

# Land Matters

Atlanta Regional Commission

## **If it takes a village to raise a child, how many villages does it take to raise a region?**

By Dan Reuter, June 2010

Chris Leinberger was in Atlanta on May 24<sup>th</sup> to present a report completed by the Brookings Institute, Robert Charles Lesser (RCL) Co., HDR and Bleakly and Associates to document the economic potential and possible financing options associated with passenger rail from Atlanta to Macon. Chris Leinberger worked as the President of RCL and ran its Atlanta office for 15 years. In 1999, Chris famously described the Atlanta region as the “fastest growing human settlement in history”.

The May 2010 passenger rail economic study provides an excellent overview of the potential to support passenger rail operations and provide new economic benefits to middle Georgia but it also could create unique development opportunities in many small towns and communities along the line. Chris Leinberger has a related article in the June 2010 Atlantic Monthly on the history and potential of neighborhoods supported by rail transit. See the following link:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/06/here-comes-the-neighborhood/8093>

Chris Leinberger and Brookings Institute also produced a report in 2007 that compared the Atlanta region to the 29 largest metro areas in the U.S. in terms of the number of transit enabled, walkable urban locations. The report ranked Atlanta 14<sup>th</sup> with a whopping total of four (4) walkable urban places: Midtown, Atlantic Station, Decatur and Buckhead. Washington, D.C. which was ranked #1 and has twenty (20) locations. The full report can be found at:

[http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2007/1128\\_walkableurbanism\\_leinberg/1128\\_walkableurbanism\\_leinberger.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2007/1128_walkableurbanism_leinberg/1128_walkableurbanism_leinberger.pdf)

Keep in mind the study focused on locations that had adequate transit and other urban amenities. Arguably metro Atlanta has more than four walkable urban places. Many historic town centers, a few other MARTA stations areas and one or two major activity centers could be considered as walkable urban places.

But the 2007 Brookings study is essentially right on target. I often point out that Atlanta’s period of development, federal transportation policy and national migration trends were the most important determinants of its development patterns. Single-use developers, local government reliance of Euclidean zoning, NIMBYs and lots of other issues are important too. But those issues are no different for Atlanta than many other regions during its primary period of development. Keep in mind “smart growth” was not a common term in Georgia until the mid-1990s.

The big failure of metro Atlanta is that we did not continue to build our rail transit infrastructure to our growing suburbs (by choice) as did Washington D.C., and we have under-built and under-zoned most of our existing rail station areas. We have MARTA stations such as Decatur, Midtown and even Lindbergh that are on their way to becoming walkable, urban locations. But we continue to waste rail stations and thus public investments at many others.

Bankers, developers, local governments, neighborhood leaders and even MARTA itself has not been particularly supportive of development at rail stations until the past decade. But looking forward we have no excuses. Many other cities and regions have gotten it right and yet we continue to stumble.

MARTA has recently developed Transit Oriented Development (TOD) guidelines for their station properties but guidelines are not enough. Vacant parking lots are the primary use around many stations. The parking lots at end of line stations are needed but many others serve few patrons and undermine new development off-site.

The nation's capital provides a great model for how the Atlanta region might look if we had grown differently in the past and could yet become with sufficient changes and incentives.

Where should the sixteen (16) additional walkable, urban locations be in metro Atlanta to allow us to catch up to Washington D.C.? Existing MARTA rail stations areas are the obvious first choice. That goal will require substantial support and some pressure on MARTA and local governments as well as developers.

But not all communities must be supported by rail, large and dense. Small centers that have a mix of uses, walkable infrastructure and some density already exist in many locations. So while metro Atlanta and Georgia should consider more transit enabled and walkable urban places, we also need to upgrade many existing smaller retail centers to be safe for pedestrians and provide more residential options than a single-family home. A neighborhood anchored by a grocery store is about the right size to allow many trips to occur via walking for dry cleaning, drug store, etc.

There may be several hundred potential villages in metro Atlanta where no additional development or density is needed but better sidewalks, lighting and safe crossings at intersection would allow adults, children or seniors to walk to more destinations. Creating a few hundred walkable villages will not solve our traffic bottlenecks but it could help reduce our oil dependence and "raise a region" that currently drives for 90% of its needs.