

**MINUTES**  
**CITY OF SUWANEE, GEORGIA**  
**ZONING APPEALS BOARD MEETING**  
**April 18, 2023**

**PLANNING AND ZONING APPEALS BOARD MEMBERS:** Present: Donald Lee, David Sullivan, Ray Brown, Paul Altnauer, and Beth Lembo. Staff members present: Alyssa Durden, Peyton Chiang, and MaryAnn Jackson.

**CALL TO ORDER**

Ray Brown called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

**ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA**

*David Sullivan moved to approve the agenda as presented, second by Paul Altnauer. Motion carried 5-0.*

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

*Beth Lembo moved to approve the January 17, 2023 minutes, second by Donald Lee. Motion carried 5-0.*

**OLD BUSINESS**

**NEW BUSINESS**

V-2023-002- Owner/Applicant: Sawmill Drive Industrial Partners, LLC. The applicant requests a variance from Section 1704 of the City of Suwanee Zoning Ordinance to deviate from tree preservation and replacement regulations by reducing the size of replacement trees. The site contains approximately 26.4 acres in Land Lot 170 of the 7<sup>th</sup> District and is located at 195 Sawmill Drive.

Alyssa Durden presented the staff report as follows: the applicant seeks a variance from section 1704.6.1 of the City of Suwanee Zoning Ordinance to allow for a reduction of the required 20 tree density units per acre for the site. The subject parcel is approximately 27 acres and is located at 195 Sawmill Drive and fronts Sawmill Drive. The parcel is currently vacant and the owner is in the process of developing a 327,825 square foot distribution facility. The applicant is seeking to reduce the size of trees to be replanted on the subject property. This would reduce the overall number of tree density units provided for the project. As such, a variance would be required.

The Buffer, Landscape, and Tree Preservation (BLT) Ordinance, Article XVII of the Zoning Ordinance provides the landscaping requirements for the development in Suwanee. The Zoning Ordinance requires 20 tree density units (TDUs) per acre. Tree density units may be obtained by either saving existing trees or planting new trees. Larger trees (either saved or replanted) are assigned a higher TDU value than smaller trees. The subject property is approximately 26.45 acres. This means the site is required to provide a minimum of 529 TDUs.

Prior to clearing, all trees with a trunk diameter larger than 24" DBH (measured at 4.5 feet in height) must be identified and if they are not to be saved, then the developer must replace twice the number of tree density units for the specimen trees. On the subject property, there were 8 trees with trunks larger than 24". As a result, the development is required to provide an additional 61.2 TDUs. Between the specimen tree requirements and the requirement for 20 TDUs per acre, the development is required to provide a total of 590.2 TDUs.

The development proposes to save approximately 0.46 acres of the overall property. Through tree sampling, the landscape architect determined that the trees saved on this property would have a value of 116.1 TDUs. This means that the site would need to be replanted with 474.1 additional tree density units. The current landscape plans indicate 104 6" caliper trees, 158 5" caliper trees, 267 4" caliper trees, 35 3" caliper trees, and 40 2" caliper trees are proposed to be planted on the property. The total value of these 604 trees is 474.1 TDUs.

The subject property is located on Sawmill Drive, north of the intersection with Lawrenceville-Suwanee Road in the highly commercialized Suwanee Gateway character area. To the west of the subject property is a Wal-Mart and an associated shopping center both zoned C-2A. To the south of the subject property is a shopping center formerly anchored by a business supply store zoned C-2A. There are also hotels (one zoned C-2A and the other C-3), undeveloped land (zoned C-2), and a liquor store (zoned C-3) located to the south of the property. To the north of the subject property are several M-1 zoned properties developed with office warehouse (similar to what is proposed on the subject property) uses that back up to Sawmill Drive but access Satellite Boulevard. Across Sawmill Drive, to the east, are undeveloped commercially zoned tracts, an M-1 zoned tract developed with a self-storage facility, and I-85.

As mentioned earlier, the subject property is under development with a 327,000 square foot office warehouse. The applicant is requesting to reduce the size of the trees to be replanted on the property. The current plans include 104 6" caliper, 158 5" caliper trees and 267 4" caliper trees, They propose to reduce the size of these trees to 3" caliper. This would reduce the site density for the property by 115.7 TDUs.

The Satellite Boulevard corridor is developed with a number of similar developments. Some of these were developed in unincorporated Gwinnett County and then annexed into the City. However, it is still worth reviewing the intensity of development at which the various office warehouse buildings were developed in the area.

A review of the intensity of development of the nearby office warehouse buildings indicates that the subject property is less intensively developed than all of the nearby buildings (see Table 1). The average for the 7 nearby buildings is 15,013 square feet of building per acre. The subject property will be developed with 12,375 square feet of building per acre. The applicant is not proposing more building per square foot than the property can accommodate.

The subject property is lightly developed compared with other office warehouse buildings. The subject property was encumbered with several environmental hurdles. The property required stream buffer variances from the state EPD and from Suwanee (V-2022-002). The property was

also required to obtain approvals from the US Army Corp of Engineers for impacts to the wetlands. This approval required the developers to purchase wetland credits (at a cost exceeding \$2 million). The variance granted by the City, the variances granted by the state, and the wetland mitigation were all necessary in the order for the subject property to accommodate the proposed development.

The applicant proposes to plant the subject property with over 600 trees. The 27 acre site will average more than 22 trees per acre. Most of the trees will be planted at the front of the property adjacent to Sawmill Drive and to the rear of the property. The remaining trees will be replanted throughout the parking lots for the property (not to be confused with the areas designed to accommodate semi-trucks).

The site currently requires 590.2 tree density units. The applicant has proposed planting, with the currently approved plans, a combination of trees ranging from 2-inch caliper to 6-inch caliper, and preserving about a half-acre worth of trees, thus providing a total of 590.2 TDUs. With the latest proposal to reduce the size of the replanted trees, the applicant is seeking to provide no trees larger than 3” caliper, which would reduce the total number of TDUs to 474.5.

The City incentivizes the replanting of larger trees by assigning a greater TDU value to those larger trees. These larger trees provide for a greater “wow value” for an immediate visual impact. However, this more immediate impact comes with a cost for the trees. Larger trees do not adapt well to being replanted and as a result, the larger trees are more likely to die and will not grow as quickly the first several years. In landscaping circles, 3” caliper trees are considered the ideal size for balancing the desire for an immediate impact with an improved rate of survivability. Another challenge with larger trees is finding them. Large trees are not readily available in large quantities. While the City has had some developments choose to plant more larger trees, we have not seen a project of this size with this number of trees in excess of 3” caliper. It should also be noted that studies have shown that 3” caliper trees replanted at the same time as 6” caliper trees will catch and exceed the 6” caliper trees in size within 5 years (because of their superior ability to adapt when replanted). Finally, most of the trees are going to be tightly grouped together, with the result that individual trees will not stand out and the size of the trees will not be noticeable. Parking lot trees however, will be more high profile and more likely to stand out individually. If the variance request to reduce the size of the trees is granted, the net effect would not be noticeable in most portions of the property. It does not appear that there are any more locations for additional trees to be planted. Trees need a certain amount of space in order to grow.

The City of Suwanee’s Zoning Ordinance grants the Zoning Board of Appeals the authority to grant variances. According to Section 2006 of the Ordinance, the Board is authorized to grant variances when literal enforcement of the Ordinance will result in unnecessary hardship to a property owner. A variance may be granted if the conditions are unique to the property and/or are unlikely to cause substantial detriment to the public good, or if the variance will not undermine the intent of the Zoning Ordinance.

The site is unable to accommodate the required number of trees even with planting more than 500 larger caliper trees. A decrease in the caliper of trees would in fact be beneficial to preserving the

natural environment around the site, as it would increase the survival rate of the trees and with the tight grouping of the trees in most locations the size of the tree will not have a significant visual impact on the overall appearance of the project. The purpose of the City's landscape requirements is to preserve and enhance the City's natural environment through the planting of trees and other landscape material. Given the large number of 4" and 5" caliper trees, availability is also likely to be an issue. Provided all trees are planted according to the submitted plans and other landscape requirements from the City are met, approval of the request could be appropriate.

In conclusion, approval of this variance would not undermine the intent of the Zoning Ordinance, which is to preserve and enhance the City's natural environment through the planting of trees and other landscape material. Approval of this requests would not likely negatively impact nearby properties. As such, staff recommends approval with conditions of V-2023-002.

Donald Lee asked if there is any information from an arborist regarding the trees to be planted. Alyssa Durden stated that the arborist frequently used by the City of Suwanee supports the staff recommendation for three inch caliper trees to be planted. A landscape inspection will be required before a certificate of occupancy is issued.

Beth Lembo asked about the wildlife being displaced with the removal of the trees. Alyssa Durden indicated that there is no documentation regarding the wildlife.

Paul Alznauer stated that 5" caliper trees are hard to find.

Beth Lembo asked how long the City of Suwanee will hold the performance bond. Peyton Chiang stated that we will hold the performance bond for a year.

Ray Brown called upon the applicant.

Mr. Rees Waite, Sawmill Industrial Partners, LLC., 1776 Peachtree Street, Atlanta, GA. Mr. Waite explained that it is difficult to find 5 inch caliper trees. He will have to use more than one nursery to find all the trees needed.

Ray Brown called for opposition. There was none.

Beth Lembo asked about trees that are down on Sawmill Drive by I-85. Mr. Waite stated that he does not own that property.

***Paul Alznauer moved to approve V-2023-002 with staff conditions, second by David Sullivan. Motion carried 5-0.***

1. Tree preservation must be accomplished as indicated on the approved landscape plan.
2. Trees indicated as 4", 5", or 6" caliper may be replanted with a 3" caliper tree of similar or comparable species, except those trees in the parking lot. The 49 parking lot trees on the site should be 5" caliper trees.
3. Prior to the final landscape inspection for the project, but after installation of all trees, the applicant and the City will meet to identify any other locations that might reasonably accommodate additional

3” caliper trees. Once a location and quantity of additional trees is identified, the developer shall provide a performance bond in the amount of 110 percent of the cost of the material and labor for planting the additional trees. The trees shall be planted prior to release of the performance bond.

**OTHER BUSINESS**

**ANNOUNCEMENT**

**ADJOURNMENT**

*David Sullivan moved to adjourn at 6:50 pm.*