YOUTH ROUNDTABLES
SUMMARY REPORT

KEY THEMES, CONCERNS, AND AMBITIONS
AS EXPRESSED BY THE DECATUR YOUTH COUNCIL

OCTOBER, 2020

DESTINATION:2030
2020 STRATEGIC PLAN | DECATUR, GEORGIA

INTRODUCTION

A key goal of the community-wide engagement strategy for Decatur's 2020 Strategic Plan is to assure participation opportunities for those who don't always show up at the usual meetings. That often means connecting with them where they already gather, as opposed to summoning them to meetings and locations elsewhere. Young people are among those harder-to-reach groups. Fortunately, the City of Decatur regularly convenes a Youth Council of local teens who self-organize for projects and programs of interest to their peer groups. So members of the consulting team attended two of their virtual meetings in October to facilitate conversations about their concerns and hopes for the future. Their responses, summarized below, will be added to those from the Citizen Roundtables and folded into the overall community conversation moving towards a first draft of the new Strategic Plan.

SESSION ONE: OCTOBER 7, 2020

After an introduction outlining the 2020 Strategic Plan process, the 16 Youth Council members were divided into two break-out Zoom groups for moderated discussions around the following three questions:

1. How do you "talk up" Decatur? What are the positive qualities or successes that you hold and share as a source of pride? What positive stories or descriptions do you share with those who don't know our community as you do?

2. What problems or challenges do you see or experience in our community? How do those issues impact your positive thoughts about Decatur?

3. Many if not most of you will be going off to college and then moving on into your adult lives. Describe the Decatur that would need to exist in the future for you to consider returning and making your home here.

Group 1

Group 1 was a diverse collection of Decatur teens, exclusively female save for one male participant. They spoke candidly and without reservation, and demonstrated some unique takes on larger topics oft-mentioned in the Roundtable process.

For example, among Decatur's positive qualities, they spoke in depth about walkability, noting its impact on local character, its role in building relationships between neighbors, business owners and employees, and its availability as a much-appreciated option when driving isn't possible. Paths and greenways were also called out as positive amenities. But there were also fears that too much urbanization detracts from the small town qualities many appreciate.

They spoke fondly of our local businesses (with the caveat that unique specialty retail and restaurants at premium price points can raise equity concerns), but also noted the need for national brands and providers so long as they're located in close proximity to Decatur's borders. Emphaticaly **not** as a part of downtown.

The city's sense of safety was also appreciated. One participant indicated that she lived right at Decatur's border and, when going out for a run, could choose either direction to go — inside or outside the city. Her choice? Inside the city because her surroundings felt safer.

Contrasting these feelings were concerns — felt across the group — about dwindling diversity and the city's failure to act sufficiently in addressing the problem. Variations of

the theme, "Decatur prides itself on its diversity but doesn't walk the talk" were repeated during the session, and the city's single family neighborhoods were called out specifically as the areas where the lack of diversity was most apparent. It was generally agreed that a more aggressive approach to affordable housing was the number one thing the city could do in response.

However, these thoughts culminated in a certain level of cynicism that anything would be done. "Adults in Decatur need to realize," said one participant, "that they're not as liberal as they think they are." Their collective take? To return after college to build their lives here, the city would need to become significantly more diverse. Not just in terms of black and white or rich and poor but across all ethnicities and income levels.

Group 2

The eight teens in Group 2 were easily engaged and clearly accustomed to expressing well-thought-out views. All participated in the discussion, hitting on themes similar to ones in the broader Citizen Roundtable conversations. For instance: action on climate change, diminishing housing affordability, and the broader issues of inclusivity.

Unsurprisingly, their responses to the question about what they like reflected their appreciation of Decatur amenities they were most likely to take advantage of: public open spaces like the Square and parks; civic facilities like the library; and arts and music events where they were likely to enjoy the company of others in their age group.

What concerned them is a sense of shrinking community diversity. And not just as it applies to race, gender, and income. Though they assumed those topics to be essential for an honest community conversation, they wanted to include what they see as intolerance for political perspectives at odds with Decatur's majoritarian liberal vibe. While none volunteered they felt their views were unwelcome, they were concerned that a standard for true diversity, for an atmosphere in which everyone feels comfortable expressing themselves, was threatened by political intolerance.

So strong was the general feeling in the group that Decatur has much work to do to deliver on its promises of diversity and inclusion, improvement on those ambitions, they said, would be a factor in whether or not they'd return after their college years to build careers and start families.

SESSION TWO: OCTOBER 21, 2020

The second and concluding Youth Roundtable session involved the same Decatur Youth Council members participating in the same groups. Questioning resumed where the previous session had left off.

Group 1

1. Responding to the question: "Many if not most of you will be going off to college and then moving on into your adult lives. If you got cut short in our previous discussion, describe now the Decatur that would need to exist in the future for you to consider returning and making your home here. How can Decatur make that vision a reality?"

Following up on this question cut short in their first session, the group continued with its theme that any reluctance to return to Decatur would be rooted in the city's dwindling diversity. Expressing an absence of confidence that Decatur would, or even could, become a more diverse community in the coming decade, one participant commented, "I want my kids to grow up in a diverse place to see the world as it really is and experience all races."

Another noted that our well-regarded school system would not be enough to bring her back to Decatur if her kids would be talking about diversity in classes that are predominantly white, adding that the schools are an example of how diversity and equity can be pursued earnestly and yet nothing substantive ever seems to materialize.

Others echoed this absence of confidence, noting that a lack of diversity is rooted in the city's lack of affordability, making for a challenge on a grand scale that the city's not equipped to take on. One noted that meaningful change was going to require forceful demands on the part of the community — what she characterized as "the energy that was invested in the monuments coming down" — something unlikely in an affluent and largely comfortable community such as Decatur. However, this view was contrasted by more hopeful suggestions that "Decatur needs to buy and hold more land to subsidize housing costs," pursue more aggressive inclusionary zoning, and cap the maximum size of new homes.

Accepting that dwindling diversity is a problem the city won't likely solve on its own, one participant suggested that Decatur explore opportunities to be more connected and integrated with its more diverse surrounding communities — seeking not to impose itself upon them but to learn from them and provide for mutual benefit. This could be done through reciprocal school system programs so that kids interacting becomes a bridge bringing families and neighborhoods together.

The group further agreed that the Strategic Plan and related meetings are good, productive vehicles for pursuing change, but that they're too infrequent and too formal. Many people don't enjoy going to city meetings, they said, so they end up not sharing their opinion. It's incumbent on the city to consistently reach out.

2. Responding to the question: "In our previous session there was some discussion of the environment. Let's elaborate on that. To what degree do you see climate change as a threat to both you and our future? What actions, if any, do you think Decatur should take in response? What actions are you personally willing to take, like reducing or ending your car usage?"

Climate change, according to the students in this group, is very real and very top of mind. "It's painful to act like it's a future thing," said one, stressing that the city needs to require sustainability measures now like solar on public buildings or a solar farm to create local energy.

Other solutions were offered as well. "We're going to need to be more adaptive in materials, packaging, new ways to create renewables. If we continue on the path we're on our lives will be significantly different." This extended to requests for local initiatives, like regulations on plastic bags or programs to incentivize reusable bags.

Transportation and equity also entered the conversation, as the oft-discussed subject of a local shuttle system was again suggested, while composting — which is currently available to residents only through private, pay-for-service companies and organizations — was identified as something to be provided by the city or through partnering with multiple cities, spreading costs across the broader community so those unable to pay can still participate. And harking back to plastic bag regulations, one student suggested collecting a bag tax and using the revenue to fund individual sustainability efforts for residents who can't already afford them.

The economic component of climate action, and its impact on making change, was further acknowledged. One student noted that someone looking to contribute in the form of an electric vehicle can find themselves spending $100,000 on a Tesla.

This led to discussion of what students can do personally. As in other parts of these discussions, there was talk of the need for reduced car use, increased investments in public transportation, and efforts to disincentivized driving. But these sentiments were not universally shared, as one student pushed back on efforts to build out biking networks, noting that they "remove lanes and create congestion which leads to more idling and pollution." She further noted the impact of congestion on convenience and time.

Ultimately, the students were united that the city should be aggressive in its commitment to addressing climate change, and that that commitment should extend to partnering with other communities to work together on a larger scale.

3. Responding to the question: "Since last March, much has impacted our community and what we might consider our most pressing challenges and priorities — from a pandemic public health crisis to escalating efforts to combat racial discrimination and injustice. How is being a well connected community an asset in the face of such challenges? What could Decatur do to improve our web of connections to each other and to the city?"

According to the students, one advantage of the pandemic is that it exposed the fragility of our community. Decatur is not as tight knit as it once was, they said. The pandemic "exposed injustices that were otherwise overlooked."

The key to strengthening the community and taking on our big issues? Discourse, and more of it. "Public discourse is how we solve our issues," said one student. "People talking and finding common ground is the key."

"We need to be more open to difficult conversations with other people," offered another. People aren't open to really listening and hearing what others have to say. Decatur, it was added, has become too focused on staying comfortable. More discussions with more people is how the city can work its way through.

Concluding with a focus on solutions, the students stressed that, as the most connected generation in human history, it's on them to get the word out, utilizing the internet and social media and constantly pressing for change. Bringing the topic around to Decatur itself, there was a push for further utilizing the Square as our central civic hub and for creating more events to help people make connections across neighborhoods.

Group 2

1. Responding to the question: "Many if not most of you will be going off to college and then moving on into your adult lives. If you got cut short in our previous discussion, describe now the Decatur that would need to exist in the future for you to consider returning and making your home here. How can Decatur make that vision a reality?"

Expanding on the walk-your-talk discussion from the first session, the teens were aware that Decatur's character was evolving and were concerned that the changes were toward less diversity and more crowding. An African-American student felt the declining percentage of Black households would probably continue, making it less likely he'd want to return.

Most struggled to reconcile the appeal of a more urbanized environment with more choices for activities they enjoy and the loss of the small town feel they identify with quality of life. One said, "I just don't want Decatur to grow." Some in the group seemed hopeful planning and design strategies – especially strategies that increased housing affordability and expanded public green space – might mitigate the downsides of growth. But worries about "too many people packed together" were persistent.

Bottom line: Even the more optimistic in the group shared a general concern that the changes they noticed – or anticipated – were going in the wrong direction. No one volunteered that returning to Decatur was a high-priority goal, at least at this stage in their lives.

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Everyone in the group seemed aware of – and concerned about – the broader themes of climate action. It's an emergency. Something has to be done. "If we don't fix climate change, we won't be able to fix anything," said one participant. But they worried about apathy in the broader population and among their peers. And uncertainty about what climate change solutions would look like led to a wide-ranging discussion.

Water conservation, city-wide composting, intensified recycling programs, alternative energy systems, electrification of buses, expanded transit options, better managed waste programs in schools were all topics the teens hit on. They recognized the potential conflict between the need to reduce reliance on private automobiles and their own preferences for cars. Females in the group expressed concern that fear of personal safety on transit systems – especially MARTA – kept them from regularly choosing that option over automobile travel.

The group as a whole was good at thinking about what might be done effectively at local – even neighborhood – levels to make a difference. For instance: An adopt-a-street program for regular neighborhood clean-ups and even peer support for safer-feeling MARTA trips.

Bottom line: Exposure to climate change issues in schools and in media they consume has inspired high levels of awareness about the topics in this group. They're already thinking about small efforts that can have large effects. And they appear up for learning more about specific strategies and actions they can participate in – and perhaps share with peers.

3. Responding to the question: "Since last March, much has impacted our community and what we might consider our most pressing challenges and priorities — from a pandemic public health crisis to escalating efforts to combat racial discrimination and injustice. How is being a well-connected community an asset in the face of such challenges? What could Decatur do to improve our web of connections to each other and to the city?"

The group responded to this topic on a personal level: How connected do they feel to the community? And what might increase that connection?

Their comments again revealed their concern about general apathy. Among those in their age group, said one teen, these topics "are just not on their radar." So how best to engage them? Would someone their own age have more credibility leading a discussion or an activity?

Not necessarily, they were quick to say. If expected to respond to a speaker just because they were young, "I'd just role my eyes," said one participant. The key to engagement is to be engaging, the group suggested – to approach topics that have the potential to command action with approaches and discussion leaders that command attention.

So would they as a Youth Council or as individuals help design those kinds of approaches and help pick the right discussion leaders? Sure, they said. And the session wrapped with an invitation to follow up with questions for the consulting team, via Meredith, to assure they maximized their chances to participate – and influence – the ongoing Strategic Plan process.

Bottom line: Members of this group feel connected to Decatur daily life and value the efforts of the City to formally include them as a Youth Council. At the same time, they're as concerned as other residents that Decatur is at risk of losing some of the things that make it distinctive in a sprawling region of millions. And they're up for being part of the conversation that addresses those concerns.