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## CHAPTER 8

# The Genesis of Citizen of Participation in Atlanta

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When Atlanta's newly elected mayor, Maynard Jackson, entered his office for the first time in January 1974, he found a city that few would have recognized just a few decades earlier. Building on an excellent railroad and highway network, Atlanta in the previous decades had evolved into the major center of economic and political activity of the southeastern region. Military operations in and around the city during World War II had strengthened that primacy, and at the end of the conflict, an important portion of this war-related activity settled in and remained. Strong economic activities followed, responding not only to the wartime growth but also to pent-up consumer demands that had gone unsatisfied during the 16 long years of depression and war. The region's population exploded, and by 1950 almost a million people were residing in the Atlanta area, with one-third of them living within the city.

### **Transformation in City and Region**

Throughout the the 1950s, the future of the region seemed highly favorable and assured. The Atlanta region covered five counties, and it was attracting tens of thousands of newcomers, a large number of employment opportunities, and considerable investments and wealth. Construction on three interstate highways was underway, expansions were made at the international airport, and large federal grants were flowing in to underwrite new infrastructure, roads, schools, and housing. Favorable local and federal lending practices also helped underwrite new development.

Nevertheless, a sharp change had begun to take place in the region's traditional trends. While more than 313,000 people were added during the decade of the 1950s, the city's growth began to take a different and slower path. Census figures for that decade showed that Atlanta had gained 156,000 residents, and it was widely assumed that the city would continue these considerable population gains. Actually, that expectation proved to be illusionary. Overlooked was the huge annexation which had been approved in 1952, which had tripled the city's size and added 130,000 persons who were living in that adjacent area. Without that annexation, the city's population would have actually increased by only about 26,000 people, fewer than had been added in the previous decade.

Nonetheless, the region's population continued to increase at a galloping pace. During the 1960s, another 450,000 people were added into the Atlanta region, bringing the total population to over 1.3 million inhabitants. By contrast, the city's shrinking growth continued, with only 10,000 more residents gained. Even with so few added, the city's population still reached almost a half million residents in 1970.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, that was to be its historical high mark, a total that has never been reached again since. An era of abandonment had set in. Atlanta's population would drop sharply, by 71,000 people during the 1970s and still another 30,000 in the 1980s. Those 20 years were catastrophic for the city in many vital ways in addition to its diminished population.

## **Stirrings**

Few issues have been more central to the shaping of Atlanta throughout its history than that of race. The proportion of African Americans and whites came into balance in Atlanta in the early 1950s, and throughout the 1960s, the races were almost totally equal in number. Segregation was then the universal law, firmly held and rigidly enforced. Signs of a limited integration were occurring, but slowly, in small increments, and sometimes forced. Yet the walls that had long existed between parallel worlds were being pierced. This transformation was taking place even as the city, with its strong black leadership, was emerging as a national center for the civil rights movement. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, under its president, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., set up its headquarters in downtown Atlanta, coordinating the efforts of dozens of black churches throughout the South on strategies for local boycotts and marches (Morris 1984).

Amid this era of change, the number of perceived threats due to changes in the distribution of housing was beginning to increase. At the time, the main area where African Americans lived was confined primarily to a tightly drawn part of central downtown Atlanta, plus some fringe housing around it. The rapid growth of Atlanta's African American population in the 1950s, however, had led to severe shortages of housing for African American fami-

lies. Bolstered by the discriminatory actions of real estate companies, African Americans were beginning to exert pressure to buy into white neighborhoods to the west and south, and the phenomenon of so-called "blockbusting" began. Political efforts to halt the movement of African Americans into traditionally white neighborhoods were undertaken, to no avail. Then, in April 1960, bombings took place in Adamsville and other neighborhoods (Meridan Record 1960). In October 1960, students from historically black colleges at nearby Atlanta University Center launched a number of sit-ins at Rich's, one of the two leading department stores in downtown Atlanta. That action received the immediate and full attention of the business community, whose members had always sought to portray a positive and progressive image of the city. The pressure for change was sweeping into the city, and the Downtown stores became integrated in 1961, three years before the adoption of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which had mandated fair access to public accommodations (Allen 1996).

On August 30, 1961, nine students became the first African American students to attend several all-white Atlanta public high schools. Nine days later, on September 8, 1961, Time magazine reported: "Last week the moral siege of Atlanta (pop. 487,455) ended in spectacular fashion with the smoothest token school integration ever seen in the Deep South. Into four high schools marched nine Negro students without so much as a white catcall" (Time 1961).

Meanwhile, soon after World War II, construction was underway on Atlanta's Central Artery (later Interstate 75/85). A huge corridor was created on land formerly occupied by dilapidated, blighted rental housing units that were demolished, thereby displacing thousands of families, mostly black and very low income. The highway engineers, in fact, referred to the construction as a "slum clearance" project. During the 1960s, the city also embarked on a comprehensive urban renewal program, funded primarily by the federal government. Three projects were undertaken that almost totally cleared the land. Similar to the downtown highway project, these projects also removed thousands of low-rent, primarily substandard housing units, formerly occupied by both black and white residents (Allen 1971). Together, these two local and federal initiatives dislocated some 57,000 white and black individuals and families over a 10-year period. Regrettably, little funding was made available to assist displaced people who needed to be relocated.

### **A New Charter**

The turbulence Atlanta faced after the end of World War II made governing the city under its existing city charter increasingly difficult. Elected and appointed officials were unable to deal adequately with the changes that confronted them, and the public was unable to assess responsibility for performance. In order to adjust

to its major managerial problems, the City of Atlanta, together with its political and business leadership, petitioned the Georgia General Assembly in 1972 to grant the city a new charter. The new charter that was issued substantially altered the city's historical manner of governance. Administrative oversight of departments was shifted from the city council to the mayor, thereby replacing a so-called "weak mayor" form of government with a "strong mayor" government. For the first time, the mayor would manage the city's daily administrative functions. Most important, the new charter gave the mayor the opportunity to lead, coordinate, and direct all executive activities in a common direction.

### **Following the 1973 Election**

A watershed moment arrived in Atlanta history with the city-wide election of 1973. It pitted the white incumbent mayor, Sam Massell, against Maynard H. Jackson, an African American who was at the time the vice mayor of the Board of Aldermen (a position later known as the president of the City Council). Following a highly contested campaign, Jackson was handily elected as the city's first African American mayor, and Atlanta became the first large metropolis in the South to come under African American leadership.

Entering office in January 1974, Jackson was to govern over a city that was steadily growing smaller. Atlanta had a new populace, one more diverse and exhibiting wider mixtures of interests and expectations. Atlanta had started the previous decade as a majority white, middle-class, and segregated community. Now, 14 years later, thousands had moved away, taking with them not only their economic capacity but also their contribution to the social fabric of the city. Those who remained bore witness to an evolving and different culture (Kruse 2005).

Young college graduates intent on starting their careers were arriving, as were empty nesters and retirees. But by far, the largest category of newcomers arrived from farms and small towns, in search of economic opportunities. The new arrivals included thousands of individuals who were poor and dispossessed, many with little experience with urban living and its particular requirements leading some business leaders began to question Atlanta's economic future.

Early on, Jackson was confronted with the reality that the changes of the 1950s and 1960s required immediate attention. At the outset of Jackson's administration, the city had first to deal with matters which were negatively impacting the city's tax base. The considerable loss of people, especially the white middle class, was affecting the consumer markets upon which businesses depended. A serious challenge was also posed by the large increase the number of households with lower incomes, as well as the obligation to address the problems of the tens of thousands of mostly lower-income people who had been displaced by public construction projects. As a result of these

changes, cuts had to be made regularly in the maintenance of infrastructure, schools, parks, and public buildings. Along with this was the related challenge of trying to retain the needed workforce, including police personnel.

In addition to these internal management issues confronting Jackson, an unexpected national economic downturn also impacted businesses already feeling the effects of the loss of their middle-class customers. Competition was felt from new shopping centers being built in the close-by suburbs. Finally, and not to be overlooked or understated, was the difficulty experienced by many white residents in adapting to the new reality of their city under African American leadership.

### **Reaching Out**

With a new city to govern and its shifting demographics, Jackson recognized both the need and the obligation to provide a better means for connectivity between citizens and the city's public and social institutions. He spoke of providing a structured and permanent way to increase communications, not only between residents and his administration but also between newcomers and those who were long-time residents. The intent of this framework was also to carry out the charter's requirement for continuous citizen involvement in its comprehensive planning and development (CDP) process. Finally, he sought to launch such a program quickly, with a goal to put it in place in 1975, a year after he took office.

### **Planning under the New Charter**

For the most part, Atlanta's 1972 charter was written in rather general terms. It described, for example, the duties and expectations of the mayor's office in typical general terms, leaving to the mayor the task of developing organizational guidelines. In regard to city planning, however, the charter, and its accompanying Reorganization Ordinance, was quite specific. In addition to the routine roles undertaken by most city planning components (zoning, subdivisions, research, maintenance of maps and records, and public hearings), the charter charged Atlanta's planning department to perform its current and long-term planning functions by means of an annual CDP, a unique approach among American cities. It called for the plan to cover three time periods—1, 5, and 15 years—each of which would emphasize the importance of citizen input. It was intended that the 1-year plan would indicate those city projects to be undertaken in the upcoming year, while the 5-year plan would lay out goals to be accomplished during that longer span of time. The 15-year plan was to be aspirational, intended to show how the city planned to implement the long-range goals adopted by the plan.

To strengthen the ability to implement the CDP, the Reorganization Ordinance tied comprehensive planning to the city's annual budget. To accomplish this, a new Budget Policy Bureau was created and placed with plan-

ning within in the Department of Budget and Planning. This would permit the operations and actions of the two bureaus to be linked, so that the city's plans for their implementation would be strengthened.

Finally, the charter directed that the annual CDP be presented by the mayor each year to the city council. Following possible additional citizen hearings, the council, after discussions and any amendments, would then adopt the plan by ordinance. By law, the council would have to adopt a CDP by no later than the middle of June. The ordinance would thus give the plan firm legal status, an especially valuable tool when city actions were challenged in court.

At the outset of the new planning and citizen participation process, the Bureau of Planning prepared a city-wide map showing 177 so-called "neighborhoods" in Atlanta. These areas were predominantly residential clusters, or sometimes small commercial nodes, with clearly defined boundaries and names. Some were quite large in size, while others were very small. Public housing projects, for example, qualified as neighborhoods, and even a small, organized business community was included.

With only a limited planning staff for the planning and participation program, and with so many neighborhoods to service, it became necessary to bundle the neighborhoods into larger units. Neighborhoods were placed together when they were physically close and appeared to have similar interests or characteristics. The combined clusters of neighborhoods were called neighborhood planning units, or NPUs. Generally six to eight neighborhoods would make up an NPU. In all, 24 NPUs were created, each given a letter of the alphabet (omitting J and U). NPUs would be required to elect a board annually, comprising individuals chosen by each neighborhood in the NPU to serve as its representatives for the year.

Identifying the appropriate name for each neighborhood was deemed essential. Establishing and maintaining neighborhood identity was central to the NPU process, to ensure that residents would identify with their communities and derive a sense of place and pride from living there. Once all neighborhoods had been defined, any community name that was already in widespread use locally was chosen to identify that cluster. Whenever a neighborhood lacked a widely recognized name, local interviews were conducted and, taking into account the input of the residents, a name was suggested, often referencing the name of a main street, park, or school.

## **Citizen Involvement**

The basic structure of the NPU system put in place in the mid-1970s is still in use today. Each NPU has a monthly meeting that is open to the public. Citizens can become involved at such meetings by participating in issues or by putting forth issues that they would like to see discussed. At such meetings, opinions are

sought on all proposals received by the Bureau of Planning (such as a rezoning request, a proposed public or private project, or the like), especially those that would directly impact the NPU. Following such discussion, votes may be taken on whether to approve or deny the proposal, or to not take a position. In cases when a change in that year's adopted CDP might also be required if the project is approved, the NPU can vote on whether or not it would favor the approval of a plan change. In some cases, one of the member neighborhoods may also want to discuss a proposed rezoning or a CDP change, or express the neighborhood's position at the board meeting. In many cases, the individual or company seeking the request will give a presentation at one of the meetings, or even to an affected neighborhood. In response to community input, a rezoning request may be altered to gain support for the proposal.

Whenever proposals requiring zoning change come before the Zoning Review Board (ZRB), members of the public, the NPU, and the Bureau of Planning are given the opportunity to express their opinions. Decisions of the NPU—as well as those of the ZRB—are advisory only. From these hearings, all opinions of the NPU are passed on to the zoning committee of the city council. There are no hearings at zoning committee meetings, although the opinion of the Bureau of Planning is presented. Once the committee's opinion of a proposal is determined, the matter is then forwarded to the full city council for its review and a final vote.

Most staff members of the Bureau of Planning staff are assigned to work with one or two NPUs. Planners attend monthly meetings and collaborate with NPU leadership to draw up agendas on a full range of issues to be considered at each monthly meeting. Two educational guides for citizen use were published in the 1970's: *The Value of Neighborhoods* and *How To Do Neighborhood Planning*.

As earlier indicated, the two bureaus within the Department of Planning and Development—Planning and the new Budget Policy Bureau—are continually involved in putting together the annual CDP. All executive department staffs are also continuously involved to get input on projects they are seeking to implement. The bureau has the responsibility of examining the city's traditional budget, put together by the Department of Finance, in order to provide links between the budget and the CDP's goals. Also reviewed by the Budget Policy Bureau is how well the proposed traditional budget relates to the mayor's priorities, reflects larger administrative considerations, makes full use of grant funds, incorporates intergovernmental recommendations, and provides for the continuation and implementation of multiyear projects (Shelby 2013).

### **Lessons Learned**

All Georgia cities now produce comprehensive plans and also have processes that allow citizens to become engaged in urban planning and other major is-

sues in their communities. Sometimes the initiatives of planning and citizen participation are linked, although none as closely as they have become in Atlanta.

Efforts elsewhere in Georgia to link planning and citizen participation tend to differ from Atlanta's processes in important ways, especially the following three:

- First, in a dynamic economy, plans can soon become obsolete unless a structured and permanent means is adopted for keeping both the plans and the involvement apparatus current. If it is not current, then when a comprehensive plan begins anew after a multi-year gap, most of the previously assembled information and data must be collected again, often from scratch.
- Second, even where cities require that a zoning change must conform to its plan, most places readily and quickly change their plans to comply with the zoning, giving short shrift to the long and arduous plan review process. Constantly changing a city's plan undermines the citizen participation efforts. Atlanta's process, which makes plan changes only quarterly, places considerable dependence on the agreed plan and serves as the statement of what citizens say they want their city to become. As a result, hearings in Atlanta are often very well attended, and the issues are sharply critiqued. Since the annual plan is put together with citizen input, citizens take an ownership position in preserving the plan.
- Third, all cities have developed varied means for bringing citizens into the planning process. Large hearings which usually are held ad hoc, however, have proven to be a poor way to assure meaningful citizen input, particularly when citizens do not know the background of an issue and have had little experience in how to respond to a proposal.

## **Conclusions**

Atlanta's comprehensive planning and citizen participation processes were developed in 1975, two years after the Georgia General Assembly give the city a new charter. In each of the past 38 years, Atlanta produced its CDPs in accordance with the process described here. One major change in the original process is that now a review of the entire city plan occurs every five years rather than annually. Whenever a proposal is introduced that might require a change in the current CDP, hearings on those matters are held at the quarterly meetings throughout the year. Such discussions are also reviewed by the affected NPUs to obtain their opinions, and, when expressed, this feedback is integrated into the remainder of the city review process. The CDP, therefore,

has remained central to the city's decision process, and proposed actions are not undertaken unless they first obtain a favorable recommendation to amend the CDP. Citywide plans, such as for parks or transportation or for projects to be undertaken during the year by city departments, are also reviewed by the NPUs and included in the final plan.

Throughout almost four decades, the activities of the NPUs have increased in importance at the local level. At monthly NPU meetings, proposals made to the Bureau of Planning, together with parochial matters, are discussed, often with a fair amount of preparation and passion. Localized problems are also identified and brought to the attention of city council representatives and city agencies, such as streets that need to be repaired or parks that require attention.

At the required annual NPU elections for officers, persons seeking to be selected as one of the NPU officers sometimes actively engage in campaign efforts. Though the NPU leadership positions are unpaid, their impacts on the communities are substantial, and interested persons in a neighborhood may vie to become its representative on the NPU board.

Today, the planning and participation process has resulted in a generation of Atlanta citizens who have become better informed as to how their government operates and how well. It has also encouraged residents to become better prepared to articulate their ideas and concerns. Several members of the current city council were formerly active in their NPUs