

**EXPLORE**  
**SOUTH RIVER FOREST**  
CO-INVESTING IN  
SE ATLANTA &  
SW DEKALB COUNTY

**SOUTH RIVER  
FOREST**



**SOUTH RIVER TRAIL**

**GRESHAM PARK**



**CONSTITUTION LAKES**



**SOUTHSIDE PARK**



**LAKE CHARLOTTE**



February 2023  
prepared by the



Atlanta Regional Commission



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Special thanks to:

### Steering Committee:

Commissioner Marvin Arrington, Jr., Fulton County  
Don Bolia, Decide DeKalb  
Celia Bynes, South River Gardens Community Association  
Alison Clark, Community Stakeholder Advisory Committee, The Great Park Connection Conservancy, & Southeast DeKalb Neighborhood Alliance  
Sam Collier, Business Owner  
Patricia Culp, Cedar Grove Neighborhood Association  
Chuck Ellis, DeKalb County Department of Recreation, Parks, & Cultural Affairs  
Ayana Gabriel, Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta  
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Kathy Waller, Atlanta Committee for Progress  
Betty Willis, DeKalb Chamber of Commerce  
Council Member Jason Winston, City of Atlanta  
Katherine Zitsch, Metro Water Planning District

### Project Management Team:

Deron Davis, The Nature Conservancy  
Jacqueline Echols, South River Watershed Alliance  
Ryan Gravel, Sixpitch, Inc.  
Maria Houser, DeKalb County  
Joshua Humphries, City of Atlanta  
Shirley Nichols, South River Gardens Community Association  
Michael O'Reilly, The Nature Conservancy  
Renée M. Palmer, BlaqueBook Management Group  
Joe Santifer, South River Forest Coalition

### ARC Project Team:

Steven Aceto, Community Development Program Assistant  
Katherine Atteberry, Stormwater Planning Specialist  
Mollie Bogle, Principal Planner (Project Manager)  
Bonnie Lapwood, Senior Planner  
Marian Liou, Director, Community Engagement & the Arts  
Tanning Nyman, Community Development Program Assistant  
Ryan Schlom, Senior Planner  
Samyukth Shenbaga, Director, Community Development Department  
Lauren Wiggins, Community Development Program Assistant

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary	4
Chapter 1: Introduction	6
Chapter 2: Recommendations	12
Chapter 3: Approach	28
Appendix A	32
Appendix B	36
Appendix C	42
End Notes	44

Cover image by Lauren Hicks Graphic Design.



# ATLANTA REGIONAL COMMISSION

## Vision

One Great Region.

## Mission

To foster thriving communities for all within the Atlanta region through collaborative, data-informed planning, and investments.

## Goals

The ARC has identified the following goals as critical to meeting our mission and vision.

- Healthy, safe, livable communities throughout the Atlanta region.
- Strategic investments in people, infrastructure, mobility, and preserving natural resources.
- Regional services delivered with operational excellence and efficiency.
- Diverse stakeholders engage and take a regional approach to solve local issues.
- A competitive economy that is inclusive, innovative, and resilient.

The study and the recommendations herein will help accomplish these specific goals: creating healthy communities, strategic investments in people and preserving natural resources, and engaging diverse stakeholders.

## Role

ARC’s role throughout the study process has been to serve as the facilitator and convener, to create an inclusive and engaging process, and to outline consensus-based recommendations for the City of Atlanta and DeKalb County to act upon. ARC relies on community advocacy and leadership from the City and County to implement the recommendations in this report.



welcome to

# SOUTH RIVER FOREST



## WHAT

The South River Forest is a proposal for an expansive 3,500-acre network of connected greenspaces along the South River and its tributaries.

## WHERE

The South River Forest rests in southeast Atlanta and unincorporated southwest DeKalb County, primarily inside I-285.

## WHO

The City of Atlanta and DeKalb County, together with government, nonprofit, and community partners, can co-invest their efforts and resources.

## WHEN

Already underway with new investments like the Lake Charlotte Nature Preserve, the need to protect the South River Forest is increasingly urgent.

## WHY

The full vision for the South River Forest would provide publicly accessible greenspace, significant environmental, social, and economic benefits, an improved quality of life for several metro Atlanta communities that have a long history of disinvestment and environmental injustices.

## HOW

This document includes a series of recommendations to help protect, connect, and activate the South River Forest.

LIVE  
SOUTH RIVER  
FOREST

HIKE  
SOUTH RIVER  
FOREST

WORK  
SOUTH RIVER  
FOREST

EAT  
SOUTH RIVER  
FOREST

EXPLORE  
SOUTH RIVER  
FOREST

### SOUTH RIVER TRAIL

GRESHAM PARK



CONSTITUTION LAKES



SOUTHSIDE PARK



LAKE CHARLOTTE



“Metro Atlanta continues to grow fast, which is having a dramatic impact on our tree canopy and natural landscapes. The South River Forest vision provides a “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity to expand our greenspace network and preserve what would become one of the largest urban forests in the Atlanta region.”

Jason Winston, Councilmember, City of Atlanta

“Our community has been fighting battles to protect the forest since before we even knew what we were protecting... We’ve always known that we had something special and that we couldn’t let it go.”

Shirley Nichols, South River Gardens

Graphics by Lauren Hicks Graphic Design.





CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

Trail at Constitution Lakes Park

## PURPOSE

Although southeast Atlanta and unincorporated southwest DeKalb County have been burdened with multiple correctional facilities, landfills, wastewater treatment plants, illegal dump sites, truckyards, asphalt plants, and a river with some of the worst contamination in Georgia, thousands of people call this area home. **The City of Atlanta and DeKalb County can repair this long history of disinvestment and environmental damage by co-investing in the greenspace and neighborhoods of the South River Forest, maximizing the quality-of-life of its residents.**

In partnership with DeKalb County Commissioner Larry Johnson, The Nature Conservancy applied through the Atlanta Regional Commission's Community Development Assistance Program (CDAP) for assistance in engaging area advocates and key decision makers to begin planning a healthier, more resilient future for the South River Forest. Through December 2022, the South River Forest Consensus Building & Stakeholder Engagement project utilized a Steering Committee, community meetings, and an online survey to determine the South River Forest's primary assets, key challenges and opportunities, and priority actions for the City of Atlanta and DeKalb County.

In addition to a community engagement and preliminary findings summary, the recommendations outlined in this report are based on high-level research, community input, and several discussions with subject matter experts and stakeholders. This is not a detailed master plan. **This document is meant to serve as a starting point for a detailed technical and community-led master planning process, wherein each of the ideas in our report are further assessed for feasibility, execution, and timing.**

## SOUTH RIVER FOREST

*The South River Forest, a proposal for an expansive 3,500-acre network of connected greenspaces inside I-285 in SE Atlanta and SW DeKalb County, would be protected, connected, and activated as **publicly accessible greenspace providing significant environmental, social, and economic benefits for metro Atlanta's communities.***

### PROJECT TIMELINE

- **JANUARY 2022**  
-Project Kick-Off
- **FEBRUARY 2022**  
-Monthly PMT Meetings
- **MAY 2022**  
-Online Survey Live
- **JUNE 2022**  
-Community Meeting #1  
-Steering Committee Meeting #1
- **JULY 2022**  
-Steering Committee Meeting #2
- **AUGUST 2022**  
-Steering Committee Meeting #3
- **SEPTEMBER 2022**  
-Community Meeting #2
- **NOVEMBER 2022**  
-Stakeholder Phone Interviews
- **FEBRUARY 2023**  
-Final Report Released



# SOUTH RIVER FOREST

The South River Forest concept **unites existing greenspaces in southwest DeKalb County and southeast Atlanta** and the neighborhoods nestled around them into a distinct, definable area that **protects the over 60,000 native trees** which make up the forest’s canopy, **restores the water quality of the South River** and its tributaries, **supports economic mobility of community members**, and **provide additional recreation and transportation options** for forest communities. If implemented, the result would be a roughly 3,500-acre territory where nature is woven into the built environment, creating spaces that are unprecedented within Atlanta’s perimeter highway. The concept came from the City of Atlanta’s 2017 *Atlanta City Design: Aspiring to the Beloved Community* as the South River Park, a southeastern counterpart to the Chattahoochee River Park. Its genesis, however, can be traced back as far as seventy years ago, when a greenbelt or linear park was proposed along the South River to connect to a larger preserve in DeKalb County upon the Soapstone Ridge.

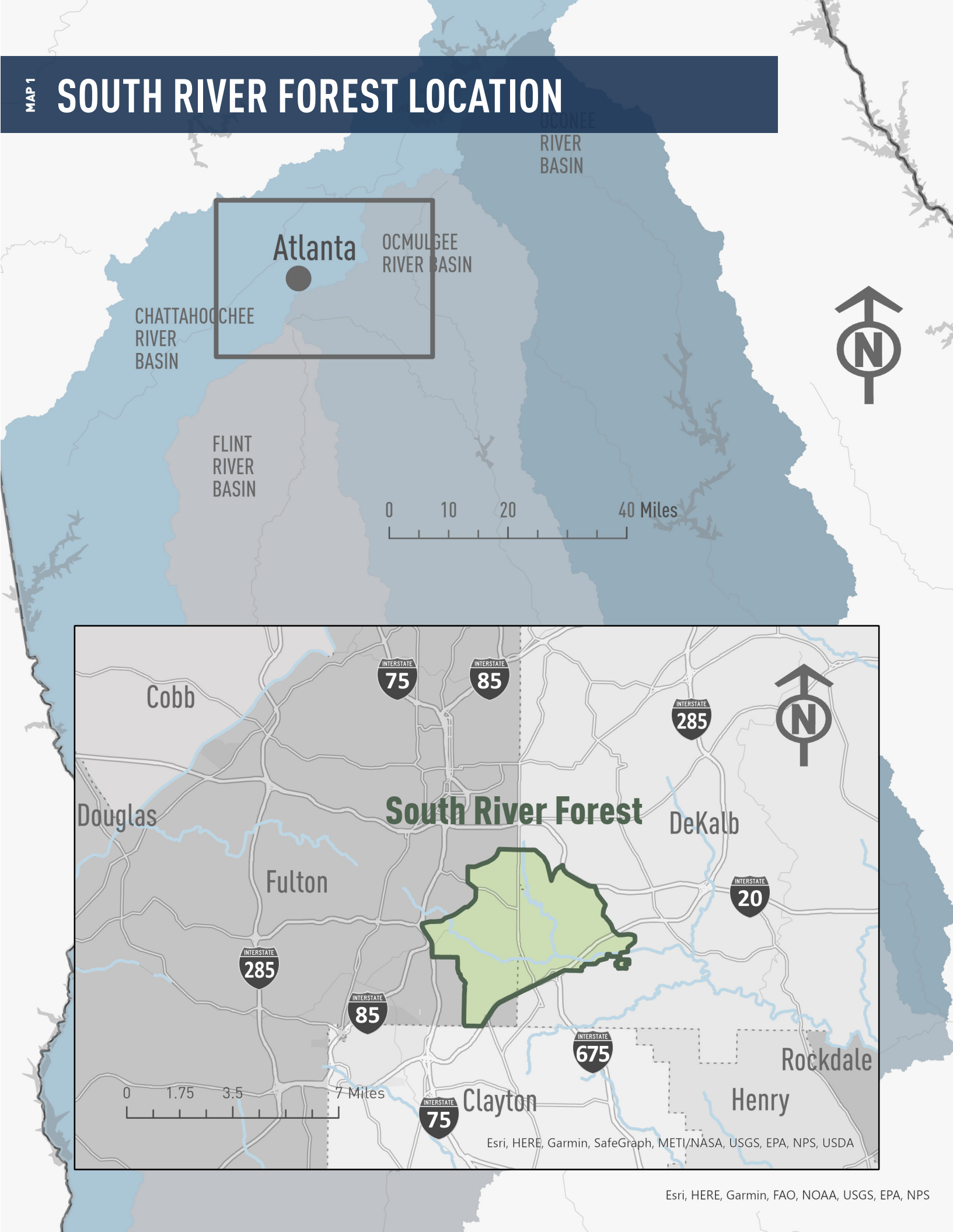
The South River Forest concept would bring decades of bold ideas for the area to fruition, while redressing environmentally unjust realities that have caused

pollution and degradation and affected the lives of the area’s residents. Residents of forest neighborhoods have long advocated for a healthier environment, forming and supporting groups such as the South River Watershed Alliance and the South River Forest Coalition to promote the health of the river and its surrounds, and organizing against the building and expansion of environmentally harmful facilities such as the landfills and other harmful land uses.

Establishing and protecting the South River Forest would **generate immense benefits in terms of air quality, temperature regulation, and space for active lifestyles** and the mental health benefits that come from being in nature. It would also **draw new growth and amenities that are compatible with the natural landscape** around them, a change of direction for an area that has until now housed mostly industrial uses. The City of Atlanta and DeKalb County have taken steps towards this vision: participating in consent decrees and other efforts to prevent further pollution of the South River watershed; setting aside greenspace like Glen Emerald Park, Constitution Lakes Park, and the Lake Charlotte Nature Preserve; and building out infrastructure like the PATH trail along the South River.



## MAP 1 SOUTH RIVER FOREST LOCATION

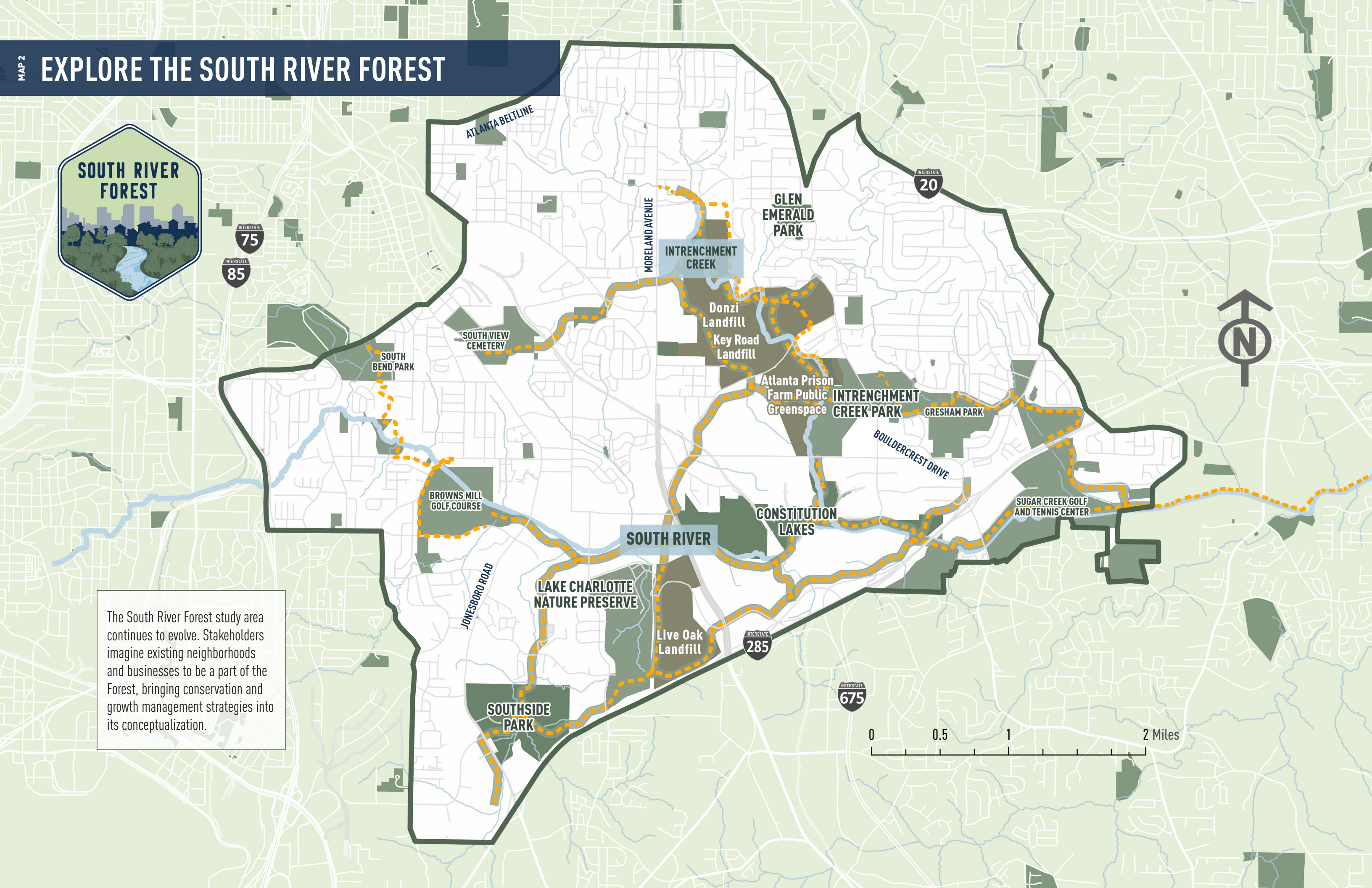




# EXPLORE THE SOUTH RIVER FOREST



The South River Forest study area continues to evolve. Stakeholders imagine existing neighborhoods and businesses to be a part of the Forest, bringing conservation and growth management strategies into its conceptualization.







## CHAPTER 2

# RECOMMENDATIONS

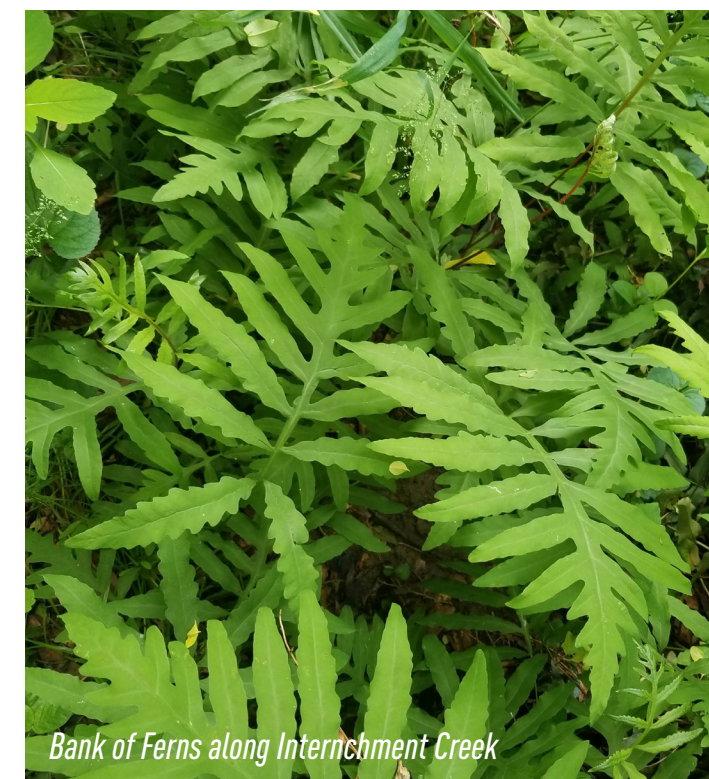
Volunteers Testing Water Quality of the South River

## ADVANCING THE CONCEPT

In order to implement the vision, goals, and action items identified and prioritized by the community (see *Appendix B - Appendix C* on pages 36-43), a series of recommendations have been developed and envisioned in three categories:



Leading priorities across these three categories include improved community engagement, the urgent transfer of unprotected public land and acquisition of private land as dedicated greenspace, and the allocation of funding required to make those properties publicly accessible through trail building and similar projects. A suggested timeframe, responsible and support party(ies), and potential funding source(s) are specified for each recommendation (see Table 1 on pages 16-17). In addition, recommendations for how to define the South River Forest at multiple scales, the additional technical reports necessary to support broader planning initiatives and investments within the Forest, and the development of a comprehensive master plan guided by a community-defined vision are detailed.



Bank of Ferns along Internchment Creek

*The South River Forest is a unique and vital opportunity to retain and improve our long term sustainability. It's a critical investment in the future of the region and the City of Atlanta is already working on several key projects and partnerships to help realize this vision.*

Doug Shipman  
City Council President, City of Atlanta

*I'm looking forward to sitting down with diverse minds to discuss equity, saving our forests, and economic development. It's good to have us coming together at a common table where we can share hopes and aspirations as opposed to talking against each other.\**

Larry Johnson  
Commissioner, DeKalb County

\* Saporta Report: "South River Forest civic engagement work can help bridge divide." June 27, 2022.



## PROTECT

Imagine both sides of the South River  
as publicly accessible forest...

## CONNECT

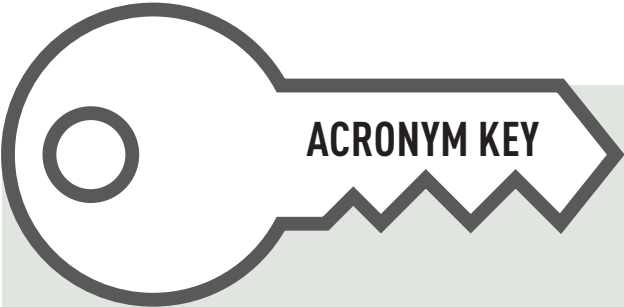
Imagine connecting trails along  
existing easements like this...

## ACTIVATE

Imagine new ways to enjoy our  
old forests, including the Lake  
Charlotte Nature Preserve...



TABLE 1. SUMMARY MATRIX OF RECOMMENDATIONS							
	RECOMMENDATION	TIMEFRAME			RESPONSIBLE PARTY	POTENTIAL PARTNER	FUNDING SOURCE <i>Does not include local General Fund(s), Bond(s), Special Purpose Option Sales Tax (SPLOST), etc.</i>
		ST	MT	LT			
PROTECT	A.1: Develop a Detailed Masterplan				CoA, DC	ARC, TNC	
	A.2: Transfer Existing Public Land to Parks and Recreation				CoA, DC		INODIC, LWCF, ORLPP, TCP
	A.3: Acquire Additional Private Land for Parks and Recreation				CoA, DC	PATH, TCF, TNC	BRIC, GCTCP, GOSP, INODIC, LWCF, ORLPP, TCP
	A.4: Establish the South River Forest Management Authority				CoA, DC		LWCF, TCP
	A.5: Coordinate Regionally to Restore the South River				CoA, DC	SRWA, TNC	GOSP, BRIC
	A.6: Address Gentrification with strategic Growth Management Practices				CoA, DC	TNC, ULI	BGP, BRIC, GDOT, GTIB, IJJA, INODIC, LCI, LWCF, ORLPP, TCP, TIP
	A.7: Establish a Green Development Zone				CoA, DC	GT, TNC	LCI, LWCF, TCP
CONNECT	B.1: Expand the Existing Trail Network				CoA, DC	PATH	BRIC, GCTCP, INODIC, LCI, ORLPP, RTP, TCP, TIP
	B.2. Connect the Forests				CoA, DC	ARC	
	B.3: Increase Community Engagement				CoA, DC	SRFC	ORLPP, TCP
ACTIVATE	C.1: Establish the South River Community Development Corporation				CoA, DC	DD, IA	TCP
	C.2: Construct a Model Affordable Housing Eco-Development, starting with Thomasville Heights				CoA, DC		
	C.3: Create a Small Business Incubator				CoA, DC	DD, IA	BRIC, INODIC, TCP
	C.4: Launch an Education Hub				CoA, DC	APS, DCSD	BRIC, TCP



Check here for an alphabetical list of acronyms and program links!

- APS = Atlanta Public Schools
  - BGP = [Brownfield Grants Program](#)
  - BRIC (Grant) = [Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities](#)
  - CoA = City of Atlanta
  - DC = DeKalb County
  - DCSD = DeKalb County School System
  - DD = Decide DeKalb
  - GCTCP = [Georgia Conservation Tax Credit Program](#)
  - GDOT = [Georgia Department of Transportation District 7 \('Quick Fix'\)](#)
  - GOSP (Grant/Loan) = [Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Program](#)
- GT = Georgia Institute of Technology
  - GTIB (Grant/Loan) = [Georgia Transportation Infrastructure Bank](#)
  - IA = Invest Atlanta
  - IJJA (Grant) = [Infrastructure Investment Jobs Act \(Discretionary Grant Programs\)](#)
  - INODIC (Grant) = [Improving Neighborhood Outcomes in Disproportionally Impacted Communities](#)
  - LCI (Grant) = [Livable Centers Initiative](#)
  - LT = Long Term
  - LWCF (Grant) = [Land and Water Conservation Fund](#)
  - MT = Mid Term
  - ORLPP (Grant) = [Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program](#)
- PATH = The PATH Foundation
  - RTP (Grant) = [Recreational Trails Program](#)
  - SRFC = South River Forest Coalition
  - SRWA = South River Watershed Alliance
  - ST = Short Term
  - TCF = The Conservation Fund
  - TCP (Technical Assistance) = [Thriving Communities Program](#)
  - TIP (Grant) = [Transportation Improvement Program](#)
  - TNC = The Nature Conservancy
  - ULI = Urban Land Institute



# PROTECT

*"Parks and green space are a perfect example of a shared priority between us, the City, The Nature Conservancy, and lots of other actors where we routinely make investments in parks and green space that are calculated to have long term impact in the communities they serve."*

Erik Johnson  
Robert W. Woodruff Foundation



**Recommendation A.1: Develop a Detailed Masterplan**

The City of Atlanta and DeKalb County should embark on a 12-15 month-long detailed planning process with a robust community engagement that delivers a joint masterplan for the South River Forest. Comparable in some ways with the Chattahoochee Riverlands project, this effort would build on the recommendations outlined in this report and related work by The Nature Conservancy of Georgia (TNC). ARC would work with the City and County to help with this action item.

**Recommendation A.2: Transfer Existing Public Lands to Parks and Recreation**

Create a 445-acre park by implementing the Atlanta City Council’s commitment in the land lease with the Atlanta Police Foundation (APF) to open 265 acres of the former Atlanta Prison Farm as public greenspace and by transferring to Parks and Recreation approximately 180 acres of additional City-owned land north of Key Road (which currently contains the Key Road Landfill and Intrenchment Creek Water Reclamation Facility). Support efforts and provide resources needed to fulfill the City Council’s commitment to acquire an additional 85 acres of land within the South River Forest geography to replace the 85 acres leased to the APF.

**Recommendation A.3: Acquire Additional Private Land for Parks and Recreation**

Coordinate regionally to acquire target greenspace properties and trail corridors within the South River Forest for public use as funding and opportunity allows. Develop new parks and trails with grants, bond funding, and other allocated resources as they become available. In support of capital investments, look at possibilities for leveraging public-private partnerships (PPPs), transfer of development rights (TDRs), conservation easements, or other tools for acquisition of real estate rights. Land acquisition should be focused in the following areas:

- Properties on the South River/Intrenchment Creek or its tributaries that support river health.
- Properties that connect larger parks and planned trails throughout the Forest.

**Recommendation A.4: Establish the South River Forest Management Authority**

Create, staff, and fund an interjurisdictional South River Forest joint management authority between the City of Atlanta and DeKalb County to coordinate and manage shared community engagement, land acquisition, forest management and maintenance, and programming tasks across the South River Forest, including in residential and business districts.

**Recommendation A.5: Coordinate Regionally to Restore the South River**

Create policies and investment resources that help protect, clean, and restore the South River and its tributaries.

**Recommendation A.6: Address Gentrification with Strategic Growth Management Practices**

Tackle growth risks for existing and future populations, especially those who are vulnerable to rising taxes and rents, through multi-prong strategies that include:

- **Housing Overlay.** In response to public investment in the South River Forest, establish an overlay zoning district designed around recommendations from the City of Atlanta’s Atlanta City Design Housing report. These would preserve the legacy residential neighborhoods while including allowances for accessory dwelling units, small multi-family buildings, eliminated parking minimums, increased density along growth corridors like Jonesboro Road and Moreland Avenue, and review of the Urban Enterprise Zone designation.
- **Transportation.** In addition to multi-use trails, invest in transportation enhancements that encourage the sustainable, walkable density needed to support the local economy and climate resiliency goals. These include improved sidewalks, bus service, bike lanes, streetscapes, street trees, and on-street parking, as well as roadway narrowing, traffic calming, and electric vehicle charging stations. Leverage the Atlanta Regional Commission’s Livable Centers Initiative program.
- **Land Use.** Due to a long history of environmental injustice in the South River Forest, work to relocate any land use designations that allow future or additional heavy industry, prisons, landfills, or other incompatible uses. Invest in land acquisition for public greenspace.



*Unprotected Private Land in the South River Forest*

- **Job Opportunities.** See C.3 Small Business Incubator. Leverage acquisition, development, maintenance, and programming of parks and greenways in the South River Forest to support local and disadvantaged businesses, creating green collar and other related jobs, including youth employment opportunities such as:
  - *Conservation/Natural Resources Management* (policy, acquisition, governance)
  - *Green Infrastructure* (design, maintenance, management)
  - *Forest Management* (science, research, design, field crews)
  - *Watershed Management* (science, research, design, field crews)
  - *Ecological Restoration* (science, research, design, field crews)
  - *Urban Agriculture* (science, research, design, field crews)
  - *Horticulture and Landscape Design*
  - *Biofuels* (extraction, refinement, sales, buyers)
  - *Health & Nutrition*
  - *Park-related programming* (vendors, events, equipment rentals)
  - *Redevelopment of adjacent districts* (retail, commercial, investment)

**Recommendation A.7: Establish a Green Development Zone**

Partner with professional organizations for architects, landscape architects, city planners, and developers to develop a South River Forest Green Development Standards Handbook to improve site and building design for new and existing developments. Implement corresponding recommendations, including changes to regulations in the City of Atlanta and DeKalb County.



# CONNECT

*"I want to see it become a connected series of parks, forest, and greenspace..."*

Joe Santifer  
Glen Emerald Park



**Recommendation B.1: Expand the Existing Trail Network**

Coordinate, fund, and build a network of multi-use paths throughout the South River Forest, connecting the South River Trail to the Atlanta Beltline, proposed Intrinchment Creek and Thomasville Trails, and future Flint River trails (see Map 3 on pages 22-23).

**Recommendation B.2: Connect the Forests**

Identify and invest public and private resources required to make South River Forest parks publicly accessible and connected to the trail network.

**Recommendation B.3: Increase Community Engagement**

City of Atlanta and DeKalb County collaborate on a robust community engagement plan that includes all communities and other interested parties throughout the geographic area of the South River Forest. Ensure a more extensive engagement than has been accomplished to date. Invite people to participate in all future planning efforts and shape outcomes for environmental justice, economic equity, recreational opportunity, and other goals defined in this report. Secure public or private funding in order to accomplish these objectives.



*Exploring the Forest at Constitution Lakes Park*



*Old Roads Became Trails at Lake Charlotte Nature Preserve*



# POSSIBLE TRAIL CONNECTIONS



## TRAILS

- Connector
- Constitution Trail
- Intrenchment Creek Trail
- Poole Creek Trail
- Soapstone Trail
- South River Trail
- Sugar Creek Trail
- Thomasville Creek Trail

ATLANTA BELTLINE

MORELAND AVENUE

INTRENCHMENT CREEK

BOULDERCREST DRIVE

SOUTH RIVER

JONESBORO ROAD

SOUTH TOWNE TRAIL



# ACTIVATE

*"If we don't seize this opportunity now, we'll miss it. This is our last chance to do something with the South River Forest. We have momentum right now and we can't slow down."*

*"This can be a place where all kinds of creatures grow and thrive and where kids can develop a passion for nature and ecology."*

Shirley Nichols  
South River Gardens



**Recommendation C.1: Establish the South River Community Development Corporation**

Create, staff, and fund an interjurisdictional Community Development Corporation that can operate independently from the South River Forest Authority (Recommendation A.4) to leverage federal grants that can help support goals for the South River Forest, such as land acquisition, job creation, affordable housing, and conservation best practices. For reference, see [Benedict College](#) and [Push Buffalo](#).

**Recommendation C.2: Construct a Model Affordable Housing Eco-Development, starting in Thomasville Heights**

Following its new master plan, leverage recent attention to public land and development sites in Thomasville Heights to create a model high-quality, eco-friendly, affordable housing development in the South River Forest. This includes the former site of Atlanta Housing's Thomasville Homes, the Forest Cove apartments, and several other parcels owned by public agencies, including the City of Atlanta, Atlanta Public Schools, and Fulton County. Include the proposed Thomasville Creek Trail and Greenway connecting Thomasville Park to the larger South River Forest trail network (see Map 3 on pages 22-23).

**Recommendation C.3: Create a Small Business Incubator**

Focus economic development initiatives from both the City of Atlanta and DeKalb County to support local, small, Black and Brown businesses in the South River Forest. Perhaps led by the CDC recommended above, create a partnership between Invest Atlanta, Decide DeKalb, and the Metro South Community Improvement District that focuses on both green/clean jobs related to the Forest and local business that can benefit from Forest visitors and adjacent development.

**Recommendation C.4: Launch an Education Hub**

Both the City of Atlanta and DeKalb County have high schools within the South River Forest, creating unique opportunities for STEM/STEAM programs and demonstration projects that leverage the Forest itself as a testing ground for education. Create a South River Forest Education Hub in these schools that brings in local partnerships like the Greening Youth Foundation, state and national partnerships like the US Forest Service, and various programs at Atlanta area and Georgia universities.

## GEOGRAPHIC OUTREACH

The South River Forest should be defined at multiple scales, including:

- *Urban Watershed* – the entire watershed headwaters defined by the South River and its Intrenchment Creek branch. These waterways, which are primarily upstream from the South River Forest, should be included in environmental assessments and policies.
- *South River Forest* – the area of southeast Atlanta and southwest DeKalb County along the Jonesboro Road, Moreland Avenue, and Bouldercrest Road corridors that is roughly south and east of Lakewood Heights, south of East Atlanta, west of Gresham Road, and adjacent to I-285. Communities and neighborhoods within the South River Forest should be the primary focus for growth management and environmental policies.
- *Public Forests* – all existing and future publicly accessible greenspaces within the South River Forest retain their individual names and roles but fall within the umbrella label of the 'South River Forest' (see Map 4 on pages 26-27). These properties should be the primary focus areas for investments in greenspace acquisition, development, and programming
- *Forest Waterways* – the South River, Intrenchment Creek branch, and all their tributaries within the Forest. These waterways should be the primary targets for stream restoration and green infrastructure projects. Land within the South River Forest along I-285 should be placed under conservation easement(s).

## TECHNICAL REPORTS

Technical reports should be completed to support broader planning initiatives and investments in the South River Forest.

- *Cultural Review*. From the South River Brick Company to the Atlanta Prison Farm, the South River Forest is rich with cultural landscapes that should shape decisions that are made about those lands. Adjacent communities also have rich histories that are largely un-researched, meaning many sites on the front lines of urban development and gentrification within the Forest are not yet designated as historic or culturally valuable. A comprehensive cultural review would identify the leading themes and baseline histories that should be included in future planning efforts. Funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities [Culture and Community Resilience](#) program should be considered.

- *Climate Review*. The South River Forest provides dozens of climate benefits and could provide many more, including reduced local temperatures, carbon storage, flood attenuation, stormwater management, improved air quality, and other ecosystem services. A community-scale solar facility sited on a landfill or land currently used for industrial purposes could increase residents' access to affordable clean energy. A climate review would identify specific existing and potential contributions to climate resiliency and adaptation and articulate potential climate-related funding for land acquisition, forest restoration and management, water quality improvements, and other investments needed in the Forest. Partnerships with Atlanta-area universities should be considered, including Emory University's [Resilience and Sustainability Collaboratory](#) and the Georgia Institute of Technology's [Climate and Energy Policy Laboratory](#).
- *Landfills Review*. Dozens of examples from around the world illustrate how closed landfills can be transformed into passive and active greenspaces, but little is known about the age, contents, ownership, condition, and future of the South River Forest's landfills. A review of each one would illuminate both the scope and timeframe of their eventual transformation into publicly accessible lands.
- *Recreational Review*. A landscape the size of the South River Forest offers many opportunities to support recreational activities that are not possible in other places. Existing and future parks within the Forest also provide opportunities to introduce underserved populations to recreational activities they may not have access to otherwise, such as equestrian trails or camping. Some of the Forest's most strategic acquisitions are truckyards along the South River, the purchase of which are traditionally cost prohibitive for recreational use. However, as they are already deforested, they provide the opportunity to develop recreational fields and green infrastructure in the Forest that may not be possible in other places which, in turn, may help cover higher land costs. A recreational review would identify any and all of these options.

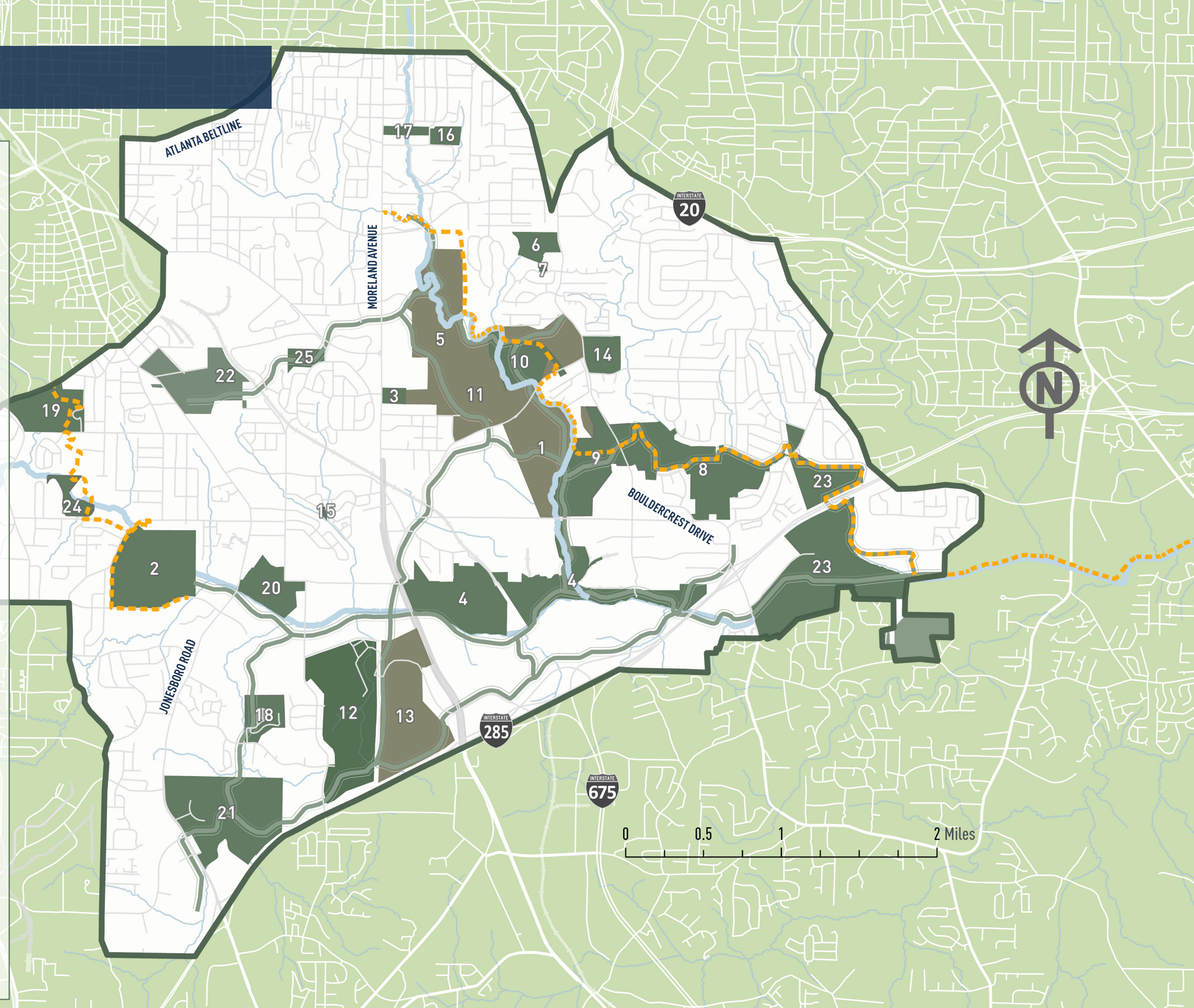
## NEXT STEPS FOR PLANNING

Through a well-funded participatory planning process and technical inputs, a **comprehensive master plan** guided by a cohesive and compelling vision similar to the Chattahoochee Riverlands should be developed and used to direct planning and implementation efforts.



GREENSPACES

- 1 - Atlanta Prison Farm Public Greenspace
- 2 - Browns Mill Golf Course
- 3 - Chestnut Hill Cemetery
- 4 - Constitution Lakes Park
- 5 - Donzi Landfills
- 6 - Glen Emerald Park
- 7 - Glen Emerald Park Rock Garden
- 8 - Gresham Park
- 9 - Intrenchment Creek Park
- 10 - Intrenchment Creek Water Reclamation Center
- 11 - Key Road Landfill
- 12 - Lake Charlotte Nature Preserve
- 13 - Live Oak Landfill
- 14 - McNair High School
- 15 - Rebel Valley Park
- 16 - Skyhaven School
- 17 - Skyhaven Quarry
- 18 - South Atlanta High School
- 19 - South Bend Park
- 20 - South River Water Reclamation Center
- 21 - Southside Park
- 22 - Southview Cemetery
- 23 - Sugar Creek Golf & Tennis Club
- 24 - Swann Nature Preserve
- 25 - Thomasville Park







## CHAPTER 3

# APPROACH

Rocky Shoals along Intramural Creek

## SURVEY

An online survey provided insight into the thoughts, ideas, and preferences of residents and community stakeholders for the South River Forest. The survey asked participants to consider the boundaries, characteristics, history and heritage, primary challenges and opportunities, and resources of the Forest, as well as each participant's own relationship to the area. The survey launched in May 2022 and was open through October 2022. Almost **600 people participated** in the survey, providing over **1,800 survey responses**.

While this response was significant considering the conceptual nature of the South River Forest, survey responses may not reflect the demographics of adjacent communities. Future efforts led by DeKalb County and the City of Atlanta should leverage all existing engagement structures, media outlets, and other resources to ensure the full participation of residents.



Rare Shagbark Hickory at Lake Charlotte Nature Preserve

## KEY THEMES

These ten (10) key themes were identified by community members through the survey (see definitions for these themes in Appendix A on pages 28-31).

- CULTURAL PLACEKEEPING
- ECONOMIC EQUITY
- ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE
- ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP
- GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY
- HOUSING AFFORDABILITY
- INTERGOVERNMENTAL COORDINATION
- RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITY
- SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
- TRANSPORTATION ALTERNATIVES



# STEERING COMMITTEE MEETINGS



A project steering committee was convened and comprised **30 residents, neighborhood leaders, business owners, members of community organizations, environmental advocates, philanthropic leaders, and local government elected officials and staff** (see full list of members in *Acknowledgements* on page 2). The steering committee convened three times between June and August 2022. These steering committee meetings were held at key locations within the South River Forest and were each followed by community tours, led by community and project partners, of significant sites within or very close to the study area. They provided input and recommendations on environmental justice, economic equity, recreational opportunity, sustainable development, intergovernmental coordination, housing affordability, environmental stewardship, transportation, cultural placekeeping, and more (see a summary of the vision, goals, and action items for Environmental Justice, Economic Equity, and Recreation Opportunity discussed at each meeting in Appendix B on pages 36-41).

The first steering committee meeting was hosted at **Ali Events at Lakewood**, a special events venue located in Lakewood Heights. Through a combination of responses submitted through the online survey and at the first community meeting (additional details for which can be found in *Community Meetings & Supplemental Outreach* on page 31), environmental justice, economic equity, and recreational opportunity were identified as the top three priorities by project stakeholders and participants. At the first steering committee meeting, attendees considered the opportunities for advancing **environmental justice** in the South River Forest area.

The meeting was followed by an optional tour of **South-View Cemetery**, a historic African American cemetery. The tour was led by Winifred Hemphill, President of the South-View Cemetery Association, and Charmaine Minniefield, an artist who is designing a public art activation with the association that will celebrate the community’s cultural heritage.

The second steering committee meeting took place at the **Thomasville Recreation Center** in Thomasville Heights, followed by an optional tour of an **Atlanta Housing site**. During the meeting, steering committee members were encouraged to consider opportunities for advancing **economic equity** in the South River Forest area. The steering committee hosted John Skach, Atlanta Housing Director of Planning, Design, and Community Development, and Joshua Humphries, City of Atlanta Director of Housing and Community Development, for a presentation and discussion about the site’s history and plans for a mixed-income housing development.

The third and final steering committee meeting was located at **McKenney’s**, a mechanical contracting company, followed by a tour of **Moreland Plaza**. At the steering committee meeting, members discussed ideas, opportunities, challenges, concerns, and priorities around **recreational opportunity**. The steering committee hosted Kevin Norton, Empire Communities Vice President of Land Acquisitions and Development, and Justin Adams, Crow Holdings Managing Director of Trammell Crow Residential, for a presentation and discussion about current plans for a mixed-use development on the site.

# COMMUNITY MEETINGS & SUPPLEMENTAL OUTREACH

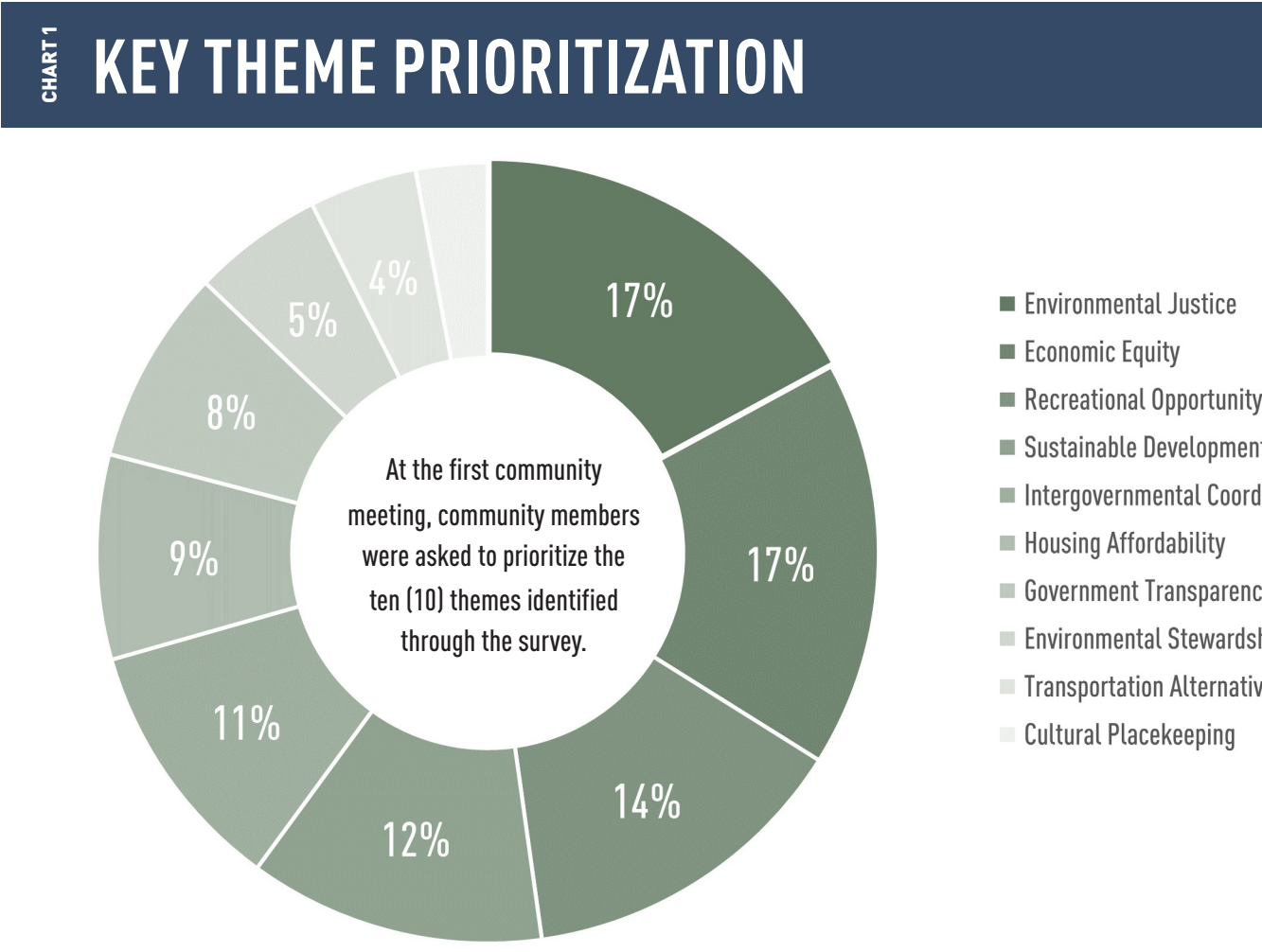
The community engagement undertaken during the course of this project included several community members. However, given the limited scope of the work and resources available to ARC for this project, the City and County should ensure a detailed and in-depth community engagement process within the master plan, one that ensures participation from all sectors of the County and City, especially the under-represented residents who typically are unable to participate but make up a big part of the study area.

Two community meetings were held in June and September 2022 in the South River Forest. These community meetings were open to the public.

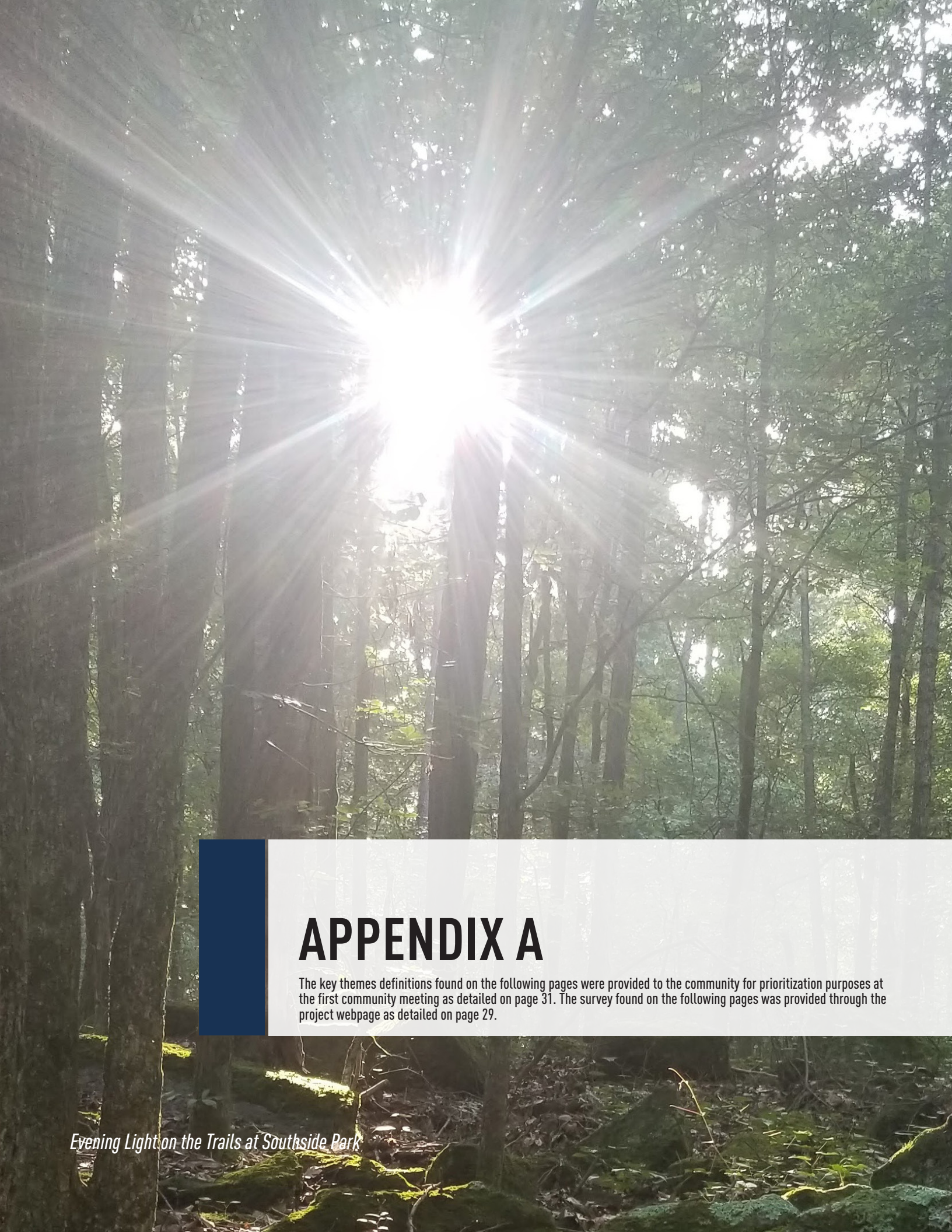
The first community meeting, hosted at the **DeKalb County Sugar Creek Golf and Tennis Center** off Bouldercrest Road, followed by an optional tour of **Glen Emerald Park** led by DeKalb County’s Torrance Jones, served as an introductory open house for attendees to learn about the scope of the project and **provide input and identify key project goals and priorities** (see Chart 1 below).

The second community meeting, hosted at **Atlanta Public Schools’ South Atlanta High School** and followed by an optional tour of **Lake Charlotte** led by neighborhood advocate Shirley Nichols of the South River Gardens Community Association and urban planner Ryan Gravel, provided an opportunity for interested stakeholders to share information and **provide further input regarding the initial project recommendations** that were based on community feedback gathered during the preceding months (see action item prioritization tables in Appendix C, pages 42-43).

In addition to the community meetings organized and hosted by the Atlanta Regional Commission, project partners including The Nature Conservancy, the South River Forest Coalition, and the South River Watershed Alliance conducted outreach and engagement communications and activities with their own constituents and communities.







*Evening Light on the Trails at Southside Park*

# APPENDIX A

The key themes definitions found on the following pages were provided to the community for prioritization purposes at the first community meeting as detailed on page 31. The survey found on the following pages was provided through the project webpage as detailed on page 29.

## KEY THEMES DEFINITIONS

### CULTURAL PLACEKEEPING

The active care and maintenance of a place and its social fabric by the people who live and work there... keeping the cultural memories associated with a locale alive, while supporting the ability of local people to maintain their way of life as they choose.<sup>1</sup>

### ECONOMIC EQUITY

[Fair] distribution of economic wealth, tax liability, resources, and assets in a society.<sup>2</sup>

### ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.<sup>3</sup>

### ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Environmental education that includes stewardship provides opportunities for participants to connect with local ecosystems and tools that can help them understand how individual behavior impacts the environment... [encouraging] people to take an active role in managing and protecting these resources.<sup>4</sup>

### GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY

[Government's] obligation to share information with citizens that is needed to make informed decisions and hold officials accountable for the conduct of the people's business.<sup>5</sup>

### HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

[Housing] that a household can pay for, while still having money left over for other necessities like food, transportation, and health care.<sup>6</sup>

### INTERGOVERNMENTAL COORDINATION

Activities that foster working relationships with other governmental and quasi-governmental agencies.<sup>7</sup>

### RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

[The] availability of a real choice for a user to participate in a preferred activity within a preferred setting in order to realize those satisfying experiences which are desired.<sup>8</sup>

### SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.<sup>9</sup>

### TRANSPORTATION ALTERNATIVES

[All] modes of travel other than the private motor vehicle.<sup>10</sup>





Southeast Atlanta and unincorporated southwest DeKalb County have been burdened with multiple correctional facilities, landfills, wastewater treatment plants, illegal dump sites, truckyards, asphalt plants, and the worst water quality in Georgia, yet thousands of people still call the area home. A long history of disinvestment and environmental injustices have created an area in which the City of Atlanta and DeKalb County now have the opportunity to co-invest to maximize the quality-of-life potential for its residents.

In 2021, The Nature Conservancy applied through the Atlanta Regional Commission’s Community Development Assistance Program to assist in engaging with a comprehensive group of area advocates and key decision makers to plan for the future of the South River Forest. Through October 2022, the South River Forest Consensus Building & Stakeholder Engagement project will utilize stakeholder interviews, community meetings, and an online survey to determine the South River Forest’s boundaries, primary challenges and opportunities, and key priorities for the City of Atlanta and DeKalb County to utilize for future planning efforts! Your input is requested through this survey.

What is your residential zip code? \_\_\_\_\_

What does the “South River Forest” area mean to you? How would you describe the South River Forest area?

How would you describe your relationship to the South River Forest area today?

What do you think are the South River Forest area’s greatest resources?

What are the top three challenges or threats to the South River Forest area?

What are the top three opportunities in the South River Forest area?

What are your three long-term priorities for the South River Forest area?

What issue must be most urgently addressed in the South River Forest area?

How should the City of Atlanta and DeKalb County invest in the South River Forest area?

What investments should be made to ensure equitable and sustainable land use in the South River Forest area?

These last few questions will help us get to know who we’re reaching as well as who we aren’t, so future engagement opportunities can be better tailored to reach the whole community.

Which of the following statements apply to you? (check all that apply)

- ☐ I am a resident of the City of Atlanta.
- ☐ I am a resident of DeKalb County.
- ☐ I own a business in the City of Atlanta.
- ☐ I own a business in DeKalb County.
- ☐ I am an individual and/or part of an organization interested in the future of the South River Forest area.
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

What is your age?

- ☐ 17 or under
- ☐ 18-20
- ☐ 21-29
- ☐ 30-39
- ☐ 40-49
- ☐ 50-59
- ☐ 60-69
- ☐ 70-70
- ☐ 80 or above

With which race do you identify?

- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ White
- ☐ Multiple Races
- ☐ Other

Do you identify as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

What best describes your housing status?

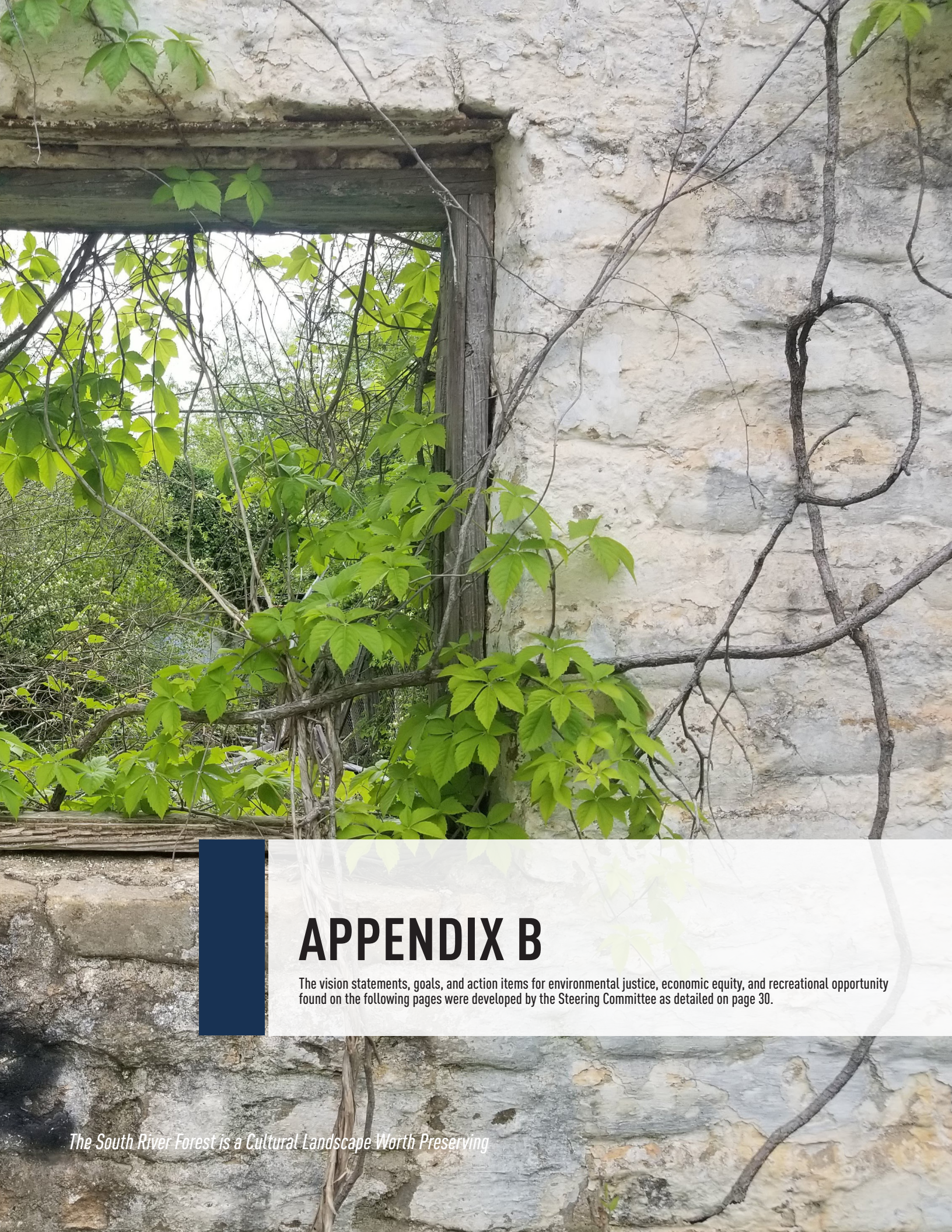
- ☐ Renter
- ☐ Homeowner
- ☐ Dependent
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your participation! If you’d like to be contacted in the future about this project, please provide your information below:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_  
Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Go to [publicinput.com/SouthRiverForest](https://publicinput.com/SouthRiverForest) to learn more!





# APPENDIX B

The vision statements, goals, and action items for environmental justice, economic equity, and recreational opportunity found on the following pages were developed by the Steering Committee as detailed on page 30.

*The South River Forest is a Cultural Landscape Worth Preserving*

# ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN THE SRF

**VISION** The inclusion, involvement, and equitable treatment of members of disadvantaged communities in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws and policies, land use and development proposals, and investment decisions.

ENGAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To center community-driven engagement activities and processes leading to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws and policies, land use and development proposals, and investment decisions</li><li>• To spread awareness of past injustices, current environmental issues, and opportunities for involvement in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws and policies, land use and development proposals, and investment decisions</li><li>• To provide opportunities (e.g., neighborhood planning unit(s)) for citizens of unincorporated southwest DeKalb County and southeast Atlanta to be more involved in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws and policies, land use and development proposals, and investment decisions</li></ul>
PROTECT, CONNECT, & ACTIVATE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To protect the significant natural resources (e.g., tree canopy, watershed, greenspaces) within the area</li><li>• To establish a managed community forest that brings additional environmental, recreational, and health benefits to the community</li><li>• To protect the people and sense of place of existing communities and neighborhoods from displacement and destruction due to gentrification</li><li>• To create multimodal corridors throughout the area where community members can safely and comfortably move while also accessing a variety of businesses, resources, and amenities</li><li>• To connect greenspaces within the area to one another, the surrounding area, and the region</li><li>• To activate greenspaces within the area so that community members and visitors can utilize the areas for recreational purposes</li><li>• To engage local elected officials and hold their offices accountable for redressing past injustices and making reparations to those disproportionately harmed by environmental burdens and injustices</li><li>• To expand engaged stakeholders to include new community members and organizations who will meaningfully invest in the area's future</li></ul>
REGULATE & REPAIR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To create a regulatory framework to redress past and current injustice and ensure future justice</li><li>• To make the actions and decisions of local governing bodies more transparent</li><li>• To provide timely and sufficient infrastructure improvements by responsible parties (e.g., developers)</li><li>• To reduce the amount of impervious surface created through development, redevelopment, and transportation construction by requiring the use of green infrastructure when appropriate</li><li>• To provide reparations to those disproportionately harmed by environmental burdens and injustices</li></ul>
INVEST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To redress historic disinvestment in these communities with commensurate investment in the South River Forest today.</li><li>• To encourage fiscal investment in disadvantaged communities</li><li>• To invest in local, Black businesses in order to create and sustain generational and community wealth</li><li>• To encourage investment within the area through development and redevelopment while centering the protection of its valuable natural resources</li><li>• To provide affordable housing and employment opportunities within the area</li><li>• To identify areas suitable for more dense residential development (e.g., smart growth)</li></ul>
HONOR & EDUCATE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To elevate the people and places within the area and bring awareness to and interest in the area's Black and Indigenous histories and the lived experience of community members</li><li>• To educate youth about the area's history, natural resources, and responsible environmental stewardship</li><li>• To educate the public about the South River Forest, its history and importance, and the role it plays in our ecosystem</li></ul>



# ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

IN THE SRF

## ACTION ITEMS

Action Item	Responsible Party
1. Establish bond(s) for the purchase of greenspace and the development of public lands into parks	Local jurisdiction(s)
2. Amend land use regulations (e.g., zoning)	Local jurisdiction(s)
3. Establish overlay district(s) (e.g., environmental, housing, land use)	Local jurisdiction(s)
4. Amend environmental regulations (e.g., stormwater)	Local jurisdiction(s)
5. Establish carbon offset program(s) (e.g., land acquisition, forest restoration)	Local jurisdiction(s)
6. Establish community garden program(s)	Local jurisdiction(s), community member(s)
7. Establish oral history program	Community member(s), NPR StoryCorps

# ECONOMIC EQUITY

IN THE SRF

## VISION

The equitable distribution of economic opportunities, resources, healthcare, and access in a community to support economic mobility.

## GOALS

ACCESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>To create opportunities for economic growth and individual economic mobility</li><li>To provide equitable access to multimodal and transit routes</li><li>To improve transportation infrastructure</li><li>To require improved multimodal access within and around new developments</li><li>To provide equitable access to the social safety net and work support programs</li></ul>
EDUCATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>To provide job training that aligns with those existing economic opportunities that support economic mobility, with a focus on small business development</li><li>To expand available economic opportunities to include recreation, hospitality, agriculture, and the arts</li><li>To improve the quality of educational facilities and technology</li><li>To leverage future green and clean technology industries to fund job training</li></ul>
HOUSING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>To retain legacy residents</li><li>To provide housing stability in the form of housing diversity and affordability</li><li>To increase energy efficiency of existing and new housing</li></ul>
PUBLIC HEALTH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>To provide for additional sources of food including grocery stores, restaurants, and urban agriculture</li></ul>

## ACTION ITEMS

Action Item	Responsible Party
1. Establish legacy resident retention program(s)	Local jurisdiction(s)
2. Establish residential retrofit program(s)	Local jurisdiction(s)
3. Establish supplementary school support fund(s)	Local jurisdiction(s), school system(s)
4. Develop a community incubator to provide technical and monetary assistance	Local jurisdiction(s)
5. Establish business license fee waiver program(s)	Local jurisdiction(s)
6. Establish local hire preference program(s)	Local jurisdiction(s)
7. Establish program between Georgia Film Academy (GFA) and Ronald E. McNair High School	Local jurisdiction(s), school system(s), GFA



RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

IN THE SRF

VISION

The availability of and accessibility to protected and connected natural and recreational spaces for members of a community to engage in a variety of activities in diverse settings for their physical and mental wellbeing.

GOALS

PROTECT, CONNECT, & ACTIVATE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>To protect the existing natural landscape and tree canopy</li><li>To improve the water quality of the South River and its tributaries (e.g., Intrenchment Creek)</li><li>To improve and/or relocate existing water treatment facilities (e.g., Intrenchment Creek Water Reclamation Center)</li><li>To improve stormwater retention throughout the area</li><li>To create connections to existing trails and greenspace (e.g., Atlanta BeltLine, Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area, Panola Mountain State Park)</li></ul>
ACCESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>To provide accessibility to all amenities (e.g., wheelchair ramps) and opportunities (e.g., trails for the visually impaired) for people of all ages and abilities</li><li>To provide accessibility to the South River (e.g., boardwalks, boat ramps, trails)</li></ul>
PLAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>To provide opportunities for a variety of active and passive activities on land (e.g., bicycling, bird watching, gardening, gathering, hiking, mountain biking, rock climbing, walking) and water (e.g., canoeing, fishing, kayaking, paddling, wading)</li><li>To provide areas for the development of active recreational amenities (e.g., dog parks, picnic facilities, and sports fields (e.g., baseball, basketball, disc golf)) while prioritizing natural landscape and tree canopy protection</li></ul>
HONOR & EDUCATE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>To provide educational opportunities exposing community members to the significant natural resources surrounding them as well as to the recreational opportunities that exist within each</li><li>To provide a better understanding of the City of Atlanta’s historic consent decree with the Environmental Protection agency and its effects on DeKalb County</li></ul>
PUBLIC HEALTH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>To promote improved physical and mental health of community members</li></ul>

RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

IN THE SRF

ACTION ITEMS

Action Item	Responsible Party
1. Acquire and dedicate undeveloped land as public greenspace	Local jurisdiction(s), nonprofit(s)
2. Develop and construct trail system connecting public greenspace	Local jurisdiction(s), nonprofit(s)
3. Construct access infrastructure to public greenspace (e.g., crosswalks, boat ramps)	Local jurisdiction(s), nonprofit(s)
4. Develop educational programming (e.g., environmental, recreational)	Local jurisdiction(s), school system(s), nonprofit(s)
5. Develop map and self-guided tour of recreational opportunities	Local jurisdiction(s), nonprofit(s)
6. Establish visitors center	Local jurisdiction(s), nonprofit(s)
7. Construct access infrastructure to public greenspace (e.g., crosswalks, boat ramps)	Local jurisdiction(s), nonprofit(s)
8. Install signage for wayfinding and education	Local jurisdiction(s), nonprofit(s)
9. Establish volunteer program(s) for maintenance and education (e.g., invasive species removal)	Local jurisdiction(s), nonprofit(s)





Donzi Landfill

# APPENDIX C

The action items found on the following pages were identified by the Steering Committee (see Appendix B starting on page 36) and prioritized by community members at the second community meeting as detailed on page 31.

TABLE C.1 ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ACTION ITEM PRIORITIZATION\*

ACTION ITEM	% VOTE
1. Establish bond(s) for the purchase of greenspace	38%
2. Amend land use regulations (e.g., zoning)	25%
3. Establish overlay district(s) (e.g., environmental, housing, land use)	25%
4. Amend environmental regulations (e.g., stormwater)	13%

*\*Other priorities in this category include establishing carbon offset program(s) (e.g., land acquisition), community garden program(s), and an oral history program.*

TABLE C.2 ECONOMIC EQUITY ACTION ITEM PRIORITIZATION\*\*

ACTION ITEM	% VOTE
1. Establish legacy resident retention program(s)	78%
2. Establish residential retrofit program(s)	11%
3. Establish supplementary school support fund(s)	11%

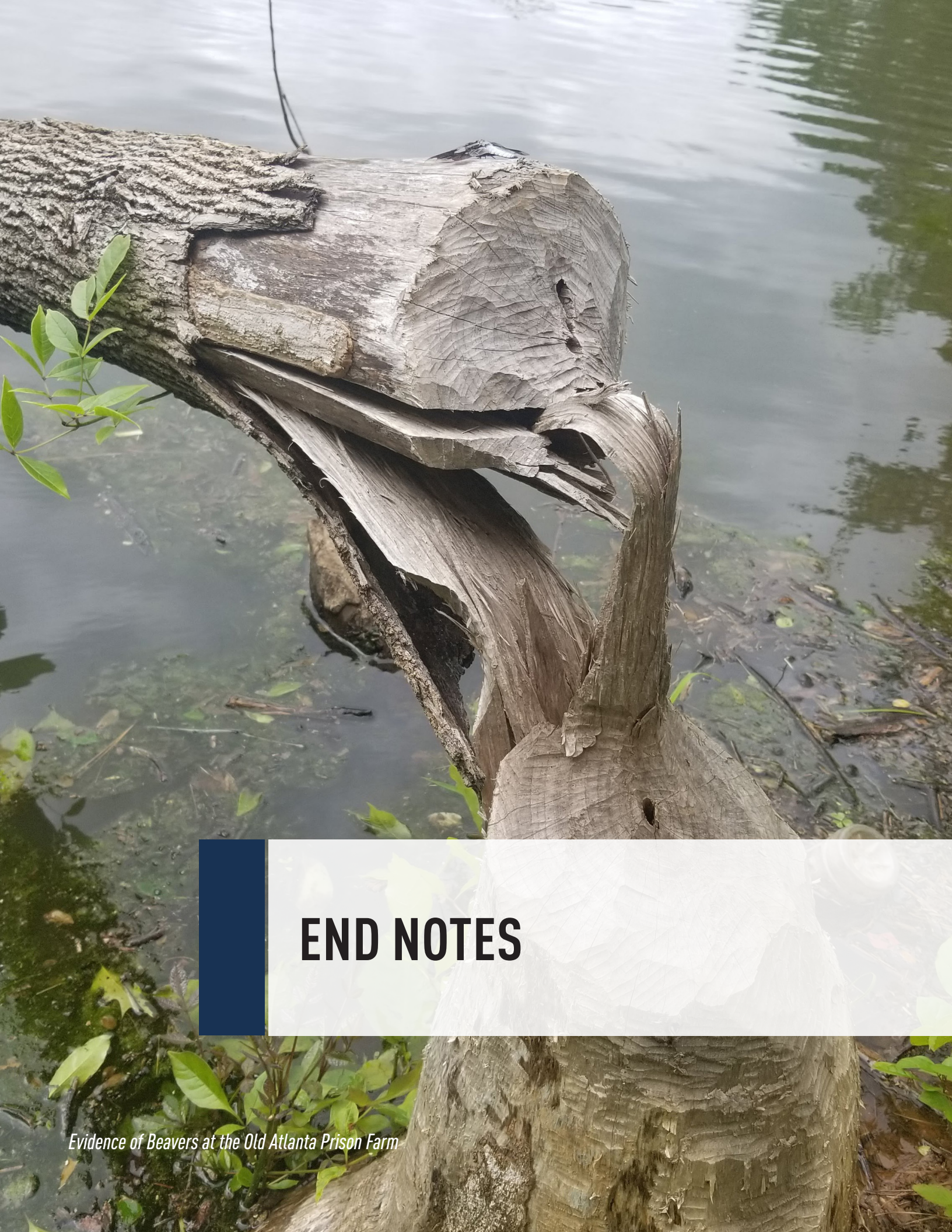
*\*\*Other priorities in this category include developing a community incubator to provide technical and monetary assistance and establishing business license fee waiver program(s), local hire preference program(s), and a program between Georgia Film Academy (GFA) and Ronald E. McNair High School.*

TABLE C.3. RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITY ACTION ITEM PRIORITIZATION\*\*\*

ACTION ITEM	% VOTE
1. Acquire and dedicate undeveloped land as public greenspace	73%
2. Develop and construct trail system connecting public greenspace	27%

*\*\*\*Other priorities in this category include constructing access infrastructure to public greenspace (e.g., crosswalks, boat ramps), developing educational programming (e.g., environmental, recreational) and a map and self-guided tour of recreational opportunities, establishing a visitors center, nature preserve, volunteer program(s) for maintenance and education (e.g., invasive species removal), and installing signage for wayfinding and education.*





# END NOTES

*Evidence of Beavers at the Old Atlanta Prison Farm*

# REFERENCES

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