

# SUBURBAN SPRAWL

## Culture, Theory, and Politics

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OCT 31 2003

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.  
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Oxford

2003

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### From Sprawl to Smart Growth: The Case of Atlanta

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**B**ETWEEN 1980 AND 2000, the Atlanta metropolitan area's population doubled, its built environment doubled, and it is considered the most rapidly expanding and largest human settlement ever constructed, consuming 500 acres of undeveloped land a week.<sup>1</sup> In those last two decades, metropolitan Atlanta's reach has spread to 110 miles from one end to the other, and average commuting times have risen to national highs of thirty-one minutes, ahead of Chicago, Los Angeles, and Houston,<sup>2</sup> with this traffic producing 250 tons of nitrogen oxide a day,<sup>3</sup> making Atlanta the media's "poster child of sprawl."

To get a grip on this growth, the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA)<sup>4</sup> was created in 1999. The creation of GRTA is significant not only because it is one of the boldest attempts in the nation to solve regional problems directly through state intervention but also because the metro Atlanta business community played a leading role in the process. The metro business community reacted, collectively and decisively, to the escalating threats to the region's economic vitality in the late 1990s and took the lead in efforts to curb sprawl and to promote "smart growth."

This concerted behavior of the business community is in fact a continuation of its traditional role in Atlanta politics. As in most American cities, the dominant cultural norm in Atlanta is that what is good for business is good for the city.<sup>5</sup> The Atlanta business community has a strong sense of collective self-interest, and as the area's best organized social group, it is seen as natural that it exercises leadership in public policymaking.

For more than a century, city boosters promoted unfettered growth. Their role in the creation of GRTA signifies an important turnaround. They have not

abandoned growth but have begun promoting restrained and planned growth (smart growth). In this chapter, we delineate these developments in metropolitan Atlanta and discuss the implications for regional politics.

These developments will be better understood in the context of national politics and culture, the legal status of local governments in Georgia, and the region's social and economic dynamics. Federal transportation policies and America's car-dependent transportation culture, which mutually produced and perpetuated one another for decades, have been hugely influential in the economic and geographic development patterns in Atlanta as in many other metropolitan areas. As a home-rule state, Georgia constitutionally vests land use authority in counties and municipalities, and the resulting competition among the metro area's jurisdictions for economic growth has thus propelled sprawl. Race relations always played a large role in the area's social and economic dynamics and influenced transportation policies. Although Atlanta has traditionally projected a more progressive image in race relations compared to its peers in the South, "white flight" to the northern suburbs nonetheless intensified both racial segregation and urban sprawl in the metro area.

#### Business Interests and Urban Politics

The rigorous planning requirements and restrictions that are the norm in European countries are all but nonexistent in American cities because of a political culture that is antigovernment and "privatist" and that enshrines private persons' rights to develop and dispose of their property as they see fit.<sup>6</sup> This American privatism enables organized business interests to play powerful roles in policymaking in urban areas.

The role of business interests in city politics has long been debated by the "elitist"<sup>7</sup> and "pluralist" theorists.<sup>8</sup> Later Clarence Stone's and Harvey Molotch's theories emphasized that urban politics is complex and involves multiple actors, but the economic resources held by certain groups place them in more powerful positions. In his study of Atlanta, Stone argues that businesses did not necessarily control the decisions of elected officials directly, but their economic resources made them the more powerful partners in the informal biracial coalition, the "urban regime," which they formed with the middle-class blacks who commanded the African American majority's electoral power.<sup>9</sup>

Molotch's "growth machine" theory also emphasizes that municipal governments serve the needs of capital, particularly the needs of the "land-based elite" whose property interests are closely tied to the economic growth of the city.<sup>10</sup> Unlike corporations whose interests in any particular urban area are not

strong because of the mobility of their investment capital, real estate developers, property-financing institutions, media, and utilities have strong interests in the economic growth of their cities and therefore pursue leading roles in their governance.<sup>11</sup>

In our discussion of the transportation policies in metropolitan Atlanta, we use Molotch's and Stone's theoretical frameworks. Molotch's growth machine metaphor aptly describes the role of the business community in Atlanta. We propose two "upgrades," however: First, the growth machine has been transformed into a "smart-growth machine." Second, it is not the city (and hence an urban regime) but rather the metropolitan region that should be the unit of analysis since the focus of the business elite has become regional and a new "regional regime" may thus emerge. And as the sphere of politics has become regional, the role of the African American community, so central to Atlanta's urban regime in the past, has thus also undergone a transformation.

#### The Business Elite, Race Relations, and the Evolution of Transportation Policies

While Atlanta owed its origins and early growth to the railroad, it might have stayed little more than a mere "Terminus," as it was first called, had this early growth not sufficiently whetted its business community's appetite for more growth to trump its racial distastes. For when the then capital's innkeepers in Milledgeville refused, after the Civil War, to house the newly elected African American legislators, Atlanta was quick to assume the role of capital.<sup>12</sup> This marked the beginning of Atlanta's efforts to put economic growth before racial considerations, and while racial problems in Atlanta may not have been less than in other southern cities, Atlanta continued to do everything to promote its business interests first and to cultivate an image of racial accommodation, enabling it to attract a vast influx of northern capital.

That Atlanta's business community did not practice the most benign race relations and that it would seek to influence policy accordingly was demonstrated in an early transportation issue. The electric streetcars operated by the Georgia Power Company in Atlanta beginning in the late nineteenth century got their first competition in 1915 from jitneys. Small vanlike motor vehicles, jitneys offered passengers faster and more flexible transportation at modest fares and seriously threatened the streetcar business.<sup>13</sup> When in 1922 an African American-owned and -operated jitney business also started up,<sup>14</sup> the Georgia Power Company used its influence to convince the city's aldermen to pass an ordinance effectively eliminating the jitney in 1925.<sup>15</sup>

As the battle between jitneys and streetcars was going on, automobiles were making profound inroads onto the Atlanta transportation scene. The state of Georgia attempted to deal with the influx of automobiles with the creation of a state highway commission in 1916. However, the seemingly endless reorganizations of the commission until it reached its current form as the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) in 1972 created a policy vacuum that in effect left transportation planning in the city to its economic and political leaders who in the process pushed for more use of automobiles.

In the 1940s, the Atlanta business community, as represented by the Chamber of Commerce, underwent a transformation in which the leaders of the big businesses downtown (such as Coca-Cola) established a separate organization to promote their more systematic and comprehensive vision of the future of downtown Atlanta. This was the Central Atlanta Improvement Association (CAIA), later renamed Central Atlanta Progress (CAP).<sup>16</sup>

In this era, race relations entered a new phase as well. Thanks to the 1946 federal court mandate to end Georgia's all-white primaries, African Americans mobilized a voter drive that made them more than a quarter of the Atlanta electorate.<sup>17</sup> The white business elite, particularly the CAIA's prominent property holders, recognized that future economic growth would require abandoning segregation and courting the emerging political power of African Americans.<sup>18</sup> This view, combined with the racially pragmatic and pro-business political leadership of Mayor William B. Hartsfield (1937-1941, 1943-1961), laid the foundation for the biracial urban regime of Atlanta.

This did not, however, mean that this elite would promote integration. Its policies promoted spatial segregation via transportation policies. Thus, for example, they pushed for the construction of a north-south expressway that would curve around downtown in such a way as to form a "buffer between the business district and the black neighborhoods."<sup>19</sup>

### Impacts of Federal Legislation

The most important federal legislation affecting transportation developments and hence the direction of growth were the acts that launched the construction of the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways and the creation of the Highway Trust Fund (that is, the Federal-Aid Highway and Highway Revenue Acts of 1956).<sup>20</sup>

While these acts made massive amounts of federal money available to states and cities, the placement of these federal highways was, as noted, dictated by local racial politics. As Stone points out, "The original north-south and east-west expressways [1-75/I-85] mostly disrupted black neighborhoods, espe-

cially those close to the CBD,"<sup>21</sup> and, as Bayor notes, Interstate 20 was built immediately south of the CBD to limit African American access to it.<sup>22</sup> The African American community initially protested these highway plans but was placated by the city's offer to hire minority contractors in the construction.

The early frenzy of highway building was tempered in the 1960s, particularly by the federal legislation that came in response to the "Freeway Revolt" that had arisen in threatened neighborhoods and included environmentalists and African Americans. Subsequent acts required relocation assistance that would begin to diminish the destruction of poor neighborhoods, which had been the cheapest way for Georgia highway builders to go, and preservation of parks and historic sites, which had also been cheap for the state to build across, but the main racial transportation patterns had already been put into place.

### African American Power in Atlanta and Mass Transit Redivivus

During the 1960s, when the last white mayors of Atlanta—Ivan Allen Jr., a member of a liberal business elite family, and Sam Massell, the first Jewish mayor—governed the city, Atlanta's official support for civil rights and the African American universities, which gave it its "Black Mecca" reputation, spurred a tremendous influx of African Americans to Atlanta. The growth of this population and the continuing white flight to suburbs in the 1960s created the conditions for the election of Maynard Jackson as Atlanta's first African American mayor in 1973. Whereas before African Americans could only bargain with city hall, they now controlled it, but Atlanta's white business elite was still able to exert their influence because of their control over resources. African Americans needed the white elite for economic opportunities, and this elite continued to work with African Americans for the sake of a progressive image and thus growth.<sup>23</sup> The relations between the partners of the regime were not always smooth, however.

African American electoral power had been demonstrated in the 1968 and 1971 referenda on the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA). The first MARTA campaign was energetically backed by downtown business leaders and the Allen administration, but forgetting that this was not the 1920s, they ignored the African American community's insistence that MARTA had to be more than "a rapid rail system for white suburbanites working downtown."<sup>24</sup> The referendum lost in all four jurisdictions—Fulton, DeKalb, Gwinnett, and Cobb Counties—and its leaders learned a lesson: They added an African American who had been a vocal critic of the 1968 proposal to the MARTA board and incorporated the African American community's

concerns into the text of the second referendum. This passed in 1971, though only in Fulton and DeKalb Counties, where African Americans constituted substantial percentages of the populations, and not in predominantly white Gwinnett and Cobb Counties.

The MARTA referenda illustrate the geographic limits of the power of the downtown business elite. Its policy of racial accommodation was not widely endorsed by white suburbanites. This racial divide between the city and the core metropolitan counties of Fulton and DeKalb on the one hand and suburban counties on the other has influenced metro Atlanta politics for decades and has hampered regionwide approaches to social and economic problems in the multiple jurisdictions of metro Atlanta.

#### Metropolitan Planning and the Atlanta Regional Commission

Atlanta has a long tradition of metropolitan planning. The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) is a federally recognized metropolitan planning organization whose predecessor, the Metropolitan Planning Commission, was created by the legislature in 1947 as the nation's first multicounty planning agency (and it received part of its funding from private businesses).<sup>25</sup> Why then, one might ask, the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority, with its largely overlapping jurisdiction? The answer lies in the legal limitations on the ARC's power and political composition of its board.

The ARC does not have the legal authority to enforce its plans. The ARC's power is limited to leveraging the planning decisions of its member governments by allocating federal and state funds among them. Its power is further limited by the composition of its board: Of its thirty-eight voting members and one nonvoting member, twenty-three are elected public officials (county commission chairs, mayors, and an Atlanta City Council member) from the ARC's member governments, and the remaining fifteen are private citizens chosen by them from multijurisdictional districts in the metro area. As board member Claire Mueller put it, "Developing a consensus . . . [is] virtually impossible with a board that is dominated by county commission chairs who are elected to represent their counties and not the region as a whole."<sup>26</sup>

#### The Georgia Regional Transportation Authority

##### A Changing Environment in the 1990s

Between the ARC's incapacity to solve the region's problems and the steady worsening of these, something had to change. Atlanta had failed to meet clean

air standards ever since the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) began monitoring ozone in 1980, but no one in the region or in the state had taken any serious action.<sup>27</sup> Under the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990, the area was classified as a "serious" violator of the National Ambient Air Quality Standards,<sup>28</sup> and in 1996 the EPA threatened to withhold federal funds for highway construction. Funds were finally withheld in 1998, except for "grandfathered" projects.<sup>29</sup>

The classification of Atlanta as a "serious" violator of these standards was a problem not only because of the threat of losing federal money for highway projects. More important was the prospect of projecting an image of pollution and sprawl that could discourage outside investment in the region's further growth. Leading business groups, such as the Regional Business Coalition of Metro Atlanta and, particularly, the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, had thus been watching these developments for some time, and the newspaper attention these regional problems were getting had been steadily increasing with major *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* editorials in the fall of 1997.<sup>30</sup> In its January 1998 issue, *Atlanta* magazine answered its bold-print rhetorical question, "Is Traffic Killing Atlanta?" with a resounding "yes."<sup>31</sup> A survey of national real estate investors had rated Atlanta fifteenth among eighteen cities in investment potential for 1998. Two years before, it had been ranked first. By May 1998, the *Journal-Constitution* was shouting "SMOGLANTA" in a huge headline.

As it turned out, the day after the very June 18 that the whole country saw the *Wall Street Journal* ask on its front page, "Is Traffic-Clogged Atlanta The New Los Angeles?" A. D. "Pete" Correll, chairman of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, announced the chamber's plan to address the issue.<sup>32</sup>

#### The Metropolitan Atlanta Transportation Initiative

With the stage set for major policy change and no one else taking the lead the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, a public policy-oriented organization of business leaders with a regional vision, stepped in and formed an ad hoc committee—the Metro Atlanta Transportation Initiative (MATI)—to study the region's air quality, sprawl, and economic development problem: and to recommend solutions. The membership of the MATI board was quite diverse—including university presidents, local government leaders, and representatives of state agencies—but the preponderant leadership role of the businesses was unmistakable. The executive summary of MATI's full report stated,

In times of crisis, the metro Atlanta business community has often led and championed change. Recognizing its unique ability to galvanize the community,

the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce gathered a diverse set of leaders from the region's businesses, universities, and government agencies to address the growing traffic congestion problem.<sup>33</sup>

MATI observed that the rapid population growth, suburban expansion, exclusionary zoning policies, and the limited availability of transit alternatives had increased the dependency on cars and the total vehicle miles traveled in the region. Although metro Atlanta had added more road capacity than any other metro region in the country, all these factors had overwhelmed that capacity, and traffic congestion had gotten worse. The report also pointed out that while all related agencies in Atlanta worked to relieve congestion, there was no agreed-on regional target for congestion relief that drove the planning process. Therefore, it called for empowering

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.<sup>34</sup>

Governor Roy Barnes, elected in November 1998, quickly adopted MATI's recommendations and proposed the creation of GRTA. The resulting bill was steered through the Georgia General Assembly in the 1999 legislative session so forcefully and swiftly that no serious opposition formed, although many of the state representatives and senators were from districts in which county commissioners and mayors would be strongly opposed to any interference in their home-rule prerogatives.<sup>35</sup>

### The Structure and Powers of GRTA

The GRTA legislation stipulated a fifteen-member board, all appointed by the governor. From the beginning, it was quite clear that an overwhelming majority of the board members would be representatives of the metro Atlanta business community, and indeed, only three were not (one community activist, one professor, and one environmentalist).

Granted large direct and indirect powers, GRTA was given authority over all transportation projects in the thirteen counties (the ARC's ten plus three adjacent ones) that had been declared in nonattainment by the EPA, and it has the authority to plan, coordinate, or directly operate transit systems in its jurisdiction. It does not have direct land use planning authority—that would require a risky attempt to amend the state constitution—but it can influence planning and zoning through its authority to withhold state and federal funds from counties and municipalities that do not comply with its standards. The

broad authority of this "superagency" has caused some apprehension, especially among leaders of the wealthy northern metropolitan counties who are particularly sensitive to any signs of interference with their planning authority and its implications for economic growth.

To diminish this apprehension, GRTA has taken a cautious approach. In December 1999, Executive Director Catherine Ross stressed that GRTA would not "dictate to local governments or other agencies about how they should grow and how people get around." It would "avoid pitting cities against suburbs and car commuters against transit riders," and it "won't evolve into the big, bad actor that many are worried about. Instead GRTA wants to step in to fill gaps left by other agencies . . . [such as the ARC and GDOT]."<sup>36</sup> GRTA policies have, however, gotten somewhat more decisive, as in the example of its board's decision to link the amount of state funding a local government receives for transportation to its acceptance of GRTA's mass-transit and dense land use policies, and these "impositions" are resented by some local governments.<sup>37</sup>

While the GRTA board has broad powers and autonomy legally, its policy decisions are largely beholden to the political will of the governor, as is perhaps most signally illustrated by the "Northern Arc." The GRTA board approved a long-term Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) in 2000 and a three-year Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) in 2002. Both the RTP and the TIP heavily favor building and improving alternative transportation systems for mass transit, bikes, and pedestrians along the lines of ISTE and TEA-21, but among the proposed investments there is also the highly controversial Northern Arc project—a highway that would connect metro Atlanta's northeastern and northwestern exurbs. The Northern Arc was placed in the RTP, and the funding process was hastened by GRTA<sup>38</sup> despite the fact that it was heavily criticized for enabling further sprawl in the region in editorials of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* time and again (for example, "Northern Arc would do one thing: Enable sprawl"<sup>39</sup>), and that a coalition of environmentalists and suburban neighborhood associations was strongly opposed to it.<sup>40</sup> The governor and GRTA present the Northern Arc as a solution to sprawl (and, of course, it may be a sop to his supporters among developers).

### Conclusions

GRTA's success in curbing sprawl in metro Atlanta is yet to be determined. Its current structure and functions may also evolve into different ones. One possible future direction of GRTA's development is that it turns into a more comprehensive regional government, such as Portland's Metro. In its 2001 session,

the Georgia General Assembly, once again heeding the advice of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce,<sup>41</sup> created another regional board—the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District (MNGWPD)—to address water problems within sixteen metro area counties. In the long term, a regional government structure may emerge from a merger of these two and, say, the ARC in the manner that Portland's Metro emerged from the merger of a voluntary association of local governments and a metropolitan service district.<sup>42</sup> To judge by a lead editorial in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* advocating a "metro council" modeled after Portland's Metro, this idea had gained some currency even before the creation of the MNGWPD.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, of course, strong opposition from local jurisdictions may render GRTA and the MNGWPD nonfunctional or dysfunctional. County leaders' grumbling about GRTA's "power grab" has already been in the news, as mentioned previously. This opposition may effectively stymie regional solutions to the metro area's problems.

In the face of the opposition from local governments, the regional smart-growth orientation of the business leaders is, perhaps ironically, a progressive one. They have recognized and articulated that improved quality of life is the chief criterion for economic growth in this era, and only they seem to be capable of providing concerted leadership in the area. Environmental groups have not been very effective in grassroots organizing and mobilizing, although they have shown some signs of strength in the recent Northern Arc controversy. In a loose coalition with some neighborhood groups and local politicians, they forced the governor to suspend the building of the road, at least temporarily.<sup>44</sup>

The general public is at best ambivalent about regional solutions, particularly regional mass transit. On the one hand, there is increasing public support for mass-transit alternatives. A poll conducted by the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the Mortgage Bankers Association in seven booming metropolitan areas—Atlanta, Boston, New Orleans, Phoenix, St. Louis, San Jose, and Washington, D.C.—shows that substantial majorities of people support using public dollars for improving public transportation and that they would be willing to take smaller homes for a reduced commute time.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, people in metro Atlanta still love their cars, and the "not-in-my-backyard" (NIMBY) phenomenon is strong indeed. When MARTA announced its plans to extend its rail lines in 1999, neighborhood groups in northern DeKalb County—one of the two metro counties with MARTA rail lines and otherwise the most liberal and transit-friendly county in the region—organized strong opposition against the plans.<sup>46</sup>

Since it is not likely for there to be a progressive grassroots coalition representing the whole region, the business elite is bound to play a progressive role

in cultivating regional solutions. But that does not guarantee success; its skills in building regional coalitions will determine the outcomes. Stone points out that the business elite of the city of Atlanta were forced to acknowledge that they needed the support of African American groups in the 1960s and forged a coalition with them.<sup>47</sup> The political economy and demographics of metro Atlanta have changed substantially since the 1960s. Suburbs have attracted new businesses, and their populations increased at much faster rates than the city's (in fact, the population of the city declined after 1970 until the late 1990s). New centers of business power emerged in the suburbs, and the traditional business elite of the city, although still powerful, had to take this new regional reality into account.<sup>48</sup> Today's business elite, now regional in nature, acknowledges the need to collaborate not only with its own members but also with local jurisdictions throughout the metro area. Hence, the question is whether a larger, more diverse group, such as the Metro Chamber, can play as forceful a role in the region as the closely knit elite of CAP were able to play in the city.

The regional scope of the economy in metro Atlanta has also affected race relations. While African Americans constitute the majority of the electorate in the city (about 68 percent as of 2000), they represent less than 27 percent of the metro area. During the 1990s, the long-standing rift between the black city and white suburbs was accentuated by the behavior of Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell, who was criticized for ethical impropriety by the African American editors of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and who refused to attend ARC board meetings beginning in May 1999. The newly elected mayor, Shirley Franklin, a businesswoman and former member of the GRTA board, not only took actions to ensure ethical functioning in city government but also began attending the ARC meetings, which is welcomed by the ARC executive director as a sign of the city's recognition of its place in the region.<sup>49</sup> This may be a sign of a new relationship between the city and suburbs.

As a final and further encouraging point, we must note that the role the Atlanta area business leaders have played in creation of GRTA and are likely to play in the future is not unique. It is illustrative of larger trends in metropolitan areas. Rusk observes that while religious leaders, universities, grassroots activists, and business communities have all been involved in attempts to solve metropolitan problems, his examples from different metropolitan areas in the United States show that among these four groups, the business community is by far the most effective in influencing legislation for regional solutions.<sup>50</sup>

Rusk points out, "Business leaders are practically the only natural constituency for regionalism. Business groups tend to think in terms of economic and labor market areas."<sup>51</sup> He also observes that the nature of the leadership among local businesses has changed. Like Molotch, he points out that

leaders come from businesses that are more dependent on the local market—the gas, electric, and telephone companies; locally owned banks; local newspapers; and local hospitals—the land-based concerns.

These business leaders today do not have that much power individually or as a small clique, as was much the case in the city of Atlanta's urban regime, and they therefore have to build and work in larger-scale coalitions. Accordingly, the future of regionalism in Georgia seems to depend on the coalitions the metro Atlanta business leaders will be able to build. And it remains to be seen whether they succeed in maintaining an operative smart-growth machine and, even further down the horizon, creating a regional regime.

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