

Waycross-Ware County Housing Study

September 2026

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THANK YOU

This project was completed by staff at the Georgia Conservancy in partnership with the Waycross-Ware Development Authority. This report was made possible by the dedicated efforts of many project partners, whose time, expertise, and enthusiasm was invaluable to the completion of this study. The consultant team was welcomed warmly by Ware County and the City of Waycross staff, leadership, and community members alike. We acknowledge and thank all the members of these communities — from public officials and staff, to local business leaders, to residents — who lent their time and perspectives to informing our understanding. We are also immensely grateful for the support from the team members on the Waycross-Ware Georgia Initiative for Community Housing (GICH) team, whose on-the-ground mobilization and support were essential to this study - particularly with the community engagement activities which were so crucial to informing the study. Lastly, the Waycross-Ware Development Authority's commissioning of this study and commitment to addressing local housing needs was essential in bringing this project to life.

To all individuals and organizations who answered countless emails, calls, and data requests - thank you. We are indebted to your kindness and commitment to a better and brighter housing future.

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ABOUT GEORGIA CONSERVANCY

Georgia Conservancy is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization founded in 1967. Georgia Conservancy was founded by Georgians, and we work for Georgians across the state. Our mission is simple: healthy lands, thriving communities, and a future where every Georgian can enjoy the outdoors for generations to come.



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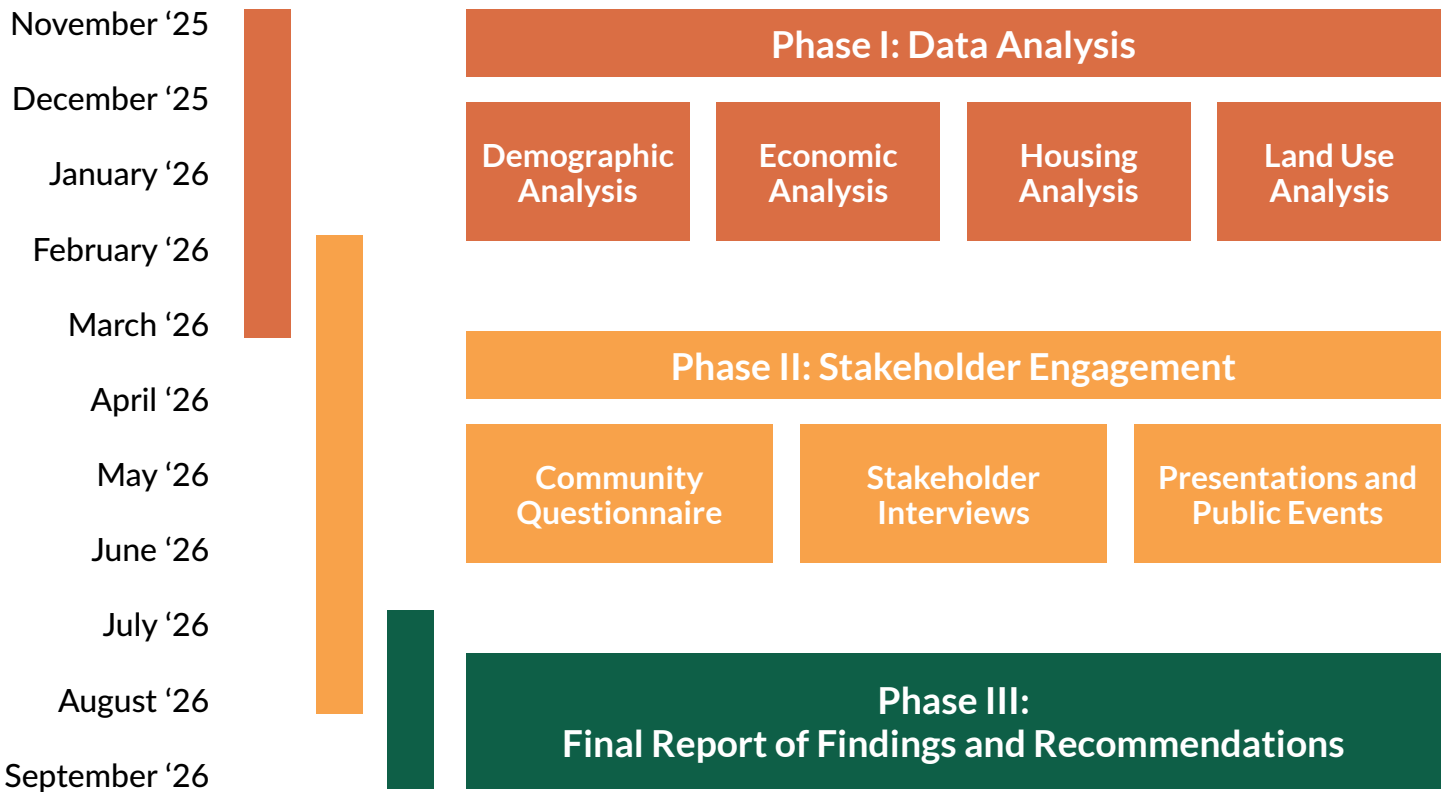
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

PROJECT INTRODUCTION

The Waycross-Ware County Housing Study aims to analyze local housing needs, challenges, and opportunities in both Ware County and the City of Waycross. The purpose of the project will be to equip the Waycross-Ware County Development Authority, and, by extension, the City of Waycross and Ware County with an understanding of their housing stock and the potential housing challenges to address in light of incoming economic development and population growth. This project was conducted in partnership with the Waycross-Ware Development Authority, with support and contributions from a range of stakeholders throughout the city, county, and region.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

This project was organized into three distinct phases: data analysis (Phase I), stakeholder engagement (Phase II), and final report development (Phase III). The project kicked off in November of 2025, with Phase I concluding in March 2026 and Phase II concluding in July 2026. The information gathered from these phases was then compiled into the final report’s findings and recommendations, which were completed in September 2026. See the graphic below for an illustration of each phase and its subsequent timeline below.



WHY A HOUSING STUDY?

Communities throughout the state of Georgia, and throughout the nation, have been struggling with soaring housing costs and affordability challenges in recent years. These issues have also substantially affected Ware County and the City of Waycross.

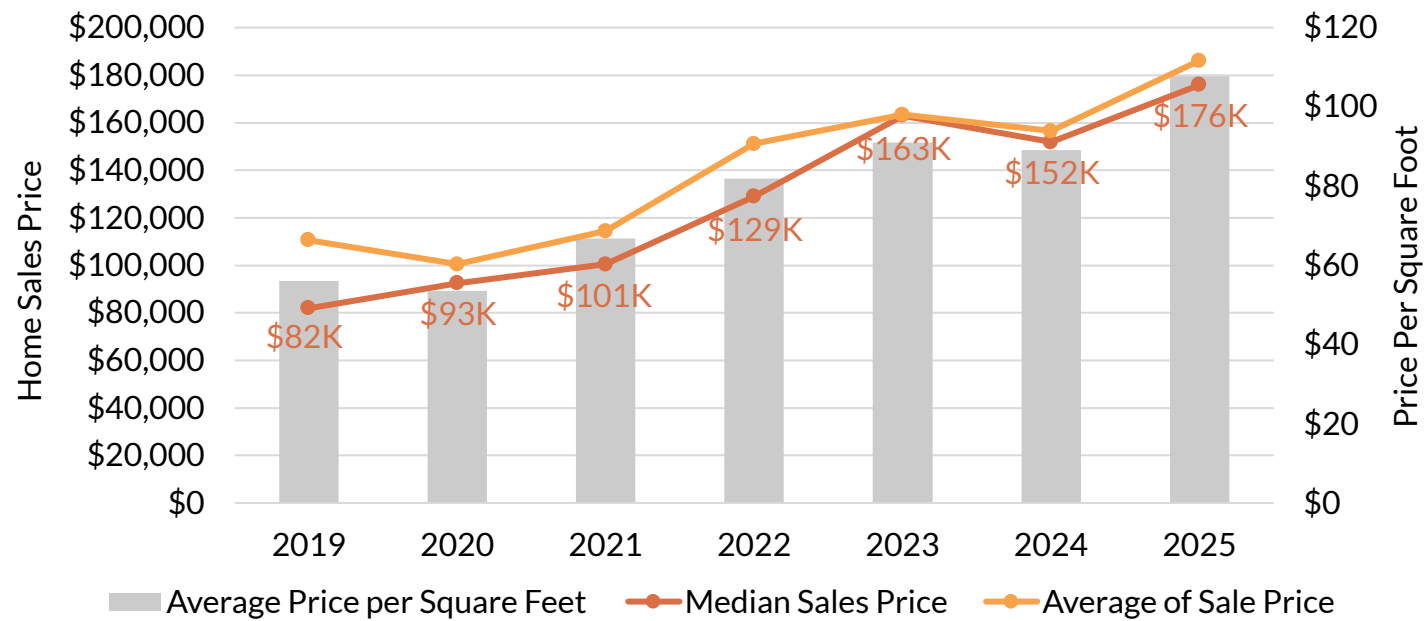
From 2019 to 2025, median home sale prices increased 115% across Ware County. Costs have been rising steadily nearly every year in that timeframe, with no indication that they'll be slowing down anytime soon. Incomes have not kept pace with home prices, leaving more and more community members struggling to afford housing or find housing that meets their budget.

Many of the forces driving housing costs up are outside of local control, such as rising construction costs influenced by interest rates, material availability, and labor costs. However, there are a range of locally implemented regulations, policies, procedures, and programs that shape the local housing landscape. It is these local decisions that this report seeks to inform and influence for a more resilient and attainable housing future for all people in Waycross and Ware County.

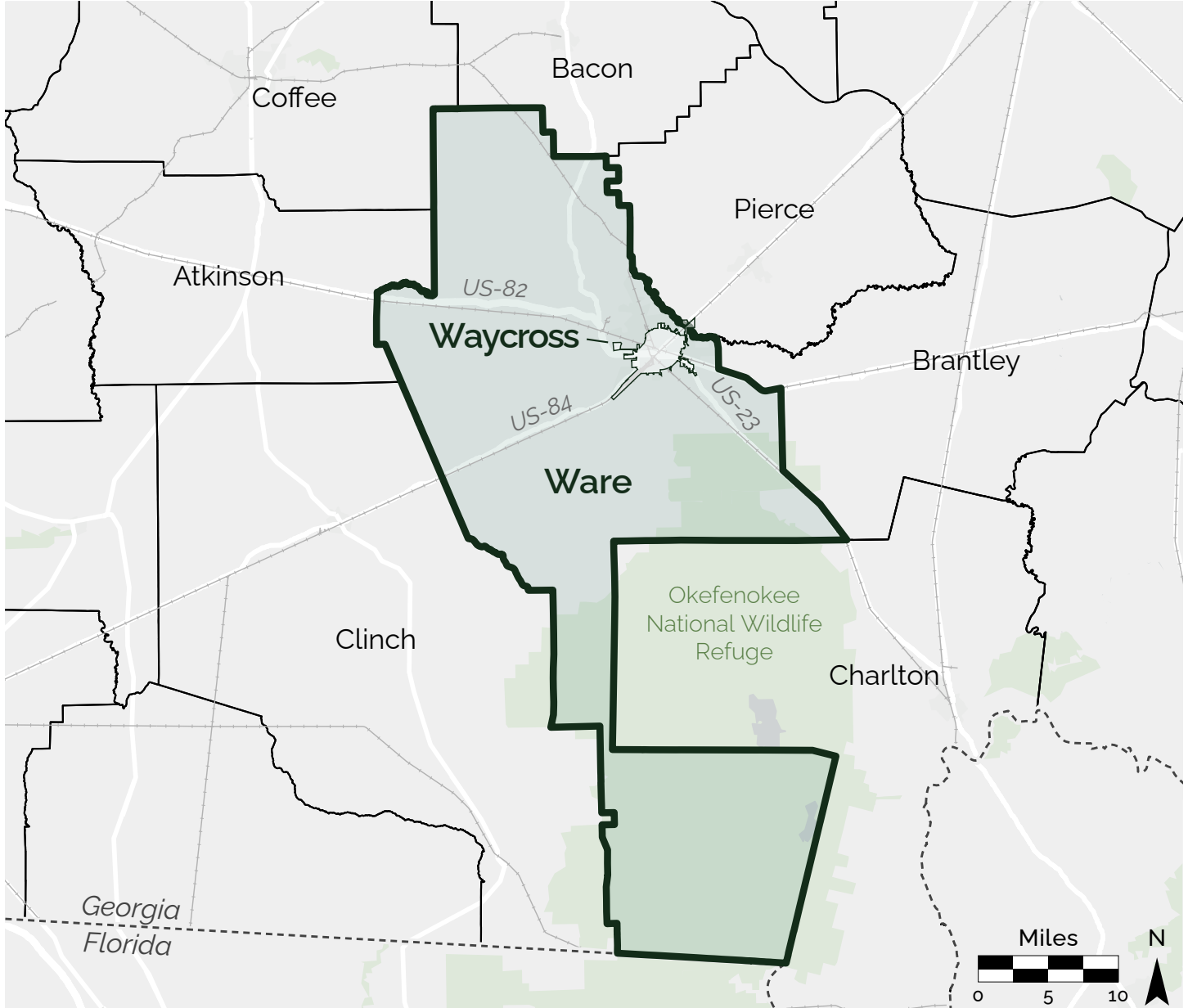
Housing Study Goals

- 1. Understand current conditions of relevant housing metrics in Waycross and Ware County
- 2. Build a clearer picture of what specific housing needs are, and local solutions to address those needs
- 3. Identify opportunities and constraints for future housing development

Ware County Home Prices over time (2019-2025)



Source: Qpublic Sales Data, local MLS listing data



GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT: WARE COUNTY AND CITY OF WAYCROSS

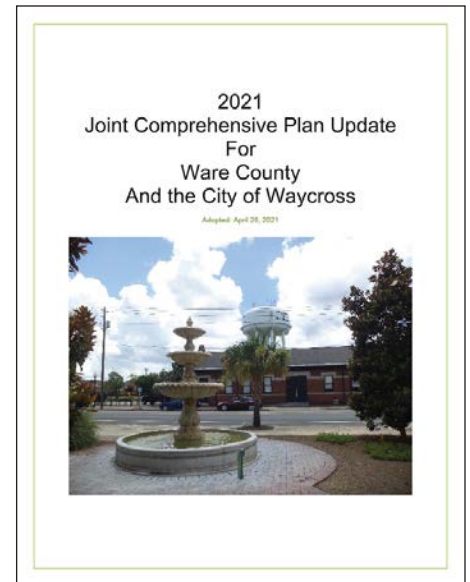
Ware County is located in the Southeastern corner of the state of Georgia, bordering Florida to the south. Ware County is the largest county in Georgia by area. The City of Waycross is nestled in the northeastern corner of the county, with a small section of the city's boundaries crossing over to neighboring Pierce County.

PREVIOUS PLAN REVIEW

There are a handful of recent planning efforts and studies that informed the development of this housing study. See below for a summary of key findings and takeaways from each.

JOINT COMPREHENSIVE PLAN UPDATE FOR WARE COUNTY AND THE CITY OF WAYCROSS (2021)

A comprehensive plan is the guiding document to how a community approaches growth and development, in order to ensure alignment between community needs, opportunities, and goals with new development. This comprehensive plan outlines Ware County's housing supply and key needs by analyzing both housing supply, and demand. Building on this analysis, the plan provides a comprehensive strategy on how to address the gap between demand and supply. Specific topics addressed include substandard housing inventory, planning for growth to address sprawl, and ensuring housing supply aligns with demographic changes and an aging population. The report concludes with a Community Work Program that offers a pathway to address housing needs in the County.



SOUTHERN GEORGIA REGIONAL COMMISSION (SGRC) REGIONAL PLAN

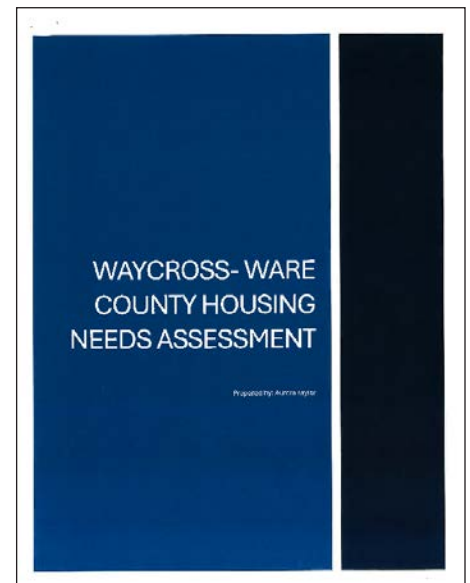
This regional plan identifies key focus geographies within the SGRC footprint, a handful of which impact housing need and growth pressures in and around Ware County. Specific areas identified include growth occurring along the Ware and Pierce County line, and the Ware/Waycross Industrial Park. The plan highlights the need to manage growth and meet housing demands, while also balancing conservation of working agricultural lands from sprawl. Lastly, the plan identifies rehabilitation of historic structures and infill development in downtown Waycross as a priority to manage growth in the area.



PREVIOUS PLAN REVIEW

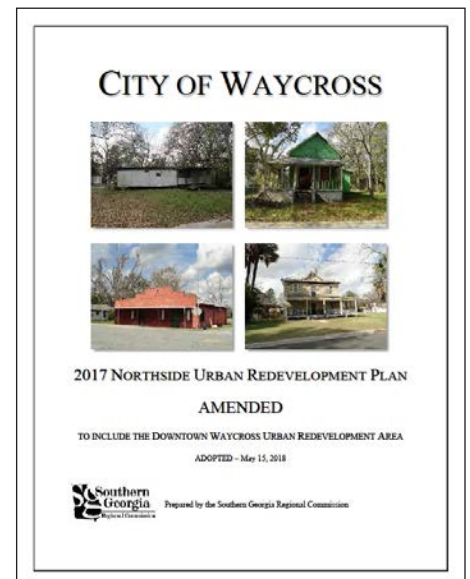
WAYCROSS WARE COUNTY HOUSING NEEDS ASSESSMENT (2024)

This study outlines a narrative of local housing supply and key needs, with the intended goal of preserving and increasing workforce affordable housing within the city of Waycross and Ware County. The report is organized around an analysis of local housing supply and inventory, which is then compared with housing demand to outline the existing housing gap between the two. The report concludes with a list of high-level recommendations to address this housing gap in both the city and county, many of which align with the recommended policies and actions included in this report.



CITY OF WAYCROSS NORTHSIDE URBAN REDEVELOPMENT PLAN (2017)

This analysis, lead by the Southern Georgia Regional Commission, reviews redevelopment needs and opportunities in Waycross's Northside and Downtown neighborhoods. This plan sought, among other goals, to outline strategies for future infill and affordable housing (re)development in the neighborhoods. The report outlines various strategies, though the implementation plan is not as detailed. This analysis informed the interpretation of the neighborhood conditions assessment completed as a part of this study. See the "Housing Condition Assessment" section of this report on page 51 for more information.



CHAPTER 2: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

The community engagement strategy for this housing study aimed to validate findings found through data collection and analysis, as well as provide additional insights into prioritizing responding to housing challenges and opportunities. The project team carried out several methods of outreach and input, while also providing education on interim findings from the housing study. The following chapter provides a summary of each outreach approach, as follows:

- Stakeholder Interviews
- Community Housing Questionnaire
- Initial Findings Presentation
- Housing and Economic Development Symposium

The chapter concludes with an overview of key findings from these community engagement activities. Key themes identified included:

1. Concerns with local housing stock conditions
2. Regulatory and administrative hurdles
3. Infrastructure capacity and organizational readiness
4. Quality of life and housing demand
5. Local coordination and alignment

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

A critical component of the project's engagement process was interviews with key community stakeholders, who offered a deeper dive into the

challenges, opportunities, and status of housing in Ware County and the City of Waycross. The project team conducted 9 interviews with municipal staff, active business owners, real estate agents, developers, and service providers. These conversations completed the study's qualitative research and analysis by offering an in-depth and on-the-ground perspective of topics and issues that may not have been captured by data and metrics. Topics included, for example, firsthand accounts of regulatory processes, challenges with conditions of the existing housing stock, market dynamics, and the personal experiences of people looking for homes for themselves or their community members.

Interviewees were selected to represent a cross-section of perspectives directly engaged in local housing outcomes, from those managing public infrastructure and administering local regulations to those building, selling, and financing housing on the ground. While individual perspectives varied, several consistent themes and priorities emerged across interviews, which were further reinforced by input from the community housing questionnaire and a series of in-person educational meetings. A summary of these themes can be found at the conclusion of this chapter on page 16.

COMMUNITY HOUSING QUESTIONNAIRE

INTRODUCTION

This questionnaire sought to understand housing priorities and needs in Waycross and Ware County, including: how much housing costs, how much people can generally afford to pay for housing, what types of housing are needed, and critical housing issues to address. In total, the questionnaire collected 295 responses.

The questionnaire was deployed in partnership with the Waycross-Ware County Community Housing Initiative, which is a joint city/county team participating in a three year program offered by the Georgia Initiative for Community Housing (GICH). This program offers collaboration and technical assistance related to housing and community development, in order to create and implement locally based plans to meet local housing needs. This partnership was instrumental in getting the word out about the survey. The project team regularly attended GICH team meetings to collaborate on local housing efforts and analysis.

FINDINGS AND TAKEAWAYS

The questionnaire highlighted key issues and priorities for local housing needs in both Waycross and Ware County. In addition to housing price and cost concerns, the questionnaire highlighted the urgency of poor housing unit conditions and the limited supply of quality available housing units for both rent and for sale. In addition, available home size (both in square feet and in bedrooms) appears to be a priority for households looking for a place to live, but finding right-sized units for a household appears to be difficult for the majority of households currently looking for housing. Perhaps the most clear statistic from the survey highlighting this issue: 54% of respondents shared that they would change their housing situation if more options were available to do so.

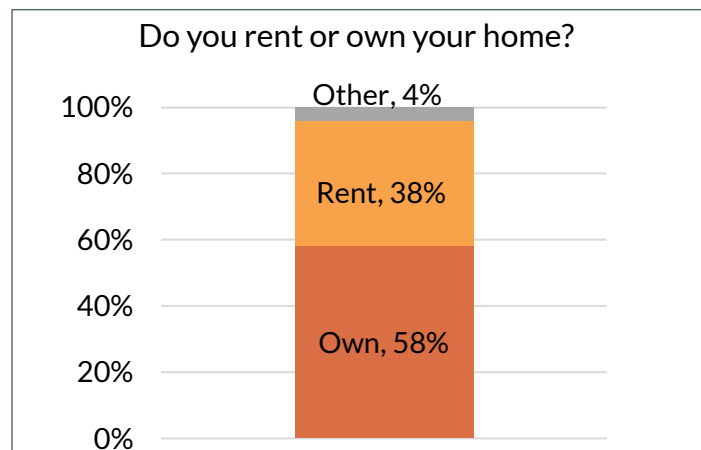
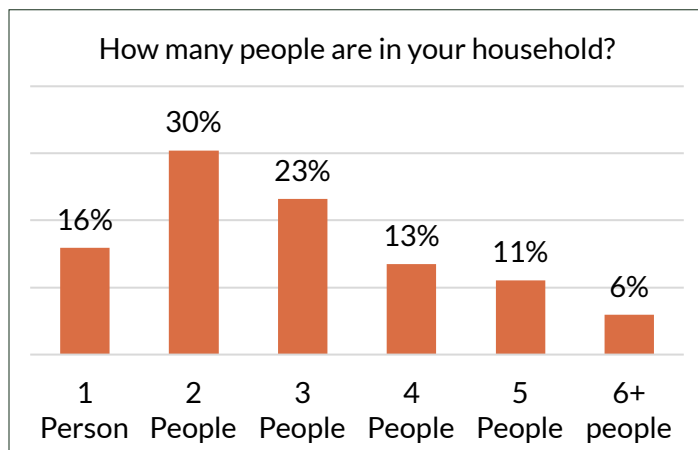
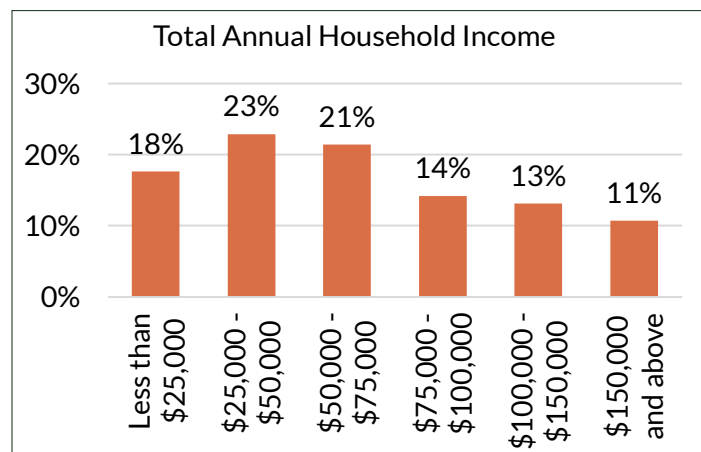
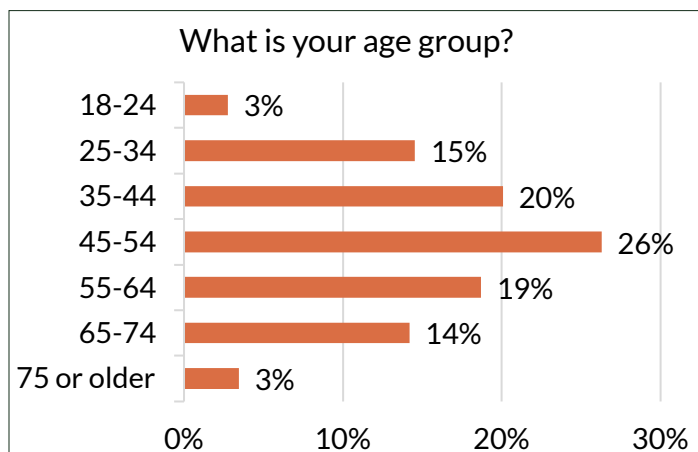
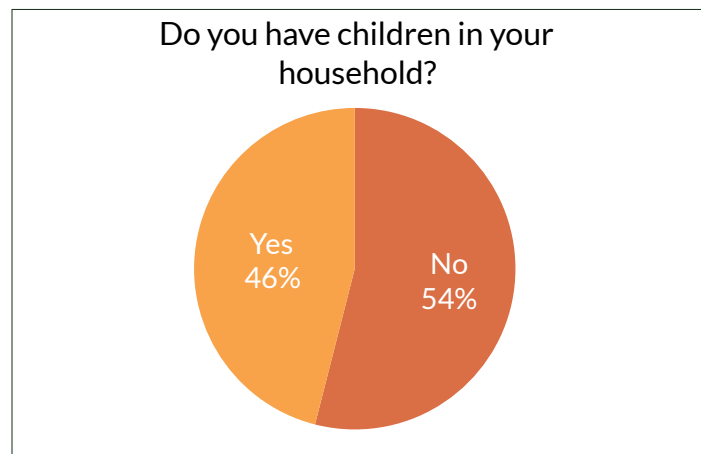
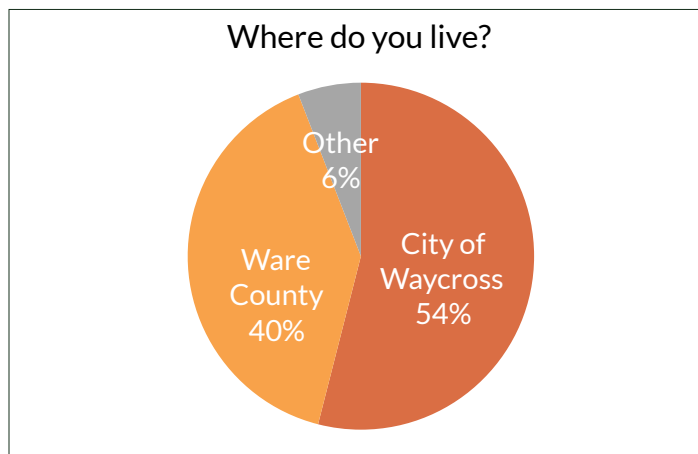
The following pages include a highlight of responses and findings. Note that these findings reflect only the survey respondents, and are not a comprehensive analysis of the entire population of Ware County and the City of Waycross. However, these responses provide clear and valuable qualitative feedback to inform the direction of the study.

54% OF RESPONDENTS SHARED THAT THEY WOULD CHANGE THEIR HOUSING SITUATION IF MORE OPTIONS WERE AVAILABLE TO DO SO.

- KEY FINDING FROM THE COMMUNITY HOUSING SURVEY

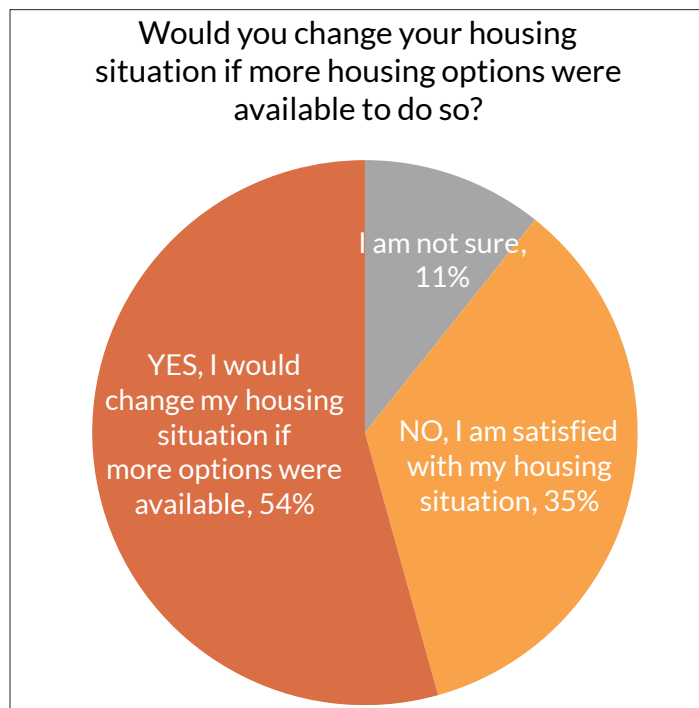
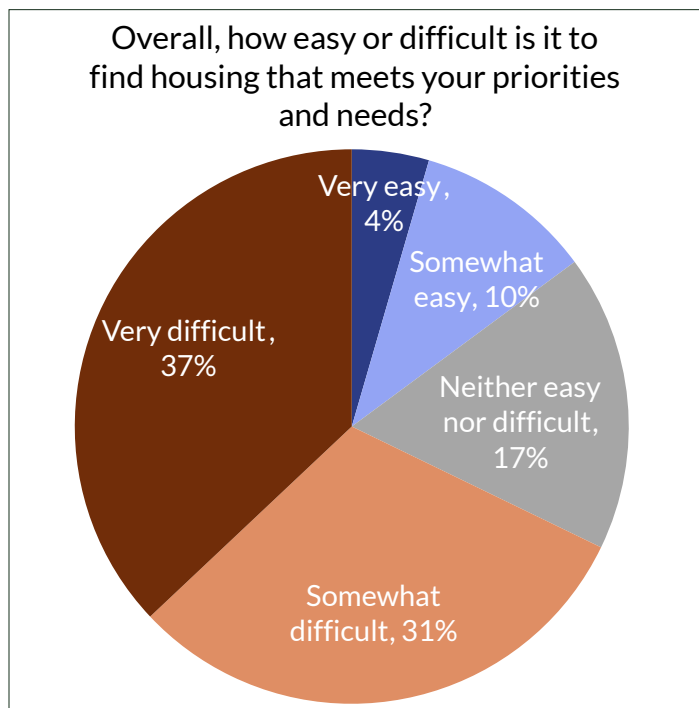
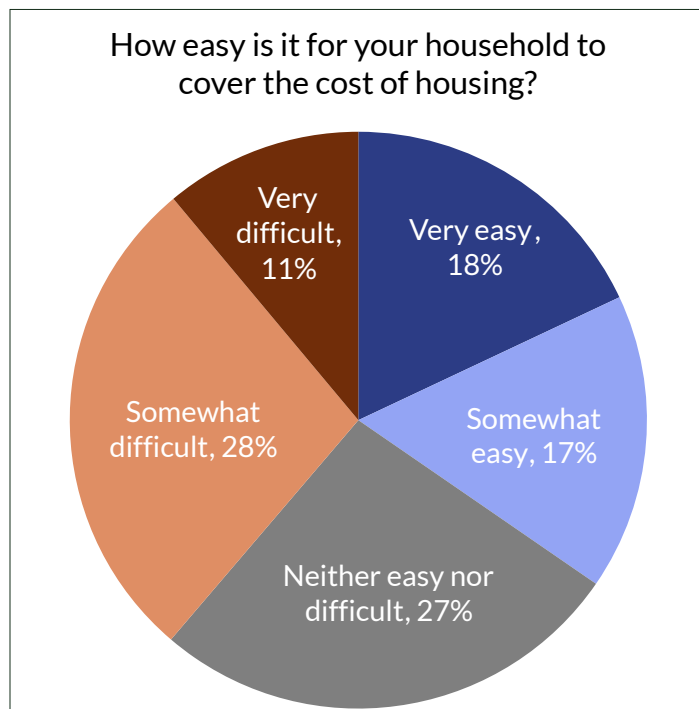
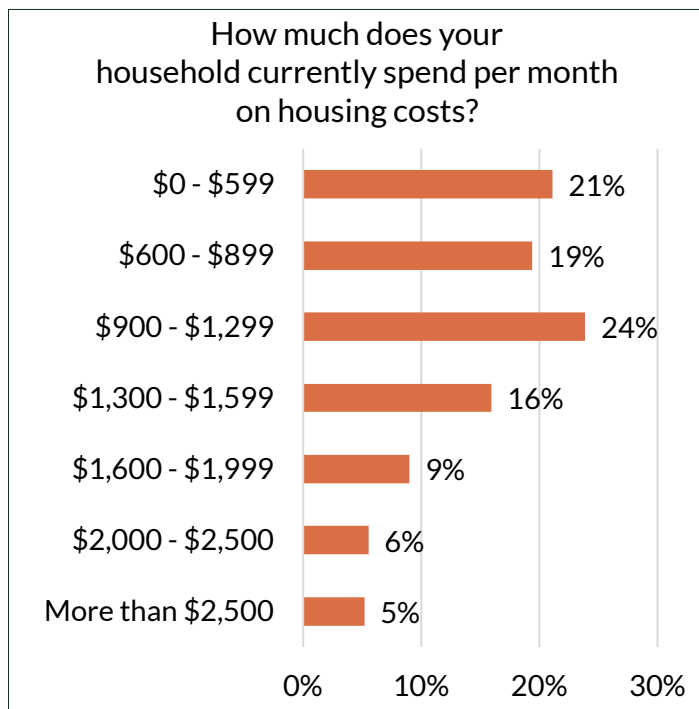
COMMUNITY HOUSING QUESTIONNAIRE

RESPONDENTS DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND INFORMATION



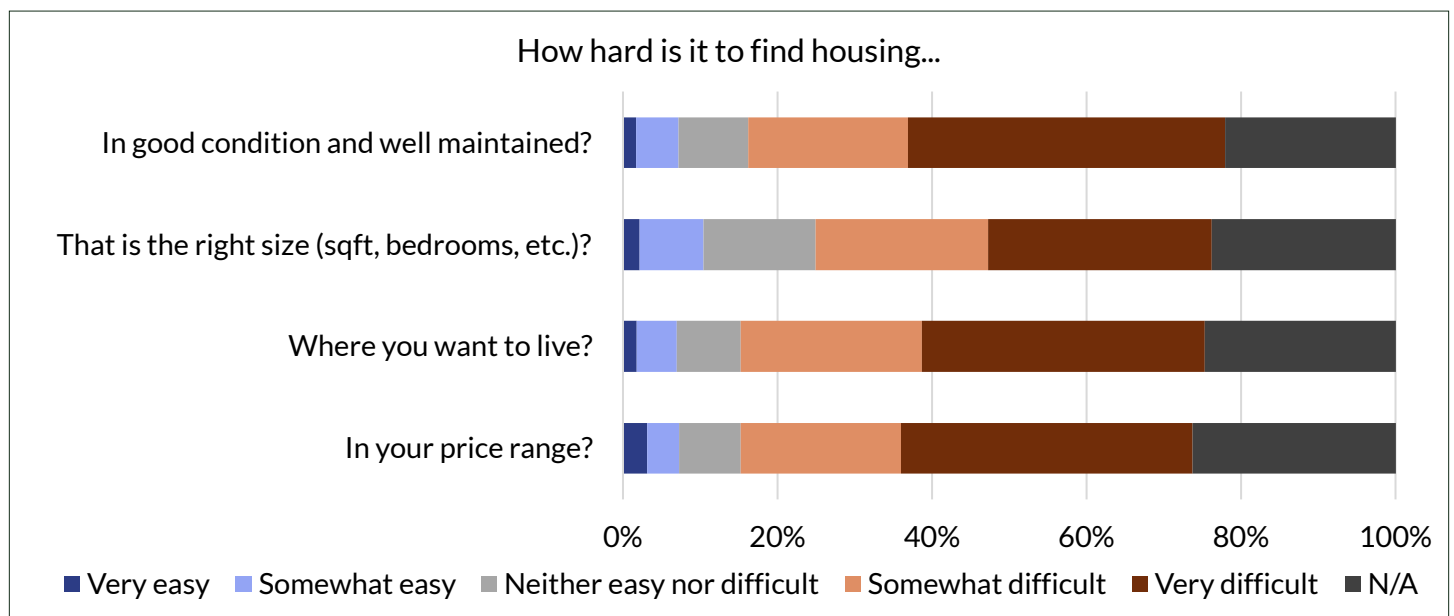
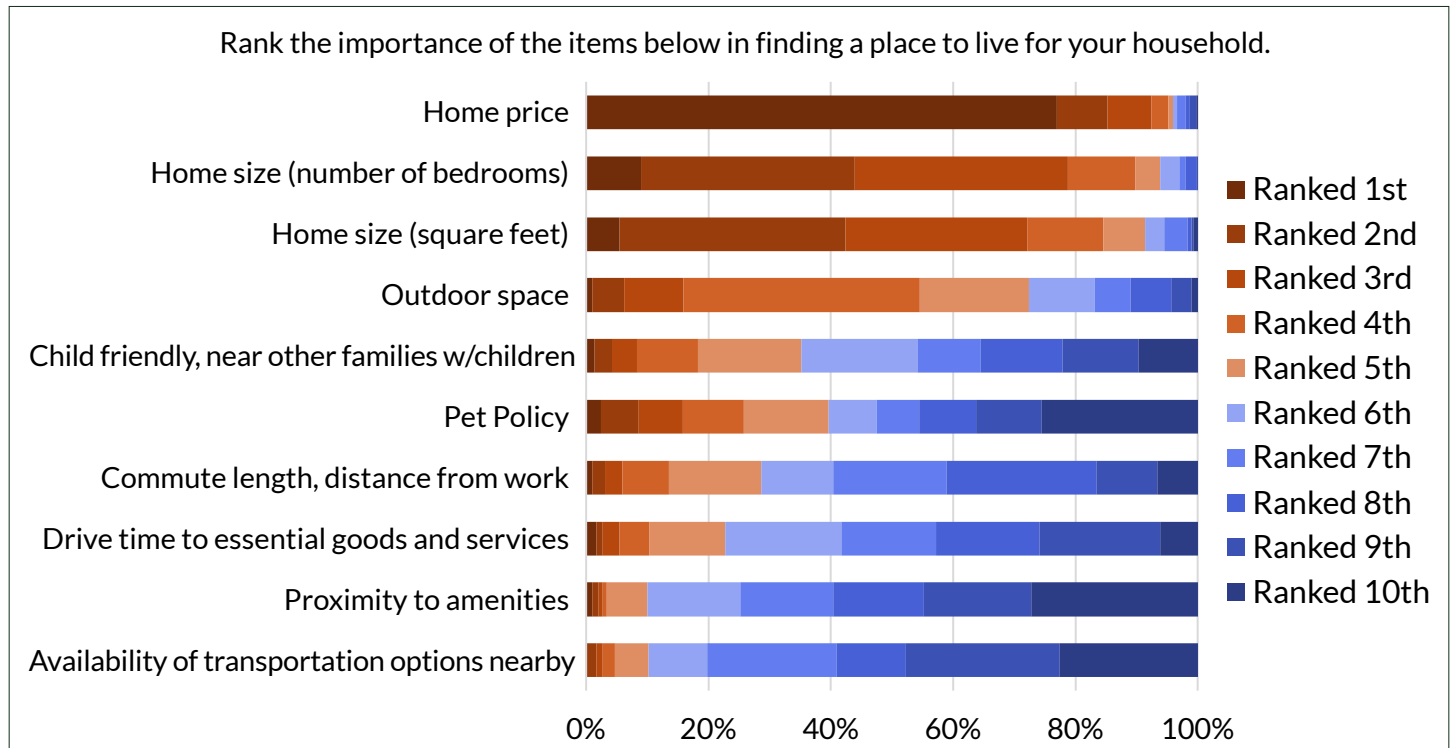
COMMUNITY HOUSING QUESTIONNAIRE

HOUSING NEEDS AND PREFERENCES RESULTS



COMMUNITY HOUSING QUESTIONNAIRE

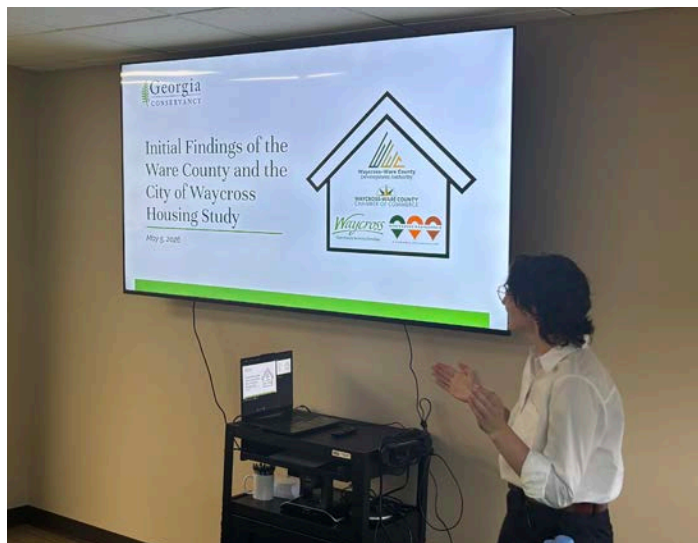
HOUSING NEEDS AND PREFERENCES RESULTS



IN-PERSON ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

MEETING #1: HOUSING STUDY UPDATE AND DISCUSSION

Following the completion of the existing conditions report, the project convened a meeting with key stakeholders and local decision-makers. Roughly 20 attendees participated, which included elected representatives and staff from both the City of Waycross and Ware County, as well as representatives from major employers and service providers. The meeting's purpose was to share initial findings and gather feedback on how the study could best inform each organization's needs and priorities. The meeting also provided an opportunity to educate decision-makers on the status and urgency of local housing issues, while also inviting their input on how the study findings aligned with their various perspectives. Following this meeting, the project team was able to move from data analysis to synthesizing findings and developing recommendations to guide the community towards a more resilient housing and economic development future.



IN-PERSON ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

MEETING #2: HOUSING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SYMPOSIUM

This public event brought together community members, decision makers, and project stakeholders to showcase findings from the housing study and gather input from members of the public. The event had three key objectives: to share the study's key findings; to connect those findings with planning and development best practices; and to gather input on local housing priorities, needs, and opportunities.

To fulfill these goals, the event agenda included three components: a presentation of the study findings, a public Q&A, and an open house segment. The open house segment included various stations where attendees could speak with the project team, learn more about the study findings, participate in the housing questionnaire (described above), and provide feedback. In addition, various organizations and partners were invited to host a table during the open house and connect with attendees. These tabling partners included the City of Waycross, the Waycross-Ware County Community Housing Initiative team, and the Coastal Pines Technical College. In total, roughly 60 attendees gathered at the Coastal Pines Technical College campus to participate in the symposium.

Lastly, the presentation also incorporated live polling software, allowing attendees to scan a QR and respond to questions in real time. This helped the project team get a better sense of who was in the audience, and ensured that the conversation flowed in both directions rather than one.



CHAPTER SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

HOUSING STOCK CONDITION CHALLENGES

Housing quality is a concern throughout the county and city. A significant share of the existing housing stock is aging, substandard, or vacant. These issues appear to be closely linked: units in poor condition are more likely to sit vacant, and vacant units deteriorate further over time. For many properties, the costs to tear down and rebuild are far higher than the finished home would be worth. There appears to be limited financial resources available to bridge this gap, leaving property owners without a clear path to bring these units back into productive use. This challenge has been particularly acute for renters, as rental rates have soared while unit quality has not followed suit - resulting in a widening gap between what families are paying and what they're receiving.

REGULATORY AND ADMINISTRATIVE HURDLES

Development and rehabilitation activity is shaped by a mix of locally controlled and externally imposed regulatory hurdles. An example of an external issue that arose in multiple conversations is Heirs' property, which are homes passed down through families without a clear legal owner or documentation. This challenge can keep properties tied up in probate court, and creates a general barrier to home maintenance, sale, and potential redevelopment. Some technical assistance is available statewide for untangling heirs' property inheritance, but none targeted locally. Locally controlled regulations further challenge rehabilitation efforts, particularly in administration of redevelopment regulations. There is an opportunity to fine-tune regulations to better align them with housing rehabilitation goals.

QUALITY OF LIFE AND HOUSING DEMAND

Housing demand is shaped by much more than just the availability or cost of units. Broader quality-of-life factors, including tax burdens and school

system quality, play a significant role in where residents choose to live, and can drive demand toward neighboring communities even with available local housing options. These findings suggest a need for a holistic approach to consider housing alongside broader quality-of-life measures.

INFRASTRUCTURE CAPACITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS

Water and sewer systems are often significant determinants of new development (read more on page 36). Local water and sewer systems are operating well below capacity in both the city and county, and could accommodate substantial additional growth - if the demand is there. A handful of key local players, such as the housing authority and city land bank, also have room to take on additional projects, such as acquiring or developing vacant land. However, both organizations are held back by limited financial resources and support. Both the built and organizational infrastructure is available and could be leveraged to address housing needs - given sufficient funds.

LOCAL COORDINATION AND ALIGNMENT

Sustained progress on housing depends on strong coordination and alignment across local jurisdictions and institutions. As elected officials and appointed leadership change, there is a need to educate new decision-makers on local housing needs, opportunities, and tools. One clear step in this direction is greater transparency and easier public access to zoning, regulatory, and administrative requirements, which may reduce uncertainty for both residents and developers alike. This is imperative given potential future economic development, as being prepared for development pressure starts with coordination and alignment.

CHAPTER 3: EXISTING CONDITIONS ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

The Existing Conditions Analysis is the “meat” of this study, where a variety of metrics are analyzed individually and synthesized together to paint a clear picture of housing supply and demand in Waycross and Ware County. To do so, this chapter looks at four key categories and compiles a “profile” for demographics, economics, housing, and land use locally. Each profile will include high level summaries and key takeaways. Then, the chapter conclusion will weave these four topics together to create a clear and cohesive narrative of local housing demand and supply.

KEY QUESTION FOR EACH PROFILE:

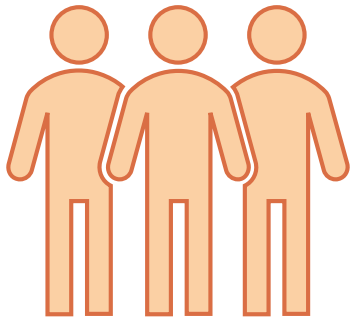
DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS	<i>HOW CAN WE BETTER UNDERSTAND WHO LIVES IN WAYCROSS AND WARE COUNTY?</i>
ECONOMIC ANALYSIS	<i>WHAT DO EMPLOYMENT, WAGES, AND INCOME LOOK LIKE IN WAYCROSS AND WARE COUNTY?</i>
HOUSING ANALYSIS	<i>WHAT DOES THE HOUSING SUPPLY LOOK LIKE IN WAYCROSS AND WARE COUNTY?</i>
LAND USE ANALYSIS	<i>WHAT DOES LAND USE LOOK LIKE IN WAYCROSS AND WARE COUNTY, AND HOW DO PAST AND PRESENT LAND USE DECISIONS INFLUENCE HOUSING?</i>

NOTES ON DATA SOURCES

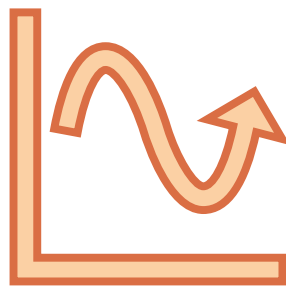
This chapter draws on the most current data available at the time the study’s analysis was conducted, primarily between November 2025 and March 2026. Data sources include the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), Woods & Poole demographic and economic projections, and Ware County Tax Assessor records, among others. Some data points, such as median rental rates, are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to accurately measure. As such, the information included in this section provides as robust a picture as possible, given these data limitations.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

KEY FACTS AND FINDINGS:



*STABLE POPULATION
ACROSS THE ENTIRE
COUNTY, MINIMAL
DECREASE IN THE CITY*



*MAJORITY OF
HOUSEHOLDS IN
BOTH COUNTY AND
CITY ARE 1-2 PERSON
HOUSEHOLDS*



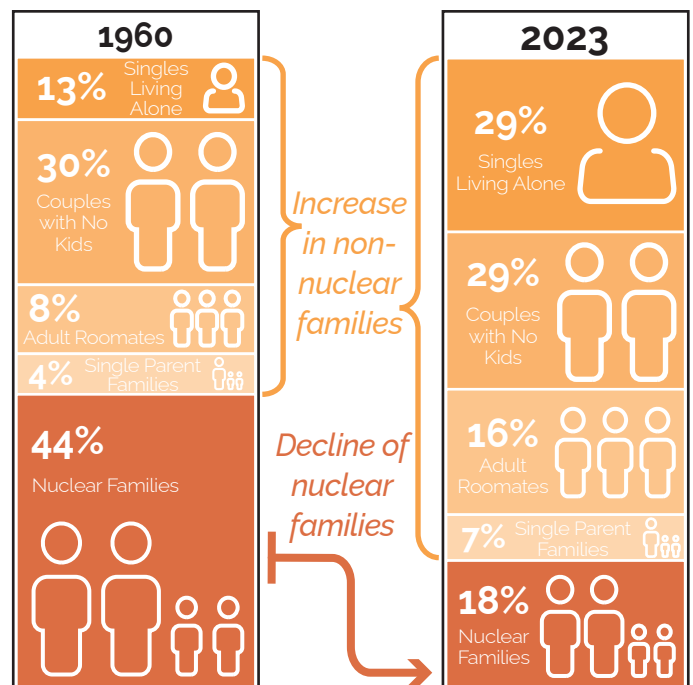
*1 OUT OF 5 RESIDENTS
ARE CURRENTLY 65+
ACROSS THE COUNTY*

Key Concept: Housing Mismatch

Local demographics help to understand the types of housing that will meet current household needs. However, demographic changes happen more quickly than housing supply changes. Housing developed for previous generation's demographics may not meet the needs or preferences of the current demographic profile.

Housing supply, therefore, must be flexible to meet both current and future needs. To illustrate this concept, see the illustration to the right highlighting how household size has changed over just a few generations, going from predominantly nuclear family to a more diverse array of household types.

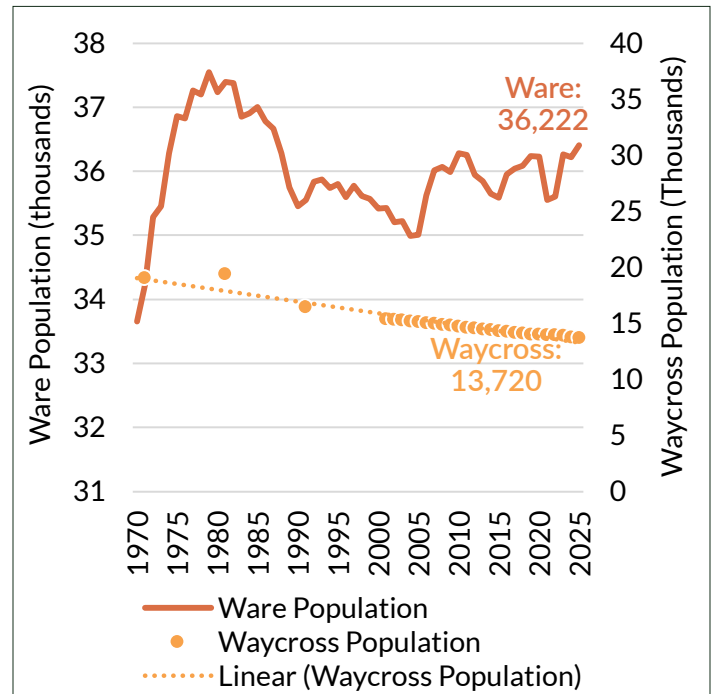
America's Households by the Numbers



DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

HISTORIC AND PROJECTED POPULATION

Ware County's population has followed a "boom and bust" pattern, peaking in the late 1970s at the height of Waycross's influence as a major railroad and transportation hub. The county's overall population saw a sharp decline throughout the 1980s, and has remained relatively stable since. The city of Waycross's population mirrored that of the county, with the population peaking around 1980. However, the city's population has continued to decline since then. The chart to the right includes available data on the city's population from 1970 to 2024, as the census only has data available every 10 years prior to 2000. The linear trend line connects these data points, highlighting the gradual population decline over time.

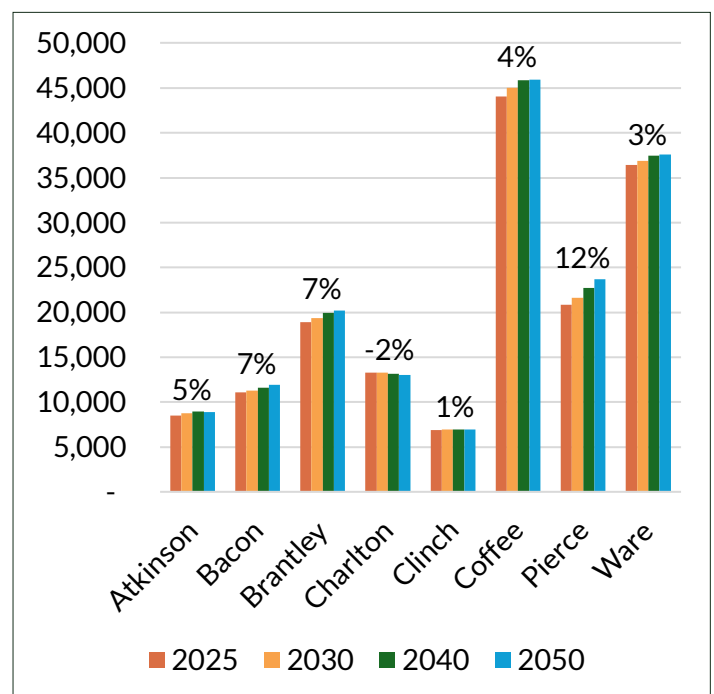


Source: Woods and Poole 2025 Demographic Data - Ware County

LONG-TERM POPULATION PROJECTION

Looking at the broader region, the eight counties surrounding Ware County are expected to grow by about 5% over the next 25 years. Ware County's growth is projected to be more modest, with an increase of about 3% during the same time period. The county's projected growth is more modest than most of its neighbors: Pierce County, for example, is projected to grow 14% over the same period.

Note that these projections are not guaranteed, however, and are based on current trends and estimates. Projections may alter due to unexpected economic developments, changes to economic and housing conditions, or other trends that could push actual population growth higher or lower than expected.

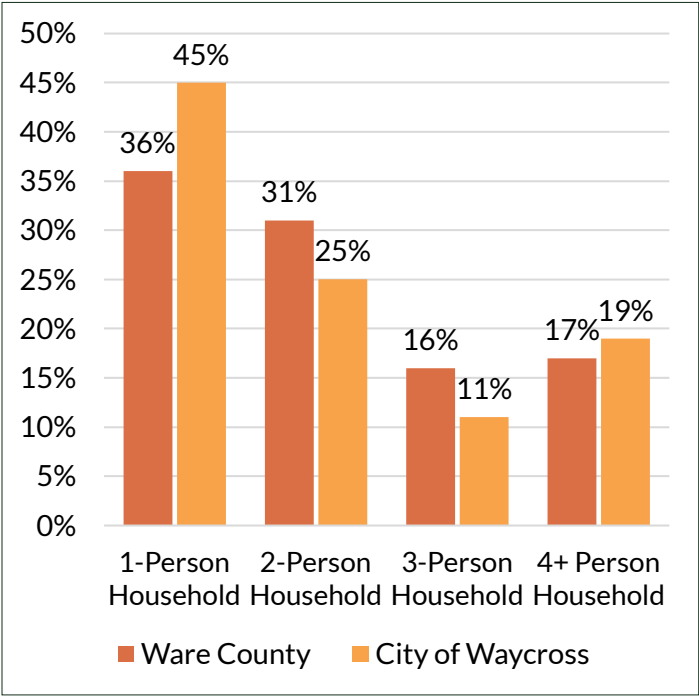


Source: Georgia Office of Planning and Budget

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

POPULATION BY HOUSEHOLD SIZE

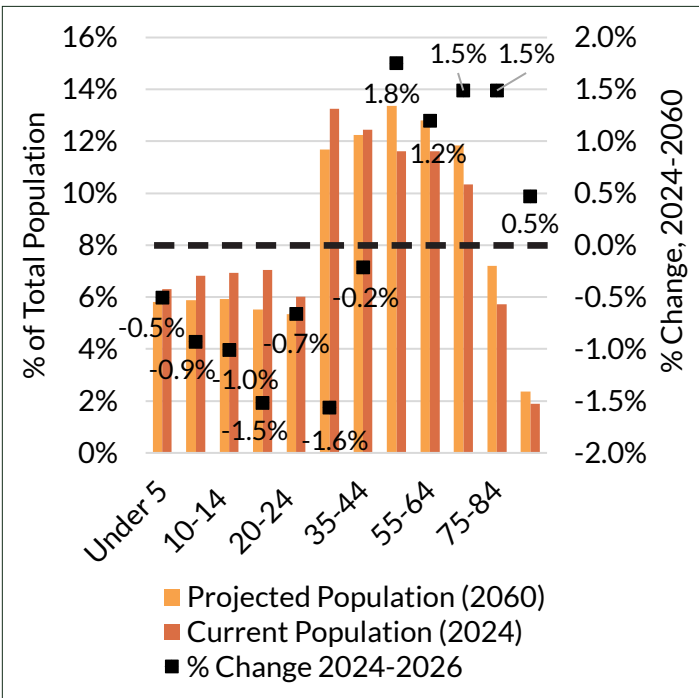
Most households in both Ware County and the City of Waycross are small, made up of just one or two people. This trend is especially strong in Waycross, where one person households make up nearly half of all households in the city. These smaller household sizes mirror national trends, where households are generally more diverse than they were a few generations ago. However, most housing has historically been developed for the nuclear family structure, which tend to be at least 3 or more people per household. Read more about this nationwide shift and its implications on housing demand on page 18.



Source: 2024 ACS data, table S2501

POPULATION BY AGE, CURRENT & PROJECTED (WARE COUNTY)

About one in five residents in Ware County are 65 years or older. Projections indicate that this share will continue to grow slowly over time as the population ages. Without sufficient replacement by younger cohorts, the county may face economic challenges tied to having an increased proportion of retirees and fewer working-age residents. Given housing needs change over the course of a person's life, this statistic is important to take into account in understanding current and future housing needs.

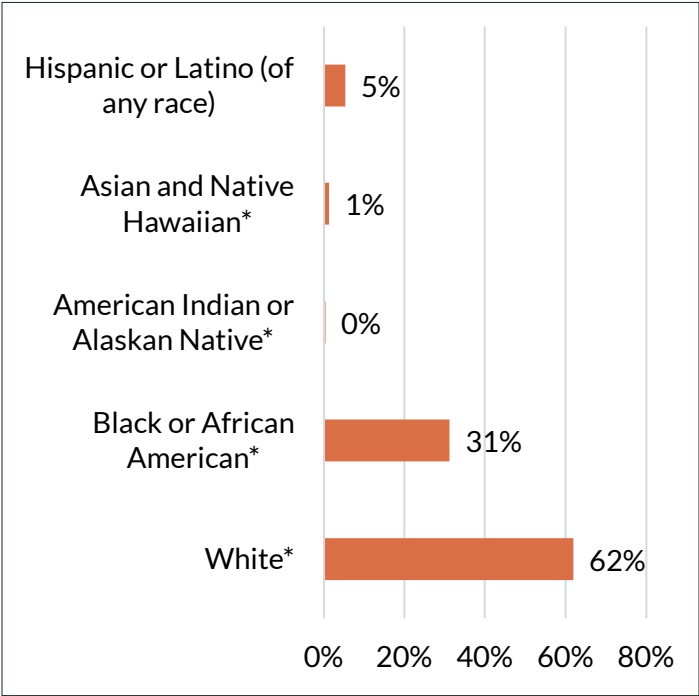


Source: Woods and Poole 2025 Demographic Data – Ware County

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

POPULATION BY RACE (WARE COUNTY)

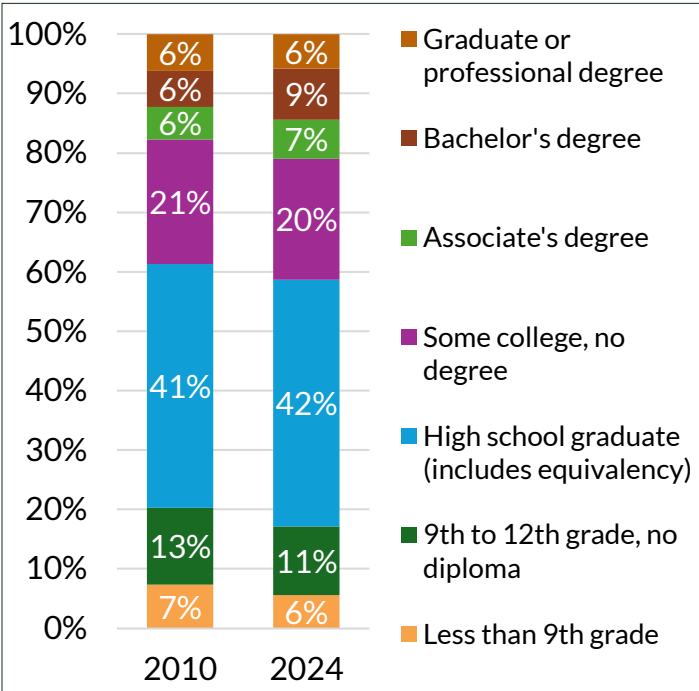
Ware County is predominantly White and non-Hispanic, with this demographic making up about 62% of the county’s residents. The second largest racial demographic in Ware County is Black or African American individuals, representing 31% of the county’s residents. About 5% of county residents identify as Hispanic or Latino, which is a category that can include people of any race. Together, these three groups account for 98% of the county’s total population.



Source: Woods and Poole 2025 Demographic Data – Ware County. *Non-Hispanic.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

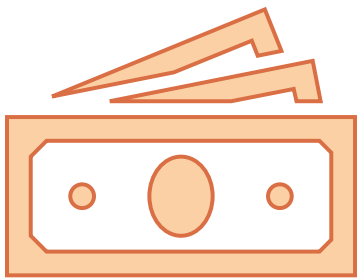
Educational attainment in Ware County improved slightly from 2010-2024, which is the period of data availability for this metric. The share of residents without a high school diploma dropped from 20% to 17% during this period. At the same time, the share of residents with a college graduates (including both associate’s and bachelor’s degrees) grew from 12% to 16%. These gradual shifts point to a more educated workforce overall in the county.



Source: 2024 ACS data, table S1501

ECONOMIC PROFILE

KEY FACTS AND FINDINGS:



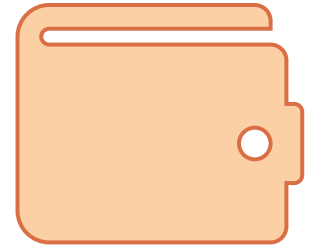
*MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD
INCOME:*

WARE: \$47,448

WAYCROSS: \$38,301



*LOW LABOR FORCE
PARTICIPATION RATE
IN BOTH CITY AND
COUNTY, COMPARED TO
STATE AVERAGE*



*MEDIAN SALARY IN
WARE COUNTY IS \$40K;
NEARLY ½ OF JOBS ARE
PAYING \$54K OR LESS*

Key Concept: The 30% Rule

Every household has a housing cost at which housing is “income aligned”. This means that what is considered an “affordable” housing cost will differ from household to household. This amount is determined by how much income a household has on a monthly, and taking 30% of that monthly income to find a monthly housing payment. This concept applies for both homeowners and renters, for low income and high income households alike.

This section will consider local economic conditions in Waycross and Ware County, which can then be compared to housing costs and prices.

How much **should** housing cost, according to housing policy experts?

Ideally, monthly housing costs should be no more than

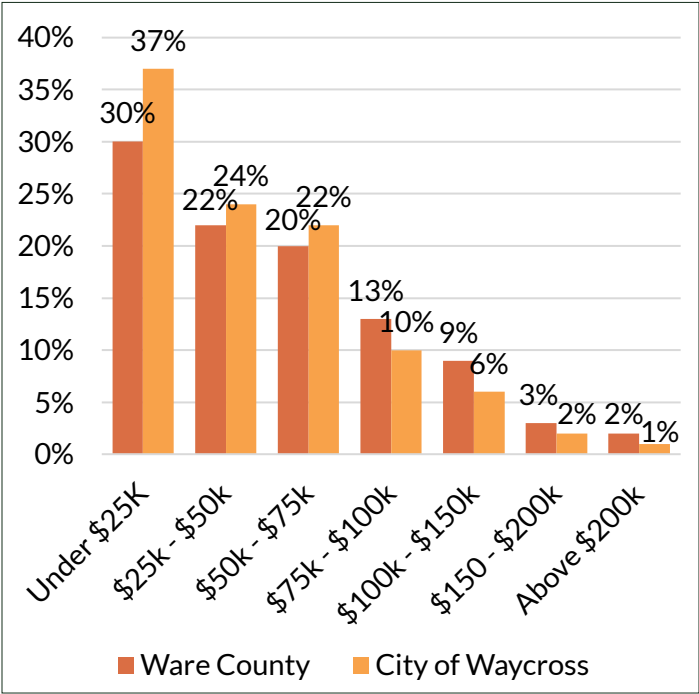
30%

Of monthly income

ECONOMIC PROFILE

HOUSEHOLD INCOME (HHI)

As of 2024, the median household income was \$47,448 in Ware County and \$38,301 in the City of Waycross. Both the county and the city have a significant share of low-income households, with roughly one in three households making less than \$25,000. Median household income is a key indicator in how to interpret how attainable local housing options are, as it helps understand how much a family can reasonably spend on housing each month. To learn more about the 30% rule and how it's applied to household income, read page 22.

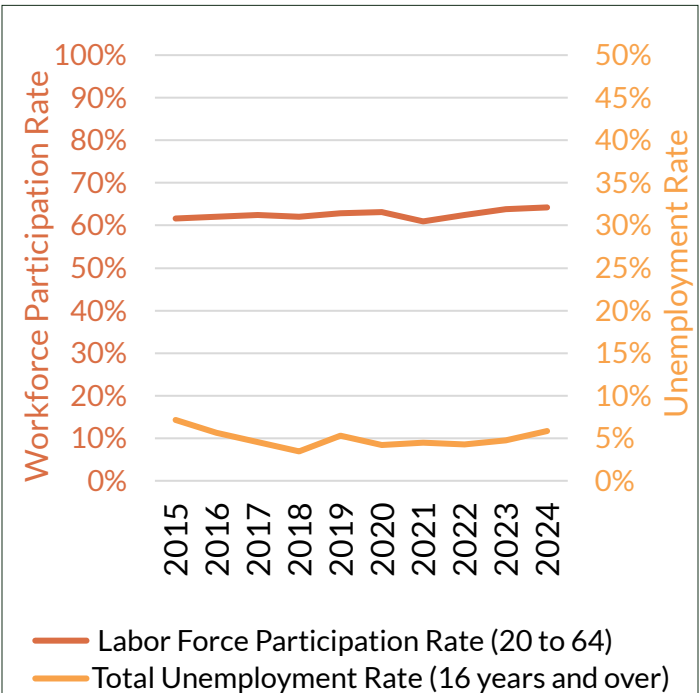


Source: 2024 ACS data, table S1901

UNEMPLOYMENT & WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION (WARE COUNTY)

Workforce participation measures the share of working-age residents who are either employed or actively looking for work. Workforce participation is low in Ware County among working-age adults (ages 20 to 64) at just 64% participation.

Unemployment, on the other hand, measures the number of people who are actively looking for work but unable to find any. The unemployment rate for Ware County is moderate, at 4% as of 2025. This is slightly higher than Georgia's statewide unemployment rate of 3.3% for the same time period.



Source: Georgia Department of Labor, 2024 ACS data, table S2301

ECONOMIC PROFILE

EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY (WARE CO.)

Nearly half of all jobs in Ware County pay \$54,000 or less, and the median salary in the county is roughly \$40,000. The highest wage jobs in the county are in management and utilities jobs, though these industries employ a small share of the local workforce. Most residents work in lower- or moderate-wage jobs, such as health care, retail, and food service.

Utilizing the 30% rule, an income-aligned monthly housing payment would be anywhere from **\$523 through \$1,356** for households employed in the top 3 industries in Ware, which include health care, retail trade, and food services.

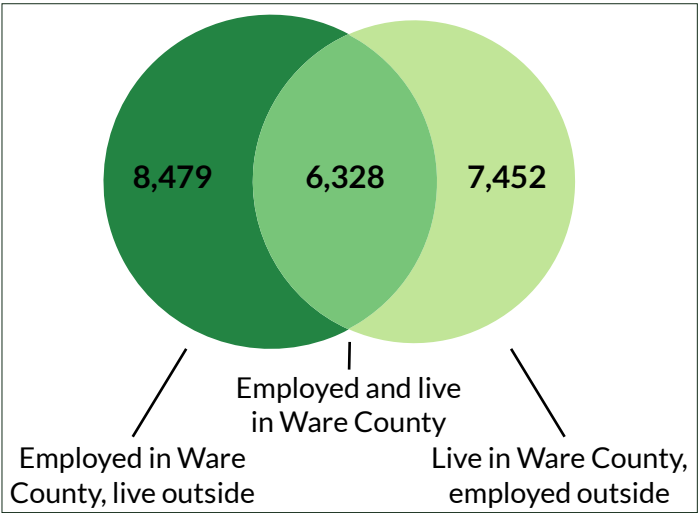
Industry	Percent Employed in Sector	Mean Annual Wages	Income-Aligned Monthly Housing Payment
Health Care and Social Assistance	19.7%	\$54,248	\$1,356
Retail Trade	13.9%	\$36,715	\$918
Accommodation and Food Services	10.2%	\$20,909	\$523
Educational Services	8.1%	\$49,413	\$1,235
Manufacturing	7.4%	\$54,260	\$1,357
Public Administration	7.1%	\$47,060	\$1,177
Transportation and Warehousing	6.7%	\$60,756	\$1,519
Other Services (except Public Administration)	5.9%	\$30,634	\$766
Construction	5.0%	\$52,936	\$1,323
Wholesale Trade	3.4%	\$63,767	\$1,594
Admin, Support, and Waste Management Services	3.3%	\$39,638	\$991
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	1.7%	\$42,997	\$1,075
Finance and Insurance	1.7%	\$71,023	\$1,776
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	1.7%	\$53,844	\$1,346
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	1.6%	\$17,448	\$436
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	0.9%	\$50,317	\$1,258
Management of Companies and Enterprises	0.6%	\$89,377	\$2,234
Information	0.6%	\$51,344	\$1,284
Utilities	0.3%	\$96,302	\$2,408
Unclassified	0.1%	\$39,047	\$976

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

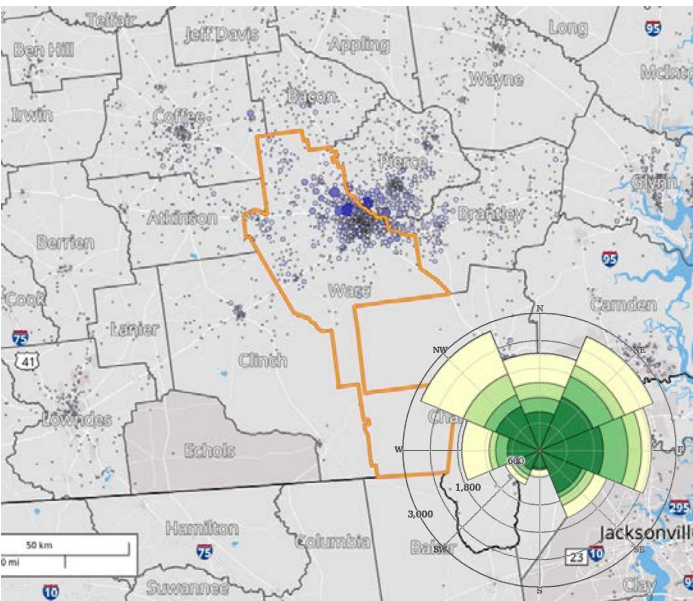
ECONOMIC PROFILE

COMMUTING PATTERNS

Ware County sees a significant amount of daily commuting both in and out of the county. Of the nearly 15,000 people who are employed in Ware County, roughly 60% commute in from outside the county. Of the nearly 14,000 workers who live in Ware County, about half leave the county for work every day. Overall, more people commute in to Ware County for work than commute out for work on a daily basis. This finding reinforces input from the community housing questionnaire (see page 10) where over half of respondents said that they would change their housing in Ware County if more options were available to do so.

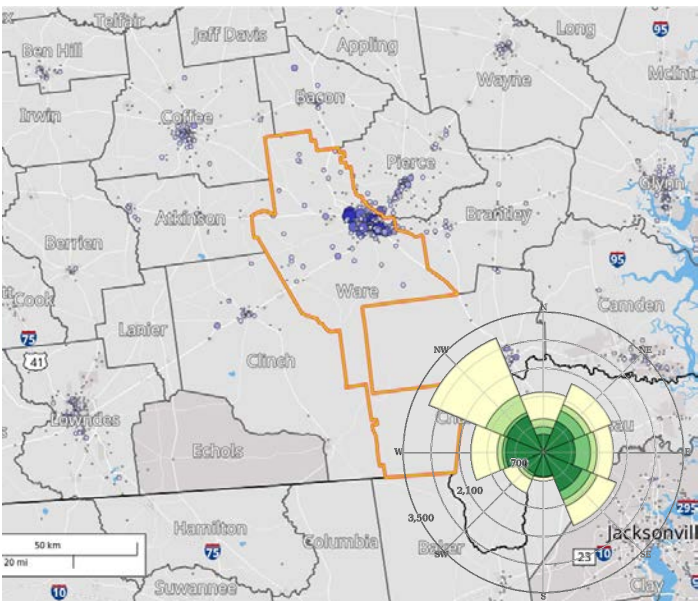


INFLOW ANALYSIS



Profile of Ware County Employees		
	Count	Percent
Employed in Ware County, Total	14,807	100%
Employed in Ware County, lives outside Ware	8,479	57%
Employed and live in Ware County	6,328	43%

OUTFLOW ANALYSIS

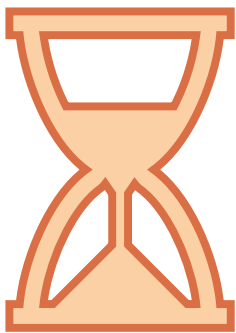


Profile of Ware County Residents		
	Count	Percent
Living in Ware County, Total	13,780	100%
Living in Ware County, Employed outside Ware	7,452	54%
Living and Employed in Ware County	6,328	46%

Source: US Census On the Map

HOUSING PROFILE

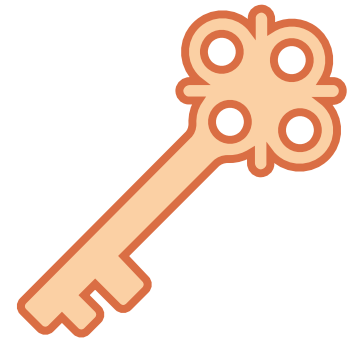
KEY FACTS AND FINDINGS:



*RELATIVELY OLDER
HOUSING STOCK:
MEDIAN YEAR BUILT IN
1965*



*ABOUT 1 OF 5 HOUSING
UNITS IN THE COUNTY,
AND 1 OF 4 UNITS IN
THE CITY, ARE VACANT*



*THE CITY AND COUNTY
BOTH HAVE A LARGER
THAN AVERAGE SHARE
OF RENTERS (COMPARED
TO GEORGIA AND
NEIGHBORING COUNTIES)*

Key Concept: Missing Middle

Missing middle housing refers to moderate density housing types that fall between single-family homes and mid rise apartments. It includes attached single family, duplexes, multiplexes, and small apartment buildings (up to 9 or so units). They are harder to build today due to various regulatory and construction constraints, despite being common in historic development.



Source: Opticos

HOUSING PROFILE

HOME SALES PRICE TRENDS

Home prices have risen sharply in Ware County in recent years. From 2019 to 2025, median home sale prices increased 115% in total. The number of homes sold each year spiked in 2023, with nearly double the number of homes sold compared to prior years. At the same time, the number of days for a home to be on the market declined sharply between 2021-2023 before rising again. This is a sign that the county’s fast-moving housing market may have cooled off slightly, but is still warmer than it was 5 or so years ago.

Year	Median Sales Price	Number of Home Sales	Average Number of Days on Market
2019	\$82,000	60	129
2020	\$92,500	67	81
2021	\$100,500	95	46
2022	\$129,000	108	53
2023	\$163,000	227	46
2024	\$151,950	246	63
2025	\$176,000	230	76

Source: Qpublic Sales Data, local MLS listing data

CONVERTING SALE PRICES TO MONTHLY HOUSING COSTS AND PAYMENTS

Home sales prices tell us a great deal of how much a home buyer might expect to pay in order to purchase a home. However, sales price alone does not tell us clear information on what we can expect a household's monthly housing costs to be. See below for a table of inputs to calculate monthly housing costs, given the average sales prices above. Both scenarios use 6.5% interest rate, a 10% down payment, 30 year mortgage, a credit score of 700, and no HOA fee. Maintenance is 1% of total home cost saved per month.

2019

MEDIAN SALES PRICE: \$82,000

Monthly costs*:
Principal and interest: \$442
Homeowners Insurance: \$46
Taxes: \$69
Private Mortgage Insurance: \$49
Monthly Maintenance: \$68

TOTAL MONTHLY COST:
\$675/MONTH

ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD NET INCOME+
NEEDED TO AFFORD HOUSING COST:
\$26,996

2024

MEDIAN SALES PRICE: \$1176,000

Monthly costs*:
Principal and interest: \$950
Homeowners Insurance: \$100
Taxes: \$148
Private Mortgage Insurance: \$104
Monthly Maintenance: \$147

TOTAL MONTHLY COST:
\$1,449/MONTH

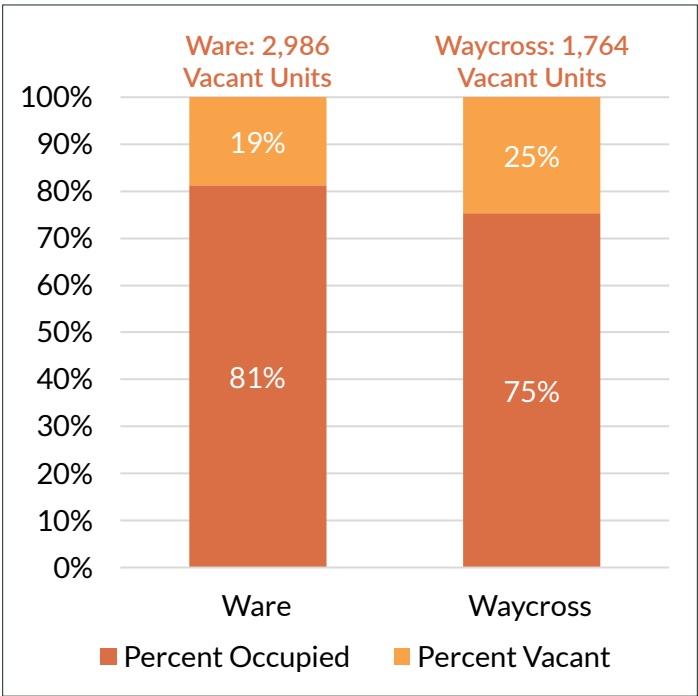
ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD NET INCOME+
NEEDED TO AFFORD HOUSING COST:
\$57,948

* This exercise does not take into account monthly HOA fees or utility costs, which can add a substantial amount to monthly housing costs.
*Annual income calculations are net, meaning these are post-tax amounts. Pre-tax income amounts would be higher.
Sources: Property taxes utilized Smartasset.com’s Georgia property tax calculator. Homeowners insurance utilized BankRate.com’s Georgia 20204 statewide average payment of \$1980 annual premium for \$300,000 dwelling coverage. PMI calculated via Nerdwallet’s PMI Calculator, assuming a credit score of 700.

HOUSING PROFILE

TOTAL AND VACANT HOUSING UNITS

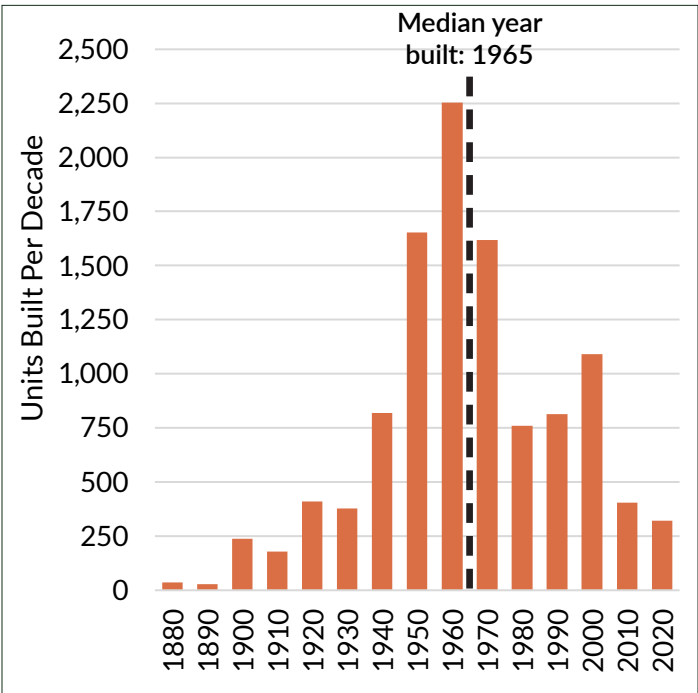
Ware County has a total of 15,943 housing units, with roughly 45% of these units located in the City of Waycross. About 1 out of every 5 housing units are vacant throughout the county, with 1 out of every 4 units vacant in the city. A vacant unit is defined as a housing unit that are is not currently occupied, nor is it actively being marketed for rent or sale. Vacancy rates have remained consistent in the county over the last 5 years, but have increased modestly in Waycross during that same time period. Vacant and dilapidated housing has been a key challenge and focus point to address through this housing study.



Source: 2024 ACS data, table DP04

AGE OF HOUSING (WARE COUNTY)

Ware County has a relatively older housing stock, with the median year built of 1965. There was an uptick in new home construction during the 2000's, but building activity has not has not recovered to levels seen before the Great Recession. Housing units within the city tend to be even older than those in the county. This older, and actively aging, housing stock aligns with maintenance and rehabilitation concerns and challenges.

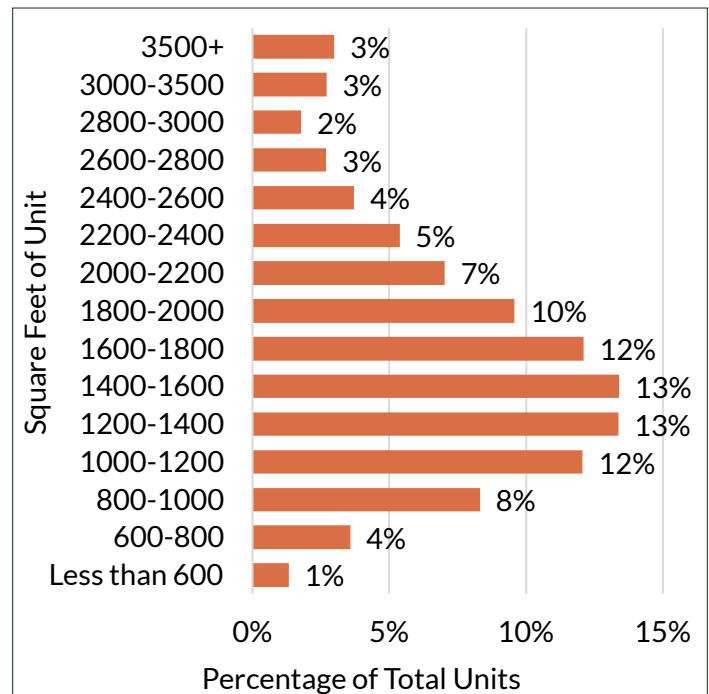


Source: 2024 ACS data, table B25002

HOUSING PROFILE

HOME SIZE BY SQUARE FOOTAGE (WARE COUNTY)

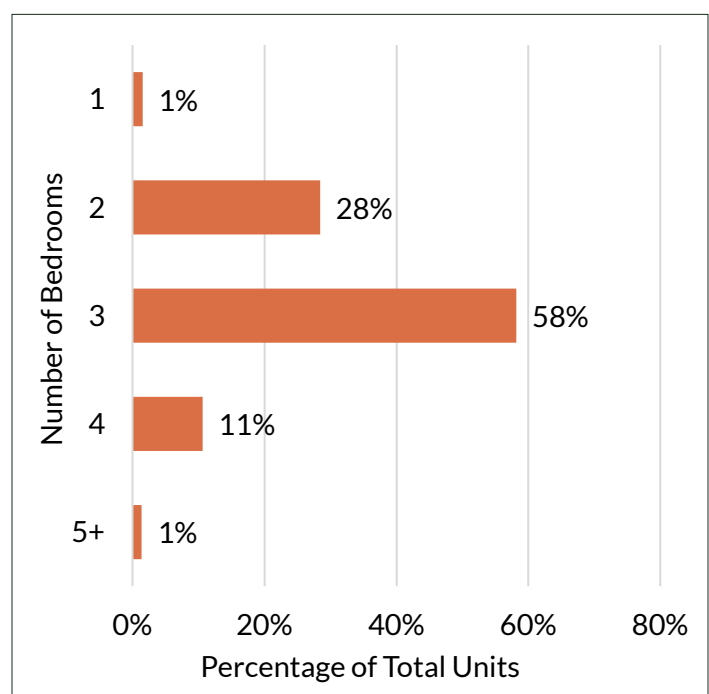
The median home in Ware County is 1,567 square feet large. The majority of homes in the county fall between 1,000 to 1,800 square feet, with a handful of larger homes as outliers. This size distribution closely mirrors broader trends of home sales data, where the majority of homes bought are in this 1,000 to 1,800 square foot range. This is important to note, as zoning and development regulations often dictate minimum heated square footage of new housing development.



Source: Ware County Tax Assessor Data

HOME SIZE BY BEDROOM (WARE COUNTY)

The typical home in Ware County has 3 bedrooms, with homes two to three bedrooms in size making up the majority of the county's housing stock. Larger homes, with four or more bedrooms, are less frequent. This suggests the current housing supply is generally suited to smaller households, which lines up with the county's household size trends discussed on page 18.



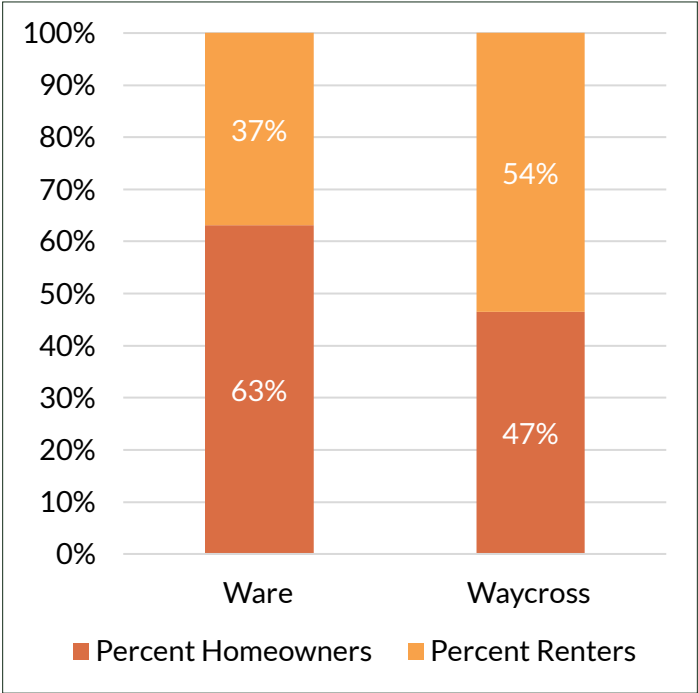
Source: Ware County Tax Assessor Data

HOUSING PROFILE

RENTER-OWNER TENURE SPLIT

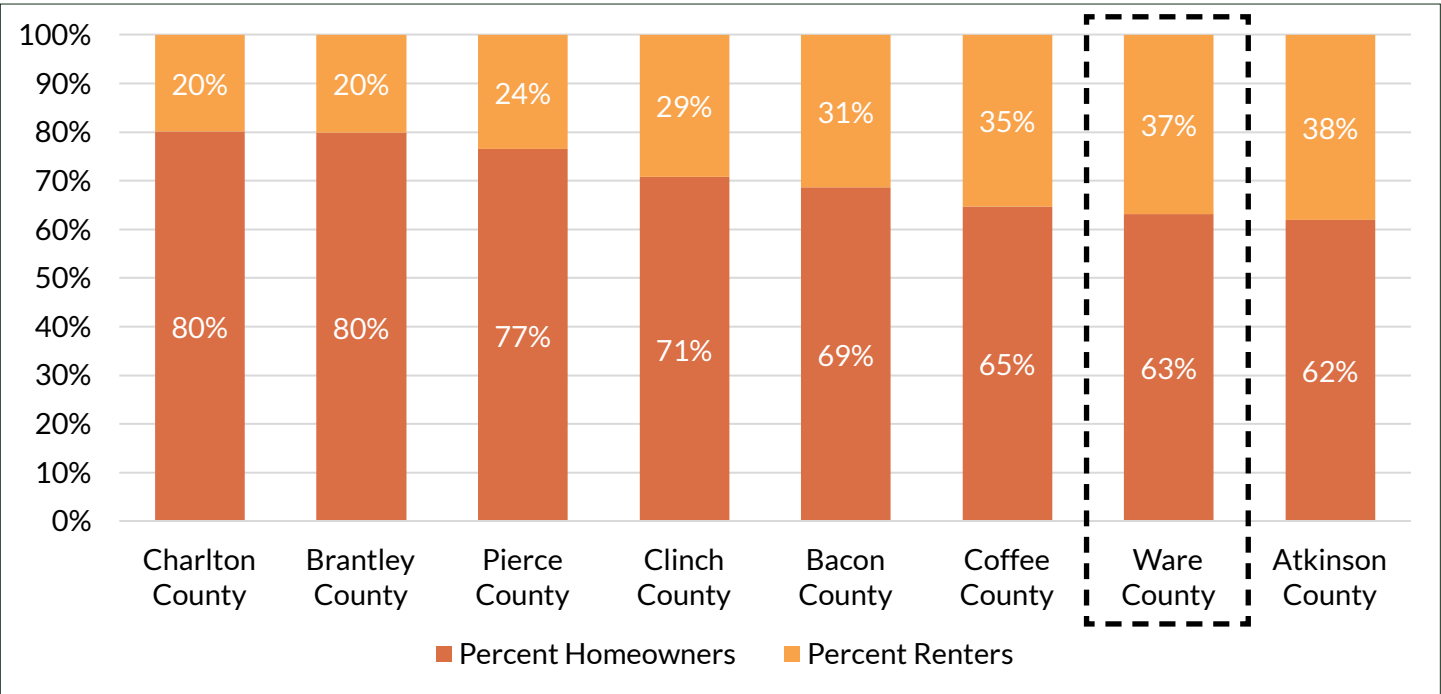
Renters make up a significant share of households in both Ware County and the City of Waycross. In Waycross specifically, the majority of housing units are rented rather than owned. This differs from typical tenure patterns in Georgia and the broader nation, where homeownership is typically more common than renting.

Compared to its surrounding counties, Ware County has also has higher rental rates than nearly all of its neighbors, with the exception of Atkinson County. See below for a comparison of Ware County and neighboring county tenure splits.



Source: 2024 ACS data, table DP04

TENURE SPLIT (PEER COUNTY COMPARISON)



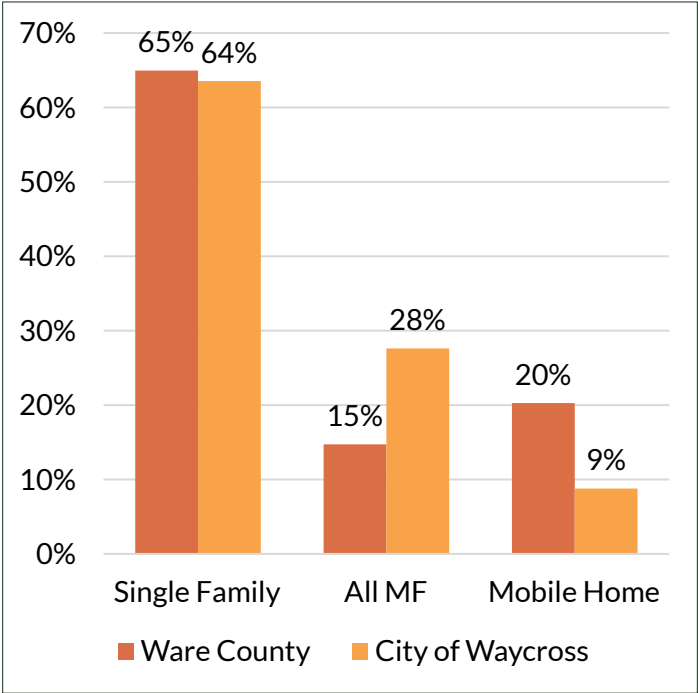
Source: 2024 ACS data, table DP04

HOUSING PROFILE

HOUSING TYPOLOGY

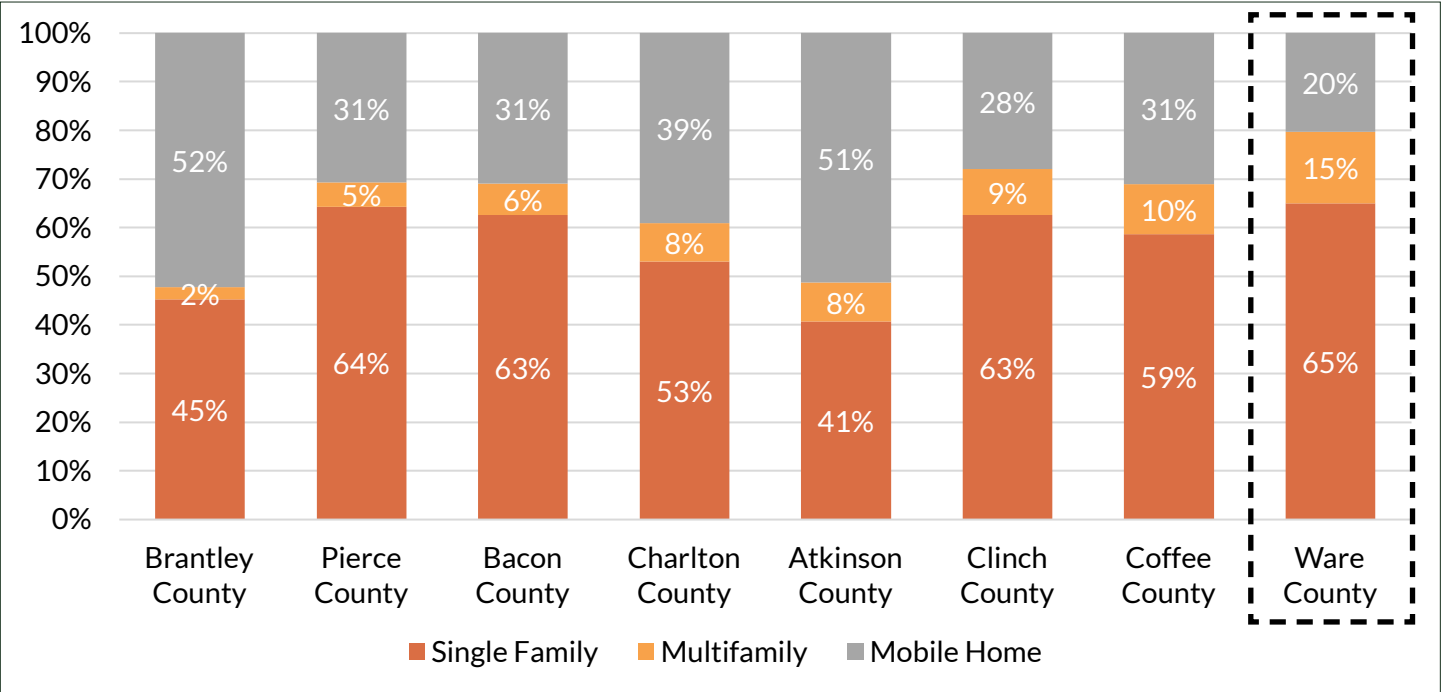
Single-family homes make up the majority of housing in both Ware County and the City of Waycross. Ware County also has a significant share of mobile homes, which account for roughly 20% of the county’s housing stock. Waycross, meanwhile, has a significant share of multi-family housing units, a category that includes everything from attached single family homes to larger apartment buildings.

Compared to its surrounding counties, Ware County has the largest share of multifamily housing units than all of its neighbors. This includes attached single family, multiplexes, and all apartment sizes. Ware County also has the smallest share of mobile homes, relative to peer counties.



Source: 2024 ACS data, table B25024

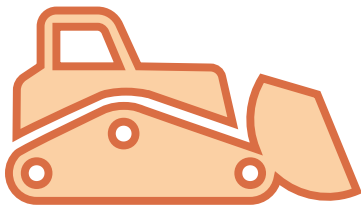
TENURE SPLIT (PEER COUNTY COMPARISON)



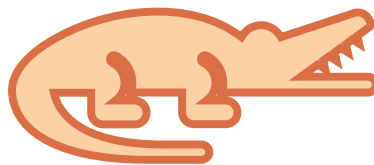
Source: 2024 ACS data, table B25024

LAND USE PROFILE

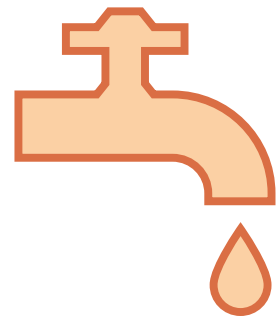
KEY FACTS AND FINDINGS:



*RELATIVELY LOW
AMOUNT OF LAND
COVER CHANGE OVER
LAST 50 YEARS*



*SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT
OF FEDERALLY
CONSERVED LANDS*



*AMPLE EXISTING
INFRASTRUCTURE
AVAILABLE FOR (RE)
DEVELOPMENT*

Key Concept: Land as a Limited Resource

Although Ware County is the largest county by land area in Georgia, land is still a finite resource that must be stewarded through careful land use planning. Development pressure can be especially difficult to control given the strong private property rights protected under Georgia and federal law, even amidst modest population projects. Once land is subdivided, it is nearly impossible to undo. As such, providing a pathway for thoughtful, strategic growth is essential to align development with community goals including housing.

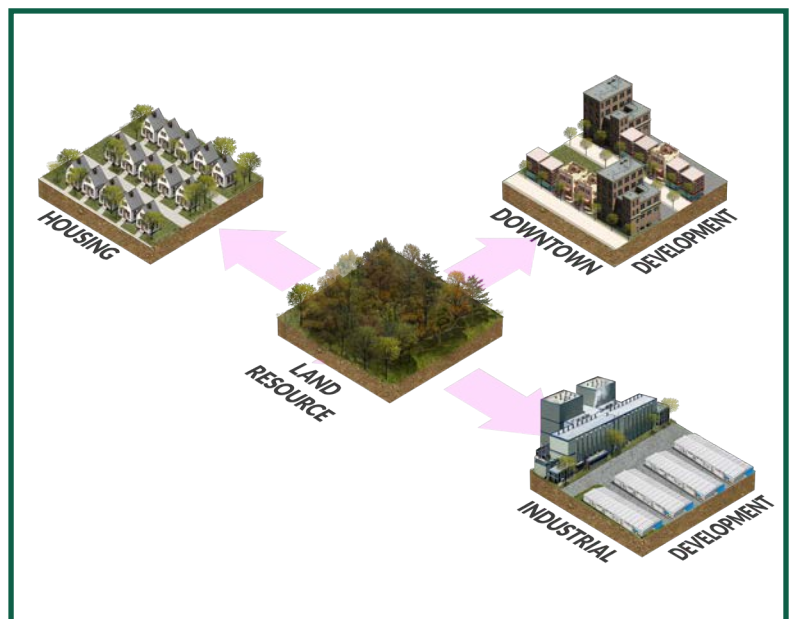


Diagram highlighting the relationship between land use decision making, housing, and economic development. Land is a limited resource, and requires wise management to ensure its development reflects local needs.

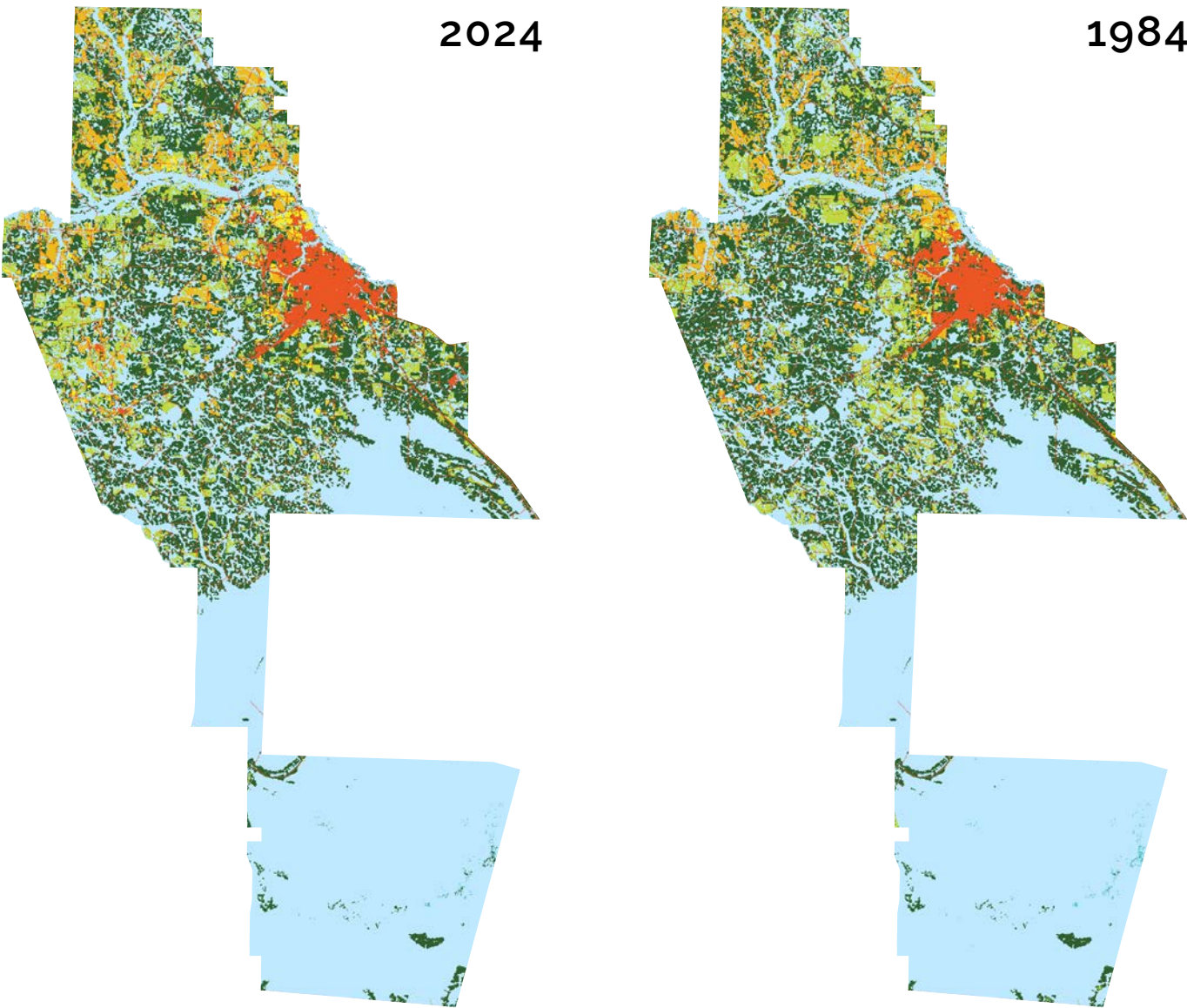
LAND USE PROFILE

DEVELOPED LAND COVER TRENDS

Between 1985 to 2024, Ware County’s land cover composition has remained relatively consistent. During this time, Ware County gained 8,000 acres of developed land. This represents an increase from 5.5% to 6.5% of the county’s total land being developed. This slow pace of change suggests Ware County has experienced relatively limited development pressure over the past four decades.

LEGEND

- Forest
- Pasture and Hay
- Developed
- Wetlands
- Grassland & Shrubland
- Open Water
- Cultivated Crops

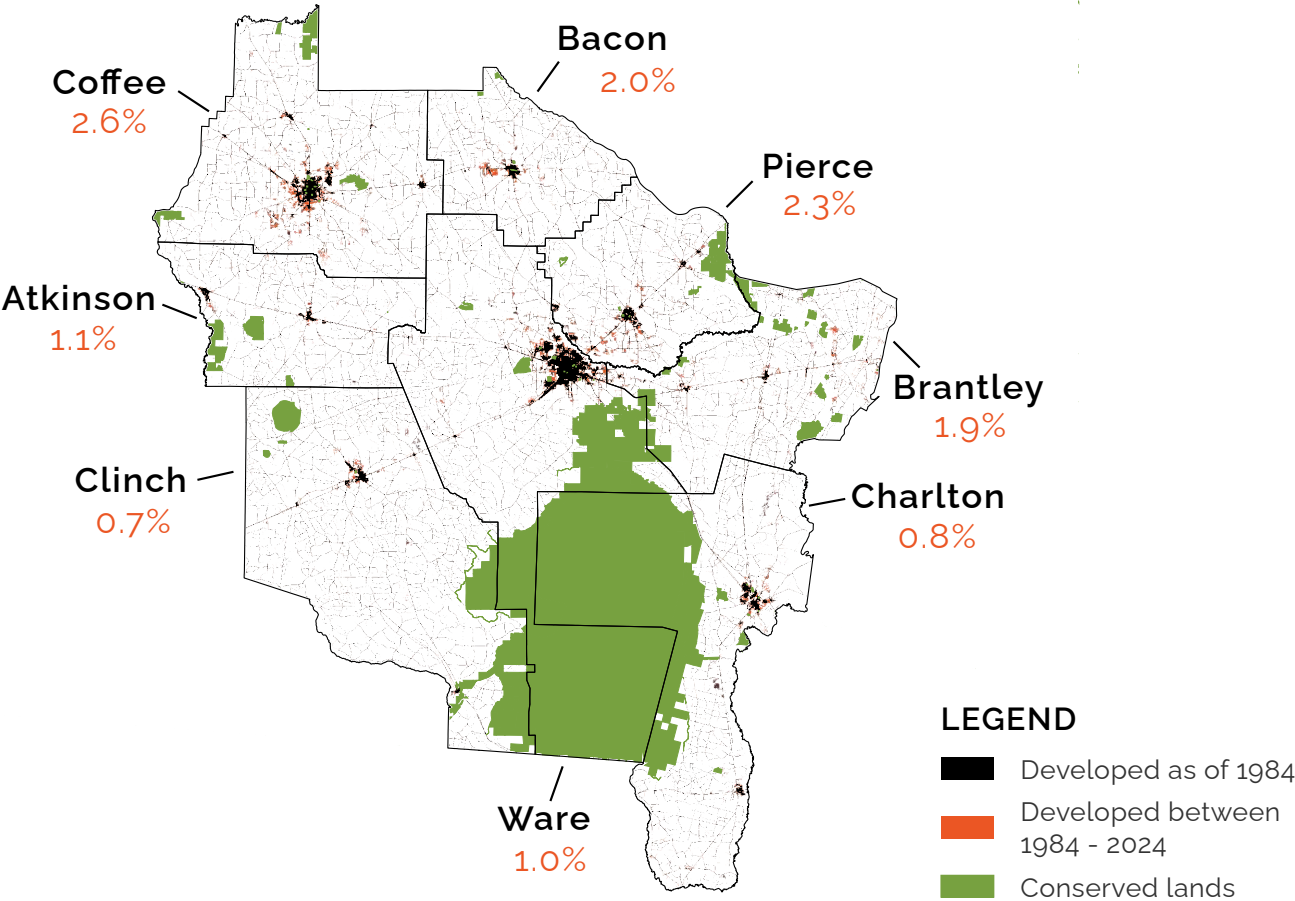
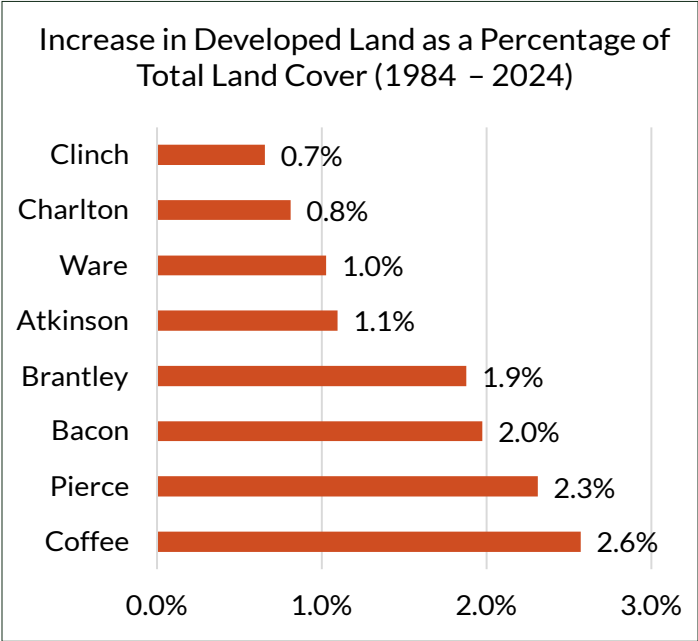


Source: NLCD

LAND USE PROFILE

DEVELOPED LAND COVER TRENDS: WARE COUNTY & SURROUNDING COUNTIES

Relative to its surrounding counties, Ware County has had a smaller increase in developed land cover compared to its neighbors, especially compared with counties to the north and northeast. This slower pace of development may be due, in part, to the large amount of conserved lands in the County. Protected areas such as the Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge and Wilderness Area and the Dixon Memorial Wildlife Management Area take up a significant proportion of the county’s total land. As such, there is less land available for new development in Ware County relative to its less conserved neighbors.

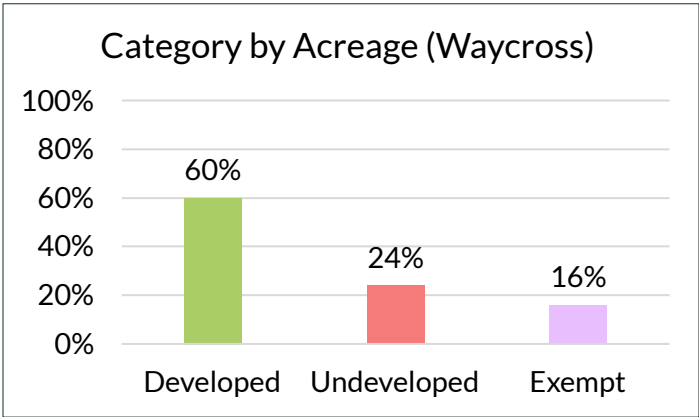
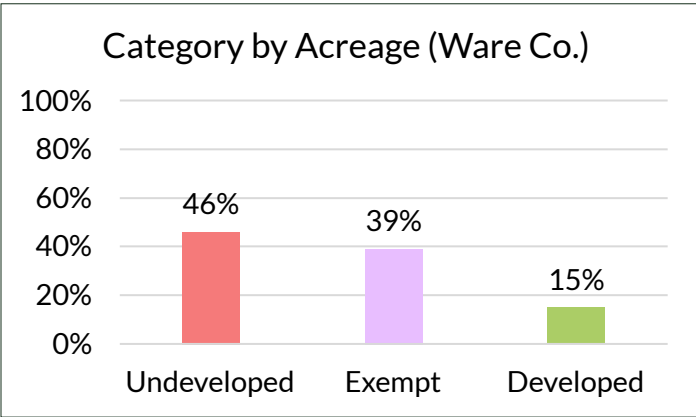
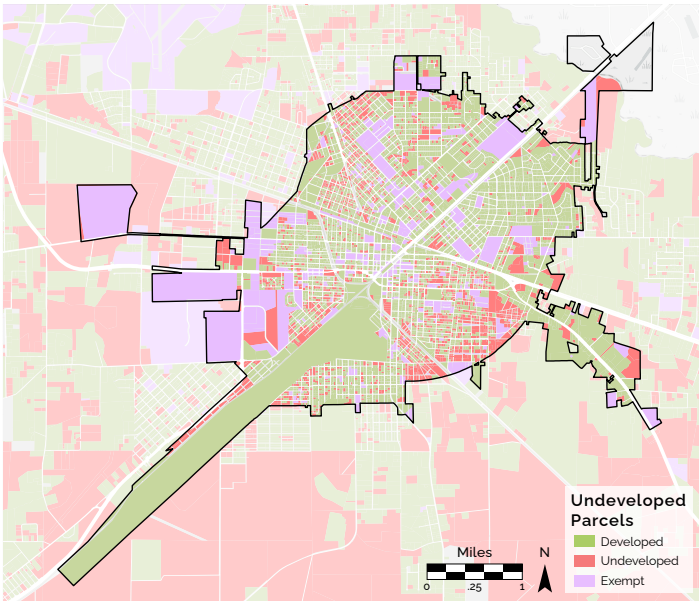
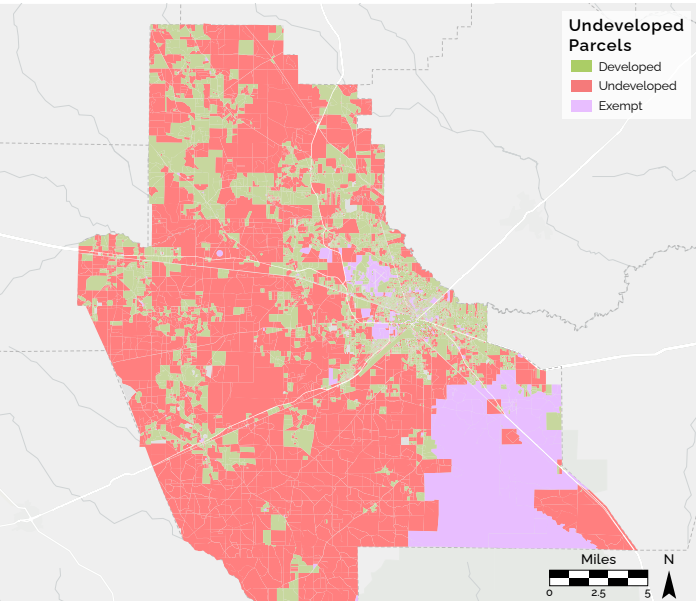


Source: 2024 ACS data, table B25002

LAND USE PROFILE

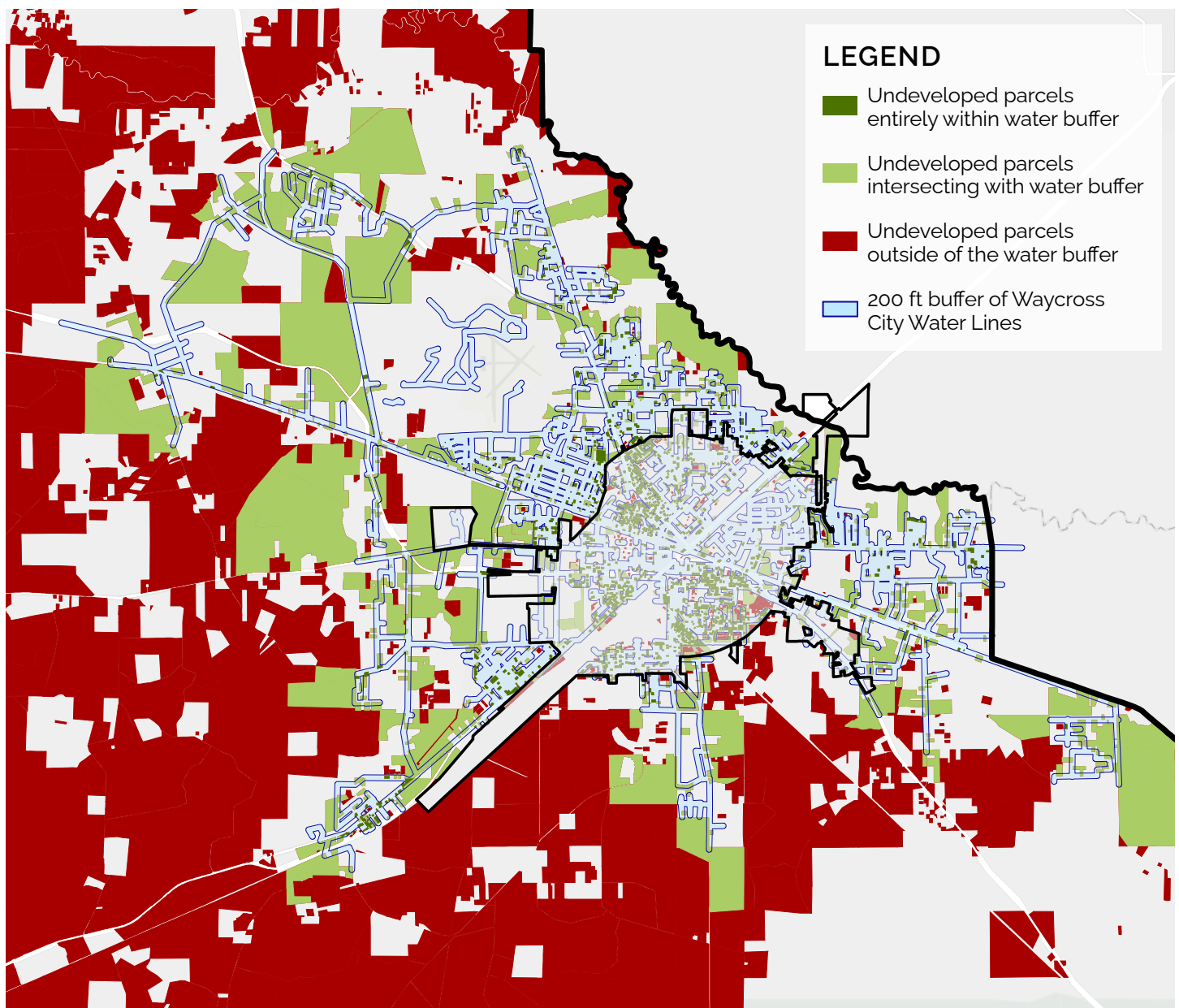
UNDEVELOPED PARCEL ANALYSIS

Undeveloped land is defined as any property with a total property improvement value of zero, meaning no structures or improvements have been added to a property. In Ware County, about 15% of all acreage belongs to parcels with some sort of improvement value on them. This does not mean that 15% of the county is fully developed, rather, we can analyze this information to better consider where potential residential development might have the path of least resistance. In the City of Waycross, 24% of all acres do not have an improvement on them. This highlights a significant opportunity for infill development in the city, residential or otherwise.



Source: Ware County Tax Assessors Office

LAND USE PROFILE

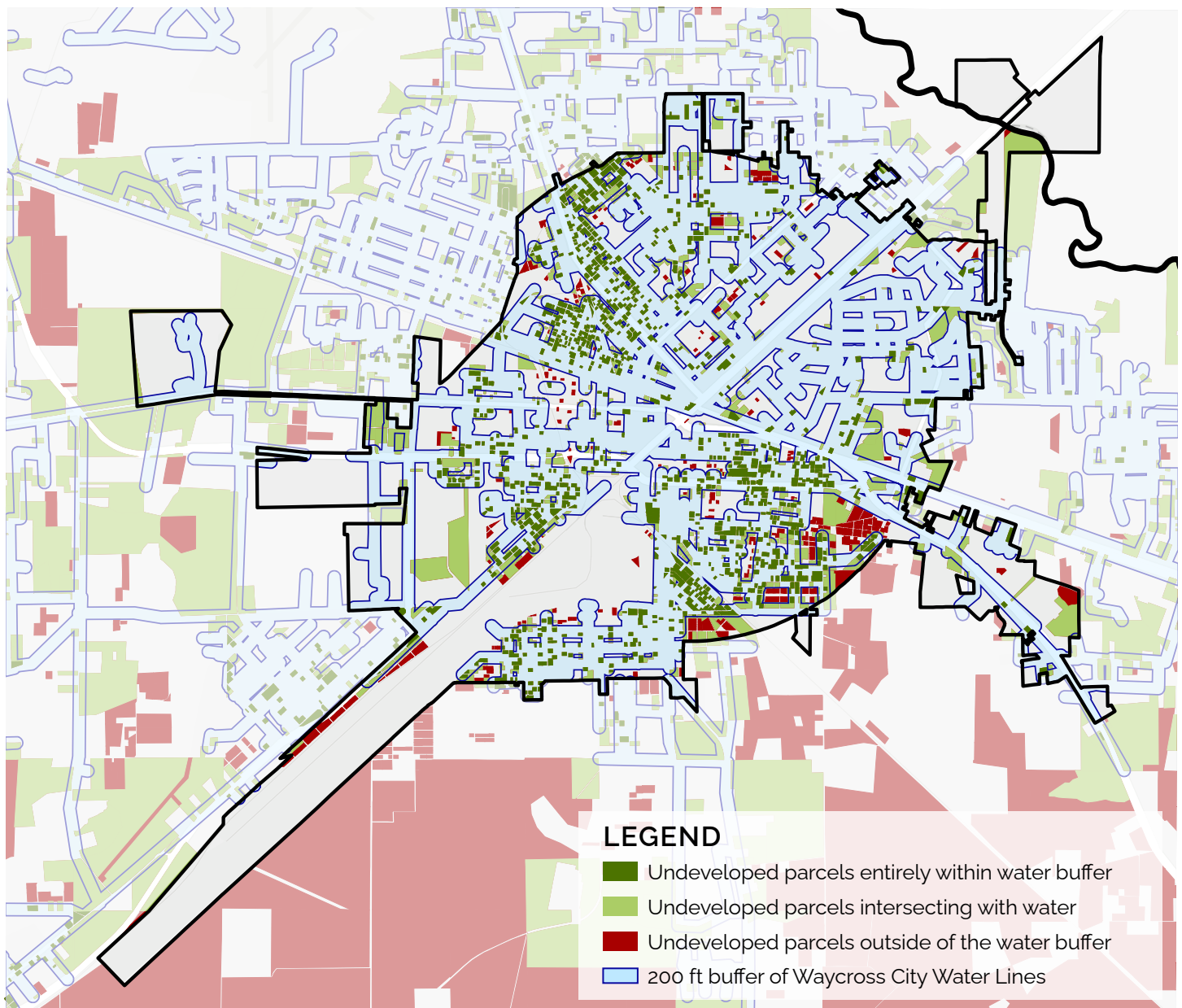


INFILL DEVELOPMENT & PROXIMITY TO EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE (WARE COUNTY)

As discussed on the previous page, about 46% of all land in Ware County is undeveloped. To help guide future development decision making - particularly for residential development - we can overlap infrastructure with vacant land to identify areas more suitable for development, as infrastructure presence (particularly sewer) is a strong driver of development. Developing areas with existing water and sewer services increases the efficiency of the infrastructure, as more residents are served without additional investment required to expand infrastructure.

Source: Ware County Tax Assessor; Satilla Regional Water and Sewer Authority

LAND USE PROFILE

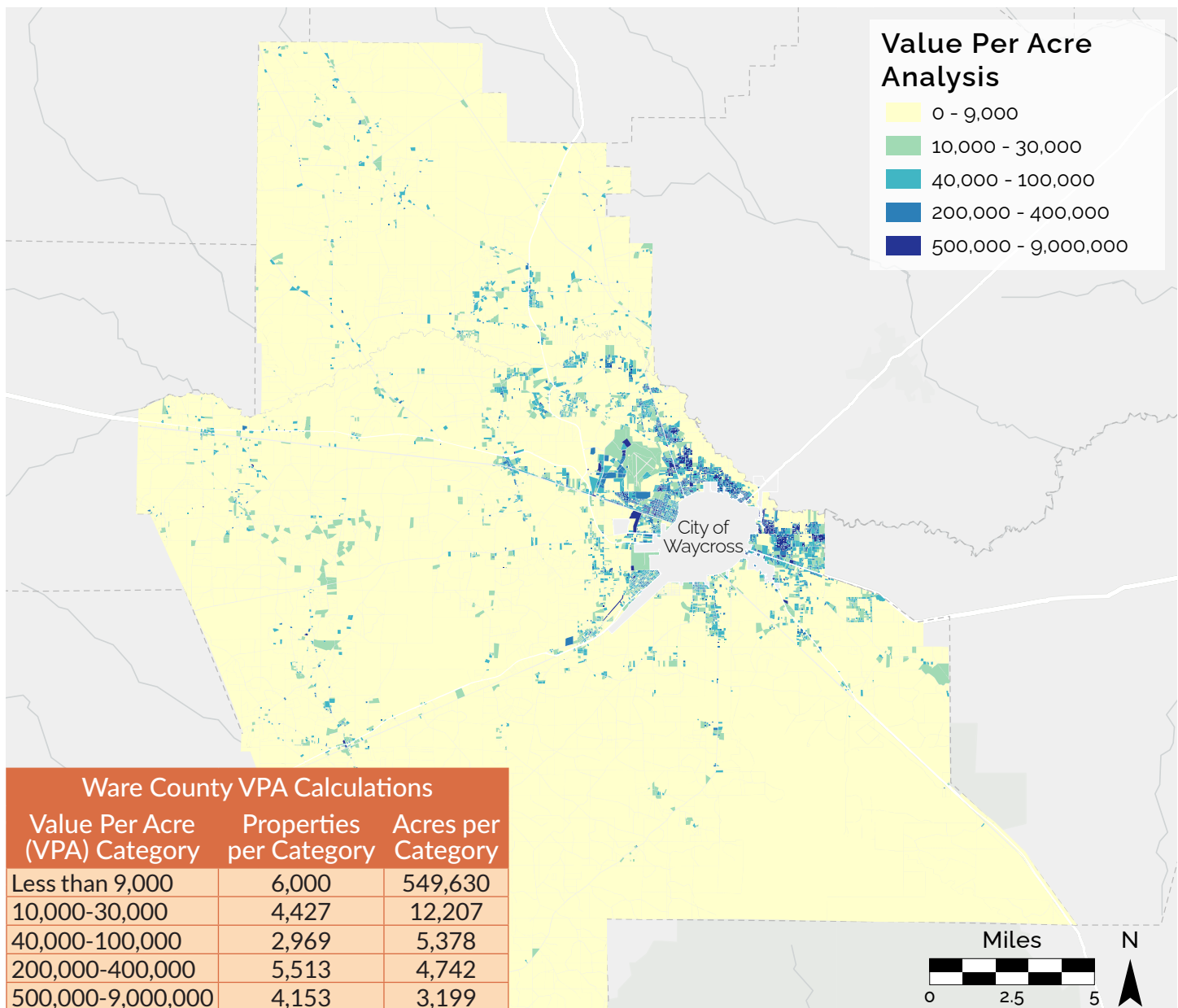


INFILL DEVELOPMENT & PROXIMITY TO EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE (WAYCROSS)

As discussed on page 35, about 24% of all land in the City of Waycross is undeveloped. To help guide future development decision making - particularly for residential development - we can overlap existing infrastructure with vacant land to identify areas more suitable for development, as infrastructure presence (particularly sewer) is a strong driver of development. This overlap applies to most of the city's undeveloped parcels. Developing these areas may also reduce longer-term costs, as building additional infrastructure to accommodate development will require more resources for maintenance in the long run.

Source: Ware County Tax Assessor; City of Waycross

LAND USE PROFILE

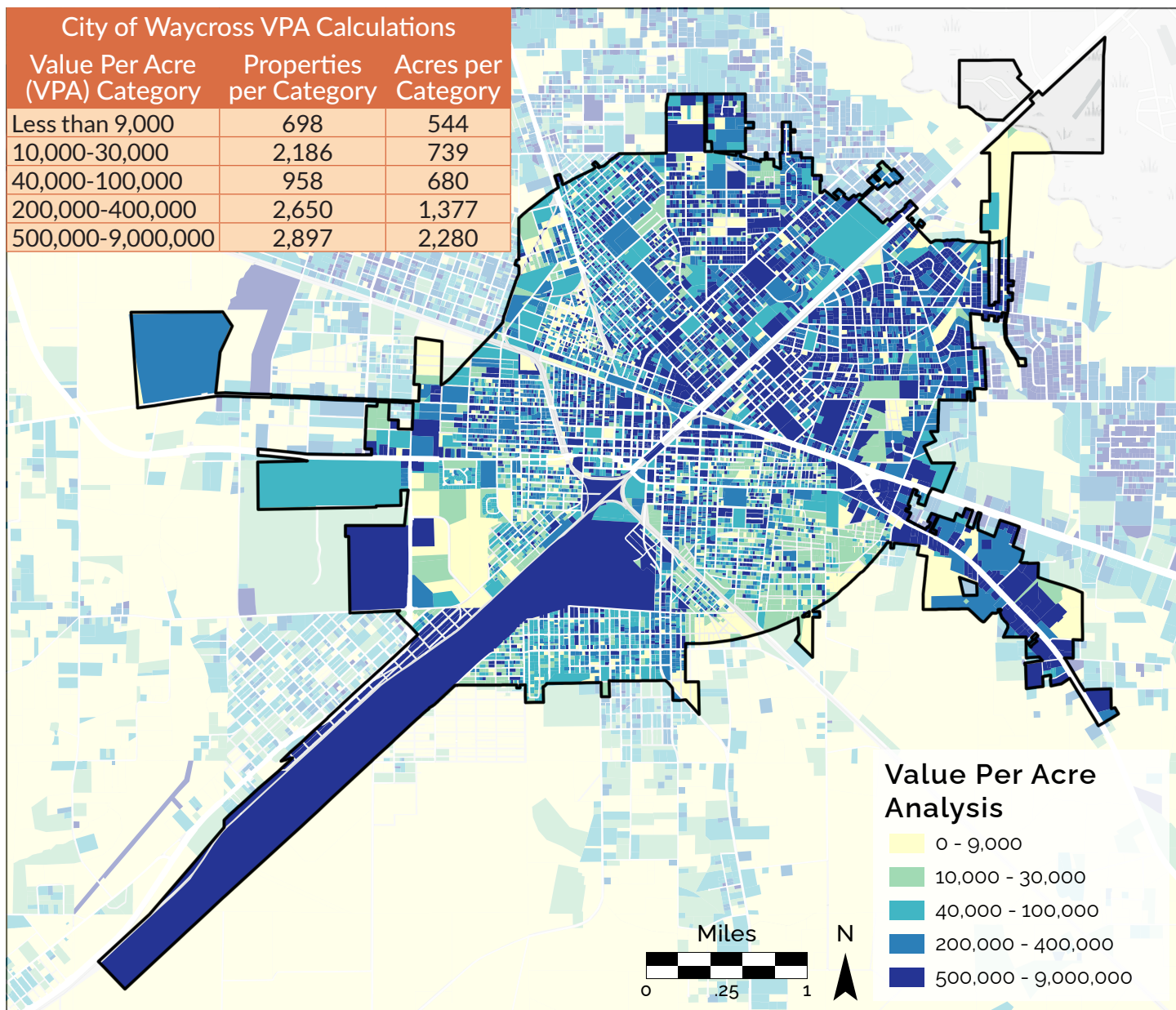


VALUE PER ACRE ANALYSIS (WARE COUNTY)

Value Per Acre (VPA) is calculated by dividing a property's total value by its total acreage. Higher VPAs indicate higher land use "efficiencies," or more value per unit of land. Higher VPAs of properties near an urban core provide a strong case for infill development, as these developments typically provide a higher return on investment - both in direct tax benefits as well as broader economic spillover impacts. Ware County has a modest number of high VPA parcels, given how rural and spread out the county is. A handful of parcels adjacent to Waycross's boarder have high VPA values, suggesting these locations would be suitable for targeted development.

Source: Ware County Tax Assessor

LAND USE PROFILE

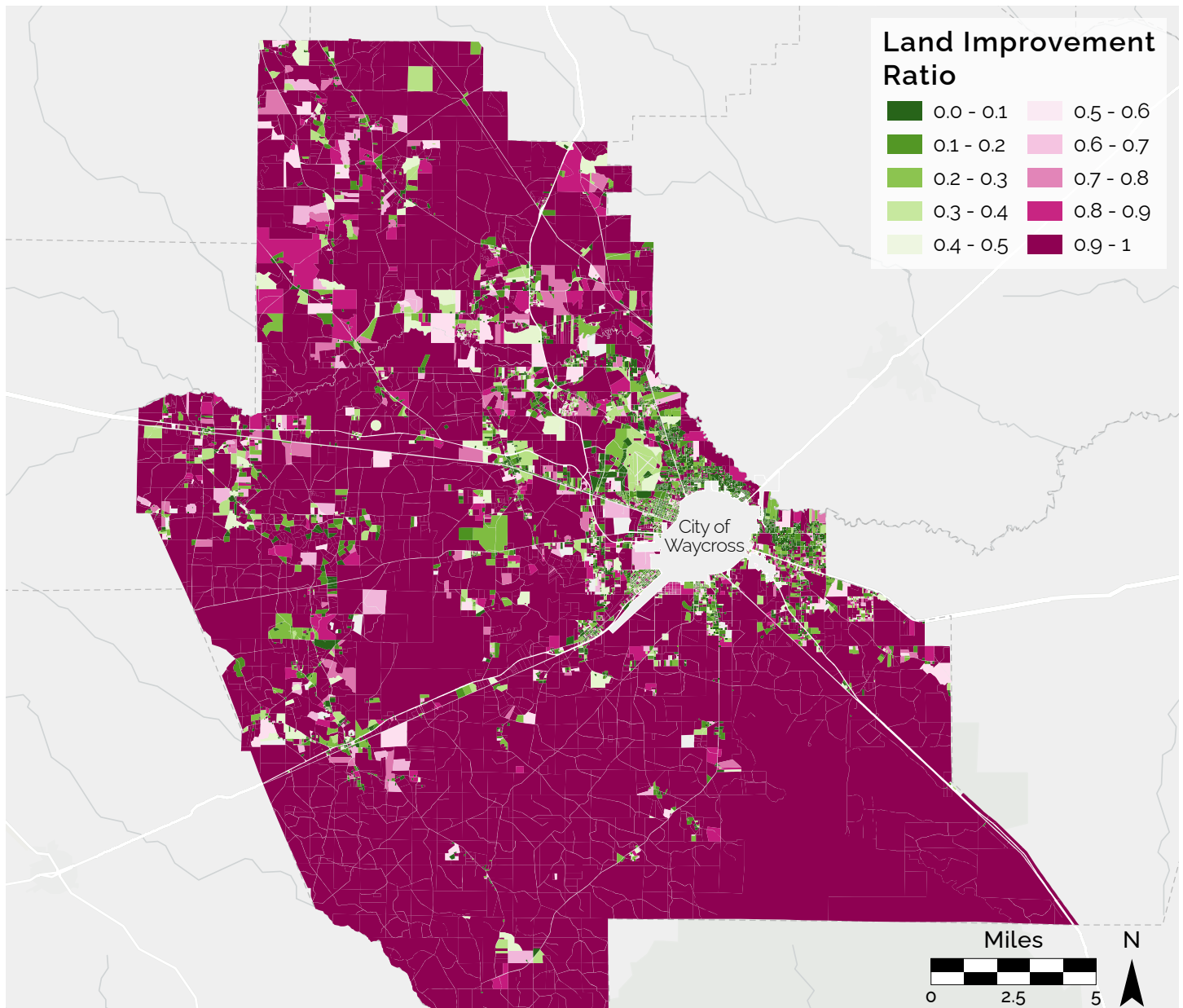


VALUE PER ACRE ANALYSIS (WAYCROSS)

See the previous page for an overview of Value Per Acre (VPA). Waycross has a relatively large number of high VPA parcels distributed throughout the city, as seen in both the map and chart above. Although VPA is not directly related to housing, higher VPAs of properties both near and throughout the urban core provide a strong case for continued improvement and infill development in those areas. Developing land farther out from the city center would likely provide a lower return on investment from a public revenue standpoint.

Source: Ware County Tax Assessor

LAND USE PROFILE

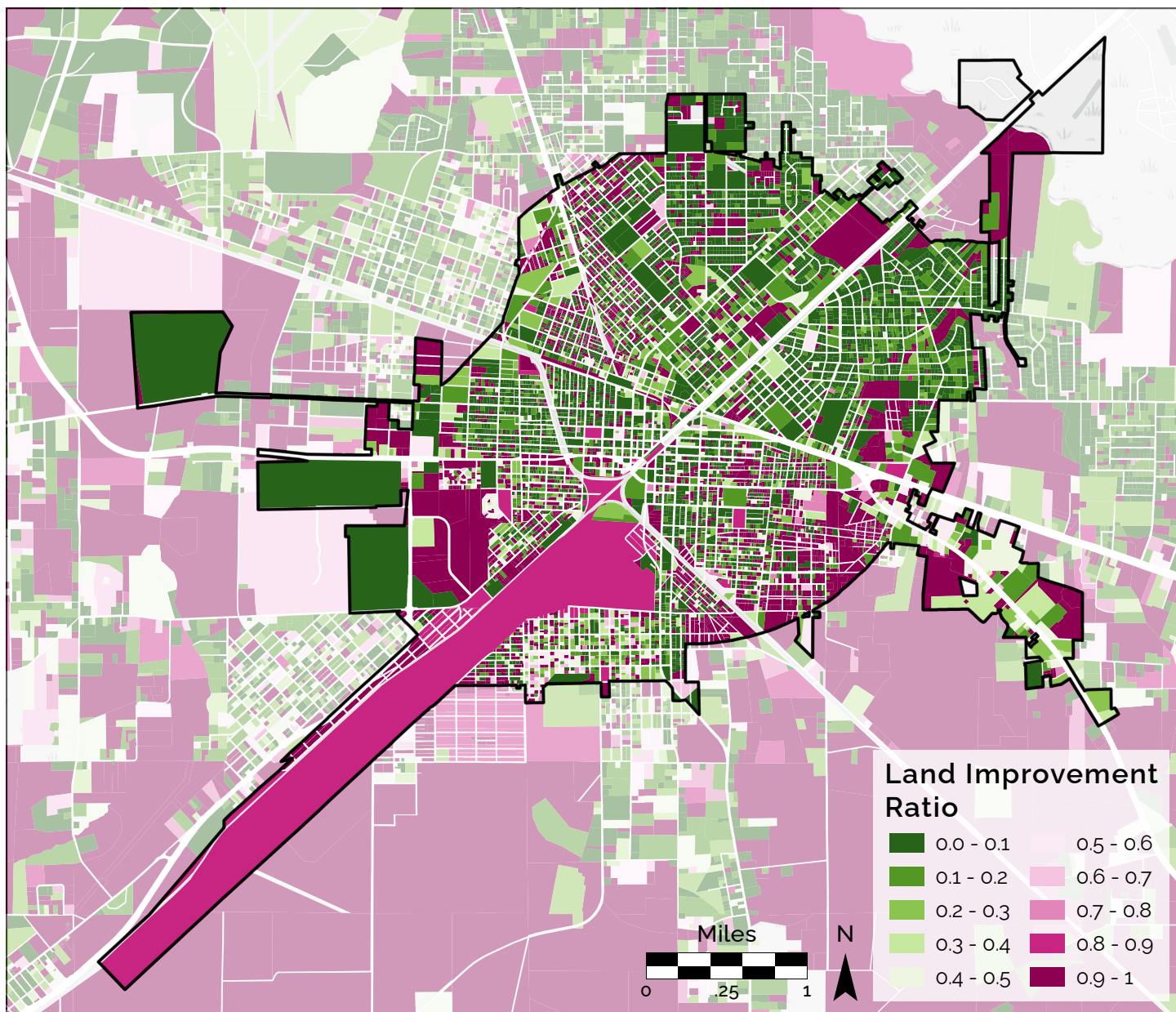


LAND IMPROVEMENT RATIO (WARE COUNTY)

A land improvement ratio (LIR) compares a property's land value to the value of the improvements, or built assets, on that land. If the LIR is greater than 0.5, then the value of the land is greater than the value of the improvements on the property. Put another way: the land is more valuable than the structure that sits on it. Properties with a higher LIR might be underutilized, and are great candidates for redevelopment opportunities. Note that a LIR value of 1.0 suggests that the parcel may be undeveloped, as it has none (or very little) structural or land improvement elements.

Source: Ware County Tax Assessor

LAND USE PROFILE



LAND IMPROVEMENT RATIO (WAYCROSS)

A land improvement ratio (LIR) compares a property's land value to the value of the improvements, or built assets, on that land. If the LIR is greater than 0.5, then the value of the land is greater than the value of the improvements on the property. Put another way: the land is more valuable than the structure that sits on it. Properties with a higher LIR might be underutilized, and are great candidates for redevelopment opportunities. Note that a LIR value of 1.0 suggests that the parcel may be undeveloped, as it has none (or very little) structural or land improvement elements.

Source: Ware County Tax Assessor

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter looked at four distinct profiles of Waycross and Ware County, analyzing local demographics, economics, housing, and land use. Bringing these findings together, we can clearly understand housing demand and supply. Housing demand is informed by the demographic and economic profiles, as these factors create a composite of individual household's needs and preferences for their housing choices. Housing supply is informed by the characteristics of the housing stock, as well as the underlying land use characteristics that either help or hinder housing development and/or redevelopment. This chapter articulates a mismatch between local housing supply and demand. The following chapters seek to outline strategies and frameworks to close this gap for both Waycross and Ware County. See below for a summary of key takeaways of each profile.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR EACH PROFILE

HOUSING DEMAND FACTORS (DEMOGRAPHIC + ECONOMIC PROFILES)

DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS	<i>STAGNANT POPULATION, GETTING OLDER, AND INTO SMALLER HOUSEHOLD SIZES</i>
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ECONOMIC ANALYSIS	<i>MAJORITY OF JOBS PAY MODESTLY, WITH LOW OVERALL WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION AND HIGH POVERTY</i>
--------------------------	---

HOUSING SUPPLY FACTORS (HOUSING + LAND USE PROFILES)

HOUSING ANALYSIS	<i>EXISTING HOUSING STOCK IS OLDER, FREQUENTLY VACANT, WITH PRICES INCREASING RAPIDLY</i>
-------------------------	---

LAND USE ANALYSIS	<i>ALTHOUGH LAND IS PLENTIFUL, CONSUMING LAND WITHOUT A STRONG VISION OR STRATEGY CAN LEAD TO UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES</i>
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CHAPTER 4: REGULATORY ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

The housing landscape is heavily influenced by a wide range of policies and regulations, many of which are written and enforced on a local level. One of the most impactful is the zoning code, which is one of the most effective tools on a local level to influence land use and align development with community goals. The zoning code plays a significant role in the development of new housing units, which is a key tool in addressing housing challenges in Waycross and Ware County.

This chapter will take a deep dive into Ware County and the City of Waycross's zoning codes and accompanying subdivision regulations. Each jurisdiction's regulations will be introduced on a high level, then combed through in detail to highlight areas where the rules on the books might conflict with housing needs and opportunities as identified in this study.

WHY ZONING?

Zoning has direct influence in regulating development, with input on building types, land uses, residential density, parking requirements, and a host of dimensional requirements pertaining to lot size, setbacks, and buffers. Because of the significant influence it has on development, zoning regulations must be calibrated to avoid being overly restrictive, placing an undue burden on development at a time when new housing is desperately needed. At the same time, zoning must balance being restrictive enough to promote public health, safety, and community benefit.

THE POLICY AND REGULATORY LANDSCAPE: BEYOND ZONING

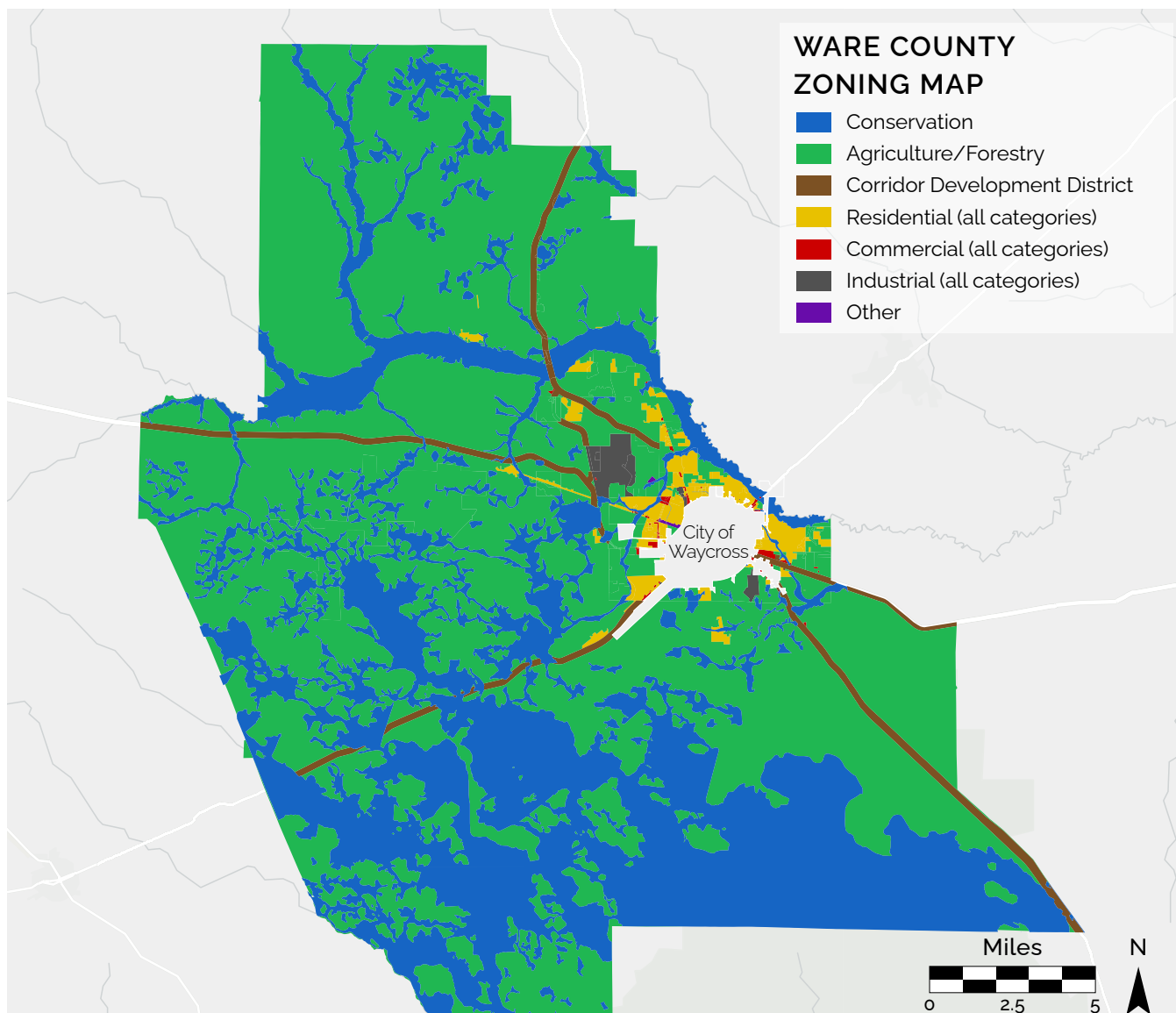
Notably, there are a variety of development regulations and restrictions that are outside city, county, and even state control. These include international building codes and fire regulations. Financial institutions - a needed partner to developers in order to acquire the capital needed to develop - can have input on developments in order to minimize risk and/or liability of a project, according to their definition of a successful and profitable development. Local and/or regional regulations from infrastructure providers - such as stormwater and utilities - might be created on a local level, but often don't interface easily with zoning code and development regulations. Therefore - zoning code is an important piece of the policy landscape influencing housing, but it is not a silver bullet solution to the housing crisis. However, in terms of where opportunities lie in addressing housing concerns, this is an essential first step.

ZONING MAP REVIEW

WARE COUNTY ZONING

97% of Ware County is zoned as either Conservation or Agriculture/Forestry. From a housing perspective, there are a relatively limited number of acres that are zoned to accept residential growth in the county. The majority of parcels zoned for residential development are in the area immediately surrounding the City of Waycross, with nearly all south of the Satilla River.

Ware Co. Zoning Districts	Acres	Percent
Conservation	302,303	52%
Agriculture/Forestry	262,976	45%
Corridor Development District	9,580	1.6%
Residential (all categories)	6,785	1.2%
Industrial (all categories)	2,106	0.4%
Commercial (all categories)	473	0.1%
Other (Medical, Mixed-use)	84	0.0%



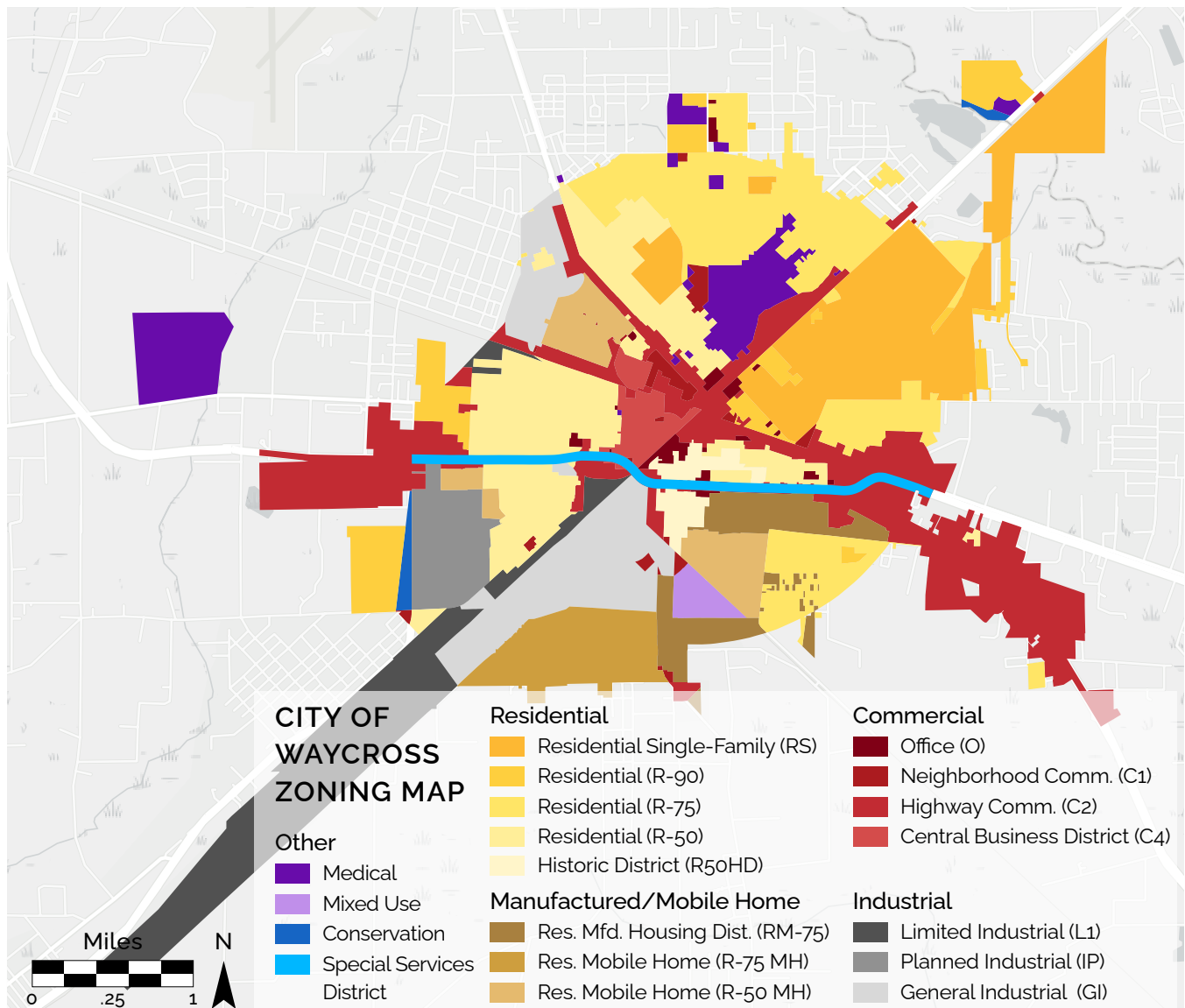
Source: Ware County Planning and Zoning

ZONING MAP REVIEW

CITY OF WAYCROSS ZONING

Nearly 1/2 of the city's land is zoned for residential land use. The city has 8 different residential zones, which is a relatively large number given its size. The 8 zones fall into two general categories of residential development: site-built residential (zones RS, R90, R75, R50, and R50HD), and manufactured/mobile home residential (R50MH, R75MH, RM75).

Waycross Zoning Districts	Acres	Percent
Residential (all districts)	4,032	53%
Commercial (all districts)	1,468	20%
Industrial (all districts)	1,444	19%
Manufactured/Mobile Home (all districts)	554	7%
Medical	393	5%
Special Development District	118	2%
Mixed Use	55	1%
Conservation	33	0%



Source: City of Waycross Planning and Zoning

REGULATION REVIEW

A key component of this housing study is an in-depth understanding of local development regulations, and how they might impact housing development and/or redevelopment. This includes how regulations shape the final built form of a development, as well as the administrative processes required to complete a development.

The project team reviewed the zoning code and subdivision regulations in both Ware County and City of Waycross. This provided insights on where friction might be occurring between desired community housing goals and (re)development outcomes. The project team pulled out specific items to recommend for each municipality's regulations, as well as shared recommendations to consider by both city and county.

This review focuses on addressing residential redevelopment opportunities, given the amount of vacant housing units in both the city and county. As such, it also outlines opportunities to reduce barriers for smaller-scale and infill residential development.

WARE-WAYCROSS JOINT REGULATORY REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

JOINT RECOMMENDATION ITEM 1: CLARIFY AMBIGUOUS TIMELINE FOR BUILDING PERMIT REVIEW

The zoning code and subdivision regulations outline specific timeline requirements for staff review of most permits and steps in the development application process. However, the building permit review step does not have clear timeline requirements for review. For alignment and continuity purposes, this step might also include timeline requirements.

JOINT RECOMMENDATION ITEM 2: SITE IMPROVEMENTS ARE REQUIRED PRIOR TO FINAL PLAT APPROVAL, REGARDLESS OF DEVELOPMENT SIZE.

In both Waycross and Ware County, the subdivision application process requires site improvements to be installed (or financing for them secured) prior to applying for final plat approval. This is true regardless of subdivision size. Thus, developers are required to sink funds into a project without a guarantee of final plat approval and being able to move forward with development. Reimbursement for public infrastructure items are only offered after improvements are completed, limiting development to those with upfront capital and squeezing out smaller or family-owned properties.

JOINT RECOMMENDATION ITEM 3: STREAMLINE PERMITTING PROCESSES NEEDED, ESPECIALLY FOR CONCURRENT REZONING AND SUBDIVISION APPLICATIONS

In both Ware County and the City of Waycross, development projects requiring subdivision as well as zoning amendments (rezoning, conditional use permits, or zoning variance requests) would have to go through these application processes one at a time. Moving to a concurrent review process, rather than a sequential one, would allow these processes to occur side by side, cutting down a long a costly process that can inhibit smaller infill projects.

WAYCROSS REGULATORY REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

WAYCROSS RECOMMENDATION ITEM 1: RESTRICTIONS ON NON-SINGLE FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

Waycross has a diverse range of housing types. As noted on page 31, nearly 2 in 5 homes in the city are not single family dwellings. These are mostly duplexes or multiplexes, where multiple units are located within one building. However, a significant amount of the city is zoned to permit only single family detached dwellings, as is the case in Zones R-S and R-50HD. These zones require an arduous timeline to develop these housing types, even though many residences in those areas are not single family homes. Given the requirements outlined in the zoning code, the permitting and rezoning process will add, at minimum, three months to the development process, though realistically this look more like six to nine months of permitting. This timeline creates significant barriers for these zones, given that duplexes are defined and treated the same as larger multifamily developments in these zones.

WAYCROSS RECOMMENDATION ITEM 2: MINIMUM LOT SIZE AND DIMENSIONAL REQUIREMENTS CREATE CHALLENGES, ESPECIALLY FOR INFILL (RE)DEVELOPMENT

Much of the city is platted into relatively small lot sizes. However, many of the dimensional requirements outlined in the zoning code create conditions that might render development (or redevelopment) infeasible without a zoning variance. For example, the 2026 Waycross Comprehensive Plan Update includes a table of lots that fall below minimum lot size. See the chart to the right for the residential zoning categories and rates of nonconformance. Anywhere from 8% to a whopping 51% of lots in each residential zoning category are too small to meet the current

regulations. Furthermore, all residential zones have identical minimum of 1,000 square footage per dwelling unit, regardless of other dimensional requirements. This may create a situation where permitted uses cannot be developed even though they are explicitly outlined as allowed by-right in the code.

Waycross Zoning Districts (Residential Only)	Minimum Lot Area (Square Feet)	Percent of City Lots that Are Nonconforming
RM-75 (Residential manufactured housing)	9,000	51%
R-S (Residential)	9,000	17%
R-90 (Residential)	9,000	8%
R-75 (Residential)	7,500	20%
R-50 (Residential)	5,000	26%
R-75MH (Residential Mobile Home)	7,500	25%
R-50MH (Residential Mobile Home)	5,000	35%
R-50HD (Residential Historic District)	5,000	9%

Source: Ware-Waycross 2026 Joint Comprehensive Plan

WAYCROSS RECOMMENDATION ITEM 3: DENIAL OF REZONING APPLICATION REQUIRES A LENGTHY SIX MONTH WAITING PERIOD

This lengthy timeline, required in the city’s zoning code, creates a challenging roadblock to develop a site if an application is denied. This limits a developer’s ability to collaborate with the city commission and planning commission through an iterative and collaborative process. Again, this timeline can be especially challenging for small developers and/or family property owners.

WAYCROSS REGULATORY REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS (CONT.)

WAYCROSS RECOMMENDATION ITEM 4: NO ALTERNATIVE PROCESS FOR SMALL-SCALE SUBDIVISIONS

In the subdivision ordinance, any division of land is treated the same and has one single administrative process comprised of preliminary plat review, site improvements, and final plat approval. This is the case if a lot is split into 2, or 200. Small-scale subdivision - typically defined as dividing into 5 lots or less - does not have a simplified and streamlined path, creating a barrier to small infill development or redevelopment. This can be especially challenging timeline-wise if a subdivision also required a rezoning or variance process, as described above.

WARE CO. REGULATORY REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Generally speaking, Ware County's regulations on residential development are less stringent overall than those in Waycross. The county also has a "simple subdivision" clause, where subdivisions with four lots or less may bypass the subdivision approval process through direct approval by the County Planning Director, as long as all applicable regulations are met. However, tweaks can be made to support smaller-scale development as well as development that is aligned with housing and broader community goals in the county.

WARE CO. RECOMMENDATION ITEM 1: CALIBRATE MINIMUM LOT SIZES AND DIMENSIONS FOR WATER AND SEWER ACCESS PARCELS

As seen on pages 36 and 37, there are a significant amount of undeveloped parcels within relatively close proximity to water and sewer lines in the

county. This is significant, as the county's area, yard, and height requirements are directly tied to if a property has access to public water and/or sewer. However, some zoning districts require relatively large minimum lot sizes for properties with both water and sewer access. In particular, zone R-S requires 15,000 square feet minimum for lot size, and a lot width of 100 feet or greater. Agricultural zones A, A-1, A-2, and A-3 all permit non-farm residences, which must have a minimum of 20,000 feet in lot size, 100 feet in lot width, and a floor to area ratio of 20%. These requirements all point to future residential development sprawling away from the city, consuming large amounts of land and detracting from county character. To steward both land and infrastructure resources, the county can consider reducing lot size and lot width minimums in areas serviced by infrastructure.

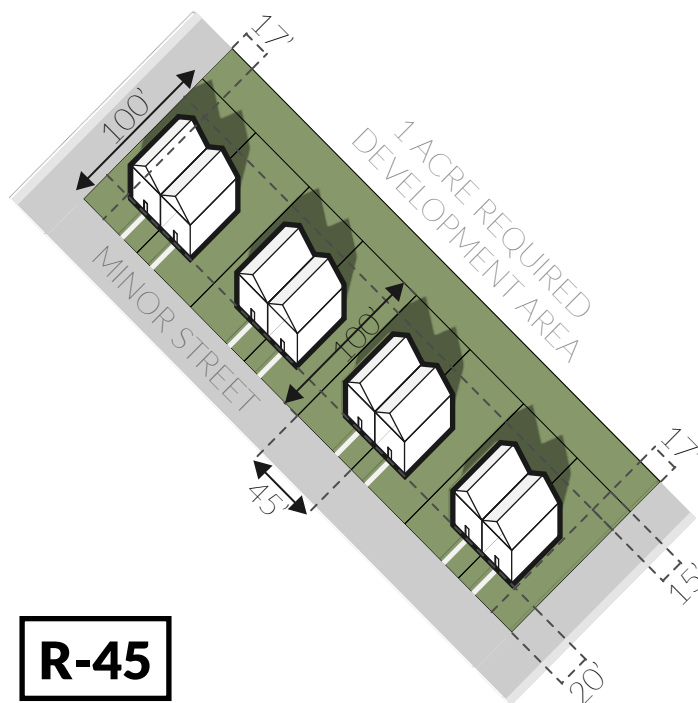
WARE CO. RECOMMENDATION ITEM 2: ALIGN DIMENSION REQUIREMENTS BETWEEN ZONING AND SUBDIVISION REGULATION

The county's subdivision regulation outlines its own separate minimums on lot size and lot width. For lots with both public water and sewer, the minimum lot width is 60 feet, and the minimum lot size is 6,000 square feet. All residential zones have larger minimum lot widths, and many have larger minimum lot size as well. The county can consider calibrating these two regulations, with preferences to lower minimum requirements.

ZONING IN PRACTICE

To better understand the recommendations outlined above, the project team illustrated the required dimensions for one zone from Ware County and the City of Waycross, respectively. The zones were selected to highlight opportunities for infill development in each jurisdiction. These illustrations are meant to highlight specific components of the development regulations, comparing rules on the books with what permitted residential development would look like in both Waycross and Ware County.

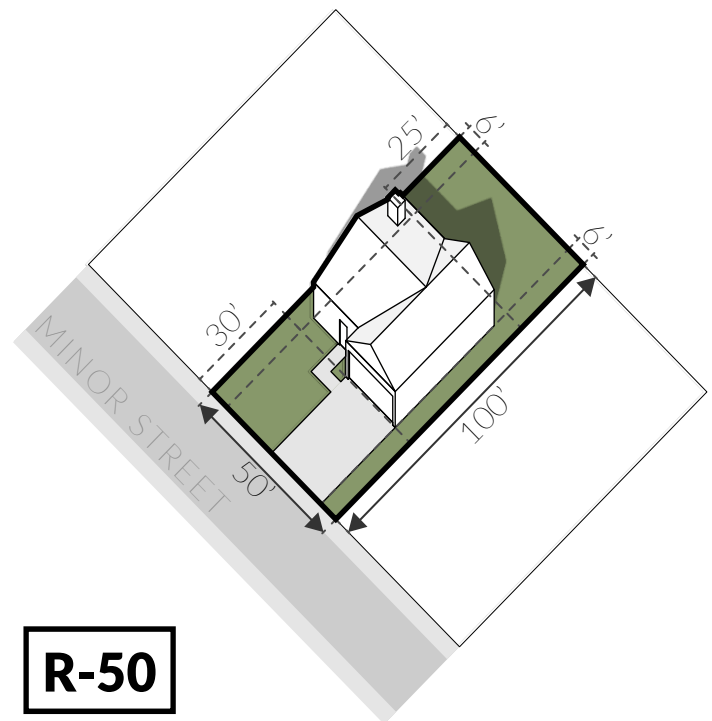
WARE COUNTY: ZONE R-45



R-45

Ware County's Zone R-45 is defined as a "zero-lot line" residential dwelling district. This allows for slightly increased densities at 8 units per acre. This zone still requires front yard and rear yard setbacks, but removes side setbacks on one side of each dwelling unit. This added flexibility allows for smart growth through smaller unit sizes on smaller amounts of land. Chapter XXX will highlight why this is a cornerstone of sustainable growth. Currently, only about 5 acres in Ware County has this zoning designation. The county may utilize this zone in the future to support growth management in the face of increasing development pressures.

CITY OF WAYCROSS: ZONE R-50



R-50

Roughly 150 acres of vacant property in the city falls within an R-50 residential zone. This zone is notable as it has one of the most modest setback and lot size requirements relative to all other residential zones in the city. The diagram above illustrates a 5,000 square foot lot, which is commonly found throughout the city. These zones provide a promising opportunity for targeted infill redevelopment in the city.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The chapter's zoning and regulatory recommendations are summarized below:

WARE-WAYCROSS JOINT REGULATORY REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Joint Recommendation Item 1:** Clarify ambiguous timeline for building permit review
- **Joint Recommendation Item 2:** Site improvements are required prior to final plat approval, regardless of development size.
- **Joint Recommendation Item 3:** Streamline permitting processes needed, especially for concurrent rezoning and subdivision applications

WAYCROSS REGULATORY REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Waycross Recommendation Item 1:** Restrictions on non-single family development
- **Waycross Recommendation Item 2:** Minimum lot size and dimensional requirements create challenges, especially for infill (re)development
- **Waycross Recommendation Item 3:** Denial of Rezoning application requires a lengthy six month waiting period
- **Waycross Recommendation Item 4:** No alternative process for small-scale subdivisions

WARE REGULATORY REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Ware Recommendation Item 1:** Calibrate minimum lot sizes and dimensions for water and sewer access parcels
- **Ware Recommendation Item 2:** Align dimension requirements between zoning and subdivision regulation

CHAPTER 5: HOUSING CONDITIONS ASSESSMENT

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2026, the project team conducted a targeted neighborhood housing conditions assessment. The goal of this assessment is to collect information on the existing housing stock in a particular geography, beyond what is available from existing records such as tax assessor data. This allows a deeper understanding of various metrics of housing conditions, quality, and needs beyond what's available.

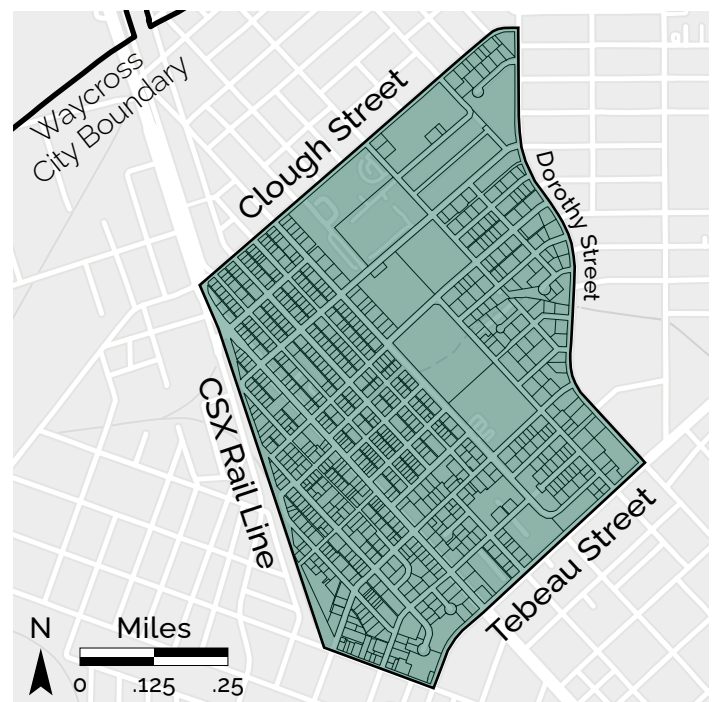
In addition, this data will support application for Community HOME Investment Program (CHIP), administered through the Georgia Department of Community Affairs. This program funds housing rehabilitation projects for owner-occupied homes, with annual funding limits of up to \$500,000 total. A housing conditions assessment is a requirement to apply for the program.

METHODOLOGY

The assessment completed in Waycross had three sections of questions: first, an overview of property identifiers, determining the housing type of the structure(s) on the property, and detailed analysis of property condition. Specific housing conditions assessed included the condition of a property's foundation, roof, exterior, windows, and doors. The assessment also included an "other" category for condition considerations outside of these categories. To conduct the assessment, the project team utilized a 360 camera secured to a car while driving through

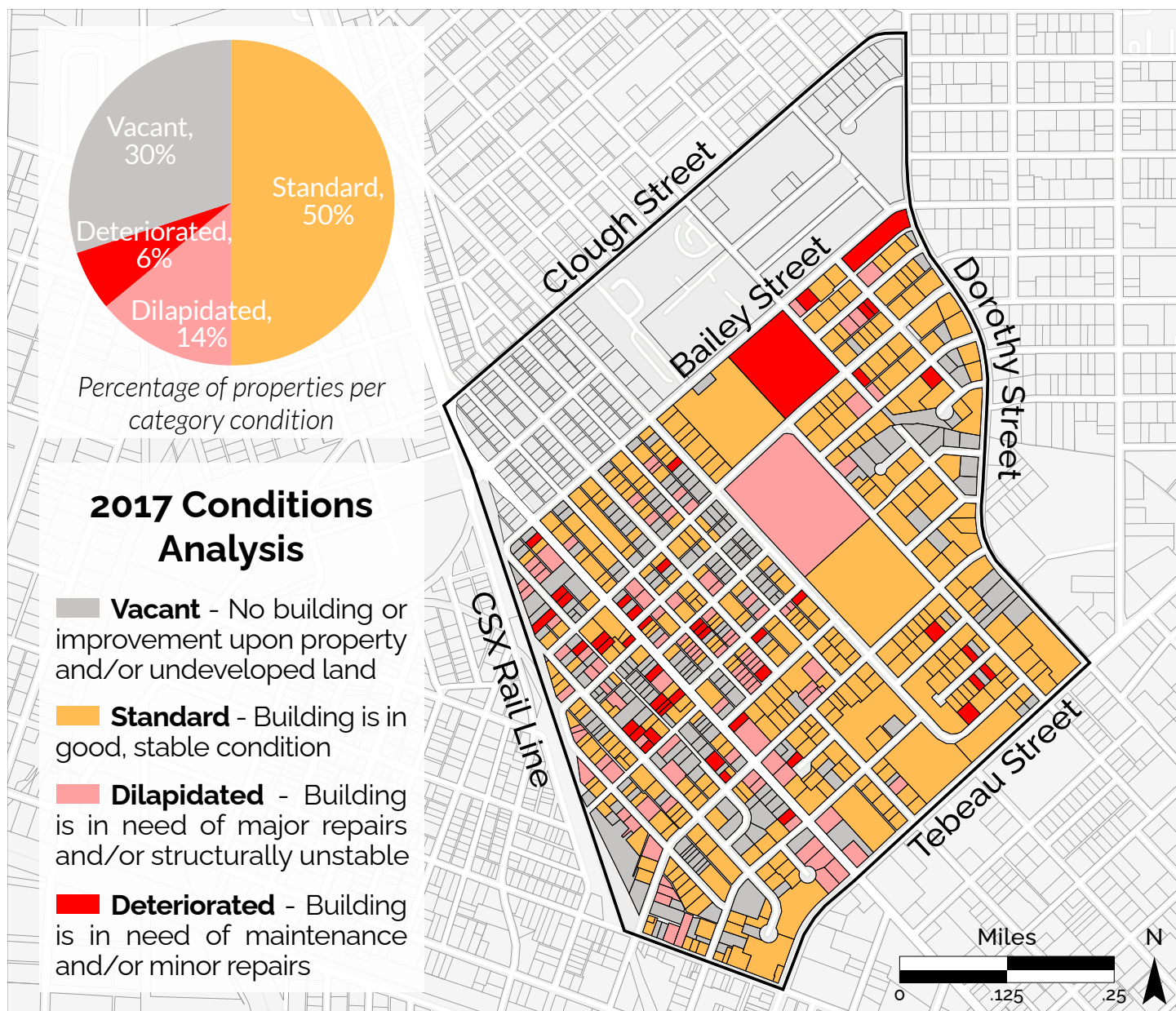
TARGET NEIGHBORHOOD

The target geography for this assessment was the Bailey Heights neighborhood. This area was selected due to it being analyzed in the 2017 Northside Urban Redevelopment Plan, summarized on page 8. Thus, in addition to supporting current redevelopment goals, the analysis can serve as a longitudinal study to see how the neighborhood has changed in the time since the 2017 plan was completed. However, the project team expanded the neighborhood boundaries slightly, expanding the northern area boundary from Bailey Street to Clough Street. See below for context maps of the project boundaries. In total, the project team surveyed roughly 800 properties in the neighborhood.



Housing Conditions Assessment Target Area Boundaries

HOUSING CONDITIONS ASSESSMENT FINDINGS

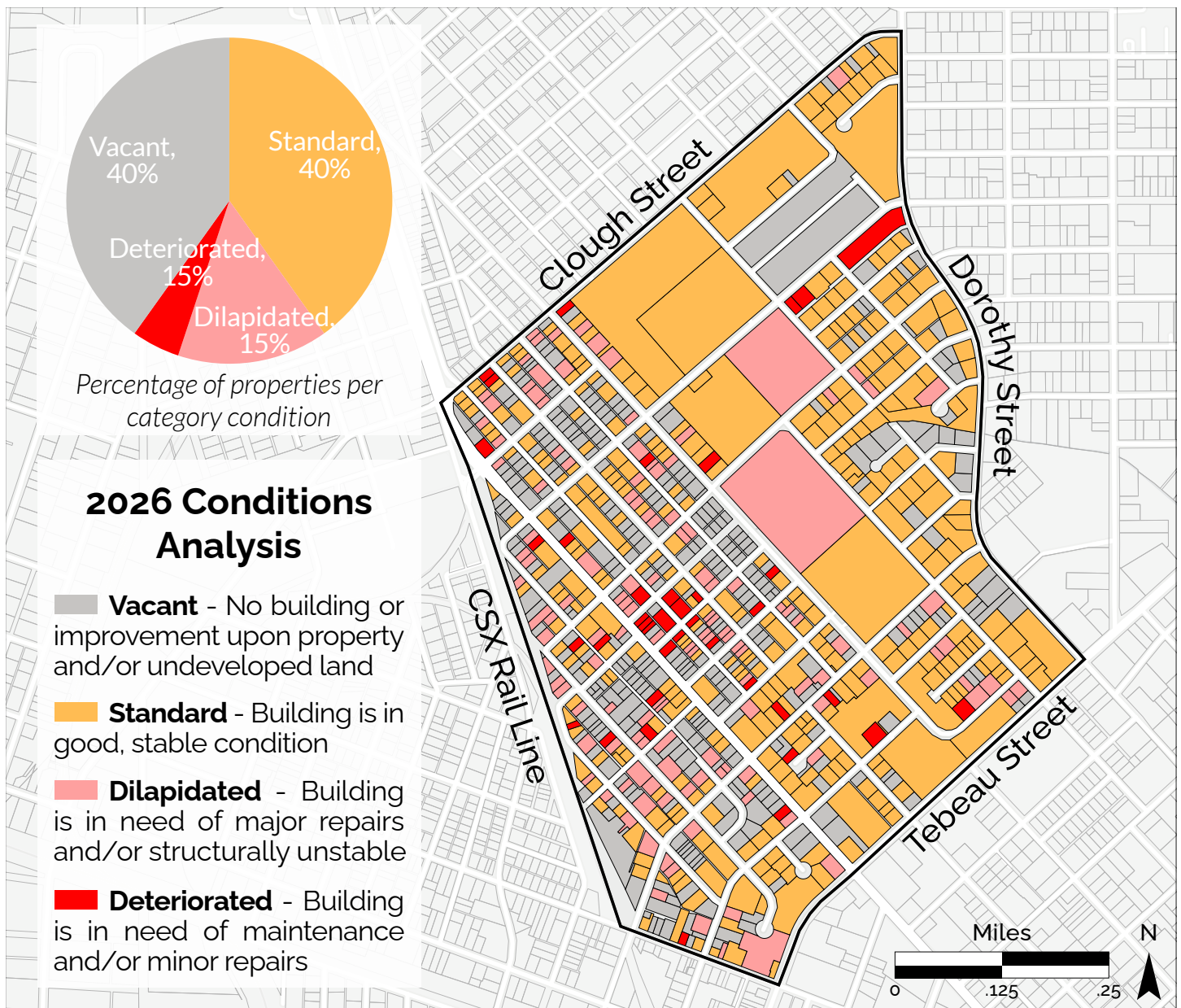


2017 CONDITIONS ASSESSMENT

The 2017 Northside Urban Redevelopment Plan included a detailed building condition assessment for Waycross's Northside neighborhoods. The project team extracted the data included in this assessment, as shown in the map above, to track neighborhood change over time. See the chart to the right for a breakdown of properties by condition category. Note that the boundaries of the 2017 analysis are different from 2026, and as such, the breakdown of properties per condition category cannot be directly compared between the two time periods.

Source: 2017 Northside Urban Redevelopment Plan

HOUSING CONDITIONS ASSESSMENT FINDINGS



2026 CONDITIONS ASSESSMENT

This assessment found that a significant amount of parcels in the neighborhood remained vacant from 2017-2026. Some deteriorated homes have been demolished, though some homes have become deteriorated since 2017. Housing conditions oscillate significantly block by block. Lastly, large key properties - namely, the former Bailey Heights School, and the former Housing Authority Property - remain key opportunities for larger scale infill redevelopment. Note that the boundaries of the 2017 analysis are different from 2026, and as such, the breakdown of properties per condition category cannot be directly compared between the two time periods.

CHAPTER 6: LOOKING AHEAD

INTRODUCTION

The task of addressing housing challenges can be daunting thanks to the many variables that influence housing construction, maintenance, and costs. Generally, there are two parallel sets of strategies that communities can employ to tackle housing challenges. “Supply side” housing strategies focus on creating more housing opportunities: prioritizing new housing development, improving existing housing stock, and redeveloping non-residential properties into new units. These strategies follow microeconomic theories that greater supply results in, broadly, lower prices. “Demand side” housing strategies, on the other hand, focus on how households can be supported to pay for housing costs. In addition to direct financial assistance, demand side strategies can be thought of broadly as programs or policies that support the economic wellbeing and stability of households to compete in the housing market. In this sense, nearly any public policy or program focused on community wellbeing could have a secondary effect of addressing housing challenges in some way.

On a local level, supply side housing strategies are much easier to influence, as local jurisdictions have more policy levers that impact housing development and land use controls. As such, this section will focus on development and redevelopment opportunities within Waycross and Ware County to support housing attainability goals within the city and county, respectively. In particular, this chapter will compare “business as usual” development practices with Georgia Conservancy’s Sustainable Growth framework, pulling together key report findings with recommendations to move forward on local housing goals.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter includes the following items to support local implementation of this housing strategy:

- Key housing needs, opportunities, and goals
- “Business as Usual” and Georgia Conservancy’s Sustainable Growth Framework
- Recommendations framework, including:
 - Key action items
 - Housing Action Plan

HOUSING NEEDS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND GOALS

Bringing together data analysis, community engagement, and policy research, the project team identified four priority areas that, together, comprise a local housing strategy. Each topic includes a description of the relevant issues and opportunities in Waycross and Ware County, along with key goals to work through via the recommended Housing Action Plan found at the end of the chapter. The four topics are as follows:

1. Develop policies and programs to address vacant, abandoned, or deteriorated housing units.
2. Preserve existing housing stock.
3. Support new housing development, with a focus on infill development in vacant and/or underutilized lots.
4. Implement policies, programs, and procedures needed to support housing outcomes.

HOUSING NEEDS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND GOALS

TOPIC 1: DEVELOP POLICIES AND PROGRAMS TO ADDRESS VACANT, ABANDONED, OR DETERIORATED HOUSING UNITS (CONT.)

This topic area is about addressing homes which are no longer able to reasonably provide adequate, safe, quality shelter, and need intervention to be brought back to productive use.

Issues:

- **High number of vacant, dilapidated structures throughout Waycross and areas of Ware County surrounding the city.** This is an issue impacting both residential and commercial properties alike, and is not necessarily a new issue in Waycross or Ware County in recent years.
- **Rising housing affordability and skyrocketing prices for both renters and owners.**
- **Limited available supply of quality units available to households seeking housing.** Addressing vacant residential properties is one potential avenue to provide additional supply to the local housing stock, and with it the potential to provide relief on rising prices.

Opportunities:

- **Incentivizing rehabilitation.** Development, and with it redevelopment, is largely conducted by the private sector. Given the scale of need in Waycross and Ware County, incentivization will be key to get the private sector on board in moving rehabilitation goals forward.
- **Expand code enforcement.** Code enforcement, on the other hand, requires individual property owners to abide by regulations for property upkeep. Expanding code enforcement and regulatory measures will help bring properties into compliance, which is a necessary step for rehabilitation as well as preservation of housing stock.
- **Address complexities with legal barriers to rehabilitation.** Sometimes, the scale of work needed to rehabilitate properties is too large or too complex for an individual to address. As such, key partners focused on housing rehabilitation may be able to step in and address larger underlying issues, such as heirs property challenges or property tax liens.

Goals:

- **Goal 1.1:** Implement policies and programs to encourage rehabilitation of vacant, abandoned, or deteriorated homes, bringing them back into the active housing stock
- **Goal 1.2:** Expand code enforcement and regulatory measures for properties confirmed as vacant and/or abandoned to bring them into compliance
- **Goal 1.3:** Address underlying legal and regulatory barriers to rehabilitation, either through individual support or transfer of ownership to entities equipped to support housing rehabilitation efforts

HOUSING NEEDS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND GOALS

TOPIC 2: PRESERVE EXISTING HOUSING STOCK

This topic area is focused on maintaining the existing housing stock that is actively in use in Waycross and Ware County.

Issues:

- **Aging and deteriorating housing stock.** Concerns about condition and quality of the existing housing stock was a key theme emerging from the study's community engagement efforts. The data echoes this: The median year built for homes throughout the county is 1965, which is a few decades older than the state median year built of 1991. Coupled with this is an older population, with 1 in 5 residents in the county being over the age of 65, it is essential to ensure homes stay in quality shape and productive use, and prevent further dilapidation and eventual vacancy. Preserving housing is often more effective, dollar for dollar, compared to developing new housing units. However, the ultimate goal of this topic is to ensure that folks are able to safely stay in their homes in the face of maintenance challenges and hardships.

Opportunities:

- **Establishing and expanding home maintenance programs, and technical assistance for current property owners.** Given the aging housing stock in Ware County, and especially Waycross, home maintenance is an essential preventative step to keeping homes in productive use. Maintenance includes addressing critical repairs, as well as proactive improvements to keep homes running efficiently and safely.
- **Providing education on financial options for housing rehabilitation and tax relief programs.** Lastly, lower income or vulnerable homeowners may benefit from homestead exemption workshops, to ensure resilience amidst rising property values and subsequent increases in property taxes.

Goals:

- **Goal 2.1:** Address home maintenance needs to help keep existing housing stock functional and in active use
- **Goal 2.2:** Provide technical assistance and funding support to property owners to address property quality concerns, supporting renters and homeowners alike

HOUSING NEEDS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND GOALS

TOPIC 3: SUPPORT NEW HOUSING DEVELOPMENT, WITH A FOCUS ON INFILL DEVELOPMENT IN VACANT AND/OR UNDERUTILIZED LOTS

This section focuses on bringing new infill development opportunities to vacant lots and/or underutilized lots in Waycross and Ware County.

Issues:

- **Proliferation of vacant properties.** Throughout Waycross, and in areas of Ware County within close proximity to the city limits, there are dozens of properties in close proximity to infrastructure (water, sewer, roads, etc.) as well as services and amenities. In the city, many of these properties may have previously been developed, but have since been demolished. In the county, these properties might have been demolished, or may have never been developed in the first place. Regardless of the reason why, there is a significant amount of vacant land which is already being serviced by local infrastructure, but is not offering any productive use back to either the city or county.

Opportunities:

- **Infill development.** This term refers to development on small, undeveloped lots often scattered throughout areas within closer proximity to a city center. The term contrasts with “greenfield development,” which refers to new construction on undisturbed land, usually (but not always) farther from a city center and farther from infrastructure. Infill development can offer long-term advantages over greenfield development, such as ensuring more efficient use of existing infrastructure as it often does not require creating new roads or extending pipes. As a result, infill supports affordable and high-quality public services, mitigates pressure on city infrastructure, and reinforces that land as a limited and high-value resource.

Goals:

- **Goal 3.1:** Collaborate with private developers and landowners to support new infill housing development
- **Goal 3.2:** Provide programmatic or regulatory support to infill development of vacant lots

HOUSING NEEDS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND GOALS

TOPIC 4: IMPLEMENT POLICIES, PROGRAMS, AND PROCEDURES NEEDED TO SUPPORT HOUSING OUTCOMES

Housing is influenced by a complex array of policies on a federal, state, and local level. Everything from finance regulations, to labor laws, land use regulations might impact housing supply and demand, in some way.

Issues:

- **Lack of housing policies/programs focused on housing outcomes.** On a local level, however, is where there is a need to consider whether policies and regulations on the books align with stated housing goals and needs, as so many immediate hurdles are written and enforced on a local level. In addition to the rules on the books, inefficient processes and procedures done can create a stumbling block that prevents housing activities from otherwise moving forward. Lastly, a clear understanding of housing needs and opportunities by decision makers of all levels is needed to innovate forward towards a brighter housing future. This work is challenging, and needs strong champions to create momentum in moving action forward.

Opportunities:

- **There is an opportunity to fine-tune regulations and better align them with local housing goals and outcomes,** particularly in housing redevelopment, preservation, and infill development as articulated above. This topic is cross-cutting, and can be thought of as providing wraparound support to the previous goals. The intended result is to reduce regulatory friction and increase programmatic support, thus broadly supporting a more housing-friendly administrative environment. Lastly, engaging and educating all stakeholders in the housing ecosystem – regulatory and otherwise – will support better collaboration and overall flow of housing activities.

Goals:

- **Goal 4.1:** Amend administrative, governance, and regulatory policies and processes to be more supportive of housing
- **Goal 4.2:** Develop opportunities for education, training, and collaboration in support of housing goals and outcomes

THE SUSTAINABLE GROWTH FRAMEWORK

Georgia Conservancy’s Sustainable Growth Framework offers an alternative to “business as usual” growth. This framework has two goals:

- 1. To support attainable and income-aligned housing development, and
- 2. To ensure responsible stewardship of land.

The ideas included here are informed by decades of research in urban planning and widely agreed-upon best practices from industry experts. They also derive from how communities used to plan and build neighborhoods before rapid personal transportation became the norm.

The Sustainable Growth Framework can be used by City and County staff, developers, residents, and other local stakeholders as a lens when approaching both development policies and projects. The intended result is a clearer, stronger approach to land use planning and development that supports local housing goals and outcomes. There are four tenets of sustainable growth, as described in the following pages.

Why Sustainable Growth?

Provides quality, varied housing, needed to serve the full range of your population—both today and in the years to come

Strengthens economic development and resilience

Comes in a variety of shapes, sizes, and types—it does not have to come at the expense of community character

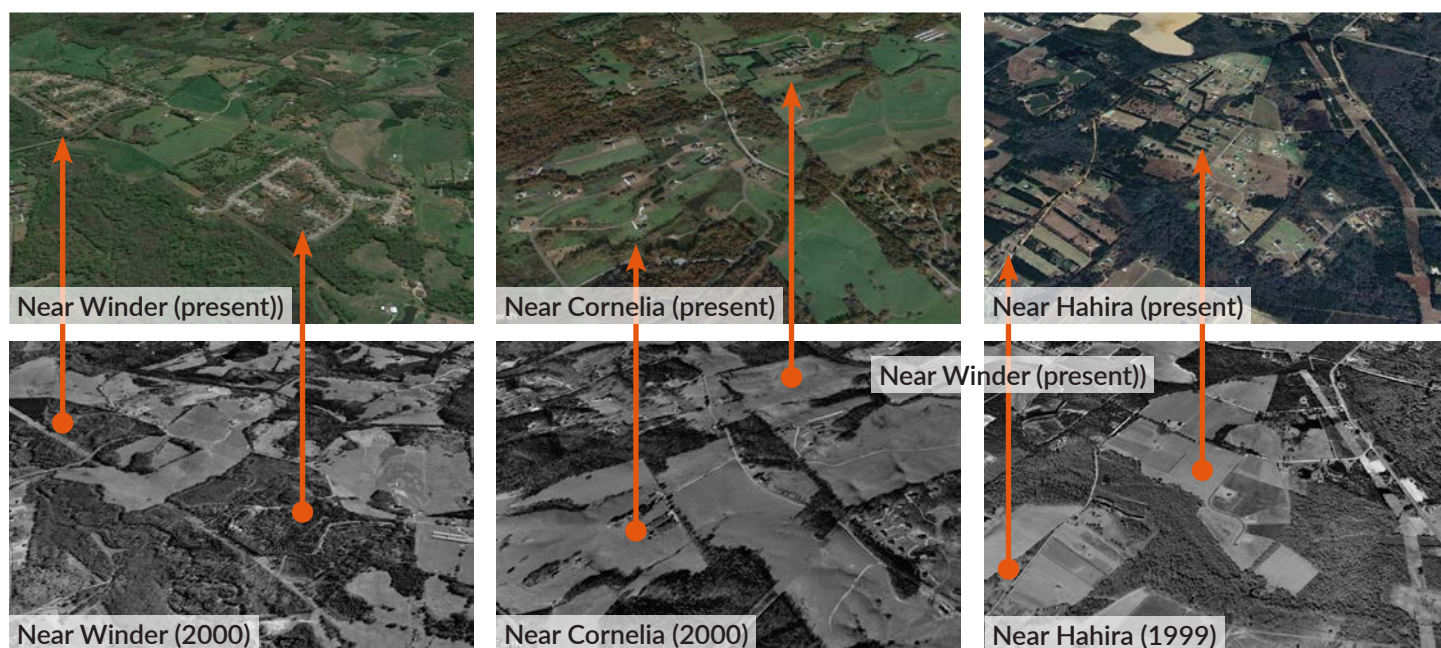
Preserves rural landscape and identity by “growing in”, rather than “spreading out”

TENET 1	TENET 2	TENET 3	TENET 4
INCREASED HOUSING SUPPLY AT A LOWER FOOTPRINT	RANGE OF HOUSING PRICE POINTS	RANGE OF HOUSING TYPES AND VARIETY	INFILL DEVELOPMENT, ADJACENT TO EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE

THE SUSTAINABLE GROWTH FRAMEWORK

BUSINESS AS USUAL: SPREADING OUT

Over the last several decades, typical development patterns in much of the United States have generally been characterized by increasingly larger single-family structures on large lots, spread out for access primarily by car. The same is true in Georgia: the vast majority of developed land in the state follows this pattern. Although commercial, office, and industrial development have certainly changed Georgia's land cover, low-intensity residential development is the principal driver of this phenomenon. See the diagram below for examples of what this development looks like in small towns throughout Georgia.



Examples of “business as usual” growth seen throughout Georgia’s small towns

The intent of analyzing this development pattern is not to denounce this style of development. Generations of Americans have grown up within a low-intensity residential context, and the American suburbs have provided housing for millions of families. However, the proliferation of large lot developments especially as our “default” way of providing housing, poses several key challenges:

- 1. Large lot developments consume more land**, intensifying the “spreading out” phenomenon: the amount of land per person and per housing unit has steadily increased over the past several decades. This pattern is closely tied to the increased prominence of cars in society. Since land is a limited resource, this presents critical challenges as Georgia’s population continues to grow.
- 2. Large lot developments stretch infrastructure resources**, including roads, water supply, sewer and wastewater treatment (if present), storm water drainage, safety and emergency response, and more.
- 3. Large lot developments fragment natural space** and diminish the effectiveness and integrity of ecosystem services, such as our ability to manage storm water. Even if residential lots are not fully built over and still have yard space, it is unlikely that the land (now subdivided into individually owned lots) will return to a natural state.

THE SUSTAINABLE GROWTH FRAMEWORK

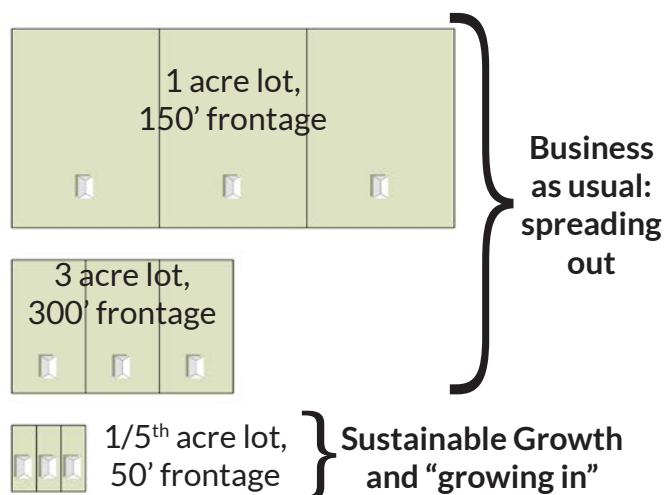
TENET 1: INCREASED HOUSING SUPPLY AT A LOWER FOOTPRINT

What: The foundational building block of sustainable growth is building smaller houses on smaller lots. Housing and transportation development have a closely intertwined history – prior to the dominance of cars for personal travel, homes were often smaller and closer together as it was challenging to get around otherwise. Looking at land development patterns prior to the mass production of automobiles, houses of all shapes and styles were overwhelmingly smaller and more densely developed. This can be seen throughout Waycross and especially in its older neighborhoods.

Why: Given rising land prices, this sustainable growth tenet is essential for bringing down housing development costs. See the diagram to the right for context on what “smaller” might look like. Smaller homes on smaller lots typically allow for more affordable price points, both in the short and long term. In the short term, smaller homes may have lower sale or rental prices compared with larger properties. In the long term, maintenance costs (both in time and money) may be more modest with a smaller property than a larger one.

How: Support more small-scale construction projects to offset rising demand/costs and provide quality options for existing residents and new arrivals. Regulatory levers to do this include reducing minimum

How does one 3000 square foot (two story) home fit on different lot sizes?



Graphic comparing different lot sizes, shown to scale. Sprawl is proliferated by a handful of key policy regulations, one of which is large lot zoning. Smaller lots are key for sustainable growth and development.



Graphic comparing large lot developments, all shown to scale. Each aerial image includes one unit of house. These types of lots and developments are common throughout Georgia, particularly in the state's more rural communities - including Waycross and Ware County.

THE SUSTAINABLE GROWTH FRAMEWORK

TENET 2: RANGE OF HOUSING TYPES AND VARIETY

What: Support the (re)development of the full spectrum of housing supply types, in order to provide the varied housing needed to serve the full range of your population – both today and in the years to come. .

Why: Demographic changes happen more quickly than housing supply changes. As such, housing supply must be flexible to meet the range of both current and future needs. No two households are exactly alike: they each have different combinations of housing needs and preferences. Sustainable growth encourages a wide variety of different housing types to meet the needs of a wide variety of households. While “business as usual” produces mostly single-family homes and large apartment buildings, Sustainable Growth encourages the full range of housing options. This includes the “missing middle,” a range of housing types once common in neighborhoods in the early 20th century, but now difficult to build due to housing policy, local regulations and market forces. Sustainable Growth comes in a variety of shapes, sizes, and types—it does not have to come at the expense of community character.

How: Provide more living options of varied sizes that match household needs. To do so, calibrate development regulations to give preferred development the path of least resistance. Amend zoning and development regulations to allow more flexibility with housing typology, especially given the prominence of non-single-family housing units already within the neighborhood fabric in Waycross and Ware County. Create a culture of collaboration with developers to support development of a wider range of housing types.



Images of housing variety, all found in communities and towns throughout the state of Georgia

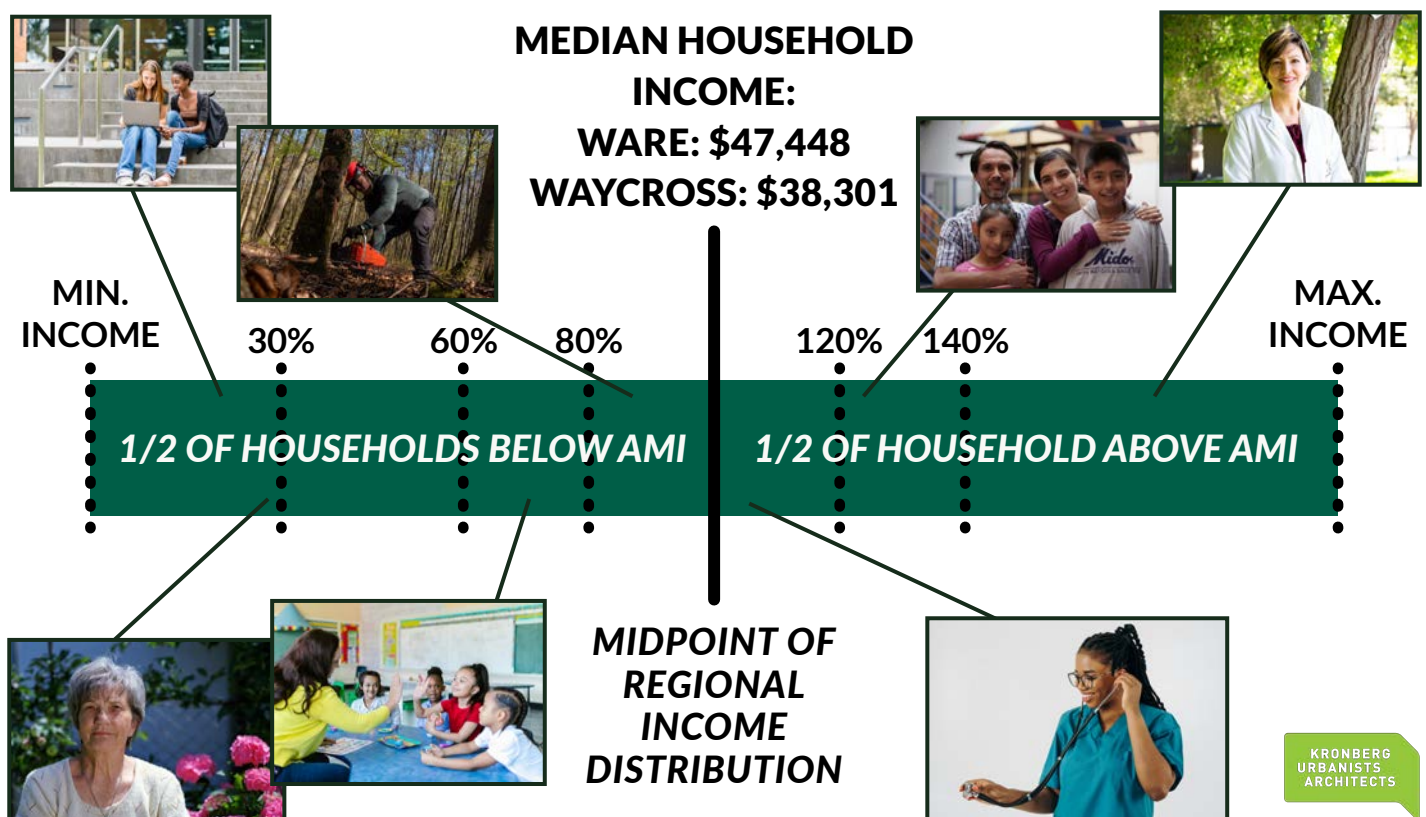
THE SUSTAINABLE GROWTH FRAMEWORK

TENET 3: RANGE OF HOUSING PRICE POINTS

What: Support development regulations that allow (re)development of housing units at a full range of housing costs to meet the full range of household incomes across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Why: As discussed earlier in this report, every single household has what is considered an “affordable” monthly housing payment. There must be a range of housing price points to meet the range of incomes earned by households in Waycross and Ware County. See below for a graphic representation of Area Median Income - highlighting how different housing price categories are needed for households throughout the range of AMI distribution.

How: Promote different housing types, at different price points, to allow for housing development that meets the full range of local communities’ diverse needs. Promoting affordability can be achieved either through policy incentives or directly supporting the development of smaller-footprint houses that cost less to build. Zoning incentives to achieve this include density bonuses, fast-tracking permit and development applications, and offering pre-approved site plans in line with the zoning code



Graphic visualizing the income range in Cornelia, highlighting common professions and how their incomes might rank compared to one another. Housing is needed for each type of household with incomes spanning this range. Image credit: Kronberg Urbanists + Architects.

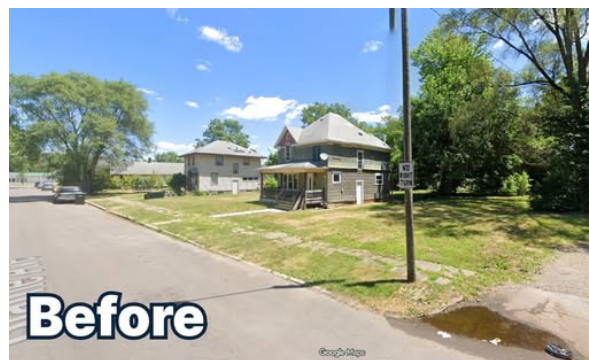
THE SUSTAINABLE GROWTH FRAMEWORK

TENET 4: INFILL DEVELOPMENT, ADJACENT TO EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE

What: Infill development is, simply, building where infrastructure, services, and existing development are already located. This development type uses vacant or underutilized land in or near the city, rather than expanding into undeveloped areas. Infill development supports affordable and high-quality public services, mitigates pressure on infrastructure systems, and reinforces that land as a limited and high-value resource. There are many infill development opportunities within both Waycross and Ware County, particularly on vacant lots close to water and sewer infrastructure (read more about this on pages 36 and 37).

Why: the primary driver of land use change in Georgia is *low-intensity development*, particularly residential development. This is true even when population projections are modest - once you subdivide land, it is extremely difficult to reassemble it, especially if it's been sold to multiple owners. By utilizing where infrastructure already is, infill development reduces pressure on rural areas farther from services by “growing in,” rather than “spreading out.” Thinking long term, infill is essential to keep Waycross and Ware County vibrant and competitive for generations to come.

How: Support a development strategy that takes advantage of existing infrastructure capacity and doesn't cause increased cost burden for residents. Champion pilot projects that promote infill development and provide support to additional zoning updates and additions with a focus on maximizing land with water and sewer access.



Source: Strong Towns Reporting on South Bend, IN

RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTION ITEMS

The following are a summary of high-level items that should guide decision makers and all stakeholders that are a part of the local housing landscape in Waycross and Ware County. This includes elected leadership and both city and county staff, though they can be considered by any decision makers or actors who may influence the local housing landscape.

KEY ACTION ITEMS

1. Calibrate your development regulations

Give preferred development the path of least resistance. Adapt local regulations – primarily zoning and subdivision ordinances - to allow for the types of development and housing that align with local housing goals (see page XX). Streamline the development review process to reduce friction: Clearly post fees, applications, turnaround timelines, and expectations on applications. Ask for feedback on this process from developers.

2. Adopt a pro-housing agenda

Adopt a pro-housing agenda in alignment with the Sustainable Growth framework: Promote and allow for different housing types, at different price points, for the full range of community needs. Consider this framework to inform future decisions related to community development.

3. Support education efforts

Support education efforts to all key stakeholders in the development process, which includes developers, builders, real estate agents, brokers, financiers, Board of Zoning Appeals, Planning Commission, engineers, resident leaders, community groups, and elected leadership. Utilize these opportunities to support coordination between departments, municipalities, and administrative/regulatory entities.

4. Identify housing champions

Identify housing champions to help advance new development opportunities, embracing innovation and creative solutions to housing needs and opportunities. Cultivate a culture of innovation and collaboration to address housing challenges.

5. Develop a pilot project

Collaborate to develop a pilot project for infill housing development. This item combines all the items above, and will help build momentum and excitement in moving forward on local housing strategy and opportunities.

HOUSING ACTION PLAN & TABLE OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This table overviews all identified recommendations gathered through this housing study. This table can be thought of as a potential menu of strategies and actions to target the four key housing goals that arose from this planning process. Recommendations are ordered in sequential order for each sub-goal, ranging from lower-hanging fruit opportunities and escalating to longer term and heavier lift items.

Refer to the “housing needs, opportunities, and goals” section of Chapter 6 (page 54) for each recommendation item’s corresponding goal. The four housing goals are included here for reference:

- Goal 1: Develop policies and programs to address vacant, abandoned, or deteriorated housing units.
- Goal 2: Preserve existing housing stock.
- Goal 3: Support new housing development, with a focus on infill development in vacant and/or underutilized lots.
- Goal 4: Implement policies, programs, and procedures needed to support housing outcomes.

Goal 1: Develop policies and programs to address vacant, abandoned, or deteriorated homes.		
<i>Goal 1.1: Implement policies and programs to encourage rehabilitation of vacant, abandoned, or deteriorated homes, bringing them back into the active housing stock</i>		
Item	Recommendation	Potential partners
1.1.1	Establish a geospatial database of potentially abandoned properties and begin a concerted effort to contact property owners of those abandoned properties. Determine a threshold of contact attempts after which a property may be considered abandoned.	Ware County; City of Waycross
1.1.2	Apply for a Community HOME Investment Partnership (CHIP) Grant for rehabilitation of owner-occupied homes or construction of new affordable homes. Applicants may be municipalities (city or county), the Waycross Housing Authority, or the Waycross Land Bank.	Ware County; City of Waycross
1.1.3	Consider policy of tax abatement and/or removing outstanding property liens for rehabilitation of dilapidated homes.	Ware County; City of Waycross
1.1.4	Consider providing incentives for residential rehabilitation and/or redevelopment, such as density bonuses, tax credits, or administrative fast-tracking.	Ware County; City of Waycross
<i>Goal 1.2: Expand code enforcement and regulatory measures for properties confirmed as vacant and/or abandoned to bring them into compliance</i>		
1.2.1	Work with residents to establish and/or enhance code enforcement protocols that are appropriate for and supportive of the community's overall health.	Ware County; City of Waycross
1.2.2	Work with code enforcement to address dilapidated structures, with an eye in particular on absentee landlord challenges. Identify funding opportunities to help property owners manage their properties and avoid displacement as a result of enforcement.	Ware County; City of Waycross; Southern Georgia Regional Commission
1.2.3	Consider imposing a blight tax on vacant or abandoned properties. A blight tax is a punitive tax on vacant or abandoned properties to encourage their return to productive use.	Ware County; City of Waycross

HOUSING ACTION PLAN & TABLE OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Goal 1: Develop policies and programs to address vacant, abandoned, or deteriorated homes.

Goal 1.3: Address underlying legal and regulatory barriers to rehabilitation, either through individual support or transfer of ownership to entities equipped to support housing rehabilitation efforts

Item	Recommendation	Potential partners
1.3.1	Connect landowners to technical assistance for heirs property management assistance to help landowners establish clear legal titles as homes pass between generations. Encourage family estate planning to proactively reduce the occurrence of heirs property challenges.	Georgia Heirs Property Law Center, Southern Georgia Regional Commission
1.3.2	Support funding and expansion of the Waycross Land Bank, provide education to support land bank activities and expansion. A Land Bank Authority can, for example, help clear property title, hold properties tax exempt, and sell or develop properties for productive community use.	City of Waycross
1.3.3	Partner with the Waycross-Blackshear Housing Authority in acquiring dilapidated properties for rehabilitation. The Housing Authority is not currently exceeding its Faircloth Amendment limit, meaning it is able to take on more units under management if resources are available to do so. Offer option to donate land in lieu of paying liens.	Waycross-Blackshear Housing Authority; City of Waycross; Ware County
1.3.4	Support the Waycross land bank in acquiring rehabilitation. Prioritize the land bank in instances of property tax foreclosures to support a pipeline of properties through the land bank, rather than selling the property tax liens to purchasers - thus giving away any ability for the government to influence property upkeep. Offer option to donate land in lieu of paying liens.	Waycross Land Bank; City of Waycross; Ware County

Goal 2: Preserve existing housing stock.

Goal 2.1: Address home maintenance needs to keep prevent existing housing stock functional and in active use

2.1.1	Apply for a Community HOME Investment Partnership (CHIP) Grant for rehabilitation of owner-occupied homes or construction of new affordable homes. Applicants may be municipalities (city or county), the Waycross Housing Authority, or the Waycross Land Bank.	Ware County; City of Waycross
2.1.2	Organize volunteer service to provide free home maintenance work for the elderly and other vulnerable residents, focusing on home health and safety.	Ware County; City of Waycross; Waycross-Ware Development Authority
2.1.3	Provide support to low-income and/or elderly households to keep homes up to code through grants or tax rebates for home repairs, especially for elderly and low income owner and renter occupied homes.	Ware County; City of Waycross
2.1.4	Promote existing home repair and maintenance programs available for Waycross and Ware County residents, such as Rebuilding Together Waycross.	Ware County; City of Waycross; Rebuilding Together Waycross

HOUSING ACTION PLAN & TABLE OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Goal 2: Preserve existing housing stock.		
<i>Goal 2.1: Address home maintenance needs to keep prevent existing housing stock functional and in active use</i>		
Item	Recommendation	Potential partners
2.1.5	“Support property owners in applying for retrofit and weatherization programs to address maintenance concerns and reduce energy costs, with a focus on low-income residents. There are a large range of programs offered statewide and federally, as well as a handful of private programs. A highlight of options to consider include: - Georgia Power EASE - Georgia Gas Light Rebate Programs - Fannie Mae Homestyle Energy Mortgage - GEFA's home Efficiency Rebates (HER) and Home Electrification and Appliance Rebates (HEAR)”	Ware County; City of Waycross; program administrators (see list)
<i>Goal 2.2. Provide technical assistance and funding support to property owners to address property quality concerns, supporting renters and homeowners alike</i>		
2.2.1	Offer homestead exemption workshops to help homeowners, particularly low-income and senior residents, apply for available tax exemptions. Partner with county tax assessor to organize these events.	Ware County Tax Assessor
2.2.2	Identify a sponsoring partner to create a low- to no- interest rotating loan fund for home maintenance and preservation of resident homes, particularly for elderly and low-income households. Potential sponsoring partners could include a CDFI or local land trust.	Ware County; City of Waycross; Waycross-Blackshear Housing Authority
Goal 3: Support new housing development, with a focus on infill development in vacant and/or underutilized lots		
<i>Goal 3.1: Collaborate with private developers and landowners to support new infill housing development</i>		
3.1.1	Collaborate with private landowners to support activation of vacant or underutilized lots.	Ware County; City of Waycross; Downtown Waycross Development Authority
3.1.2	Conduct outreach to better understand barriers for activation of vacant lots.	Ware County; City of Waycross
3.1.3	Directly support housing redevelopment pilot projects on key sites. Provide site preparation to support redevelopment, such as proactive zoning changes as necessary and solicit bids for development proposals. Work with technical assistance providers to conduct market analysis and plans to support redevelopment, as needed.	Ware County; City of Waycross; Downtown Waycross Development Authority
3.1.4	Utilize vacant publicly owned parcels for redevelopment opportunities, particularly residential redevelopment.	Downtown Waycross Development Authority; Waycross-Blackshear Housing Authority; Downtown Waycross Development Authority

HOUSING ACTION PLAN & TABLE OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Goal 3: Support new housing development, with a focus on infill development in vacant and/or underutilized lots

Goal 3.2: Provide programmatic or regulatory support to infill development of vacant lots

Item	Recommendation	Potential partners
3.2.1	Develop and approve pre-approved designs for infill and/or Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) development.	Ware County; City of Waycross; Southern Georgia Regional Commission
3.2.2	Consider utilizing a Tax Allocation District (TAD) to support development of undeveloped properties in key districts. A TAD is a geographic area where, as property values rise over time, additional tax revenue is set aside to fund local infrastructure and reinvestment needs within the defined area. TAD funds may be used, for example, to support infrastructure investment for infill housing development. This item could also support vacant property rehabilitation efforts (see goal 1).	Ware County; City of Waycross
3.2.3	Develop low-cost loan funds to support local housing infill development activity.	Ware County; City of Waycross; Waycross-Blackshear Housing Authority

Goal 4: Implement policies, programs, and procedures needed to support housing outcomes

Goal 4.1: Amend administrative, governance, and regulatory policies and processes to be more supportive of housing

4.1.1	Using results from outreach regarding challenges building on vacant lots, amend potential regulatory barriers to housing development and redevelopment, including modifying local zoning and subdivision regulations, and streamlining the development approval processes. Ask for feedback on this process from developers.	Ware County; City of Waycross
4.1.2	In Waycross, create small-scale subdivision process to help small-scale development.	City of Waycross

Goal 4.2: Develop opportunities for education, training, and collaboration in support of housing goals and outcomes

4.2.1	Provide education for elected officials, municipal staff, and other key decision makers about housing needs and respective roles in moving housing solutions forward.	Ware-Waycross Development Authority; Waycross-Ware GICH Team
4.2.2	Promote collaboration and coordination between departments, municipalities, and administrative/regulatory entities to support housing outcomes.	Ware-Waycross planning commission and local zoning boards
4.2.3	Identify housing champions to help advance new development opportunities, embracing innovation and creative solutions to housing needs and opportunities. Cultivate a culture of innovation and collaboration to address housing challenges.	Ware-Waycross Development Authority; Waycross-Ware GICH Team
4.2.4	Work with local nonprofits to offer home ownership and educational training sessions, especially for young families and first-time home buyers.	Ware County; City of Waycross; Neighborworks America; Local Initiatives Support Corporation