

# SECTION

# 2

BACKGROUND INFORMATION  
HISTORY OF DECATUR/ROUND TABLES



SECTION 2

2



# VISION: *The City of Decatur Will Assure a High Quality of Life for its Residents, Businesses & Visitors Both Today and in the Future.*



Introduction: The City of Decatur requested a Strategic Plan that included physical and economic planning while incorporating social goals. The Vision, Principles, Goals and Projects listed below were developed through a collaboration of residents and government, business and institutional leaders. Goals and Projects are aligned under the Principles that they most appropriately support. It should be noted that many of the Goals and Projects do not fit neatly under a particular Principle. In fact, many of the Goals and Projects are interrelated and could support more than one Principle.



## PRINCIPLE A: Manage Growth While Retaining Character

Accommodate commercial and residential growth while retaining a small town character within an urban environment.

### Goal 1: Retain and Enhance The Existing Character Of Commercial Districts

Project A: Refine Standards For Downtown.

Project B: Develop and Adopt Standards For Neighborhood Commercial Districts.

Project C: Adopt Standards For East College Avenue.

### Goal 2: Encourage A Diversity Of Business Types With Particular Focus On Small Businesses

Project A: Diversify the Office Tenant Base.

Project B: Encourage Owner Occupied Retail.

### Goal 3: Protect Existing Neighborhoods While Identifying The Potential For Selected Growth And Adopting Standards That Guide Future Growth

Project A: Adopt Standards for New Residential.

Project B: Consider Guidelines for Residential Renovations.



## PRINCIPLE B: Encourage Community Interaction

Determine methods to maximize communication and connections between residents, businesses, institutions and government.

### Goal 4: Maintain And Encourage Racial, Ethnic, Economic, Cultural And Other Types Of Diversity

Project A: Diversify attendance at public events.

Project B: Support and expand volunteer activities.

Project C: Expand distribution of and personalize community publications.

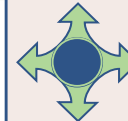
### Goal 5: Reinforce Neighborhoods And Develop Connections Between Neighborhoods

Project A: Support Decatur Neighborhood Alliance or Similar Organization.

### Goal 6: Strengthen Communication And Connections Throughout The Community

Project A: Improve Communication between residents, the City and Schools.

Project B: Support New and Existing Programs that Strengthen Community Connections.



## PRINCIPLE C: Provide Quality Services Within Fiscal Limits

Provide housing, transportation, environmental quality and public services to Decatur's residents and workers.

### Goal 7: Increase Opportunities For Economically Diverse Housing For Persons Who Live Or Work In Decatur

Project A: Identify Tax Relief & Other Programs To Aid Elderly.

Project B: Provide Housing For People Working In The City.

Project C: Develop Programs To Attract Minority Residents.

Project D: Develop Programs To Improve Rental Housing.

### Goal 8: Enhance Mobility In And Through Decatur

Project A: Selectively Reduce Traffic Volume and Speed.

Project B: Improve Public Transit.

Project C: Improve Sidewalks and Crosswalks.

Project D: Improve Bicycle Paths.

### Goal 9: Continue The Commitment To Environmental Quality

Project A: Improve Linkages between Green Spaces.

Project B: Preserve and Expand Green Space, Wetlands & Trees.

Project C: Study Air and Water Quality Programs.

### Goal 10: Continue To Provide Quality City And School System Services Within Fiscal Limits Acceptable To The Community

Project A: Address Concerns Regarding Taxes For General Operations.

Project B: Address Concerns Regarding Taxes For School Operations.

Project C: Address Concerns Regarding Quality Of Services.

Project D: Improve Quality Of Buildings, Parks & Recreational Facilities.

## History

Decatur was founded in 1823, before Atlanta, and named for Stephen Decatur, the U.S. naval hero. The town was laid out by a land surveyor, James Diamond, as an orthogonal grid, a type traditional in the South.

In the center of the city, on its highest knoll of land, is the old DeKalb County Courthouse. The Courthouse is on axis with a north-south street; east-west streets pass to the north and south of the Courthouse, thus creating Courthouse Square.

The original form of the town was a tight urban settlement of cabins and stores built around Courthouse Square in 1830-1840. This wagon-train urban settlement was in strong contrast to the scrub and woodland of the open country around the town. Decatur's early growth was based on the manufacturing of hats, furniture, carriages and rifles. A stagecoach inn stood on the Courthouse Square at Sycamore Street, the mid-point between Augusta and Chattanooga. The construction of the Georgia Railroad in 1845 led to the decline of the stagecoach and moved the center of regional growth to Atlanta. However, with a depot near downtown Decatur, the railroad also brought commercial and residential growth to Decatur.

Civil War fighting occurred in and around Decatur in July 1864; very little pre-1870 development is left of the town. Most of Decatur today dates from 1880. For example, although the first courthouse, a log cabin, was



*Stephen Decatur*

built in 1823, the building we know today as the Old Courthouse was built in 1898, and was the fourth on that site. It was largely destroyed by fire in 1916, and rebuilt using the surviving granite walls, in 1917. It is a neo-Classical Revival building, listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Beginning in the late 1800s, Decatur became a city of neighborhoods surrounding the Courthouse Square area, which became a true "Downtown". Decatur's oldest homes and neighborhoods border the railroad, with newer neighborhoods having their character set during the 1930s.

Downtown Decatur is unusual for small cities because it remained a vibrant commercial center through all of the 1900s. Like other cities, Decatur's downtown expanded through the 1950s, but as other cities experienced decline beginning in the late 1960s Decatur

continued to "hold its own". In the 1980s Decatur experienced significant growth in office space. In the 1990s Decatur attracted a multitude of new restaurants and retail establishments, making it a regional destination for shopping and dining. Most recently the Downtown has experienced "urban residential" growth with the addition of over 300 units.

Much of the stability of Decatur in the past twenty years can be attributed to the commitment of its residents and government, business and institutional leaders to maintaining the character and small-town qualities of the City. The School System has also been a major factor in Decatur's stability. The City Schools have consistently attracted and retained residents because of their quality, which exceeds that of other Metro-Atlanta Districts.

Three major planning and community consensus-building initiatives have reinforced and documented the commitment to retaining and enhancing Decatur's qualities: the 1982 Town Center Plan, the 1995 Comprehensive Plan and the 1998 Round Tables process.

### 1982 Town Center Plan

The 1982 Town Center Plan was based on sound and sustainable planning principles and has proven a very successful tool for the City. The Town Center Plan proposed ten Goals to revitalize Downtown Decatur: 1) Define the Edge of Downtown, 2) Improve Access and Parking, 3) Interrelate Different Scales and Types of Development, 4) Conserve Decatur's

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Small-Town Scale, 5) New Development Should Reinforce the Existing Scale, 6) Optimize the MARTA System, 7) Develop Incentives for New Infill Structures, 8) Explore Opportunities for New Housing Downtown, 9) Create Demonstration Development on the Candler Hotel Block, 10) Seek an Image for Downtown. That all of these goals have been accomplished says a lot about the impact of publicly supported planning in Decatur. It should be noted that a significant update to the plan was prepared in 1989 that refocused attention on the original document and provided necessary revisions. This type of monitoring process was also a part of the plan's success.

### 1995 City of Decatur Comprehensive Plan

The 1995 City of Decatur Comprehensive Plan is a document prepared by the City of Decatur in response to the State of Georgia Planning Act of 1989. The Comprehensive Plan has two parts: 1) an Inventory and Assessment which provides an analysis of the community's economic development activities, natural and historic resources, community facilities and services, population, housing and land use; 2) a Statement of Community Needs and Goals for meeting the City's social, economic and physical requirements, an implementation strategy through 2010 and a short-term work program of actions from 1995-2000. A significant number of the Projects in the short-term program were accomplished.

The Comprehensive Plan identified eight key issues that residents felt needed to be addressed: 1) Quality of Life – maintaining the existing



*above: Historic Decatur - image provided by DeKalb Historical Society.*

quality of life despite development pressures; 2) Traffic – finding solutions to moving traffic efficiently and discouraging neighborhood cut-through traffic; 3) Unity of North and South Decatur – how to improve the physical, social and business connections between the two areas; 4) Housing – maintenance of predominantly residential areas as single-family and support for medium/high density housing downtown and in commercial zones along College Avenue, Scott Boulevard, Clairemont Avenue and Church Street, among others; 5) Historic Preservation – increase awareness of the Decatur Historic Preservation Commission; 6) Commercial Development – limit commercial growth to the Downtown as currently defined; 7) Parks & Recreational Areas – expand programs; existing area for recreation is

adequate; 8) Infrastructure – focused on issues raised by new development.

### 1998 Round Tables Process

In 1998, the surest sign of Decatur's health was conflict. Major conflicts underscored the simmering tensions between the black and white communities, between Agnes Scott and its adjacent neighbors and among the neighbors of the Old Scottish Rite Hospital. Conflict was proof that residents of Decatur were passionate about the place in which they lived.

Out of this conflict the Decatur Round Tables were born. The Round Tables were a citywide citizen-dialogue based on the principles developed by the national Study Circles Resource Center, listed as follows:





### *Principles of a Study Circle – (Round Tables)*

A group of 8-12 people who meet regularly to address a critical issue.

- Facilitated by someone who does not give his or her own opinions on the issue but helps create a balanced, honest, productive discussion.
- Open to many different views.
- A diverse mix of people.
- A process that takes you from personal experience, to larger questions, to action.
- A catalyst for action: individual, small-group, institutional.

*A community-wide study circle program is...*

- A large number of study circles taking place on the same issue(s) at the same time.
- Includes anywhere from 100 – 1,000 people.
- Backed by a coalition of organizations.

More than 500 residents and individuals representing the businesses, government and institutions of the City met in dialogue circles. Every political, racial and cultural group in the City was represented. Starting with their own experiences of life in Decatur, participants then identified the issues that meant the most to them and created the Action Items that would be used to build a stronger sense of community where every voice was important and could be heard.

### **Round Tables Results**

Following the Round Tables, the City dedicated staff time to linking neighborhood associations more closely with city government. Action Teams of citizen volunteers worked to start



*Round Tables Participants*

regular meetings for all neighborhood associations, to encourage racial and other kinds of diversity in public life and in neighborhoods, to monitor new growth and development, to ensure good communication, and to work for a pedestrian friendly community with parks and other green spaces. One of the action teams provided feedback to shape how the Strategic Plan could be carried out in a way that ensured strong citizen

involvement.

Action Items identified during the Round Tables were used as a foundation for the Strategic Plan process. On the following pages the 60 Action Items are listed as they appeared in a Checklist used during the Strategic Planning process to informally measure the level of interest and validity of each Item.

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## Round Tables Recommended Action Items (1998)



### Land Use & Planning

- 1 Create stronger standards for the use of land.
- 2 Create stronger standards for building design.
- 3 Incorporate the arts and culture into planning.
- 4 Increase green spaces and business district tree cover.
- 5 Have an annual plant-a-tree day.
- 6 Encourage citizen gardens.
- 7 Maintain older buildings and an older look in business district(s).
- 8 Create "water feature" (fountain) in business district(s).

### Transportation & Parking Management

- 9 Improve those things that will make the business districts pedestrian-friendly.
- 10 Increase pedestrian-only zones in the business district(s).
- 11 More traffic controls in school zones, in neighborhoods and on major thoroughfares.
- 12 Increase bike areas in business district(s).
- 13 Ensure more discreet parking areas.
- 14 Create a commuter trolley.

### Communication/Citizen Participation

- 15 Identify the best method for citizen participation and the healthy flow of

information about the work of the City to all citizens.

- 16 Create forums for communication with the City Commission, including Town Hall meetings and periodic issue-oriented forums.
- 17 Effectively plan and develop our business districts with citizen participation.
- 18 Create a citizen task force to study traffic and pedestrian-friendly options and make recommendations.
- 19 Create a citizen-led inventory of City green spaces and use this to develop a City-wide plan.
- 20 Effectively involve citizens in the planning process.
- 21 Install informational kiosks in the major business districts that provide civic and issue-oriented information.
- 22 Decatur Web Site - Increase and promote use providing more civic and issue-oriented information.
- 23 Decatur Focus - Provide more civic and issue-oriented information.

### Neighborhoods & Neighborhood Associations

- 24 Find ways to bring neighbors and neighborhoods together socially and formally around community issues.
- 25 Create a Council of Neighborhood

Associations.

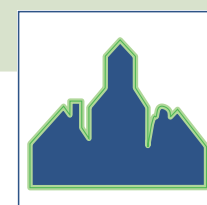
- 26 Have meetings of neighborhood representatives (formal and informal) to share ideas, determine common goals/objectives.
- 27 Provide opportunities to share organizing ideas.
- 28 Provide conflict resolution support for neighborhoods.
- 29 Encourage block parties and neighborhood dinners.
- 30 Encourage neighborhood festivals that attract other neighborhoods.
- 31 Organize and encourage open communication between the City Commission, and neighborhood association and strengthen the association's ability to participate in the major issues of the City.
- 32 Hold quarterly joint meetings between the City Commission and representatives of the neighborhood associations.

### Race & Diversity

- 33 Maintain and encourage the economic and racial diversity of the neighborhoods and city.
- 34 Use tax and development incentives and homestead exemptions, especially for those who are both elderly and with low incomes.







- 35 Encourage representation of the African American community in arenas of political power.
- 36 Support and encourage African American representation on the Commission and on all boards and committees.
- 37 Provide incentives for affordable housing.
- 38 Ensure participation of all groups in the upcoming Strategic Planning process.
- 39 Encourage interaction of all citizens at community festivals.
- 40 Join together to develop "Harmony Park" in South Decatur.

### **Taxation**

- 41 Provide tax relief for those hit hardest by our tax structure.
- 42 Create additional homestead exemption levels for the elderly and low income residents.
- 43 Create tax relief mechanisms, e.g. Sunset Taxes (taxes paid at the sale of the property from equity), for seniors.
- 44 Make an assessment of Business Occupation Tax, Utility Tax, creation of an enterprise zone.
- 45 Create a tax review task force to review options and their implications.
- 46 Ensure no over-taxation.



### **Business**

- 47 Find ways to promote businesses and preserve the look and quality of the City.
- 48 Encourage a diversity of business types.
- 49 Promote small businesses, not chain stores, and encourage the growth of community-friendly businesses.
- 50 Encourage business development in south Decatur as well as minority-owned businesses.
- 51 Maintain strong ties between the business community and the schools through ongoing business and school partnerships, including the adopt-a-school program.

### **Schools**

- 52 Provide tutors and mentors to the schools.

- 53 Post important issues prior to school board meetings, publish agendas in community paper, provide simplified reports of school spending.
- 54 Identify how taxes are spent and how rates or amounts requested are decided upon.
- 55 Encourage information and opinion flow to/from the school board: create forums for community members to receive information and discuss creative alternatives and solutions and create new mechanisms for input to the schools.
- 56 Foster community support and involvement: encourage the continued adoption of schools by community businesses, involve non-parent community members in tutoring and/or mentoring programs, hold community meetings in schools when possible so that community members gain new insights into schools and their challenges.
- 57 Deal with feelings and questions about racial diversity including: school quality, allocation of resources, and the perceived tracking of students.

### **General**

- 58 Develop a Leadership Decatur.
- 59 Develop a Hands On Decatur.
- 60 Develop more volunteering opportunities and neighborhood work parties.

