



# Decatur – Past and Present

The following sections detail the physical and social characteristics that make Decatur the city it is today. It touches on history, population, destinations, natural features and planning efforts. All of these aspects help form a comprehensive picture of Decatur in 2007 and are important ingredients in shaping the future Decatur as a vision of a healthy place to live, work, learn and play.

## History

The City of Decatur is a small, historic city located in DeKalb County, Georgia in the eastern part of metropolitan Atlanta. Despite its urban location, the City has managed to grow with the soul of a small town. It has a warm welcoming atmosphere and a focus on maintaining a high quality of life.

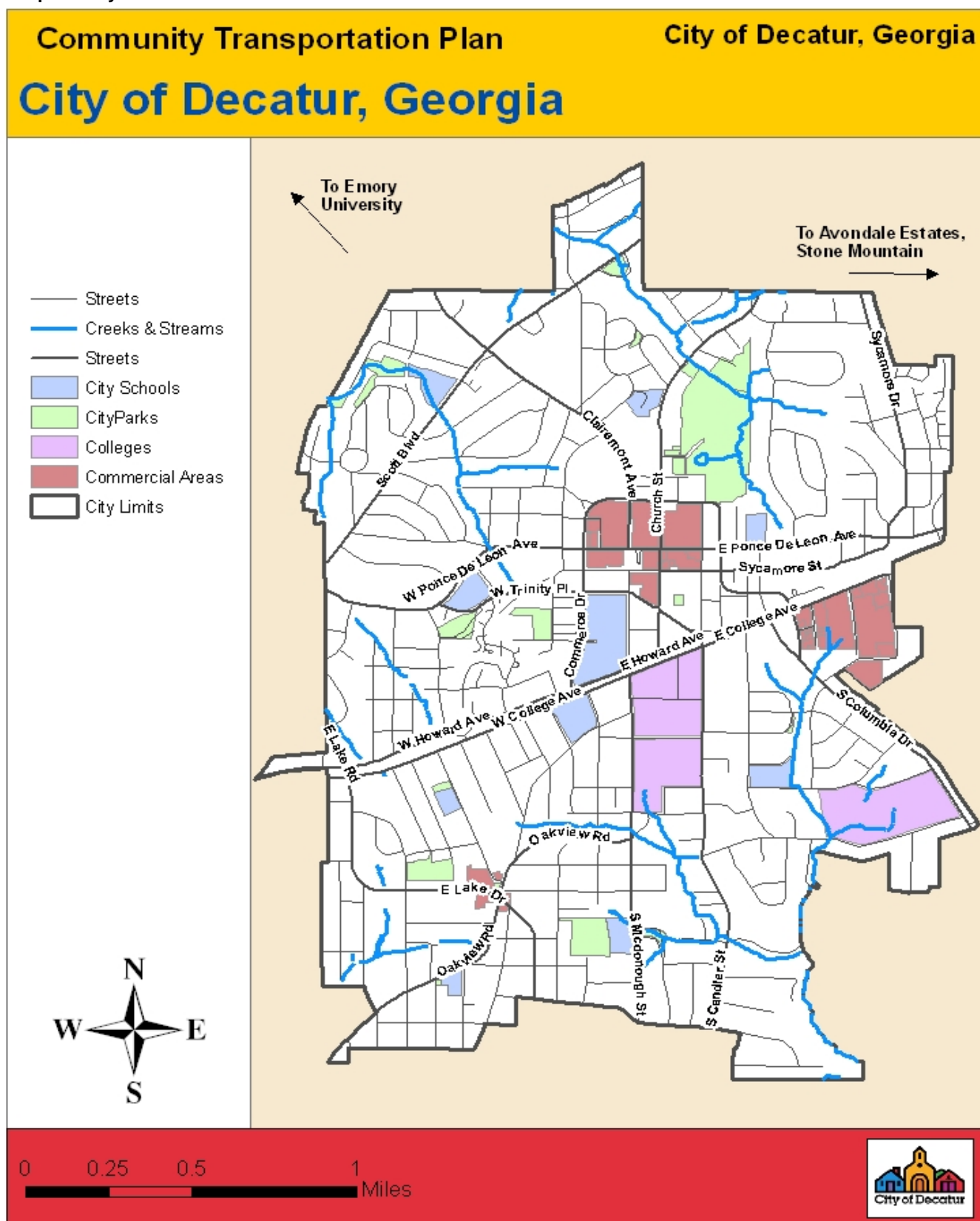
Founded in 1823, the City of Decatur has played a prominent role as the seat of DeKalb County and the second oldest municipality in the Atlanta metro region. The City is located and was named after Stephan Decatur, a popular naval hero of the early 1800's.

Transportation has always played an important role for the City. Decatur was originally located adjacent to a regional railroad line running through north and central Georgia. The city was an early depot stop along the Western and Atlantic Railroad which located a major shipping terminal seven miles to the west in the small town of Terminus, later to be called Atlanta. Decatur's prominent place along rail lines continued to the modern day as the City grew up around the rail line. The line along with movement of the CSX cargo continues to bisect the city today.

With a central location in the County, a dense residential population, and a strong downtown core, the city was well positioned for heavy passenger rail expansion in the 1970's. The city includes three MARTA stations which have increased mass transit access to the city and boosted the revitalization of the commercial center at the downtown square. With the city's proximity to Emory University, the Centers for Disease Control, and other government agencies, public transportation will continue to shape the face of the area.



Map 2-1 City of Decatur



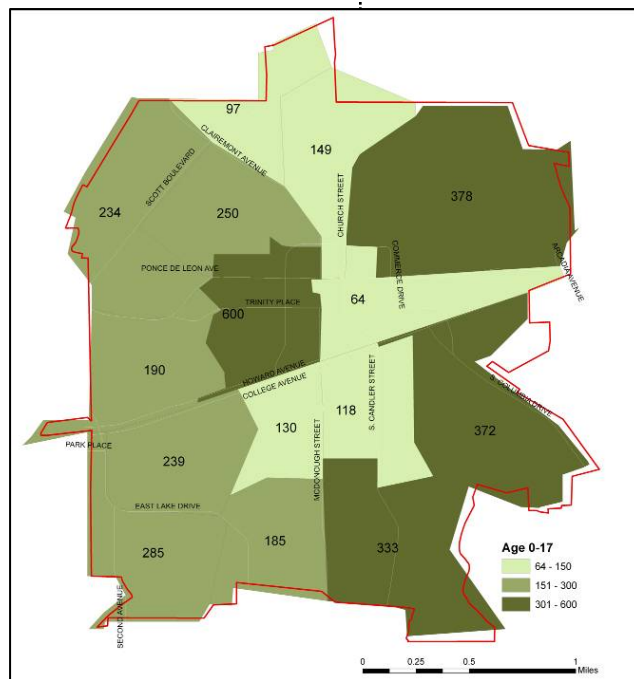
## Community Characteristics

Decatur has adopted three symbols to describe the City – houses, places of worship, and schools. Decatur's best known features are its historic single-family neighborhoods, thriving town center, and exceptional neighborhood-oriented school system. The City is the densest municipality in the County with just over 18,000 residents in four square miles.

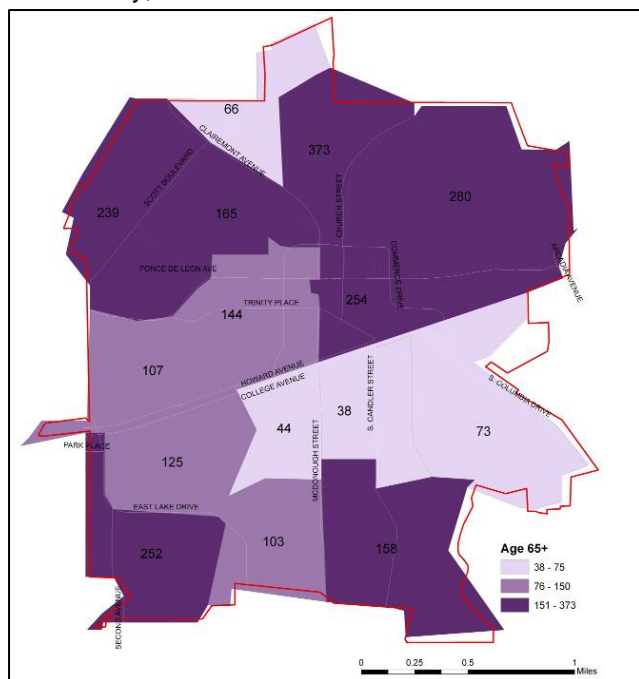
### Sensitive Populations

In a transportation network, planning for sensitive populations is critical to create a system that is safe, accessible, and easy to navigate by all users. Decatur has a very diverse population with many different types of groups. The following maps describe the demographic conditions of sensitive populations in the city. The information presented in the maps was taken from the U.S. Census in 2000.

Children are a sensitive population for transportation planning because they are likely to walk and ride bicycles, particularly as a means to get to school. The greatest concentration of children in Decatur are located in three general areas within the city: west of downtown around the Decatur Housing Authority properties, northeast in the Glendale Estates and Decatur Heights neighborhoods, and southeast in the Winona Park neighborhood. Two city schools, Glennwood Academy and Winona Park Elementary, are located within the northeast and southeast



**Figure 2-1: Distribution of Children within Decatur**



**Figure 2-2: Distribution of Senior Citizens within Decatur**

neighborhoods, respectively. Figure 2-1 displays the distribution of children within the city.

Along with children, the City also has a large elderly population. The elderly is a sensitive population in transportation because ability to drive often diminishes with age as eyesight and reflexes become less sharp. Providing alternatives to auto travel is important for maintain their mobility and connection to society.

Elderly residents live across the City with large numbers near the downtown square area.

Numbers of senior citizens live in the northern neighborhoods of

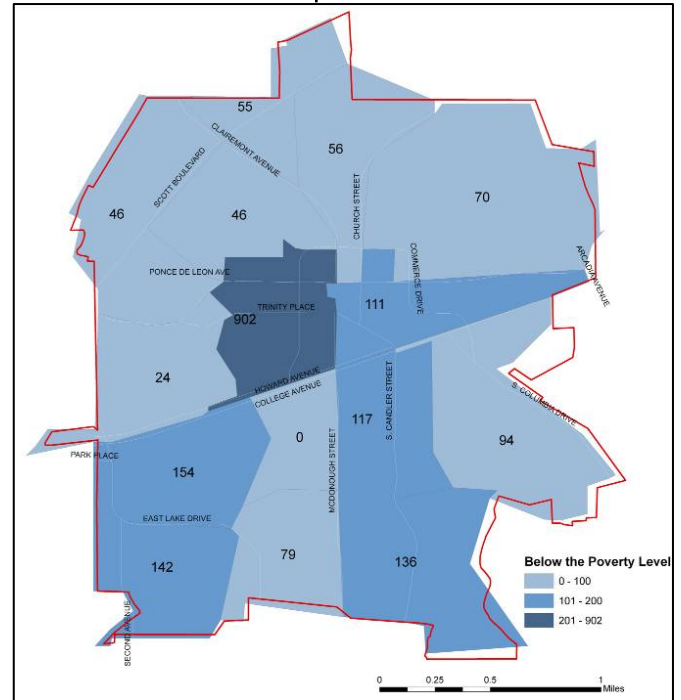
Garden Lane, the Great Lakes, and Glennwood Estates. Equal numbers live in the southwest corner of the City around Second Avenue and due south of Winnona Park along Memorial Drive. Figure 2-2 shows elderly populations in the City.

Low income populations are distributed evenly across the City with the largest concentration around the Decatur Housing Authority apartment complexes. Location of low income populations is important to know because there is a strong correlation between low income density and transit dependence. Other low income residents live on the south side of town around Second and Third Avenues as well as along South Candler Street. Figure 2-3 shows the distribution of low income populations within the City.

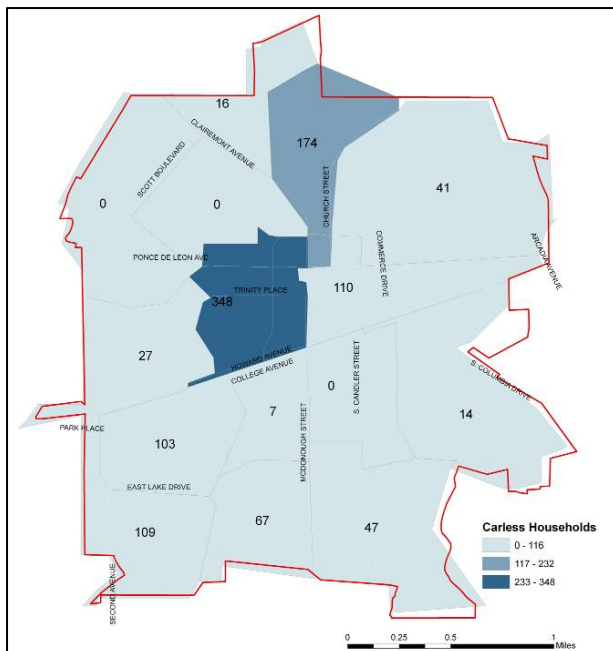
In addition to age and income, two other demographic statistics are particularly applicable regarding the transportation system: vehicle ownership and physical disabilities. A viable transportation system must be safe and accessible to all users, regardless of their physical condition or the mode that they use on a daily basis.

Figure 2-4 shows the distribution of carless households within Decatur. The largest concentration of carless households is located west of downtown around the Decatur Housing Authority properties.

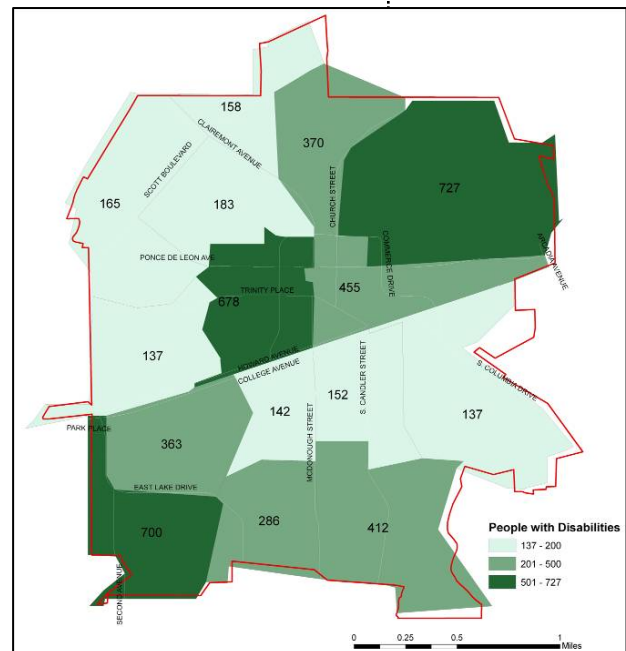
Figure 2-5 shows the distribution of disabled residents within the City. Generally speaking, residents with physical disabilities live in three main areas: the Decatur Housing Authority, the Glendale Estates neighborhood, and the southwest corner of the City along Second and Third Avenues.



**Figure 2-3:**  
Distribution of low  
income populations  
within Decatur



**Figure 2-4:** Distribution of Carless Households  
within Decatur



**Figure 2-5:** Distribution of Disabled Residents  
within Decatur



## Activity Centers & Community Facilities

Destinations are as important as the network that connects them. This section briefly outlines the existing land uses and public facilities within the City of Decatur which serve as important features of local and regional draw.

### **Activity & Commercial Centers**

Redevelopment of the downtown core and several small commercial areas has been a top priority for the City since the 1980s. Decatur is well-situated near a variety of regional attractions, but remains a small city without direct access to interstate highways or other high-volume regional routes.

The City's primary commercial destinations are the downtown core, which features a mix of small retail and restaurant spaces, the Oakhurst business district, and the East Decatur Station development.

The City is adjacent to Emory University and the city of Avondale Estates as well as a close drive to the City of Atlanta and Stone Mountain. (See Map 2-1 for local activity centers and connections to regional centers.)

### **Schools & Greenspaces**

The Decatur City Schools system consist of an early childhood learning center, three neighborhood elementary schools, a citywide academy for fourth and fifth graders, a middle school, and a high school. Elementary schools in the city include Winnona Park, Oakhurst, and Clairemont schools. Fourth and fifth graders within the school system attend Glennwood Academy. The school system also includes Renfro Middle School and Decatur High School.

For a small city, Decatur has a large amount of greenspace. Within the City of Decatur, there are 14 city-owned parks equaling 56.5 acres. The parks range in size from less than half an acre up to 17 acres and offer such amenities as tennis and basketball courts, swimming pools, picnic pavilions, playgrounds, skateboard facilities, softball and soccer fields, and nature/walking trails. Efforts to expand and link City parks via an off-street natural trail have been made under the direction of the Preservation Corridor Master Plan in 2005. The new off-street path will be called the Decatur Greenway.

## Natural Characteristics

Natural characteristics are one of the defining aspects of any city location. Topography and climate have shaped the nature of human cultures and settlements for eons and were once the determining factors of human-powered transportation. As the City of Decatur seeks to promote active living with bicycling and walking, it is important to consider the natural features of the City in determining location and design of facilities.



### ***Topography and Terrain***

Decatur is located in the Piedmont region of north central Georgia, the plateau north of the coastal plain and south of the Appalachian Mountains. The region averages 700-1000 feet above sea level with rolling hills and numerous streams and rivers.

The City of Decatur is located at what originally was intersection of several Native American trails. These trails connected the northern mountains and Chattahoochee River basin to the coastal plains to the south. The Atlanta region is defined by a flat topography due east of the Chattahoochee River which offered ridges leading eastward and southward for convenient rail access around the Appalachian Mountains. The prominent east-west ridge forms the Eastern Continental Divide, separating the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico watersheds.

Terrain within the City follows two prominent ridges, the east-west divide and another north-south ridge along Clairemont Avenue. The prominent streets within the city, including Clairemont Ave, Ponce de Leon Ave, Howard Ave, College Ave, S. Candler Rd, and S. McDonough Rd, all radiate outwards from the downtown square along high ridges which minimize elevation changes and avoid low-lying streams and wetland areas. The square itself is located on one of the highest points in Dekalb County. Map 2-2 shows the topography of the city.

Residential neighborhoods are found in the lower areas between the prominent ridges. These areas feature large shade trees, historic houses, and small creeks that make the city appealing for many residents. For walking and cycling, the prominent streets are more direct and are relatively flat, while neighborhood streets often feature greater elevation changes, natural areas and low traffic volume roads.

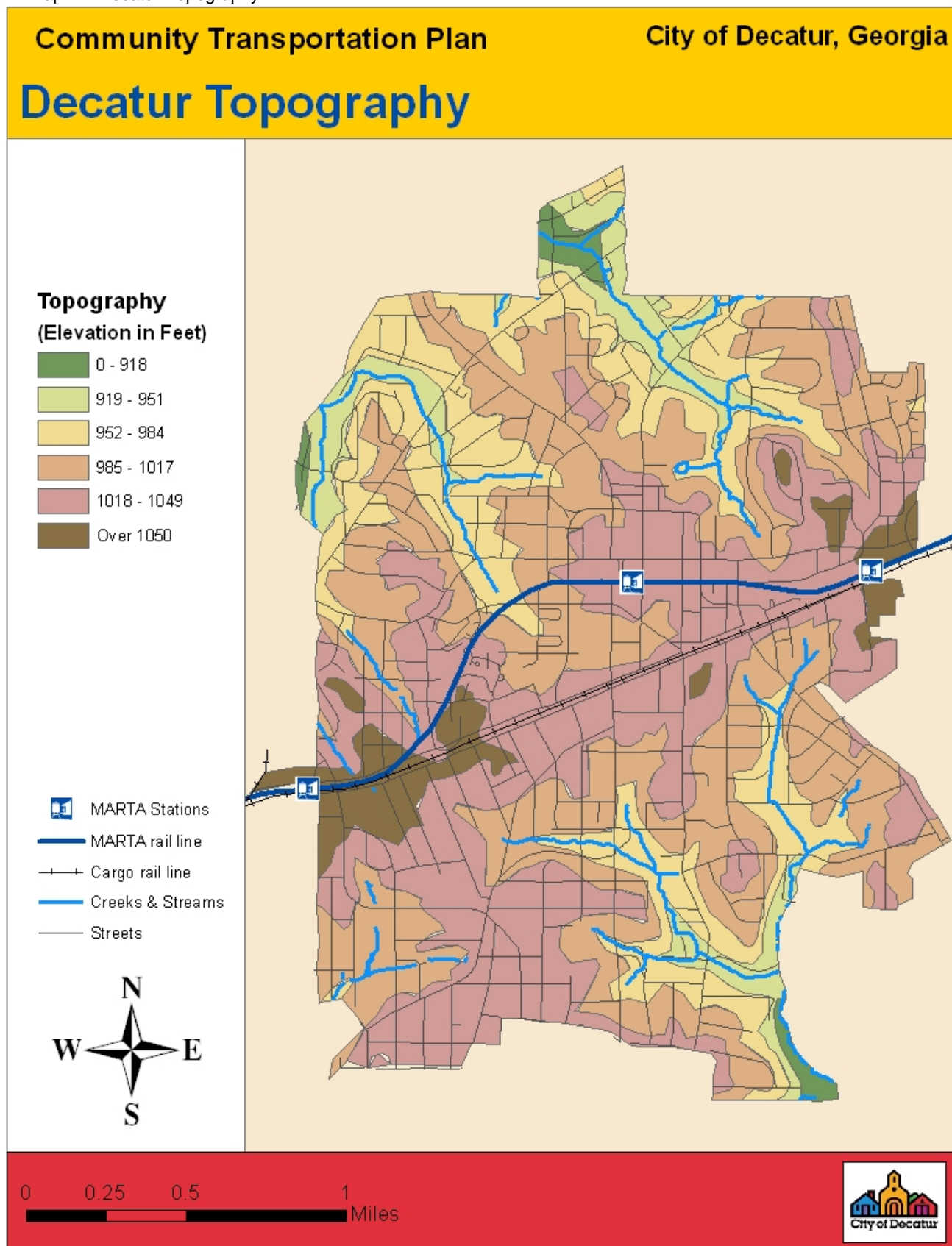
### **Climate and Environmental Conditions**

The southeastern region of the United States is well known for mild winters and hot, humid summers. The region averages 34-52 degrees Fahrenheit during January and 71-89 degrees during July. Average annual precipitation is 50.2 inches and significant snow accumulation is a rare occasion, usually only a day or two a year.

Like topography, climate and weather have an impact on the feasibility of human-powered transportation. Rain, cold, heat, and darkness all potentially limit the safety and comfort of walking or bicycle travel. However many of the cities across the United States with the largest numbers of regular bicycle commuters are located in the northern regions of the country. Portland Oregon, Seattle Washington, Chicago Illinois, and New York City all have large numbers of regular bicycle commuters and pedestrians who must face colder and wetter conditions than the southeast experiences. Decatur's climate and environmental conditions are compatible with walking and bicycling as means of travel.



Map 2-2 Decatur Topography



## History of Transportation Planning

The City of Decatur has a long and effective history of public planning initiatives. As early as 1925, City ordinances were approved which enacted limited zoning restrictions. Comprehensive development plans of 1958 and 1972 describe the City's early efforts to manage growth.

Accompanying these efforts are special plans related to development of the MARTA transit system, revitalization of downtown Decatur and the Oakhurst business district, neighborhood traffic control, rehabilitation of parks and recreational facilities and similar studies. The Town Center Plan has served as the vision for the central business district since its adoption in 1982.

The City has always taken a long and comprehensive view with transportation being part and parcel of all of its planning efforts. The following details those plans with specific transportation mention or focus.

### **Decatur Bikeway Plan, 1972**

Specifically regarding alternative transportation, the city completed the Decatur Bikeway Plan in 1972. The plan sought to provide safe, convenient, and pleasant bicycle travel throughout the city. Instigated during a major “bike boom” which happened throughout the United States during the early 1970's, the plan recognized increased public interest in bicycle riding as a form of transportation. Accessibility, safety, and healthy exercise were major focuses of the document.

The 1972 plan focused on providing “necessary facilities and services” for bicycle travel. The plan outlined seven neighborhood loops with connections between the loops to create a 70.3 mile system within the city. The bikeway routes were designed to minimize riding on routes with reported traffic accidents and high traffic volumes, and also sought to maximize connections to parks, schools, and scenic areas.

The bikeways plan further provided for support facilities including covered picnic shelters, parking racks, improvements to narrow bridges, a bicycle ramp in the Agnes Scott pedestrian tunnel, and replacing dangerous sewer grates. Educational initiatives included a bicycle registration program with the city police department as well as bicycle safety education for the general public and police officers.

Many of the issues addressed in the 1972 plan are still relevant and need to be reconsidered for the current interest in active living and promoting bicycle planning.

### **Transportation Plan, 1977**

The City's Department of Community Design and Development followed up on the 1972 efforts with a comprehensive transportation plan in 1977. The plan, prepared by Traffic Planning Associates, Inc., was developed as a complement to the City's economic development strategies.

The 1977 plan addressed transportation, such as streets, pedestrian ways, and rapid transit, as well as the associated factors of economic development and land use. The plan laid out a set of goals and objectives that remain important factors in the current CTP:



Provide for the safe and free flow of people and goods to and between all major sections of the community;

To minimize the cost of transportation facilities;

To encourage energy and pollutant reduction methods;

To use transportation facilities to support and encourage development in appropriate areas of the City.

To advance these goals, the 1977 plan sought to provide adequate major thoroughfares, eliminate major traffic in residential areas, elimination of parking on major thoroughfares, and utilizing MARTA, bicycles, and pedestrian facilities “where appropriate.”

The 1977 plan addresses many of the same concerns that Decatur is facing 30 years later. This demonstrates the City’s longstanding commitment to providing quality transportation system for its residents, and also the challenges to implementing and maintaining it.

### **Town Center Plan, 1982**

One of the City’s most successful guiding documents, the 1982 Town Center Plan, realized the need to capture the historic and small-scale feel of the City. The plan lays out goals for confining the size of the downtown core, providing access to transit opportunities, limiting the scale of new developments, and making downtown Decatur a delightful and safe place for pedestrians night and day. Some of the City’s strongest statements in the plan involve the creation of a vibrant pedestrian environment.

### **Streetscaping Master Plan, 1995**

The Town Center Plan started a downtown boom with the establishment of new retail and restaurants. With the announcement of the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, Decatur set out to improve the downtown sidewalks and streetscaping in anticipation of visitors from around the world.

Through the Streetscaping Master Plan the city has built over 6,000 linear feet of streetscape improvements and planted over 300 street trees. Funding for this program has surpassed \$3 million with funds from the federal government, the Georgia Urban Forestry Commission, and private sector investment. Private investment has largely been driven through zoning codes for new developments.

### **City of Decatur Strategic Plan, 2000**

The City reevaluated the importance of mobility and accessibility within the city during the 2000 city strategic planning process. The plan outlined a range of economic, development and transportation goals.



The strategic plan recognized that walking and bicycling can play an important role in reducing the number of automobile miles traveled and that both can become important modes of travel within Decatur. The plan also recognized that new projects should address a wide range of ages and experience levels for all cyclists. Projects listed in the strategic plan include encouraging bicycle and pedestrian accommodations to MARTA stations, improving bicycle paths through the city, improving linkages to greenspaces, and other bicycle and pedestrian improvements.

### **Avondale LCI Master Plan, 2002**

Jurisdictions across the metro Atlanta region have continually wrestled with improving access to MARTA rail stations. The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) has embarked on a program to help increase higher-density land uses around MARTA stations to promote development while improving transit access and ridership. The ARC's Livable Centers Initiative (LCI) helps promote appropriate land use and development in conjunction with MARTA rail stations.

With three rail stations within the city limits, the City of Decatur is well positioned to participate in the LCI program. The Decatur rail station has been a LCI success story with a variety of retail, restaurant, and office buildings surrounding the downtown station. In 2002, the ARC awarded Decatur a second LCI grant to produce a master plan for redeveloping the lots surrounding the Avondale rail station.

The Avondale LCI plan is designed to provide recommendations over a 5-year period. The recommendations include local actions and housing strategy; transportation recommendations; land use and urban design guidelines; and economic development recommendations. The final LCI project will help revitalize the properties around the Avondale station and improve access to the station by both pedestrians and cyclists.

### **Preservation Corridor Plan, 2005**

In 2005, Decatur commissioned a study to link the city's natural and historic resources with a pedestrian-oriented trail or path. The original plan was to improve north-south connectivity and link the Woodlands, the Decatur Cemetery, the Oakhurst Community Garden, and Dearborn Park. With more interest from residents, the plan was expanded to create a network connecting greenspaces throughout the city. The final Greenspace Preservation Corridor Plan (also known as the Decatur Greenway), adopted in 2005, included a series of paths, bicycle lanes, and streetscaping improvements designed to encourage increased walking and bicycling travel within the city.

### **Comprehensive Plan Update, 2005**

The City embarked on an update of the State-mandated Comprehensive Plan in 2005. The plan updated information on demographic data, existing conditions, land use, housing, economic development, and a wide range of other City concerns. The plan update included a section on transportation which outlined eight goals for transportation planning, including: increased transit use, transit supportive development, bicycle and pedestrian facilities, innovative parking options, connectivity between neighborhoods, and intersection and corridor improvements.

### Interim Master Bicycle Plan, 2005

The city initiated a bicycle plan in 2005 which outlined a range of design and educational initiatives to promote cycling in the city. The Interim Bicycle Master Plan incorporated existing conditions, a policy framework, bicycle planning in the city and surrounding areas, and a survey of local citizens and cyclists. The plan laid out goals, facility typology and design, and other considerations regarding safe and comfortable cycling in the city.

### Safe Routes to School, 2005-2006

The Decatur city school system, in conjunction with the Atlanta Bicycling Campaign, recently completed a one-year demonstration program of implementing a Safe Routes to School project. The project focused on promoting bicycling and walking amongst school aged children and parents, as well as identifying existing barriers for children traveling to school.

The project surveyed parents of children traveling to the pilot school locations, Glennwood Academy and Clairemont Elementary. The most commonly used routes for walking and bicycling were identified, as well as routes which would be beneficial for children to use if specific improvements were made to existing infrastructure or enforcement.

The Metropolitan Safe Routes to School Demonstration Project was presented to the Georgia Department of Transportation for review in December 2006. The project presents specific goals and recommendations which can be adopted separately by the City of Decatur. The specific recommendations are included in the Appendix section of this plan.



## Conclusion

As this chapter presents, the City of Decatur is a dense, compact city with a rich history and diversity of population and destinations. Both topography and climate make it an excellent location for outside physical activity. The City also benefits from a significant amount of planning, representing the City's constant efforts to create and maintain a high quality of life.