A turning point may finally have arrived in the Atlanta region’s famous infatuation with sprawl. The opportunity stems from widespread concern that present development patterns are unsustainable, and that to do nothing is to risk the region’s future desirability—and potential for continued economic prosperity. Today, a new consensus is emerging among citizens, developers, design professionals, and local officials that focuses on channeling new development into existing centers and corridors.

Atlanta’s new approach recognizes the need for strategies that will create places with distinctive design quality and character. Prominent among these is the five-year-old Livable Centers Initiative. LCI was created by the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) as a way to restore the region’s eligibility for federal transportation funding after it was found to be out of compliance with air-quality standards. Today it provides both planning and implementation funding for projects aimed at retrofitting declining areas into higher-density, mixed-use, livable places.

Subhead
Looking backward, Atlanta’s growth and development in the last thirty years has been as phenomenal as it has been shapeless. The result is that, at 2.8 people per acre, Atlanta is the least dense of the nation’s fifteen largest metro areas. Looking forward, Atlanta will continue to be the hub of a southeast megalopolis that is projected to grow three times faster than the country as a whole over the next fifty years. Even by 2030, the region expects to add more than two million people (50 percent more than it has now), as well as a million and a half new jobs. Such projections bring a certain sense of urgency to the need to create a better range of living, working and travel choices. At the same time, the region must address underlying social and political issues, among which are historic racial and income inequities and the divergent purposes of at least ten counties and 64 city jurisdictions. It must also face environmental threats and their health consequences—such as conserving water supplies; improving air, water and habitat quality; and managing solid-waste disposal. In a word, Atlanta must grow smarter.

Perhaps the best example of a citizen initiated LCI is the Avondale MARTA station, where local citizen and business leadership has partnered with the Decatur city government to produce a plan that integrates the superior access of MARTA with significant large scale mixed use development initiatives, among whose sponsors is the Decatur Housing Authority.
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would allow new village-like communities to be located as development in existing built-up areas. Unlike programs.

Origins of the Program

As mentioned, the LCI program ultimately owes its existence to a need to bring the region into air-quality compliance so it might regain eligibility for federal transportation dollars. After considering a range of growth-management actions, however, the ARC chose not to try to control metropolitan growth through a restrictive program of boundary lines. Along with its constituent jurisdictions, it instead decided to create a system of incentives to help focus new development in existing built-up areas. Unlike programs with a top-down mandate, it was hoped such a program would allow local communities to be located as part of a self-select process, worked out between communities, the private sector, and local, regional and state agencies. By emphasizing the carrot over the stick, it was hoped a program like this would attract development to already-developed places. From small villages to large communities, the private sector, and local, regional and state agencies are learning to work together better—although they still have a long way to go.

The community groups who have become advocates for the programs are increasingly embracing the idea that successful place-building requires partnerships. As parts of a single team, community leaders can provide a vision; private developers can provide money and expertise; and local government can provide a strong planning framework.

As the accompanying illustrations show, the program has targeted already-existing centers and corridors across a range of sizes—small, medium, large, and even extra large. Crossroads, town centers, strips, shopping centers, and major suburban and city centers have all adopted smart-growth plans and begun to implement their transportation components.

Tough Challenges Remain

As a result of its initial successes, the LCI program has become the story of how technology, government agencies, citizens groups are ahead of local governments in pressing for its application. One reason for the successes may be that the LCI program does not require localities to “think regionally.” Instead, it encourages them to pursue their own priorities, so long as they support regionally established smart-growth criteria and transportation strategies.

As the program is evolving, though, the need to address some of its provisions and promises has emerged. For example, many LCI communities are lagging in implementing required zoning modifications. There is also a need to dramatically beef up funding for alternative transportation strategies to meet the escalating market demand.

In addition, the ARC’s recently adopted 2050 Regional Transportation Plan indicates it may be backing off to the roadway-dominant culture that put the region out of compliance with federal programs and necessities development of LCI in the first place. New transportation funding should emphasize the opportunities and realities of retrofitting established areas. Instead, proportionally more money is still being spent on roadways and rubber-tired transit serving newer, less dense areas.

In the end, therefore, while the LCI program may be a cooperative and promising initiative, increasingly the region has turned the corner toward smarter growth is still premature. But as Atlanta looks to the future, this circumstance is comparable to the struggles of other metro areas. Across the country, supplying the market demand for new choices has been hampered by a lack of public-sector support as it has by a lack of developer and lender support.

Today, as concerns over community health and energy conservation have joined older forces pushing for smarter growth, it is clear that more money must be spent in the older parts of regions. For years these first- and second-generation suburbs have lost out to the forces building lower-density sprawl further out. With significant concentrations of minorities and immigrants, these communities have been unable to organize the political pressure necessary to gain their fair share.

Still, all over the Atlanta region the program is generating growing enthusiasm. As the market for more livable places takes hold, many Atlantans are optimistic the LCI strategy will provide an important tool as they face the challenge of accommodating an additional two million people by 2030.

Notes

9. Steve Wynn’s novel The Man in Full provides a powerful characterization of the Atlanta development scene.
10. In addition, seven areas that developed LCI plans independently meet the criteria for implementation funding, and sixteen areas have been awarded supplemental planning grants.
Dobbins / Focusing Growth amid Sprawl

The community groups who have become advocates for the program have increasingly embraced the idea that successful place-building requires partnerships. As parts of a single team, community leaders can provide a vision; private developers can provide money and expertise; and local government can provide a strong planning framework. As the accompanying illustrations show, the program has targeted already-existing centers and corridors across a range of sizes—small, medium, large, and even extra large. Crossroads, town centers, strips, shopping centers, and major suburban and city centers have all adopted smart-growth plans and begun to implement their transportation components.

Infill, redevelopment and retrofit plans now support such goals as mixed-use development, connecting and conserving usable green space, providing walkable, bikeable and transit-supportive streetscapes, putting cars out of sight, and planning for increased densities. Additionally, as communities become more comfortable with the demand for alternatives to sprawl, there is increasing recognition of the need to build mixed-income housing—both to accommodate the population that works in mixed-use centers and as a strategy to shorten commutes and encourage the development of transit alternatives.

Tough Challenges Remain

As a result of its initial successes, the LCI program has become competitive with other development opportunities. In many communities, citizens groups are ahead of local governments in pressing for its application. One reason for the successes may be that the LCI program does not require localities to “think regionally.” Instead, it encourages them to pursue their own priorities, so long as they support regionally established smart-growth criteria and transportation strategies.

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Notes
2. Ibid. Retrieved February 2004 from http://www.atlantaregional.com/regional-
transportation奇瑞.html.
atlantaregional.com/regionaltransportation忉.html.
transportation尧.html.
9. Tom Wolfe’s novel The Man in the Full provides a powerful characterization of the Atlanta development scene.
10. In addition, areas that developed LCI plans independently must continue to work together to make implementation funding, and eleven areas have been awarded supplemental planning grants.

Origins of the Program

As mentioned, the LCI program ultimately owes its existence to a need to bring the region into air-quality compliance so it might regain eligibility for federal transportation dollars. The use of federal transportation dollars was justified by the smart-growth goal of creating and reinforcing walkable, live-work-shop-learn communities, and creating more transparent and legible development outcomes stem from an engaged citizenry, the planning and implementation phases both also require an inclusive citizen guidance process.

After four rounds of program applications, a total of 150 planning proposals have been submitted, and 21 have been funded at levels ranging from $75,000 to $125,000. Of the initial $350 million, more than $5 million in planning grants have been awarded, and 80 projects in 40 LCIAs have been awarded $168 million in implementation funding.

Development projects enabled by the program have so far included 26,000 housing units (about 10 percent of the region’s total), 23 million sq. ft. of office space (most concentrated in existing major employment centers), 4,500 new hotel rooms, and about 5 million sq. ft. of retail space. Twenty-two jurisdictions have changed their comprehensive plans, with eleven others in the process of doing so. Some 24 communities across the region adopted zoning and subdivision regulations that support and facilitate new development patterns, with another nine in process.

Subhead

The above numbers, however, do not tell the whole story. What may be most significant about the LCI program is that it cut across old boundaries. It has required reexamination of use regulations, with eleven others in the process of doing so. Some 24 communities across the region adopted zoning and subdivision regulations that support and facilitate new development patterns, with another nine in process.

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