

*Draft*



**City of Covington 2006-2028 Comprehensive Plan:  
Community Assessment**

**December 19, 2005**

*Draft*

*As approved for transmittal to the Northeast Georgia  
Regional Development Center for review*



## Table of Contents



Section 1: Introduction .....	1
Purpose.....	1
Scope.....	1
Methodology and Schedule.....	1
Section 2: Issues and Opportunities.....	4
Section 3: Analysis of Existing Development Patterns .....	13
Existing Land Use.....	13
Areas Requiring Special Attention .....	17
Recommended Character Areas.....	19

### List of Figures

Figure 1: Location Map .....	2
Figure 2: Existing Land Use by Acres, October 2005 .....	14
Figure 3: Existing Land Use Map.....	15
Figure 4: Existing Land Use Definitions .....	16
Figure 5: Areas Requiring Special Attention Definitions.....	17
Figure 6: Areas Requiring Special Attention Map .....	18
Figure 7: Character Area Map Definitions .....	19
Figure 8: Character Area Map .....	22

### Technical Addendum (Found on the compact disc included at the end of this document)

#### Section I: Supporting Analysis of Data and Information

1. Introduction
2. Population
3. Economic Development
4. Housing
5. Natural and Cultural Resources
6. Community Facilities and Services
7. Intergovernmental Coordination
8. Transportation System

#### Section II: Analysis of Consistency with Quality Community Objectives

#### Section III: Atlas of Supportive Maps

## I Introduction



### **Purpose**

The primary purpose of this report is to lay the foundation for the update of the City of Covington (City) Comprehensive Plan. In particular, it provides a comprehensive review of the issues and opportunities that will affect the future growth of the community. This analysis is based on an analysis and inventory of existing conditions, land use patterns, public policies, and planned improvements. Covington is the county seat of one of the fastest growing counties in the nation, for its size. Community leaders recognize that this planning effort can play a critical role in directing that growth in a manner that is consistent with the community's vision for the future.

Another purpose of this report is to meet the intent of the Standards and Procedures for Local Comprehensive Planning as established by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA) on May 1, 2005. Preparation of a Comprehensive Plan in accordance with these standards is an essential requirement in maintaining the City's status as a Qualified Local Government.

### **Scope**

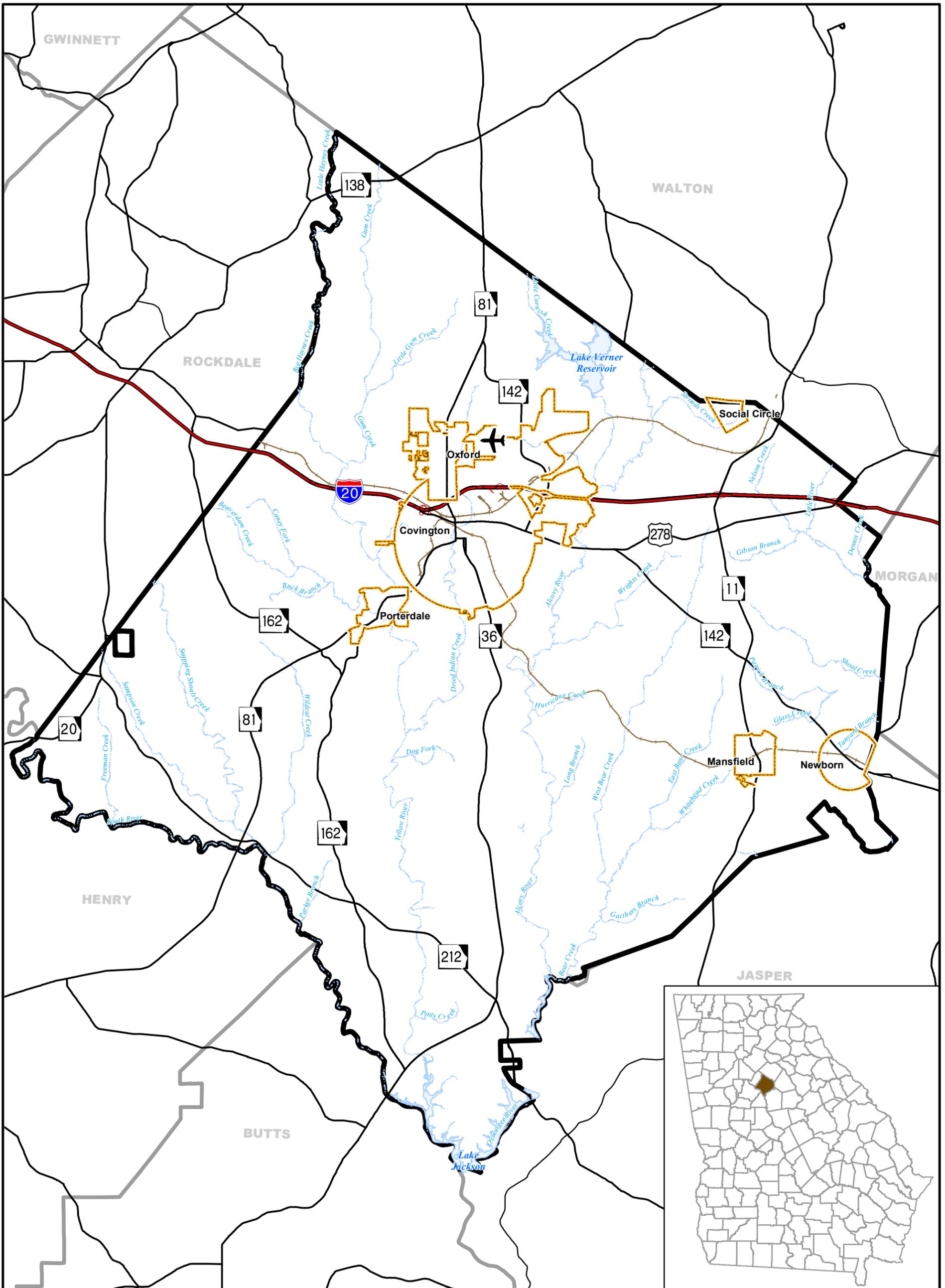
As required in the DCA standards, this report includes four basic components:

1. List of issues and opportunities that the community wants to address.
2. Analysis of existing development patterns.
3. Evaluation of current community policies, actions, and development patterns for consistency with the Quality Community Objectives.
4. Analysis of supportive data and information.

This report is written in an executive summary-like fashion so that citizens and decision makers can quickly review the essential elements and major findings of this planning effort. The evaluation of the Quality Community Objectives and the analysis of supporting data and information are included in a Technical Addendum. A digital copy of this Technical Addendum is provided on compact disc included at the back of this report.

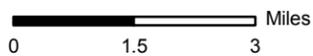
### **Methodology and Schedule**

As required by the DCA standards, this Community Assessment is primarily the product of a review of policies, plans, regulations, and development patterns. The study area for this assessment is the incorporated area within the City limits of Covington and surrounding areas. As of November 2005, Covington included an area of approximately 9,200 acres. **Figure 1** (on the following page) is a location map of the community. It shows the location of Covington and the other five municipalities in Newton County: Mansfield, Newborn, Oxford, Porterdale, and Social Circle.



**City of Covington 2028  
Comprehensive Plan**

*Location*



- Covington Municipal Airport
- Interstate
- Major Road
- Ramp
- Railroad
- River/Stream
- Lake/Pond
- City Boundary
- County Boundary



**Figure 1**

## *Draft*

This Community Assessment document is the first major step in preparation of the City's Comprehensive Plan. This document and the Community Participation Program will be submitted to the DCA for approval. This will be followed by a 30-day comment and review period by the Northeast Georgia Regional Development Center (NEGRDC) and the DCA.

Upon approval of both documents, work on the Community Agenda will commence. The Community Agenda is the most important part of the plan; it includes the community's vision for the future, key issues and opportunities it chooses to address during the planning period, and its implementation program for achieving this vision and addressing the identified issues and opportunities. To kick off the effort, a series of three Community Visioning Workshops will be held in March and April 2006. This will be followed a month later by a Strategic Framework Workshop in May 2006. These community involvement events will provide the public support and input critical to a successful Comprehensive Plan. The Planning Commission and City Council are scheduled to transmit a final draft of the Community Agenda to the NEGRDC and DCA in August and September 2006. After this begins a 3-month review and adoption process. This is scheduled to take place between October and December of 2006.

## 2 Issues and Opportunities

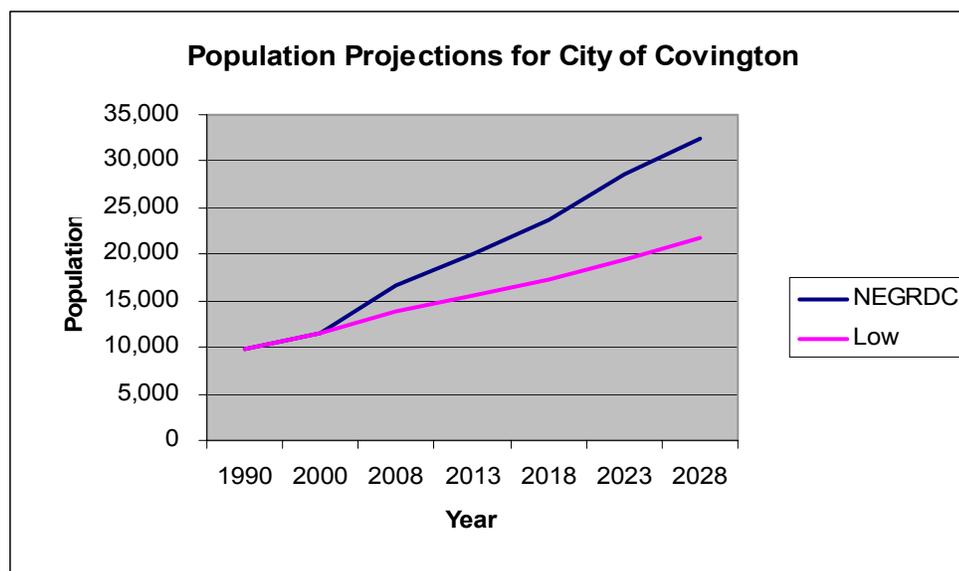


The following issues and opportunities were identified from a review of “Quality Community Objectives” and the “Analysis of Supportive Data and Information;” the documentation of which can be found in the **Technical Addendum** to this report. An Adobe PDF version of the Technical Addendum can be found on a CD located in the back of this document. The following issues and opportunities are organized under major topics as defined in the DCA Local Planning Requirements. These assessment topics are:

- Population
- Economic Development
- Housing
- Natural and Cultural Resources
- Community Facilities and Services
- Transportation
- Intergovernmental Coordination
- Land Use

### Population Issues

1. **Accelerated Population Growth.** Future population in the City of Covington is somewhat unpredictable, depending on the City’s land use and growth management policies. Other factors influencing future growth include the land use and growth management coordination between the City and Newton County (County), local housing market conditions, and economic conditions in metro Atlanta and the nation. The City’s



Source: Ackerman & Co., November 2005

## *Draft*

population projections from the NEGRDC are based on forecasted growth rates for the Covington-Porterdale Census Division, which includes portion of the County surrounding the communities of Covington and Porterdale. These projections form a “high” projection for the City of Covington, resulting in a 2028 population of 32,441. By comparison, a “low” projection scenario, based on the most recent population growth rate of 2.3 percent (1990-2004), results in a 2028 population of 21,827. The two projections create a spread of 10,614 people.

2. **Preferred Population Projections:** As just pointed out, the population projections for the City vary widely over the planning horizon. In order to properly plan for the next 20 years, a preferred population projection that is defined more precisely will have to be developed. This preferred projection will be based on public input gathered during the public outreach process for this plan update and the community’s vision for the future.
3. **Decline in Share of Population Under 18.** There is a recent downward trend among children under 18, as a component of total population. In addition, the majority of the City’s children do not reside in traditional – married couples with children – households.
4. **Shifts in Senior Population.** The senior population, as a percentage of total population, is also on a downward trend; however, this trend is expected to reverse as the “Baby Boom” generation ages, creating needs for senior housing, healthcare, and other services.
5. **Rapid Rise in Minority Population.** The minority population is growing at a rapid pace. One 2005 estimate indicates that African-Americans have become the City’s largest race category, representing 54 percent of the population. Although the Hispanic and Asian populations represent a small portion of the total, these groups have a rate of growth that is sharply higher than for other ethnic groups. Providing housing, bilingual services, and education for these minority groups could present a challenge to the community in the future.
6. **Income Disparity Between Covington and Newton County Residents.** There is a considerable income disparity among City residents, compared to County residents. The City’s 2000 median household income was \$32,000, significantly lower than Newton County (\$44,875), the Atlanta Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) (\$52,195) and Georgia (\$42,433). The income disparity between the City and the County presents some community challenges related to housing and education.
7. **High Level of Poverty.** Nearly one in five families and 25 percent of individuals in Covington live below the poverty level. The incidence of all types of poverty in the City of Covington is higher than for the County, the MSA, and the state by a significant margin. The City will carry the burden of housing and servicing the majority of the impoverished population in Newton County.

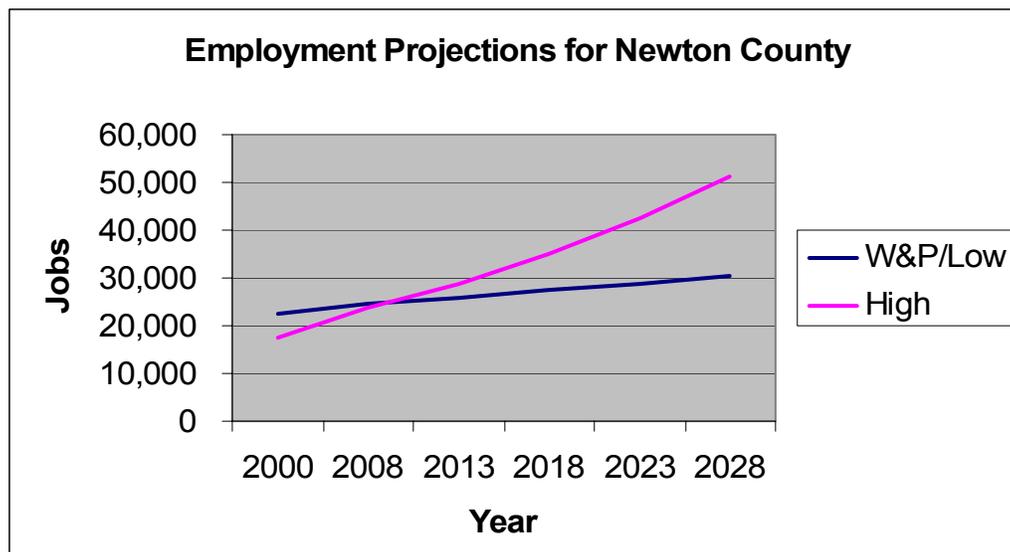
### Economic Development Issues

1. **Slower Job Growth than Population Growth.** Jobs are not growing as fast as the population, so the surrounding County is becoming more of a bedroom community of metro Atlanta.
2. **Lack of a Strategic Economic Development Plan.** The City and County lack a strategic economic development plan. The local Chamber of Commerce provides the administrative services for the Industrial Development Authority. However, there is no professional staff to support the efforts of economic development for the City and County. Providing a consistent, proactive approach to business marketing, recruitment, and retention is vitally important for developing new jobs in the County and likely will require professional staff.
3. **Provision of Adequate Infrastructure to Support Future Economic Development.** Other potential challenges are ensuring there is adequate land for industrial and commercial development and providing the appropriate infrastructure – roads, water, and sewer – to support this type of development.

### Economic Development Opportunities

1. **Growing Economic Base.** Similar to population, future economic growth in Newton County will be strongly influenced by policy decisions made today, particularly those related to roads, water, and sewer improvements. Maintaining the County’s high quality of life and attracting a high-quality workforce are other important factors.

Newton County has a 2003 employment base of 18,584 jobs, according to the Georgia



Note: The High Projection was based on U.S. Census data which estimated a lower 2000 Employment figure than Woods & Poole.  
Source: Ackerman & Co., November 2005

Department of Labor. The County is projected to grow at a slightly lower rate than metro Atlanta, Georgia, and the nation, according to Woods and Poole Economics, Incorporated. metro Atlanta, which includes Newton County, is forecasted to outperform the state and the nation but at a slower rate than its recent performance of 3.1 percent between 1990 and 2004. Metro Atlanta's economy, however, is maturing, so it is likely going to grow at a slower rate in the future. By comparison, Newton County is in an expansion mode, so the projected annual growth rate of 1.1 percent annually appears low. A "high" projection scenario was prepared based on the 1990-2003 annual employment growth rate of 3.9 percent. If the County continues to growth at this rate, the employment base would expand to 51,251 jobs by 2028, compared to 30,350 jobs for the "low" projection. These two projections create a spread of 20,911 jobs. The City of Covington currently comprises 56 percent of the jobs in Newton County. The City's job base, as a portion of the County's, likely will erode in the future as new employment centers, such as Stanton Springs, emerge in unincorporated areas of the County.

2. **Diversified Economy.** One of Newton County's advantages is its diversified economy. Its employment base is not dominated by a single sector. Major industry sectors include services, manufacturing, government, and retail trade, all of which comprise 83 percent of local jobs. Manufacturing is the most significant basic or export-oriented industry. Although manufacturing is an industry in decline nationally, it offers potential growth in Newton County, particularly among firms requiring advanced technologies and a highly skilled labor force. Other high-growth employment sectors are professional and business services, education and health services, trade, transportation and utilities, and government. All of these sectors offer excellent future growth potential. Maintaining a diversified economic base, while expanding the local economy, is critical to the future of the County for several reasons. A broad-based economy mitigates downward turns in the national and local economies. In addition, a variety of employment opportunities and wages creates opportunities for County residents to work inside the County.
3. **Geographic Advantages for Economic Development.** Newton County and Covington have several strengths for economic growth and development. First, is their location on the I-20 corridor close to Atlanta. Second, Covington has a small-town lifestyle, offering a high quality of life.
4. **Strong Education System.** The City offers an excellent education system. It has one of the top primary education systems in the State of Georgia, as well as a variety of secondary education opportunities; including Oxford College of Emory University, DeKalb Tech, and Georgia Perimeter College (planned).



Entrance to DeKalb Tech

## Housing Issues

1. **Demographic Changes Affect Housing Demand.** There are several demographic factors shaping the local housing market for the City of Covington, based on 2005 estimates from Claritas. These include:

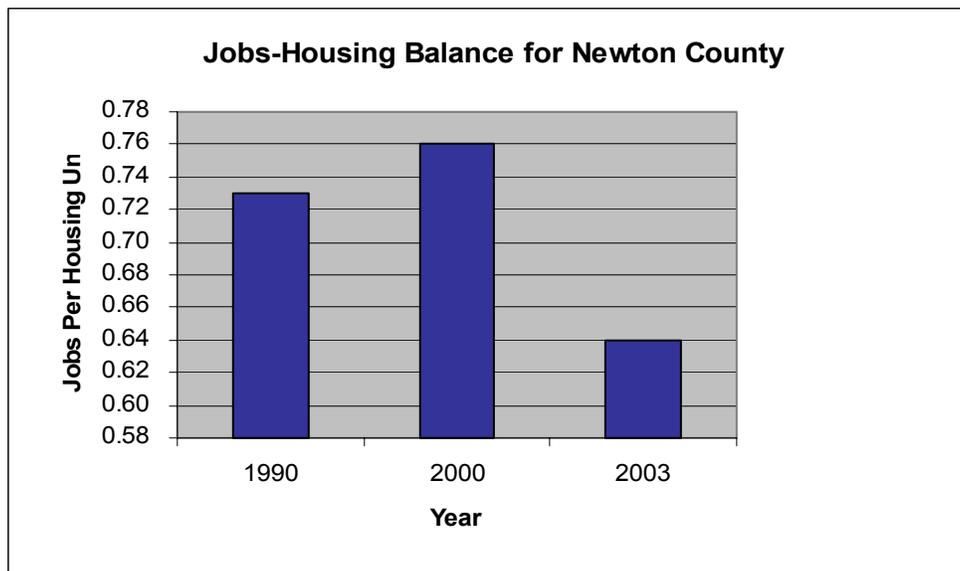
- Similar to the County, the market in Covington is dominated by family households, representing 67.1 percent of total households. A total of 46 percent of family households have children, split evenly between traditional married families and single-parent families.
- Non-family households, representing one-third of the market, are increasing at a faster rate than family households. The City also has a higher share of people living alone (27 percent) compared to the County (18 percent). These non-family households will create demand for smaller, higher-density housing units.
- Although the majority of householders are white (58.5 percent), there is a significant number of African-American households (39.8 percent) and a fast-growing Hispanic population.
- The largest and fastest-growing age cohorts, representing 40 percent of householders, are in their child-raising years – 35 to 44 years old. However, the age cohorts are much more evenly distributed in the City as compared to the County.
- Householders in the City of Covington are less affluent than the County. The City has a median household income of just under \$44,000 per year, according to Claritas. Only 14.3 percent of households have incomes exceeding \$75,000, but these higher-income groups are growing at a significantly higher rate, creating some demand for higher-priced housing. By contrast, more than 37 percent of householders earn less than \$25,000. If this segment of the housing market grows at the same pace as the total market, then more affordable housing will be required.



2. **Continuing Need for Workforce Housing.** Although housing prices, or costs, in Newton County and Covington are considered relatively affordable compared to more urban counties of metro Atlanta, costs are rising more rapidly than incomes. Median house values in Newton County have increased at an average annual growth rate of 5.1 percent since 2000 (4.1 percent for the City). Median sales prices also are on the rise, increasing at an average rate of 5.9 percent per year. By contrast, median household incomes have increased by 1.9 percent annually (1.3 percent for the City), and average weekly wages have increased at an annual rate of 3.3 percent. During 2003, annual wages for all industries in Newton County were approximately \$31,500, which would support a house price of approximately \$125,000. This is higher than the 2003 estimated

median house values for the County (\$118,500) and the City (\$95,800), based on Claritas data. However, median household income for the County and the City actually would support significantly higher housing prices of approximately \$190,000 and \$130,000, respectively. This trend indicates that current housing generally is affordable to people who work in the City, but the balance of affordable housing is changing; because new high-income households are relocating to the area, pushing housing prices higher than local wages can support. County and City officials need to ensure that workforce housing continues to be available in the future.

- Jobs-Housing Imbalance.** Jobs-housing balance seeks a geographic equilibrium between housing and jobs. The underlying theory is that as jobs and housing are more evenly distributed and mixed, people will be able to live closer to their jobs, and traffic congestion and vehicular traffic will be reduced. A balanced community generally has a jobs-housing ratio of 1.25 to 1.75, with 1.4 considered ideal. Newton County has a low jobs-housing ratio of 0.64, as of 2003. This ratio has fallen from 0.73 in 1990, which indicates that the County serves as a bedroom community more than a balanced community. According to Claritas data, the 2005 jobs-housing balance for the City of Covington is 2.73, which is the antithesis of the County; it indicates a need for additional residents rather than jobs in the City to bring it in balance.



Source: Ackerman & Co., November 2005

### Housing Opportunities

Because of external demographic forces, the metro Atlanta area is experiencing a rapid increase in single-person households, empty nesters, and retirees. This trend creates two housing market opportunities for the City of Covington:

- Incorporate More Traditional Neighborhood Developments (TNDs).** There are several excellent examples of TND developments in Covington, such as Clark's Grove, that can serve as a model for future developments. These TND developments offer a variety of housing types in a dynamic mixed-use environment that helps to reduce auto

trips and create a strong sense of place that can help maintain Covington's small town character.

2. **Downtown Lofts.** Downtown Covington is undergoing a strong revitalization effort, including the development of downtown lofts. This form of development should be encouraged to continue to help maintain a 24-hour presence downtown that will help support downtown businesses.

### **Natural and Cultural Resource Issues**

1. **Declining Water Quality.** Four of Newton County's significant streams and rivers do not meet federal water quality standards, including the Yellow River just west of Covington's current city limits. None of these streams originate in Newton County, but all are impaired by the time they reach the County. Several large urban areas are upstream of Newton County, as are a number of active agricultural areas. Much of the pollution generated is a result of urban and rural non-point source runoff, but wastewater from industrial and municipal uses also contribute to substandard water quality.
2. **Poor Air Quality.** Newton County is one of 21 metropolitan Atlanta counties with poor air quality. The County, along with the region, does not meet federal clean air standards for particulate matter or ground-level ozone. Regionally, the bulk of the problem originates with high traffic volumes, often traveling relatively long distances in congested operating conditions. Several ongoing trends likely will exacerbate Covington's air quality problem. These include:
  - Increased development – commercial and residential.
  - Auto-dependency of new developments.
  - Segregation of land uses.
  - Poor street connectivity/cul-de-sac and dead-end streets.
  - Lack of pedestrian or bicycle facilities.
  - Lack of adequate job opportunities in the County.
  - Loss of tree canopy.

Stemming these trends will require a multi-faceted campaign of zoning and land development regulation reform, public education, and intergovernmental coordination with all government entities in the region.

### **Natural and Cultural Resource Opportunities**

1. **Greenspace and Open Space Preservation.** A greenspace plan, which identified opportune areas for trails and greenways, was created shortly after the County's April 2000 Comprehensive Plan Update. This plan has stimulated greater levels of interest in trails and greenspaces as both community assets and tools for natural resources preservation. Further efforts should be made to implement the plan and keep it up-to-date.
2. **Protect the Water Quality.** A regional solution, which is carried out in cooperation with the surrounding counties, will be the optimal approach for addressing this problem.

## *Draft*

Consistent enforcement of existing erosion and sedimentation control regulations also is needed, and revisions to development standards could include limits on impervious surfaces, additional conservation subdivision options, requirements for pervious parking areas, or incentives for green roofs.

3. **Protect the Air Quality.** Currently, neither Covington nor Newton County has a specific strategy for addressing air quality, other than to cooperate with regional efforts. Standards that help reduce driving, promote walking and bicycling, or preserve trees and tree canopy help improve air quality. Many aspects of the existing regulatory environment promote air quality-friendly development including:
  - Overlay districts that allow for mixed land uses.
  - Requirements for pedestrian facilities.
  - Conservation subdivision and tree saving standards.
  - Standards to limit impervious surfaces and shared parking.
4. **State and Federal Historic Preservation Program.** One of the City's primary assets is its stock of historic buildings and neighborhoods. The preservation of historic and cultural sites within the City presents an opportunity to maintain a unique sense of place that can help to attract residents, business, and tourism. There are numerous state and federally funded programs that support the goal of historic preservation and that could be utilized to help in this effort.

### **Community Facilities and Services Issues**

1. **Meeting the Service Demands of Explosive Population Growth.** Recently, the City has experienced rapid population growth, and this growth is expected to continue throughout the planning horizon. With that growth has come increasing demands for public services. Careful planning is required to ensure that adequate services are available over the next 20 years.
2. **Diminishing Supply of Regional Water.** Septic and land application systems are consumptive uses of water. As a result, there may be future political pressure to develop sewer systems with surface water discharges, as opposed to continued use of septic systems or land application systems.
3. **Solid Waste Planning.** Both the City and County currently are operating under a 1993 Solid Waste Master Plan. Under state law, the Solid Waste Master Plan will need to be updated by 2008.

### **Community Facilities and Services Opportunities**

1. **Expanding the City's Trail System.** The County Recreational Authority has plans to expand the City's trail system, providing both recreational and practical pedestrian and bicycle connections between local housing and City destinations.

### **Intergovernmental Coordination Issues**

1. **Regional Transportation Planning.** To ensure proper coordination and execution of much needed transportation improvements, City and County officials need to be actively involved in transportation planning activities at the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), the NEGRDC, Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA), and Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT).
2. **Land Use Conflicts That Result from Annexation.** Newton County and its cities have not established future annexation areas and service agreements that could serve as a basis for its extraterritorial jurisdiction. For example, the City of Porterdale, to Covington's west, has annexed several hundreds of acres in the past year. As both Porterdale and Covington continue to grow, the possibility of land use conflicts along a newly shared border is likely to grow.
3. **Regular County-Municipal Coordination.** The City does not have a regular meeting process with the County and neighboring cities to discuss regional issues

### **Intergovernmental Coordination Opportunities**

1. **Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax Renewal.** City and County officials need to continue to work closely to help ensure that this important source of capital improvements funding is used effectively.
2. **Shared Services.** The City and County governments cooperate with at least one local government to provide or share services (parks and recreation, E911, Emergency Services, Police or Sheriff's Office, schools, water, sewer, other). There are opportunities to do more.

### **Transportation Issues**

1. **Poorly Connected or Incomplete Pedestrian Network.** There are ordinances in place to promote sidewalk construction as a part of new development, but the network is disconnected, particularly along the major corridors on outside edge of the City. The City should continue to encourage the construction of sidewalks as a part of new construction.
2. **Mitigating Increasing Traffic Congestion.** Traffic congestion is going to get worse as the City and County grow. Steps need to be emplaced to slow the increase in congestion, including requiring street connectivity, traffic studies, and a reconsideration of impact fees.
3. **No Community Transit System -** There is no community transit system in Newton County. The community should study the opportunities for express bus routes and vanpooling.
4. **Lack of Adequate Traffic Signals –** There are many all-way stops in the community that need to be signalized, and existing signals should be synchronized. This would help to reduce queuing.