



February 14, 2024

To the Stonecrest Mayor and City Council Members,

The Stonecrest Economic Development Plan Advisory Committee (EDPAC) would like to thank you for the opportunity to serve our City and its citizens in this inaugural Strategic Economic Development Plan (SEDP) initiative. Our committee, composed of a cross section of our community and economic stakeholders, engaged in meaningful deliberations of the SEDP to help add value to this process.

**This is a summary report of efforts by the EDPAC**, which was created by the city council "to provide input and insights to the City Staff to ensure the views of residents, businesses, subject matter experts, and other stakeholders are represented; to serve as a sounding board to City Staff; and to report either in person or in writing to the Mayor and City Council at a time to be established by the City Council and the EDPAC." The mission of EDPAC, as reflected in this report, is to "support efforts towards diverse and sustainable economic vitality within the Stonecrest community." This report highlights our inputs and experience in this initiative and our recommendations to the city's economic development efforts going forward.

### **Purpose**

The purposes of this report are to apprise the Mayor and City Council of the EDPAC's:

- Assessment of and perspectives on the plan.
- Additional insights and recommendations to supplement the recommendations included in the plan.
- Suggested steps to improve the performance of future committees in this process.

### **Findings: EDPAC's Assessment of the Plan**

The EDPAC believes that the plan is a good first start for the City. Though it contains some areas which we see needing improvements, the plan provides the City of Stonecrest with a starting baseline and framework upon which to build an executable Strategic Economic Development Plan. The plan provides base information and data with which the City can begin the process to:

- Identify its options.
- Define measurable, attainable and time-bound economic development goals.
- Use its internal and external relationships.
- Prioritize a phased approach to develop its economic development infrastructure.



## Detailed EDPAC Plan Feedback

This feedback identifies features of the plan that could be strengthened:

- A one-sentence reference is made to “unmet demand” for groceries. Stonecrest is a food desert. More attention should be given to this fact, as it is a key barrier to prosperous economic development. Quality residential housing typically does not thrive in a food desert, which creates a cycle. A lack of quality housing affects the City’s ability to attract quality jobs and economic growth.
- A Community Improvement District (CID) is an integral tool for economic development. The East Metro CID (EMCID) encompasses a portion of the City of Stonecrest. In the report’s recommendation in this regard, rather than recommend meeting with the EMCID, the EMCID’s lack of progress since its inception should be reviewed and appropriate steps taken—either dissolution or the recession of certain properties from it and creation of a more focused CID. To that end, the report makes only a minor reference to an industrial CID without giving it importance even though a CID’s function is to provide important services and facilities that assist in the area’s economic development, including infrastructure projects.

The industrial sector in Stonecrest has attracted several notable companies and plays an increasingly important role in the financial health of Stonecrest. Many of those companies are willing to self-tax themselves in the form of a CID. That itself speaks volumes about the value of an industrial CID.

- Reference is made to various city departments including Planning and Zoning, Building, Code Enforcement, etc. The value of close collaboration with local business organizations, including the Stonecrest Business Alliance, the Stonecrest Industrial Council and The Stonecrest Chamber is great—these organizations can be a valuable resource for support to the City.
- The report mentions crime and the perception of crime in Stonecrest, but stops short of recommendations related thereto. We believe it is critical that greater importance be given to solving this problem. Quality housing and development will not thrive unless residents, businesses, and the visiting public feel safe and secure.
- Higher density development is referred to throughout the plan. Higher density alone is not the solution. “Quality” in all areas of development (housing, retail, etc.) is what Stonecrest needs to progress forward and quality should be emphasized as much as density.



- The plan could significantly improve its discussion of the correlation between K-12 schools performance as an asset to attract economic development.<sup>1</sup>
- The plan does not address the significant presence of the international business base in and near Stonecrest. DeKalb County's Commission District 5 has \$98M in annual revenue and 14,500 people employed in import/export and foreign owned businesses.
- The Stonecrest Industrial Council (SIC) indicates that they take strong exception to the discussion of the CID in the SEDP. They have serious concerns regarding the future impact of that treatment. The SIC will send a separate communications to the Mayor and City Council regarding this issue. Nonetheless, the SIC endorses the plan in general as well as EDPAC recommendations (later in this report).

#### EDPAC additional feedback for "Plan" text

- Consider adding the word "quality" wherever higher density as mentioned, for example using phrases such as "high quality, higher density housing development" throughout the plan.
- In the section on the Stonecrest Economic Development Plan Intent, consider emphasizing Stonecrest's commitment to our natural resource by adding this as a final sentence:

"The city does not believe that economic development needs to reduce the city's attractiveness, and it is the city's intent to move along the Path Forward while minimizing the impact on Stonecrest's existing natural resources, especially the parks, green space, and trails and other recreation areas along the South River and in the vicinity of Arabia Mountain."

Alternatively, this phrase could be added to the current text:

"... while minimizing the impact on Stonecrest's existing natural resources, especially the parks, green space, and trails and other recreation areas along the South River and in the vicinity of Arabia Mountain."

#### EDPAC Recommendations - City Departments and Authorities

- Task all City Departments to collaborate with the local business organizations such as the Stonecrest Business Alliance, the Stonecrest Industrial Council and The Stonecrest Chamber and with non-profits such as the Arabia Mountain

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, see <https://www.slideshare.net/lexie4/how-public-schools-benefit-local-economies>



### Heritage Area Alliance.

- Task the Planning & Zoning Department to inform Economic Development Department of all inquiries from new businesses.
- Task the Stonecrest Development Authority to give high priority to ensuring that the land around the Mall is developed and is developed in such a way as to be aligned with the goals stated in this plan.



## **EDPAC Recommendations - General**

- As additional focus areas for economic development:
  - Acquire resources and establish relationships to develop ongoing initiatives to fully, engage the international business sector, including with entrepreneurial development initiatives.
  - Strategize ways to monetize visitors to the natural areas via retail services (natural food café, bicycle and kayak sales and rental, etc.). This will increase (a) visitorship and (b) shopping and dining opportunities for visitors to spend money on.
  - Provide a micro-transit shuttle service to connect commercial destinations such as the Stonecrest Mall and NBWS with trailheads and with cultural resources such as the Lyons Farm and the Flat Rock Archives as well as other resources within the Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area.
  - Support the South River as an emerging destination for kayakers, and the planned botanical garden at the New Fairington Park as a future destination. Promote our natural attractions (such as Arabia Mountain, other Stonecrest trails and green spaces, the South River, and the future botanical gardens) as a package of destinations that work together to bring nature-oriented visitors. Include the Big Ledge Quarry if this property opens to the public.
- To remove key barriers to development:
  - Move as quickly as possible to revisit the DeKalb County agreement for police services and/or move forward with Stonecrest police department. Ensure that the city is leveraging the DeKalb police department's Stonecrest liaison as effectively as possible.
  - Establish a standing Council-Community Committee to evaluate school performance and recommend initiatives with DCSS and other stakeholder organizations to address performance deficits that impact Stonecrest economic development appeal to businesses and workforce. [Note: School performance is a major determinant of location selection for high skills-high-income earners, and the businesses that hire them. Currently, 75% of DeKalb County schools that serve Stonecrest perform in bottom 25% of metro-Atlanta and the State of Georgia.]
- Give more emphasis to the potential for a thriving industrial CID.



- Prioritize attracting a quality neighborhood grocer to Stonecrest.
- In the recommendation to encourage mixed use development “throughout the city”, specify that this should be only in areas that are not within the Arabia Mountain Conservation Overlay and are not within existing industrial areas.

## **Committee Experience**

The EDPAC began with a very successful launch and full participation in 2022. However, the lapse in time between the EDPAC's initial launch and Consultant's engagement may have contributed to a decline in EDPAC members availability and participation. The time gaps and member participation lapse (several meetings canceled due to lack of quorum), without sufficient updates or interim engagements, likely contributed—at least in part—to the Consultant and EDPAC being out of synch with each other. Consequently, the opportunity for the Consultant and EDPAC to work collaboratively for higher quantity and quality business engagement was a missed opportunity.

In its efforts to overcome the timing misalignment, the EDPAC focused its efforts on leveraging the following to provide meaningful input to this report.

- Its members' knowledge of Stonecrest businesses and industries
- Member relationships with the Stonecrest residents and business communities
- Members' expertise in economic development planning

During the process, the EDPAC made over 75 specific suggestions to the consulting team. They adopted a very large majority of these.

## **Conclusions**

The Stonecrest Economic Development Plan Advisory Committee (EDPAC) believes that the Consultant's plan is commendable, though we found several opportunities for improvements. The enhancements we recommend are not intended to second guess their work. These recommendations come from using our collective and intimate knowledge of Stonecrest, S.E. DeKalb, and regional market to give Stonecrest’s government and staff added information and suggestions to help prioritize and target efforts to implement the Economic Development Plan. We think that executing the plan with the EDPAC input will enable the City of Stonecrest to better prioritize and focus its economic development resources investments.



Thank you again for this opportunity to serve.

Sincerely,

The Stonecrest Economic Development Plan Advisory Committee

Thad Mayfield, Chairman

Dave Marcus, Vice Chairman

Andrew Wells, Secretary

Bernard Knight, Member on behalf of the Stonecrest Industrial Council

Chris Seabrook, Member

Revonda Cosby, Member on behalf of the Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Alliance

Shelbia Jackson, Member on behalf of Discover DeKalb

Jetha Wagner, Member on behalf of Avila Development, LLC

Mayor Jazzmin Cobble, ex-officio