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**Author:**

[Dobbins, Michael](#)

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# Focusing Growth amid Sprawl: Atlanta's Livable Centers Initiative

Michael Dobbins



A turning point may finally have arrived in the Atlanta region's famous infatuation with sprawl. The opportunity stems from widespread concern that present development patterns are unsustainable, and that to do nothing is to risk the region's future desirability—and potential for continued economic prosperity. Today, a new consensus is emerging among citizens, developers, design professionals, and local officials that focuses on channeling new development into existing centers and corridors.

Atlanta's new approach recognizes the need for strategies that will create places with distinctive design quality

Chamblee, an inner suburban sprawl victim, was an early program applicant (2000), seeking to better retrofit its town center to connect to a MARTA station blocked by a large parking lot. The city staff and elected officials believed that such a move was doable and then lined up developers to try out the integrative mixed use and streetscape plan. The first phases of the ensuing midsize development are nearing completion.

and character. Prominent among these is the five-year-old Livable Centers Initiative. LCI was created by the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) as a way to restore the region's eligibility for federal transportation funding after it was found to be out of compliance with air-quality standards. Today it provides both planning and implementation funding for projects aimed at retrofitting declining areas into higher-density, mixed-use, livable places.

## Subhead

Looking backward, Atlanta's growth and development in the last thirty years has been as phenomenal as it has been shapeless. The result is that, at 2.8 people per acre, Atlanta is the least dense of the nation's fifteen largest metro areas.<sup>1</sup> Looking forward, Atlanta will continue to be the hub of a southeast megalopolis that is projected to grow three times faster than the country as a whole over the next fifty years.<sup>2</sup> Even by 2030, the region expects to



add more than two million people (50 percent more than it has now), as well as a million and a half new jobs.<sup>3</sup>

Such projections bring a certain sense of urgency to the need to create a better range of living, working and travel choices. At the same time, the region must address underlying social and political issues, among which are historic racial and income inequities and the divergent purposes of at least ten counties and 64 city jurisdictions.<sup>4</sup> It must also face environmental threats and their health consequences—such as conserving water supplies; improving air, water and habitat quality; and managing solid-waste disposal. In a word, Atlanta must grow smarter.

As occasionally happens in the south, the need for change has also been precipitated by a combination of federal intervention and unfavorable national attention. Most importantly, in 1998 the region was barred from spending federal dollars on new transportation projects until it adopted a transportation plan that met the provisions of

the Clean Air Act. At about the same time Atlantans awoke to an ABC News report that dubbed their region “the poster child of sprawl.”<sup>5</sup> With congestion continuing to cost time and money and create “road rage” levels of frustration, the *Wall Street Journal* also reported that Atlanta had slipped from number one to number fifteen in the standings of cities desirable for real estate investment.<sup>6</sup>

These trends caught the attention of civic leaders. Indeed, the business community became sufficiently alarmed that its Metro Chamber, which had long vaunted the region’s lack of boundaries, began redirecting its energies toward the infilling of existing areas. The change of

Perhaps the best example of a citizen initiated LCI is the Avondale MARTA station, where local citizen and business leadership has partnered with the Decatur city government to produce a plan that integrates the superior access of MARTA with significant large scale mixed use development initiatives, among whose sponsors is the Decatur Housing Authority.

attitude was recently punctuated by the release of a “Quality Growth Atlanta” report from its Quality Growth Task Force, encouraging a more sustainable growth trajectory.<sup>7</sup>

Demographics have also changed in Atlanta. Seniors, empty-nesters, and young adults now provide a better balance to families with children—the population that largely drove suburbanization after World War II. These new markets are demanding more choice in how and where to live.

Clearly, the region will continue to sprawl, but indications are past leapfrog expansion will be slowed by these new markets—a trend that will work to the advantage of already-developed places. From small villages to large centers, these are typically the region’s oldest, densest, and most diverse communities. Currently plagued by aging infrastructure and disinvestment, many are looking to re-center themselves, and they hope that growth can be used to improve levels of access, service and amenity. After thirty years of declining population and private disinvestment, the City of Atlanta is today regaining population and jobs.<sup>8</sup> Many smaller, older towns in the region are similarly experiencing a turnaround.

### Origins of the Program

As mentioned, the LCI program ultimately owes its existence to a need to bring the region into air-quality compliance so it might regain eligibility for federal transportation dollars. After considering a range of growth-management actions, however, the ARC chose not to try to control metropolitan growth through a restrictive program of boundaries. Along with its constituent jurisdictions, it instead decided to create a system of incentives to help focus new development in existing built-up areas. Unlike programs with a top-down mandate, it was hoped such a program would allow new village-like communities to be located as part of a self-selecting process, worked out between communities, the private sector, and local, regional and state agencies. By emphasizing the carrot over the stick, it was also hoped such an approach would be a better fit with Atlanta’s freewheeling real estate development culture.<sup>9</sup>

The LCI program was launched in 1999 with a particularly big carrot: a five-year \$350 million commitment of federal Q23 (formerly Congestion Mitigation/Air Quality, or CMAQ) funds. The use of federal transportation dollars was justified by the smart-growth goal of creating and reinforcing walkable, live-work-shop-learn communities with densities sufficient to support alternatives to travel by private vehicle.

The idea has been to use federal funds to support both community planning and the construction of transporta-

tion projects to support it. Under the program, planning proposals are solicited annually, and then reviewed by a diverse, knowledgeable panel. Among other requirements, applicants must commit to pursuing transportation strategies that support higher-density, mixed-use development patterns; enacting land use regulations that bolster these patterns; and identifying matching funds (20 percent) for each grant. On successful completion of the planning work, applicants may also apply for implementation funds to support the transportation component of their plans. Recognizing that superior community design and development outcomes stem from an engaged citizenry, the planning and implementation phases both also require an inclusive citizen guidance process.

After four rounds of program applications, a total of 150 planning proposals have been submitted, and 51 have been funded at levels ranging from \$50,000 to \$120,000.<sup>10</sup> Of the initial \$350 million, more than \$5 million in planning grants have been awarded, and 80 projects in 40 LCIs have been awarded \$108 million in implementation funding. Development projects enabled by the program have so far included 26,000 housing units (about 10 percent of the region’s total), 23 million sq.ft. of office space (most concentrated in existing major employment centers), 4,500 new hotel rooms, and about 5 million sq.ft. of retail space. Twenty-two jurisdictions have changed their comprehensive plans, with eleven others in the process of doing so. Some 24 communities have adopted zoning and subdivision regulations that support and facilitate new development patterns, with another nine in process.<sup>11</sup>

### Subhead

The above numbers, however, do not tell the whole story. What may be most significant about the LCI program is that it cuts across old boundaries. It has required governments to amend zoning and subdivision codes, reexamine public-works standards (particularly related to street-design), and create new legal frameworks for public-private cooperation. A range of innovations has also emerged from planning staffs and consultants—including mixing uses and densities, establishing conservation provisions, adapting “transect” principles to existing communities, and creating more transparent and legible (often form-based) code structures. The private sector has also found itself breaking new ground, overcoming old cultures, histories and habits in development and finance. And the various design disciplines, both in government and private consulting, are learning to work together better—although they still have a long way to go.



The community groups who have become advocates for the program have increasingly embraced the view that successful place-building requires partnerships. As parts of a single team, community leaders can provide a vision; private developers can provide money and expertise; and local government can provide a strong planning framework.

As the accompanying illustrations show, the program has targeted already-existing centers and corridors across a range of sizes—small, medium, large, and even extra large. Crossroads, town centers, strips, shopping centers, and major suburban and city centers have all adopted smart-growth plans and begun to implement their transportation components.

Infill, redevelopment and retrofit plans now support such goals as mixed-use development, connecting and conserving usable green space, providing walkable, bikeable and transit-supportive streetscapes, putting cars out of sight, and planning for increased densities. Additionally, as communities become more comfortable with the demand for alternatives to sprawl, there is increasing recognition of the need to build mixed-income housing—both to accommodate the population that works in mixed-use centers and as a strategy to shorten commutes and encourage the development of transit alternatives.

### Tough Challenges Remain

As a result of its initial successes, the LCI program has been embraced across the region. In many communities, citizens groups are ahead of local governments in pressing for its application. One reason for the successes may be that the LCI program does not require localities to “think regionally.” Instead, it encourages them to pursue their own priorities, so long as they support regionally established smart-growth criteria and transportation strategies.

As the program is evolving, though, the need to adjust some of its provisions and premises has emerged. For example, many LCI communities are lagging in implementing required zoning modifications. There is also a need to dramatically beef up funding for alternative transportation strategies to meet the escalating market demand.

In addition, the ARC’s recently adopted 2030 Regional Transportation Plan indicates it may be backsliding to the roadway-dominant culture that put the region out of compliance with federal programs and necessitated development of LCI in the first place. New transportation funding should emphasize the opportunities and realities of retrofitting established areas. Instead, proportionally more money is still being spent on roadways and rubber-tired transit serving newer, less dense areas.

In the end, therefore, while the LCI program may be a creative and promising initiative, any claim that the region has turned the corner toward smarter growth is still premature. But as Atlanta looks to the future, this circumstance is comparable to the struggles of other metro areas. Across the country, supplying the market demand for new choices has been as hampered by a lack of public-sector support as it has by a lack of developer and lender support.

Today, as concerns over community health and energy conservation have joined older factors pushing for smarter growth, it is clear that more money must be spent in the older parts of regions. For years these first- and second-generation suburbs have lost out to the forces building lower-density sprawl further out. With significant concentrations of minorities and immigrants, these communities have been unable to organize the political pressure necessary to gain their fair share.

Still, all over the Atlanta region the program is generating growing enthusiasm. As the market for more livable places takes hold, many Atlantans are optimistic the LCI strategy will provide an important tool as they face the challenge of accommodating an additional two million people by 2030.

### Notes

1. Report from the Metro Atlanta Chamber’s Quality Growth Partnership study. Retrieved February 2004 from <http://www.qualitygrowthatlanta.org>.
2. University of Pennsylvania graduate planning studio research, Spring 2004.
3. Atlanta Regional Commission, Volume I: Mobility 2030 Regional Transportation Plan. Trends and Challenges Section. Retrieved February 2004 from <http://www.atlantaregional.com/transportationair/v11s2.pdf>
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5. David Goldberg, “Survey: Metro Area Tops in Urban Sprawl,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, September 10, 1998, all editions.
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7. Report from the Metro Atlanta Chamber’s Quality Growth Partnership study. Retrieved February 2004 from <http://www.qualitygrowthatlanta.org>.
8. Atlanta Regional Commission, ARC 2004 Population Estimates. Retrieved February 2004 from <http://www.atlantaregional.com/regionaldata/arcregionaldata.html>.
9. Tom Wolfe’s novel *The Man in Full* provides a powerful characterization of the Atlanta development scene.
10. In addition, seven areas that developed LCI plans independently meet the criteria for implementation funding, and sixteen areas have been awarded supplemental planning grants.
11. Atlanta Regional Commission, LCI Program Summary. Retrieved February 2004 from <http://www.atlantaregional.com/qualitygrowth/programsummary.html>.