

Land Economics Weekend Atlanta, GA April 3rd-5th, 2014

Ron Thomas, FAICP



The spring breeze animated the rooftop deck of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce as the recently arrived participants to the first Land Economics Week-end in Atlanta convened at the President's Reception to watch the sun set over Centennial Olympic Park, alive with a carpet of people enjoying the urban environment, the aquarium, World of Coca-Cola and the other attractions with the new Skyview Atlanta Ferris wheel taking some to a higher plane.

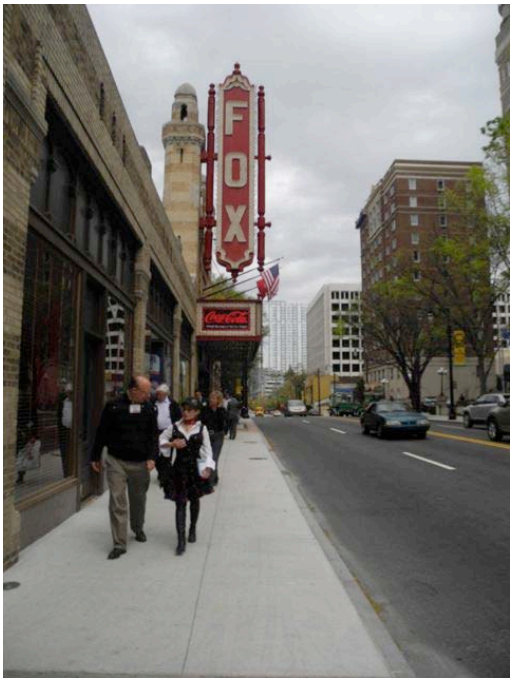


For some of the guests, this was a truly transformational setting as they had departed their homes in the morning amid late seasonal snow, sleet and ice. The next two days would prove to be a good year for the new (5 years old) Atlanta Chapter of Lambda Alpha International to host a Land Economics Weekend (LEW). With this backdrop, welcomes were received from Tim Youmans, President, Lambda Alpha International and Joan Herron Atlanta Chapter founding President. Following was the story told by member Bill de St. Aubin and his Sizemore Group colleagues of what we could see from the rooftop deck. We heard of the coming of the 1996 Olympics, the political challenges, design concepts, \$75 million financing and development struggles and the resulting \$2 billion new heart of Atlanta we were witnessing below and around us on this Atlanta spring evening.



What the next two days would reveal would be an Atlanta in significant transformation and the emergence of a 21st century city a pole apart from its latter 20th century reputation.

The first full conference day began with a presentation led by Dan Reuter, AICP, Deputy Director of the Atlanta Regional Commission - the multi-faceted agency for planning and guiding transportation, sustainable land use, and a number of social service programs. While learning of Atlanta's new directions, the momentum of inertia still moves it in its 50-year old regional patterns of sprawl and congestion. Atlanta, a here-to-fore "recession proof" economy had one of the hardest hits in the down-turn with its housing bubble, infrastructure needs and conservative public financing



preferences – 2 years earlier voters had rejected a \$7.2 billion transportation financing referendum (a campaign effort spearheaded by ARC) that would have come from a 10-year one per cent sales tax.

But what we did hear about was the Livable Communities Initiative that ARC has innovated to provide competitive grants to their local community members to first plan and then development livable, walkable communities and amenities aligning local plans and development with regional priorities and goals. The program works within a state structure without the strong requirements of Oregon and with the normal federal transportation funding stream. This is a program that has proven the viability of integrally linking livable communities, healthy environments and supporting transportation.

Drilling down into the Atlanta story the next chapter was presented by Kevin Green and Shannon Powell of Midtown Alliance. Kevin and Shannon would add to the story of the current efforts of create a dynamic live-work-play environment in, on and round the streets of Midtown Atlanta spurred by \$600 billion in development guided by Blueprint Midtown. A part of this story is also in the area’s amenities of regional and even national significance for the performing arts, The High Art Museum and the great Piedmont Park with its 189 acres of green life and activities. The current trendiness of the older in-city neighborhoods and the mixed-use standards of the new development are putting people on the streets, if not 24/7, then at least 12/7... and that’s real progress for what has been perceived as the ultimate car city.

Another Atlanta story that we could see emerging and would continue through the weekend is the area-oriented partnership innovations leading the new Atlanta. We will continue to hear from partnerships similar to Midtown Alliance throughout the weekend with their various business, public agency, nonprofit and special authority partnerships. We will hear from partnerships for attractions like Olympic Park, Fox Theater, for Downtown as well as Midtown. There would not be time to visit Buckhead – the third Atlanta city-center. I’ll digress to explain that Atlanta (perhaps one of the most polycentric Cities within the city limits itself) is divided between three counties – Fulton, Cobb and DeKalb. On the other hand, Atlanta is simply organized along the same “main street” with Peachtree St. (and MARTA rail running beneath) connecting the three together in the 9 miles stretch from the original financial Downtown, to mixed-use Midtown to entertainment and shopping Buckhead on the north side.



But, like Chicago (my former hometown), don't ask to see the comprehensive or master plan. There isn't one in a conventional sense. But, with the earlier mentioned partnerships and related membership organizations like Lambda Alpha, Urban Land Institute and the Chamber of Commerce, there does seem to be an effective sharing of mutual goals and active planning and development leadership from the specific area organizations. As we will find later in the weekend, Atlanta does have a new guiding vision and capacity that is reinventing the 21st century city - but more on the Atlanta Beltline later.



Friday was the day to explore Midtown from the campus of Georgia Tech itself and its innovative public-private research oriented joint development. Also explored was the major \$2 billion brownfield development of the Atlantic Steel site into the 138-acre mixed-use LEED-certified "campus" of Atlantic Station.

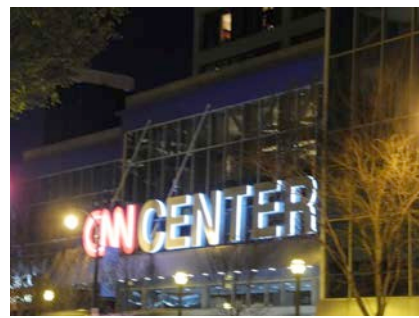
A Midtown highlight was touring what may be the catalytic spark for the reinvented Atlanta when the demolition of the historic Fox Theater was halted in the 1970s to be renovated as the cultural heart of the city and a national model for historic preservation and redevelopment through the effort of Atlanta Landmarks - another mission specific development organization.

Private development is of course the driving force in Atlanta and one of the midtown examples is 12th & Midtown by the Selig Company - 3 million square feet of class A offices, 1,500 hotel rooms and 1,600 residences with street level storefronts to support the new walkable midtown.

Friday evening was a chance to explore Atlanta's dining downtown choices as LEWers enjoyed the "family reunion" nature of the weekends between old friends - and new - from across the country and increasingly from around the world.



Saturday was the day for Downtown Atlanta but first Professor Catherine Ross presented Atlanta in its megaregional context extending from Charlotte, NC through Atlanta and west to Birmingham, AL. The America 2050 Megaregion project, launched about 10 years ago by the Regional Planning Association in the New York Region with support from the Lincoln Institute for Land Policy, has been the champion for research, cooperation and infrastructure to support the 10 or so "megaregions" as the nation's population centers and driving economic generators. Atlanta is increasing aware of its role in this southeast quadrant of North America.



The Downtown Atlanta story would be one led by Central Atlanta Progress (CAP), one of the national's oldest operating downtown development organizations, organized in 1941. CAP President A.J. Robinson and its Vice President Jennifer Bell would host the morning to visit the Downtown Improvement District with its new, soon to open, street car line, the destination attractions we had seen from the Chamber roof deck on Thursday evening with the soon to open National Center for Civil and Human Rights and National College Football Hall of Fame along with the enormously successful Georgia Aquarium and the World of Coca-Cola in Centennial Park framed by CNN headquarters, the World Congress Conference Center and the Georgia Dome.



Along with Downtown, Midtown and Bulkhead are the Atlanta neighborhoods. Historic areas like the traditional Ansley Park, the reviving Virginia Highland and of course the Auburn Avenue Historic District with its Martin Luther King, Jr. Historic Site (with the addition of the National Center for Civil and Human Rights and the Jimmy Carter

Presidential Library) Atlanta show the progress it is making as a living as well as working city.

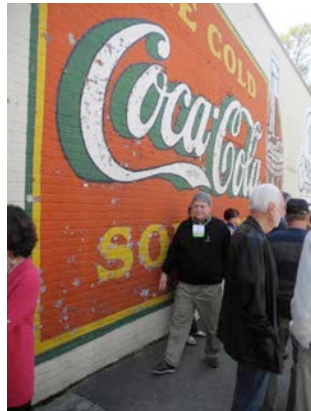
This progress is characterized by the East Lake story of "Purpose Built Communities (PBC)." Founded in 1995 by downtown developer, Tom Cousins who brought public, private and nonprofit leadership together to turn around a neighborhood with some of the worst crime rates in the country in both the public housing project and the surrounding historic East Lake neighborhood. Purpose Built Communities President, Greg Giornelli, would tell the story.





East Lake had opportunities to spur the turn around when seen as assets and not liabilities. The first was the East Lake Country Club - Bobby Jones' home club - also then in decline. The other was the neighborhood school, then one of

the worst performing in the state. PBC started with these two as strategic opportunity resources. It put all its energy and creative resources into improving the school it helped transform into a Charter School and positioning the country club as a national historic resource through corporate sponsorship providing the resources need in the community. A HOPE VI project would reinvent the public housing and any and all available community renovation resources went into reviving the historic single-family neighborhood. In a decade the results are impressive, crime has been reduced by 95%, the Charter School is the 4th best performing in Atlanta with over



95% of the students exceeding state standards and overall generating \$175 million in neighborhood reinvestment. PBC now also has a nonprofit consulting arm to help other neighborhoods learn from its successes.

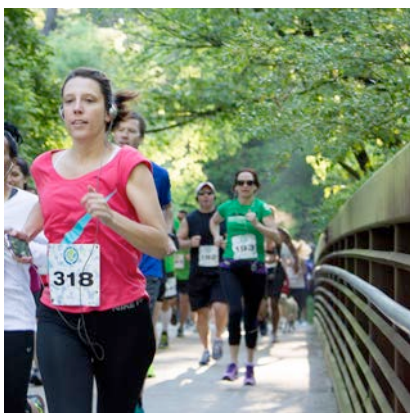
During the afternoon the LEW tour did what any good Atlanta would have done over the last 50 or so years and took a break for lunch at the power center of the city:

Manuel's Tavern.

After one of those intensive LEW tour days, the concluding Saturday night Banquet awaited along with Atlanta newest and possibly most exciting story: The Atlanta Beltline.

The multi-centered Atlanta we had been touring is in the process of being linked together in a coherent whole by what many consider the most exciting urban development program in America - The Atlanta Beltline. The Beltline is a Cinderella story in many ways - from riches to rags and back again as a sustainable 21st century city.

When early 20th century Atlanta began to industrialize with mill and factory relocations to the South, rail service was essential and a network of freight rail lines were built around (but within) the city of Atlanta. As these operations began to relocate again 50 or 60 years ago, the rights-of-way were



closed but not sold for the most part. In 1999 it was a Georgia Tech planning student, Ryan Gravel, who identified the existence of the old network that if linked together would form a greenway ring around Atlanta. His professor advisors challenged him to carry the idea forward and today, within 15 years the Atlanta Beltline is a 22 mile corridor planned as a greenway, trail/bikeway and eventually light rail corridor encircling the connecting Atlanta's several development centers, existing stream trail network and linked directly to the new trolley line and MARTA regional rail.



The Beltline began as a grassroots advocacy effort, organized into a supporting Beltline Partnership nonprofit and in 2006 the former Atlanta Redevelopment Authority formed Atlanta Beltline, Inc. The City of Atlanta, The Atlanta Public Schools and Fulton County authorized the Beltline, Inc. Corridor as a TIF-like Tax Allocation District (TAD). In the already developed sections, the Beltline is serving Atlanta much like the 18-block long Highline is doing in New York. New and redeveloped neighborhood centers are already building-up and major centers, such as 1.1 million sq. ft. Ponce City Market, are bringing new mixed-use life to the historic Sears & Roebuck distribution center. The Beltline, with planning and development authority in a mile-wide corridor is able to find its functional bounds for projects with partnerships rather than arbitrary lines. For instance, Ponce City Market will be directly bridged into the Beltline and across North Avenue, an old city-owned amusement park, has been converted into not only a major residential oriented park but watershed management conservation area. Funds were used to assemble, plan, design and develop a creatively landscaped retention pond - with the help of Trust for Public



Lands - that solved the regular flooding problem of the old Sears building. In all, some 45 neighborhoods and centers are being linked together and 3,000 acres of additional, underdeveloped adjacent land is being included in the beltline corridor for redevelopment.

The Beltline story entitled “Building a City from the Inside Out” was presented to the Atlanta LEW by its Executive Director, Paul Morris, FAICP (and LAI member) who many may know from his time in Portland, OR with his own firm, in Washington DC with PB World or from the last several years in the Raleigh NC area with first, Cherokee Properties and then the NC State DOT. Paul’s leadership along with that of his design director Fred Yalouris, and their 35 some staff ensures a successful, creative and sustainable future for Atlanta and its organizing Beltline. The presentation generated a most lively discussion running well past the usual diner closing.

Joan closed with what she hopes is a new LEW tradition for the Host Chair. When introducing the next Host Chair to pin a Host Chair ribbon on his or her meeting badge so that the LAI “torch” is passed. Joan Herron then ended the evening introducing Emilio Gomez Delgado, President of the LAI Chapter in Madrid, to make his lively presentation about the next LEW in Madrid in October.

The Atlanta LEW now confirms the charter’s full LAI membership, giving participants an experience producing the most heard comment of the weekend with variations on statements like, “I have had a stereotypical impression of car-oriented Atlanta that this weekend has really changed!” Atlanta is changing and we hope you can visit if you missed our LEW or soon return if you did!

SCRIBE: Ron Thomas, FAICP, is a recent transplant to the Atlanta Region, relocating with his family to Athens, GA where he coordinates the new mid-career masters planning degree at the Gwinnett Campus of the University of Georgia’s College of Environment and Design. He is the former Executive Director of Chicago’s regional planning agency and long-time LAI member.