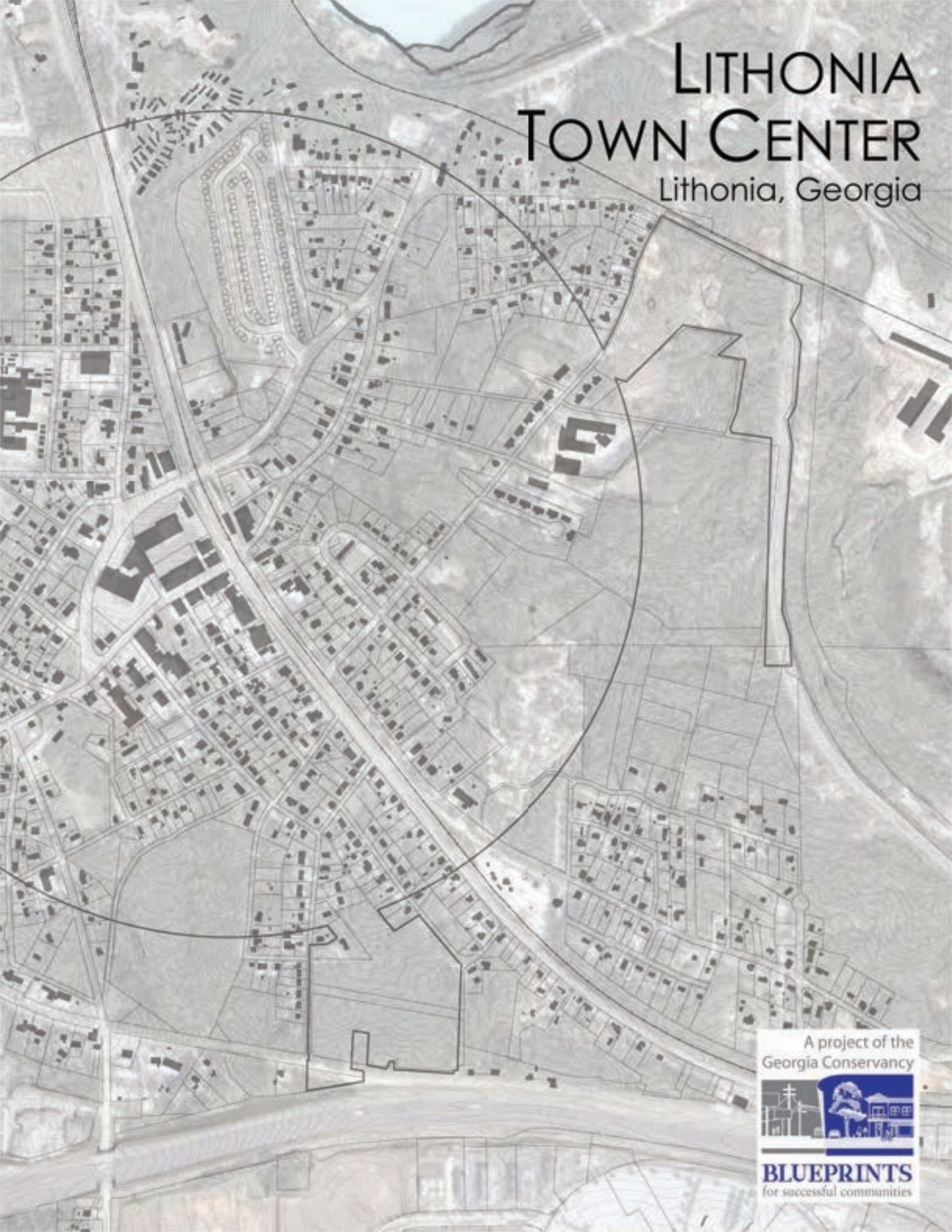

LITHONIA TOWN CENTER

Lithonia, Georgia

A project of the Georgia Conservancy

BLUEPRINTS for successful communities

Georgia Conservancy—Blueprints Partners

American Council of Engineering Companies of Georgia
American Institute of Architects - Atlanta Chapter
American Society of Landscape Architects - Georgia Chapter
Association County Commissioners of Georgia
Atlanta Neighborhood Development Partnership
Georgia Institute of Technology - College of Architecture
Georgia Municipal Association
Georgia Planning Association
Greater Atlanta Homebuilders Association
Institute of Transportation Engineers
Southface Energy Institute
Urban Land Institute - Atlanta District Council
U.S. Green Building Council - Georgia Chapter

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Alcoa Foundation
Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Alliance, Inc.
City of Lithonia
DeKalb County Department of Community Development
American Institute of Architects - Atlanta Chapter

THIS REPORT WAS CREATED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
College of Architecture
Georgia Institute of Technology

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION 01

2.0 THE PROCESS 09

3.0 OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, STRATEGIES 15

4.0 TACTICAL URBANISM 25

5.0 PLAZA REVITALIZATION 45

6.0 LONG-TERM REDEVELOPMENT 81

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS 125

APPENDIX 139

CITATIONS 154

PARTICIPANTS 155

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 BLUEPRINTS FOR SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITIES

Blueprints for Successful Communities is a 15-year old sustainable community design program of the Georgia Conservancy. *Blueprints* uses a community-based approach to sustainable planning and design. It is unique in that it involves key stakeholders – including citizens, businesses, agency and institutional representatives, and elected and appointed officials – throughout the entire planning process of redeveloping a community to better incorporate and focus on natural resource protection, green space accessibility, sustainable land use, and live-work connectivity. The *Blueprints* process is one of the most highly respected planning processes in our state because of its inclusiveness, transparency and technical quality.

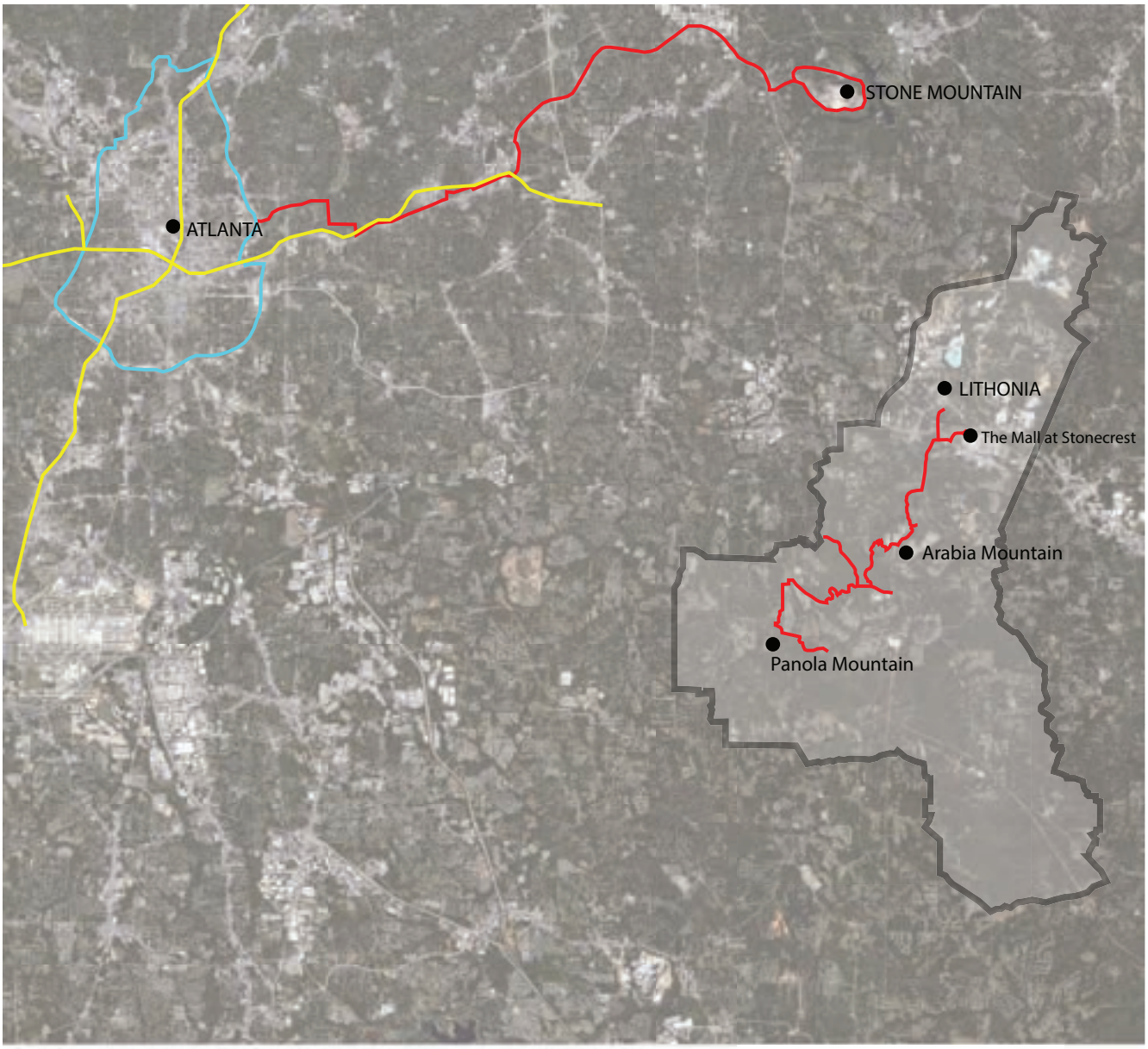
In 2011, Lithonia leaders called on *Blueprints* to explore opportunities to apply the *Blueprints* process to the City of Lithonia. In 2010 Lithonia completed a Short Term Work Plan as part of its Community Agenda. Written within this plan was the goal of working with *Blueprints* to examine redevelopment opportunities for Lithonia's downtown core, the Lithonia Plaza. Concepts for the Plaza have been generated by several plans, including the 2010 Community Agenda, the 2003 Livable Centers Initiative (LCI) study, and the 2005 Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Management Plan. These previous studies form the foundation of the *Blueprints* work. *Blueprints* was also drawn to this area because of Lithonia's walkable block structure near the Plaza and along Main Street, Lithonia's location within the Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area, and its proximity to Arabia and Panola Mountain via the PATH Foundation's Arabia Mountain trail. In discussions with local leadership, it became clear that stakeholders wanted a community plan that identified redevelopment options for the Lithonia Plaza that would encourage new businesses and visitors to occupy this downtown core. The community was also interested in low-cost design strategies that could be implemented in the near term to engage the community and enliven downtown Lithonia. Finally, Lithonia leadership was interested in identifying long-term redevelopment strategies for the greater Lithonia area that utilized Lithonia's many natural, historic, and recreational assets. *Blueprints* solicited the assistance of Professor Ellen Dunham-Jones with Georgia Tech's College of Architecture and a group of graduate students (studio) under her direction to address these requested focus areas.

Through a stakeholder-driven process, the *Blueprints* Team (composed of *Blueprints* staff, Professor Ellen Dunham-Jones and the Georgia Tech graduate architecture studio) conducted a series of community workshops and presentations, collected information and maps, conducted data collection within the community, and performed resident and business interviews to develop a set of draft recommendations for consideration by stakeholders. These recommendations were supported by the community and form the basis of this report.

1.2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Lithonia is located in eastern DeKalb County, in the Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area, approximately 18 miles east of the City of Atlanta, and just north of I-20 and Stonecrest Mall (refer to Figures 1.2a and 1.2b).

In the fall of 2011 the Lithonia community joined with



LEGEND

EXISTING PATH

EXISTING MARTA RAIL

ATLANTA BELTLINE

ARABIA MOUNTAIN NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

Figure 1.2a: Lithonia Regional Context

the Georgia Conservancy's *Blueprints for Successful Communities* to create a community master plan, emphasizing downtown revitalization, long-term redevelopment opportunities, and small-scale strategies to reinvigorate the community; this report is the result of that collaboration.

Lithonia was founded in 1856 and flourished economically around its granite quarrying industry until the late 1920s. The Great Depression led to a decline in granite operations, closing quarries at Arabia Mountain and slowing production in numerous other quarries.[1.1] Today at least three granite quarries remain in operation at Big Ledge, Rock Chapel, and Pine Mountain.

Several of the large granite quarries in the area, including those located near Arabia Mountain, Panola Mountain, and Stone Mountain, which closed operations after the Great Depression, were gradually handed over to government departments to be designated as natural areas. Stone Mountain is now a recreation and tourist area; Panola Mountain was protected as a state park in 1969, with the assistance of the Georgia Conservancy; and Arabia Mountain became the Davidson-Arabia Nature Preserve, also with the assistance of the Georgia Conservancy. The Panola Mountain State Park and the Davidson-Arabia Mountain Nature Preserve, along with Lithonia and surrounding lands, make up the 40,000-acre Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area, designated as such in 2006.[1.2] The close proximity to these treasured areas, as well as the PATH Foundation's Arabia Mountain Trail that extends from Arabia and Panola Mountain into Lithonia, remain as major assets to this community and provide opportunities for connectivity and partnership. Refer to Figure 1.2b for a map of Lithonia's potential assets.

Lithonia's granite history can also be observed throughout the community, as numerous buildings have been constructed of local granite. Notable buildings include the Seminary, or Malone House, built in 1883 and recognized on the National Register of Historic Places[1.3]; the Lithonia Woman's Club, home of DeKalb County's first library; and the ruins of the Bruce Street School, the first African American elementary school in DeKalb County.

Also important to Lithonia's history is its African American culture. Many African Americans migrated to Lithonia after the Civil War to work in the booming granite industry, leading to the settlement of one of the earliest African American communities in DeKalb County, the Bruce Street Community. Several Bruce Street Community structures remain to this day, including the Bruce Street School ruins, mentioned previously, the Union Missionary Baptist Church, and the Lithonia African American Cemetery.[1.4]

While Lithonia is home to some incredible physical and historical assets, many of them are under-utilized and disconnected from the community. The PATH trail which extends to Arabia and Panola Mountains, currently dead ends into a residential street, blocks short of downtown, becoming a missed opportunity to draw people into the downtown area. The railroad tracks that exist adjacent to the Lithonia Plaza have few crossings, disconnecting the Bruce Street School ruins and the Lucious Sanders Recreation Center (which includes the recreation center and the East DeKalb Bruce Street Senior Center), east of the railroad, from the rest of Lithonia. The Stewart Amphitheater, the Lithonia Middle School, the Lithonia Library and the Lithonia City Park, all situated within walking distance to downtown, are tucked away, with no directional signage, making them difficult to access without knowledge of their location.

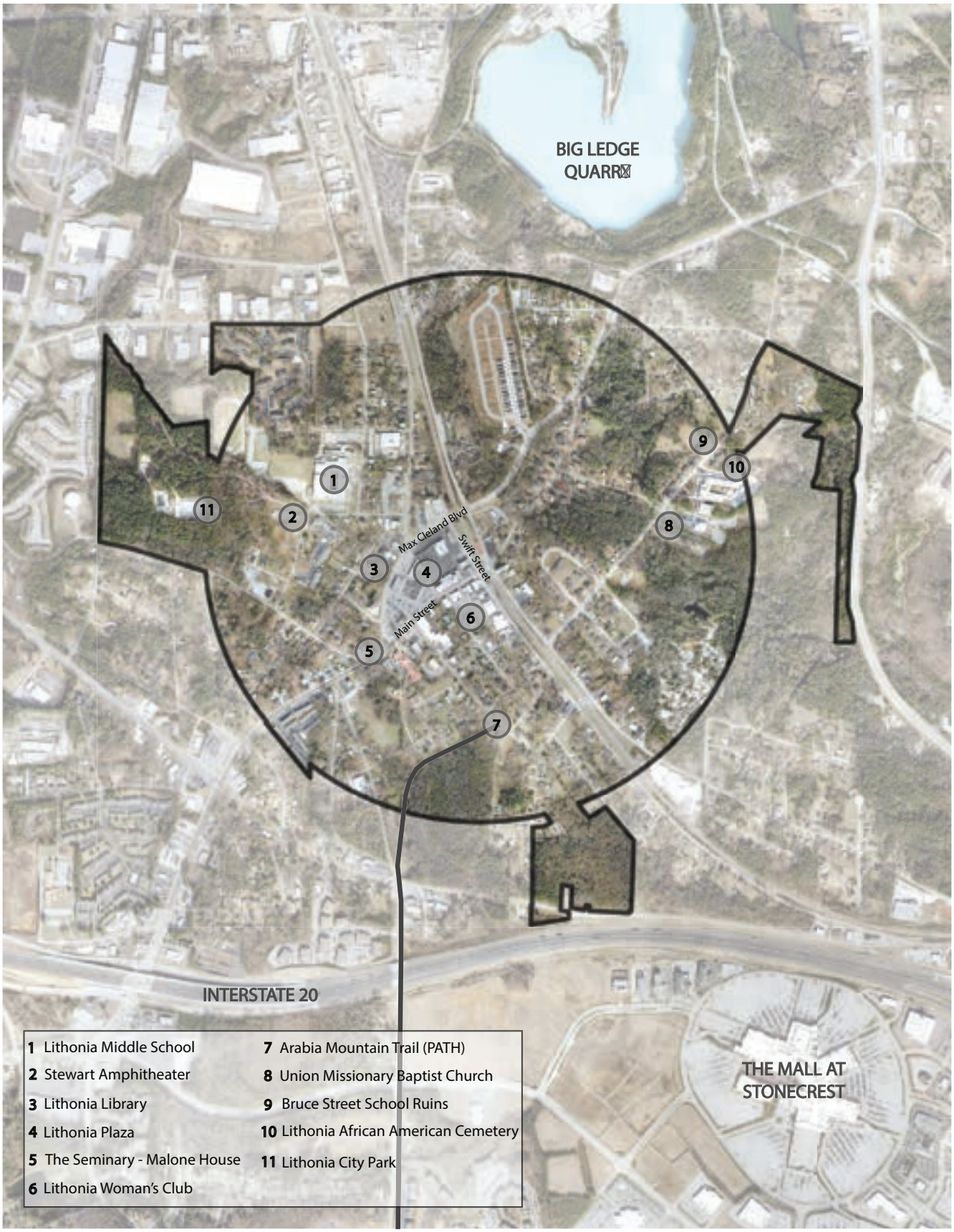


Figure 1.2b: Lithonia's Potential Assets

Lithonia's rich history is also overlooked within the community. The Big Ledge Quarry, located just north of downtown, is an important part of Lithonia's granite history and is a beautiful natural amenity. Many stakeholders expressed that they have never seen this quarry or were not even aware of its location. This quarry has potential to draw activity into the area because of its natural beauty. Additionally, Lithonia's African American history is not well documented. The Bruce Street School ruins currently sit inaccessible behind a chain link fence and most stories are only shared through word of mouth.

Last, but not least, the current state of the Lithonia Plaza has become a hindrance to the success of this community. The property underlying the Plaza was once part of the original street grid and was the heart of downtown. In the 1960s, an urban renewal project was implemented that tore down many of the historic buildings and destroyed the historic street grid and replaced them with two large strip mall style buildings on a large parcel. Today, many of the retail spaces within the Plaza are vacant and the economic vitality of this center is depressed. A portion of the Plaza is owned by the City of Lithonia, allowing for potential city-supported redevelopment as funding allows.

To address these issues and build on Lithonia's assets and opportunities, this report focuses on three major improvement areas: Tactical Urbanism (Immediate Actions), Plaza Revitalization, and Long-term Redevelopment. Each of the associated recommendations is made with the goal of creating a vibrant community that allows for growth while acknowledging the small town character of Lithonia and recognizing its rich history.

Tactical Urbanism strategies are low-cost, small-scale installations that can be installed immediately throughout the city and can engage and excite community members by demonstrating immediate change. Proposed installations include bicycle signage, a "pop-up cafe" which provides seating and tables along Main Street, a storytelling bench, and historic markers that express the history of Lithonia.

The Plaza Revitalization concepts identify a phased approach to subdividing and redeveloping the Plaza property. The intent of these strategies is to make the Plaza more walkable, provide public spaces to gather, create a framework that allows for economic development opportunities, and create housing options in the heart of downtown.

The Long-term Redevelopment strategy identifies opportunities for nodal development based on the character of each area, along the community's main corridor; provides recommendations for a Form Based Code for the City of Lithonia; and details the development potential at the Big Ledge Quarry.

It is crucial that Lithonia gains the support of, and builds partnerships and consensus with, allied organizations in order to implement the strategies recommended within this report. The recommendations in this report detail more work than the City can undertake alone. Partner organizations can provide vital expertise and resources to aid in implementation.

The concerns and community supported recommendations captured in the *Blueprints* report reflect the input of the stakeholders and participants at the time of the *Blueprints* planning process. As with any significant community project, each recommendation

should be revisited as implementation opportunities arise to verify that the recommendation is still supported and appropriate for the community. Over the life of the *Blueprints* report, it is likely that a community's population, development/redevelopment pressure, traffic patterns, local leadership, and economic activity will change. Such changes may result in a shift in recommendation priorities for implementation, may render a recommendation no longer applicable, or may result in a change in a community's needs or wishes. This is expected and part of the normal cycle of change in a community. However, it is important that future community leadership respect the stakeholder effort and community support that resulted in this *Blueprints* report.

1.3 PARTNERSHIPS

The following diagram identifies some of the partner organizations with which the City of Lithonia should work with in order to implement the recommendations as discussed in the remainder of this report (refer to Figure 1.3a). More specific information on partner organizations can be found in Chapter 7.0: Recommendations.

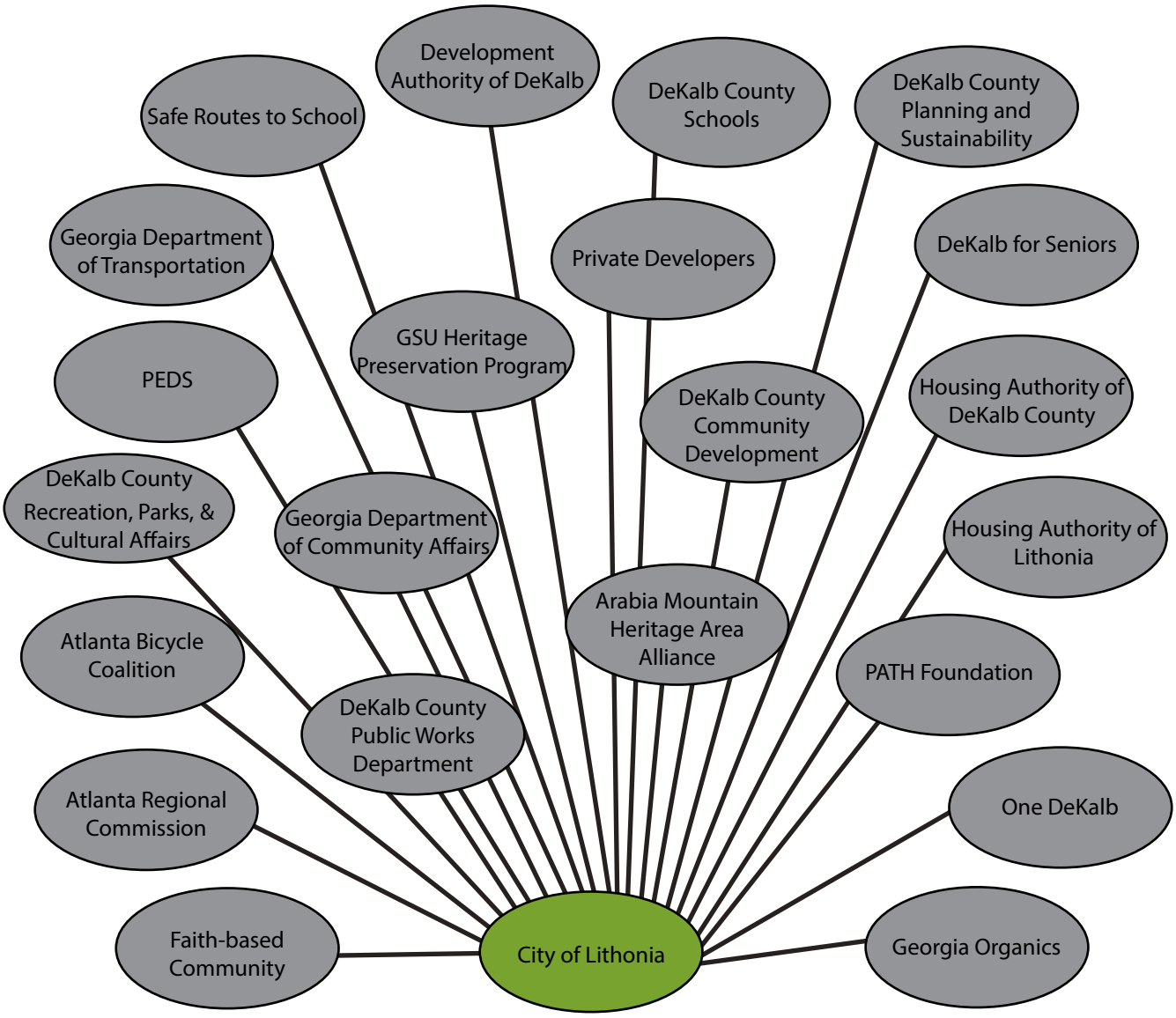


Figure 1.3a: Implementation Partners

The Process

2.0 THE PROCESS

Figure 2.1a: Community Workshop 3

The *Blueprints* process was directed and managed by the Georgia Conservancy, in close coordination with Lithonia leadership. Technical support for the project was provided by Professor Ellen Dunham-Jones of Georgia Tech's College of Architecture, with a fall 2011 Architecture Studio, composed of graduate students studying architecture and city planning. The planning process relied heavily on participation and input from community stakeholders through a series of public workshops, discussed in more detail in Section 2.1. Final recommendations found within this report, reflect, as best possible, the consensus of community participants, as well as professional judgment of the *Blueprints* Team - Georgia Conservancy *Blueprints* staff, Professor Ellen Dunham-Jones and participating graduate students.

The Lithonia *Blueprints for Successful Communities* began in the summer of 2011 with data collection, stakeholder identification, and project preparation. From August to December of 2011, the community planning and stakeholder involvement work occurred, coinciding with the semester calendar of Georgia Tech. From January to March of 2012, the Georgia Conservancy compiled, edited and added to the architecture studio's work to create this final report.

The City of Lithonia, the Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Alliance, the Atlanta Regional Commission, and other groups have invested in master plans and targeted area plans in past years. These previous plans were studied and utilized, as appropriate, in developing specific recommendations for Lithonia. The intent of this project is to fill voids in other plans that have taken a broader approach to this community, while respecting the stakeholder-supported and best professional judgment recommendations of these previous efforts.

2.1 WORKSHOPS

Throughout the Lithonia *Blueprints* process, three community workshops plus a kick-off meeting were facilitated, directed and managed by the Georgia Conservancy, with presentations and participation from

Figure 2.1b: Community Workshop 1

Figure 2.1c: Community Workshop 1

Figure 2.1d: Community Workshop 2

Figure 2.1e: Community Workshop 2

Figure 2.1f: Community Workshop 3

Figure 2.1g: Community Workshop 3

Figure 2.1h: Community Workshop 1

the Georgia Tech Architecture Studio. The intent of these workshops was to engage stakeholders in the process; identify the strengths, challenges, and opportunities of the neighborhood; and collect stakeholder input as recommendations were drafted. Refer to Figures 2.1a to 2.1j for images from each workshop.

2.1.1 KICK-OFF MEETING

On July 28, 2011 the *Blueprints* Team conducted an educational meeting to kick-off the Lithonia *Blueprints*. At this meeting the Georgia Conservancy *Blueprints* staff described the *Blueprints* process, discussed key terms and concepts that were likely to be expressed during the process, and outlined the next steps, including upcoming workshops.

2.1.2 WORKSHOP 1

The *Blueprints* Team hosted the first workshop at Lithonia Middle School on September 19, 2011. During this workshop the *Blueprints* Team explained the *Blueprints* process and presented their initial findings and understandings of the Lithonia community. Professor Ellen Dunham-Jones, an expert on retrofitting defunct retail centers, presented nationwide examples of struggling strip mall retail centers that have been successfully redeveloped as examples for potential revitalization of the Lithonia Plaza. The stakeholders were then divided into work groups to discuss the strengths, challenges and opportunities of Lithonia. The discussions from each group were analyzed and common topics were discovered. Discussions included: Historical downtown Lithonia's character before the Plaza development was built; the current state of the Plaza development - including vacant retail spaces and poor condition of the city-owned building; visions for what the Plaza could become; the potential relocation of City Hall; the Stewart

Figure 2.1j: Community Workshop 2

Amphitheater and a desire to bring it back to life; and the lack of jobs in the area; among many other topics.

2.1.3 WORKSHOP 2

The *Blueprints* Team utilized the outcome of the discussions from the first workshop to create draft recommendations that addressed the issues and desires voiced by the stakeholders. These draft recommendations were then presented at the second workshop, which was held on October 12, 2011 at the Lithonia Middle School. The recommendations presented at this workshop included: 1) Recommendations for regional nodal development; 2) Redesign options for the Lithonia Plaza; and 3) Suggested small-scale improvements that could be implemented by the community to improve and enliven the city.

After the presentation of these draft recommendations, stakeholders were divided into small groups to provide their feedback on each recommendation. The stakeholder input received at this workshop led to the revision of the proposed recommendations into strategies that more clearly adhered to the community's desires.

2.1.4 WORKSHOP 3

The final workshop was conducted on November 21, 2011 at the Lithonia First United Methodist Church. At this meeting, the *Blueprints* Team presented final recommendations to the Lithonia community, answered questions and took note of any community concerns regarding the presented recommendations. These final recommendations, with stakeholder concerns addressed, are detailed in the following report sections.

Opportunities
Challenges
Strategies

3.0 OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, STRATEGIES

Figure 3.1a: Big Ledge Quarry

This section identifies the major opportunities within and challenges facing the City of Lithonia. Determination of the opportunities and challenges was based on data collection, field study and analysis, conversations and discussions with stakeholders during Community Workshops, and interviews with community members through-out the process. Strategies, as discussed in Section 3.3, were formed in response to the opportunities and challenges as discussed below.

3.1 OPPORTUNITIES

Lithonia is teeming with assets and opportunities. Lithonia's history is unique and important to the region, as it is known for its rich African American culture and has strong ties to the booming 19th-century granite industry. Lithonia is also fortunate to be located in close proximity to some of Georgia's most beautiful natural areas, Arabia, Panola and Stone Mountains. Lithonia is also home to local amenities, including the Stewart Amphitheater, the Lithonia Library, the Lithonia City Park, and several historically significant buildings. Due to its close proximity to the business centers of Atlanta, Lithonia also has potential for a population growth that can contribute to Lithonia's vitality. The following paragraphs describe these assets and opportunities in greater detail.

3.1.1 GRANITE HISTORY

Founded in 1856, Lithonia's economy quickly centered around the granite quarrying industry as granite deposits were discovered throughout the region. Large quarries were founded just outside of Lithonia at Big Ledge (refer to Figure 3.1a), Pine Mountain, Arabia Mountain, Panola Mountain, and Stone Mountain. Lithonia area granite was found to be unique in that it was able to withstand weathering, retain its color and pattern, and its ability to be easily split.[3.1]

As the Great Depression hit the country in the 1920s, the granite industry declined and many quarry operations were closed or greatly slowed.[3.2] There are a few granite

quarries that remain in partial operation today near Lithonia, including Big Ledge, Pine Mountain, and Rock Chapel.

Lithonia's stake in the granite industry is evident throughout the city today, with the presence of many significant buildings constructed of local Lithonia granite. The Seminary, or Malone House, was built of Lithonia granite in 1883, and operated as a Seminary, a Hotel and a residence before being placed on the National Register for Historic Places in 1978.[3.3] The Lithonia Woman's Club, home of DeKalb County's first library, and currently owned by the Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Alliance, was constructed of local granite. The Bruce Street School, DeKalb's first African American school, was also composed of Lithonia granite. Additionally, there are residential buildings through out Lithonia that have utilized this local material. Highlighting these buildings through signage, new uses, and historic tours would allow Lithonia's significance in the granite industry to become a more visible and prominent part of this community.

The remaining quarries near Lithonia provide an opportunity to become community assets as well. In particular, Big Ledge Quarry, which is located just north of downtown Lithonia and just outside of City boundaries, has great potential to spur development in the area and draw visitors in to enjoy this beautiful amenity. While a portion of the quarry is still in operation, it is a beautiful scenic asset showcasing natural granite formations and striking blue water. This amenity has the potential to draw people in from all over the state to enjoy the view and recreate, take advantage of other local amenities in the Lithonia Plaza, and ultimately, contribute to Lithonia's economy.

Figure 3.1b: Bruce Street School Ruins

3.1.2 AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

Lithonia's African American history dates back to just after the Civil War when many African Americans migrated to Lithonia to work in the booming granite industry. This led to the settlement of one of the earliest African American communities in DeKalb County in 1895, the Bruce Street Community. This community settled in north-eastern Lithonia and several of the original structures remain today. The granite ruins of Bruce Street School, the first African American elementary school in DeKalb County, remains as a reminder of Lithonia's rich African American history (refer to Figure 3.1b). The Union Missionary Baptist Church stands in its original location and remains in operation today. The Lithonia African American Cemetery is located near the Bruce Street Community and has been in operation since 1850. The Antioch Lithonia Baptist Church, located on the west side of town, is the first African American church in DeKalb County, established in 1869. Lithonia also has a strong history in African American civil rights. Lucious Sanders, an African American activist and veteran, formed the Lithonia Civic League in 1940 to challenge racial discrimination.[3.4]

While this history is abundant, there is little signage within the community or documentation of these significant

Figure 3.1c: Arabia Mountain Trail - Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area
Photo courtesy of www.pathfoundation.org

places and stories. The opportunity is ripe to record and display Lithonia's African American history and share it with the greater community.

3.1.3 NATURAL AMENITIES

Lithonia is fortunate to be located in close proximately to several natural areas and is situated within the Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area, a 40,000-acre National Heritage Area, designated as such by the National Park Service in 2006.

The Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area includes the Davidson-Arabia Nature Preserve, where Arabia Mountain is located, the Panola Mountain State Park, and the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Rockdale County. Davidson-Arabia Nature Preserve was designated as such in 1992 when the Davidson family donated the land to DeKalb County, with the assistance of the Georgia Conservancy. Panola Mountain was protected as a state park by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources in 1969, also with the assistance of the Georgia Conservancy, and was designated a National Natural Landmark in 1980.

Stone Mountain Park is also nearby, just 10 miles north of Lithonia. Stone Mountain was purchased by the State of Georgia in 1959 and turned into a recreation and tourist area.[3.5]

The opportunity for Lithonia to better connect with these natural amenities is great. Currently, a PATH Foundation trail connects Lithonia to Arabia and Panola Mountains, but ends short of downtown Lithonia. Connecting the trail to downtown and incorporating signage, could bring more visitors into downtown to enjoy the amenities Lithonia has to offer and support future shops and restaurants. An added benefit would be to make this asset more visible and accessible to Lithonia residents. Further, a trail that connects Lithonia to Stone Mountain, would create a wonderful regional recreation amenity that would complete the connection from Arabia and Panola Mountains, to Lithonia, Stone Mountain, and all the way to Atlanta. A similar regional PATH Foundation

trail, the Silver Comet, brings thousands of users a year to various trail access points. A partnership with the Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Alliance and the PATH Foundation will be imperative to complete the connections necessary to create a regional trail and to draw visitors to downtown Lithonia.

3.1.4 LOCAL AMENITIES

Lithonia is home to several local community amenities, all within walking distance to downtown. Investing in these amenities, in conjunction with redeveloping downtown, will create more reasons for visitors to come to Lithonia and contribute to the local economy. These amenities could also be selling points encouraging new residents to relocate to the city.

The Stewart Amphitheater, which saw regional success in the early 2000s, has in recent years seen decline and disinvestment. Many stakeholders are interested in seeing the Amphitheater reinvigorated. The revitalization of the Amphitheater would give visitors a destination point in Lithonia. As redevelopment occurs and restaurants and retail open in the nearby Lithonia Plaza, Amphitheater patrons would contribute even more to the local economy by enjoying dinner and shopping prior to an event at the Amphitheater. Refer to Figures 3.1d to 3.1f.

The Lithonia City Park, where the Amphitheater is located, extends 53 acres and includes a multi-use field, a basketball court, a tennis court, a swimming pool, a playground, picnic areas, and trails. Maintenance and upgrades of these facilities could further draw people into the community.

The Lithonia Middle School, the Lithonia Library, the Kelly Memorial Park and the Lucious Sanders Recreation

Figure 3.1d: Stewart Amphitheater

Figure 3.1e: Stewart Amphitheater

Figure 3.1f: Stewart Amphitheater

Figure 3.1g: Lithonia Plaza

Center (which includes the recreation center and the East DeKalb Bruce Street Senior Center) are also located within walking distance to downtown and are actively utilized by the community.

3.1.5 POTENTIAL GROWTH

As Lithonia is located just 18 miles east of Atlanta, many Lithonia residents currently commute to this job center. Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) bus service, which connects Lithonia to Atlanta, provides an alternative transit option for these commuters. Recent discussions have recommended building a MARTA rail line from Atlanta, along I-20, to Lithonia. While there are no current plans to implement this connection, its potential makes Lithonia an even more desirable place to live.

The potential for population growth in Lithonia is expected as Atlanta continues to grow and new residents look outside of Atlanta for places to live that are convenient to job centers. These new residents would provide a larger tax-base for Lithonia and would bring more people into downtown to enjoy the growing amenities that Lithonia has to offer. To support this potential growth, development policies and regulations should be put into effect now so that new development occurs in a way that allows for greater density in specific areas - such as where transit stations will be located; creates walkable, sustainable communities; and respects the small town character with which Lithonia identifies.

3.2 CHALLENGES

While Lithonia is full of assets and opportunities, there are challenges that must be addressed in order for Lithonia to become a vibrant and successful community. Lithonia's downtown core, the Lithonia Plaza, currently sits as a mostly vacant strip mall leaving the downtown core under-utilized and economically depressed. Amenities are plentiful, but access to these amenities is hindered by a lack of prominent signage and poor sidewalk infrastructure. As seen all over the world, the current economic state of Lithonia is stagnated and in need of a boost. The following paragraphs further explain these challenges.

3.2.1 LITHONIA PLAZA

The Lithonia Plaza, which is bounded by Max Cleland Boulevard, Main Street, and Swift Street, is a retail district located in the center of Lithonia. Historically, this area

was a part of the original street grid and was the heart of Lithonia, hosting a fire station, church, and a train depot within its footprint. Today, several historic buildings remain, housing City Hall and the police station. The historic structures, however, only make up a small portion of this development. The majority of the Plaza was reconstructed in the 1960's with urban renewal funding into a strip-mall style building surrounded by expanses of asphalt parking lots all located on one large super-block that absorbed and obscured the original street grid. With the exception of the Wayfield Foods grocery store, many of the retail spaces are vacant and the economic vitality of the center is depressed. Refer to Figure 3.1g.

A large portion of the Plaza is owned by the City of Lithonia. Stakeholders explained concern that the building on this city-owned property is in tremendous disrepair and needs to be demolished. The city-owned property provides a great opportunity to implement first steps in redevelopment of the Plaza, as the City has control to move forward with demolition and reuse of the site.

Competing retail does exist just south of the city limits at the Mall at Stonecrest. Developed in the early 2000s, this large shopping center provides shopping and entertainment amenities to the area. As redevelopment of the Plaza area becomes a reality, a merchandising plan for downtown retail should be completed so that new retail complements the Mall at Stonecrest.

The lack of public gathering and civic space in the downtown core was also expressed as a concern by many stakeholders throughout the process. There is only one small park, Kelly Memorial Park, located just west of the Plaza. City Hall and a police station are located in the Plaza's historic buildings, but are in store fronts and not easily identifiable if the location is unknown. A more prominent location and signage for City Hall could become a welcoming indication that you have entered downtown Lithonia.

3.2.2 DISCONNECTIONS TO AMENITIES

Local and regional amenities are plentiful, however, many are poorly connected to downtown Lithonia, making them difficult to access. Signage is also lacking in Lithonia that would make residents and visitors more aware of these great amenities.

Within the city limits, the railroad tracks and the weak sidewalk infrastructure make it difficult to access local amenities such as the Stewart Amphitheater, the Lithonia City Park, the Lithonia Middle School, the Lithonia Library, the Bruce Street Community, and the Lucious Sanders Recreation Center.

Amenities located east of the railroad tracks, such as the Lucious Sanders Recreation Center and the Bruce Street Community structures - which include the Bruce Street School ruins, the Union Missionary Baptist Church, and the Lithonia African American Cemetery - remain disconnected from the west side of town. Near the Lithonia Plaza there are only two railroad crossings. An at-grade crossing exists on Main Street, for cars, but no sidewalks or pedestrian crossings are present. A second crossing exists at Max Cleland Boulevard, where the street tunnels under the railroad tracks. While this crossing is convenient for automobiles, there are no sidewalks to accommodate the pedestrian.

Pedestrian connectivity and signage is also lacking as a means to access the Stewart Amphitheater, the Lithonia

Figure 3.1h: Arabia Mountain trail at Johnson Street

City Park, the Lithonia Middle School, and the Lithonia Library. Sidewalks near these amenities in many situations do not exist or are in poor condition. Signage providing direction and announcement of these amenities is sparse, making it more difficult to access them if you are not familiar with the location.

Connections to regional amenities are also a challenge. The PATH Foundation's Arabia Mountain trail extends from Arabia Mountain and the Panola Mountain State Park north to the Mall at Stonecrest and into Lithonia, where the trail dead-ends into residential Johnson Street, blocks short of downtown Lithonia (refer to Figure 3.1h). If the trail extended into downtown and signage existed to direct people to points of interest around the community, Lithonia could potentially benefit from cyclists and recreational visitors coming into town and contributing to the local economy through dining and shopping. A trail head in Lithonia could also provide a reason for cyclists to come to Lithonia before and after their ride. The Arabia Mountain Heritage Area Management Plan provides trail extension ideas to historic sites throughout Lithonia, as well as a recommended trail head at the Lithonia Woman's Club. A PATH trail connection into downtown could take many forms: an on-street bike lane or the traditional PATH layout. PATH has worked with many residential neighborhoods and has been able to successfully minimize negative impacts on property owners.

There is also potential for the PATH Foundation trail to connect from Lithonia north into Stone Mountain, where an existing PATH Foundation trail, the Stone Mountain Trail, connects to Atlanta. This connection would complete a large regional arc, connecting Panola and Arabia Mountains all the way to Atlanta, and would possibly draw even more visitors into Lithonia.

3.2.3 ECONOMY

The current economic climate has affected the entire nation. Lithonia, like many cities across the country, suffers from a lack of public and private investment to assist with revitalization, new businesses and retail

are scarce, and unemployment rates are high. While this report does not focus on economic development strategies and the national economy will have to recover in its own time, Lithonia can plan for and redevelop in a way that will promote and allow for new businesses and jobs to move into the area. Building on existing amenities and providing a framework for new businesses to prosper can put Lithonia is a position to draw entrepreneurs and jobs into the City. This planning process did uncover a strongly held belief by stakeholders that Lithonia's small town scale and unique architecture built of local granite should be represented in any future redevelopment ventures - public or private.

3.3 STRATEGIES

The following paragraphs outline strategies that address the challenges and build from the opportunities as identified in Sections 3.1 and 3.2. The three strategies, Tactical Urbanism (Immediate Actions), Plaza Revitalization, and Long-Term Redevelopment, engage different scales of the community to provide revitalization recommendations. Tactical Urbanism provides small-scale, low-cost strategies; Plaza Revitalization addresses the medium-scale through redevelopment of the downtown core; and Long-Term Redevelopment recommends large-scale strategies for revitalization throughout the city. The remainder of this report provides further detail on each of these three recommended strategies.

3.3.1 TACTICAL URBANISM

Tactical Urbanism is a community planning approach to revitalize the city through incremental, small-scale, often lower cost improvements that strive to achieve a larger purpose. In the case of Lithonia, Tactical Urbanism is attempting to excite and engage the community in revitalization, educate the community and visitors about existing amenities and Lithonia's rich history, draw people into downtown, and create more public gathering spaces. These objectives are addressed through five strategies: 1. A Project Lithonia event; 2. A Bike Lithonia campaign; 3. Installation of a pop-up cafe that provides seating and tables on Main Street; 4. A storytelling bench; and 5. An installation denoting a historic site in downtown Lithonia. Further detail on the Tactical Urbanism approach is discussed in Chapter 4.

3.3.2 PLAZA REVITALIZATION

The Plaza Revitalization section focuses on redevelopment of the downtown core, the Lithonia Plaza. These recommendations attempt to revitalize the historic heart of Lithonia, to draw people into downtown and activate the streets at all hours, to create more permanent public gathering spaces, make civic spaces more prominent, support and connect to surrounding amenities, and create a physical framework that will encourage economic growth. Some of the strategies to address these objectives include bringing housing into the Plaza, creating more public gathering spaces, relocating City Hall, and building more retail and office space. The Plaza Revitalization strategy is further described in Chapter 5.

3.3.3 LONG-TERM REDEVELOPMENT

The Long-term Redevelopment strategy provides recommendations that address future growth throughout the City of Lithonia. This strategy attempts to address issues of development pressure due to population growth and the issue of poor connectivity to regional amenities. These issues are addressed through Form Based Code recommendations, leveraging existing amenities to encourage new development, and providing recommendations for extensions of the PATH Foundation trail. Long-term Redevelopment is further described in Chapter 6.