# Economic Development for Bloomingdale

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Economic development can be an elusive prize: Bloomingdale has watched as her closest neighbor to the east has experienced massive growth over the past few years. City leaders are desirous of sharing in the benefits of growth but have not seen sufficient interest on the part of potential developers. The city leaders would like to better understand this process and determine what they can do to expand this growth into Bloomingdale. This report will examine certain factors that are inhibiting growth in Bloomingdale and preliminary steps that the city leadership can take to encourage growth within the city.

Background:

Bloomingdale is a city of approximately 2,700 residents in Western Chatham County Georgia. The city is bisected by U.S. Highway 80, a four lane highway that once was the main route between Savannah and Atlanta before the construction of Interstate 16. Like many towns across our nation with the completion of the Interstate, the town lost its front porch showplace to the masses as they traveled to and fro. There is an exit from the interstate for Bloomingdale with undeveloped land around and along Bloomingdale Rd/Cherry St. to where it intersects Hwy. 80. Currently the Jimmy Deloach Parkway, which begins at GA Hwy 21, ends at U.S. Hwy 80. Future construction plans are to extend Deloach Parkway to connect the port on the Savannah River with I-16.

Figure 1: relationship of Bloomingdale to Pooler, Savannah with Chatham County
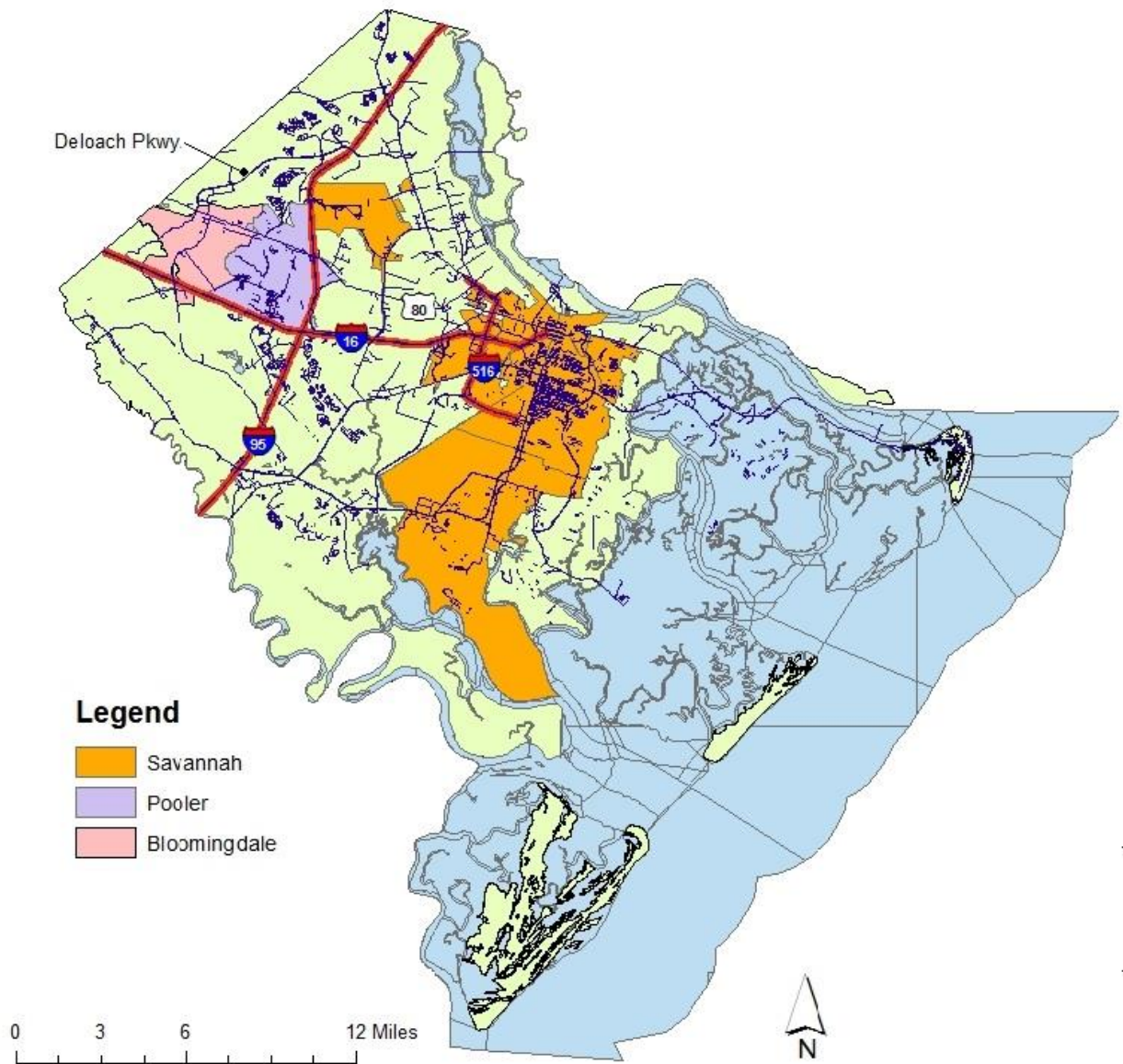
Other than a set of exit signs along I-16, anyone driving the interstate (which is mostly travelers and business people) would never know that a town called Bloomingdale exists. As realtors often say location is the key to the worth of any real-estate. Pooler, Bloomingdale's next door neighbor, has experienced tremendous growth and is located at the junction of 2 major

interstates. Pooler is also located nearer to the City of Savannah than Bloomingdale making it a logical first choice for residential development close to Savannah and allowing it to share first in development spreading west from Savannah. This puts Bloomingdale at a temporary locational disadvantage for luring new Development. While Pooler just broke ground on the new Outlet Mall of Georgia, Bloomingdale has not issued a building permit in several years. However, the city would appear to have a bright future for developing into a bedroom community for those working in Savannah, Garden City, and Pooler. As Savannah and Pooler continue to grow, development should spread to the West and, therefore, to Bloomingdale if the city is prepared to welcome development. Development from Savannah to the east is, of course, impossible as the East is occupied by the Atlantic Ocean.

Figure 2: illustrates location of potential development lands in Bloomingdale

City of Bloomingdale Potential Development

Legend

Wetlands
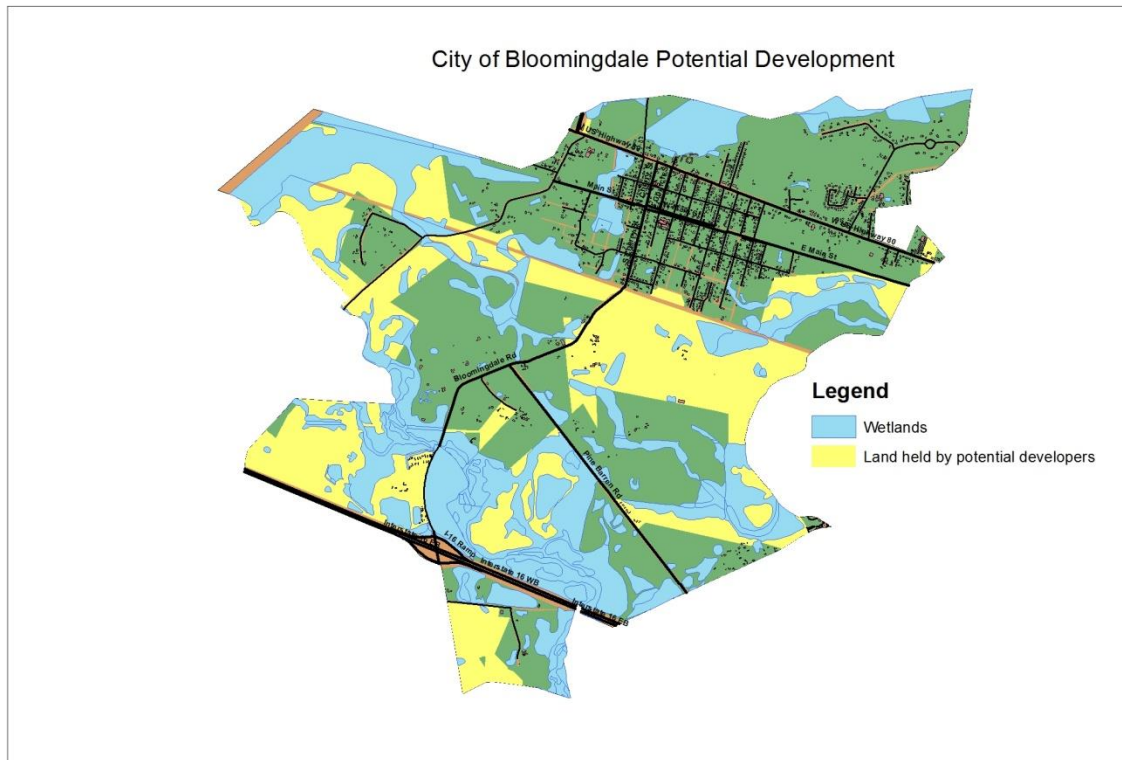
Land held by potential developers

Figure 3: criterion for selection as land for potential development

1. Own multiple land lots
2. Land owned by company based outside city.
3. Owner name alludes to development.

As growth moves West along I-16, developers will naturally consider Bloomingdale as a potential growth area. Several real estate companies and other investors already own substantial tracts of land within the city limits. These tracts have been owned since before the recession that began in 2008.

Figure 4: shows potential development tract owners, land size, and year of purchase

NAME	Acreage	Sale Year
D K MORGAN CONSOLIDATED LLC	203	2007
HEADLANDS REALTY CORPORATION	2	2007
MORGAN SAMUEL EDWARD & G PHILL	725	1970
MT PROPERTIES LLC	161	2004
OTTAWA REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT	194	1996
PLUM CREEK TIMBERLANDS LP	106	2009
SMITH & LAND IMPROVEMENT CORPORATION	2	1994
SOUTHWEST QUARTER HOLDINGS LLC	98	2002
DBSI NEW HAMPSTEAD II LLC ETAL*	99	2008

One must believe that they bought the land for development when the economy was strong. With the recession, growth has slowed and the development of land in Bloomingdale might wait longer than once was thought. With the completion of Deloach Parkway, traffic passing through Bloomingdale, especially commercial traffic, will increase greatly as Deloach Parkway will be a major artery for handling transportation of cargo heading westbound from the port. Pooler's rapid growth will also push to the West in time. Anyone new to the area looking for a reasonable commute to Savannah, all the necessities of shopping in Pooler, and a nice quiet place to live would find such desirable characteristics in Bloomingdale.

While the city cannot force development to happen within its borders, it can take steps to make itself more appealing to developers and potential citizens. This action plan will take time and effort but in the long run will prove beneficial to both the city and the citizens.

Plan of Action:

Step 1: Inventory all City Services.

Starting with the water department, city infrastructure should be mapped, preferably in an electronic format compatible with Geographic Information System (GIS) software to make updates easier to process as facilities are expanded, upgraded, and repaired. This will allow city officials and developers to see the state of the water and sewer system. It will also show new transmission and distribution expansions required to bring a new subdivision online without having to leave city hall. Once the water and sewer infrastructure is properly mapped the city can also assess the status of the system and what improvements are needed to best serve its current clients. This process, as it relates to the water and sewer system, is vitally important because as one land owner stated, "Bloomingdale has a major water problem." It appears possible that new development might have begun already if this problem, whether perceived or real, did not exist. Included in the inventory should be an assessment of the maintenance status of the system to determine if it is being maintained in a sustainable way and to identify areas where improvements are most immediately necessary.

Growth will create demand for other services as well. Police and Fire departments should be inventoried to understand their current capabilities and their ability to service additional development with current staffing and resources.

The city currently has park projects that are ongoing which should be reviewed for current status and future planned expansions, including the initiation of new projects related to proposed new development.

The inventory must include a thorough analysis of the city's ordinances and zoning to insure they are conducive to growth, and the capabilities of the department responsible for

zoning with respect to provision of assistance to developers with respect to zoning and permitting.

After the inventory is complete, the city will then have a much improved understanding of its current abilities to service expanded development and will know what improvements are required to better serve current citizens as well as accommodate growth.

Step 2: Review city ordinances to ensure the facilitate growth

The city's municipal code should be examined with the help of an attorney in comparison with other growing cities. This will make sure that the codes of the city both permit and encourage growth. The same should be done with all fees that the city charges. With fees and ordinances that encourage growth the city can ensure that it is not standing in the way of growth

Step 3: Project needs for Services and Funding:

With current inventory and infrastructure in hand, the city will not only understand current status but will be able to project development needs, infrastructure repair and maintenance requirements over the near term in the form of a five-year plan. To formulate this plan the city must think strategically about the growth they hope to attract and determine not only how they will meet the needs of this growth, but how they can demonstrate a commitment to infrastructure improvements that are likely to be crucial to a developer's decision to develop within the boundaries of Bloomingdale. Developers will need to know what is required to extend sewer and water mains into areas in which they undertake development efforts and that the city has considered, planned for, and stands ready to accommodate the needs of the developer. The initial investment in the capabilities required to enable extension of these services will make the

city more attractive to developers and will reduce construction time for development. During this planning process input from the largest landowners should be incorporated.

Step 4: Funding Options

With a new five-year strategic plan for growth that includes the determination of required and desirable upgrades to existing infrastructure, the city will most likely have identified a need for additional funding. Money will be needed not only for infrastructure improvements but also for maintenance and upkeep of the expanded city services. Bloomingdale currently does not impose a property tax upon its landowners. While this is popular politically, it handicaps the city's ability to make improvements or to expand. New growth will ultimately produce more revenue, but in order to attract new growth a new revenue stream must be found now. A property tax could give the city a source of revenue that would be reliable and could be used to fund growth. Currently, Pooler has a property tax levied at 4.635 mils. If Bloomingdale were to institute a tax at half that rate (2.3175 mils), the city would realize about $81,000 in additional annual revenue. This income could then be used to fund development either directly or by servicing debt related to any needed infrastructure improvements.

Figure 5: A comparison of city property tax rates in Chatham County

City	Millege Rate
Bloomingdale	0
Garden City	0
Pooler	4.635
Port Wentworth	4.397
Savannah	12.5
Thunderbolt	6.496
Tybee Island	4.186
Vernonburg	0

The State of Georgia has several opportunities for grants and special financing for cities to improve their water and sewer systems. Organizations like the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority and the Georgia Department of Community Affairs are offering loans to cities with interest rates as low as 1.4 percent and repayment terms up to 20 years. A new property tax imposed as described above could provide debt service on up to $1.4 million in funding under these terms and double that if the millage rate is set at Pooler's rate. These organizations also offer grants to small cities that can help fund their efforts to develop. Additional funds could be realized through impact fees.

With more funding and potential grants, the city should be able to meet the needs set out in its Comprehensive Plan (August 2008).

Step 5: Improve Public Information/ Technology

The existing city website is an older design which does not provide information to the public in a complete or efficient manner. The website should be seen as the city's welcome mat to the world. As technology use skyrockets across the nation, increasingly more and more people get their information from the internet. Many people who may have never been to Southeast Georgia will form their opinion on Bloomingdale by what they see from the city's web presence. This presence should encompass a multi-pronged approach using not only a traditional webpage but should incorporate social media accounts such as Twitter and Facebook to improve communication. Social media will give the city a way not only to sell itself to the world but also to communicate rapidly and efficiently with the citizens currently in the city.

As the city seeks to grow, there is no better avenue for it to sell itself to the world than through technology. An enhanced web presence can also facilitate providing more information to developers online in a format that is easy to access and easy to follow. An examination of technology use by many cities that are experiencing growth illustrates that most have websites that provide clear instructions as to how to go about getting permits to build or develop. This can be important for several reasons. First, large developers might not want to signal their plans during the preliminary stages of the development process but nevertheless need a way to easily find pertinent information about the city that informs their planning effort. Second, unless the city is flush with employees who can be available 24/7 to answer developer questions, an enhanced and fully functional web site can substitute for employees if the site is well structured to provide answers to the most common development questions. The site should include enough information to walk a potential developer through the entire process of zoning, permitting, extending water and sewer connections, and securing other services that might be needed during the development process. An inability to quickly find answers needed can stymie development efforts and frustrate potential developers. Web site development and hosting has fallen in price greatly in recent years and the city would be well advised to hire a professional web designer to help redesign a more user- and developer-friendly website.

Step 6: Survey/Sell the Citizenry on the Plan

After the new comprehensive development plan is established a marketing effort should be launched to inform the citizens about the new plan and explain in detail how it will benefit them. Some of the benefits to be realized include a more solid and stable water and sewer infrastructure, more city revenue produced by new residents and businesses moving into the city, and increases in the market value of existing homes as a direct result of development activities.

Marketing efforts should make use of all avenues possible including social media to get the message to the people and to explain why they should welcome the plan even though it might include a tax increase. After marketing the plan a survey should be utilized to gauge the level of acceptance and willingness of the residents to support expanded development and willingness to vote for the additional property tax. With the results of the survey,the city can then determine if the plan is politically feasible and move to implement the plan.

Conclusion:

Bloomingdale will experience growth even though a timetable for the growth cannot be determined at this time. The city should act now to make sure that it is ready when developers come calling. By following the preliminary action plan laid out herein the city should be able to set a course toward meeting the needs of future development and residents. Current residents will benefit immediately from improvement of current city services and over the long term with an enhanced revenue base and increased market values of their property. With the execution of a comprehensive development plan, the city should be able to properly accommodate new growth and can avoid some of the pitfalls of poor planning.

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