Growth and Consequences in Metro Atlanta: Inside Stories from One of America’s Fastest Developing Regions
Envy and Relief

Let’s start with the bad news: we can’t have their airport. The single best business decision Atlanta ever made was to lay a runway on an abandoned racetrack in the hopes of grabbing a few government mail contracts. Who knew in 1926 that the jet age was just around the corner? Today, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport is the engine room of the sprawling powerhouse that metro Atlanta has become. Philadelphia International would have to triple its customers and quadruple its flights to match it. That would be great, but we just don’t have the space, either on the ground or in the air. And we’re unlikely to get Atlanta’s population growth, either. Metro Atlanta has added 180,000 people a year for twenty years. A city can do that when it’s surrounded by acres and acres of developable greenfield. We have room to grow, but not at that rate.

But there’s another way to think about these things: it’s not that Philadelphia will never have them, it’s that we already got them. Our regional population doubled once - between 1850 and 1860. We were a global transportation hub once – when railroads were king. We captured the world’s attention as a can-do economic power once – with our 1876 Centennial. So we’ve been through Atlanta’s growth, and we’ve been through its growing pains too. Obsolete, overused infrastructure creating new costs? Check. Congested roads and insufficient public transit choking growth? Check. Booming new immigrant populations forcing new political calculations? Check. Fragmented regional governance, shortage of regional planning, and competition between city, suburbs, and state? Check, check, and check.

In fact, over the three days of the Greater Philadelphia Leadership Exchange visit to Atlanta, it was easy for a listener to whipsaw between two very different reactions: envy and relief. Envy that we cannot match Atlanta’s astonishing growth or replicate the conditions that created it. Relief that when dealing with the problems growth creates, we have the resources and experience they’re still developing.

This is not to say that Greater Philadelphia has nothing to learn from metro Atlanta. The capital of the New South pairs an infectious optimism with an admirable culture of civic inclusion. Its faith in low taxes and limited government is matched by a commitment to personal service and charitable giving (the head of the local United Way told us that Atlantans give twice as much per capita as do Bostonians). Civic responsibility is deeply ingrained in their private sector leadership and is expressed in any number of successful projects and partnerships. And, the Atlanta Housing Authority pioneered the master-planned, mixed-finance, mixed-income residential development model now used by the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

But more than anything, a visit to Atlanta is a reminder of what it’s like to aspire. Its leaders go for world class. They are into permanent problem-solving. They understand their strengths and build on them.

In this region, we would do well to remember ours. Our renowned cluster of universities, research centers, and healthcare institutions. Our irreplaceable web of roads and rails. Our variety of communities, from small towns to suburbs to downtowns. Our access to 24-hour cities to beaches to mountains. Our abundance of water. Our food. Our history. Our people. These are what make us world class.

We hope this issue of Insight lives up to its name. Metro Atlanta has much to teach us, not only about what we could be, but about what we are. We’ll never have their airport, we’ve already had their growth, and we have more than enough to build a world class future of our own.

Sincerely,

Daniel Fitzpatrick
2008 Co-Chair
President and CEO
Citizens Bank

William Marrazzo
2008 Co-Chair
President and CEO
WHYY

Sharmain Matlock-Turner
2008 Co-Chair
Executive Director
Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition

Steven Wray
Executive Director
Economy League of Greater Philadelphia
## Atlanta and Philadelphia by the numbers

### Atlanta City Philadelphia City Metro Atlanta Greater Philadelphia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size (sq. miles)</th>
<th>131.8</th>
<th>129.7</th>
<th>8,376</th>
<th>3,855</th>
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### Demographics

| Population | 519,145 | 1,449,634 | 5,134,871 | 5,826,742 |
| White       | 35%     | 39%     | 54%     | 68%     |
| Black/African-American | 55%     | 44%     | 31%     | 20%     |
| Asian       | 2%      | 5%      | 4%      | 4%      |
| Hispanic/Latino | 6%      | 10%     | 9%      | 6%      |
| Foreign Born | 8%      | 11%     | 11%     | 9%      |
| Median Age  | 35      | 35      | 35      | 38      |
| Median Household Income | $41,612 | $33,229 | $55,552 | $55,593 |

### Education

| High School Diploma | 23% | 38% | 27% | 32% |
| Some College        | 15% | 15% | 19% | 16% |
| Bachelor’s Degree   | 24% | 12% | 22% | 19% |
| Graduate Degree     | 16% | 9%  | 11% | 12% |

### Employment by Sector

| Manufacturing       | -   | -   | 9%  | 10%  |
| Retail              | -   | -   | 12% | 11%  |
| Professional/Scientific/Technical Services | -   | -   | 8%  | 8%   |
| Educational Services | -   | -   | 8%  | 9%   |
| Health Care Services | -   | -   | 9%  | 14%  |
| Government          | -   | -   | 4%  | 5%   |

### Innovation (% of US Average)

| Patents/100,000 Persons | -   | -   | 78% | 92%  |
| NSF/NIH Funding/Capita  | -   | -   | 114%| 166% |
| Venture Capital Funding/Capita | -   | -   | 79% | 120% |
| Research University Enrollment | -   | -   | 88% | 121% |

### Infrastructure

| Air Passenger Boardings/Capita | -   | -   | 8.3 | 2.6  |
| Public Transit Passenger Miles/Capita | -   | -   | 181 | 323  |
| Population in High-Broadband Areas | -   | -   | 91% | 68%  |

### Housing (2000 U.S. Census)

| Owner Occupied | 39% | 53% | -   | -   |
| Vacant         | 10% | 11% | -   | -   |

### Real Estate

| Commercial Vacancy Rate | 21.1% | 10%  | 17.6% | 13.6% |

### Quality of Life

| Average Commute (Minutes) | 24.2 | 29.4 | 31.2  | 28.7  |
| Parkland Acres            | 3,400 | 2,000 | -     | -     |

### Economic Contribution

| Metro Atlanta: GDP 2% of U.S. total; 67.6% of Georgia total |
| Greater Philadelphia: GDP 2.4% of U.S. total; 42.7% of Pennsylvania total |

Sources: Brookings analysis of data from U.S. Census Bureau; Bureau of Economic Analysis; Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness, Harvard University; Fortune Magazine; U.S. Patent and Trademark Office; National Science Foundation; National Institutes of Health; Thompson Financial; Ned Hill calculations of Economy.com data; Carnegie Foundation; National Center for Education Statistics; Federal Aviation Administration; Federal Transit Administration; Federal Communications Commission; Internal Revenue Service; ESRI; American Community Survey of the U.S. Census; Free Library of Philadelphia; FBI; and, Grubb & Ellis. Data are most recent available.
The phrase has a history. After race riots wracked Atlanta a century ago, the “Atlanta Way” came to describe a peacekeeping tradition in which the city’s blacks won limited autonomy and a small share of civic improvements in exchange for providing political support for white leadership. One historian called it a kind of “racial détente” designed to keep calm in everyone’s streets and business in everyone’s shops. It was a strategy that helped Atlanta avoid the worst of the violence that plagued other southern cities during the Civil Rights era.

Later, with the election in 1974 of Atlanta’s first black mayor, the “Atlanta Way” came to describe a careful division of power: the political sphere to blacks, the business sphere to whites. Fortune described it as an alliance of “folks who understand and accept why and how the spoils of any venture must be divided between blacks and whites.”

But when asked today to describe the Atlanta Way, Ed Baker, publisher of the Atlanta Business Chronicle, offers something much less political. “To characterize the Atlanta Way,” he said, “at the top of my list, I believe our biggest point of difference is southern hospitality.”

Baker told the Leadership Exchange that Atlanta was “a city of dreamers and entrepreneurs.” Among its count-
Explosive growth has created new problems that will challenge the city’s old habits.

“People are places they never dreamed they’d be.” Milton James Little’s last job was in Boston, where at first nobody would listen to him. “Your family had to be in the ground for 400 years before you were a native,” he recalled, and one was expected to serve a long apprenticeship before being given a voice in civic affairs.

Now Little is the head of the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta. Before he’d even moved into his office, he was on the cover of Ed Baker’s paper, named one of the region’s most influential people. “I hadn’t even sat in the chair yet,” Little said with a laugh. “But I was in the center [of the cover photograph], surrounded by all these longtime, important people.”

With the warm welcome came a very clear message. “It’s a reminder of the expectation. If you’re in a position of responsibility in this community, somebody asks ‘Is this person willing to team up with local governments to push the region’s leaders get stuck on other issues too, he said, “It had been coming. We knew it. Leadership threatened, we create something and sell it.”

To Ed Baker, if the Olympics were a victory for the Atlanta Way, their aftermath was something else. “We woke up after the Olympics, and we had gridlock,” he said. “It had been coming. We knew it. Leadership ignored it, and it still remains our albatross.” Baker was speaking literally about the crippling traffic jams that now threaten the region’s growth. But the region’s leaders get stuck on other issues too, he said, unable to adjust a hands-off governing philosophy even as demand grows for someone to fix the problems growth has created. “Leadership has not taken us down the road to the promised land,” Baker said, “with regards to transportation, environment, air quality, and water.”

Little was astonished by the region’s abundant and well-attended Rotary Club luncheons, which to him epitomize a culture of openness and inclusion. “You’ve got the great opportunity to see anybody that you need to see. To talk about the things that phone calls don’t allow.” Everywhere he got more than lip service — people who told him “call me if you need help,” he said, called later to find out why he hadn’t called.

Little calls it the “y’all come” culture, and he says it works. By welcoming anyone who’ll join the effort to boost the region, he said, the city has transformed itself into a beacon of possibility. Middle class blacks now live in the shadow of Stone Mountain, once the symbolic home of the Ku Klux Klan. “People are places where they never dreamed they’d be,” Little said. William Jelani Cobb, a professor at Atlanta’s Spelman College, wrote recently that the city has become “what Harlem was in the 1920s: the destination for a critical mass of highly educated and talented blacks in search of a better life.”

Ed Baker says it’s a mistake to read too much into Atlanta’s racial successes. “Black business and white business don’t integrate in any meaningful way,” he said. “And the belief that Atlanta is the place for minority business opportunity is more conversation than reality…in some ways, we get more credit than we deserve.”

But nonetheless, Baker said, power in Atlanta is no longer nearly as concentrated as it once was. “In the sixties, it was basically six to eight white men in a room,” he said. “Most of them were bankers.” Then came the city’s first black mayor, Maynard Jackson, who in the 1970s secured for blacks control of the political sphere (including the city-owned airport) and with it a prominent and powerful seat at the regional table. Suddenly, dividing the city-owned airport) and with it a prominent and powerful seat at the regional table. Suddenly, dividing services — reflects the priorities of private developers and the customers they serve to seek.

Meanwhile, the region has not excelled at providing the kind of services that rely on government or nonprofit sector leadership. Public education depends on some of the lowest levels of public funding in the nation, and test scores and graduation rates rank among the nation’s worst. Infrastructure for transportation and water are woefully outdated. The region ranks number one in child poverty and number two in income inequality.

Robinson says the region’s businesses are more than willing to team up with local governments to push an agenda. But he left no question about who wears the pants. “When we [the business community] feel threatened,” he said, “we create something and sell it into our political system in a way that gives them just enough say in it that we can call it a public/private partnership.” And when the business community does push for increased public investment — as it is currently doing around transportation issues — it is often undercut by a state government which sees itself as the guardian of a low-tax, limited government ideology. “I was at a program where the chief operating officer for the state was boasting that Georgia’s a ‘great state’ because we rank second in terms of the lowest amounts of public investment,” recalled Saporta. “He would call it public taxation. What he thought was a great barometer, I interpreted another way, which is that the state is not investing in who we are and what we are.”

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Whatever its shortcomings, the Atlanta Way of attracting business and residents has helped the region grow at a dizzying rate. Metro Atlanta has doubled in size since 1980. It accounts for 60 percent of the state’s revenue. Its leaders hope to add another two million residents by 2015, and this growth is itself an integral part of the region’s economic plan. Grow is what Atlanta does.

But as it has grown, Atlanta has changed. The region is no longer a fifty-fifty split of southern-born blacks and southern-born whites. It’s rapidly adding Latinos, Asians, Indians, and other immigrants, along with whites. It’s rapidly adding Latinos, Asians, Indians, and other immigrants, along with whites. It’s rapidly adding Latinos, Asians, Indians, and other immigrants, along with whites. It’s rapidly adding Latinos, Asians, Indians, and other immigrants, along with whites. It’s rapidly adding Latinos, Asians, Indians, and other immigrants, along with whites. It’s rapidly adding Latinos, Asians, Indians, and other immigrants, along with whites. It’s rapidly adding Latinos, Asians, Indians, and other immigrants, along with whites. It’s rapidly adding Latinos, Asians, Indians, and other immigrants, along with whites.

The results have shaken up the region. Past formulas for dividing the civic spoils are no longer sufficient. Former Governor Roy Barnes faced a revolt from black lawmakers when he tried to change the state’s definition of “disadvantaged business” to include other ethnic groups. With new residents come unfamiliar problems. Fayette County officials planned to open clinics to handle the uninsured Latino families who were using the local emergency room for routine care. Atlantans wanted a global city, and after adding 100,000 people a year for twenty years, they have one.

Likewise, Atlanta wanted to join the global economy, and now the corporate community is losing its deep regional roots. “You have very few home-grown CEOs, and their companies have gone international,” said Maria Saporta, the journalist. “There’s not as much sense that the health of the company depends on the health of the region. It’s becoming more and more of a struggle to get those leaders engaged. The profile has changed.”

And finally, as a region of more than a dozen separate counties has grown and thrived, new power centers now compete with each other. “I happen to believe that we’re becoming tomorrow’s Los Angeles, in many different ways,” said Baker. Wealthy Gwinnett County is now “our Orange County,” he said, with “its own geography, with its own leadership, setting its own strategy.” That’s not the exception — “that’s how it’s going across the region.”

Thus the overarching sense at the Leadership Exchange was that whatever the past Atlanta Way has been, the next Atlanta Way must accommodate an increasingly diverse population, living in an increasingly fragmented political landscape, depending on an unpredictable global economy whose interests are not synonymous with Atlanta’s own.

But if the tactics and conditions are changing, the overall strategy that guides the Atlanta Way appears unlikely to change: business leads, government follows. “The business community has worked with local government to get us out of every scrape we’ve been in over the last fifty years,” said Tad Leithead, a developer who’s deeply involved in traffic issues. Leithead was one of many Leadership Exchange panelists who said that with better regional cooperation and planning, and better support from state government, metro Atlanta can improve its public infrastructure and services without giving up its fundamentally pro-business attitude.

That would be the Atlanta Way: balance the politics so that business can thrive and make a bigger pie for everybody. And if Atlanta’s leaders have proved anything, it’s that they can spot a business opportunity virtually anywhere, including the Leadership Exchange. “You are all now part of the Atlanta Way,” said Hardin, the foundation president, as he sat in a sparkling midtown hotel, gazing across a room of 100-plus Greater Philadelphians. “I’m not sure what the Atlanta Way is — I missed that one. But one theme here since Reconstruction days is our earnest, nonstop attempts to attract Yankee money.”

Too often, the ‘Philly Way’ involves people debating how to slice up the pie, instead of brainstorming about how to make the pie bigger. In Atlanta, for example, they spend lots of time trying to attract foreign businesses — growing the Atlanta business pie. In Philadelphia, the city’s current budget crisis gives us a chance to take a new approach — a new ‘Philly Way’ — which would bring everyone to the table with the goal of growing the pie. At the Redevelopment Authority for example, we are working on getting vacant parcels into the hands of the private sector more quickly — which will add to the city’s tax base and give us sales proceeds that we can use to fund development projects. Growing the pie should be the new ‘Philly Way’.”

As I look out onto the tarmac, awaiting the departure of my flight to the Silicon Valley, “I can’t help but think that the ‘Philadelphia Way’ should be: Always Happy; Never Satisfied. Philadelphians should take justifiable pride in a home which has no peer when it comes to that rare combination of authenticity, architecture, history, smarts, arts, recreational assets, and an abiding civic spirit. Greater Philadelphia is truly one of the most livable and enjoyable regions of the world, and we’re lucky to have so many people who are passionate about making it their home. But we must never be satisfied with where we are, lest we lose ground to some of our most ambitious sister regions, many of whom are plotting, on a daily basis, to eat our lunch. Whether it is the relentless planning of Chicagoland, the invention and entrepreneurship of the Bay Area, or the sheer force and size of the governmental engines fueling the growth of Washington, D.C., we’re up against some stiff competition. But if the region that is home to Comcast, Aramark, the University of Pennsylvania, an army of Philadelphia lawyers, and 60 percent of all pharma workers in the world can come together and share a sense of urgency about taking Philadelphia to the next level, surely we cannot fail. And somehow I think one of the projects that will get us there is right outside my window. Can we begin by working together to make the Philadelphia International Airport a world class gateway to our world class region?”

Ahmeenah Young, President and CEO Pennsylvania Convention Center

Gregg Melinsson, Chief Marketing Partner
Drinker Biddle & Reath, LLP
1837 - Terminus, GA founded at the termination point of several rail lines

1847 - Terminus incorporated as Atlanta

1864 - Union General William T. Sherman orders Atlanta burned to the ground

1866 - Coca-Cola invented by Atlanta pharmacist

1886 - Candler Field opens as city's first airport

1926 - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. becomes 1st President of Southern Christian Leadership Conference

1957 - Atlanta Mayor Ivan Allen, Jr. is the only white Southern official to testify before Congress in support of the Civil Rights Act

1963 - Atlanta Mayor Ivan Allen, Jr. is the only white Southern official to testify before Congress in support of the Civil Rights Act

1965 - Atlanta Lures Milwaukee Braves by building $18 million stadium

1968 - Maynard Jackson takes office as Atlanta's 1st African American mayor

1974 - Turner Center opens, later becomes CNN Center

1976 - Jimmy Carter appoints Andrew Young, former U.S. Congressman and future Atlanta Mayor, U.S. Ambassador to the UN

1990 - Georgia Research Alliance founded to promote public-private partnerships among business, research universities, and government

1993 - State Lottery Funds Hope Scholarship, guarantees free tuition at public colleges for meritorious students

1996 - Summer Olympics

1996 - Atlanta Housing Authority creates nationally-renowned model for mixed-income, mixed-finance development

1999 - Atlanta Magazine publishes "The Global City" issue, profiling 55 most influential foreign born citizens

2002 - Shirley Franklin becomes 1st African American woman to run a major Southern city

2006 - Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport opens 5th runway

2007 - Georgia Governor Sunny Purdue declares a state of emergency in response to water crisis

2008 - Greater Philadelphia Leadership Exchange to Atlanta

2010 - Mayor Shirley Franklin will complete 2nd term
FROM THE CLEAR BLUE SKY

Photo courtesy of Hartsfield – Jackson Atlanta International Airport

How Atlanta made an airport – and how an airport made Atlanta

by Bill Hangleby, Jr.

Thank the boll weevil. Thank the drought of 1925, too. As the Roaring 20s peaked, bad weather and penituous pests were squeezing farmers off their land across the South. To the man serving as Atlanta’s mayor, Walter C. Wilson, the sound of regional economic collapse was the sound of opportunity. Displaced people needed to go somewhere. Why not Atlanta?

The city was already on the rebound, using its rails and roads to bring itself back from the destruction of the Civil War. Atlanta doubled in size between 1910 and 1920, and Mayor Sims believed that even greater growth was possible if only the city had an airport. As it happened, he was right. In fact, it seems unlikely that he could have guessed how right he would prove to be.

Today, in a region of more than 5 million people, Atlanta’s airport is responsible for about one job out of every eight. It moves 90 million passengers a year on more than 2,400 flights a day, an average of one takeoff every 36 seconds. It turns Atlanta into a hub of international business and travel, redefining the region and its economy.

Atlanta Olympic host? Made possible by the airport. Atlanta, home to more than a dozen Fortune 500 companies, another for the airport. Atlanta, adding 100,000 new residents a year? Couldn’t have been done without the airport.

The airport was born at a time when the Atlantic Railroad – had thrived and survived the Depression. It was the first official arrival at a brand new airport then known as Candler Field. Asa Candler was a Coca-Cola tycoon and former Atlantic Railroad president. Candler Field’s best prospects for profit lay in lucrative government mail contracts. But within five years, Delta and Pitcairn (later Eastern) Airlines were offering regular passenger service. World War II brought the military, and by the end of the war, Candler was the nation’s busiest airport.

Given Atlanta’s civic DNA and the airport’s early success, it’s no surprise that the city fathers couldn’t stop hatch ing plans to expand their new property. Manufacturing had never been Atlanta’s driving force. Moving goods and people was always bread and butter. The town originally named “Terminus” – it was the last eastbound stop on the Western and Atlantic Railroad – had thrived and survived by linking roads, rail, and ports. Once the war was over, the city took full ownership of the property (which was then outside city limits), converted a surplus hangar into a terminal, and started looking for business.

By 1948, what was now known as Atlanta Municipal Airport moved a million passengers a year. Within a decade, that number had doubled. By the early 60s, six million passengers annually passed through a brand-new terminal. By 1970, Atlanta planners were working to expand the airport’s capacity by a factor of ten for the cool price of $500 million. That last step would prove to be, as they say, a doozy.

The massive airport expansion completed in 1980 under Mayor Maynard Jackson put Atlanta firmly on both the national and international map. The publisher of the Business Chronicle, Ed Baker, calls the 1980s the “decade where Atlanta could do no wrong,” and the region’s signature successes all depended on its major air hub. In the 80s, Atlanta lured the headquarters of regional and international businesses, grew new service industries to support its new corporate community, it established itself as a hotel and convention center. The airport helped Atlanta redefine itself as the capital of the New South: cheerful, accessible, modern, and open for business.

Getting there took Atlanta through uncharted territory. When the airport finished its 1961 major expansion, black Southerners were still living under Jim Crow and virtually all political decisions were made for them. The airport deal set a precedent: it put it. The airport deal set a precedent: the airport needed without a guaranteed role for minority businesses.

Jackson knew how badly Atlanta’s business leaders wanted a new airport. But he also knew they had no choice but to collaborate with airport officials — or the airport would be on the block. Asa Candler was running the city, he was running the city, and he refused to give the expansion the support it needed without a guaranteed role for minority businesses.

Atlanta’s current mayor, Shirley Franklin, recalls how she was on the rebound, using its rails and roads to bring itself back from the destruction of the Civil War. Atlanta doubled in size between 1910 and 1920, and Mayor Sims believed that even greater growth was possible if only the city had an airport. As it happened, he was right. In fact, it seems unlikely that he could have guessed how right he would prove to be.

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Ultimately, Jackson prevailed. Once started, the airport was finished in just three years – “ahead of schedule and under budget” was how Jackson liked to say. And under Jackson’s leadership, the percentage of city contracts given to minority businesses peaked, but only did the 1980 expansion usher in the economy that made Atlanta what it is today – the region that made it. The airport deal set a precedent: the airport needed without a guaranteed role for minority businesses.

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Today, as recession redraws the global economic landscape, airport officials say they know that as the airport goes, so goes the region.
It’s enough to make a Philadelphian mad with jealousy. In the three days of the Greater Philadelphia Leadership Exchange, the words “Atlanta airport” and “regional growth” were mentioned together way too often. The unofficial count, approximately a hundred thousand times. Philadelphia will consider itself lucky to meet Mayor Michael Nutter’s goal of adding 75,000 new residents in the next five years. By comparison, metro Atlanta has added as many as 250,000 new residents a year over the last decade. The airport gets much of the credit, not only for creating jobs, but for serving as a bridge to global capitals and their immigrant grants to metro Atlanta. So, can Philadelphia replicate that success? Here are some of the issues:

ROOM ON THE GROUND. Atlanta’s airport is sited on some of the region’s most sparsely developed land. Highways offer the biggest physical obstacles to growth, and a recently added runway solved that problem with an overpass. Philadelphia International Airport, by comparison, is hemmed in by roads, water, and people. A recent draft plan to add a runway would require the airport to buy and tear down 72 houses and a mailing plant in the township of Tinicum. Residents aren’t happy—the township claims that would cost them $300,000 jobs—and they’ve vowed to fight. 

Altogether, airport officials want to increase traffic from 90 million passengers to 121 million passengers in 2015. 

Officially, the plan is to keep growing. Airport leaders are courting the new international terminal to increase the number of direct flights to what they believe are the business world’s growth markets. Atlanta, India, South America, and China. They’re also planning a number of development projects on land around the airport that they hope will attract hotels and office parks, and with them airlines and passengers.

Altogether, airport officials want to increase traffic from 90 million passengers in 2007 to 121 million passengers in 2015. Their belief in the unlimited potential of their region is probably no different from that of Mayor Michael Nutter, who started the whole thing when he had the word “airport” painted on the roof of a barn in 1926.

But the global economy is slowing, and Atlantans are adjusting. City officials recently completed a wish list of infrastructure funding requests they’ll send to President Barack Obama. On it is $500 million for airport expansion. “There’s no harm in asking,” one city councilman told the Atlanta Journal Constitution. “That seems to be how we govern these days, ask the president-elect.”

Flagged for racism

In the category of unintended consequences, the airport’s success helped force Georgia to give up a treasured piece of its Confederate identity. Since 1966, the Georgia state flag had prominently featured the Confederate “Stars and Bars”– to some a symbol of regional pride, to others, an emblem of violent racism. The flag had long stirred controversy, but by the late 1990s, Georgia Governor Roy Barnes was hearing a steady stream of complaints from the national and international businesses he was trying to lure and keep.

These were the sorts of complaints Barnes paid close attention to. “My theory is, you keep business happy, and they’ll keep bringing in money, and you can do anything you want,” Barnes told the Leadership Exchange. Executives from one major German firm told him, “We only see that flag when we see Nazi skinheads marching in Berlin.” When the CEOs of all the city’s Fortune 500 companies collectively asked Barnes to get rid of the Stars and Bars, the governor pushed a bill through the legislature creating a new flag with only a tiny confederate symbol of the bottom. The move probably cost him his job. Barnes, a Democrat, lost his 2002 bid for re-election, with the flag issue playing a major role. “I believe in full voter participation. But I made some white guys come out that hadn’t voted in fifty years,” Barnes recalled. “They usually hunt that time of year. That year, the deer were safe.”

Fellow Leadership Exchange panelist Jack Smith, an official in Fayette County, wrote

Why not us?

And yet, as strong as its performance may be, Atlanta’s airport is not invincible. Airport leaders are counting on the bazooka bond market to cast a shadow on the region’s life sciences industry. “If you understand how important that is to the region’s life sciences industry. ‘If you understand how important that is to the region’s life sciences industry. ‘If you understand how important that is to the region’s life sciences industry. ‘If you understand how important that is to the region’s life sciences industry.”

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Why not us?
Beach is the president of the North Fulton Chamber of Commerce, representing a county of almost a million people that sits four miles north of downtown Atlanta. On the day he spoke to the Greater Philadelphia Leadership Exchange, Fulton County was scheduled to break ground on a two-mile stretch of four-lane highway designed to reduce congestion on the local interstate. The West Side Highway was eight years in the making, and the process left Beach—an outwardly mild-mannered man who also sits on the board of the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA)—disgusted. Federally mandated environmental studies took five years to prepare. In that time, Beach said, the price went from $16 to $25 million.

"Now I’m all for the environment," Beach said. "I love trees. But we’ve got to have a little common sense. If we had to build an interstate system today we couldn’t do it. It’s mind-boggling. I’m tired of hearing it’s federal money—it’s our money, and we’ve got to fight like hell to get it back. So it’s not fair, he went on. "We’re mired in congestion, and we can’t build our way out of it because of the time and the bureaucracy. That it takes to build the roads."

Beach paused. Then he talked some more about the improving state of collaboration among metro Atlanta’s many transit agencies. He talked about the need to overcome the region’s reflexive opposition to high-density developments. He talked about the chronic and worsening shortage of transportation funding at every level: local, state, and national.

"The good news is, Atlanta is the fastest growing city and will continue to be. The bad news is, Atlanta is the fastest growing city and will continue to be."

But as he spoke, he stopped to recall a time when he was in charge of a road. "I didn’t know what I was doing," he said. As a new town official, he’d approved a developer’s plans to build hundreds of homes in clusters of cul-de-sacs connected to the main two-lane road by only a single entrance. "There’s only one way in and one way out," he said. "Now these people are cussing me because they can’t even get out of their subdivisions, and when they do there’s a mile of traffic to get to the stoplight."

What happened to Brandon Beach is what happened to Atlanta. The city and its leaders know how to grow. But they struggle to solve the problems growth creates. Another Leadership Exchange panelist, Ted Leithead, Senior Vice President of Cousins Properties, put it this way: "The good news is, Atlanta is the fastest growing city and will continue to be. The bad news is, Atlanta is the fastest growing city and will continue to be."

"WE’RE NUMBER ONE."

Leithead knows both sides of the story. As a private developer, he’s seen metro Atlanta thrive on a steady diet of affordable, suburban, single family homes built on former farmland — what some call "greenfield development" and others call "sprawl." But as a transportation committee chairman for the regional planning board (the Atlanta Regional Commission, or ARCO), Leithead suspects the strategy has reached its limit. He says Atlanta’s one transportation option is no longer enough.

"I have a brother-in-law who lives in Jersey and works in New York City," he said. "When he wakes up in the morning, he has five choices for how to get to work. He can drive his car, he can carpool with his next door neighbor, he can take a ferry, a taxi, or he can ride the train. When I wake up in the morning, I also have five choices."

"I can drive my car down Riverside Drive, I can drive it across Lower Roswell Road, I can take I-85, I can take 75, or I can take Georgia 400. But either way I’m gonna get stuck in traffic, and I’ll be in my car myself."

Leithead is an optimist who calls Atlanta a “can do” place that will solve its problems. But the problems are undeniable. This year, Forbes rated metro Atlanta’s traffic as the nation’s worst. Atlanta drivers spend an average of sixty hours a year in traffic, trailing only Los Angeles. Every day, 300,000 of its 2.3 million workers drive more than an hour to get to work.

One could call this the price of success. "How big is the economy?" asks Mike Alexander. "I like to say it’s bigger than Argentina." Alexander is a planning specialist with ARC. He arrived at the Leadership Exchange with a laptop full of charts, graphs, and slides that add up to a simple story: Atlanta has been growing like crazy for thirty years.

"We’re number one," Alexander said. Atlanta has outgrown every other metropolitan statistical area in the U.S. since 2000. We’ve added over a million people. You made the slide, though," he told his audience, pointing at Greater Philadelphia’s spot at the low end of his chart. "You made the slide, though," he told his audience, pointing at Greater Philadelphia’s spot at the low end of his chart. "You made the slide, though," he told his audience, pointing at Greater Philadelphia’s spot at the low end of his chart. "You added 144,000 people. We added a million," and that’s just in this decade.

In 1980, metro Atlanta was home to just more than two million people. Today, the region’s workforce alone is more numerous than that, and the total population has climbed to more than five million. The
long, steady pattern – less a boom than a swell – has been driven by Atlanta’s unique combination of climate, space, affordable housing, and above all, jobs.

Atlanta’s airport, low taxes, and famously business-friendly state and local governments have helped it attract and retain the headquarters of dozens of national and international companies, from Coca-Cola and CNN to Rubbermaid and Waffle House. It trails only New York and Houston in its number of Fortune 500 companies (15). With corporations come support services, and, to take one example, Atlanta now employs more data-hosting workers than any other city in the nation. Still more jobs come from government and military bases. The federal centers for Disease Control and Prevention alone employs 15,000 people.

Over the last forty years, metro Atlanta’s most visible transportation-related failure has been its inability to create a truly regional public transit system. The city of Atlanta boasts a clean, comfortable subway called MARTA that serves just two of more than a dozen counties in the region; voters in the other counties wouldn’t approve a one percent sales tax to bring the system their way. Some developments drive down the value of building yet another batch of single-family homes on the empty field beyond the last cul-de-sac, density is virtually synonymous with government intervention in private development.

That may be one reason density was a bad word, recalled would-be roadbuilder Brandon Beach of Fayetteville, a small city 22 miles south of Atlanta. “That may be one reason density was a bad word.”

“We’re in a foxhole.”

“When it comes to the power of the private sector, it’s fair to say that Atlanta has developed a civic culture of true believers. At the heart of the so-called “Atlanta Way” is a conviction that business and industry should lead, and government should follow. And while Georgia loves to tout its business-friendly labor laws and low taxes, the Chamber’s op-ed – a reminder that government isn’t necessarily inclined to follow when business leaders cry, “Spend!”

On the last day of its 2008 session, the Georgia state legislature was presented with a bill that would have allowed local counties to raise their own taxes in order to fund transportation. It wasn’t a tax increase. It was a bill to allow voters to choose to tax themselves. Despite strong support from business interests, one minute before midnight, the bill failed by three votes.

The op-ed was the Chamber’s response. “We face another year of increasing traffic congestion, less time with families, worn-out infrastructure, rising costs for transportation, and lost economic development across the region.”

Greater Philadelphia – Metro Atlanta comparison (Source: Atlanta Regional Commission)

“We are one of the fastest-growing regions in the country, and dedicated more to...”

What our customers are telling us is that we really don’t have 2.3 million potential employees,” he said. “We have people that are willing to drive only about 30 minutes maximum. So what we have are about ten employment centers that each has access to about 500,000 potential employees.”

Thus, the region’s business community sees its growth threatened by – well, by growth. “All this prosperity could come to an end because of one thing – transportation,” wrote the Georgia Chamber of Commerce in a recent op-ed. “Even though we are one of the fastest-growing states, we invest in transportation infra-structure at the lowest rate in the entire country. The result is gridlock – families disconnected because they can’t get to ball games and dinner on time, companies...”

Ken Steele is the mayor of Fayetteville, a small city 22 miles south of Atlanta. He told the Leadership Exchange that any increase in state support for transportation will require legislators to embrace a fundamental shift in their responsibilities. Eighty percent of the budget of the state of Georgia is tied up in education and health care,” he said. “We need leadership to go before the people and make the argument that we have to spend more and dedicate more to transportation." Steele believes there is still a chance the re-"ultant legislature will come around in 2009. “I hope that’s right,” replied Leithead. “I’m afraid it’s not...”

Mike Alexander, the ARC planner, was thrilled with the plan they produced. “I can tell you, having 20 counties at the table talking about transportation resources is a challenge,” he said. “That’s how we’ve come together. The politicians have really stepped up to engage a different level of planning.”

Known as “ITF,” the plan calls for improved inter-county bus and rail options, more public safety, and the political will to commit the state to the county to the process. Doug Tollett, a real estate entrepreneur who helped steer the process, said the transportation crisis has forced many of the region’s players to shed their parochial interests and think regionally for the first time. “Some of the people at these..."
organizations are great people with bright ideas,” he said. “And leadership gets in the way. They have finally decided that they have to work together.”

Leithard put it another way. “We’re in a foxhole,” he said. “We panicked, and it’s brought us together—and that’s the good news.”

“If we don’t give ‘em gas, they can’t get on the roads.”

The bad news is that no one can say how much of the multi-billion dollar IT3 plan will get the support it needs. The state recently announced plans to expand some bus services and introduce toll lanes to reduce congestion. But in the wake of the legislature’s failure to pass the transit-funding referendum, the governor, lieutenant governor, and the speaker all unveiled their own transportation plans. It’s strange,” Leithard said, “they bear very little resemblance to each other.” One plan calls for 4,000 miles of new highway lanes. We have some serious disagreement not only on how we raise money, but on what we do with it.

All this leaves metro Atlanta where it started: dependent on the magic of the marketplace to shape its environment. Regional officials say they already see it happening: data show the city of Atlanta’s population on the increase as residents eschew long commutes for downtown convenience. As more unpleasant, “The price of gasoline is getting more expensive as well,” Lewis said. “And leadership gets in the way. They have finally decided that they have to work together.”

Water.

Water. Metro Atlanta outgrew its plumbing decades ago, but no one wanted to pony up the cash to fix it. It took the threat of federal action—the system was in violation of the Clean Water Act—followed by a long political showdown with ratepayers, business interests, and state government for Mayor Shirley Franklin to win state approval for a massive, $3 billion dollar repair plan.

Opposition to that kind of spending was not confined to the region’s big businesses—some residents, too, were furious about the prospect of rising water bills. “If I didn’t have a federal judge saying, ‘you will,’ I never would have done it,” said Franklin.

“It’s too hard, I have people following me around the grocery store! An older gentleman was following me around, said, ‘You think you’re some kind of mayor!’ said Franklin. “I’m just trying to buy groceries!”. He said, “Mayor Jackson never would have done this.”

Maury Jackson was Atlanta’s first black mayor; elected in 1974, said, “If Mayor Jackson had done it, I wouldn’t have to!”

Education.

Georgia ranks near the bottom in many educational achievement categories, from graduation rates to SAT scores. But state funding remains at one of the lowest per capita rates in the nation, and even Franklin—a Philadelphia native and Girls High graduate who betrays no fear of confrontation—learned quickly to keep her distance from what she called Atlanta’s “very territorial” school board, one of more than thirty separate boards in the region.

Atlanta’s extraordinary growth has exacerbated what critics call the “WET” problems: water, education, and transportation. As with traffic issues, those who promote regional plans and funding increases for schools and water infrastructure struggle to gain traction in a state committed to low taxes and limited government. Here’s a quick look at the other two-thirds of the WET problem:

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People’s Emergency Center

Benjamin Young
Philadelphia Convention Center

Ahmeenah Young
Pennsylvania Convention Center
Against a backdrop of national financial crisis, last September 24 to 26, 100-plus Greater Philadelphia civic business, and government leaders joined the Economy League in Atlanta for the Greater Philadelphia Leadership Exchange. From our base in midtown Atlanta, we learned about how the Atlanta region is tackling issues of environmental and economic sustainability, traffic gridlock, governing the nation’s fastest growing region — and much more. While Blackberries and Treos were burning with the latest news, the participants remained focused on learning more from Atlanta and each other in a shared commitment to make Greater Philadelphia a world class region.

So, what did we learn about Atlanta that will resonate as we think about Philadelphia’s future? Most striking is the combination of optimism, southern hospitality, and cross-sector collaboration that Atlantans refer to as the “Atlanta Way.” While our speakers were very honest and forthright in pointing out how much work Atlanta still has remaining on tough issues dealing with race relations, integrating an exploding immigrant community, and handling growth, it is clear that there is a “cultural DNA” that is passed on from generation to generation.

The Atlanta Way also means forward movement. Mayor Shirley Franklin in her address to us emphasized the success that her administration — and prior administrations — has had in leveraging private sector assistance to tackle big problems, such as rebuilding a crumbling sewer system. Sometimes it is easy to say that we can’t do something because of others. But if recent economic events tell us anything, it is that we all are connected, no one individual, institution, or company will be able to solve problems by themselves. Such challenging times as these require new collaborations and alliances, new ways of looking at problems, and new resolve to seize opportunities. A Leadership Exchange is not merely a conference in another city — it is a way for leaders to develop true relationships with their peers who care deeply about the future of Greater Philadelphia and to challenge themselves to think, and then act, differently. We are on the way to building a new culture of collaboration and action in this region — and given the world we find ourselves in today, it is not a moment too late.

By 2008, Greater Philadelphia's leaders and civic leaders had recognized the need for a new culture of collaboration and action that could tackle big problems.

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