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 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.4 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.5 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.6 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.4 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.”

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.7 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.
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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. 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.” 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. 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 paradigm has been underwritten by a number of catalysts...
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ity of Growth” report from its Quality Growth Task
Force, encouraging a more sustainable growth trajectory.
Demographics have also changed in Atlanta. Seniors,
empty-nesters, and young adults now provide a better bal-
cane. This is particularly 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.

At least thirty years of declining population and private disinvest-
ment, the City of Atlanta is today regaining population and
jobs. Many smaller, older towns in the region are similarly experiencing a turnaround.

Origins of the Program
As mentioned, the LCI program ultimately owes its exist-
ence to a need to bring the region into air-quality compli-
cance so it might regain eligibility for federal transportation
dollars. After considering a range of growth-management actions, however, it was decided to try to control met-
ropolitan growth through a restrictive program of bound-
aries. 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
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Force, encouraging a more sustainable growth trajectory. Demographics have also changed in Atlanta. Seniors,
empty-nesters, and young adults now provide a better balance
can be an increasingly emerging trend. As areas that
successful place-building requires partnerships. As parts of
a single team, community leaders can provide a vision; pri-
ivate 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.

In some communities, however, it does not tell the whole
story. What may be most significant about the LCI pro-
gram is that it is not going to be easy. 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
growth management. A range of innovations has also
emerged from planning staffs and consultants—including
mixing uses and densities, establishing conservation
provisions, adapting “transit” 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.

In the end, therefore, while the LCI program may be a con-
ceptual and promising initiative, increasingly the region
has turned the corner toward smarter growth is still prema-

ture. 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 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 concen-
trations of minorities and immigrants, these communities
have been unable to organize the political pressure neces-
sary to gain their fair share.

Still, all over the Atlanta region the program is generat-

Tough Challenges Remain
As a result of its initial successes, the LCI program has become an ever more necessary and complex proposition. As
the program is evolving, though, the need to adjust some of its provisions and promises has emerged. For example,
many LCI communities are lagging in imple-
menting required zoning modifications. There is also a
demand to dramatically beef up funding for alternative trans-
portation 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 dev-

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3. Atlanta Regional Commission, Volume I: Mobility 2030 Regional Transportation
   qualitygrowthatlanta.org.
9. Tom Wolfe’s novel The Man in Full provides a powerful characterization of the
   Atlanta development scene.
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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. 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 leaping 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. 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 money. After considering a range of growth-management actions, the region decided 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 community groups and localities, 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 community groups and localities, 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 transportation projects to support it. Under the program, planning proposals are submitted by communities, 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 17 have been funded at levels ranging from $50,000 to $120,000. Of the initial $3.5 million, more than $2 million in planning grants have been awarded, and 80 projects in 40 LCIs have been awarded $1.08 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 14 communities, including those across the region, have adopted zoning and subdivision regulations that support and facilitate new development patterns, with another nine in process. Subhead The above numbers, however, do not tell the whole story. What may be most significant about the LCI program is that it represents a sea change from 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 programs 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 become a recognized leader in the field. 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 backing off 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 cooperative and promising initiative, surprisingly 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 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.

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