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Opinion: 'Housing is personal. But solving the housing crisis requires a broader lens'

Sam McCachern, PE, Civil Engineer, and President & CEO of Thomas & Hutton Special to the Savannah Morning News

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Key Points AI-assisted summary

- A lack of regional coordination on infrastructure and zoning increases costs and slows down housing projects.
- Collaborating across city and county lines can lead to more efficient use of resources and stronger economic resilience.
- Regional planning helps communities prepare for challenges like climate change, population growth, and economic shifts.

As engineers, we work behind the scenes to support housing and help communities grow by mapping out the systems that make them possible. We design the roads that connect communities, the water and wastewater systems that sustain them, the stormwater systems that protect them, and the power and technology infrastructure that keeps them running. We don't always get the headlines, but we see the big picture. And as the housing landscape grows more complex across our region, building together across disciplines, sectors and communities is the only way to create places where everyone can thrive.

Every city and county in our area is feeling pressure. Demand is high, costs are rising, and infrastructure systems are aging or may not even exist in some areas. At the same time, each community is doing its best to respond—often with limited resources and under pressure to move quickly. These challenges aren't a sign of failure, they're a natural result of growth, shifting demographics, and decades of infrastructure investment that wasn't always designed for what comes next. People

want to live in this region, and that's something to celebrate, but it also means we must plan and build smarter than ever before.

What we see now is a clear opportunity: to move from isolated efforts to coordinated solutions. Working together gives our region the scale it needs, and when the path forward is clear, investment follows.

When infrastructure, zoning and permitting vary widely from one jurisdiction to the next, it slows down good projects, increases costs, and makes it harder to create the kinds of housing we all agree we need: homes for families, workers, seniors, and young people who want to stay here. When local governments work together, with input from engineers, planners, builders, and residents, we can align goals, streamline processes, and make better use of both public and private resources.

'Lack of coordination risks our economic resilience'

Our firm works across this region, and we've seen how much stronger we are when we collaborate. Coordinating infrastructure across boundaries doesn't mean giving up local identity or control. It means sharing a vision for where and how we grow, so the systems that support housing (think: roads, utilities, stormwater and broadband) are ready when and where they're needed. Coordination in the region allows limited funds to have the greatest impact.

If we don't coordinate, we risk far more than missed opportunities. We risk duplication and waste, laying new water and sewer lines that stop just short of where another jurisdiction's systems could have easily connected. We risk overloading older infrastructure in one community while underusing excess capacity in another, forcing taxpayers to fund unnecessary expansions. We risk pushing growth into areas where land is less expensive in the short term, but more costly to serve over the long term, leading to increased public service costs, mounting maintenance backlogs,and higher property taxes that future generations will inherit.

Lack of coordination risks our economic resilience. If workers can't find housing they can afford near job centers, businesses may struggle to recruit and retain talent. Traffic congestion grows as commutes lengthen. Emergency response times stretch. These are not abstract problems; they affect the reliability of our workforce, the stability of our local economies, and the safety and well-being of our communities.

By contrast, when we plan and invest regionally, the benefits extend far beyond housing. Coordinated infrastructure planning eliminates duplication, lowers per-unit costs, and saves taxpayer dollars and private investment capital alike. It allows us to target growth where roads, schools and utilities already exist, cutting down on expensive new extensions and reducing the long-term burden of upkeep. It strengthens our ability to withstand shocks, whether that's a hurricane, a major employer closing, or a sudden population surge. Systems designed with built-in flexibility and shared capacity are able to handle the shocks

Regional collaboration also allows communities to think ahead about climate resilience and adjust zoning and development regulations to accommodate responsible growth where it is needed. Watersheds are not limited by county and municipal boundaries. Systems related to energy grids, broadband networks and transportation corridors make our region more adaptable to future technologies and more competitive in attracting new industries and are not jurisdiction dependent. These are the foundational systems that make communities thrive and they are strongest when planned as part of a bigger picture.

Housing is personal. But solving the housing crisis requires a broader lens.

By planning regionally, we can deliver locally, more affordably, more efficiently, and with greater long-term impact.

We can build neighborhoods where people want to live and can afford to stay. We can give businesses confidence that the workforce they need will be nearby. We can make sure that every public dollar we spend stretches as far as possible and serves as many people as possible. And we can ensure that the infrastructure we build today doesn't just meet today's needs, but can flex and endure for decades to come.

In March 2025, Georgia Tech's Center for Economic Development Research (CEDR) conducted a study of housing needs across a four-county region — Bryan, Bulloch, Chatham, and Effingham. CEDR is now expanding that effort, preparing a similar study for five additional counties, including Liberty, Long, Evans, Candler and Screven. Understanding the numbers demonstrates the need; the next step is a coordinated plan. With clear data on housing demand, our region can chart a thoughtful path for growth that balances environmental stewardship, community needs, and available resources, while avoiding the missteps of other high-growth regions.

None of this is easy work. But it's necessary—and it's possible. It starts with building relationships across city and county lines, comparing our growth plans, and looking for opportunities to align. It means asking where our infrastructure systems could connect, where permitting and zoning standards could be better coordinated, and where joint investments could serve multiple communities at once.

It means looking beyond boundaries and seeing ourselves as part of one interconnected region. It's time to build bridges between agencies, between communities, and between people, so that together, we can build a region that's prepared, inclusive, and resilient.

Sam McCachern is CEO and President of Thomas & Hutton, leading the firm's regional growth across the Southeast. A licensed professional engineer and community leader, he is deeply committed to strengthening both the engineering profession and the communities Thomas & Hutton serves.