



CITIZEN ROUNDTABLES

ROUND TWO SUMMARY REPORT

KEY THEMES, CONCERNS, AND AMBITIONS
AS EXPRESSED BY RESIDENT PARTICIPANTS

MARCH, SEPTEMBER, 2020

DESTINATION:2030

2020 STRATEGIC PLAN | DECATUR, GEORGIA

Introduction and Overview

In the first of our three Roundtable discussions for Decatur's 2020 Strategic Plan, Decatur residents shared their thoughts about the city — what they're proud of, what needs work, and what aspirations they hold for the future.

In the second Roundtable session — detailed in this Summary Report — residents explored specific issues raised in phase one where there was no clear agreement among participants regarding how to move forward — neighborhood zoning changes that could assist in affordable housing and inclusivity efforts, managing traffic as we build out our walking and biking networks, and how aggressively we should address climate change at the local level.

Paused in March for reorganization in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the phase two Roundtable discussions resumed in August of 2020. Almost all of the 17 groups that had not completed meetings before the pandemic forced an end to in-person sessions agreed to reassemble virtually or masked and distanced to complete the second of the three Roundtable discussions planned.

As a result, we have more than 2,000 comments and recommendations from participants of nearly 70 groups focusing on three broad topics: Housing and Inclusivity; Transportation; and the Environment.

In some sessions — particular ones dealing with Housing & Inclusivity — participants used discussion guide topics more as conversation-starters for expressing broader opinions, questions, and recommendations than to focus on the guide's specific questions. Even so, comments in all groups revealed aspirations and concerns that will be helpful in shaping the next stages of the Strategic Plan process.

It's important to note the willingness for so many citizens — both the recent participants of the phase two discussions and the phase three groups now organizing for their final discussion — to wedge Zoom meetings into family and business schedules turned upside down by the pandemic. That alone says something about the traditions of community engagement for Decatur planning. Commenters in some of the groups who met online spoke positively about the experience, even suggesting that video conferencing should become part of the regular suite of tools for City of Decatur communications with citizens. That, in itself, is an important takeaway.

Throughout the comments there ran a theme the City and its consulting team have hoped would emerge: connectivity. Challenges intersect and overlap. And so must solution paths. Under each topic, there were comments like this: Housing and transportation policies need to be examined through an environmental sustainability lens. Housing affordability is easier to achieve without the added expense of a car for everyone in the house older than 16. Energy efficiency saves money for homeowners and renters as it reduces levels of greenhouse gases required for energy production.

"Lower income housing must go hand in hand with walkability, bike lanes or public transit goals – higher density housing needs to be near this infrastructure."

"We note that the housing and transportation issues we discussed all have environmental impacts. As noted in previous discussions, these initiatives all intersect."

The call to break through silo thinking applied to jurisdictional crossovers, as well. Is it possible, some asked, to scale up policy and program impacts by better connecting with the resources of the county, the City of Atlanta, and other governments? How about

public-private partnerships with businesses and non-profits, including educational institutions like Agnes Scott and Emory?

We can be leaders. We can leverage others... "

Throughout discussions, regardless of issues intended as their focus, commenters felt it important to stress the need for broader community education, especially at neighborhood levels. Commenters were clear in their call for deeper explanations of the whys and hows of planning across sectors of concern.

It's important to note that though the broader topic headings didn't explicitly focus on the impacts of systemic racism and efforts to mitigate those impacts, both the discussion guide and the Roundtable participants assumed the connections. "Because race permeates all these conversations," said one commenter, "recommendations and decisions past and future, we recommend that we continue to be direct and intentional in confronting racial inequities in this process."

HOUSING AND INCLUSIVITY

Thrown off a little by difficulties clarifying goals for "inclusivity" and "diversity," most Roundtable participants seemed more comfortable refocusing on the topic at higher altitude — simply "Affordable Housing."

Questions that then emerged: Affordable for whom? And how to deliver affordability?

"Everybody who comes to make this an awesome place to live should be able to be my neighbor if they want to be. (Some don't.) But some can't afford it. There's no middle anymore and there's little on the low end."

A consensus emerged around two priorities to address the "whom" question: Affordable housing policies and programs should assure opportunities for community service workers, especially City employees, to make their homes in Decatur. And there should be ways for long-time residents vulnerable to rising costs of living to remain in their homes and near their networks of support.

Tackling the "how" encouraged Roundtable participants back into the inclusivity and diversity issues prompted by the discussion guide. Particularly the thorniest issues about diverse housing types and the appetite for greater density in existing neighborhoods, wherein property zoned for single-family homes comprises 91% of the city's total residential land.

"Decatur citizens need to walk the talk. Lots of concern over lack of affordable housing but citizens passed the laws that redlined the city, changed the zoning, prevented density, and the current citizens need to recognize that affordable housing means tough choices. They need to stop complaining if the answer is NIMBY."

Though there were dissenters, most commenters seemed ready to accept modest increases in density as long as new housing was at the duplex, triplex, or quad scale and achieved "blendability" with the existing neighborhood homes. Enthusiasm waned when examples grew in height and in the potential for families with children stressing local schools or with the prospect of absentee landlords failing to maintain their properties.

"We need to identify and focus on opportunities that are currently available and be alert to and prepared for opportunities in the future. Ideally, all neighborhoods will have affordable housing."

"Well, we came from Buckhead because we wanted a small village/suburb. We don't want to become Buckhead. I'd like to see growth controlled rather than this becoming a blur in the city of Atlanta landscape."

There were compelling arguments for protecting existing apartment buildings and smaller-scale multifamily housing that have become "naturally occurring affordable housing" by virtue of age and fewer amenities. More strictly regulating short-term rentals, such as those offered through Airbnb, might keep more affordable houses and apartments in the long-term rental market.

"If the city insists on higher density housing, it should perhaps consider taking a more active role in maintaining "niceness" by enforcing parking and traffic rules, keeping overgrowth off the sidewalks, making sure city trash cans are emptied, upgrading city parks and pools, etc."

Many were interested in talking about a variety of regulatory carrots and sticks aimed at developers. Among them: incentives for carving out affordable units in multifamily projects; impact fees; "tiered taxation" plans based on scale and units of development; inclusionary zoning; and rent control.

Most commenters acknowledged the high costs of development and urged exploration of creative financing to close gaps between market rate price points and affordable rents and mortgages: Land banking, community land trusts, tax funding, public-private partnerships.

"Someone has to pay to make the city more affordable. We should be up front and honest about the tax burden."

TRANSPORTATION

As in our first round of conversations, it was clear in this second phase that support for the City's efforts towards increased options and safety for pedestrians and bicyclists is not universal. There remains a distinct segment of the community frustrated with traffic congestion, travel times and more, and unable or unwilling to view pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure as a potential solution to these challenges.

"The community didn't ask for bike lanes and planters in the first place."

"Hard for those living in Decatur to get through Decatur quickly with fewer car lanes, and traffic often diverts through neighborhoods."

These underlying sentiments may help explain why the City's alternative mobility ambitions are often supported in the abstract but then vocally opposed as implementation efforts begin.

Still, while some Roundtable participants certainly made it clear they were more concerned with the perennial hassles of traffic (too much), parking (not enough), and commuter traffic through neighborhoods, a majority of comments reflected a willingness to broaden mobility options beyond private automobiles.

"Citizens of this community and this country who only transport themselves in a car will always be frustrated by plans to improve roadways for pedestrians and bikers. They need to stop being the ruling voice on all matters regarding who owns the road."

Many recognized the advantages of living in neighborhoods with access to MARTA and wondered about ways to expand transit via hop-on/hop-off shuttles that connect key destinations with MARTA stops. How about dedicated bus lanes to speed commutes and attract more transit riders? Pedicabs?

There were numerous suggestions for supporting bicycling and pedestrian travel around town: more protected bike lanes, bike racks, and showering facilities; interconnected walking paths, wider sidewalks, and additional benches for rest breaks for pedestrians. Might Decatur schools be ready for limiting student parking and incentivizing biking and walking? And is anyone considering bridges over train tracks for safe crossings, especially for bikers and pedestrians?

"Walkability is a big plus in Decatur – especially for schools."

To cut down on traffic congestion at peak times, could the City facilitate moves to staggered times for work and school commutes? There was general support for encouraging more car pooling and for more rigid enforcement of speed limits. And is it time to consider banning autos altogether for areas around the Square?

Commenters seemed interested in the potential of electric bikes to increase the number of residents willing to move from cars to bikes for many daily tasks. And there was some discussion of supporting that idea with expanded bike infrastructure, such as free charging stations and bike repair facilities. (Electric vehicle comments crossed over into discussions under the Environment topic heading, as well.)

Most thought questions about ways to "minimize frustration," as outlined in the discussion guide, could also be addressed by improvements in policies and programs already underway, including: parking and traffic enforcement, sidewalk and pothole repair, and clear signage on biking and pedestrian routes.

ENVIRONMENT

Clearly, Decatur's Environmental Sustainability Board members and supporters have already informed and influenced community discussions around sustainability and resilience topics.

Many in the Roundtable groups prioritized consideration of almost all policies and programs with a mind to impacts on the environment in general and on mitigation of

climate change threats in particular. Some commenters proposed that the Board be given the same role as citizen boards addressing planning and zoning.

Responding to prompts in the Roundtable discussion guide, commenters generally opted for a “think big” approach that reinforces the City’s role as a regional leader. That includes ramping up citizen and student education programs to address the sense of urgency, clarify broad goals, and support strategies at the speed and scale required.

“We cannot wait on the federal government to make good decisions for our local communities.” “Decatur should be a shining example. Aim to be the greenest city in the state!”

Many saw the linkages between environmental and transportation policies. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions by reducing dependency on private automobiles was a high priority. So there were lively conversations around accelerating bike, pedestrian, and transit options — echoing comments and suggestions under the Transportation topic area.

The “think big” commitment shouldn’t mean missing opportunities to maximize “act local” strategies where the City has direct control. Some commenters focused on better orienting City landscape maintenance priorities — including protecting and expanding the tree canopy. Perhaps a tree ordinance might integrate goals with storm water management and water conservation and reuse programs. The City should encourage native plantings, centralize compost collection, protect pollinators, and support community gardens.

“Strengthen the tree ordinance and integrate this with stormwater master planning given the value of trees as green infrastructure.”

In the realms of construction and development, energy efficiency should be a high priority, both in new construction and in retrofitting older structures. Might there also be more thought given to expanding permeable surfaces for storm water management? And shouldn’t there be a higher focus on creating and maintaining greenspace, including park space in the downtown core?

Because of Decatur’s proximity to higher ed institutions, there are likely to be opportunities for partnering with schools like Emory, Georgia Tech, and Agnes Scott for programs and workshops on sustainability and resilience. Long range programs, including those that might be candidates for the 2020 Strategic Plan, can be informed by those partnerships.