

## Site Acquisition Policy

The Chatham County Resource Protection Commission (CCRPC) created this policy to establish a standard procedure for acquiring sites. Specifically, the Site Acquisition Policy describes how sites are to be classified, the process of site acquisition, and the creation of management plans once sites are acquired.

### **Site Classification**

Continuing from the prioritized list of sites created through the Site Ranking Criteria Policy and catalogued in the Chatham County Resource Protection Database, the next step in the process towards acquisition is to categorize these sites into classes. The five sites with the highest scores will be categorized as Class A. Within this class, sites will be unranked so that each site is considered equally. Only sites within Class A will enter the acquisition process. All remaining sites within the Chatham County Resource Protection Database will be categorized as Class B. Sites within this class will hold their rankings and whenever an opening occurs in Class A, the top ranked site in Class B will advance to fill the vacancy.

In addition, certain sites that enter the acquisition process may at some point be deemed suspended, either because a property owner is unwilling to sell or protect his/her land or because a technical aspect of the acquisition makes it infeasible to pursue. These suspended sites will be categorized as Class C and will be reviewed periodically to determine if the circumstances surrounding their acquisition/protection have changed. If circumstances have changed, the site will be reevaluated by the CCRPC and will potentially be reinstated as a Class A or B property.

### **Site Acquisition**

Once classification is complete, the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) will review and recommend all Class A sites to the CCRPC for protection. The CCRPC will then review these sites, and recommend that Chatham County pursue their protection.

To begin the acquisition/protection process, the Resource Protection Planner (RPP) will contact the property owners of Class A sites to determine their level of interest in protecting the land. The RPP may pursue the protection of each property through several means, including, but not limited to, fee simple acquisition, options, leases, conservation easements, or the purchase of mineral, water, or development rights, depending on the owner's level of interest and the best means of protecting the site. If a property owner is interested, the RPP will obtain a written Right of Entry to enable the follow-up requirements for a Due Diligence process for land protection. This process, as authorized by the Chatham County Commission, requires that, unless already completed, a title search and a boundary survey be conducted, and that a plat be recorded in the Clerk of Superior Court's office. In addition, a Phase I environmental assessment and a fair market value appraisal are completed. If the property contains wetlands or bottomlands, a wetland delineation must also be completed.

Based on the results of these assessments, County staff and the RPP will choose up to three of the most feasible sites to pursue for protection. In choosing, County staff and the RPP will consider the price and ease of acquisition of each property, and review any grants or matching funding sources that may be available. The site or sites chosen will be presented to the Chatham County Commission, with a recommendation to authorize financial negotiations with the property owners. Once an acceptable price is determined and a site is purchased or protected through other means by the County, the RPP will initiate the rezoning of the property as Conservation, if applicable.

### **Site Management**

The RPP, along with the Site Management subcommittee of the TAC, will develop a management plan for each property acquired or protected by Chatham County for resource protection. These plans will detail the uses allowed for each property. For example, a plan would stipulate whether a property would be open to forms of passive recreation, such as hiking and camping, or strictly preserved for ecological reasons. In addition, the management plans will discuss the need for improvements on the property, e.g., wetland restoration or the creation of trails. The plans will specify a timeline for achieving the intended improvements and the funding required.

The management plan for each property purchased through fee simple acquisition will also require the creation of a perpetual conservation easement that details the specific restrictions to be placed on each property. These easements will be held by a third-party beneficiary who will be responsible for ensuring that the terms of the easement are upheld. Beneficiaries can be either a government agency, such as the State of Georgia or the US Army Corps of Engineers, or a credible land trust, such as the Georgia Land Trust.

Once a management plan is complete, the TAC will recommend that the CCRPC recommend the plan to the Chatham County Commission for adoption. Once adopted, the terms of the management plan will be established and the conservation easement created, providing perpetual protection to the property's natural and cultural resources. In addition, the deed of record will be amended to incorporate these restrictions on use.