



# The Civic League

for Regional Atlanta

**Your Voice. Your Community. Your Region.**



## **Citizens Shaping the Region: The Civic League Neighborhood Forums, 2008-2010**

**Imagine the ideal Atlanta region 50 years from now.**

***What does it look like? How does it work? What did we do to make it happen?***

Between 2008 and 2010, The Civic League for Regional Atlanta asked 746 people across the 10-county region these questions through a series of facilitated discussions called Neighborhood Forums. The Civic League is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that involves everyday citizens in regional public policy, and its Neighborhood Forum model recruits and engages citizens at the community level to fulfill this mission. In this instance, The League's goal was to ensure that citizens' voices were represented in the Atlanta Regional Commission's Fifty Forward project, an ambitious visioning initiative centered around critical topics expected to impact metro Atlanta for decades. In all, 13 forums were held, each focused on one of five topics: diversity, sustainability, land use and housing, transportation, and public health and health care.

For the Atlanta region, The Civic League's Neighborhood Forums represent an important first step toward a more inclusive approach to regional planning and decision-making, a process that differs fundamentally from local and state policymaking. At the regional level, citizens do not elect a high-level leader comparable to a governor or a mayor, nor do they have the easy access to ARC board members that they have to their state representatives, county commissioners and city council members. Public meetings have long been part of the regional process but are too often dominated by individuals who are strongly "for" or "against" change that has already been planned.

The Civic League's approach is different because it begins with the experience and insights of leaders at the community level. Like public meetings, Neighborhood Forums are open to all; however, The League also employs a more targeted approach by identifying community leaders and asking them to invite key stakeholders representing neighborhoods, the local business community, the nonprofit sector and other relevant community interests. The result is a thoughtful exchange of ideas among interested individuals representing diverse backgrounds and viewpoints. Participants identify areas of consensus within their respective communities, and The Civic League conveys their ideas and opinions to regional planners and decision-makers. The Atlanta Regional Commission recognized the value of the community-based input that comes from these "working conversations" and has subsequently partnered with The Civic League on forums addressing other issues.

The outcomes of the Fifty Forward Neighborhood Forums were recently analyzed in a research paper, “Prominent Themes in the Neighborhood Forums of The Civic League for Regional Atlanta,” by Janelle Jolley and John C. Thomas of the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University. In their review of participant-generated comments and ideas from the 13 Neighborhood Forums, the authors were able to identify seven distinct themes:

### **1. Encourage more activities that promote healthy living**

- Encourage walking, biking and other forms of exercise by making them easier to engage in and more inviting.
- Educate people about maintaining good health through healthier food options and public policies that promote healthy living.
- Make healthcare services more accessible in the community and available in a wider variety (“not just the emergency room”).

### **2. Improve and expand area public transportation services**

- Create “more public transit, including a large expansion of rail transit.”
- Implement a more integrated transportation system that may include elevated high-speed rail, light commuter rail, a rail system to connect the airports, and “multiple types of urban transport.”
- Enhance cooperative regional transportation planning that “[standardizes] the transportation agenda between counties.”
- Decrease the need for cars as the primary mode of transportation as neighborhoods become more walkable and public transit becomes more user-friendly and accessible.

### **3. Increase residential density**

- “Build higher,” utilizing air space rather than building “out,” ideally targeting transportation hubs to maximize the benefits of high-density areas.
- Move local governments toward “stricter zoning, concentrated density.”
- Increase support for walkable, dense, mixed-use neighborhoods in which “homes are within a five-minute walk of significant green space and within a quarter-mile of a business node, not strip malls.”

### **4. Promote and plan more diverse neighborhoods**

- “Encourage people of different backgrounds and income levels to live close by.”
- Enhance the role of arts in bridging cultural divides in order to facilitate more social interaction between people from different walks of life.
- Strengthen the role of schools in supporting community diversity by helping schools “to bring together children of diverse ethnic origins,” to “do a better job of teaching children from diverse backgrounds,” and to “teach about ethnic groups by focusing on ‘other cultures as they are’ and not just their histories and traditions.”

### **5. Preserve and expand green space**

- Improve land use in the region so that people will be able to “fly over and see green” with an abundance of “urban farms and gardens, green roofs, and linear parks.”
- Strengthen green space protection to “preserve the rural character of the area” through tax benefits to property owners who promise to not develop their land.

### **6. Embed schools more thoroughly in their communities**

- Make “existing schools . . . a community magnet, serving needs for all residents.”

### **7. Promote more judicious use of water resources**

- Conserve and preserve the watersheds of the Atlanta region, as by ending the pollution run-off into the Chattahoochee River.
- Protect and sustain the environment through improved solid waste recycling and zero-waste requirements.
- Consider development of a “water grid” that could redistribute water resources where they are needed in the region.

***For the full version of this report, as well as information on Civic League programs, membership and other research, please visit our web site: [www.civicleagueatlanta.org](http://www.civicleagueatlanta.org).***