

# The Atlanta Metropolitan Region



## The Region

The Atlanta Metropolitan Statistical Area is a 10-county, high-growth region. The population in metropolitan Atlanta increased by 46 percent over the last decade, from 2.8 million people in 1990 to 4.1 million in 2000. The rate of job growth in metro Atlanta between 1992 and 2001 was double the average among U.S. metro areas as a whole. The region's growth in wages and salary grew by 106.9% during this time, almost twice the US metro average of 68.2%.

Atlanta has become a global center for both telecommunications and media. The Progressive Policy Institute's New Economy Index ranks metro Atlanta 11 out of the top 50 metro regions in the U.S., with high marks in the number of new business start-ups, gazelle companies and digital connectedness in the region. The region ranks third in the nation for Internet backbone. It is also a major southeast United States hub for the transportation of both people and products as evidenced by the status of UPS and Delta Airlines as major employers. Other Fortune 500 companies headquartered in the region are Coca Cola, Home Depot, Cox Communications, Bell South and SunTrust Banks.

Metro Atlanta's high growth rate also has led to strains in the region's infrastructure. Land is being consumed at a greater rate than population growth, and the region is projected to grow by 2.5 million people over the next 25 years. Transportation systems have struggled to keep up with the region's growth. The quality of air and quantity of water are looming issues, as well as strained race relations and growing economic disparities between the city and suburbs. There are a number of regional business-led civic organizations in metro Atlanta tackling these and other issues critical to the region's economic future.

## The Business-Led Organizations

The Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce is the largest and most influential of the region's business-led regional civic organizations. The Chamber has 4,000 members representing the region's largest employers. Its 90-member Board of Directors is made up of "first tier" CEOs that include Coca-Cola, Delta Airlines, Georgia-Pacific and Wachovia Bank. The Chamber's size and power make it a major player in the region, and its leadership takes action on key issues that affect the region's competitiveness. Within the last few years, the Metro Atlanta Chamber has taken strong stances on transportation, air quality and water resources, K-12 education and land use/growth issues.

The Atlanta region is home to more than 20 other business-led organizations, many of them county-wide chambers of commerce and downtown Atlanta business organizations. One example is the Atlanta Regional Business Coalition, a coalition of 16 chambers

encompassing 13 counties and representing 25,000 total members. Its members include the Metro Atlanta Chamber, Central Atlanta Progress, and chambers representing Cobb and Winnet counties. The Atlanta Regional Business Coalition's regional priorities — transportation and water and land use — coincide with some of the priorities of the Metro Atlanta Chamber.

Atlanta also has a number of business-led organizations based directly in the city. The longest established of these is the downtown district's Central Atlanta Progress, a prominent CEO-led organization with a long history of involvement. Central Atlanta Progress has a 56-member Board of Directors of downtown Atlanta's top business leaders. The group has changed significantly over the years. Fifteen years ago it was a small catalyst for action that spun off many other organizations, such as the Midtown Alliance (see next paragraph for more on the Alliance). But the core function of Central Atlanta Progress changed when state legislation created Community Improvement Districts in the City of Atlanta. Central Atlanta Progress now manages the Community Improvement District in downtown Atlanta. This private tax assessment district gives Central Atlanta Progress a steady income source (almost \$4.5 million in 2002-2003) and provides direct services to downtown Atlanta. The organization's priorities now include marketing the central city, serving the homeless and major capital investments projects.

The Midtown Alliance was created out of Central Atlanta Progress to address neglect and distress in the city's Midtown section. The Midtown Alliance, which like Central Atlanta Progress is a CEO-led organization, manages Midtown's Community Improvement District. City leaders credit the Midtown Alliance with leading a strong rebirth of this district, which is just north of Downtown. In the last five years residential growth has risen by 250 percent in Midtown and new office space has grown by 60 percent. The Midtown Alliance's priorities include land-use planning, transportation, air quality and workforce housing.

### **The Regional Business-Civic Landscape**

The Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce has become an important catalyst for change on regional civic issues. It has a powerful CEO-led Board of Directors, strong President and effective committee structure to study and follow through on issues. In the last five years, the Chamber's leadership on regional issues has become more decisive. The Chamber forced change in the management and oversight of regional transportation planning, led the charge to restructure the city of Atlanta's School Board and pushed for the creation of the region's first regional water district.

The Atlanta Regional Business Coalition often plays a complimentary role with the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. The two often work on similar issues or in partnership. The Regional Business Coalition tends to represent more suburban interests, and its core members are smaller to mid-size employers from the region's suburban counties. The Metro Chamber's membership, in contrast, includes more of the region's largest employers, from the City of Atlanta and the wider region.

In the end, the similarities of the two organizations are more prominent than the differences. The Regional Business Coalition's three regional priorities — transportation, water, and land use — coincide with the priorities of the Metro Atlanta Chamber.

“Ninety percent of the Regional Business Coalition and Chamber's roles are collaborative,” says Eric Meyer, Executive Director of the Coalition. “The Chamber and the Regional Business Coalition are on the same page and working together. We share the same goals of regional transportation, water and land use.”

An example of these shared goals is the Clean Water Initiative, which created a 16-county water planning district called the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District. The Initiative was co-sponsored by the Regional Business Coalition and the Metro Atlanta Chamber.

The Regional Business Coalition and Chamber also are collaborating on each other's land-use and quality-growth initiatives. The Chamber is using in its quality-growth initiative an audit done by the Regional Business Coalition that reviewed 26 local government zoning codes and development practices in the region. The Regional Business Coalition's audit documented the need to address high-density development and affordable housing on a regional basis. The Chamber's new Quality Growth Task Force adopted these principles and integrated them into its research and education efforts.

### **Business Leadership**

The business community in the Atlanta region is paying more attention to regional issues than it used to. Two regional crises caused this change. The first was the region's failure to reach standards set by the U.S. Clean Air Act. Four environmental groups seized on the lack of Clean Air Act compliance and filed a lawsuit. The lawsuit blocked the use of federal money for new highway projects in the 13-county metro area until the region improved its regional transportation planning.

The second crisis was the growing threat to the quality and availability of the region's water supply. Atlanta, unlike many other metropolitan areas, is not located on a major body of water, so its growth has placed a particular strain on an already limited water supply.

Regional planning organizations and government in the Atlanta region had always wanted to keep the business community at arms length on regional issues such as these. “It was simply easier that way,” says Sam Williams, President and CEO of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. But in the late 1990s and early 2000, these crises galvanized the business community. The region's business leaders led an effort to respond to the Clear Air lawsuit and pushed for the creation of the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority, a new regional transportation planning body. Responding to the region's dwindling water resources, a group of 10 CEOs took action and their efforts led to the creation of a 16-county water planning district, the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District. The District is creating the region's first

long-term plans for water supply, wastewater and storm water. The lawsuit by the environmental groups was eventually settled and some of the highway projects were allowed to go forward.

The actions of these CEOs emboldened the region's business-civic leaders. For the first time, the business community became empowered on regional issues. They saw the need to lead these issues and use their influence to assemble people and take actions. In the past, the region's CEOs had passively trusted that regional civic issues would take care of themselves, but today's CEOs have become more activists.