



CITIZEN ROUNDTABLES

ROUND THREE SUMMARY REPORT

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

SEPTEMBER, 2020

DESTINATION:2030

2020 STRATEGIC PLAN | DECATUR, GEORGIA

Introduction

These summaries represent the last of three analyses of Decatur residents' focused discussions on topics to be addressed in the City's 2020 Strategic plan.

In phase one of the Roundtables, 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, they were invited to dive more deeply into popular Round 1 issues where there was no clear agreement on the best ways to move forward. These included 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, phase two Roundtables resumed virtually in August of 2020 and were completed and summarized in early September. Round three virtual sessions began in mid-September, focusing on community connectivity and civic spirit. By the end of September, the Roundtables' last phase was sufficiently wrapped to inform the summaries here.

Given the pandemic's stress on families, it's a tribute to Decatur's tradition of community engagement that so many residents continued to make time for participating in Roundtables deprived of the advantages of in-person conversation with their neighbors. While there was some predictable pandemic-related attrition, there were enough recurring comments and suggestions to build confidence that a representative range of residents' opinions was captured.

Overview

The third and final Roundtable session explored "how we become and stay connected — to the city, to nonprofits and civic organizations, and to each other — and how those connections can be strengthened and better leveraged in the service of addressing our challenges."

The Discussion Guide suggested specific questions to get the conversation started. But, as was the case with the other Roundtable discussions, participants saw the questions as interrelated and expressed opinions that might fit under any of the topic areas, regardless of the prompting question.

The experience of the pandemic and lockdown was obvious. Underlying many of the participants' responses was an appreciation of what's sacrificed when citizens can't talk to one another face-to-face.

Commenters recognized digital communication tools will be required — and perhaps enhanced — post-COVID. Many urged beefing up the main City website so that it's the go-to hub for all activities and engagement opportunities.

At the same time, lots of the same commenters stressed the importance of reviving and expanding in-person meetings, especially in small groups, after the pandemic. What's more, they said, online communications advancements shouldn't preclude improvements in old-school techniques like printed mailers, fliers, and posters. When it comes to tools and methods: more of everything, please.

In general, current City-to-resident communications earned approval. But there were also calls for more clarity and timely explanations of the whys of policies and programs, especially when it comes to potentially controversial projects. (The Legacy Park housing process was used as an example by several commenters.)

Some volunteered that any suspicions about a lack of transparency could be preempted if the City was more intentional about celebrating successes. Maybe point out how popular projects and programs are often the end product of inclusive engagement processes that set goals and strategies to achieve them.

There's a recognition that despite earnest efforts on the part of the City there are people and perspectives left out of planning conversations. And there were lists of potential outreach techniques to target them. A common admonition: Go to where the targeted populations are, and engage them when they're comfortable meeting; don't require people to gather at times and locations convenient only to those who are privileged to have flexible schedules and transportation options.

What's likely to be rewarding for the City and the consulting team is that at least some Roundtable participants figured out on their own the need for multi-session discussions to tease out conflicting perspectives and identity questions that need answering before the strategy-shaping phase begins. Some even acknowledged the need for topic experts to help them answer the questions.

That's a pretty good description of the approach baked into the 2030 Strategic Plan process. Even if the comments didn't explicitly call out the Roundtables-to-202s-to-draft-plan structure, seeing citizens "invent" the Roundtables validated the design of the process.

Here are summaries of comments organized under the three topic areas outlined in the Discussion Guide:

COMMUNICATION & COMMON GROUND: HOW WELL ARE WE CONNECTED?

As suggested in the comments overview, Roundtable participants tended to provide and reaffirm similar responses under all three of the Discussion Guide's question prompts. That was especially true under this section and under the "What can we do?" question below.

When asked to name their principal resources for information about Decatur activities, they provided long lists, including: the City's website, Facebook, and "Focus" newsletter; the "Decaturish," "Next Door," and "Decatur Minute" blogs; the Decatur section of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution; and neighborhood listservs.

Pandemic restrictions didn't limit citizens' access to digital versions of those outlets; so there weren't concerns that the lockdown prevented most from keeping at least minimally informed. Some noted that the pandemic emergency accelerated adoption of virtual meeting techniques and encouraged the City to explore expanding digital tools. Might there be, for example, an online dashboard to monitor the City's progress on sustainability and resilience goals?

However, there were important caveats to the enthusiasm for online communications. Many were concerned that over-reliance on digital platforms excluded residents without adequate computer and wi-fi capacities. That's likely to further complicate the widely shared goal of engaging the broadest possible cross-sections of people without regard to whether they have access to the right hardware, software, and broadband connectivity.

Also worrying, said many, was the loss of crucial social connectivity when face-to-face meetings are restricted or curtailed. That concern was reflected in extended discussions under all topic categories. The overwhelming majority of commenters urged prioritizing and expanding in-person meeting opportunities, especially in small groups, once the COVID emergency passes.

"The idea of a connected community is a large part of why people want to move here. Face-to-face interactions are where we are at our best."

CONTRIBUTIONS: WHAT CAN WE DO, ALONE AND TOGETHER?

Prioritizing in-person meetings in the post-COVID era led the groups toward suggestions for more targeted outreach to those missing from many community discussions. The most mentioned strategy:

Instead of asking folks to come to official meeting places, engage with them where they are, within the networks in which they're already comfortable. Is it possible, for instance, to plug into a wider variety of organizations, from service clubs and churches to neighborhood associations and cultural arts groups? Even block parties?

"Use different venues. Go to the neighborhoods. Don't make people come to you."

Might the City piggy-back information-sharing campaigns with those organizations and events? How about making more use of the Rec Center to reach regulars there who don't attend the usual meetings? And because this is Decatur: Schools. How can already active teacher, student, and parent organizations be used to communicate not only among their networks, but also with the broader population?

While applauding the efforts of Decatur's elected officials and senior staff to make themselves available to the community, some commenters suggested increasing opportunities for information sharing between citizen groups and staff with specific responsibilities in areas like transportation and housing policy. What people might suspect as a lack of transparency, some said, might just be a missing chance for clarity — to hear and discuss in greater detail the thinking behind some policy or program, especially as it applies to the concerns of a specific neighborhood or interest group. And some suggested occasional meetings with staff without official agendas to allow for open-ended Q&A.

"Make it clear to citizens that their participation and feedback doesn't mean that the outcome will always go their way. They are part of the process, but the commission or city leaders are doing their best to represent the whole city (all 25k), not just the citizens who show up to meetings."

Popular models for person-to-person communication post-COVID: Community dinners like those focusing on racial equity. And the Roundtables themselves. Many volunteered appreciation of the value of a progressive meeting strategy to better focus questions and to resolve conflicts.

LEVERAGING OUR COMMUNITY FABRIC IN TIMES OF DIFFICULTY

"Connectedness is a solace, and it is a buffer for the community that helps facilitate positive change. Connectedness can also serve the community to smooth tensions and keep highly contentious situations from developing."

Roundtable participants said the pandemic emergency made them appreciate what Decatur already has in place because of past planning:

A community in which it's possible to get outdoors in pleasant surroundings for walking

and biking. Existing social connectivity that could migrate to online forums for basic information sharing. Community-focused businesses that expanded services and volunteered space for City and non-profit use — all in line with infection-aware customer protections.

There was pride in what many saw as a demonstration of community adaptation to what the emergency required instead of demanding that reality conform to pre-COVID expectations. “A willingness to change to fit the model that is needed right now,” said one participant.

How might those lessons be applied to the Strategic Plan process and beyond?

Comments largely echoed suggestions under the other two topic categories: Yes, adopt and expand emerging digital tools for community engagement. No, don’t give up on the tried-and-true printed fliers, posters, and mailers — and definitely not on in-person meetings. Look for new opportunities, new groups, new events to expand conversations.

The pandemic and lockdown inspired a new respect for uncertainty — and perhaps for humility, as well. Given the challenge of figuring out what to expect in the next few months, let alone the next decade, one participant asked, “Can we even plan for 10 years out?” Maybe revisiting assumptions and recalibrating strategies in shorter time frames, perhaps in five-year increments, is a more realistic idea.

Participants implied throughout this final Roundtables phase that the adaptation mind-set is woven into the Decatur community fabric. And they appeared to appreciate its value when tested by crisis and are open to be reminded of that as the planning process moves toward draft strategies for the future.

“As the group wrapped up discussion, one attendee raised the idea of our group’s continuing to meet, informally. We have created trust in this group, and the thought is that it would be a good platform to build upon the ideas we put forth today — creating community — connecting our neighborhoods, doing work together, getting to know each other and other neighborhoods better. It was a fitting conclusion.”
