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News: Feature

## Urban alchemy

### Smart growth is changing Atlanta but can only get so far without better transit

BY THOMAS WHEATLEY

Published 11.14.07

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Catherine Ross thinks of Atlanta as a house, and inside that house there are three people and one bathroom.

"That might just work out fine for a while," she says. "But triple the number of people in that house without adding another bathroom, and you're going to have to start making other arrangements."

The director of Georgia Tech's Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development is preaching to the choir. She's standing before a banquet room full of planners, academics and developers. But she isn't just spouting smart-growth propaganda.

The Atlanta Regional Commission estimates that the metro area will add more than 2 million people over the next two decades. And with them will come an even greater demand for housing, shopping, working, transportation and, of course, water.

"By 2030, we're going to have rebuilt the urban environment," Ross says. "So let's do it right."

Atlanta seems the last place forward thinkers would flock to examine an approach to designing cities aimed at turning our sprawling mess into a community that's friendlier to people than to cars. Last week, however, the Seaside Institute hosted a three-day seminar at the Loudermilk Center downtown where Ross, along with 150 other smart-growth thinkers and advocates from around the country,



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Sarah Harms

RECREATING IDEALS: Glenwood Park, praised by many smart-growth planners, made a pedestrian environment by mixing residential and commercial.



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shared ideas and, surprisingly, a dollop of praise for Atlanta.

"Why Atlanta?" said Phyllis Bleiweis, executive director of the Florida-based organization that planned the event. "Because I've heard for so long that Atlanta is the poster child for sprawl. We thought it was about time we change that impression. I know, from people who live here and who visit, that the city's changing."

Audience members, particularly Atlantans, saw hope in Midtown's live-work-play revival, ongoing progress on the Beltline, and Glenwood Park – the ultimate greenie, mixed-used neighborhood developed by Charles Brewer near Ormewood Park. Each project represents a turn away from automobile dependence and toward multifaceted neighborhoods that give the city more of a people-centric character.

A less concrete example of smart growth drew lots of curiosity from the wonkish crowd. Tom Weyandt, the ARC's director of comprehensive planning, explained that the agency directs money from transportation grants toward its Livable Communities Initiative, which doles out the money to help cities and districts create "town centers" in hopes that they'll reduce the need for automobile trips. ARC started the project in the 1990s after the federal government barred metro Atlanta from spending federal money on roads because the region's air was already so bad. Among the LCI's 42 beneficiaries are existing suburbs such as Duluth and Woodstock, and commercial districts such as Perimeter Center and Atlantic Station.

"With congestion and rising fuel prices, people are feeling stuck," Weyandt said after the meeting. "But now people have these models. People can go to them."

But all those good ideas do little to address the elephant – or better yet, Hummer – in the room: More and more roads will only create more and more bottlenecks in an increasingly dense, citified metro area, and Georgia's transportation funding overwhelmingly favors roads.

It's a problem Mike Dobbins knows all too well. The Georgia Tech architecture professor once served as commissioner of the city's Department of Planning. In his presentation on an "eight-step program to kicking the car habit," Dobbins blamed the lack of transportation progress on road-builder clout, state legislators and a "corporate culture" at state transportation agencies. The region has gone "from trying to attract growth to now wondering what to do about it," he said. "There were lots of changes – but little of that was transit."

For Atlanta to live up to its potential, Dobbins continued, the metro area must stop searching for such "magic bullets" as vast highways and double-decker tunnels – ideas he considers ineffective and cheekily brands "solution-ism."

Dobbins projected a map on the wall to display one solution: colorful ribbons of bus routes and rail lines coursing through the city, with some jutting off toward such far-flung destinations as Macon, Rome and Athens. He argued that such a fantasy could become reality if "layers of transit" – buses, trolleys, light rail and commuter trains – were seamlessly connected by a single authority.

Dobbins marveled at the map's ingenuity but then surprised the crowd that it came not from a transit behemoth but from Citizens for Progressive Transit, a grassroots transportation-advocacy group. "Here it is," he said. "A volunteer group with no money but a lot of passion, saying, 'Wake up, Atlanta.'"

Ross, who was executive director of the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority under Gov. Roy Barnes, laid out a very similar vision to Dobbins' "layers of transit," although she added that Atlanta should look into the possibility of extending high-speed, intercity trains to other cities in the Southeast. But, as she clicked through a PowerPoint presentation detailing a plan to solve Atlanta's transit problems, she noted that the region doesn't have a stellar track record when it comes to speeding such projects along.

A black-and-white image appeared on the two screens bookending the stage. It was a MARTA map from 45 years ago. The familiar color version of today followed.

"About the same," she solemnly said.

Next, she displayed a side-by-side map of Madrid and downtown Atlanta. The map of the Spanish capital bears a resemblance to Atlanta's, replete with a 22-mile ring circling the urban core much as the Beltline is supposed to loop around Atlanta's inner city. Madrid's ring, M-30, is an expressway, but Ross says planners there are looking to convert it to a corridor including parks and people-friendly development.

It took Madrid four years to build the M-30. Ross notes that the Beltline's expected date of completion is 25 years down the line.

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