding County will have one-third fee simple ownership of the tract, while the State’s Department of Natural Resources will hold title to the remaining property.

The key to this successful preservation effort was the Georgia Land Conservation Program. Proposed by Gov. Sonny Perdue and overwhelmingly approved by the Georgia General Assembly, the GLCP offers cities, counties and the state Department

of Natural Resources additional tools to capture sensitive land plots that meet certain criteria.

Under the GLCP, land owners work with their city, county or the DNR to apply for programs that include:

- Low interest loans to cities or counties for fee title or easement purchases from the Georgia Land Conservation Revolving Loan fund. The state has a \$55 million revolving low interest loan pool to help finance conservation easements.
- Competitive grants to cities, counties or DNR for fee title easement purchases. Currently, the state has \$48.6 million in land conservation grant funds (\$42.3 million for projects of statewide significance and \$6.3 million for grants to cities and counties).
- Assistance programs, including consultation, referrals and technical support for land conservation initiatives.

Grant and loan applications are due on March 1, June 1, September 1, and December 1 each year. Each project area is visited by GLCP staff and scored, generally within five weeks of the application's receipt.

The Governor's Land Conservation Council considers applications at its quarterly meetings, pending available funds, but will typically not take action on an application until at least one MAI appraisal has been completed and there is a land acquisition agreement with the landowner. In the past 18 months, the Council has endorsed 11 conservation easement projects totaling over 11,000 acres. Full details, including application forms, are on-line at <http://www.glcp.org>.

“The GLCP allows other Georgia communities to do exactly what Paulding County has done,” said GLCP's Soper, “whether they are a fast growing county that wants to protect sensitive areas from development or a rural area wanting to protect agricultural, historic, watershed, scenic or recreationally significant areas for other reasons.”

“We could not have done this without the GLCP,” said PAULDING COUNTY OFFICIAL. “Without it, we would have been like many other high growth counties in the metro area – facing the nearly impossible task of buying high-cost, previously developed land and returning it to a natural state to have the green space our community richly deserves.”

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