

## Neighborhood Forum

### East-Central Atlanta

The Civic League for Regional Atlanta convened a Neighborhood Forum on Dec. 11, 2008 in East-Central Atlanta, including parts of DeKalb and Fulton counties, at the East Lake YMCA. 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? Thirty-one people participated in the East-Central Atlanta 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 94 ideas, which are listed later in this report. Some of the most common themes of this meeting were:

- **Transportation systems** could make it easier for groups to meet and reduce residential segregation. Two groups said it was important to diversity to get people to walk more and drive less, and one imagined that by 2058 there might be a ban on single-occupancy transportation during the workweek.
- There should be more efforts to **encourage people of different backgrounds and income levels to live close by**. This idea found expression in the groups in different ways: as a need for more walkable neighborhoods, which would encourage people from different backgrounds to know one another; and a need for diversity of age and income. The latter would require, one group said, a range of housing prices in neighborhoods. Another group suggested that property taxes be scaled down for people with modest means, particularly the elderly, so rising taxes wouldn't "force (the) elderly out of their homes."
- **Schools would be important to diversity** in several ways, all the groups agreed. First, they could do a better job of teaching children from diverse backgrounds, one group said. Second, another group said, the school districts themselves could be configured to bring together children of diverse ethnic origins. Finally, the third group said, the schools could do a better job of teaching about ethnic groups by focusing on "other cultures as they are," and not just their histories and traditions.

### Meeting Process

Participants were welcomed by Myles Smith, executive director of the Civic League for Regional Atlanta, who turned the program over to Otis White, the meeting facilitator. Otis 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 Otis 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 Otis posed to the groups:

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



Otis gave the groups 50 minutes to work on this question. As they were finishing, Otis 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, Otis 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:

- Diversity in socio-economic class
- Diversity in neighborhoods leads to elimination of achievement gap in schools
- Find a way to reach all children/students of different backgrounds — expand education to reach all students of varying scholastic ability — will cure drop-out rate, increase vocational learning
- Diversity in housing options in each neighborhood — supported by good transportation system — improve social services to support aging community members, ie, they don't have to move to special communities
- Multigenerational community center that offers transport to and from home for the elderly — promotes diversity
- Age and income-appropriate property tax policies — could include exemptions — won't force elderly out of their homes
- No poverty in GA
- More diversity in the workplace — compete better globally — may need a catalytic corporate entity to promote this
- More child care services in the workplace
- More green space — parks, gardens — this will encourage more community interaction
- After-school programs to support the working parent
- More coordinated, responsive, representative, simpler (fewer layers) government structure — will lead to a consolidation of lower level (city, county) governments
- Region-wide transportation & water systems — reduces geographic segregation
- Local/walkable communities with mini-commercial nodes
- No single occupant vehicles, Monday through Friday
- Bring back the Beltline



#### Small Group 2:

- Transportation: Atlanta to SC, TN, AL, Savannah
- Transportation within Atlanta, connecting neighborhoods
- True affordable housing for low/fixed income residents
- Stronger schools for all communities
- Innovative teaching methods
- Keep different economic groups living together
- Stop development that tears down neighborhoods and forces people out

- Need stability of neighborhoods
- Break cycle of poverty
- Different ethnic/economic groups need to feel more stable and comfortable interacting
- Festivals that celebrate diversity
- School districts that encompass diverse neighborhoods
- How do you make renters invested in the community?
- Maintain neighborhood identities — each has its own feel
- Get people out of their cars

#### Small Group 3:

- Large lots with diverse gardens
- Livestock (we should encourage the raising of animals in cities to teach children about the diversity of work and lifestyle)
- Places to work
- Community gardens
- Diverse businesses — range of businesses for range of people
- Business — neighborhood-based and owned
- Celebrate, participated in ethnic activities
- Integration of ages — old and young — learn from older people's life experiences, oral history
- Preserve history of neighborhood — homes, people businesses
- Neighborhood parties, gatherings
- Sense of community — promote
- Share individual experiences
- Archive citizens' life experiences — record oral history, video, audio
- Schools teach more languages than just English
- Schools — learn about other cultures as they are, not just history of
- Multipurpose center — park in city for all to mingle — old, young — games, music
- Community center
- Politicians could not be elected by campaigning about differences, negatives
- Close income gaps
- Address and eliminate poverty and homelessness
- Integrate age, income
- Reverse the traditional pyramid of the haves on the top and the have-nots on the bottom

#### **Consensus Ideas**

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

- Find a way to reach all children/students of different backgrounds — expand education to reach all students of varying scholastic ability — will cure drop-out rate, increase vocational learning
- Diversity in housing options in each neighborhood — supported by good transportation system — improve social services to support aging community members, i.e., they don't have to move to special communities

- Age and income-appropriate property tax policies — could include exemptions — won't force elderly out of their homes
- More coordinated, responsive, representative, simpler (fewer layers) government structure — will lead to a consolidation of lower level (city, county) governments
- Region-wide transportation & water systems — reduces geographic segregation
- Local/walkable communities with mini-commercial nodes
- Transportation: Atlanta to SC, TN, AL, Savannah
- Transportation within Atlanta, connecting neighborhoods
- True affordable housing for low/fixed income residents
- Stronger schools for all communities
- Keep different economic groups living together
- Break cycle of poverty
- School districts that encompass diverse neighborhoods
- Maintain neighborhood identities — each has its own feel
- Diverse businesses — range of businesses for range of people
- Celebrate, participated in ethnic activities
- Integration of ages — old and young — learn from older people's life experiences, oral history
- Neighborhood parties, gatherings
- Schools teach more languages than just English
- Politicians could not be elected by campaigning about differences, negatives
- Close income gaps



### **Visionary Ideas**

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

- No poverty in GA
- No single occupant vehicles, Monday through Friday
- Livestock (we should encourage the raising of animals in cities to teach children about the diversity of work and lifestyle)

### **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:

- Historic structures/ neighborhoods
- Town squares
- Greenspace — expand
- Trees
- Neighborhood schools
- Neighborhood businesses
- Streams and rivers
- Walkable communities as models for future development
- Libraries
- Fox Theatre
- Museums
- Public Television, Radio

Small Group 2:

- DeKalb County Farmers Market
- Walkable neighborhoods
- Tree canopy
- Neighborhood signage
- Parks and trails

Small Group 3:

- Old buildings — architecture
- Trees
- Greenspaces
- Farms, livestock
- Institutions of higher learning
- Museums
- Heritage
- Libraries

**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:

- Reduce size of freeways
- No landfills in neighborhoods
- Land use policies to encourage diversity in housing options, commercial nodes
- Property tax policies
- Transportation options

Small Group 2:

- Public education — school districts not geographically based
- More smaller schools
- Teach diversity in the schools
- Improve sidewalks and transit
- Approach development differently — build to the community — mixed-use development

Small Group 3:

- Transportation
- Government consolidation
- Government coordination
- Reduce government duplication of services
- Reduce number of duplicate jobs in government (politicians, sherriffs, marshals, etc)
- Homelessness

**The Civic League Lineup**

As a final exercise, Otis 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, Otis 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	41%
Female	59%

### Age

Under 18	0%
18-24	0%
25-44	27%
45-65	50%
Over 65	23%

### Race/Ethnic Group

Black or African American	36%
Asian/Pacific Islander	0%
Hispanic/Latino	0%
White or Caucasian	64%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0%
Other	0%

### Zip Code

Home: 30317	10%
Surrounding	55%
Other	34%

\* 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.