

Neighborhood Forum

East Cobb County

The Civic League for Regional Atlanta convened a Neighborhood Forum on Oct. 16, 2008 in East Cobb County, at the East Cobb Senior Center. This forum was in support of the Atlanta Regional Commission's Fifty Forward visioning initiative and was focused on a major question facing the region in the next 50 years: How can we make our increasing ethnic and racial diversity a major regional asset? Fifty-nine people participated in the East Cobb forum. In the course of two hours, participants worked in small groups of 8 to 10 on a series of questions that helped them think about how the region can make diversity a major asset.

By the end of the evening, they had recorded 227 ideas, which are listed later in this report. Some of the most common themes of this meeting were:

- The **schools will play a central role** in making diversity an asset. One group foresaw educators teaching “students from the earliest grades to enjoy each others' assets, company and socialize comfortably together.” The same group thought it would be a good idea if school children could do some form of community work “in a community not their own.”
- **Transportation systems and land-use policies** could make it easier for groups to meet. One group said it believed “diversity is tied to transportation.” The same group thought local governments could do more to encourage “cultural diversity within communities and neighborhoods,” perhaps through zoning. Another group suggested governments providing “neighborhood development that supports and encourages and facilitates diversity in a wide variety of activities.”
- There's a need for **cultural centers** and **cultural exchanges** in building understanding of other groups. One small group suggested that entire communities could be formed around interests that cross ethnic lines – like communications, arts and recreation – and that these communities could help bring people of all ethnic backgrounds together. “It's a different form of diversity,” the group said, “a diversity of interests.”
- There should be more **acculturation services**, particularly for immigrants. Several groups mentioned the need for English as a second language classes for immigrants, but one group had a specific model to offer, Israel's free ulpan schools, which teach immigrants language skills and offer instruction on the culture and history of Israel.

Meeting Process

Participants were welcomed by Lesley Grady, vice chair of the Civic League, who turned the

program over to Jon Abercrombie, the meeting facilitator. Jon explained that participants would work in small groups or “circles” of 8 to 10 people and would be asked to think about, discuss and come to consensus on several questions. Each group selected a “moderator” to act as facilitator and write the group’s comments on a large flip-chart pad.

The first question Jon asked was part of a scenario. Its purpose was to help the groups imagine how the region would look and work in 2058, if it were successful in creating growth and a healthy environment. Here’s the scenario:

In 2058 iMag, the leading news web site of the 21st century, comes to our region to write about how the Atlanta Region has become a model for a vibrant economy built on the contributions of all its racial and ethnic groups.

Here’s the question Jon posed to the groups:

What does iMag photograph, videotape and write about? What lessons does it find that other regions could learn from?

Jon gave the groups 50 minutes to work on this question. As they were finishing, Jon asked the groups to look over the ideas and images they had listed and highlight the ones they felt most reflected the rough consensus of the group – and also place a mark next to the one or two that they thought might be their most visionary ideas.

In the remainder of the meeting, Jon asked the groups to consider two other questions:

- *What do we need to preserve among things that already exist in the Atlanta Region today for the iMag article (and our vision of the future) to come true?*
- *What do we need to change in the Atlanta Region for the iMag article (and our vision of the future) to come true?*



The results of these three group discussions (a general vision of how the Atlanta Region can make its growing diversity a major regional asset, the assets that should be preserved and things that should be changed) are in the following three sections of this report.

Small Group Results: A Vision of Diversity for the Atlanta Region

Here are the vision ideas – the things that participants felt iMag would focus on, if it were writing about the Atlanta region as the ideal or model community in 2058.

Small Group 1:

- Education - broader understanding of different cultures - encourage diversity for all ages
- Complete new sense of community
- Smaller schools using volunteers of all ages, including seniors
- Decent food, air, water
- Valuing individual responsibility for taking on and completing projects
- Keep and add on to our green spaces
- Encourage interaction of diverse groups using the green spaces
- Better and expanded mass transit and communication channels
- Consolidating the smaller governments to improve transparency and accountability
- Business, government and non-profits work together to develop communities where all services, work, etc, can be reached without vehicles
- Economic allocation to develop job incentives, affordable housing and services, recreation and health care
- Businesses and education working together to develop "real life" experiences in the work world
- School systems address life skills (reading, writing, math), personal aptitudes, job awareness, internships, individual units of learning, celebrate diversity education at all levels

Small Group 2:

- Building project with people from many ethnic groups working together
- Create cultural centers
- Cultural festivals
- Expanded transportation systems - more sophisticated, easier to get across region
- Use New York of the past as a model - great diversity - use technology to facilitate mixing of groups and understanding
- Respect and share differences
- Atlanta is not just black and white, but more diverse
- More intermarriage and blending of cultures - will come from openness of schools
- Respect differences and find similarities - what do we all have in common
- Initiate activities to break down barriers - education
- Will have ethnic neighborhoods but outsiders are welcome there - so blending takes place
- Atlanta area finds ways of bringing diverse groups together around interests - communications, arts, recreation - maybe even have entire communities built around these interests - this helps with bringing people together - it's a different form of diversity, a diversity of interests
- Government should provide for neighborhood development that supports and encourages and facilitates diversity in a wide variety of activities
- Establish a coalition of religious leaders to engage community leaders to develop and participate in activities - educational and otherwise to promote understanding
- Community leaders should organize trips and cultural exchanges, including exchange students to promote understanding
- Creation of umbrella group to facilitate infrastructure
- Help facilitate cultural festivals and centers

- Ethnicity is ethnic traits, background allegiance and association

Small Group 3:

- Everyone is accepted, not tolerated, because toleration is unacceptable
- Markets and stores have goods for all persons regardless of cultural backgrounds and needs
- Educators will teach students from the earliest grades to enjoy each others' assets, company and socialize comfortably together
- The entire educational system will practice acceptance
- People need the opportunity to tell each other their stories
- Photograph the ultimate classroom - children of all backgrounds, physical and



- mental/intellectual abilities work well together
- Respect and empathy are practiced by all
- All students receive opportunity to travel at the behest of the educational system
- Every child is required to serve community service in a community not their own
- Consequences for wrongdoing should be constructive - ie, take them to a museum and have them write a paper about what they saw/did
- Microbusinesses should be nurtured by government
- More diversity of government officials
- Infrastructure in transportation to all areas in the community
- Change educational priorities - better trained and paid teachers
- Community servants - fire and police - are more fairly compensated and appreciated
- More shadowing of government officials by citizens interested in serving
- Students in high school and college should also have similar shadowing programs to have them become interested in how government works and to serve
- Keep taxes lower to allow people to better work with each other and to engage everyone in the community
- Keep lots of green space to allow that feeling of "neighborhood"
- No vacant strip malls
- Business incubators
- Education through the arts embraced as a leavening tool
- Free access to cultural arts facilities - ie, movies, theater, several times a year with free public transportation

- Create green economy - help homeowner and businesses green their buildings and homes
- Make green education and jobs available
- Encourage carbon free economy regardless of cost
- Create a welcome unit that uses the Israeli Ulpan method for newcomers
- Pet friendly communities and pet therapy for those in need of companionship
- Nonprofits, faith based and all other entities should be involved in this process

Small Group 4:

- Series of communities with diverse characters working together
- Better transportation system - airports - access for all - workable infrastructure which supports population
- Diversity is tied to transportation
- Racially mixed neighborhoods
- Common focus, diverse ethnicities
- Common infrastructure which supports all
- Communication infrastructure, but include human contact
- Diverse system of education leading to multi-linguistic aptitudes, cultures
- Community service in different communities
- State, local governments encourage education system about diversity to children - languages, cultural exchanges
- Using technology to communicate through language - translators
- Diversity based on contact with rest of world
- Avoid isolation of elderly, other groups
- Life-long communities which are part of urban fabric
- Religion - multi-cultural and diverse in same places of worship
- Sports
- Picture: 100k soccer stadium
- Picture: Community with multi-facet religious centers (open-door policies)
- Picture: children speaking different languages
- Picture: international trade being primary economic engine
- Municipal actions for cultural diversity within communities and neighborhoods
- Mixed-income, affordable housing - diverse communities (zoning)
- Subsidize housing for civil service to live in communities
- Make provisions for a workable water infrastructure
- Private sector input - financial, policy, HR
- Consolidation of governments - all levels
- Elect visionary leaders - take courses to qualify to run - must pass test - bilingual - finance, diversity, cultural, languages, collaboration, governance

Small Group 5:

- Consolidation of Atlanta area to one political unit - get rid of small cities - example: Nashville, Louisville
- Photos: neighbors visiting on front porches - neighborhoods with mixed value houses
- Change the rules of the game to make doing diversity is in the best interest of the group

- Atlanta is made up of people from all over - what do we do to make the area attractive to new people
- Photo: University learning groups of all ages collaborating with other groups of all ages
- Marietta square - with people walking, interacting
- Vibrant businesses with growing economy challenging and rewarding occupations
- Communities where people live where they work - they are safe to walk and interact on the street
- Total transportation plan - consolidation of transportation - cannot have multiple bus and train systems - strong transportation policy
- Parks and trails throughout community
- Clean water

- Article:
community of
minority-
majority -
vibrant,
diverse,
work-live-
play
community



- The industries that drive the economy are based on technology
- The area attracted think tank who were able to solve the energy problems
- Government recognized the importance of the universities and high speed communication - fiber and beyond - research triangle, NC
- Create an environment that is economically rewarding but challenging enough to motivate the people to care more about what their co-workers can do, not what they look like or where they're from

Small Group 6:

- Early ESL programs, alongside continuing education ESL programs for adults
- No question that ESL services should be available
- Integration of newcomers is essential to learning english
- Capture the existing diversity within ESL classrooms so that students can learn from one another
- Break down the separation of churches from one another
- Find ways to break down barriers between religions
- A common spiritual foundation - non-denominational
- A melting pot of all nationalities

- A Star Trek community
- Community arts organizations
- More focus on mass transportation brings people together
- Transportation focuses on moving cross-section of people to jobs
- We find our own sources of energy
- A single chamber of commerce - existing chambers merge

Consensus Ideas

Here are the ideas, from those listed above, that the groups felt reflected a consensus of their thinking:

- Decent food, air, water
- Business, government and non-profits work together to develop communities where all services, work, etc, can be reached without vehicles
- School systems address life skills (reading, writing, math), personal aptitudes, job awareness, internships, individual units of learning, celebrate diversity education at all levels
- Create cultural centers
- Government should provide for neighborhood development that supports and encourages and facilitates diversity in a wide variety of activities
- Community leaders should organize trips and cultural exchanges, including exchange students to promote understanding
- Every child is required to serve community service in a community not their own
- Change educational priorities - better trained and paid teachers
- Community servants - fire and police - are more fairly compensated and appreciated
- Better transportation system - airports - access for all - workable infrastructure which supports population
- Diverse system of education leading to multi-linguistic aptitudes, cultures
- Total transportation plan - consolidation of transportation - cannot have multiple bus and train systems - strong transportation policy
- Early ESL programs, alongside continuing education ESL programs for adults
- A common spiritual foundation - non-denominational
- A Star Trek community
- Transportation focuses on moving cross-section of people to jobs

Visionary Ideas

Here are the ideas, from those listed above, that the groups felt were their most visionary or “out of the box” ideas:

- School systems address life skills (reading, writing, math), personal aptitudes, job awareness, internships, individual units of learning, celebrate diversity education at all levels
- Atlanta area finds ways of bringing diverse groups together around interests - communications, arts, recreation - maybe even have entire communities built around these interests - this helps with bringing people together - it's a different form of diversity, a diversity of interests
- More shadowing of government officials by citizens interested in serving

- A single chamber of commerce - existing chambers merge

Small-Group Results: Existing Assets That Should Be Preserved

Here are existing community assets that participants felt should be preserved, if the Atlanta Region is to become sustainable in 2058. These things could include physical assets, organizations or institutions, public policies or decisions, or positive traits or skills of the people who live here now.

Small Group 1:

- Trees
- Recreation
- Historical locations
- Hartsfield-Jackson Airport
- Cobb Senior Services
- Library services
- The arts (High Museum, Symphony)
- All religions

Small Group 2:

- Greenspace
- Historical buildings
- Multi zoning
- Southern hospitality
- Trees

Small Group 3:

- Open green spaces
- Taxes
- Cultural festivals
- Can-do attitude
- Older neighborhoods - architecture, etc.
- Contributions of seniors
- Arts and culture
- Parks
- Flextime for business – employees

Small Group 4:

- Restaurants
- Trees
- Welcome new cultures
- Water
- Friendliness
- University, colleges
- Private sector participation

- Beltline projects
- Big chicken
- Public landmarks
- Greenspace
- Atlanta's position in the south (economic)

Small Group 5:

- Parks, trees, lakes, trails
- Universities
- Water
- Air transportation hub
- Preserve town square
- Art centers
- Festivals
- Life long learning

Small Group 6:

- Natural spaces
- Natural character of areas
- Positive outlook - constructive - optimism
- Spirit of valuing and embracing our cultural differences
- International city
- Non-profit/philanthropy
- Community service
- Economic vitality
- History/historic nature
- Sense of regionalism

Small-Group Results: Things That Should Be Changed

Here are things that participants felt would need to be changed if the Atlanta Region were to become sustainable in 2058.

Small Group 1:

- Mass transit
- Pollution
- Political borders
- Education
- Business zoning
- Tax structure - allocation of funds
- Add parks
- Expand library services
- Easier access to health services
- Shorten terms for politicians
- Increase participation in the political process

Small Group 2:

- Education
- Image
- Library
- Transportation
- Activities for young people
- Signage
- Bike paths
- Utilities (underground)
- Cultural centers
- Going green
- Sidewalks
- Water

Small Group 3:

- Educational system
- Mass transportation
- Negative to positive visions
- Politicians
- To neighborhoods that don't divide
- Disallow clear cutting for building
- Support new/local businesses
- Get rid of stupid and archaic laws

Small Group 4:

- Restaurants
- Water
- Transportation
- Welcome new cultures
- Too many governments
- Beltline projects
- Walkable communities
- Visionary elected official
- Zoning laws
- Government funding
- Urban sprawl

Small Group 5:

- Transportation
- Pollution
- Political process
- Change water consumption
- Cities more user/walker friendly
- Add festivals

- Change the perception that sports is more profitable (more money) than the arts
- Increase green spaces within the cities
- Consolidate and change building codes
- Increase recycling
- Increase opportunities for life-long learning

Small Group 6:

- Provincialism/parochialism
- Political boundaries
- Redevelop barren areas
- Raise educational attainment
- Sprawl (need less)

The Civic League Lineup

As a final exercise, Jon asked participants to line up across the meeting room according to how hopeful they were that the Atlanta Region could achieve the things they had talked about that evening. On one wall, he posted a “1” and on the opposite wall, he posted a “10.” Those who were very pessimistic should line up near the 1, Jon said; those who were very optimistic should line up at the 10. Others should line up at a point reflecting degree of optimism and pessimism. A large majority lined up in the 7-10 part of the line.



Snapshot of Participants

The Civic League collected demographic surveys of the participants in this forum. Here are the results:

Gender	
Male	49%
Female	51%

Age	
Under 18	0%
18-24	0%
25-44	16%
45-65	43%
Over 65	41%

Race/Ethnic Group	
Black or African American	17%
Asian/Pacific Islander	4%
Hispanic/Latino	6%
White or Caucasian	72%
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	0%
Other	0%

Zip Code	
Home: 30066*	12%
Surrounding**	49%
Other	39%

* This is the ZIP code where the meeting was held

** These are the ZIP codes adjoining 30066

About the Civic League

The Civic League for Regional Atlanta is an organization that builds the knowledge, involvement, voice and power of metro Atlanta's citizens. As part of the Civic League's work, it convenes Neighborhood Forums where citizens can listen to one another and offer their own ideas for improving the region. The Civic League gathers and documents the citizens' ideas and brings them to the attention of state, local and regional leaders.

In 2008 and 2009, we are working with the Atlanta Regional Commission on its Fifty Forward visioning initiative. Our role is to help bring the citizens' voice to this effort to plan how our region will look and work in the year 2058.

In the years ahead, we will host other kinds of citizen gatherings, including forums on pressing regional issues and overlooked problems. Our format for those meetings will be similar to the Neighborhood Forums: facilitated, open-ended discussions aimed at gathering the citizens' thoughts on important issues.