

Development plans pose a threat to Athens Thomas N. Lay Park  
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Potential redevelopment plans threaten Thomas N. Lay Park as citizens and commissioners debate a land swap in order for developer Core Spaces to build a parking deck for proposed student housing in the space of the park's playground and parking lot.

Athens Downtown Development Authority ([ADDA](#)) owns the land parcels located on Jackson Street and Dougherty Street. If commissioners vote on the land swap, ADDA will swap the parcels with Core Spaces for proposed [student housing](#). Athens-Clarke County Unified Government considers the land swap due to the potential public benefits of the project, such as Core Spaces' offer to donate \$7.9 million to ACC's affordable housing fund.

Commissioners and locals expressed concerns that the addition will change the current student drop-off system for after-school programs and deter citizens from using Lay Park Community Center's [facilities](#), located adjacent to Thomas N. Lay Park. The addition may cause Lay Park to lose parking spots, change park access, complicate student drop-off, lose trees, and change viewshed, according to the project's [development agreement](#).

“Well, it would probably be pretty hard for us to get out here and play because this is one of the main places we play here, and Bishop,” Zach Verner, University of Georgia graduate student, said. “So, it would kinda suck.”

Verner said he often goes to Lay Park and recently went to play frisbee with his friends. He said the increased development surrounding the park would limit his ability to play frisbee.

Lay Park opened in 1975 as the Central Athens Community Center. Multiple ages use its facilities to participate in activities, such as frisbee or basketball, and connect with local community members. The community center offers after-school programs and summer programs for students, along with facilities such as a pool, a gymnasium and [more](#).



Youth play at Thomas N. Lay Park's playground on Nov. 16, 2025. The current playground is at risk of demolition for a parking deck. Photo/Allie Phillips

Recent redevelopment discussions sparked confusion and rumors that the park could be demolished. District 4 Commissioner Allison Wright spoke out against those claims and said that the park is not at risk.

“What it is is a property swap,” Wright said. “... we're having a land swap, those two triangles are going to end up with public easements, which means they're still public, they're not going to put up a fence and say ‘This is private now.’”

Wright said the project does not involve tearing down the park and that rumors spread confusion and misinformation throughout the community. Core Spaces proposed its new parking deck in the current place of Lay Park's playground and parking lot. Core Spaces will donate \$275,000 to fund a new playground for Lay Park, although the new playground's location is unclear.

Despite the land swap's benefits, commissioners and locals show unease about the rise in student housing developments.

[District 9 Commissioner](#) Ovita Thornton raised worries regarding the increased development of student housing and how it impacts the community.

“Even though the developers are saying ‘You know, we're not touching Thomas Lay Park, we're not doing that to you,’” Thornton said. “... but there is a fear that over the years, with new student

housing development, that Thomas Lay will disappear, and I hate to say it, it might be just paranoia, but it's a fear for me."



Daniel Young, Business Development & Incentives Coordinator, holds a poster showing the East Downtown Tax Allocation District boundaries at the Costa Building on Nov. 14, 2025. Lay Park is located within the TAD's boundaries. Photo/Clara Lee

While some commissioners convey worries, Athens-Clarke County Economic Development Department's Business Development & Incentives Coordinator Daniel Young addressed benefits of the project.

"For government it's always hard, you know, to satisfy everybody with everything," Young said. "So, to have this developer come forward and say, you know, instead of just working on their own project and their own areas, to say, 'We can do this,' it really does give us that infill and it addresses the housing need that we know we have."

Young said that the development is a long-term project and the government could do little with the two triangular spaces of land. The county can focus on existing community needs if it accepts the developer's offer.

Young said the project is a temporary disruption, but the local government is going to ask citizens to work with the government because he sees long-term benefits from the project.

Therapeutic Programs Specialist for the Athens-Clarke County Leisure Services Department Amanda Grimes provides and creates programs for individuals with disabilities. Grimes hosts the therapeutic program “Let’s Play Ball” at Lay Park Community Center.

“I come to Lay because of the accessibility into the facility and the participants, they enjoy coming here as well,” Grimes said. “Personally, when I come here, I feel like I’m at home, even though this is not my building per se, the staff here are very welcoming, anything I need from them, they are willing to do it.”

ACC commissioners postponed the land swap vote, and locals continue to use Lay Park.

### Why I Wrote The Story

Addressing a current issue related to my beat alongside my beat group demonstrated teamwork and in-depth research to fully cover a newsworthy topic in the local community. We worked to emphasize the proximity and impact of this story because many locals use the park and its facilities. We aimed to highlight newsworthiness during each step of the assignment and provide multiple interviews on the subject matter.