

ANOTHER DAY, A NEW VISION



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Metro Atlanta has reached a turning point as it prepares to embrace a population boom of more than 2 million residents by 2030. The region's typical response --- sprawl --- is one choice. But for the first time in history, regional leaders and residents are collectively taking a new view. This special report looks toward the future and how the region might grow a different way.

Atlanta commuters last year spent an average of 67 hours behind the wheel stalled in traffic behind hundreds of thousands of their fellow motorists cursing the air blue.

That shared frustration apparently fueled a housing boom intown as Atlantans flocked to close-in neighborhoods, snapping up new townhouses, condos and loft conversions at a rapid clip, far outstripping the pace of single family home sales in some traditionally yard-house-kids jurisdictions such as Cobb County.

Recognizing this, business leaders and regional planners are recommending a dramatic change in the way metro Atlanta should develop over the coming decades. They say the region is at a crossroads where it must choose to develop as it has in the past --- in an ever-widening ring of suburbs inhabited by families with school-age children --- or must choose another path defined by the pressing need to deal with traffic problems and air quality issues, and a desire to stop re-creating huge public infrastructure such as water and sewer systems and highways.

The latter is the way the market is taking us, leaders say. Changing demographics make it inevitable.

The region will be home to older empty nesters and young couples who want everything they need within walking distance, according to projections by everyone from the U.S. Census Bureau to the Atlanta Regional Commission.

They may want to live in Cherokee County, but they'll live there in a condo in Woodstock, perhaps over a restaurant or grocery. Older folks may still opt for Decatur, but they will live in midrise communities designed to meet their needs, rather than those of young children.

Development to suit these new Atlantans will rise up along corridors already fitted out with water, sewer, roads, public transit and schools. And, the leaders say, Atlantans won't have to be forced to change their ways; they already are demanding alternatives to a house, a yard and a long commute.

"The region is redefining itself," said Charles "Chick" Krautler, director of the Atlanta Regional Commission, the planning agency.

Driving that redefinition are forecasts that show an additional 2.3 million people will live here in 2030. That would be like dropping the entire population of Denver into the midst of 3.7 million residents already in Atlanta's 10-county core area.

Metro Atlanta will remain a young person's town in 2030, when more than half the population is expected to be age 44 or younger. These are the people expected to head for refurbished town centers such

as those recently created in Smyrna, Suwanee and Duluth, just as today they are attracted to edgy areas such as East Atlanta and East Point. And many won't worry about living in a good school district, because the percentage of families with school-age children is expected to drop by a third.

Meantime, the region's fastest-growing demographic will be 45 years or older. The number of residents 60 and older will rise from about 451,000 this year to a projected 1.2 million in 25 years, according to the ARC.

"So we're going to have the aging baby boomers, the need for more elderly housing, and the young and restless who want this alternative housing approach in different geographies around the region," said Sam Williams, president of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. "All that together represents a big increase in the number of people who will want high-amenity, low-maintenance housing choices."

At the same time, Atlanta's traffic congestion grows worse every day and threatens to choke development. Indeed, a recent plan developed by ARC shows that, given today's traffic patterns, even \$50 billion in road and other improvements over the next 25 years would not shorten the average metro commute by more than a minute or two.

Faced with those facts, top leaders in business and government concocted a different approach.

A task force created by the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce to study the area's development path came up with a question: What if metro Atlanta grew within its existing footprint, with new projects being directed toward areas where commercial and residential buildings are reaching the end of their useful lives? After all, that kind of redevelopment has worked in places like Smyrna, which set the standard for urban renewal with a downtown redevelopment where condos above shops are selling for \$300,000 and up.

A NEW SUBURBIA

Over the next 25 years, close-in suburbs all around I-285 are expected to be torn down, rebuilt and remade. The hot spots stretch from Alpharetta in the north to McDonough in the south, from Douglasville in the west to Lawrenceville and Conyers in the east, according to Chris Nelson, a former Georgia Tech professor who now teaches at Virginia Tech.

"The 1980s was the last decade of large suburban expansion," Nelson said. "The '90s were a re-sorting era, with the central city gaining population after decades of decline. Now we're in a decade trending toward a fairly large-scale re-sorting of the housing market away from the far reaches of suburbia."

As the chamber's task force worked along, members had what Oprah Winfrey would call an "Ah ha!" moment about possible collaboration among groups that traditionally are at odds, said Sam Olens, chairman of both the Cobb County Board of Commissioners and the Atlanta Regional Commission.

For example, Olens said, groups as divergent as the Sierra Club and the state Department of Transportation could agree on the merits of building a dense, walkable development along a roadway in an area already served by water and sewerage. A new mixed-use community south of Little Five Points in Atlanta sailed through the approval process after these conditions were met.

"We still think a good proportion of our development will go into suburban areas, but not nearly at the rate it was in the 1980s and '90s," ARC's Krautler said. "I think you'll also see a lot of redevelopment of the major transportation corridors --- Buford Highway, Peachtree Industrial Boulevard, Metropolitan Parkway, to name a few --- and you'll see them much more intensely developed than they are today."

Significantly, government has to do nothing but get out of the way of the market. Business leaders decided that if buyers want to live in mixed-use communities, local governments should wipe away zoning codes that segregate land uses --- and therefore communities --- into residential, commercial and industrial. These leaders have no interest in following the lead of cities that have mandated where growth can go.

The fervor created by Atlanta's proposed Beltline underscores the high level of interest in changing the way we live. The region's business elite are flocking to help the city create a 22-mile network of green space and transit that many believe will spark \$20 billion in redevelopment over the next 20 years.

A COLLABORATIVE VISION

Subdivisions are already showing signs they will look different in the future. Houses are built on smaller

lots, compared with historic patterns, and the leftover land is being turned into green space. Families that once played in their big, private back yards will instead have the choice of playing in a smaller yard or walking to a playground.

A project in Jackson County, northeast of downtown Atlanta, will offer some amenities of urban life to residents even as they live in the country. One in south Fulton County is preserving green space by clustering development into hamlets.

Williams points to the urban rebirth under way in Midtown. Business leaders and community advocates worked together through the Midtown Alliance to create a vision for where certain types of development could be located. Developers flocked to the area, in part because of confidence they and their lenders had in Midtown's plan for its future development.

For the first time in metro Atlanta's history, the business community and regional planners have framed a collaborative vision to build an alternative to sprawl. The recent Metro Voices/Metro Choices survey of 2,600 residents and community leaders, sponsored by a group that included the ARC, showed traffic and growth are the top concerns among those who live and those who do business here.

Choices made today will go a long way to determining future mobility issues and other aspects of living in a city with a projected population of more than 6 million residents.

"The future's not going to be the past, but it can be better than it would otherwise be," Nelson said. "You're not going to redevelop everything, but a sterling project here will spin off a sterling project there, and in 30 years you'll see a vastly different community. It's going to take conversation to have it all make sense when it's done, and conversation is tough. But we're getting better at that."