

The Chattahoochee Quill

Listening to the Wind - Sunday, December 14, 2025

DEAR GENTLE READER

THE WIND BLOWS COLD IN CHATTAHOOCHEE HILLS THIS WEEK. YES, WE ARE PREPARING FOR THE HOLIDAY SEASON, LIGHTS, GATHERINGS, FAMILIAR RITUALS. AND YET LIFE, AS IT SO OFTEN DOES, INTERRUPTS OUR PLANS AND REMINDS US HOW PRECIOUS OUR TIME ON THIS EARTH TRULY IS.

AS I REFLECT ON THE **December 5th council session**, MY THOUGHTS TURN AWAY FROM CEREMONY AND TOWARD CONSEQUENCE, NOT ONLY THE LOSSES WE FEEL IN OUR OWN HOMES, BUT THE FAR GREATER LOSSES WE MAY FEEL AS A COMMUNITY IF WE CONTINUE ON OUR CURRENT PATH.

IN JUST NINETY DAYS, AFTER YET ANOTHER DEFERRAL OF THE **Merrill rezoning**, WHAT WILL THE LONGTERM COST BE?

HOW MANY MORE APPLICATIONS WILL QUIETLY SLIP INTO THE CATEGORY OF “GRANDFATHERED”? AND WHAT ARE THE FOREVER CONSEQUENCES OF THOSE DECISIONS, CONSEQUENCES THAT WILL SHAPE THIS CITY LONG AFTER TODAY’S ELECTED OFFICIALS HAVE MOVED ON?

I COULD NOT HELP BUT NOTICE A SUBTLE SHIFT IN THE ROOM THAT EVENING. PERHAPS OTHERS FELT IT TOO, THE MOMENT WHEN TWO OF THE MOST OUTSPOKEN SUPPORTERS OF ONE OF THE LONGEST, PLANNED PROJECTS SEEMED TO HESITATE. WAS IT THE REALIZATION THAT THE FUTURE OF CHATTAHOOCHEE HILLS IS NO LONGER THEORETICAL?

WHY DID AN ARTIST DEVELOPMENT OF ROUGHLY **100 acres** RAISE DEEPER CONCERN THAN A PROPOSAL POISED TO CONSUME **8,700 acres** OF THE HILLS?

THE WIND MOVED THROUGH THE ROOM THAT NIGHT. SOME OF US HEARD IT.

Quiet Reports, Loud Numbers

AS THE MEETING DREW TO A CLOSE, DEPARTMENT HEADS DELIVERED THEIR CUSTOMARY “QUIET REPORTS”, SPOKEN BRIEFLY, THEN SUBMITTED TO THE RECORD. PERHAPS THIS IS DONE FOR EFFICIENCY. STILL, IT REMAINS CURIOUS HOW OFTEN THE MOST CONSEQUENTIAL INFORMATION ARRIVES.

DURING DEPARTMENT HEAD REMARKS, **Mike Morton**, stated that an additional **200 acres** had been identified and placed into permanent preservation, adding to the **100 acres already on record for Serenbe**. It was further noted that **17 existing acres, in conservancy** came from another citizen.

TRANSPARENCY MATTERS, SO LET US PLACE THIS IN CONTEXT.

ACCORDING TO A **February 14, 2025 Urbanize Atlanta** interview with **Steve Nygren**, SERENBE’S TOTAL LANDHOLDING IS APPROXIMATELY **2,000 acres**, THE EQUIVALENT OF TEN PIEDMONT PARKS STITCHED TOGETHER. THAT SAME ARTICLE STATES THAT APPROXIMATELY **250 acres** HAVE ALREADY BEEN DEVELOPED.

USING THE COMMONLY CITED RATIO, ROUGHLY **2.3 acres preserved for every acre disturbed**, ONE WOULD EXPECT ***approximately 580 acres*** TO BE PERMANENTLY PRESERVED AT THIS MOMENT IN TIME.

BY THAT MATH, WE ARE NOT CLOSE.

NUMBERS, UNLIKE NARRATIVES, DO NOT BEND.

When Ordinances Exist Only on Paper

THE DISCUSSION AROUND THE **City Arborist** DESERVES SHARPER HONESTY, AND PUBLIC ACKNOWLEDGMENT.

Herman Hudson, ONCE AGAIN, BROUGHT THESE CONCERNS DIRECTLY BEFORE COUNCIL, REMINDING THE CITY OF OBLIGATIONS THAT HAVE LINGERED UNFULFILLED FOR YEARS. BY PUBLIC RECORD AND PUBLIC EXPERIENCE, THE **Tree Committee has not met in nearly six years**. THERE HAS BEEN **no formal report** FROM THE SO CALLED “*on-call*” ARBORIST, **no review by City Council**, AND **no disclosure to the public** REGARDING ENFORCEMENT ACTIONS, INSPECTIONS, OR OUTCOMES.

AN ORDINANCE WITHOUT OVERSIGHT IS NOT PROTECTION.
IT IS DECORATION.

MR. HUDSON’S COMMENTS UNDERScored WHAT MANY RESIDENTS HAVE QUIETLY OBSERVED: INVOKING AN ARBORIST WHO NEVER REPORTS, AND A COMMITTEE THAT DOES NOT CONVENE, CREATES THE APPEARANCE OF GOVERNANCE WITHOUT THE SUBSTANCE OF IT.

THE SAME PATTERN APPEARS IN ZONING ENFORCEMENT, AND THE DECEMBER MEETING MADE THAT PAINFULLY CLEAR.

IN THE CLOSING MOMENTS OF THE SESSION, THE RETIRING **Mayor casually disclosed** that **Robbie Rokovitz is serving as the City’s Zoning Officer**. THE STATEMENT WAS DELIVERED AS THOUGH THIS WERE COMMON KNOWLEDGE, THE RESULT OF A VISIBLE HIRING PROCESS, PUBLIC DISCUSSION, OR COUNCIL VOTE.

FOR MANY RESIDENTS, IT WAS NONE OF THOSE THINGS.

FROM THE PUBLIC’S PERSPECTIVE, THE ZONING OFFICER POSITION APPEARED **vacant or inactive for nearly three years**. THERE WAS NO WIDELY ADVERTISED POSTING, NO PUBLIC INTERVIEW PROCESS, NO COUNCIL DEBATE, NO CLEAR APPROVAL OF EXPANDED AUTHORITY, AND NO DISCLOSURE OF COMPENSATION CHANGES TIED TO THE ROLE.

AND YET ZONING DECISIONS CONTINUED.

THE QUESTION IS NOT PERSONAL.
THE QUESTION IS PROCEDURAL.

HOW DID THIS APPOINTMENT OCCUR?

WHO APPROVED IT?

WHEN WAS THE ROLE FILLED?

UNDER WHAT ORDINANCE WAS AUTHORITY DELEGATED?

AND WHY DID THE PUBLIC LEARN OF IT ONLY IN PASSING, AT THE VERY END OF A COUNCIL MEETING?

WHEN AUTHORITY APPEARS WITHOUT PROCESS, TRUST ERODES.

A Plan Is Not the Law

AS THE CITY NOW TURNS ITS GAZE TOWARD A **glorified Comprehensive Plan**, IT IS WORTH REMEMBERING WHAT SUCH A DOCUMENT IS, AND WHAT IT IS NOT.

A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN EXISTS TO ARTICULATE A LONG-TERM VISION, ALIGN PHYSICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL GOALS, AND GUIDE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH POLICIES AND STRATEGIES. IT IS FOUNDATIONAL. IT IS ADVISORY. IT CAN BE USEFUL.

But it is not the law.

AND YET WE NOW OBSERVE AN ALMOST IRRATIONAL REVERENCE FOR THIS PLAN, TREATED WITH THE DEVOTION OF SCRIPTURE, WHILE THE VERY **preservation ordinances embedded in the Unified Development Code** GO UNENFORCED, UNREVIEWED, AND UNDISCLOSED.

WE PRAISE VISION WHILE NEGLECTING DUTY.

WE ADMIRE THE MAP WHILE IGNORING THE RULES OF THE ROAD.

BEFORE WE CHART NEW FUTURES, PERHAPS WE SHOULD BEGIN BY **following the law already on the books**, STAFFING REQUIRED POSITIONS OPENLY, ENFORCING PRESERVATION CONSISTENTLY, DOCUMENTING DECISIONS CAREFULLY, AND DISCLOSING OUTCOMES FULLY TO THE PUBLIC.

Listening Before It Is Too Late

THERE IS **no room in our code for favoritism**.

IF WE DO NOT FOLLOW THE **Unified Development Code**, WE ALL LOSE, NOT SOME OF US, ALL OF US.

SO I ASK YOU, DEAR READER: REFLECT ON THE SORROW ALREADY PRESENT IN YOUR HEARTS. THEN IMAGINE THE DEEPER GRIEF OF WATCHING THIS COMMUNITY BECOME UNRECOGNIZABLE, NOT ALL AT ONCE, BUT SLOWLY, DECISION BY DECISION, DEFERRAL BY DEFERRAL.

THE COUNCIL MEETINGS AND WORK SESSIONS TELL STORIES FOR THOSE WILLING TO LISTEN.

THE WIND IS SPEAKING.

UNTIL THE NEXT WHISPER BRINGS US TO OUR KNEES, MAY WE PAUSE.

MAY WE LISTEN.

AND MAY WE FINALLY HEAR THE MESSAGE IT CARRIES.