

Banking against urban sprawl

Landowners outside Atlanta draw the line on development

By Larry Copeland
USA TODAY

PALMETTO, Ga. — Trella Dickerson, 70, is something of a celebrity here: She's the first person in Georgia to sell development rights to her property — only to guarantee that it won't be developed.

Now she's trying to persuade others to make similar deals as part of a years-long effort to preserve the last major green space in sprawling metropolitan Atlanta.

Last September, Dickerson sold to a conservancy land bank the development rights to part of the 17 acres she and her ex-husband bought in 1988.

Any developer that later buys Dickerson's development rights from the land bank actually will be pledging not to develop her property. In return, the developer would be permitted to construct houses elsewhere in the community.

She owns the property, lives there and gets the tax benefits, but she and subsequent owners cannot build on it.

"I just have such a deep love for this land, and building is just going crazy in metro Atlanta," says Dickerson, a retired executive secretary with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "I wanted to preserve this land for my children and grandchildren."

The concept is called transfer of development rights (TDR) and is a critical part of preserving 65,000 acres called the Chattahoochee Hill Country. Only 30 minutes south of Atlanta's airport, its forests and rolling hills are a world apart from the ever-expanding city.

The Chattahoochee Hill Country effort is being tracked by environmentalists nationally to see if the TDR concept, which had rarely been tried in the South and never in Georgia, can work here.

The goal is to preserve green areas and control where subdivisions and businesses are built. In Atlanta, environmentalists see this as a way to channel growth while preserving green space.

"Having watched lots of conservation efforts nationally, the Chattahoochee Hill Country is a very impressive, creative model that adds to our tool kit for



"I wanted to preserve this land for my grandchildren": Trella Dickerson, a pioneer in the transfer of development rights, sold 17 acres to a land bank so it won't be developed after she's gone.

accomplishing quality conservation in America," says Chris Sawyer, an Atlanta attorney who is a trustee of the Urban Land Institute and past director of the Trust for Public Land.

So far, though, only two of about 1,700 eligible property owners have sold their development rights.

"We had hoped for more, and we expect more," says Terry DeMeo King, executive director of the Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance. "A lot of that is subject to the level of threat that people feel" from sprawling development.

As the housing market regains momentum and development picks up, more people will opt to sell development rights, say King and Christine McCauley, executive director of the Chattahoochee Hill Country Conservan-



Photos by Michael A. Schwarz, USA TODAY

Preserving green: Anissa and James Harris, owners of an upscale general store in Serenbe, Ga., fell in love with the hamlet where homes and businesses are designed to preserve the natural landscape.

to sell development rights.

Rodney Peek, a fifth-generation resident of the Chattahoochee Hill Country, says more people will sell development rights as they understand more about the process.

"You're only giving property owners more rights," he says. "It is a tough concept because there are a lot of misperceptions. When Trella Dickerson sold her TDR, there was a lot of 'Oh, that's how it works.'"

For now, the most tangible example of what's possible in the Chattahoochee Hill Country is Serenbe, a 900-acre hamlet developed by former restaurateur Steve Nygren, who was a driving force in the initial conservation efforts. Homes and businesses are built to preserve the natural landscape and eliminate the need for mass grading.

Homes range from \$300,000 to \$1.2 million. An organic farm supplies Serenbe's three restaurants and its weekly farmers market. There's a 14,000-square-foot stable, walking trails and a biological wastewater treatment system rather than a sewer.

The community rises like a tiny city in the Georgia woods and people often make an on-the-spot decision to buy, Nygren says. "You'd never know there was a slowdown in the housing market looking around here, would you?" he says, looking around at workers building homes and putting in sidewalks.

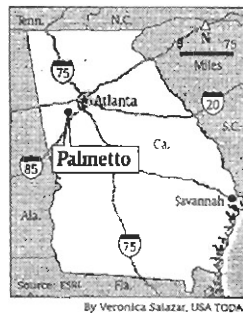
Anissa and James Harris — owners of Harris & Clark, an upscale general store that opened June 30 at Serenbe — were awed after their first visit.

"I had to think, Oh, my God, I'm still in Atlanta," says Anissa Harris, 38. "I was amazed that someone could come up with a plan and make it come together. And we began to think, how can we be a part of this?"

Dickerson likes to visit Serenbe, to get a sense of how the land she so loves may endure long after she's gone.

"Even if my grandchildren don't understand or appreciate it now," she says, "in generations to come they will have grown up, and they'll see what's going on around them, and they will appreciate what their grandmother did."

cy, which acts as the TDR land "bank." The conservancy buys rights from property owners and sells them to developers.



By Veronica Salazar, USA TODAY

The Chattahoochee Hill Country encompasses about 65,000 acres in Fulton, Coweta, Carroll and Douglas counties.

A land-use plan was designed to save two-thirds of the 40,000 acres in Fulton County by concentrating development in three communities called villages, and in several smaller communities called hamlets.

Within the villages are "receiving zones," areas where developers can build after buying development rights, and there are "sending zones" in the nearby countryside where development rights are sold. Property owners in "sending zones" can opt not

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