

Work Session of the Sandy Springs City Council was held on April 21, 2026 at 6:00 PM, Mayor Rusty Paul presiding.

I. Staff Discussion Items

Mayor Rusty Paul called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

A. 2026-090 Tree Canopy Assessment Presentation

Bridget Lawlor, GIS Manager, presented the Tree Canopy Assessment Update.

GIS Manager Lawlor said tree canopy studies were done since the beginning of the City's inception in 2008. We started with 30 meter landsat data and the information was not very detailed. We then purchased imagery through the National Agriculture Inventory Program (NAIP) from 2010 through 2019 which was a higher resolution. Due to processing delays, we used a different satellite imagery in 2021.

For canopy assessment, we used pixel classification for several images in the same area to distinguish the imagery more. It is a tedious process to determine if the area has canopy or not. We also discovered that Nearmap, which provides our aerial images, has products, derivatives that were AI generated, and one of which was an AI vegetation layer. We used that for comparison in 2021. Council requested that we use the AI data for 2017 to compare the results, and we also did this for 2023. In this most recent study, we used AI vegetation again. We continue to use AI data because there is greater than 95% accuracy than our pixel classification. It is also less labor intensive, and allows us to focus on the analysis.

For the study this year, we used Nearmap imagery and AI vegetation to determine canopy areas. This included percent canopy by council district, zoning, and within the stream buffer. We also did a comparison from 2023 based on the council district and zoning, and then we also assessed the Transform I-285 GA/SR-400 Project area.

Councilmember John Paulson said it appears that tree canopy increased in the City by 2% from 2023 to 2025 but lost 0.5% from 2021 to 2023. How accurate is the analysis technique?

GIS Manager Lawlor said on the accuracy assessment, we take 1000 points throughout the City and compare where the model matches what is seen on the ground. It is consistently more than 95% percent. We can review for inconsistencies.

Councilmember Paulson said it is difficult to believe tree canopy grew by 2% in two years but lost 0.5%. Do you physically review the area for coverage and compare with reality of the images?

GIS Manager Lawlor said this is done in the office. The AI layer is provided to four GIS staff members independently who review 1000 spots across the City. In the next study, we will focus on the express lanes and compare.

Councilmember Melissa Mular thanked **GIS Manager Lawlor** and team for their efforts. The City funded the hiring of an Urban Forest Coordinator which helped with sustainability and stewardship. We implemented a recommended species list which included wildlife. We also adopted a specific tree fund policy on how to use the tree fund. Forest restoration, pest management, conservation, and acquisition were all important steps. While the number is good overall, it is not reflective of the pressures we are feeling in some areas because we have redevelopment of existing properties and new development that is

going to take place. For example, in my district there is a 20-acre parcel and **Councilmember Frank Roberts** has a parcel off Glenlake Parkway in his district. As we go forward, we discuss housing and not having enough room. We may consider how do we fit housing into where we already have tree canopy. Maybe in District 1 and 3 where there is more land. The overall canopy number is not as reflective of where we should be focusing and skews where we are feeling the development pressures. We cannot look at our tree ordinance now because we have a Transportation Master Plan and Comprehensive Plan starting, which will also include the Recreation and Parks Plan, but we need to be set up for the future when we are going to do an update to the ordinance. Is there a way to track the amount of acres associated with each of these here?

GIS Manager Lawlor said yes, we have this information and can provide the table.

Councilmember Mular said that data would be interesting, and we could focus on the areas that are going to be experiencing the pressure of redevelopment. Having those metrics are important as we go forward and look at what we can do as we get these big developments.

GIS Manager Lawlor said the acres are there and how we determined the percentages.

Councilmember Mular said that would be helpful. Though there is a good percentage overall, it is not reflective. In the table by district, some districts are different than others as well. Is the data easily accessible?

GIS Manager Lawlor said yes. This table is based on acres.

Councilmember Mular said this is important. It will help to know where to focus in the future.

Councilmember Mary Ford said it was also surprising to me that the City's percentage increased. It appears there are a lot of trees coming down. It is understandable how tree canopy improved in the interstate areas where taken down and planted. Is there a residential example? Is the 2% increase entirely attributable to that?

GIS Manager Lawlor said if it is compared to 2017, Aria City Springs, the two-story Starbucks area, Atwater at Adelyn Road at Lake Forest, Glenn Perimeter which is Glenridge at I-285, Springwood connector and the 4600 Roswell Road apartments were all under construction at that point. All areas have been replanted and growing since then. The 2025 data did not include the Sandy Springs United Methodist Hillcrest area which was not under redevelopment during this canopy study. The study included Embassy Row and the Mount Vernon Johnson Ferry widening project as well as North Springs High School, but those were the main areas where we saw clear cuts in 2025. Faster growing trees are being planted, and the canopy grows much faster. **William Park, Urban Forest Coordinator**, can provide more information.

Councilmember Ford asked can you provide a recommendation to Council on getting the percentage up and how to get there?

Urban Forest Coordinator Park said regarding the 2% increase, during development many skinny edge trees were being removed, and do not contribute to a lot of canopy. Behind them are other trees waiting to branch out.

Also, some trees that are under stress next to the sidewalk under are lost. Even with removal, there is still canopy reclamation. When larger trees fall, smaller and younger trees can come up towards the canopy gap. There has never been a consensus on what is the right number for most efficient canopy coverage. Sandy Springs should be concerned with the quality of the canopy, not just the quantity. Currently, we are trying to reduce the amount of overgrown pine forest found in Council districts and create a biodiverse, ecologically resilient forest. This continues to replenish canopy yearly, and even with a glitch in one of these studies for instance, it can naturally regenerate. The number one thing we can do to limit loss of canopy is to focus on our backyards as 95% of urban canopy is on private land.

Councilmember Andrew J. Chinsky said we hear from constituents whenever there is a lot that is clear-cut, especially in a residential area. It is helpful to see the data and understand what is happening. My suggestion is to look at this as if some of the anomalies were omitted. For instance, in District 6, there is a large forest in the Palisades area that will never be cut down because it will not be developed. It may be helpful to know how the canopy in the non-park areas of the City would also be evolving.

GIS Manager Lawlor said we can technically do that. Historically, we have kept it because it contributes to the overall canopy of the City.

Urban Forest Coordinator Park said relative canopy coverage would be an interesting tool but, looking at existing canopy coverage map and studies, the areas that need attention are already visible.

Councilmember Melody Kelley asked why is there a 60% increase in canopy in District 2 RX?

GIS Manager Lawlor said more information will be provided to you.

Councilmember Mular said **Councilmember Andrew J. Chinsky** that is what I was asking about when I said pull out the PK and a conservation so that we could focus on other areas, and are there parts of the City where policy changes could help with that.

Councilmember Paulson said it is fantastic the City is looking at this level. Thank you for the good work you are doing here.

B. 2026-091 Design Guidelines Draft Update

Sukirti Gosh, Principal, Rhodeside and Harwell (RHI), presented the Design Guidelines Draft Update.

RHI Principal Gosh said this update on the design guidelines will explain the focus of the guidelines, provide feedback from the community, and how feedback was applied to create the guidelines. The guidelines will be applied to the commercial districts, apartments, multifamily areas and townhomes. The guidelines will apply to areas for development and redevelopment to include North End, City Springs, Central Perimeter, Powers Ferry, Crossroads, and Neighborhood Village.

The draft guidelines document will be available on the website until May 15, 2026 for the public to review. During this time, we will also make changes within the guidelines based on discussions with Staff.

The public process included Council feedback, and many stakeholder and public meetings. Stakeholders included neighborhood residents, business owners, developers, architects, and more. There were five rounds of public meetings. For each round, there was a public meeting followed by a survey, and some

pop ups. The final public meeting will be on Thursday. Materials from the public meetings will be available online. The guidelines document begins with the overall vision and the framework and has three specific elements to the guidelines. The first is the public realm, which are the sidewalk areas, the second is the private realm, which are the horizontal surfaces within the private properties, and the third is buildings. Each realm has specific components.

Feedback

- **Create clear and consistent design guidelines:** support a shared framework to guide development while allowing flexibility and creativity
- **Recognize the distinct character of different areas:** the six districts should each reinforce their own identity while including unifying elements of Sandy Springs
- **Make streets more walkable and comfortable:** wider sidewalks, keep and add shade trees, benches, lighting, and safe, well-designed crossings were frequently mentioned as essential improvements
- **Elevate the quality of the public realm:** landscaping, public art, durable materials, and well-designed streetscapes can create a more welcoming and timeless environment
- **Strengthen connections and gathering places:** better pedestrian links, trails, wayfinding, and outdoor spaces for lingering can help unify districts and support local businesses
- **Encourage better building design without overregulating development:** façade quality and materials can improve character without requiring major changes to building layouts

Guidelines: Key Considerations

- **Flexibility and adaptability** to accommodate a range of development types, scales, and future conditions
- Establishing a **distinct and recognizable visual identity that is “of Sandy Springs,”** while allowing for creativity and innovation within individual private sites
- **Leveraging existing spatial elements** to enhance the city’s aesthetic quality, consistent with Comprehensive Plan vision
- **Streamline implementation** by clearly illustrating the character of place, supporting staff, property owners, and developers.
- Reinforcing connectivity and cohesiveness between public and private realms, supporting a **unified public experience** (paving, furnishings, and planting, etc.), **while allowing area-specific variation** (building design, site furnishings, etc.)

Implementation

Clear Expectations = Better Outcomes	Why It Matters, The Benefits
Start Early Align projects at pre-application before major costs are locked in	Flexibility with Incentives Height bonuses and design flexibility for better projects
Built into City Decisions Guides rezonings, site plans, and Leadership actions	Predictable Approvals Less redesign; greater certainty for applicants and developers
Consistent, Staff-Led Review Clear graphical direction of OASIS and	Reduced Risk for Investment Clear expectations; stronger community and

Development Code alignment	leadership support
City Sets the Standard Applied to streetscapes and public investments	Stronger, More Cohesive City High-quality development that reinforces Sandy Springs' identity

Next Steps

- Planning Commission Work Session (April 22, 2026)
- Public Meeting #5 (Final) (April 23, 2026)
- Publish Draft Guidelines (April 2026)
- Incorporate Comments and Refine Draft Guidelines Document
- Guidelines Adoption Process

Councilmember Melody Kelley asked when will this body decide the posture to take with the design guidelines? Will it be after or before adoption?

Kristen Byars Smith, Assistant City Manager said we want your approach to be more about flexibility and less about requirements as you review the draft for areas that need to be changed. Staff is currently completing a similar exercise. It would be helpful to know what Council's priorities are from an implementation standpoint.

Councilmember Kelley said it was mentioned that it is good to catch projects in the pre-application phase, and there are parcels of land in my district that are currently in process.

Assistant City Manager Byars Smith said Staff may already be considering these projects though they may not have the same treatment. There is early intervention with a lot of conversations before a project comes so these guidelines can be most effective.

Councilmember Kelley said once this is adopted, me and my constituents will want to know how implementation will be approached. My interest is in our strategy around implementation and how we measure it.

Assistant City Manager Byars Smith said Staff is having discussions. One conversation was about figuring out where we need to prioritize, and if text amendments to the Code are needed. We also want to see how these things work and will provide an update to Council if we are not getting development that is receptive to this flexible model. The approach is to be more flexible. Included in the City Springs Master Plan, and what Council has discussed a lot, is for an evaluation of a facade improvement program. This is a tangible incentive that we will review with Council as we finalize all this work.

Councilmember Kelley asked is the draft be the best document for Council to interface with to do the extensive review mentioned?

Assistant City Manager Byars Smith said yes.

II. City Council Discussion Items

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 6:41 p.m.