

## Neighborhood Forum

### Downtown Atlanta

The Civic League for Regional Atlanta convened a Neighborhood Forum on April 2, 2009 in downtown Atlanta, at the Georgia State University Student 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 have growth and a higher quality of life through decisions we make about land use? Sixty-two people participated in the downtown 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 351 ideas, which are listed later in this report. Some of the most common themes of this meeting were:

- **The need for more and better public transit.** As downtown residents, participants at this forum knew and appreciated public transit, as they made clear in every small group. One group said the region needed an "interconnected rail system," perhaps using old rail tracks. Another group imagined "multiple types of urban transport" in the future, "so those who fear Atlanta traffic can park at Beltline and ride public transportation to special places, events, shopping areas." But it wasn't just the city that needed more and better transit, one group said. The rest of the region does, too. Its suggestion: "Real mass transit (that) connects entire region" and "goes where people want (and) need to go."
- As elsewhere, there was support for **walkable, dense, mixed-use development.** One group said the idea was "homes (that) are within a five-minute walk (of) significant greenspace (and) within a quarter-mile of a business mode, not strip malls." Another group's recommendation was succinct: "Stricter zoning, concentrated density." Another saw "integrated housing, mixed-income, mixed-use."
- Better land use means **greater attention to the environment**, nearly every group said. The Atlanta Region will be successful in its land use decisions when you can "fly over it and see green," one group said. And the groups were specific about what kinds of green they'd like to see, from "urban farms and gardens" to "green roofs" to "linear parks." And they didn't want just to see it. One groups said it wanted "greenspace people actually want to use." And another wanted environmentally friendly houses and businesses.

### Meeting Process

Participants were welcomed by Lesley Grady, chair 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 creating growth and a higher quality of life through land-use decisions. 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 accommodating growth and improving its quality of life through choices made about land use in its neighborhoods, cities and counties.*

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 accommodate growth and a higher quality of life through land-use decisions, 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 Land Use 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:

- Pocket parks within communities that have gardens in them
- Homes are within a 5-minute walk to significant greenspace - within a 1/4 mile of a business mode (not strip malls)
- Known as a medical/science leader, center - hospitals, research facilities, state of the art, everything interconnected
- City Hall East - Medical Center - photograph of an area in a place in the city showcasing connectedness to many disciplines
- Examples of sustainable building development
- Fly over it and see green
- Picture of GA Legislature: diverse, different faces
- Historic preservation - building with history reused instead of torn down or abandoned - a better face for tourism
- Scale of footprint - respect the historic palette of an area or neighborhood - build similar to your surroundings, neighborhood - integrate uses
- Celebrate the completion of the outer Beltline, connecting Buckhead, Decatur, etc.
- Interconnected rail system - reuse existing tracks
- Greater use of public transit as a land use - fewer roads
- Covering up some of the interstate - make it a park (green on top)
- Highways shouldn't cut off neighborhoods
- Rails to trails
- Utilization of the open air above the freeways
- Integration - reconnect interstates and "dead" roads
- Utilize the center of the highway for bikes
- Picture of the gulch (downtown Atlanta) developed - everything could meet there - have more than one hub
- How do we pay for it? Let it pay for itself
- Do away with the "them and us" mindset - it's not about "what's in it for us?"
- A region that encourages dialogue with everyone - north, south, east and west
- Stop thinking short-term - slow down sprawl
- Love to see an art district
- Encouraging people to come out of the buildings and interact with people
- Instead of hour lunches, take 2 hours to go out in your community and volunteer - or a day off to volunteer
- Appropriately scaled, diverse in architecture
- Allocation of smaller commercial shops in close proximity - accessible large grocers - walk to
- Allowance for neighborhood "life" - bookstores, coffee house, record store
- Lease out space for community gardens
- Greenspace people actually want to use - active space
- Allowance for running, walking, cycling - interconnected and accessible

- Bike lanes that are safer for the user - functionality in routes
- Connectivity, density
- We have a reason not to drive
- Thinning the streets
- What did it take? Actions
- Action - Government sets the right incentives, gets rid of "good 'ol boy" governing
- Action - Implement policies by working together (local and state) - combining the agendas, forming common platforms, coalition building and alliance building
- Action - it's working because we talked and worked collaboratively
- Action - we're all working for the big picture - the region, as opposed to neighborhoods
- Belief in cooperation, as opposed to suspicion
- Armed coup
- Symbiotic relationships
- Organizations, regional and local authorities working for a common goal
- Regional planning groups have final say in plans
- Drive to 285, park and ditch your car for "alternative" methods

Small Group 2:

- Urban farms and gardens, roof top gardens, business sponsored community gardens
- Use utility easements for gardens, green space
- Neighborhoods, community friendships, activities
- Beltline with plenty of parking
- Multiple types of urban transport so those who fear Atlanta traffic can park at Beltline and ride public transportation to special places, events, shopping areas
- Put a stop at specific points (Beltline) to halt urban spread
- Beltline inside I-285 - mostly around old city of Atlanta
- Taxes - unfair to tax whole state for 12-county project
- How to raise funds for transportation, greening projects - regional tax (regional mentality), business donations to transit
- Require that new businesses donate to metro area projects
- Set density % in specific areas - concentric circles, with highest density in center - Set boundaries within region
- Commercial development needs to be more pedestrian oriented
- Intergenerational housing - retirement/assisted living nestled among single-family housing
- Non-profit facilities used as community activity hubs - computer classes, banking
- Facility for homeless to live and to do community service for some pay - community gardens, community projects
- Roof-top gardens - beautify, reduce carbon footprint, shade
- Residents recycle, reduce, reuse daily
- Drive policies at local and county levels to benefit both (all) parties
- Government zoning standard: environmentally friendly homes - rain catchers, shade/sun efficient, tomb walls
- Better (more) public transportation to reduce the number of cars

- To develop regional mindset, appreciate value in each place - what is good there? Business, history, people, places - have a 5-6 city travelling "story" group?



Small Group 3:

- Live/work space
- Density along corridors, eg Peachtree Street
- Proactive planning - ie City Centers
- Connected developments that are linked by transit
- Big picture planning - planning by region
- Mixed use development
- Preserving history and historic development
- Developments similar to Broad Street in Downtown Atlanta
- Mixing green space with urban living
- Iconic developments - eg Empire State Building
- A marriage between quality of life and public safety
- Crime prevention through environmental and hardscape design
- Affordable housing
- Mixed income, age, ethnicity, aging in place
- School as a community center
- Schools that are close to communities

- Schools as community centers
- Urban farms and gardens
- State must treat the Atlanta region as the economic engine of the state
- Integrate parks, trails and green space
- Use parks as green infrastructure
- Require lighting for public safety
- Better zoning and land use - planned development
- Transfer development rights
- Dense transit near MARTA
- Regional transit, not just MARTA
- Residents become engaged, create a long-term view with community impact
- Residents encourage homeownership to create engaged neighbors
- Starter homes
- Affordable rentals
- Rent control and market rate

Small Group 4:

- Completed projects: Peachtree Corridor (extended), Beltline, Fort Mac - All Connected
- No commuter busses on the streets (stop at edge?)
- More transport - high speed rail (Chattanooga to Macon) - wider sidewalks and walking paths (biking) - MARTA improved, goes to other counties and more directions
- Power options - solar and other alternatives
- More parks
- Development patterns - similar to Broad Street during the day
- Development encourages a 24-hour city
- Curb and farmers markets - sell local produce
- Urban farming expanded - model: East Lake Commons
- Zoning patterns change - only allow live/work/play
- Smoke-free
- Infill (lake?)
- Community land trusts
- Recycling - goal: 90% recycled - especially plastics - or no plastics
- Schools - improved urban schools (as well as improved perception of urban schools)
- All types of schools
- Teachers - improved standards, quality, have work force housing opportunities
- People - happy, mixed-age, mixed Socio-economic status, mixed-race
- Diverse
- No crime, no vagrancy
- Businesses are encouraged to return to cities
- Businesses build infill housing - different types, scale, dense
- Businesses build infill development - parks, water, man-made lake
- Businesses redevelop underutilized space

- Businesses use models like Midtown Alliance
- Businesses educate people on good patterns and speaking out
- NPUs are more educated - funded by other npus?
- Continued work of ARC
- Government maintains sidewalks
- Police walk around, enforcing laws - more stations
- Programs to reduce recidivism
- Incentives to bring businesses
- Freeze house assessment - or school taxes for seniors
- More programs/housing for seniors - stay in own home, have transport
- Residents maintain property (lawns, homes) and common areas (schools, parks)
- Sense of pride, respect
- Participation in NPUs, etc - educated participation - outreach to other meetings
- Know neighbors, block clubs
- Drive less/not at all
- Bike
- Sustainability in/on home - reduce, solar panels
- Start early, start young
- Educate kids about homeownership - through schools, nonprofits, family
- Get outside

Small Group 5:

- More walking and bike riding - educate - better infrastructure, sidewalks, bike paths
- Trees - just as many as there are now
- People communicating - not by themselves, riding in the car - Sense of community
- Streetcar or trolley - Cherokee Street
- Improve education
- Activities, community center, diverse global sports, olympics
- Lifelong learners
- Cultural diversity
- Center for alternative healing
- Aesthetics, art
- Efficient & streamlined transportation - accessible, more hours, safe for children
- Children playing unsupervised
- Healthcare - more cures, preventative, cheaper, accessible
- Housing - affordable, efficient, more multi-unit
- Connect parks, facilities, recreation, indoor facilities together with outdoor, should be close in the community, should be all-inclusive (all ages), quality city programming
- Respect given to others
- Neighborhood relationships and associations
- Accessibility
- Active senior citizens

- Flying cars
- Looks like Paris
- No homelessness or hunger
- Community gardens with edible plants
- Beltline - need to get all of the various organizations together at the table
- Move flexible zoning laws - more business in some residential areas
- Encourage less use of autos
- Think about maintenance - maintain what we have well, before building
- Be philanthropic - community-owned instead of individually owned
- Create youth programs that kids can get to safely
- Businesses engaging in profit sharing - down to employees - encourage creative ideas
- City promotes businesses that contribute to the city's development (and vice versa)
- Live/work that is robust enough to accommodate kids
- City/businesses engaging in a broad representation of stakeholders (all-inclusive), not an afterthought - including neighborhood organizations
- Think long-term

Small Group 6:

- Real mass transit - connects entire region - reduces need for driving, congestion, pollution - goes where people want/need to go
- Need structure for more comprehensive, citizen driven and directed planning
- Plan from the bottom-up
- More cooperation among planning agencies
- Mature, educated population to act as responsible citizens
- Citizens involved in the community
- Make planning a personal issue to people
- Look to the past as a guide - streetcars, trains - update for modern day
- More parks and greenspace - better health - outdoor recreation and family time - play outside - take it slow
- Make Atlanta more unique - own character - less homogenous
- Increased density to make transit work
- Infrastructure capacity developed before things are built - not the other way around
- More efficient, accessible access to information for citizens, including media
- Use less resources in building - more environmentally friendly - denser, smaller housing
- Infill development - abandoned industrial plants - with infill development, put gentrification in check
- Affordable housing - 30% of income - utilities included in "affordable" figure - convenient access to employment and schools - effective transportation options
- Critique of structure - less separation of planning areas - land use, transportation, environment all connected
- High level of communication and respect in planning process
- Respect neighborhood differences while planning regional - not all communities have same needs and desires

- Less strict separation of uses - analyze zoning policies in public policy process
- For citizen participation, people need livable wages and time to participate
- More community-based living - despite fear of "socialism" - community gardens, co-housing, etc.

Small Group 7:

- Linear park system
- Greenline - sprawl stops
- Integrated transit network
- Regional identity
- Connected neighborhoods
- Super perimeter highway - outer ring
- Additional airports
- Wider highways
- Higher local taxes, lower federal taxes
- Smaller schools
- Good infill
- Green roofs
- Solar panels
- Integrated housing, mixed-income, mixed-use
- No parking garages - transit over driving
- Regional government
- More community engagement
- Decrease the number of highways
- Recapture our rail
- Increase civic engagement
- Bicycle lane, pedestrian friendly streets
- Infill housing - repurpose, tax credits/incentives (federal, local, state), business incentive to move in
- Improved safety
- Underground power lines
- Smarter use of technology
- Community gardens, co-ops
- Stricter zoning, concentrated density
- No street-level parking lots
- Water
- Green roofs
- Real watershed management



- Fewer roads
- Water collection in every building
- Phased in green regulation
- Retention pond network
- Zero landfill future - incineration to control emissions and create energy - reward program for efficiency - pay to throw - garbage expensive to remove, but recycling is free

### **Consensus Ideas**

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

- Homes are within a 5-minute walk to significant greenspace - within a 1/4 mile of a business mode (not strip malls)
- City Hall East - Medical Center - photograph of an area in a place in the city showcasing connectedness to many disciplines
- Fly over it and see green
- Celebrate the completion of the outer Beltline, connecting Buckhead, Decatur, etc.
- Interconnected rail system - reuse existing tracks
- Utilization of the open air above the freeways
- A region that encourages dialogue with everyone - north, south, east and west
- Instead of hour lunches, take 2 hours to go out in your community and volunteer - or a day off to volunteer
- Urban farms and gardens, roof top gardens, business sponsored community gardens
- Multiple types of urban transport so those who fear Atlanta traffic can park at Beltline and ride public transportation to special places, events, shopping areas
- Government zoning standard: environmentally friendly homes - rain catchers, shade/sun efficient, tomb walls
- Connected developments that are linked by transit
- Schools as community centers
- State must treat the Atlanta region as the economic engine of the state
- Completed projects: Peachtree Corridor (extended), Beltline, Fort Mac - All Connected
- Schools - improved urban schools (as well as improved perception of urban schools)
- No crime, no vagrancy
- Activities, community center, diverse global sports, olympics
- Create youth programs that kids can get to safely
- City/businesses engaging in a broad representation of stakeholders (all-inclusive), not an afterthought - including neighborhood organizations
- Real mass transit - connects entire region - reduces need for driving, congestion, pollution - goes where people want/need to go
- Need structure for more comprehensive, citizen driven and directed planning
- Linear park system
- No parking garages - transit over driving
- Decrease the number of highways
- Stricter zoning, concentrated density

### **Visionary Ideas**

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

- Instead of hour lunches, take 2 hours to go out in your community and volunteer - or a day off to volunteer
- Action - Government sets the right incentives, gets rid of "good 'ol boy" governing
- Armed coup
- Facility for homeless to live and to do community service for some pay - community gardens, community projects
- Require lighting for public safety
- Urban farming expanded - model: East Lake Commons
- Infill (lake?)
- Businesses build infill development - parks, water, man-made lake
- Businesses redevelop underutilized space
- Flying cars
- More community-based living - despite fear of "socialism" - community gardens, co-housing, etc.
- Linear park system
- Zero landfill future - incineration to control emissions and create energy - reward program for efficiency - pay to throw - garbage expensive to remove, but recycling is free

### **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 a model for quality land use 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:

- Diversity - corporate, people, income
- Trees
- Historic districts
- Health care
- University system
- People who make a difference - believe in change
- Airport - do not give it to the state
- Neighborhoods
- NPU system - citizen input
- Strong philanthropy

Small Group 2:

- Transit system
- Arts community
- Parks

- Non-profit community changers
- Land for farms in future
- Trees
- Neighborhoods
- History - historical places

Small Group 3:

- Neighborhoods
- Historic buildings - highest and best use of property

Small Group 4:

- Green (trees, parks)
- Organizations - Atlanta Habitat
- MARTA (yet still more efficient)
- University/college
- Affordable housing "quality"
- Food co-ops
- NPU influence - also increase
- Community foundation
- 2-1-1 United Way project
- CERT
- Quality - type of stores

Small Group 5:

- Trees and nature
- Piedmont park
- Neighborhood schools
- University corridor
- Public transportation
- Historic structures
- Natural resources - all parks, water, gas
- Innovation

Small Group 6:

- Neighborhood character
- Signature building
- Good parts of culture - food, hospitality, community
- Education
- MARTA
- Parks, gardens

Small Group 7:

- Population - engaged, diverse

- Greenspace
- Young, smart people
- Elderly
- Airport
- Higher education
- Transit system
- Corporate headquarters
- Non-profits
- CDC
- Historic building

### **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 model for quality land use in 2058.

#### Small Group 1:

- More mixed use
- Cover highways with green
- Autonomous rule of MARTA
- Balkanized political system
- Traffic patterns - improve public transit
- Public education system
- Collaborative regional plan
- More park, open land
- Connect neighborhoods
- Demolition process - historic preservation
- Walkability

#### Small Group 2:

- Take Wednesday afternoons off work
- Learn how to separate work/home activities
- Job sharing - flex
- Telecommuting
- 3-day weekend every six weeks - be less driven re: work
- Develop zoning to allow more flexibility and innovation in housing
- Cap taxes - strategic use of public investments
- Encourage more conservation of energy, food, space

#### Small Group 3:

- NPU system needs more strength and power with checks and balance
- Extend the reach of mass transit - re-establish street cars
- Future development should be contextual

Small Group 4:

- Seamless quality education
- Eliminate concrete
- Eliminate landfills - waste
- NPU policies (co-operations)
- Balkanization of governments and community
- State standards
- Economic policies - tax-sharing
- Stop incorporation
- County government strength and efficiency
- Bike accommodations - more - paths, parking places, co-ops

Small Group 5:

- Schools
- Car culture
- Improve public transportation
- Better system for garbage (better place to put it)
- More recycling
- Improve product packaging to use less and other products
- Consuming habits
- How we heat and cool at work and home (consider solar)
- Politics

Small Group 6:

- People positive about living here
- Racial attitudes - everything in Atlanta involves race - let's change this
- Citizens perceptions based on ignorance - education
- Get people out of their cars
- Education - reconciliation work to be done, improve
- Expand MARTA
- Policy towards homelessness
- Expand parks and gardens

Small Group 7:

- End car culture
- Lower oil dependence
- Integrated transportation
- Ego-free legislature
- Water
- State cooperates with city
- Better teachers
- Transparent government, city and state

- Regional government with local representation
- Money

### 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		42%
Female		58%

**Age**

Under 18	0%
18-24	16%
25-44	48%
45-65	29%
Over 65	6%

**Race/Ethnic Group**

Black or African American	34%
Asian/Pacific Islander	0%
Hispanic/Latino	0%
White or Caucasian	56%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0%
Other	10%

**Zip Code**

Home: 30303*	16%
Surrounding**	15%
Other	69%

\* 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.