Digital First Communities

A structured framework connecting digital infrastructure readiness to Georgia's local comprehensive planning requirements and helping the City of Calhoun manage high-impact economic development proactively, transparently, and with community support.

SUBMITTED TO
City of Calhoun
Paul Worley, City Manager

SUBMITTED BY
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Georgia Tech
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Georgia Tech Enterprise Innovation Institute
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1. SCOPE OF WORK

About CEDR

The Georgia Tech Enterprise Innovation Institute (EI²) supports economic development across Georgia's communities through applied research, technical assistance, and stakeholder engagement. Georgia Tech acts as an impartial, credible third party in complex development conversations. CEDR (Center for Economic Development Research) provides the fiscal and economic modeling capacity underlying this engagement, with deep expertise in Georgia's property tax structure, state and local compliance frameworks, and local government planning requirements.

Building on recent cross-campus work with partners advancing community-facing data center research, this engagement reflects a collaborative effort between CEDR and a coalition of partners at Georgia Tech. This proposal is designed to produce a replicable model that can be scaled across communities facing similar growth challenges.

Introduction

The Center for Economic Development Research (CEDR) at Georgia Tech is pleased to present this proposal to **City of Calhoun** for a Digital First Community Planning Framework. This proposal is intended to provide a general overview of the scope of work to be performed. Georgia Tech provides assistance to support economic development and planning efforts in Georgia including research, facilitation, technical, analytical, and management expertise. EI² provides these services through its headquarters in Atlanta and a network of regional offices located throughout Georgia.

The overall purpose of this project is to provide the City of Calhoun with structured technical assistance, impartial research, and community engagement tools needed to ensure that potential data center development delivers lasting value. Georgia is one of the most active states for new data center development in the nation. The City's current moratorium (enacted April 2026) will expire in January 2027. Undertaking the Digital First process will fulfill the purpose of the moratorium which is to research how large-scale data facilities will affect local utility and energy resources.

The proposed project will be divided into five phases as follows: (1) is a Fiscal Impact Analysis, (2) Resource Validation & Stewardship, (3) Community Engagement & Education, (4) Ordinance Development & Standards Review, and (5) Final Report & Presentation.

Scope of Work Overview

Phase	Deliverable	Comprehensive Plan Alignment
1. Fiscal Impact Analysis	Scenario modeling (Minor, Medium, Major, Campus) covering personal property tax, millage rate impact, potential local revenues, and cost-of-services comparison	Fact-based planning; informed decision-making; long-term revenue and service-cost documentation
2. Resource Validation & Stewardship	Utility capacity review, demand assessments, and environmental criteria evaluation	Regional utility planning; environmental criteria; growth management requirements
3. Community Engagement & Education	Two structured public sessions: 1. Myth-busting town hall 2. Site visioning and Good Neighbor Agreements	Mandated public participation process; stakeholder involvement and documentation; misinformation prevention

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4. Ordinance & Development Standards Review	Review existing ordinances against state and national best practice templates, aesthetic standards, noise impact studies, and mitigation frameworks	Plan-to-regulation linkage; predictable, enforceable implementation of comprehensive plan policies
5. Final Report & Presentation	Comprehensive written report plus stakeholder presentation at client direction	Can strengthen the comprehensive local plan quality and compliance documentation

Each phase is designed to produce concrete deliverables and to directly support quality growth in the City of Calhoun.

The process will provide the City of Calhoun with an impartial fiscal and resource analysis and establish a structured community facilitation process that engages and empowers residents. Community-identified priorities are translated into enforceable development standards; existing ordinances are reviewed against state and national best practices, and local capacity to serve is analyzed. The process culminates in a blueprint that can be applied to future high-impact development.

Below is CEDR's proposed scope of work, along with timelines, budgets, and biographical information for each member of the project team.

1: Fiscal Impact Analysis

Data centers offer an unusual fiscal profile: large capital investment, low demand for public services, and recurring personal property tax revenue as server infrastructure refreshes every 3–5 years. Many communities and residents do not fully understand this profile, creating both opportunity and risk. CEDR will model a proposed scenario calibrated to a realistic project scale for Calhoun:

- Personal property tax projections by scenario, including server refresh cycles
- Millage rate impact analysis: how high-value industrial tax revenue creates capacity to lower residential rates; potential other local revenue sources (SPLOST, etc.)
- Cost-of-services comparison versus equivalent-acreage residential subdivision or retail development

This analysis provides evidence-based, factual answers to the financial questions residents may ask before and during public engagement sessions.

2: Community Engagement & Education

A structured community engagement process moves residents from a passive protest to active participation in shaping how development occurs. This portion of the engagement process consists of three structured sessions:

Session 1: Education & Myth-Busting

- Pre listening session survey to understand community concerns and priorities
- Myth-busting framing on data center economics, water use, noise, and employment to replace misinformation with facts
- "Ask an Expert" format featuring acoustic engineers, utility directors, and tax assessors addressing specific local concerns

Session 2: Visioning & Good Neighbor Agreements

- Facilitated discussion linking Phase 1 fiscal findings to community priorities
- Discussion of desired community-facing amenities that can be required as a condition of approval. Examples may include:

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- Recreational integration: converting mandatory buffer zones into public bike paths, dog parks, or trail connections
- Infrastructure development: developer-funded fire stations or utility upgrades tied to approval
- Fiber access: dedicated fiber strands for local schools or residential dead zones
- Workforce development: funding for STEM programs and community college certifications in Data Center Operations, connecting Calhoun residents to high-wage, skilled positions

3: Ordinance & Development Standards Review

A "ready" community has its rules written before the developer arrives. This phase translates ordinance policies into enforceable, predictable development standards. Because Calhoun has an ordinance already in process, this phase is scoped as a targeted review and enhancement rather than a full-development exercise. Deliverables include:

- A comparative review of Georgia data center-specific ordinances, ensuring that noise, water, and visual impact standards meet or exceed state baseline requirements and reflect Calhoun residents expressed priorities
- Guidance frameworks for Noise Impact Studies
- Implementation matrix identifying which standards are codified, which require conditions of approval, and which are developer commitments

This phase links directly to Calhoun's Comprehensive Plan requirements for plan-to-regulation alignment and predictable implementation of growth management policies.

4: Final Report & Stakeholder Presentation

A comprehensive written report consolidating findings from all phases will be delivered in PDF format. The report will include fiscal findings, community engagement summaries, resource assessment outcomes, and ordinance recommendations in a single integrated document suitable for Comprehensive Plan documentation.

A final stakeholder presentation will be scheduled at the client's discretion following review of the draft report. Travel for all three community engagement sessions plus the final presentation is included in the project budget.

Alignment with Georgia's Comprehensive Planning Framework

Local government engagement is essential during times of significant infrastructure transformation. Communities are far more likely to participate when they can see a clear line between their participation and results-oriented outcomes. Each phase maps directly to established DCA requirements and planning elements:

DCA Planning Requirement	How This Engagement Addresses It
Fact-based planning	Fiscal impact modeling documents long-term revenue, service costs, and millage impacts before development pressure arrives
Public participation	Structured engagement mirrors DCA's mandated process including stakeholder involvement and documentation
Plan-to-regulation linkage	Ordinance alignment translates plan policies into enforceable implementation standards

Participating in this program can strengthen Calhoun's Qualified Local Government status and produce plan documentation that meets DCA standards. The goal is not a new mandate; it is a bridge that

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demonstrates how this work improves plan quality and equips the community to proactively manage high-impact development in ways that satisfy residents expressed needs and expectations.

PROJECT TEAM

The Georgia Institute of Technology has provided research, management, and technical assistance to support economic development in Georgia for decades. Today, these services are provided by the Enterprise Innovation Institute's statewide network. Under EI²'s umbrella of services to support the state, the CEDR group extends nationally recognized expertise in economic analysis and planning to communities and local governments.

Betsy McGriff will serve as the Principal Investigator and Project Manager for this project.

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Betsy McGriff serves as a Project Manager with the Center for Economic Development Research (CEDR) at Georgia Tech and is the Program Strategist for Digital First Communities. Betsy has worked in the public, private, and utility sectors in a variety of economic, workforce, and community development roles and is an expert in rural development with deep relationships throughout Georgia.

Prior to joining CEDR, Betsy led economic development initiatives for the Development Authority of Dawson County, where she successfully initiated the county's first economic development strategic plan and developed a county-wide comprehensive trail plan. Betsy has also served as the faculty liaison for the University of Georgia's Archway Partnership, where she assisted rural communities with projects spanning workforce and education, tourism, infrastructure, downtown development, and marketing and branding.

Betsy holds a Bachelor of Science in Chemistry and a Master of Business Administration with a concentration in Marketing from Georgia Southern University. She is an active member of the Georgia Association of Economic Developers, is pursuing the Certified Economic Developer (CEcD) designation, and serves on the board of Habitat for Humanity North Central Georgia.

Leigh Hopkins, AICP, CEcD
Co-Principal Investigator
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Leigh Hopkins is the Assistant Director of the Center for Economic Development Research (CEDR) at Georgia Tech. A seasoned economic development strategist and urban planner, she specializes in regional resilience, workforce development, innovation districts, and the integration of artificial intelligence into economic development planning. Leigh leads strategic initiatives that strengthen regional economies as a project lead for the Georgia AIM (Artificial Intelligence in Manufacturing) project and Georgia's High Demand Career Initiative (HDCI), helping communities build agile, future-ready workforces.

Since joining Georgia Tech in 2008, Leigh has secured national designations, launched rural revitalization programs, and led development strategies across Georgia, including the state's first regional economic resilience plan. She has also directed Georgia Tech's economic development training programs, instructing hundreds of professionals annually.

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Leigh previously worked as a senior planner with the City of Atlanta and in the private sector, where she advanced zoning reform and neighborhood-scale development. She is a Certified Economic Developer (CEcD) and a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP), holding degrees from the University of Georgia and Georgia Tech.

Grace Barrett, AICP
Project Manager, Community Engagement

Grace Barrett is an Associate Project Manager with the Center for Economic Development Research (CEDR). Grace is an urban planner specializing in housing and community development.

While at CEDR, Grace has expanded the team's housing work, blending data analysis and meaningful community engagement into action-oriented plans to jumpstart implementation. Outside of housing, Grace is assisting with a statewide Artificial Intelligence Strategic Plan and strategic planning efforts with various small communities across Georgia.

Before joining CEDR, Grace worked as an urban planner in the private sector, managing neighborhood plans and small redevelopment projects, with a focus on guiding community-driven positive change in disinvested communities. Grace graduated from the University of Georgia with a Bachelor of Arts in Geography. She also holds a Master of City and Regional Planning (MCRP) and a Master of Real Estate Development (MRED) from the Georgia Institute of Technology.

Claire Breeden
Project Manager
GIS Analysis & Community Engagement

Claire Breeden is an Associate Project Manager with the Center for Economic Development Research (CEDR) With a background in urban planning, GIS analysis, and economic development, Claire brings expertise in housing policy, community development, and data visualization to support informed decision-making and participatory planning. Her academic research focuses on the spatial implications of housing policy across Georgia.

A member of both the American Planning Association and the Urban Land Institute and Chair of the Emerging Planners of Georgia, Claire remains actively engaged in industry advancements and thought leadership.

Claire holds a dual Master of City and Regional Planning and a Master of Science in Geographic Information Systems and Technology (M.S. GIST) from Georgia Tech, along with a certificate in Higher Education Teaching, and a Bachelor of Science in Economics from the University of Tampa.

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3. TIMELINE & BUDGET

Timeline

It is expected that the project will begin promptly following official contract initiation and a kickoff scoping call. The project is estimated to take four to six months to complete, with concurrent phasing. Phases 1 and 2 can begin immediately following kickoff; scheduling for community sessions is subject to CEDR faculty and community availability. All timelines assume timely access to local data and stakeholder contacts.

Phase	Duration	Key Milestone
Kickoff & Scoping Call	1 week	Scope, budget, and calendar confirmed
1. Fiscal Impact Analysis	4–6 weeks	Draft fiscal report delivered for review
2. Community Engagement	12 weeks	Two sessions spaced ~6 weeks apart; Community Feedback summary report delivered for review
3. Ordinance Standards	3–4 weeks	Can run concurrently with Phase 3; ordinance memo and standards delivered
4. Final Report & Presentation	2 weeks	Draft report delivered; revisions; final stakeholder presentation
Total Estimated Duration	4 months	

Budget

The total estimated cost (personal services, fringe benefits, overhead, travel, and materials & supplies) to complete the work outlined in this proposal is $22,000.

Component	Scope	Notes	Estimated Cost
Fiscal Impact Analysis	Proposed scenario modeling		$5,000
Community Engagement & Education	Two facilitated public sessions (including travel)		$12,000
Ordinance & Development Standards	Ordinance review, aesthetic standards, noise/carbon frameworks		$5,000
Total Engagement		**Final scope confirmed at kickoff**	**$22,000**

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