

Vision of what historic Darien could be in the future presented by GA Tech

By Kathleen Russell

Since February, students in the Master of Urban Design program at Georgia Tech, working with the Georgia Conservancy, came to Darien and have been studying and conjuring up what future growth and resiliency strategies could be utilized for the second oldest town in Georgia designed by General Oglethorpe in 1736. On April 29, the students came back to Darien and presented their vision.

Georgia Tech Professor Marco Ancheita explained, "This is kind of the big picture design station for the Master Urban Design, working with the Georgia Conservancy folks for Darien and St. Marys."

"We're looking through the lens of resiliency and future planning. So, thinking about growth, not necessarily just population, but economic sustainability. For St. Marys, it has significant growth, but its real threat is flooding and some sea level rise."

"Darien, we see some of those same opportunities, but what we call the human made infrastructure is kind of one of the bigger threats, like the highway going through it. It kills a little bit of a sense of place."

The approach Ancheita explained, wasn't about a master plan. It is more about a framework of potential interventions that could be done on their own. In reality, these are all ideas that you kind of get to choose what's important to you. Maybe none of them are important, or none of them are valid, or some of them are valid. So, it's about conversation starters about economic, environmental and cultural growth and resiliency.

"So, we started calling this almost urbanism a la carte," Ancheita said.

This project takes into account today's needs, while



These renderings show an overhead view of what downtown Darien could look like in the future, as envisioned by a group from Georgia Tech. (Provided graphic)

looking forward to opportunities for the future, knowing changes in economic and environmental conditions will shift populations and priorities.

These design students took a look at the town, noting Hwy. 17 featured "automobile friendly" streets, allowing for high speed and excessive space dedicated to car lanes. There is a lack of well-designed sidewalks, soft-scape and hard-scape elements. Parking on both sides of the street reduced the pedestrian friendly zones. The waterfront park needs more design and the sidewalks along the historic tabby ruins are narrow and cramped, they said.

Most importantly, there is a lack of sense of arrival into the city, with Hwy. 17 creating a major constraint rather than opportunity.

Students considered Darien's current situation, where Oglethorpe's original vision for Darien had



A major priority for Darien is to establish a sense of arrival into town from the Darien River Bridge. (Provided graphic)

been significantly disrupted. While most of the historic squares remain, some are currently being under utilized. They are surrounded by residential developments and vacant parcels around them.

Darien teems with wildlife and has a biodiverse and unique coastal ecosystem and is a convenient place to explore wildlife and have a variety of recreational opportunities. With Darien's abundant natural resources, it needs to use this for a strategic advantage economically.

Three urban design drivers were identified: establish an arrival to Darien; activate the historic neighborhood; and stitch the seam between street and nature.

Establish an Arrival to Darien

A major priority for the town is to establish an arrival into town, but that is a very present problem as the Georgia Department of Transportation has continued to threaten to rebuild

the Darien River Bridge but has not provided a time-frame and currently says it doesn't have funding. The situation prevents the immediate creation of a more welcoming landing area in downtown Darien.

To create a landing zone as one arrives into Darien via the Darien River Bridge, these Tech designers suggest a welcoming and pedestrian friendly area. Redesign the intersection at Hwy. 17/Fort King George/Broad Street to provide pause and a welcoming arrival, with just two-way car lanes. On the northeast and northwest corners, public parks are suggested for arrival plazas and green space.

The streets would be lined with trees, with 10' sidewalks and 6' bike lanes. The Hwy. 17 and Hwy. 99 intersection could be tightened and consolidated to create a more continuous public realm.

The vision is to return Hwy 17 where it becomes four lanes to three travel lanes reducing from 70' to 30' wide, with the middle lane being a turn lane. The designers suggest reducing the number of intersections downtown.

The establishment of a cultural heritage trail anchored in the area of the McIntosh Art Association could be a good starting point. They suggest four-

tain and splash pad incorporated into the area (or another place) helps to define Darien's characteristic of water. Public courtyards and promenades along underutilized streets would provide outdoor gathering spaces that could support planned events and passive recreation.

Engage the historic neighborhood fabric

The Georgia Tech designers state: "The history of

Darien can still be seen in the urban form; its remaining public squares are significant public spaces. These public squares and their edges are an opportunity to strengthen the downtown core and historic neighborhood character.

General Oglethorpe laid out the city with multiple squares and open space promenades connecting each square all the way to Fort King George at Lower Bluff. The designers state that Columbus and Vernon squares are cultural and historic landscapes.

Inverness Square and newly rehabilitated Oglethorpe Square are to the east. Where the middle school football/soccer field is located was Green Square. There is an un-utilized square between Wayne and Congress streets on Seventh Street named Washington Square. A block to the north was Oglethorpe's Public Walk and Muster Place, but today houses are located on it. East of Washington is

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People look at plans for how downtown Darien could look in the future at a recent event presented by a group from Georgia Tech. (Photo by Kathleen Russell)

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111 BROAD STREET
DARIEN, GA 31305



MONDAY, WEDNESDAY, THURSDAY
1 P.M. - 9 P.M.
FRIDAY, SATURDAY
11 A.M. - 11 P.M.
SUNDAY
NOON - 7 P.M.
CLOSED TUESDAYS

Vision

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Jefferson and Franklin squares owned by the City of Darien and not developed.

The Tech designers' project aims to highlight the cultural and historic landmarks found throughout Darien through an accessible and comprehensive trail.

Stitch the seam between street and nature

The design team states, "The rivers and salt marshes are vital assets to the coastal community of Darien. Softening this waterfront edge with pedestrian connections and activating it with new uses will allow people to seamlessly enjoy both the downtown and nature. These connections will respond to both street and water and provide valuable public spaces for the com-

munity."

One of the possibilities to seam the street to nature and provide an opportunity for an eco-tourism signature attraction for the region would be a boardwalk in the marshland to observe nature and a bird watching tower. On the waterfront, a kayaking launch could be added as well as a living shoreline.

There has been discussion of a nature and coastal ecology center, at or near Darien's waterfront, with the potential destination

that would establish Darien as a hub for eco-tourism.

Connecting on the east to Fort King George, which is a notable tourist destination, the team proposes a trail from Fort King George Drive directly into the historic fort. The team suggests an active recreational trail adjacent to garden preserves, with the reintroduction of native plants. The installation of seat walls would allow places to rest and move as people explore this site. These suggestions would provide many unique recreational and cultural design opportunities.

Following the event, the designers took a boat tour aboard the Delta Belle to view the city of Darien from

Farm to Table
Chef Driven Menu



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ARM

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