



Metro Atlanta Leaders Find Similarities North of the Border

With a population of just over 6 million, the Greater Toronto Area is the third largest metro region in North America. And while its government structure is quite different from metro Atlanta's, the two regions share many traits, like a growing and diverse population, a need for traffic solutions and a varied mixture of local governments that tend to think and act independently.

More than 100 participants on the 19th annual LINK trip probed Greater Toronto for insights to maintaining metro Atlanta's global competitiveness. Over the course of three days, the group met downtown and in two suburban cities while hearing from Toronto Mayor John Tory, as well as the Canadian Consulate to Georgia and the U.S. Consulate to Toronto.

While many innovative ideas were shared, LINK participants were particularly interested in following up in three key areas upon their return:

- » Transportation priorities and funding
- » Working together as a region
- » Using diversity as an asset for the region's development, government and economic competitiveness.

Transportation Priorities & Funding

"I always tell people you're not stuck in traffic. You are the traffic," said John Lieou of the Ontario Ministry of Transportation during Friday's session in the suburb of Markham (population 345,000). The comment drew a laugh from the LINK group but also rang true.

The transportation experts from Greater Toronto were able to boast about the options they are providing their residents who frequently sit in congestion that rivals or surpasses that of metro Atlanta. LINK participants learned that Greater Toronto has 350 miles of heavy rail, 25 miles of bus rapid transit and 60 miles of streetcar. That's roughly 10 times the amount of transit we have in the Atlanta region (48 miles of heavy rail and 2.6 miles of streetcar.)

And the Toronto area continues to invest in transit options. The Province of Ontario will invest \$80 billion in transportation over the next 10 years. And over the next 15 years, the Toronto region will invest \$32 billion on transit alone.

The biggest lessons learned about transportation were that collaboration across political parties, business sectors, government agencies and transportation modes is imperative, as is a relentless drive to pursue funding.





Come Together Around Key Issues

ARC's LINK program is all about collaboration and bringing some of the Atlanta region's best minds to bear around the issues of the day. However, as with many large groups, reaching consensus on which issue to tackle is just as difficult as deciding how to tackle it.

Sevaun Palvetzian, CEO of Civic Action, explained to the LINK participants how the Toronto region comes together to get things done. CivicAction has so much clout that its former CEO, John Tory, is now the mayor of Toronto.

Palvetzian explained that CivicAction holds a summit every four years. At the summit, they briefly report on what has been accomplished in four years, and to "identify the nut to crack" before the next summit. They focus on issues that are too big for any one government to handle alone.

For example, with a miniscule investment, the group created a competition amongst businesses and building managers to reduce energy consumption by 10 percent. They have successfully lobbied for more transportation funding (see above) and have created a program that keeps young people in the education system longer.

Diversity as an Asset

The motto of the city of Toronto says "Diversity is Our Strength." Indeed, Toronto is possibly the most diverse region in the world. With 50 percent of its current population born outside of Canada, the region celebrates its diverse communities.

According to Ratna Omidvar of the Global Diversity Exchange and DiverseCity onBoard, it's about more than just accepting people from other cultures. She said that diversity has changed public institutions and has changed "the way we play and the way we build." Thanks to her group's efforts, the police force of the city of Toronto has greatly diversified and has made Toronto one of the safest metros in the world; teachers have changed their curricula; and even long-standing business models have changed, as it's now possible for several generations of a family or siblings from the same generation to jointly apply for a mortgage.

The DiverseCity onBoard program strives to develop leaders from minority and underserved communities to help the region's leadership better reflect its population. Along with programs on government, boards, finance and other topics, the initiative hosts local mixer events bringing people from different cultures together to share food and conversation.



LINK Participants in a Pickle

In a LINK first, several participants took part in a sporting event. A group of local pickleball players in Markham taught all comers how to play this sport that's gaining momentum all over North America. Played with a paddle and a wiffle ball, pickleball is fun for people of all ages.

