

Neighborhood Forum

Decatur

The Civic League for Regional Atlanta convened a Neighborhood Forum on Sept. 24, 2009 in Decatur, at the Decatur Recreation 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 the Atlanta Region the healthiest region in the country? Seventy-six people participated in the Decatur 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 become the nation's healthiest region.

By the end of the evening, they had recorded 371 ideas, which are listed later in this report. Some of the most common themes of this meeting were:

- **Encourage walking, biking and other forms of exercise by making them easier to engage in and more inviting.** Specifically, participants listed building more sidewalks, creating more destinations in walking distance, encouraging people to walk to transit stops, building bike trails and parks and so on.
- **Encourage people to eat healthier foods by making fresh vegetables and other healthy foods more available.** For example, encouraging community gardens, which as one group said would allow people to "eat better and create more community."
- **Enact public policies that promote healthy living.** One idea was to reward doctors for keeping their patients well (rather than treating them only when they are sick). Several groups suggested using the schools to teach healthy lifestyles to children.
- **Find ways of creating healthy approaches to life.** One of these approaches, one group suggested, is "people intentionally living balanced lives." Others suggested finding ways of connecting people to their communities.

Meeting Process

Participants were welcomed by Trey Ragsdale, board member of the Civic League for Regional Atlanta, 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 accommodating growth and improving mobility. 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 the healthiest region in the United States.

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 could become the nation's healthiest region, 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 Health 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 nation's healthiest region in 2058.

Small Group 1:

- Lowering barriers to walking/biking
- Narrowing streets
- Good sidewalks - need to be wider
- Look to Europe for examples
- Need to be less car-friendly
- Better biking infrastructure
- MARTA monitors number of people on buses
- Walking safety
- Promoting walking
- Cleaner communities
- Kids walking to school
- Walking school bus
- Stone Mountain a good example of safe place to run, walk, bike
- Reduce number of drive-up fast food
- Reduce parking requirements for new buildings
- Different rail types - light rail, commuter rail
- Narrow streets
- Better bus signage
- Totally non-smoking indoor and outdoor
- Make it more expensive to eat bad food
- Eat and buy locally
- Fresh markets in lower-income communities
- Make healthy food more attractive to kids
- Zoning issues - need more building density
- Make the rest of the region look like us (Decatur)
- Make building stairwells more attractive to use
- Calorie counts on trails, stairwells, etc. ("Taking this set of stairs takes 11 calories")
- Put art up along public stairways

Small Group 2:

- Community gardens
- Parks throughout city
- Healthy fast food chains
- Dialysis clinic - closed, OOB sign
- Kids in PE class - k-12
- Smaller roads
- More bike paths
- Sidewalks, walking and bike paths

- Morning commute - bikes
- School's out - kids walking
- Fewer bars and liquor stores - limit retail alcohol
- Landscape free of advertising - billboards
- Limited advertising that is detrimental to groups
- Community health centers
- More local produce at grocery stores
- More green aerial photos
- Rain barrels
- Shuttle services
- Required recycling
- Restricting vehicles to periphery
- Retail areas - foot traffic only
- More solar panels
- More windmills
- PE in schools K-12
- Higher tobacco and alcohol tax
- Higher tax on soda
- Lower public transportation cost and higher availability
- Ban tobacco and alcohol advertising
- Subsidize healthy and local foods
- Promoting locally owned and run businesses
- Changing reimbursement structure in health care - promote primary care
- Tax incentives for locally owned businesses
- Higher density
- Mixed use
- Promoting green - LEED certification - Southface
- Educating public regarding policies - participatory Democracy
- Tax incentives to develop in certain areas
- Nonprofits promote dialogue among diverse communities
- Nonprofits promote engagement and advocacy
- Residents - Engagement
- Residents - Accountability
- Residents – Volunteering

Small Group 3:

- Noise reduction - leaf blowers
- Fund the big idea - how to make Atlanta green
- Conserve water - use less
- Start with newborns - awareness of responsibility
- Educate mothers - end processed food use
- Create mindset - build vision
- Universal basic healthcare

- Focus on social determinants of health - poverty, lack of engagement, access to health care, food
- Healthy lifestyles, prevention, diet, activity, tobacco, alcohol
- Encourage love of outdoors, healthy living
- If we had a more attractive city, it would encourage walking and biking
- Use gas tax to subsidize alternatives in Georgia
- Nurture city's global peace legacy - less violent, healthier
- Make bus shelters more inviting and attractive
- Foster community gardens - eat better and create more community - some donated to poor
- Bring better grocery alternatives to neighborhoods - decent prices, healthy foods - access to these places for those without cars
- Decatur High School community gardens could be a model for other schools
- Reorienting US agriculture subsidies to support healthier foods
- Teach children how to manage stress through meditation, etc.
- Incentivize people for healthy living - eg, fitness classes, health and nutrition screening - save on health insurance if participate
- Incentives for good health rather than penalties for unhealthy living
- Incentivize doctors for making patients healthier
- Atlanta learns from the best regions in the world about health and emulate or do even better
- Have a slogan for the Atlanta area
- Deincentivize commuting - raise gas tax
- Better housing design that encourages people to walk - eg, porches on houses
- Healthier food options - restaurants and groceries
- See the movie "The End of Suburbia"



Small Group 4:

- Poverty is non-existent
- Schools grow their own food organically as a lesson plan throughout community
- Eliminate cars on a few main streets in Decatur

- Public transportation, like the Cliff bus
- Walking paths in every neighborhood
- Efficient city planning
- Eliminate fast food
- Georgia Bike Path continuous
- Health insurance available for everyone, encouraging preventative measures
- Less pharmaceuticals, increase in holistic health care
- Community rainwater collection
- Changing the mindset of individuals that transportation should be a thought process - in-turn, we will not use our own vehicles as much
- Overpasses over the railroad tracks
- Organic grocery stores in every neighborhood
- Bring back the multi-generational dance halls
- More greenspace and parks
- Aerial view of healthy, active people
- Low-cost doctor visits to homes for patients who are unable to travel
- Health initiatives and programs throughout the community open to the public for free - eg, healthy cooking class, eat what is in season
- Everything is interrelated - community, health, transportation
- Community mindset to utilize public transportation
- Bicycles - Zip Bikes - bikes available using same method as Zip Cars
- More initiatives to have affordable housing
- Friendly mammogram - free or low-cost screenings
- Healthier school meals
- Use earth-friendly materials in our restaurants and businesses - green certification
- Policy of the State that mandates and funds physical activity - must come from the state
- Developers use green materials and encourages solar use
- Colleges use solar or wind to provide energy
- City mandated refund homeowners for conservation, low-flush toilets
- City mandated doctor offices in new housing complexes

Small Group 5:

- Cars aren't the norm
- Alternative transit
- Affordable, healthy food opportunities
- All residents are educated high school graduates - educated make good choices
- Citizens connected to the community
- People are walking and active
- Lots of public greenspace exists throughout
- Preventative care, wellness centers instead of sick centers
- Access to state of the art health care network
- More public sports, community centers within walking distances to neighborhoods
- Create intergenerational mentoring opportunities

- Outside activity options exist and are safe for kids
- Social networking options exist for adult men
- Aging in place is an option
- Community volunteering and connections are strong
- No homelessness exists
- People intentionally live balanced lives
- Teen pregnancy rates are low
- Everyone has equal access to good housing, health and community
- Housing, incomes are mixed
- Building standards require healthy, environmentally friendly buildings
- Every child enrolled in early childhood programs
- "Whole Foods" concept is affordable and accessible
- Barter systems exist
- Technology no longer isolates us
- Better connections between patient and health care provider - communication
- Community-based health care review or referral
- We found a way to address health care access
- Intentional about encouraging community conversation
- We committed to long-term goals and didn't cave in to short-term instant answers
- We tied economics to good choices
- We invested in transit, not roads
- Create ways to connect like-minded people and support pilot ideas
- Translate long-term planning into a story people can understand
- We supported gutsy leadership to enact and enforce healthy initiatives
- We grew and supported better leadership
- Civic education from early age to create "us" mentality and teach advocacy
- Close divide between urban and rural
- We harnessed media to focus on facts and be part of leadership
- Changed perception about government so we engage community
- Citizens understand connection between investment and results

Small Group 6:

- Small communities that support good health practices
- Develop small community, centralized communities
- Green transportation that connects people with bus, bikes, clean air, Cliff bus concept expanded to a larger area, walking trails, public transportation more accessible
- Support community-supported agriculture
- Building open to public to bring people together
- Mixed housing and access to green space for everyone
- Services within walking distance and aging in place is supported by infrastructure
- Support high quality education and improve present status of education - grade school curriculum that teaches healthy eating and physical activity
- Water use that addresses conservation - make sure our water is clean

- Take I-285 and convert it to rail - put communities around it with community gardens
- Georgia State and other medical universities in the area foster high-quality education to benefit health in their community - distributed university structures around town to provide a wider reach of health benefit - more focus upstream of a disease
- Choices for aging options to promote independence
- Promote healthy diets - menu labeling in restaurants
- Community mental health support - networking, access, coordination - emphasis on needs assessment
- Make sure community garden and parks are required for every member of buildings
- Leverage churches and libraries community settings to provide medical care
- Promote early childhood health and development
- Make education a priority
- Bridges to connect community that is diverse

Small Group 7:

- Develop an extensive transit network
- Linking sidewalks
- Avenues of sidewalks
- Create more greenspace
- More telecommuting
- Ripping up/transforming concrete
- Increase urban agriculture into region - offset cost of shipping food - Atlanta becomes a model - food money supports the region
- Garner political involvement relative to food - building support state-wide
- Older people living independently and gracefully
- See healthier looking people, more activity - biking, walking
- Leading country in lower obesity, cardiovascular, gastrointestinal diseases
- Improve quality of food in schools
- Kids learning food production, shaping and preparing food
- Example: Alice Waters - Community garden at high school, gardening courses, creating informed consumers, causes multi-generational benefit
- Videograph - retrofitted concrete - community clusters
- Question - how to get affordable food and housing for everyone? To keep people working and living in their community
- Cities built in hubs - return to founding idea
- Re-evaluate concept of homes
- Find best practices - Savannah
- Provide free and comprehensive healthcare for young kids under 6
- Establish more family clinics
- Create centralized business, government centers, hospitals, public safety
- Transportation network - Expanded Beltline, Rail (statewide and regional), Need political involvement, Light rail system, between Atlanta and Athens, South GA, Neighboring states
- Decatur is/can be a model for the state
- Green spaces are restored habitat for animals

- Plan communities - meet needs of residents - clinics, schools
- Improve efficiency, cut waste
- Promote green living through zoning, composts, development regulations - smart growth practices to promote healthy living
- Produce energy - solar, wind, alternative
- Manage water

Small Group 8:

- Tobacco-free area
- Created areas of cafes and socializing
- Bocce ball, shuffleboard, board games, playing music - communal games throughout the parks
- Street markets
- Small and midsize farms to buy organic food
- Community gardens
- No curbs to make community more social
- Healthy choices from the cradle on to stop obesity - public education
- Cities having their own farms providing food for schools - green markets, gardens
- Citizens gather periodically to discuss local and regional issues
- Trees planted along the roads - nurtured by citizens
- Very few roads - widespread public transportation
- Bike paths throughout the region
- Well-maintained walkways and thoroughfares
- Edible landscaping in place of lawns
- Micro-gardens
- Green roofs with gardens - vegetables and plants
- Health care - promote health, prevent disease
- A reward system for healthy behavior - co-op insurance - doctors rewarded for improving health of patients
- Ways of measuring health indices
- Chronic disease is rare - some diseases, like asthma and allergies, don't exist
- Home births are common, with immediate emergency backup
- Pedestrian focused traffic movement
- Good mental health arising from more harmonious living
- Co-housing for families, singles, elderly
- People volunteering, citizens participating
- Most things are recycled

Consensus Ideas

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

- Lowering barriers to walking/biking
- Eat and buy locally
- Make the rest of the region look like us (Decatur)
- Kids in PE class - k-12

- Fewer bars and liquor stores - limit retail alcohol
- Promoting locally owned and run businesses
- If we had a more attractive city, it would encourage walking and biking
- Foster community gardens - eat better and create more community - some donated to poor
- Incentivize doctors for making patients healthier
- Schools grow their own food organically as a lesson plan throughout community
- Health insurance available for everyone, encouraging preventative measures
- Community mindset to utilize public transportation
- Citizens connected to the community
- Preventative care, wellness centers instead of sick centers
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- Green transportation that connects people with bus, bikes, clean air, Cliff bus concept expanded to a larger area, walking trails, public transportation more accessible
- Services within walking distance and aging in place is supported by infrastructure
- Support high quality education and improve present status of education - grade school curriculum that teaches healthy eating and physical activity
- Make education a priority
- Transportation network - Expanded Beltline, Rail (statewide and regional), Need political involvement, Light rail system, between Atlanta and Athens, South GA, Neighboring states
- Decatur is/can be a model for the state
- Promote green living through zoning, composts, development regulations - smart growth practices to promote healthy living
- Created areas of cafes and socializing
- Very few roads - widespread public transportation



Visionary Ideas

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

- Make building stairwells more attractive to use

- Focus on social determinants of health - poverty, lack of engagement, access to health care, food
- Nurture city's global peace legacy - less violent, healthier
- Bicycles - Zip Bikes - bikes available using same method as Zip Cars
- We supported gutsy leadership to enact and enforce healthy initiatives
- Take I-285 and convert it to rail - put communities around it with community gardens
- Re-evaluate concept of homes

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 the healthiest region 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:

- Waterways
- Parks
- Tree canopy
- Community spirit - southern personality
- Decatur 101 - Civic Education
- Small communities that work
- Libraries and community centers
- Community gardens

Small Group 2:

- Existing green space - and expand
- Existing public transportation - and expand
- Existing access to public health care
- Public education
- Diversity - social and economic

Small Group 3:

- Trees
- Airport, Airline
- Hospitality
- Enthusiasm of region
- Parks - Piedmont, others
- Public spaces
- Grits with no butter and cheese
- Beltline (if built)
- Diversity of people
- Our health care leadership - Emory, CDC, American Cancer Society, etc.

Small Group 4:

- City officials commitment to look at the whole city

- Recycling
- Walking - safety
- Dog parks
- Farmers markets
- Community involvement
- Zip cars
- City-wide beta testing
- Free internet and computers
- Standards for school system
- Trees and green space - plant more

Small Group 5:

- Small, local public schools
- Build on racial conversation
- Trees
- Public transit
- Southern hospitality
- Local traditions, cultures
- Celebrate and protect successful places
- Small communities and historic neighborhoods
- Affordable housing

Small Group 6:

- Trees, nature, parks
- Population diversity
- Hospitality
- Small community (like Decatur)
- Neighborhood schools
- University outreach
- Community gardens

Small Group 7:

- Green areas we have
- Respect we have for good governance
- Healthy public safety and fire safety
- Small community school system
- Preserve "brain tank" (colleges)
- The educational commitment to children

Small Group 8:

- MARTA, Cliff bus, public transportation
- Pride in the community
- Preserve and enhance the tree canopy

- Chattahoochee, etc., the watersheds
- Preserve the parks
- Expand public health education

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 a the healthiest region in 2058.

Small Group 1:

- How to govern and act as a region
- Reliance on automobiles
- Public transportation
- More active lifestyles
- Civic education - provide more
- Adopt best practices from other areas eg, Europe
- Health care prevention rather than cure
- How we build new communities
- Promote green living

Small Group 2:

- Excessive consumerism
- Current advertising approach
- Dependence on automobiles
- Limited access to exercise venues
- Public involvement and engagement
- Subsidization of unhealthy behaviors

Small Group 3:

- Public spaces, including natural spaces
- Sustainable lawns - low care
- From small governments to regional governments
- Infrastructure for alternative transportation
- Accessibility for handicapped
- Alternatives to commuting and work
- MARTA and transit
- How we conserve water

Small Group 4:

- More volunteerism
- More opportunities to get involved
- Change our transportation habits
- Decrease cost of living

- More solar power
- Street lights are synchronized
- More smart development, less sprawl
- Low-flush toilets in businesses
- Water conservation
- School lunches
- Friendlier mammograms
- Arts in school
- Visionary leadership
- Recycling in recreational areas

Small Group 5:

- Reduce poverty levels
- Move past 49 in education and 41 in health
- Value education
- Disparity of options for transit, housing, health
- Promote regional perspective and cooperation
- Lower rate of teen pregnancy
- Perceptions around race
- Increase tolerance for all differences
- Build safer affordable housing

Small Group 6:

- Attitude that more is better
- Transportation policies
- Transform dying malls and big box stores into functioning small communities
- Building codes to encourage accessibility (eg, Habitat houses)
- Strengthen local public health infrastructure (eg, San Diego, Boston, MSP, Seattle) to make preventive care accessible
- Better access to health care

Small Group 7:

- Add more green space
- Enforce traffic laws - speed - Slow traffic down
- Increase transportation alternatives - light rail, commuter rail, sidewalks
- Overhaul prison/correction system - use as workers to learn new trades, etc.
- Superintendent appoints school board
- Business license fees based on healthy businesses - less fee for them
- Affordable health care

Small Group 8:

- Cars to rail
- An inclusive attitude, welcome to diversity
- Schools include PE, civics and emphasis on mental health

- Day and night care centers for mental
- Improve southern cooking to healthy southern cooking

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 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	31%
Female	69%

Age	
Under 18	3%
18-24	0%
25-44	13%

45-65	71%
Over 65	14%

Race/Ethnic Group

Black or African American	8%
Asian/Pacific Islander	1%
Hispanic/Latino	0%
White or Caucasian	89%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0%
Other	1%

Zip Code

Home: 30030	82%
Surrounding	7%
Other	11%

* This is the ZIP code where the meeting was held
 ** These are the ZIP codes adjoining 30030

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.