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## **Georgia Regional Transportation Authority: A Case Study of an Innovative Regional Planning Institution**

Brian Trelstad

*The Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA), a new regional planning institution, is a governor-appointed body of 15 regional leaders with broad authority over land use and transportation planning throughout the state. Created in the summer of 1999, GRTA emerged from a public-private process that sought to reform transportation planning in the Atlanta region, but its authority far surpasses what was initially conceived by that public-private effort, the Metropolitan Atlanta Transportation Initiative (MATI). This paper is a case study of the MATI process and the emergence of GRTA that illustrates in some detail the formation of a new and innovative regional planning institution. What it lacks in comparative breadth, it supplies in step-by-step analysis of how a group of business people and civic leaders reformed the planning process in a major American metropolitan region. One tentative conclusion is that the private sector can play a major role in regional planning, as they did in the development of this new regional planning institution. The case study also illustrates that while GRTA's initial focus will be to solve Atlanta's transportation problems, GRTA may become an implementation vehicle for the Georgia Planning Act, a comprehensive but underutilized statewide land use planning statute.*

### **Introduction**

In July 1998 the Metropolitan Atlanta Chamber of Commerce (MACOC) convened a group of regional business leaders, elected and appointed public officials, and university presidents to study the region's worsening air quality and transportation problems. Compelled to act by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's threat to withhold \$475 million in federal transportation funding and concerned that the region's economic future depended on solving its air quality and congestion problems, the Chamber created the Metropolitan Atlanta Transportation Initiative (MATI). Over a six-month period, MATI sought to understand the root causes of the region's transportation and air quality problems and to recommend a range of solutions to the Governor in January 1999.

Through the process of exploring the interconnected land use, transportation and air quality problems that the region faced, MATI grew concerned that the region's metropolitan planning organization—the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC)—lacked the authority to

resolve the situation. After six months, the MATI board presented seven recommendations to the Governor, including the recommendation to restructure the regional planning process with improved authority to coordinate transportation planning.

What emerged from that recommendation was the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA), a governor-appointed body of 15 non-elected regional leaders with broad authority over land use and transportation planning throughout the state. GRTA's authorities far surpass what was initially conceived by MATI, and while its initial focus is on solving Atlanta's transportation problems, GRTA may become an implementation vehicle for the Georgia Planning Act, a comprehensive but underutilized statewide land use planning statute.

This paper will discuss the development story and transportation crisis in Atlanta, highlight the key findings of the MATI research team, and outline how and why GRTA emerged from the process. It will also review GRTA's legal authorities and its first six months in operation, and raise questions about the implications that this new regional planning institution has for other regions grappling with similar land-use, transportation, and air-quality problems.

### **Atlanta's Development Story**

The development of Atlanta parallels the rise of a number of sun-belt cities—fast growth and a high quality of life drawing corporate and household transplants from across the country. From 1960 to 1990, Atlanta's population grew 142%, trailing only Phoenix and Los Angeles as one of the fastest growing cities in the country. Like most American cities, the thrust of the most recent population and employment growth has been at the in low density developments at the region's "edge", beyond "the Perimeter" as ring-road Interstate 285 is referred to in Atlanta. And while the 1996 Summer Olympics provided a makeover for the downtown, development in the urban core has been slower to materialize than in outlying counties, which have continued to dominate in job and population growth (see map at the end of this paper).

#### ***Rapid Low-Density Growth***

With high growth at low density—an average of 2.43 people per acre throughout the metropolitan area—metro Atlanta was believed to be growing by 50 acres a day, more land than any urbanized settlement has consumed in human history (*Atlanta Journal and Constitution* June 8, 1997). Since 1990, the region's population has increased by roughly 13 percent, but the amount of developed land has grown by 50 percent. By the mid-1990s, three of the ten fastest growing counties in the United States were in suburban Atlanta, including Henry County, growing at an annualized rate of 7.1% (at an ultra low density of 0.46 people per acre). While for many of the small counties, the rapid growth

rate is more a function of their small starting population, the large suburban counties were also growing rapidly. Gwinnett County, the largest suburban county (located in Atlanta's northeastern suburbs), accounted for a quarter of the region's growth from 1990 to 1995, adding 16,380 people a year (Atlanta Regional Commission 1997). These fast growing and demographically homogenous suburban counties promised newcomers an attractive lifestyle isolated from Atlanta's urban ills: large homes on leafy lots, new roads, decent schools, large retail malls, a mild climate, and numerous golf courses all combined to make the region the seventh most livable in the country (*Atlanta Journal and Constitution* December 12, 1997; MATI July 1, 1998).

Concomitant with the rapid population growth was the dispersal of Atlanta's employment centers beyond the traditional downtown. Downtown Atlanta remains the smallest central city of the nation's largest 20 metropolitan areas, and it is no longer considered the most dynamic employment center in the region. Since the 1960s, employment growth has been strongest in the northern part of Atlanta (Midtown and Buckhead), and more recently employment growth along Georgia 400 and beyond Route 285 (with Perimeter Center, Town Center in Cobb, and Gwinnett Place) has outstripped downtown development.

### *An Auto-Dominant Transportation Network*

Key to Atlanta's growth and success is its excellent transportation network, which makes travel to and within the region easier and quicker than in most other U.S. metropolitan areas.... The region's highway network has been a primary catalyst of economic growth and development for the past two decades.

(Atlanta Regional Commission.  
*Regional Outlook 1997*)

To accommodate—and facilitate—this tremendous and dispersed growth, Atlanta has built an impressive road network. The Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT)—led by Commissioner Wayne Shackelford—added freeway and arterial capacity in the first half of the 1990s at a faster annual growth rate (7.25%) than in any of the other top 50 urban areas in the United States. Atlanta is now crisscrossed by more than 9,691 road miles (including 1,875 lane miles of freeways and 1,226 miles of arterial roads), enabling the average metro resident to drive upwards of 35 vehicle miles per day.

Atlanta now leads the nation in vehicle miles traveled per capita and is second only to Kansas City in the number of freeway lane miles per capita (1.01 lane miles per 1,000 people) (Dunphy 1996). Notwithstanding these massive investments in the region's road system, Atlanta has not been able to keep pace with the region's worsening congestion problem.<sup>1</sup> According to the Texas Transportation Institute,

Atlanta had a Congestion Index of 1.24 in 1996, a 35% increase in congestion since the 1982. In 1999, the Congestion Index had reached 1.34, sixth in the nation, trailing Los Angeles' with a rating of 1.51.<sup>2</sup> In Atlanta, roadway congestion translates into an estimated regional cost of \$1.5 billion in lost time and wasted fuel.

Low-density residential development, a wide dispersion of job centers, and the lack of alternative transportation have all contributed to Atlanta's growing congestion problems. While the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) system adequately services Fulton and DeKalb counties, it does not provide service into the suburbs as both Cobb and Gwinnett defeated repeated ballot initiatives to extend MARTA into their counties. While a number of suburbs now operate their own bus systems, few routes interconnect, making inter-county trips time-consuming and inconvenient. The net result is that while MARTA is the ninth largest rail transit system in the country, the regional public transit system is not very effective and fewer than 5% of the region's commuters use transit. Without a viable public transportation infrastructure, Atlanta's dominant response to growing congestion over the past twenty years has been road construction.

#### *Auto Dependence Worsens Air Quality Problems*

Even though road building was a decreasingly effective strategy at addressing regional mobility, new road construction might have continued indefinitely if the federal government had not intervened. The proximal source of the "transportation crisis" among Atlanta's leadership was the connection between air quality and transportation funding that threatened the state's \$475 million in transportation funding. The federal regulatory background dates to 1970, when the Environmental Protection Agency—with the passage of the Clean Air Act—first declared the 13-county metropolitan area as a non-attainment area for ozone.

With the passage of the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990, Atlanta was again classified as a "serious" non-attainment area for ozone and given a strict timeline for compliance. Like the other serious non-attainment areas, Atlanta had until 1994 to submit a State Implementation Plan (SIP) that would demonstrate air quality attainment by 1999. The Clean Air Act required non-attainment regions to submit Regional Transportation Plans (RTPs) and Transportation Improvement Programs (TIPS) that conform to the region's air quality plans (the SIP). The passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Act of 1991 (ISTEA) augmented the link between federal transportation funding and clean air and taken together, these policies gave the federal government a lever of control over metropolitan areas that do not have viable plans to improve their air quality.

On the clean air front, Atlanta and the state's Environmental

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Protection Division (EPD) had their work cut out for them. Since 1990 Atlanta has averaged over ten days per year where its ozone levels have violated the one-hour National Ambient Air Quality Standards. According to Harold Reheis, the director of the EPD, because two-thirds of the region's volatile organic compounds (VOCs) are emitted from biogenic sources (trees, plants, soil), the more important gases to target for reduction are nitrogen oxides (NO<sub>x</sub>). In Atlanta, 68% of NO<sub>x</sub> emissions are from mobile sources, and 55% of the on-road mobile sources are from light-duty gasoline vehicles and trucks: passenger cars, sports utility vehicles and pick-up trucks. Thus, Atlanta's dependence on the automobile has been one of the key drivers of its ozone problem.

For the better part of the 1990s, the Georgia EPD worked to develop a State Implementation Plan that would demonstrate ozone attainment by the 1999 deadline. As part of that process, the EPD set a NO<sub>x</sub> "budget" of 214 tons per day for the region's transportation network. The Atlanta Regional Commission was then given the charge to develop a Regional Transportation Plan that demonstrated less than that 214 ton per day target of transportation emissions.

In the summer of 1996, the Atlanta Regional Commission presented a Transportation Improvement Program that could not conform to the region's air quality targets. At this point, with the non-conforming TIP, the Georgia Department of Transportation sought to continue to build roads by grandfathering \$700 million in transportation improvements.<sup>3</sup> And in March 1998, the ARC presented a Regional Transportation Plan that demonstrated reaching the 214 ton per day target through a variety of projected technological improvements, not through reductions in vehicle miles traveled. The ARC relied on fleet turnover, improved inspection and maintenance programs, cleaner fuels, and a number of other voluntary programs to reach its target. In a controversial move, the state EPD refused to implement requirements for the "designer fuel" required by ARC's plan, ruling that it could not be made economically available to the Atlanta market. With this decision, the ARC's plan could not demonstrate conformity with the NO<sub>x</sub> budget, and the federal Environmental Protection Agency threatened to constrain spending of over \$475 million dollars in federal transportation funding unless the region developed a conforming transportation plan.

### Metropolitan Atlanta Transportation Initiative

Not only did the EPA threaten to withhold precious highway funding, regional and national media attention began to cast into question Atlanta's perceived high quality of life. The *Atlanta Journal Constitution*—as part of a series on the region's sprawl—ran a banner headline "SMOGLANTA" in May of 1998; the *Philadelphia Inquirer* proclaimed that "Atlanta's Lures Are Becoming One Big Liability"

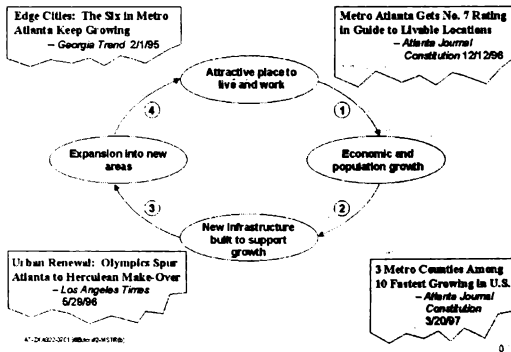
(1998). Removing two levers of Atlanta's development strategy—an expanding road network and its perceived high quality of life—jeopardized the logic of its “virtuous cycle” and prospects for future growth and development described in Figure 1.

Confirming the assessment that Atlanta's virtuous development had led to a “vicious cycle” of sprawl and congestion, ERE Yarmouth—a national real estate research firm—downgraded Atlanta's growth prospects in its 1997 “Markets to Watch” annual report from first in the nation to seventh (ERE 1997). Against this backdrop of the possible withdrawal of federal highway funding, the market's potential reluctance to continue to invest in Atlanta, and the real impact on quality of life, the region's business leadership decided to act.<sup>4</sup>

The Metropolitan Atlanta Chamber of Commerce (MACOC) had actually been following the transportation issue for the better part of the decade. The Chamber grew interested in the region's environmental quality and transportation problems with Atlanta's designation as a serious non-attainment area in 1990. The Chamber also lobbied for passage of ISTEA to give the region more flexible tools to deal with its congestion problems.

In the spring of 1998, the Chamber decided to take a high profile approach to solving the region's problems. Working together, Chamber President Sam Williams and Chair A.D. “Pete” Correll, also the Chairman and CEO of the Georgia-Pacific Corporation, developed a plan to convene a high-level task force of business leaders, government officials, and university presidents to study the region's transportation

Figure 1: Metro Atlanta's “Virtuous Cycle”



Source: MATI Board Meeting, July 1, 1998

and air quality problems. Over the course of the spring, the two men drafted a list of prominent regional leaders that they wanted to invite to join the board. They also sought the *pro bono* services of the Atlanta offices of one of the nation's most respected management consulting firms.<sup>5</sup>

In June of 1998 the Chamber went public with its plans and announced the formation of the Metropolitan Atlanta Transportation Initiative (MATI) with the goal of achieving regional consensus on solutions to the region's transportation problems. He underscored the importance of the initiative when he conceded in the kick-off press conference that "this issue really does threaten our way of life in Atlanta" (*Atlanta Journal and Constitution* June 19, 1997). Ironically, on June 18, 1998, the same morning of the press conference, the *Wall Street Journal* echoed Correll's concerns when it asked on its front page: "Is Traffic-Clogged Atlanta the New Los Angeles?"

#### *The MATI Process*

The group that the Chamber of Commerce convened included both public and private interests and was geographically diverse, balancing the interests of downtown Atlanta and the fast growing suburbs. Atlanta has long had strained urban-suburban political relationships and the chamber sought to include both perspectives without letting one side emerge as dominant. (For a list of MATI participants, see the Appendix). MATI had asked a consulting firm to do background analysis, to facilitate monthly meetings, and to work with the initiative to develop a series of recommendations that could be presented to the Governor elect in December 1998.

The first controversy that the group faced was whether or not the meetings would be open to the public. The first meeting was private, with a press conference immediately following. Initially concerned that the presence of the media and the public might inhibit elected officials from being candid about possible solutions not favored by their narrower constituencies, the group decided that closing the meetings to the public would probably do more public-relations harm than good. Each subsequent meeting was open to the public and press.

There was also some debate in the first meeting about whether or not the group should focus on air quality or congestion or both. The MATI board agreed to focus on the transportation and congestion problems, leaving the problem of air quality to the more technically qualified staff at the state's EPD. At the meeting, MATI adopted three specific objectives in regard to the transportation problem:

- to clarify facts and educate leaders on key issues;
- to identify obstacles to meeting the region's future transportation needs;
- to facilitate a process for key decision makers to remove obstacles and accelerate the implementation of solutions (MATI July 1, 1998).



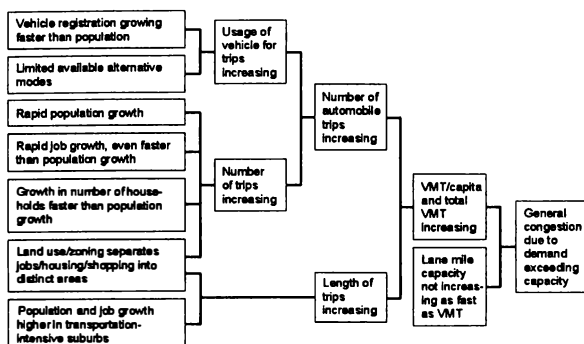
The board also agreed that the ultimate aspiration of the process should be to develop “an effective, balanced transportation system that helps Atlanta sustain economic growth and a good quality of life” (MATI September 9, 1998). Ironically, given the strong land use authorities that GRTA was ultimately given, MATI had made an early decision to avoid talking about land-use solutions to the transportation problem. The topic of “land use” planning was considered too volatile to discuss at the regional level and MATI wanted to prevent any early urban-suburban political conflict from derailing the process.

To achieve the stated goals, the MATI process was divided into four distinct stages: background research, problem identification, solution generation, and consensus. The first stage—background research on air quality and transportation issues—was completed for the August MATI meeting. The research team’s conclusions are summarized below in Figure 2. Essentially, they found that the technological solutions (e.g. cleaner fuels, improved inspection and maintenance) and expansion in the road network would both be inadequate responses to the intertwined air quality and transportation problems the region confronted.

At the August meeting the MATI board also reviewed the current congestion scenario in the region and the obstacles to the implementation of a plan to fix the problem. During that discussion, it became clear to the MATI board that the regional planning process itself was less than optimal. Despite having just completed VISION 2020, “the largest community-based long-range planning effort ever conducted in this country” according to ARC director Harry West, the ARC still lacked a plan and the authority to implement its vision for the region (Helling 1998). While consistent with how many other major metropolitan areas plan, the Atlanta region has a passive metropolitan planning organization (the Atlanta Regional Commission) that lacks the authority and political will to enforce coordination among counties to achieve regional goals. Each county develops its own plan in consultation with the state’s Department of Transportation and then sends the plan to the ARC, who compiles the plans into a “regional plan”. The regional plan—a simple aggregation of the ten counties’ plans—is then modeled for demographic, land use and air quality changes. Emission levels are adjusted to meet state targets by the proposal of additional measures (such as cleaner fuel, voluntary ride-share programs), not by changes in infrastructure investments or land use decisions.

Private sector members of the MATI board were amazed at the planning process and expressed concern during the meeting about two issues. First, they were concerned that no objective criteria were used to evaluate the impact of various transportation investments, and second, that the ARC lacked the authority to reject county transportation (and land use) decisions. Neither were objective congestion or mobility criteria used in developing the county plans, nor were they considered when

**Figure 2: The Macro Drivers of Demand and Supply are Working Against Us in Atlanta**



Source: MATI Board Meeting, August 13, 1998

the regional plan was modeled for air quality emissions. Region-wide congestion projections were also not made public (the MATI process had a very difficult time getting them from the ARC) and not used to make incremental investment decisions in the transportation network. In addition, the ARC had limited authority to reject very large land use projects—called developments of regional impact (DRIs). When the ARC did oppose a DRI, the counties could move ahead with the projects without any financial or legal sanction.

The business and academic leaders on MATI’s board continued to press the issue of the planning process and challenged the MATI research to team to identify other regions that had more effective planning processes. Thus began the second stage of MATI, which focused on obstacles to effective regional transportation planning in Atlanta. By looking at the planning process in other fast-growing metropolitan areas, the MATI team was able to identify a range of effective practices that could be adapted to fit the Atlanta planning context. MATI staff spoke with and visited planners, state and regional transportation officials, academics, and community groups in nine cities: Houston, Phoenix, San Diego, Portland, San Francisco, Chicago, Seattle, Denver and San Jose.<sup>6</sup>

Specifically, the MATI team looked at six issues in each of the benchmark cities for adaptation to that Atlanta planning context:

- Establishment of clear targets to drive public discussion and planning process;
- Optimal model for regional planning that combines the best of top-down and bottom-up approaches;

- Aligned authority and accountability to drive regionally optimal decisions;
- Funding mechanism that adequately and flexibly funds transportation infrastructure;
- Highly informed community that understands issues and is motivated to take individual steps for the common good;
- Business community that takes initiative as a role model and shaper of policy (MATI September 9, 1998).

There was no single model region. Instead, each benchmark city employed a range of practices within each of these categories. In Houston and Phoenix, for example, transportation planners used non-binding congestion targets to guide the transportation planning process. Portland is known for its strong state-wide land use planning laws that enable Metro—the region's directly elected governmental body—to direct a more top-down regional planning process, aligning authority and accountability for transportation investments. In San Diego a county sales tax and in Portland a payroll tax provide more adequate and flexible funding for transit. And in Chicago and San Jose, the business community plays an active role in advocating for more effective transportation options.

At its September and October 1998 board meetings, the MATI board reviewed a range of best practices from the comparable cities and debated what was feasible in Atlanta and in the state legislature. One issue that generated substantial debate was whether or not the state transportation funding process could be amended. After a detailed review of the region's transportation funding sources and uses, the board discussed how to improve the process and provide for adequate and flexible financing for new transportation investments beyond 2001.

Since the state's gas tax, which is the second lowest in the nation at approximately \$0.0105 per gallon, is constitutionally dedicated to roads and bridges, localities have to find their own sources of funding to meet federal matches for transit projects. And raising the gas tax, politically unpopular in rural Georgia, would do little without amending the state's constitution—considered politically impossible—to include public transit among the allowable uses of funds. After concluding that modifications to the state gas tax were politically infeasible, the debate shifted to whether or not Atlanta should plan based on fiscal constraints or emulate cities like Houston, San Diego and Portland that have developed long-range multi-modal plans that demonstrate the gap between funding needs and estimated available funds. Using the less constrained plans, these other regions then seek the necessary funding to complete their plans.

The board concluded that debate by agreeing that a more far-reaching

regional plan was needed. A consensus emerged that Atlanta could no longer depend on a process by which individual county plans were aggregated into a “regional plan” without coherent scrutiny. As the discussion moved on, the board made more procedural than technical recommendations, as specific mechanisms for improving transportation (e.g. light rail versus HOV lanes) were considered less important in the short term than improving the transportation planning process itself.

Between the October and November 1998 meetings, the Chamber staff and the consulting team interviewed the individual MATI board members to develop and react to emerging recommendations to improve the planning process. The MATI team also prepared for the November meetings by consolidating the recommendations and preparing a draft of the final report to be presented to the Governor-elect in late November.<sup>7</sup>

#### *MATI's recommendations*

At the November 1998 meeting, the MATI board reviewed and approved seven recommendations (six of which passed with unanimous support). The recommendations were:

1. Set and communicate near-term and long-term performance objectives for the Atlanta region transportation system to elevate the focus and visibility on our aspiration of improving regional mobility.
2. Adopt aspirations-based strategic planning and land use compliance incentives to strengthen the leadership role of planning and encourage exploration of creative solutions to reach our aspirations.
3. Create a regional transit authority (or some effective coordination mechanism) to promote and support local county transit initiatives while ensuring regional effectiveness by planning, evaluation, coordinating, marking, and overseeing implementation of transit service throughout the Atlanta region.
4. Develop a comprehensive financial resource plan to develop a clear understanding of future financial requirements and explore a full range of creative financing options that will ensure metro Atlanta has adequate and flexible funding for its road and transit needs.
5. Execute a coordinated public transportation awareness campaign to educate the public about important transportation issues and build awareness, acceptance, and usage of alternatives to single occupancy vehicle (SOV) travel.
6. Launch workplace initiatives to mobilize public and private employers' support for these recommendations and to accelerate successful implementation of congestion relief initiatives.

7. Empower one regionally-focused agency with integrated responsibility for planning resource allocation/authority, and monitoring of implementation for all forms of transportation in the Atlanta region to achieve a stronger alignment of authority and accountability for meeting regional transportation system aspirations.

Only the final recommendation received some opposition, although 92% of the board still voted to approve it. The small minority that opposed this recommendation was concerned that it could lead to the creation of a new agency would usurp the ARC's powers and would create another layer of bureaucracy in the planning process. MATI was careful not to be explicit about whether or not the ARC should become this new agency, only that an agency should be empowered to have the integrated responsibility for planning and implementation. Informally, MATI did not identify the ARC as the leading candidate for consolidation for three reasons: first, MATI board members considered the ARC and its staff less than effective. Second, the ARC was considered in the thrall of suburban interests and not capable of standing up to suburban sprawl. And, finally, the ARC would never have been able to wrest funding control from the GDOT. The GDOT was also not identified as the home for the new agency because it was viewed as too pro-road to balance regional transportation solutions.

Suburban representatives of MATI were the only ones to vote against the seventh recommendation, concerned that the balance of power in the region's development would shift from their grasp, potentially putting brakes on their counties' rapid growth. Little did they know that what would emerge from the state legislature in April of 1999 would go far beyond what MATI had recommended.

### **Georgia Regional Transportation Authority**

In April 1999, the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority became a reality. After passing through the state legislature with broad bipartisan support, newly elected Georgia Governor Ray Barnes (D) signed GRTA's authorizing legislation on April 6<sup>th</sup>. This new institution emerged from MATI's seventh recommendation but goes far beyond what was initially conceived. Not only does GRTA have regional transportation planning powers, it has a broad array of land-use authorities that can be used in any NAAQS non-attainment area throughout the state. Whether GRTA has the right mix of powers to help Atlanta resolve its air quality, land-use and transportation problem remains to be seen. What is clear is that GRTA is an innovative regional institution designed to address a set of interconnected problems that could not have been solved by the pre-existing planning process.

*GRTA's Legislative Authority and Structure*

After the MATI process concluded, the Chamber of Commerce arranged for a meeting with Governor-elect Barnes in the middle of November 1998. On the campaign trail, Governor Barnes had expressed concern about the transportation problem in Atlanta and had pledged to appoint a commission—headed by former Atlanta mayor Maynard Jackson—to study the issue. In the meeting with the Governor-elect, the Chamber leadership stressed that MATI had done the requisite studying and that a new commission would be redundant. They were able to convince Barnes to act immediately. Barnes agreed and before his inauguration he had his transition team and legislative counsel Joe Young work with the Chamber staff to understand the issues and draft the legislation that would create GRTA.<sup>8</sup>

The bill that Young and Barnes drafted became the cornerstone of the Governor's legislative agenda and was introduced as Senate Bill 57 by the Governor's floor leader in the Senate, Senator Steve Thompson (D-Powder Springs) (*Atlanta Journal and Constitution* April 7, 1997). The proposed legislation went far beyond the scope of MATI's seventh recommendation. Not only did it seek to coordinate regional transportation planning, SB 57 sought to create an agency with broad control over regional land-use decisions. The floor leadership of the Senate was able to manage the bill without too much opposition. Suburban Republicans, considered to be the most likely opponents of the legislation, did not act to block the bill. This was in part due to the support of the legislation from Senator Charlie Tanksley (R-Cobb County), a former law partner of Governor Barnes and, despite his party affiliation, a member of the floor leadership. With this bipartisan support the Senate passed the bill on February 5, 1999, little more than two weeks after it began deliberations, and sent it to the House where the debate slowed considerably.

The House received the bill in the middle of its budget negotiations. Knowing that it was a high priority of the new administration, the House sought to delay passage of the bill out of political gamesmanship, using the legislation to bargain for the funding of several completely unrelated issues. The floor leader, Charlie Smith (D-St. Mary's), also had some legitimate concerns shared by many of his rural Democratic colleagues. First, they did not believe that the GRTA board should require Senate confirmation, and second, they were concerned about the allocation of transportation funding in their districts. After several weeks of debate, the House decided to re-write the legislation, eliminating the call for Senate confirmation and inserting a formula for funding by U.S. Congressional District. On March 4, 1999, the House passed the bill and sent it into conference.

In conference, the Senate quickly conceded on the issue of requiring

Senate confirmation of GRTA board members when a staff member discovered that any bill silent on the issue of the confirmation of governor-appointed public officials *de facto* required it. The negotiations then turned to the issue of the funding formula. Governor Barnes' staff tried to convince the rural Democrats that their funding formula could actually hurt rural districts, but they remained unconvinced. After several iterations, a compromise was reached on the funding formula, and the bill emerged from conference. The final bill passed in both chambers on March 23, 1999—the second to last day of the legislative session.<sup>9</sup>

The law that Governor Barnes signed on April 6, 1999 created an agency with a broad range of powers. GRTA has the authority to approve the region's transportation plan (primarily the Transportation Improvement Programs), to overrule local land-use decisions, to require municipal contributions to regional transportation projects, to acquire existing and implement new transportation systems, and to issue \$2 billion in revenue bonds.

GRTA has three specific authorities that are considered key to solving the planning problems facing Metro Atlanta. The first of these authorities is the ability to enjoin federal or state transportation funding for developments of regional impact (DRIs) located in the jurisdiction of GRTA. While the ARC has made adverse rulings on certain DRIs, they have no fiscal or legal authority to prevent them. GRTA does. It can withhold state and federal transportation funding if a county proceeds with a DRI without GRTA's approval or without a supermajority of the county's commission voting to over-ride GRTA's decision.

The second authority is to declare certain counties non-cooperating with GRTA based on as yet to be promulgated standards. Local plans and their implementation can be evaluated by GRTA for their quality and consistency with regional goals. Local governments who do not comply with a defined set of "minimum standards" could be considered "non-cooperating local governments" and run the risk of having all state grants (excepting for public safety and education funds) withheld until they are compliant. The minimum planning standards may run afoul of Georgia's constitutional provision for home rule, but if fully implemented GRTA will have broad regulatory authority over the most detailed of local decisions. For example, GRTA could ultimately control whether parcel access ("curb cuts") linking certain land parcels with state and local roads will be permitted. Developers seeking to build housing on large suburban tracts of land adjacent to state roads could need GRTA's approval to move forward with the development. The implementation of this authority has yet to be completely thought through by the GRTA staff. It is clear that this authority would be far-reaching and resource-intensive, but it could provide the needed connection between land use and transportation planning at the local level.

The third new authority that GRTA has is the ability to both approve

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and implement regional transit facilities. GRTA has already provided funding for the Clayton County bus system, and with the ability to levy revenue bonds and compel local governments to contribute funds to regional transportation projects, GRTA might be able to bring some coherence to the patchwork of transit systems throughout Atlanta. One issue is whether GRTA will both approve and operate the transit facilities, or whether they will perceive the potential conflict of interest inherent in a process where GRTA has final say over funding projects that it manages.

### *GRTA's First Six Months*

In June, Governor Barnes appointed a diverse array of regional leaders to the fifteen-member board. Choosing not to appoint any elected or appointed public official to GRTA's board, Barnes chose nine business leaders (including three real estate professionals), three former city government officials, and three activists (one environmental, one transportation, and one social justice activist) to the board. The chair is Joel Cowan, the developer of a number of prominent commercial and residential projects in Atlanta and had served as the director of the state's Growth Strategies Commission in the 1980's. Martin Luther King III was appointed to "to safeguard the interests of the poor, who rely on public transportation."<sup>10</sup> John Williams, the head of Post Properties and the current chair of the Metro Chamber of Commerce is also a member of the GRTA board (for a complete list, see the Appendix).

The board's first act was to search for an executive director and staff to fulfill its expansive mandate. In September, they chose Catherine Ross, a professor of City Planning at Georgia Institute of Technology, and formerly the Principal of a consulting and research firm that specializes in urban and regional planning, as well as transportation planning.<sup>11</sup> She had initially been named to the GRTA board, but declined in order to pursue the director's position. Other key staff members include the former director of Cobb County Transit and the former transportation vice president of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce.

Despite the running joke that GRTA really stands for "Give Roy [Barnes] Total Authority", the initial public reception to GRTA has been positive. Regional and national news coverage has praised GRTA's purpose, the composition of its board, and the selection of the staff. GRTA's monthly public meetings have drawn substantial attendance, as the public remains frustrated with sprawl and congestion in the region. Staff and board members of the ARC are slightly less enthusiastic, but have remained outwardly supportive of GRTA because of its popular appeal. The ARC is obviously concerned that GRTA will take over its job as the regional planner and according to GRTA staffers ARC staff are being as uncooperative as they can be without publicly opposing GRTA.<sup>12</sup>



The first real test for GRTA will be whether or not it can help the ARC develop a conforming Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) that releases the federal highway money being withheld by the EPA. The next challenge, according to GRTA staff, is how GRTA integrates itself into the on-going transportation planning process. Currently, it has the authority to approve or reject the entire Transportation Improvement Program proposed by the ARC; it lacks the line-item ability to approve or reject individual transportation investments. Whether or not GRTA works more closely with the DOT, the counties and the ARC at the front end of the transportation planning process to shape the plans before they are submitted for an up or down vote remains an open question. GRTA will also be judged by the public on its ability to overcome the barriers to obvious transportation solutions, including coordinating bus systems, implementing an HOV system and exploring regional rail systems.

At the state level, GRTA can provide an overarching imperative for better statewide coordination of transportation and land use planning. GRTA's enabling legislation designated the GRTA Board as the Governor's Development Council, with responsibility for overseeing the planning of all state agencies. Thus, the passage of GRTA will finally give the Georgia Planning Act—a comprehensive but not fully implemented state land use planning law on the books since 1989—a chance at implementation. With GRTA in place, the Governor's Development Council is anticipating the completion of a long-overdue comprehensive state land-use plan. GRTA provides the Georgia Planning Act the implementation ability to evaluate new and existing state agency policies and their impact on development. Policies that do not support the state's long-range development plans will be re-evaluated and modified.

### **Conclusions and Lessons Learned**

The creation of GRTA and the Atlanta transportation planning experience offer some interesting lessons for other regions grappling with comparable land use, air quality and transportation problems. Like the "Portland planning miracle", however, the experience of MATI and the emergence of GRTA are unique to the Atlanta context and are more likely to offer a few innovative ideas than wholesale solutions that are entirely replicable in other regions.

The first lesson from the Atlanta experience is that a crisis can play a valuable role in stimulating political action. Whether the crisis is fiscal, economic or political (in this case the triple threat of loss of federal highway funds, firms' willingness to leave Atlanta, and the public's dissatisfaction with congestion), some exogenous shock may be required to catalyze focused debate and strategic action. It is unlikely that without the urgency created by the possible withdrawal of federal highway

funds or the national media attention that business executives and university presidents would have devoted as much time and attention to a problem that they had never seriously considered prior to the summer of 1998.

Their substantial involvement, however, offers a second important lesson from the Atlanta experience. While the private sector is getting involved with transportation planning in an increasing number of regions (for example, the Bay Area and Chicago), in far too many regions the planning process affords them no role and the business and higher education communities express little interest. During MATI, their presence was essential for three reasons: urgency, analytical support, and credibility. Atlanta has a long tradition of private sector leadership in confronting its most pressing problems. From the Civil Rights movement to the Olympics, the private sector has partnered with the public sector on only the most pressing civic issues.<sup>13</sup> When the Metro Chamber announced that it was convening MATI, the region took notice that the private sector was joining the media in declaring “war” on congestion.

Private sector and higher education participants also lent the process a level of analytical rigor and objectivity that existing planning stakeholders either lacked or had failed to demonstrate in the past few decades of transportation planning. For example, simple comparisons between the planning process and business strategy raised serious questions about how the region invested its scarce transportation resources. And ironically their economic self-interest and lack of ties to specific political constituencies lent the business and higher education communities an air of credibility during the process. Their markets and labor pools spanned jurisdictions and during the process they were perceived as interested in solving the *region's* transportation problems, not simply protecting their city, county, or agency's more narrow interests.

Interestingly, private sector leadership has persisted beyond the MATI process. Both Bell South and Coca Cola, two of the region's largest employers, have announced plans to consolidate their suburban operations downtown, together bringing more than 15,000 workers to denser commercial developments located closer to transit. Developers have also caught onto “new urbanism” and are identifying infill sites for redevelopment, including a high profile mixed-use housing and retail development on the site of the former Atlantic Steel plant on the northern edge of downtown (Firestone 1999). Even the ARC has gotten the message. It has announced a late December 1999 relocation from its suburban office park to downtown Atlanta.

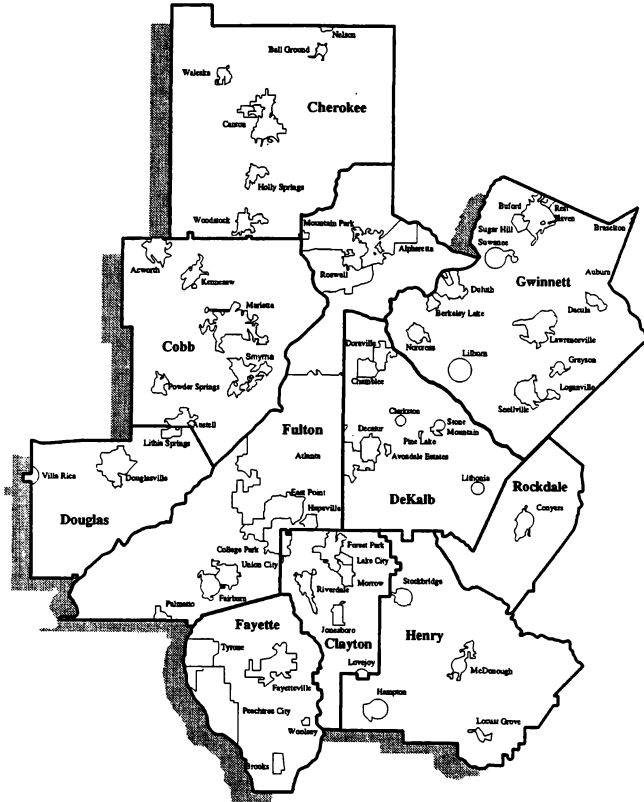
The final and most important lesson from the MATI process is that rather than seek to create the perfect planning agency, regions need to consider more seriously improving the alignment among existing federal, state, regional, and local institutions. Alignment is a concept from the

organizational theory literature that refers to the consistency among an organization's strategy, its operations, and its external environment (Podolny 1998; Milgrom and Roberts 1995). In the political context, alignment can refer to whether the range of federal, state and local policies form a consistent and operational framework that reflects the current economic and social reality and determines whether the various levels of government can work together—or at least avoid working at cross purposes.

In Atlanta and in most regions, thousands of laws, ordinances, administrative rules and political decisions have woven a complicated policy framework that often lacks the requisite alignment to promote coherent outcomes. Federal clean air law established specific clean air targets that the aggregation of municipalities and counties in the Atlanta region are poorly equipped to manage. New federal transportation laws attempted to connect transportation investments with air quality, but could not address the connection between land use and transportation demand, the state's requirement that the gas tax be spent on roads and bridges, or the market's demand for certain types of development (low-density sprawl).

The Georgia Regional Transportation Authority is given real teeth with its control over transportation funding in the region. That authority and its other tools may help it improve the alignment among the various air quality, transportation, and land use institutions that govern the region. By seeking to coordinate local plans and by wielding federal and state funding as a real stick, GRTA can connect federal and state policy with local decisions in a way that its partner agency, the Atlanta Regional Commission, cannot. GRTA's greatest success will not come from developing the ideal plan or managing the best transit agency in the country, but it will come from its singular ability to enable existing local, state, and federal institutions to work together and to plan more effectively.

Figure 3. The Atlanta Region



## Appendix

### *Metropolitan Atlanta Transportation Initiative Board*

A.D. (Pete) Correll, Chairman & CEO, Georgia-Pacific Corporation;  
Chair, Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce  
Jim Balloun, Chairman & CEO, National Services Industries  
Juanita Baranco, Vice President, Baranco Automotive Group  
Mallard Benton, General Manager, General Growth Properties  
Susan Bledsoe, Chair, The Georgia Conservancy  
The Honorable Crandle Bray, Chairman, Clayton County Commission  
The Honorable Bill Byrne, Chairman, Cobb County Commission  
The Honorable Charlie Camp, Mayor, City of Douglasville  
The Honorable Bill Campbell, Mayor, City of Atlanta  
David Chestnut, Chairman, Georgia Rail Passenger Authority  
Wayne Clough, President, Georgia Institute of Technology  
Tom Cole, President, Clark Atlanta University  
Tom Coley, CEO Southtrust Bank  
Brad Currey, Chairman & CEO, Rock-Tenn Company  
Allen Franklin, President & CEO, Georgia Power Company  
The Honorable Wayne Hill, Chairman, Gwinnett County  
Commission; Chairman, Atlanta Regional Commission  
Jim Lientz, President Nationsbank; Chairman, Georgia Chamber of  
Commerce  
Audrey Manley, President, Spelman College  
Carl Patton, President, Georgia State University  
Joe Prendergast, Sr. Executive Vice President, Wachovia Corporation  
The Honorable Cecil Pruett, Mayor, City of Canton  
Harold Reheis, Director, Georgia of Environmental Protection  
Division  
Wayne Shackelford, Commissioner, Georgia Department of  
Transportation  
Rick Simonetta, General Manager, MARTA  
Richard Skinner, President, Clayton State College & University  
Nelson Toebbe, CEO Rockdale Health System  
Judy Turner, President, Decatur First Bank  
Jackie Ward, President & CEO, Computer Generation  
Ray Weeks, Chairman & CEO, Weeks Corporation  
J.T. Williams, President, Killearn Properties  
John Williams, Chairman & CEO, Post Properties; 1999 Chairman,  
Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce  
Pelham William, Sr., CEO, Williams-Russell & Johnson  
Steve Wrigley, Carl Vinson Institute of Government, University of  
Georgia

## **Georgia Regional Transportation Authority, Trelstad**

### *Georgia Regional Transportation Authority Board*

Joel Cowan, Chairman, Former Developer  
ShirleyClarkeFranklin, Vice Chair, Former Chief Administrative Officer and Executive Officer for Operations, City of Atlanta  
Sonny Deriso, Vice-chairman of the Board of Synovus Financial Corp and Member of the Board of Directors, Georgia Chamber of Commerce  
Sharon Gay, Long Aldridge & Norman, and Former Vice Chair of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce  
Eric Hovsdven, Board Member, Georgians for Transportation Alternatives  
Martin Luther King III, Southern Christian Leadership Conference  
Thomas Phillips, Owner of Tom M. Phillips Oil Co  
Shi Shailendra, Owner S & S Engineers, Inc  
John Sibley, President of the Georgia Conservancy  
James Stephenson, President and Owner of Yancey Bros. Co  
Helen Preston Tapp, Executive Director of the Regional Business Coalition  
Ken Thigpen, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Georgia State Bank  
Richard Tucker, President and Chief Executive Officer Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce  
Michael Tyler, Partner, Kilpatrick Stocton LLP and former Vice Chairman of the Atlanta Zoning Review Board  
John Williams, Chairman & CEO, Post Properties; 1999 Chairman, Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Texas Transportation Institute as cited in MATI Board Meeting Slides, August 13, 1998, Meeting 4.

<sup>2</sup> The Texas Transportation Institute summarizes the methodology for developing its Roadway Congestion Index on its website. "Urban roadway congestion levels are estimated using a formula that measures the density of traffic. Average daily travel volume per lane on freeways and principal arterial streets are estimated using areawide estimates of vehicle-miles of travel (VMT) and lane-miles of roadway (Ln-Mi). The resulting ratios are combined using the amount of travel on each portion of the system so that the combined index measures conditions on the freeway and principal arterial street systems. This variable weighting factor allows comparisons between areas such as Phoenix, where principal arterial streets carry 50% the amount of travel of freeways, and cities such as Portland where the ratio is reversed."

<sup>3</sup> The attempt to grandfather so many highway projects became the subject of a lawsuit filed by three environmental and transportation groups, who thought that Georgia DOT was violating the Clean Air Act. The suit was settled in June 1999, with the state DOT scaling back its plans to \$125 million of highway projects (Eplan 1999).

<sup>4</sup> No real evidence of decreased investment in Atlanta exists, although the Chamber and the development community did believe it was a real possibility in 1997 and 1998. In at least one highly publicized case, the market's "potential reluctance" to continue to invest in the region became a reality in July 1998 when Hewlett-Packard announced that it was going to discontinue its expansion plans along Georgia 400 due to the region's worsening congestion problems. And even today, relocation consultants continue to question Chamber officials about the congestion problem and strategies to improve mobility.

<sup>5</sup> The consulting firm selected had a long history of performing high profile *pro bono* services in Atlanta, including work on the Summer Olympics in 1996 and the Renaissance Atlanta Project in 1997.

<sup>6</sup> These nine cities were chosen after comparing demographic, development, transportation, and land use statistics with Atlanta. Cities that were growing rapidly at low density and with low transit ridership were considered comparable to Atlanta. Phone interviews were also conducted with regional and national transportation planning experts to determine which cities would offer the most valuable lessons for Atlanta.

<sup>7</sup> On November 3, 1998 Democrat Roy Barnes was elected Governor.

<sup>8</sup> An important footnote to the fall elections in 1998 is that a number of county commissioner races in suburban Atlanta were won by anti-growth advocates, bringing slow growth majorities to several of the region's fastest growing counties.

<sup>9</sup> The details of the legislative debate are from an interview with Sharon Gay, a board member of GRTA and the former Vice President for Governmental Affairs at the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce responsible for advocating for the legislation. The interview was conducted on January 14, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> As cited on GRTA's web page at [www.grta.org](http://www.grta.org).

<sup>11</sup> Ross sold the planning firm in order to be eligible for the directorship of GRTA.

<sup>12</sup> The ARC had publicly endorsed the bill after some debate during a January board retreat (*Atlanta Journal and Constitution* January 31, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Clarence Stone (1989) describes the informal power sharing arrangement between the city's government and the downtown business elite.

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