

housing + development

Our region has been one of the fastest-growing metro areas in the country since the 1950s, topping four million people at the turn of the 21st Century. This phenomenal growth over the last half century resulted from and in a vibrant economy and substantial prosperity. But it has also strained our natural resources and infrastructure. Our sprawling development pattern has left us with traffic congestion, air quality issues and, in many places, a reduced sense of community. It is now time to determine how best to overcome these challenges. Looking 50 years into the future, there are certainly questions about how we can create a more sustainable region. Answering those questions requires envisioning where we will live and how our communities will differ from those of today. Working together and sharing our goals for the next 50 years with one another will be key to creating a sustainable future Atlanta.

The Atlanta Regional Commission's Fifty Forward initiative is an ambitious visioning effort to delve into the critical issues that will shape metro Atlanta 50 years into the future. This will be achieved through a series of public, open-house style forums held quarterly for the next two years, attracting the best national and international thinkers on a variety of key topics vital to the future success of metro Atlanta. Topics include sustainability, population and employment shifts, regional economic trends and future development patterns.



It's your future. Be heard.
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Chattanooga Gas, Florida City Gas

Milton Little, Jr. , President,
United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta

As Metro Atlanta Grows, Where and How Will We Live? Since the end of World War II, availability of suburban land and the prolific use of automobiles led families in Atlanta and around the country to choose locations in the suburbs and later, even further outside the central city, where they could have a nice piece of land and easily drive to all the amenities they needed.

From the turn of the 20th Century to the close of the Second World War, the Atlanta region grew relatively slowly—adding an average of roughly 8,600 people each year. But since the 1950s, it has been one of the fastest growing metro areas in the United States, with an average annual growth rate that is more than seven times greater than the pre-1950 rate. Much of this growth occurred in the suburban portions of the region in a relatively low-density fashion. This phenomenal suburban growth brought with it many opportunities for people choosing to make a life in metro Atlanta. It also brought many challenges for the region as a whole.

The break-neck pace of change and development of the last 50 years has slowed with the recent economic downturn and the crash of Atlanta's housing market. This slow-down presents the region with a unique opportunity to look ahead to the next 50 years to see what might be in store and make some critical decisions about the future. While applications for new development have slowed to a trickle, local governments and the development community have an opportunity to consider some pressing questions:

- Are current growth patterns sustainable for the next 50 years?
- Can governments build the transportation infrastructure required to handle longer commutes to job centers?
- Where will the increasingly large aging population live?
- Can we build more transit-enabled communities?
- Is there enough green space in our communities? Are we using it effectively?
- Can we accommodate future growth while creating a sense of community?

how did we get here?

Looking back over the last 50 years, it's easy to see what has had the greatest influence on residential development patterns. After all, there are at least two of them parked in every driveway, every night. The automobile allowed us to move our homes away from jobs—out of walking distance and beyond even the reach of mass transit.

50 years ago, the suburbs were not that far away in DeKalb County or north of downtown Atlanta, and the butcher, baker and banker were all just a five-minute drive away. Gasoline was relatively inexpensive and commuting was a simple, easy thing to do. The automobile, cheap gas and plentiful land combined to enable and encourage the majority of new residents that settled in the region to live outside its urban core in low-density, auto-dependent development patterns.

During the time of the region's strongest growth—the 1970's to today—this trend toward sprawl was supported by federal and state policy that favored the construction of roadways, as well as relatively unsophisticated local government plans and methods for managing growth.

But there have been consequences for our development decisions. Within the last 20 years, we have begun to understand these consequences and experience their impacts on our daily lives. As a result, the region's development choices and patterns have begun to change. The adoption of the Georgia Planning Act in 1989 and the arrival of “smart growth,” or “new urbanism,” as a national trend in the mid-1990s have led to Georgia and the U.S. undergoing a major reassessment of the way we build our communities.

Metro Atlanta has played a part in this movement. In addition to new development around MARTA stations and in the City of Atlanta, ARC's Livable Centers Initiative (LCI) has helped many job centers like Perimeter Mall or town centers such as Suwanee to become much more livable and available for new housing development.

These changes have caused the region to be much more diverse in terms of development patterns. We have established tools for managing growth and constructed new housing choices that did not exist just 10 years ago. If this trend continues, where will be in 10 more years? And, if the region wants the trend to continue, what are the steps we need to take to ensure that it does?

a new direction?



Most experts agree that if metro Atlanta is to remain an economic powerhouse, while simultaneously regaining a feeling of community, our vision for the development of the region must continue to evolve. But in what way? As the leaders of the Atlanta region visualize the future, what will they see? What types of places do residents of metro Atlanta want? Do they want access to restaurants and parks within walking distance of their homes? Or will they prefer to live even further away from the central city and telework? Is it possible to create a sustainable region over the next 50 years that encompasses both of these options, as well as the spectrum of choices between them?

Obviously, changing technology, housing preferences, fuel prices and the increasing age of the population will drive many of the decisions the region's leaders make over the coming decades. But right now, in the next few years, we and our leaders have a rare opportunity to create policy and enforce regulations that set us on a certain path, for better or worse.

Where will that path lead? Do we bring more housing variety and density to the major job centers? Should suburban areas add more jobs and build density around them? Can we build more development around major transit infrastructure? Should there be a mix of residential uses and price ranges so employees in our retail establishments, medical centers and other service industries can afford to live close to work?

These are just a few of the innumerable directions planners and elected officials could choose. The Fifty Forward planning process is an opportunity for you and other residents to voice opinions on development, land use and other issues that concern us all. ARC wants your input so we can guide future community design down a path that benefits the region and all its citizens.

The Nature of Sustainability



a perfect storm

Often, it's difficult for elected officials and business leaders to slow down long enough to make plans that range more than a few years into the future. However, the Fifty Forward planning effort is coming at an opportune time for such long-range conversations. Four factors contribute to this “perfect storm” for the region.

1. **Energy supply and security** – Last summer's lines at the pump are still fresh on our minds. While prices at the gas pump have declined again, the costs of electricity, natural gas and other energy continues to climb steadily. Increased energy costs have direct and significant impact on other household needs, such as transportation and food, causing the cost of these needs to increase, as well.
2. **Aging population** – Currently, one in every ten residents of the Atlanta region is age 55 or older. By 2040, that number will be one in every five. Where will they live, how will they move around and who will provide them with the services they require?
3. **Economy** – It's been said that a crisis is a terrible thing to waste. The region's current economic state and the crash of the housing market have slowed requests for building permits to a trickle. While housing will likely rebound, job losses are forecast to continue into 2010. There will not be a better time than now for city and county planners to meet with regional and state planners, as well as elected officials and business leaders, to determine the future of the Atlanta region.
4. **Sustainability** – Global and national trends point toward the need to create an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable approach to the region's continued growth and development.

These four issues will factor heavily into the decisions that determine our region's future. Will metro Atlanta continue to be a “destination city” for families, retirees, college graduates and Fortune 500 companies? Or has it peaked, only to plateau and not increase its relevance as a player in the national and global markets?

where do we go from here?

The past 10 years have seen a major deviation from the growth trends of prior decades. The resurgence of development in the City of Atlanta, and in other urban locations around the region, has helped to diversify development patterns. Many local governments, even those in areas not considered urban, have begun to make regulatory and institutional changes to create more livable and sustainable communities.

ARC's Livable Centers Initiative (LCI) program, Community Choices, the Lifelong Communities program and other resources have provided support that allows these new urban-scale and mixed-use developments to take hold. The LCI program provides funding for local governments to plan town centers, activity centers and corridors that combine best-case land use practices with appropriate transportation planning. Once a project is planned and underway, that government can also qualify for transportation funding through LCI.

Many potential neighbors get nervous when they hear the words "mixed use." Often, they picture high rises and massive parking decks adjacent to their quiet culs-de-sac. In fact, developments like downtown Suwanee and Smyrna Market Village are proof that a mixed-use development does not need to be huge in order to be successful. And, in the end, the mix of retail and residential uses within convenient walking distance of one another minimizes traffic flow in and out of the community.

Another solution to the region's long commutes is to encourage jobs and office space in areas that are near large residential developments. For example, a struggling shopping mall might be downsized, with office space and affordable residential units added on the site. This type of redevelopment allows employees to live closer to office jobs and provides housing that the retail workers can afford. By adding a park, the development gives residents and employees a place to enjoy the outdoors and become a true community, while also preserving our rapidly vanishing green space and using it in an appropriate manner.

No matter our solutions, our land-use decisions will drive future transportation, water and environmental planning. How do we make these decisions? We will have to work together and share our goals for the next 50 years with one another.

LCI by the numbers



ARC's Livable Centers Initiative program is helping local governments, developers and residents change the way they view the future of land use and housing in the Atlanta region. LCI communities come in all shapes and sizes, but most of them have one trait in common – they are popular places. In fact, since the inception of LCI 10 years ago, some 1,148 developments have been reported as planned or completed in LCI communities. These developments will add approximately:

- 84,506 residential units
- 12,329 hotel units
- 19,271,320 square feet of commercial space
- 38,398,270 square feet of office space

Planners and staff for local governments were recently surveyed regarding livability within LCI communities. Questions covered several topics, including quality of life, housing choices, mix of uses, pedestrian-friendliness, transit service and community events:

- 63 percent believe that their community is more livable since the completion of their LCI study
- 67 percent believe that there are more opportunities to walk or bike
- 69 percent believe that there is a better mix of housing structures by type
- 71 percent believe that there is more community involvement in planning related events

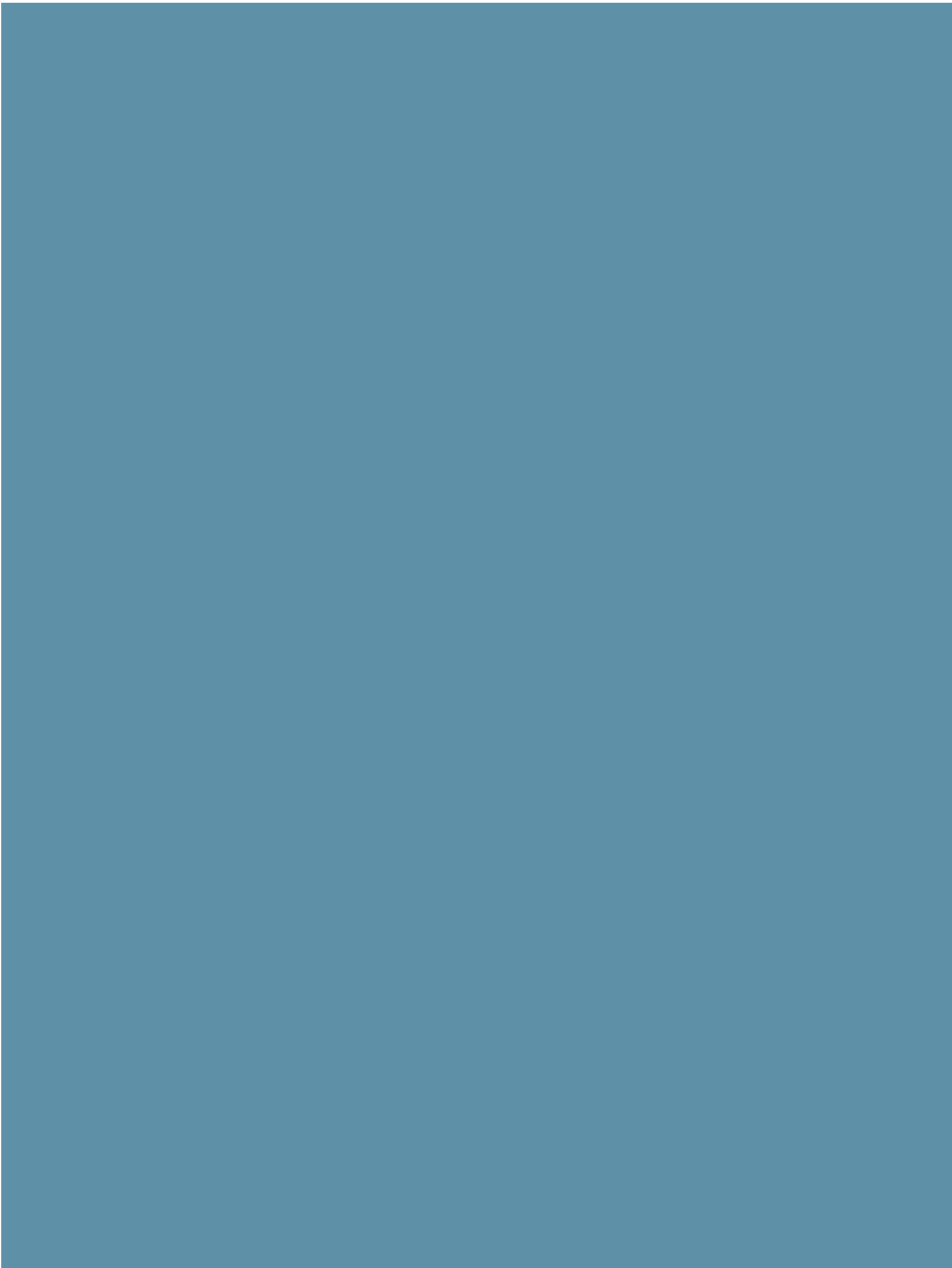
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