



DeKalb County Government

Manuel J. Maloof Center
1300 Commerce Drive
Decatur, Georgia 30030

Agenda Item

File ID: 2023-0835

Substitute

08/13/2024

Public Hearing: YES NO

Department: Board of Commissioner - District 6

SUBJECT:

Commission District(s): All Commission Districts

A Resolution to Commit to the Transformation of the South River Forest by Adopting the Recommendations of the “Explore South River Forest” Report and Requesting For the Administration to Coordinate with the City of Atlanta and the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) to Develop a Master Plan

Information Contact: Commissioner Edward C. “Ted” Terry

Phone Number: 404-371-4909

PURPOSE:

To commit to the transformation of the South River Forest by adopting the recommendations of the “Explore South River Forest” report developed by the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC). This includes requesting the DeKalb County CEO and Administration to coordinate with the City of Atlanta and the ARC to develop a master plan.

NEED/IMPACT:

[Click here to enter text.](#) The South River Forest is 3,500 acres of greenspace and forest in Atlanta and DeKalb County. On June 5, 2023 Atlanta adopted resolution 23-R-3665, committing the city to investment in the South River Forest. This DeKalb County resolution matches the city of Atlanta’s showing the need for joint stewardship efforts towards this valuable network of greenspaces that spans both municipalities. The need to protect and invest in this critical natural resource is great due to ongoing effects of climate change and the benefits such as carbon removal from the atmosphere, preventing erosion and stormwater runoff, reduction of heat island effect, and filtering pollutants from our water supply. Further, this South River Forest area has faced historical environmental injustice in the form of landfills, correctional facilities, truckyards, and heavy industrial uses in the area. Investment in the South River Forest will protect legacy communities, commit DeKalb County to environmental justice, slow effects of climate change, create climate resiliency, achieve goals in our DeKalb County 2050 Unified Plan, improve quality of life for Southwest DeKalb residents, and further stimulate economic growth in the south west portion of the county.

This resolution supports DeKalb County Government’s commitment to environmental justice and repairing histories of disinvestment and damage, and acts on the importance of protecting our trees and forests lands and how forests are vital for removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, slowing the rate of climate change, preventing erosion, reducing stormwater runoff, and filtering pollutants from our water supply.

FISCAL IMPACT:

Current fiscal impact currently unknown.

RECOMMENDATION:

Choose an item and add the information stated in the Purpose above. Adopt the attached resolution and for the Administration to coordinate with the City of Atlanta and the ARC to develop a master plan.

A RESOLUTION COMMITTING DEKALB COUNTY TO HELP FULFILL A TRANSFORMATION OF THE SOUTH RIVER FOREST, ADOPTING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE “EXPLORE SOUTH RIVER FOREST” REPORT DEVELOPED BY THE ATLANTA REGIONAL COMMISSION (ARC), AND REQUESTING DEKALB COUNTY CEO AND THE ADMINISTRATION OFFICE TO COORDINATE WITH THE CITY OF ATLANTA AND THE ARC TO DEVELOP A MASTER PLAN

WHEREAS, the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) has identified the South River Forest as a 3,500 acre network of connected greenspaces and forests inside I-285 in SE Atlanta and SW DeKalb County; and

WHEREAS, forests are vital for removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, slowing the rate of climate change, preventing erosion, reducing stormwater runoff, and filtering pollutants from our water supply; and

WHEREAS, DeKalb County has acknowledged the importance of protecting our trees and forests lands through the Tree Ordinance, Tree Recompense Fund, and No Net Loss of Tree Policy; and

WHEREAS, protecting existing forestlands is a more effective solution as opposed to replanting trees due to a mature tree’s ability to capture more carbon than a young tree; and

WHEREAS, only 2% of land in DeKalb County is undeveloped and the need to conserve the remaining green spaces and natural resources is vital for the county’s ecosystem and public health; and

WHEREAS, the DeKalb County 2050 Unified Plan acknowledges the opportunities for the South River Forest as a Conservation and Open Space Character Area and declares the necessity of smart and sustainable development and land use in this area; and

WHEREAS, DeKalb County has already begun investment in the South River Forest with the South River Trail and has included connecting the South River Trail to Constitution Lakes in the 2021 Parks and Recreation Master Plan; and

WHEREAS, in 2021 DeKalb County supported The Nature Conservancy as the program sponsor in submitting the South River Forest to ARC’s Community Development Assistance Program resulting in the “Explore South River Forest” report; and

WHEREAS, over the last century, the South River Forest communities, including those surrounding the Atlanta Prison Farm, became a historic “dumping ground” for landfills, correctional facilities, truckyards, and heavy industrial uses that have contributed significantly to economic disinvestment and environmental degradation, making the South River Forest one of the state’s most strategic investments to address environmental injustice; and

WHEREAS, DeKalb County is committed to environmental justice and repairing histories of disinvestment and damage; and

WHEREAS, in 2021 the South River was named among America’s most endangered rivers due to its sewage pollution threatening the health of the environment and DeKalb County residents; and

WHEREAS, The City of Atlanta and DeKalb County, collaborating and together with nonprofit, community, and philanthropic partners, 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; and

WHEREAS, 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; preserving 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; and

WHEREAS, the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) and private partners in the South River Forest, have made commitments to further economic development in the area; and

WHEREAS, the City of Atlanta and DeKalb County have expressed a desire to coordinate the further development, activation, management, and programming of parks within the South River Forest, including the Atlanta Prison Farm, with a new intergovernmental partnership; and,

WHEREAS, Much like the work taking place as part of the Chattahoochee River Lands, the transformation of the South River Forest will require a significant investment of both public funding – from local, state, federal sources -- as well as philanthropic support; and

WHEREAS, The proposed 2024-2028 Capital Improvements Element Plan contemplates a \$50 million public investment, and similarly sized philanthropic support, for the Chattahoochee RiverLands project; and

WHEREAS, Such a public and philanthropic investment will be needed to realize the vision of the South River Forest; and

WHEREAS, 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. When implemented, the result will 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.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED BY THE DEKALB COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS that the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners accepts and adopts the recommendations included in the Atlanta Regional Commission’s (ARC’S) “Explore the South River Forest,” report (<https://cdn.atlantaregional.org/wp-content/uploads/explore-south-river-forest.pdf>)

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the DeKalb County CEO and administration office is requested to coordinate with the City of Atlanta and the Atlanta Regional Commission to develop a master plan that will include, but not be limited to, strategies and cost estimates around: Land acquisition, park design and development, trail design and construction, invasive removal, reforestation, stream restoration, sewer system improvements to improve water quality, addressing storm water runoff, infrastructure improvements to watershed and sewer systems, and other conservation and restoration efforts.

May 22, 2024

ADOPTED by the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners, this ____ day of _____, 2024.

MEREDA DAVIS JOHNSON
Presiding Officer
Board of Commissioners
DeKalb County, Georgia

APPROVED by the Chief Executive Officer of DeKalb County, this ____ day of _____, 2024.

MICHAEL L. THURMOND
Chief Executive Officer
DeKalb County, Georgia

ATTEST:

BARBARA H. SANDERS-NORWOOD, CCC
Clerk to the Board of Commissioners and
Chief Executive Officer
DeKalb County, Georgia

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

VIVIANE H. ERNSTES
County Attorney
DeKalb County, Georgia