

INTRODUCTION

History of Decatur

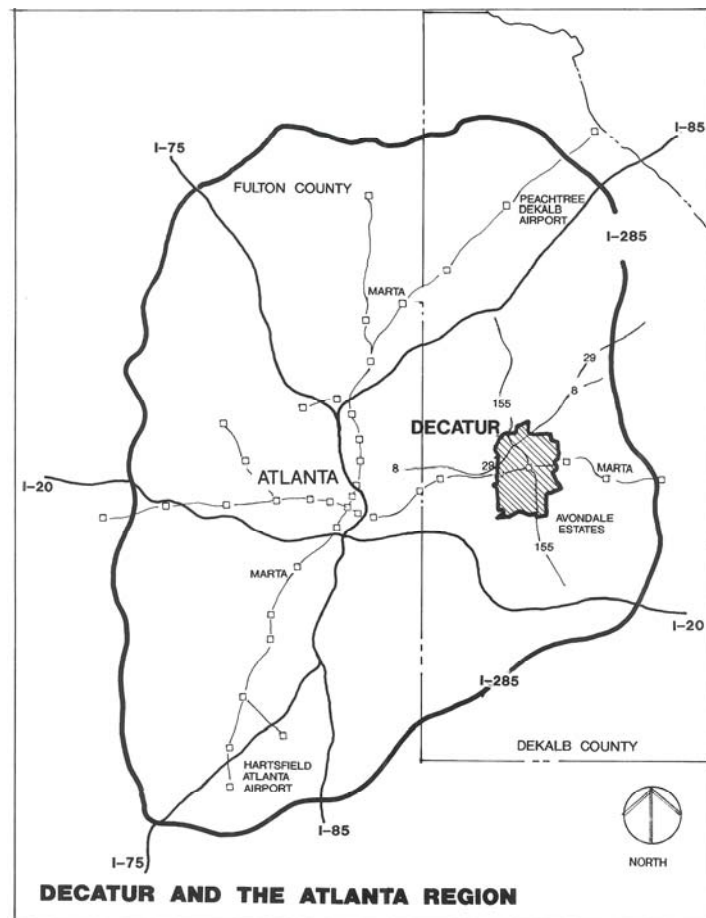
The City of Decatur is located in the central portion of the Atlanta Region, six miles from the City of Atlanta's central business core. It was incorporated in 1823, as the county seat of a newly formed DeKalb County. It is the second oldest municipality in metropolitan Atlanta and was named for Stephen Decatur, the popular American naval hero of the early 1800's.

Map 1.1 – Decatur and the Atlanta Region

The construction of the Georgia Railroad in 1845 played a strong role in the development of the City. Anecdotaly, it is said that residents rejected a proposal by the Western and Atlantic Railroad to make Decatur a major stop on its new line because citizens did not want the noise, smoke, dirt, and confusion. The railroad thus moved seven miles west to a small settlement named Terminus, which became Marthasville, and then Atlanta.

Decatur was content to remain a small courthouse town. In contrast with its larger neighbor to the west, Decatur's population had only grown to 1,418 by 1900, its first 77 years of existence. The City's greatest growth occurred during the period between 1900 and 1940, when the city limits were extended and the population grew eleven-fold to 16,561. Over the next five decades, Decatur's population reached a high of 22,026 in 1960, remained stable at 21,943 in 1970, and then slowly declined to 17,336 in 1990. The decade ending in 2000 showed the first net gain of population since 1960, with the City having a population of 18,147. Net population growth during the last 55 years has been less than 1,000 persons.

Presently, the City of Decatur covers 4.2 square miles or about 2,700 acres. Its historic pattern of development began with a small town center for government and commerce that has gradually been surrounded by residential



neighborhoods. Heavy rail public transit facilities (MARTA) were added in the 1970's. In more recent years, the downtown area has evolved into a vibrant, family-oriented entertainment and commercial district with a high-density residential component.

Widely known as the "City of Homes, Schools and Places of Worship," as graphically depicted in the City's colorful logo, Decatur's best-known features are its historic single-family neighborhoods, thriving town center, and exceptional neighborhood-based school system. It has been the goal of the City Commission throughout Decatur's history of planning to retain the character and integrity of these resources, while encouraging managed growth.

History of Planning in Decatur

As early as 1925, City ordinances were approved which enacted limited zoning restrictions. Decatur's first general zoning plan was established in April 1937. 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.

In 1988, the City Commission approved a recommendation by the Decatur Planning Commission to adopt a comprehensive land use and zoning plan. This plan zoned most properties in the City to reflect their current use, encouraging preservation of City's established neighborhoods and revitalization of its commercial districts.

In 1990, minimum planning standards and procedures for the development of comprehensive plans were established by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs and ratified by the General Assembly. The City created its first Comprehensive Plan in 1995 according to those standards and procedures.

Since the development of the 1995 Comprehensive Plan, the City has embarked on several important planning efforts including the Decatur Preservation Corridor Master Plan, the Storm Water Master Plan, Athletic Facility Master Plan, Avondale MARTA Livable Centers Initiative, and the Downtown Decatur MARTA Plaza Redevelopment Plan. The most profound and extensive effort was the 2000 Decatur Strategic Plan. The vision and policies for Decatur's growth and continued vitality set forth in the Strategic Plan have created a foundation for the community vision and goals section of this comprehensive plan.

The State of Georgia mandates that comprehensive plans must be updated every ten years in order for a local jurisdiction to retain its local qualified government status (QLG). This status allows the City to collect state and federal assistance funds. In January 2004, the Georgia Department of Community Affairs adopted a revised set of minimum standards for the development of the local comprehensive plan. In this same year, the City began the ten-year update

of the 1995 plan. The City of Decatur Comprehensive Plan Update 2005 has been prepared according to these revised standards and procedures.

Decatur Comprehensive Plan Update 2005 Overview

At its heart, the Decatur Comprehensive Plan Update 2005 is a long-range planning document guiding the growth and development of the City for the next twenty years. To the City's staff and elected officials, it provides a framework for decision and policy making. To the citizens of Decatur, it symbolizes a unified vision. For the City as a whole, it is a blueprint for success.

The preparation of a comprehensive plan requires a great deal of data collection to provide an inventory of current conditions. This inventory forms a basis of analysis that assesses how well these conditions meet the need of citizens now and in the future. To complement the technical track associated with the inventory and assessment portions of the comprehensive planning process, a public involvement program was designed to solicit input. An annotated outline of the City of Decatur Comprehensive Plan Update 2005 is included below. Details of the public input program are included under separate heading in subsequent pages.

The plan consists of ten chapters, each addressing a specific element of the plan:

- **Introduction** – This chapter provides a history of Decatur, an overview of the Comprehensive Plan and details of the Community Vision.
- **Population** – This element identifies and examines trends in population growth and in the demographic characteristics of the City.
- **Economic Development** – In this chapter, the economic base, labor force characteristics and local economic development opportunities and resources are inventoried and assessed.
- **Housing** – The inventory in this element details the existing housing stock and its condition, occupancy and affordability characteristics. An assessment follows that analyzes the City's ability to serve current and future populations.
- **Natural and Cultural Resources** – Natural and environmentally sensitive, and historic and cultural resources are included in this element. The element also includes an assessment of whether current protection measures for these resources are adequate.
- **Community Facilities** – In this element, public facilities and services are inventoried and their adequacy for serving present and future needs is assessed.
- **Intergovernmental Coordination** – This element examines the mechanisms and processes Decatur shares with other local governments and the City's level of satisfaction with each.

- **Land Use** – The land use element examines existing land use patterns and trends and includes a Future Land Use map and narrative designed to guide future patterns of growth.
- **Transportation** – This element inventories aspects of the transportation network in Decatur and provides an assessment on how well the system meets current and future needs.
- **Implementation** – This chapter includes the “2005-2009 Short Term Work Program” detailing the projects the City will undertake over the next five years to carry out the vision and goals of this plan. Also included is a status report, “The Report of Accomplishments,” for the previous 5-year “2000-2004 Short-Term Work Program.”

In addition to the inventory and assessment portions of each element, the Community Vision and specific goals relevant to each element are included in each chapter.

Public Involvement Plan

The basic strategy of the Comprehensive Plan Update's public involvement process was to involve elected and appointed leaders, City staff, community stakeholders, residents, and business leaders of Decatur in the comprehensive planning process. The plan called for two types of involvement: regular meetings of a Steering Committee, including a Joint Commission Session of resident boards and commissions, and a series of public meetings designed to elicit feedback from the general public.

Steering Committee: City and project staff considered several options for the development of a Steering Committee, and determined that the City's Planning Commission would be the appropriate group to help guide the project process. The Planning Commission, established by local ordinance, meets monthly to conduct public hearings on land use and zoning changes, proposed subdivisions of property and proposed planned unit developments, and to recommend actions for consideration by the City Commissioners. It also reviews and recommends changes in zoning regulations and future land-use plans.

Project Team staff met with the Planning Commission five times during the development of the draft Decatur Comprehensive Plan Update 2005. Meeting dates and the general presentation items are described below:

- **January 6, 2005:** Present project overview.
- **March 10, 2005:** Present update on plan, results of public meeting and comments received to date.
- **April 7, 2005:** Present March 28 Joint Planning Commission and Planning Forum results and other comments received to date.
- **May 5, 2005:** Present draft Comprehensive Plan.

- **June 9, 2005:** Present findings of May 31, 2005 public hearing and receive final comments on draft Comprehensive Plan.

Joint Commission Session: In addition to feedback from the formal Steering Committee, the project team also desired meaningful input from various other appointed commissions and elected officials. To facilitate a concise and efficient means of gathering insight from a number of different groups, the Project Team held a Joint Commission Work Session. Members of the following groups participated: Decatur City Commission, Greenspace Commission, Planning Commission, Historic Preservation Commission, Downtown Development Authority, Decatur Housing Authority, Zoning Board of Appeals, Waste Management Advisory Board, and the Board of Education. The joint session was a landmark opportunity, the first in City history, bringing together different perspectives from Decatur's various resident commissions and boards to work collaboratively on planning for the future.

Meeting participants were divided into four groups, dispersing members of the various commissions as equally as possible. Following a short presentation on the current conditions in Decatur, participants were asked to participate in a facilitated session where they responded to the question, "As we look towards the next 20 years, what areas or issues does Decatur need to focus on to remain on top?". Through a consensus-building process, the top five issues were selected from each group. Process results closely mirrored the comments heard from the general public, and are included in the Community Vision and Goals section.

Public Meetings: The Project Team also worked actively to inform, involve, and elicit input from the general public on the comprehensive plan update. In that regard, the project team held three public meetings: a kick-off meeting, a planning forum highlighting recent past planning efforts, and a public hearing for the Comprehensive Plan update. Additionally, the City web site was updated regularly with project information and an e-mail box was set up to receive comments from the public throughout the project process. Details of these efforts are outlined below:

- **January 26, 2005 – Comprehensive Plan Update Kick-Off Meeting:**

This meeting served to kick off the Comprehensive Plan Update and included a brief presentation on the Comprehensive Plan requirements, elements and schedule. It also included an overview of Decatur with specific emphasis on trends in population, development, transportation, and historic & natural resources. Following the presentation, the meeting was opened to the public for comments and questions.

This meeting, held at the Maud Burrus-Decatur Library on Sycamore Street, was advertised by various methods, including flyers distributed through the school system, a front page article in the Decatur Focus, e-

mails to the Decatur Neighborhood Alliance – an umbrella organization for 40 neighborhood groups - and a legal advertisement run in The Champion, DeKalb County's legal organ, on January 6th and 13th.

Fifty-four people attended the meeting, 30 oral comments were made, with 10 written and 4 e-mailed comments received.

- **March 28, 2005 – Planning Forum:** The Planning Forum presented an opportunity for the public to review planning projects that led up to the Comprehensive Plan update. The City's significant planning projects included the Storm Water Master Plan, Preservation Corridor Master Plan, 2000 Strategic Plan and others. City and consultant staff were on hand to answer questions and take comments. The purpose of the open house format was to allow the public to familiarize themselves with City planning initiatives and policies and speak one on one about their concerns.

In addition, there were several avenues available during the Forum for the public to express comments on the Comprehensive Plan Update. The Decatur 2005 Existing Land Use map was prepared and presented at the meeting. Participants were invited to post comments concerning any community planning issue or concern. The vision, principles and goals adopted through the 2000 Decatur Strategic Plan process were also used as the basis for an interactive visioning exercise. The statements were presented on a 4' x 8' banner. Participants were asked to comment on how valid and applicable the 2000 vision and goals were to the 2005 comprehensive planning process by posting their comments and additional goals directly on the banner. A comment card was also provided.

This meeting, held in the Decatur Recreation Center on Sycamore Street, was advertised by various methods, including: flyers posted throughout Decatur, an article in the Decatur Focus distributed to 10,000 residents and businesses, the City's website, and e-mails to various groups and the project mailing list.

Forty-five people attended the planning forum, with 13 participating in the land-use exercise and 28 participating in the visioning exercise. Three written comments were received and seven people submitted e-mail comments.

- **May 31, 2005 – Public Hearing:** The public hearing presented an opportunity for the public to review and comment on the Draft Update Plan. The plan itself was summarized in a PowerPoint presentation with special attention to the Community Vision and Goals section. Following the presentation, attendees were invited to ask questions and make

comments. The comments received were incorporated into the preparation of the final draft of the Comprehensive Plan Update.

The meeting was held at the Maud Burrus-Decatur Library on Sycamore Street and was advertised by various methods, including citywide flyer distribution, e-mails to neighborhood associations and the project mailing list, and a legal advertisement run in *The Champion*, DeKalb County's legal organ, on May 12th and May 19th.

Twelve people attended the meeting. Approximately twelve oral questions and comments were voiced at the meeting and two written comments were received.

Summaries of the public meetings, copies of advertising materials, and submitted written comments are located in the Appendix section of this document.

Decatur's Vision for the Future

The Decatur Comprehensive Plan Update 2005's "Community Vision for the Future" builds upon the existing vision and principles statements adopted by the City through the development of its 2000 Strategic Plan. In accordance with the Georgia DCA's standards, it is also based on additional public input, the inventory and assessment portions of this plan, and consideration of the regional and state planning goals as expressed through the Georgia DCA's Quality Community Objectives.

The City chose to utilize the efforts of the 2000 Strategic Plan as a basis for the Community Vision for several reasons. Primarily, the process by which the Strategic Plan was developed closely mirrored the comprehensive planning process, utilizing much of the same research and analysis of Decatur's physical, economic and social aspects. Secondly, the public involvement process was extensive and broad reaching, encompassing an inclusive collaboration of residents, governments, business and institutional leaders. Finally, many of the projects listed within the Strategic Plan to support the stated vision and goals have already been put in place. For these reasons, the City remains committed to the vision and goals set forth by the plan.

The process by which the Strategic Plan Goals and Principles were incorporated into the Decatur Comprehensive Plan Update 2005 included a two-part validation process. First, the data used to formulate the goals was compared with recently available data to ensure that it still reflected an accurate picture of Decatur in 2005. Secondly, a "check in" with the public at the March 28th Planning Forum was held to make sure the goals were still applicable and to receive input on additions of any new issues or concerns.

The validation process revealed two conclusions: 1) the conditions in Decatur had not changed considerably since the 2000 Strategic Plan; and 2) the public was still very much committed to the goals adopted by the plan. Based upon these findings, it was concluded that the Strategic Plan's vision and goals were valid and could be utilized for the Comprehensive Plan Update.

Once validated, the vision and goals were compared to the inventory and assessment portions of this plan and also the State's planning objectives to ensure consistency. A discussion of the how the vision addresses the objectives follows this section. Input from the public was added appropriately. The following outlines the resulting City of Decatur's Community Vision for the Future.

VISION

The City of Decatur will assure a high quality of life for ALL of its residents, businesses & visitors, both today and in the future.

The principles and goals identified by the community to support this vision are:

Principle A: Manage Growth While Retaining Character – Accommodate commercial and residential growth while retaining a small town character within an urban environment.

Goals:

- Retain and enhance the existing character of commercial districts.
- Encourage a diversity of business types with particular focus on local businesses.
- Protect existing neighborhoods while identifying the potential for selected growth and adopting standards to guide future growth.
- Develop residential design guidelines to ensure the compatibility of infill and redevelopment with existing resources.

Principle B: Encourage Community Interaction – Determine methods to maximize communication and connections between residents, businesses, institutions and government.

Goals:

- Maintain and encourage racial, ethnic, economic, cultural and other types of diversity.
- Reinforce neighborhoods and develop connections between neighborhoods.
- Strengthen communication and connections throughout the community.

Principle C: Provide Quality Services Within Fiscal Limits – Provide housing, transportation, environmental quality and public services to Decatur's residents and workers.

Goals:

- Increase opportunities for economically diverse housing for persons who live or work in Decatur.
- Enhance vehicular and non-vehicular mobility in and throughout Decatur.
- Continue the commitment to environmental quality, especially the preservation of green space and storm water management.
- Continue to provide quality City and education services within fiscal limits acceptable to the community.

This Community Vision and associated goals will be met through current and envisioned City initiatives. These initiatives demonstrate the City's strong commitment to:

- Affordable and life-cycle housing options
- High-density residential and mixed-use developments in central business core
- Promotion of transit oriented development around MARTA stations
- Marketing strategies to encourage and support local and diverse businesses
- Preservation and enhancement of existing green space and historic resources through the 2004 Preservation Corridor Plan
- Maintenance and creation of bike and pedestrian pathways
- Implementation of the 2005 Storm Water Master Plan
- Continued coordination with City Schools of Decatur, DeKalb County and regional and state agencies

More detail on these initiatives along with additional strategies and more specific goals identified through the public involvement process and Joint Commission Session are included under each of the related elements.

Quality Community Objectives

As part of the Community Vision and Comprehensive Plan development process, the DCA's Quality Community Objectives must be incorporated and reflected. The following objectives are supported by this Decatur Community Vision and 2005-2025 Comprehensive Plan document.

Economic Development Objectives

Decatur has achieved a successful downtown central business core of government, office, service and professional, specialty retail and restaurant related businesses, as well as a high-density residential community. The City will continue to support these types of opportunities while exploring other avenues of appropriate growth. Decatur has a strong history of growth preparedness and proactive planning, specifically identifying those areas to be protected and those suitable for redevelopment. The City coordinates closely with DeKalb County,

MARTA, and City Schools of Decatur to ensure infrastructure is in place to support its growth goals. Decatur will continue to work with its business associations and the County to offer professional development and training opportunities to support the needs of employees.

Natural and Cultural Resources Objectives

The City of Decatur has considerable natural and historic resources and is committed to protection of its open spaces and significant historic resources through its Greenspace and Historic Preservation Commissions. The City is also committed to protecting air quality and its environmentally sensitive areas. Non-vehicular methods of transportation will be encouraged wherever possible.

Community Facilities and Services Objectives

Decatur is committed to providing quality and fiscally practical services to maintain a high quality of life standard for its citizens. Decatur will continue to work with adjacent and regional governmental bodies to formulate creative solutions to service delivery to increase efficiency and reduce taxpayer costs. Wherever possible, the City will seek to provide and improve pedestrian and bicycle facilities and encourage transit services as an alternative to automobiles.

Housing Objectives

The City of Decatur is dedicated to providing a diverse range of housing types. Of primary interest is the creation of workforce housing to allow people that work in the city to also live in the city. The City is committed to providing lifecycle housing for individuals of all ages and families of all sizes.

Land Use Objectives

As the City nears 100% build-out, land use policies focus on the encouragement of redevelopment and infill. Through the City's redevelopment efforts, the City supports mixed-use development in its central business core and commercial nodes along College Avenue. The City will focus on creating design guidelines to support appropriate single-family residential infill in its existing neighborhoods. The City has a strong presence in the Atlanta Region and is well known for its successful downtown retail and entertainment district. The City is committed to preserving this urban village sense of place.