

**ICMA**

## **Healthy Communities**



## **Healthy Decatur: A Holistic Approach to Sustainability**

*Leaders at the Core of Better Communities*

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# Healthy Decatur: A Holistic Approach to Sustainability

The city of Decatur, Georgia, has emerged as a national leader in promoting active living as an essential building block of a sustainable community. After more than a quarter century of policy making and of programs designed to strengthen community connections and revitalize its downtown, the city has become a place where people enjoy getting around on foot, whether they're going to work, shopping, or attending a special event in the square. It's a place where some fourth- and fifth-graders regularly ride their bikes a mile to get to school, while many younger kids walk to school with a parent who's leading a "walking school bus" from the neighborhood. And it's a place where residents and visitors get the kind of routine physical activity that public health experts say is critical to arrest the nation's obesity epidemic and address related serious health problems such as diabetes.

The local government didn't start out with the specific goal of promoting healthy lifestyles when it decided in the 1980s to focus on making the downtown and residential neighborhoods more walkable.

But local leaders did see how creating a community that caters to pedestrians and bicyclists would help to draw people to the city center, thus meeting the challenges of the times as both an economic development strategy and a way to reconnect people with their neighbors.

Today, the strategy anchors the city's overall sustainability efforts. With the recent investment of nearly half a million dollars to develop a community transportation plan that clearly links Decatur's future transportation decisions to health-related goals, the city's commitment to walkability has grown stronger. In this small, densely populated city in the Atlanta metropolitan area—with nearly 19,000 residents on 4.2 square miles—the pedestrian continues to be the focus of policy making and planning to improve quality of life.

It's largely a response to public sentiment. Whenever local leaders have asked residents to reenvision Decatur's future, walkability has emerged as a priority. And the local government has planned and invested accordingly.

## About Decatur

**Form of government:** Commission-manager

**City commission:** Five members, including a mayor, elected in nonpartisan elections for overlapping four-year terms.

**Population (2008 Census):** 18,986

**Median age:** 36 years

**Median household income in 2007:** \$49,893

**Location:** Decatur is located just six miles east of the center of Atlanta, between downtown Atlanta and Stone Mountain. It is the seat of DeKalb County.

**Population:** After peaking at 22,000 in 1960, Decatur's population declined steadily, falling to 17,000 in 1990. The population has since rebounded to roughly its 1980 level, and minimal growth is projected for coming years, with family and

household sizes shrinking. The city's population is 66 percent white, 31 percent black, and 2 percent Hispanic; 21 percent of the population is less than 18 years old, while 13 percent is at least 65 years old. Education levels in Decatur are higher than those of the region and nation, with 29 percent of residents holding a bachelor's degree; 15 percent a master's degree; 7 percent a professional school degree; and 5 percent a doctorate degree.

**Schools:** The city has an early childhood learning center, three elementary schools, a fourth–fifth grade academy, one middle school, and one high school. Public school enrollment topped 2,800 in 2009. Decatur is also home to Agnes Scott College, Columbia Theological Seminary, the Art Institute of Atlanta–Decatur, and DeVry University.

Source: 2008 Census at [www.census.gov/popest/cities/tables/SUB-EST2008-04-13.csv](http://www.census.gov/popest/cities/tables/SUB-EST2008-04-13.csv); see also [www.decalurga.com/client\\_resources/budget/fy09-10%20demostats.pdf](http://www.decalurga.com/client_resources/budget/fy09-10%20demostats.pdf), [www.decalurga.com/cgs\\_citysvcs\\_ced\\_demographics.aspx](http://www.decalurga.com/cgs_citysvcs_ced_demographics.aspx), or [www.city-data.com/city/Decatur-Georgia.html](http://www.city-data.com/city/Decatur-Georgia.html).

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**The historic DeKalb County Courthouse anchors Decatur's town square, the centerpiece of the city's downtown revitalization over the past few decades.**



This case study recounts how this nearly 200-year-old city has developed and executed its active living strategy for improving mobility and quality of life. It traces how Decatur's efforts have evolved over the past three decades through a series of planning initiatives and strategic city investments. It also highlights the direction that city leaders hope to take in increasing local production of fresh, healthy foods through urban gardening. In a look beyond the policy making, ICMA examines two of the most innovative elements of Decatur's leadership in making health a cornerstone of sustainability: the decision to incorporate a health impact assessment (HIA) into its new transportation plan, and its move to create the position of active living director as a distinct role with its own responsibilities within city government. And finally, the case study examines the factors that have been critical to the city's success and reviews some of the lessons learned by elected leaders and staff.

### One Step at a Time

Decatur started working to become a healthier community more than a quarter century ago, long before the terms *active living* and *smart growth* were coined to represent the popular public policy goals they have become today. The strategy evolved out of the city's response to hard times. After hitting a high of about 22,000 residents in the 1960s, the city steadily lost population: a boom in highway building, new subdivisions, shopping malls, and office parks in the suburbs drew people and businesses away from the city's center, and many downtown businesses moved or closed down. "The downtown business community was on

the verge of collapse," noted Hugh Saxon, the deputy city manager who started working for Decatur in 1977 and currently oversees \$26.5 million worth of capital improvement projects.

In the late 1970s, local leaders determined economic redevelopment to be the city's overwhelming

*"It's really been a question of how do we connect people, citizens, residents, to their community in a meaningful way? . . . You can't build community if the community never sees each other."*

priority and set out to revitalize the downtown business district, charting the same path followed by many other U.S. cities during that era. City officials started out with plans to demolish a number of older buildings and replace them with a new civic center, a large hotel, and other new construction. But their proposal to build massive new structures around Decatur's new MARTA (Metropolitan Atlantic Rapid Transit Authority) station angered citizens, who had other ideas about how to reinvigorate their downtown. Residents pushed to preserve the historic, small-city feel, saying they wanted a community gathering place that would draw from nearby neighborhoods. They wanted to be able to walk into town to work, shop, or go out to eat.<sup>1</sup>

The Decatur City Commission responded in 1980, redefining the path to revitalization by recognizing



that historic preservation and walkability were just as important to a turnaround as the city's access to Atlanta's new subway system. The Decatur Town Center Plan, adopted in 1982, sought to "bring back the active hum of commercial activity" that had characterized downtown before the 1960s suburbanization boom and to strengthen the sense of community. "It's really been a question of how do we connect people, citizens, residents, to their community in a meaningful way?" said Peggy Merriss, the longtime city manager who started as Decatur's personnel director in 1983. "You can't build community if the community never sees each other." The pursuit of connection has grounded every planning process the city has followed ever since.

To implement the Town Center Plan, commissioners created the Decatur Downtown Development Authority (DDDA), which hired Lyn Menne from the state's historic preservation office to lead the effort. Menne, currently the assistant city manager for community and economic development, saw great value in Decatur's historic core, which defined the city as a traditional town. The city had initially developed as a tight urban settlement around the courthouse square, where the original DeKalb County Courthouse was built in 1823. Many of the surrounding single-family neighborhoods were built before automobiles came into wide use, so they were quite walkable.

Boosting the city's early efforts to become more pedestrian friendly were changes to the federal highway program, which made new funding available for sidewalks in the early 1990s. Decatur had been planning for sidewalk construction and improvements anyway, and with the Summer Olympics coming to Atlanta in 1996, the city was able to make a compelling case for additional federal support for this investment. The Olympics also enabled the city to showcase its downtown, fueling local business growth.

Over the next decade, Decatur invested in sidewalks and other amenities designed to encourage people to view downtown as a transit-accessible, pedestrian-friendly gathering place. New restaurants, shops, and workplaces opened, and the city started hosting live music and other regular public events in the courthouse square. As residents from the surrounding neighborhoods started spending more of their free time—and money—downtown, more businesses wanted to locate there, and developers saw a market for new housing. By 2001, the Towne Square condominiums had gone up in downtown Decatur, bringing the central business district its first residents;

in fact, more than half of the units had been sold before the developer broke ground in 1999. Other downtown residential development projects followed, with more than 700 new dwellings being built by 2008; their residents have become the daily customers that downtown restaurants and retailers need to thrive.

With the burst of real estate development interest that followed the Olympics, policy makers decided it was time to engage residents in another visioning and planning exercise in 1998. The city convened groups of residents for what it called the Decatur Round Tables, posing a series of discussion questions to find out what people liked most about their community and what their priorities were for change. The goal was to create a ten-year strategic plan for improving and sustaining the city's livability.

The process ultimately involved about 500 residents and community leaders. Participants identified sixty action items touching on everything from land use and citizen participation to taxation and schools, laying the foundation for the development of the strategic plan.<sup>2</sup> The city then formed action teams charged with identifying and prioritizing problems and finding solutions to them. Finally, community members reviewed and commented on the goals and recommendations, which related to community character, economic planning, cultural diversity, green space, and other quality-of-life and social goals. The final product was the ten-year City of Decatur Strategic Plan 2000.



**As the city started hosting live music, festivals, and other special events in its town square in the 1990s, residents flocked to the downtown.**

## The Foundation of Active Living: The Community Transportation Plan

In January 2005, less than five years after Decatur adopted its strategic plan, city staff and elected officials started talking about their next steps. With growing awareness of the nation's obesity epidemic, the concept of active living was suddenly generating a lot of attention in policy-making circles across the country. Commissioner Fred Boykin—along with Amanda Thompson, a new city employee who would become

*“There was community demand, community support from all ages. . . . This was taking it to the next step.”*

Decatur's planning director two years later—had recently attended a bicycle and pedestrian conference in Vancouver, British Columbia. They had returned inspired.

Decatur had long since committed itself to improving its pedestrian and bicycle facilities, and city leaders all agreed that promoting active living provided the best opportunity for bringing an explicit health perspective to transportation planning and investments. Commissioners gave the green light for staff to finalize the request for proposals (RFP) for a transportation plan, and they assured City Manager Merriss they were willing to commit a significant sum of money to

get the right plan—one that was comprehensive and that reflected substantial community input and a clear orientation toward health.

“We were looking at what we could do next to stay ahead, to stay in the forefront,” Boykin said. Because the city was hearing from many residents that they wanted more sidewalks, it made sense to launch another planning process that would seek to recast the city's transportation system around the principles of active living. “There was community demand, community support from all ages,” Boykin noted. “This was taking it to the next step.”

The RFP, issued later in 2005, highlighted Decatur's aspirations to become “an active living community” with a pedestrian focus, a place where people of all ages and abilities could get regular physical activity in the routines of daily life. To that end, the city included an emphasis on “complete streets,”<sup>3</sup> which would provide safe and convenient access for pedestrians and bicyclists as well as cars. The RFP also called for “an inclusive public participation process” to identify transportation needs.

Among the proposals that were received in the spring of 2006, one stood out. The Georgia Institute of Technology Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development had partnered with Sycamore Consulting, Inc. and Kimley-Horn and Associates, Inc. to propose a plan that put Decatur's goals front and center.<sup>4</sup> City commissioners agreed to spend \$450,000 to develop the plan, initiating the largest service contract in the city's history for a proposal that pointedly addressed the city's strategic goals.



**Decatur has invested heavily to ensure easy pedestrian access and transit connections for residents who rely on the MARTA subway system and buses.**



## Soliciting Public Input

The process for developing the transportation plan got under way with a kick-off public meeting for the general public and an Active Living Awareness event for children. The public meeting drew about 100 people to city hall in August 2006, just one month before the city issued its first general obligation revenue bond in half a century. The bond issue was an important source of revenue for future transportation improvements, with the city slated to receive \$16 million for capital projects, including \$1.5 million to be dedicated to sidewalk construction.

Other meetings and workshops followed in the transportation planning exercise, with the city hosting more than 450 participants and receiving more than 700 written comments by June 2007. And to ensure that the city reached out to citizens who do not usually attend community planning and transportation discussions, the plan also incorporated a random telephone survey of 300 residents. In addition, Decatur hosted a one-day HIA workshop with about 60 participants from the city, the county, a regional group, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the state transportation department, as well as from local businesses, churches, and nonprofit organizations.<sup>5</sup>

When the plan was completed, city commissioners sat through three staff-led work sessions asking detailed questions. “They were so interested in it and thought it was so important that they spent the time and went through it line by line,” Thompson said. “It was a big change. We were really putting ourselves out there in terms of saying this is how we’re going to be building things in the future. We are not auto-centered. We’re not going to be auto-centered.”

Merriss and Thompson noted that it has been challenging to get people to think about transportation as something more than moving vehicles. That was one reason that the city chose the title “Community Transportation Plan”: to convey the idea that the scope of the plan goes well beyond cars. “The community transportation plan is everything. It’s an economic development plan. It provides that underlying infrastructure needed downtown to sustain it into the future,” Thompson said. “It’s a plan for building community, for protecting the environment. And it’s a plan for improving public health.”

## Embracing Innovation

While notable, the plan’s extensive public engagement process was not its most striking feature. What most caught the attention of the city manager and

### Decatur Citizens Weigh in on Transportation

The City of Decatur conducted a random telephone survey of 300 households in May 2007 to shape the development of its transportation plan. Among the findings:

- By a 61 percent to 31 percent margin (nearly two-to-one), residents support a “complete streets” policy, requiring streets to be built with bicycle and pedestrian features that could affect the pace of vehicle travel.
- Seventy-three percent support the use of city funds for a trolley or circulator bus system.
- Three-fifths of residents say it is very or somewhat easy to get around the city.
- Two-thirds of residents drive by themselves to get to work, compared with about 90 percent identified in other Atlanta regional surveys.
- Four-fifths of residents have walked or biked to downtown, and one-third say that they would be much more likely to walk or bike to work if sidewalks were improved and bike lanes were added to roads.

Source: Sycamore Consulting, Inc., Kimley-Horn and Associates, Inc., and Georgia Tech Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development, on behalf of the Decatur City Commission, *Community Transportation Plan*, “Appendix D: Phone Survey Analysis” (July 2007), [www.decaturga.com/client\\_resources/transportation%20plan/appendix%20d%20public%20survey%20analysis.pdf](http://www.decaturga.com/client_resources/transportation%20plan/appendix%20d%20public%20survey%20analysis.pdf).

others was the recommendation to include an HIA. A relatively untested concept in the United States that has been widely used in many other industrialized nations, an HIA provides a blueprint for minimizing negative health impacts and maximizing health benefits.<sup>6</sup> For Decatur, the HIA would involve research to gauge the health impacts of different transportation policy options. The goal was to provide commissioners with critical health data and information to consider in deciding where and how to invest limited transportation dollars.

Merriss was immediately struck by the fact that the HIA not only would reflect Decatur’s evolving approach to land use and transportation but also would positively distinguish the city’s approach to planning. By using an HIA to help guide transportation planning in support of active living, Decatur would become one of a small number of U.S. cities to say that it will consider how infrastructure improvements affect people’s health before moving forward. And that, in turn, might help the city get funding for the proposed improvements. “This was a piece you





**The Brick Store pub, one of several independent restaurants and retailers to open in the 1990s, has become a popular draw in downtown Decatur.**

weren't going to get anywhere else," Merriss said. "It was, 'Here's how we differentiate ourselves from everybody else.' One of those things where I thought 20 years from now, every transportation plan will have something like this in it. And we get to do it first."

Another distinguishing feature of the plan is that it rates intersections and streets for pedestrians and bicycles. Transportation planners often calculate a level-of-service rating for car traffic as a way to help decision makers rank their funding priorities in transportation planning. Decatur's plan applies that same rationale to measure how well streets work for people who are walking or biking. By putting pedestrians, bicycles, and transit on more equal footing with automobiles, Decatur's new Community Transportation Plan seems certain to strengthen these alternative modes of transportation. The plan uses active living and complete streets as goals for transportation decision making, and it draws clear links between those decisions and residents' health.

## Active Living as the Foundation of an Active Economy

The goal in designing communities for active living is to create walkable neighborhoods with a mix of land uses, where people can engage in routine physical activity as they go to work or school, run errands, go out for the evening, or pursue other daily activities. By the mid-2000s, this was becoming a concrete reality in downtown Decatur, as residential development caught up with civic improvements and growth in downtown businesses.

Hundreds of condominiums, townhouses, and apartments have been built within walking distance of restaurants, shops, and transit. Lyn Menne also noted steady growth in the number of downtown restaurants and retailers, with an emphasis on locally owned independent businesses. In addition, the city has started to focus on job growth. As the seat of DeKalb County, Decatur has always been a magnet for hundreds of county employees. In recent years, the city has drawn a variety of smaller employers to its transit-accessible downtown as well, and there are plans to dedicate more resources to the effort in coming years. In the meantime, downtown businesses are seeing a lot more college students. In March 2009, DeVry University left its original campus on the outskirts of the city and moved to a downtown location next to the MARTA station, in the same building where the Art Institute of Atlanta opened a satellite campus.

The city also attracts people to the town square year-round with outdoor concerts and other popular special events, the largest of which include an independent book festival during Labor Day weekend and an arts festival during Memorial Day weekend. "You go out there any day, any time now and there's pedestrian activity," Menne said. "It used to be at 5 p.m., when the office buildings closed, everyone went home. The mixed-use projects have energized pedestrian activity and stretched it away from the town square."

Menne attributes much of the recent bustle to ongoing improvements in sidewalks that have made the community equally appealing to older retirees, empty nesters, families, and young adults. "People will tell you they bought [in downtown Decatur] because they can walk everywhere, and they have access to MARTA," she said. "The same thing is true of [Decatur's] single-family neighborhoods. People buy into the lifestyle. It is all about being able to walk more and drive less."

Amanda Thompson, who helped oversee much of the transportation planning process as the city's planning director, noted that all the tools and resources that the city employed—a random telephone survey, the HIA, small-group meetings, and others—can work in any jurisdiction. She added, however, that it is important to start by recognizing the enduring elements of a city's unique identity and character, to identify what residents want to preserve and enhance: "It's just so important to know your own community."

By improving Decatur's streetscape and increasing neighborly interaction on sidewalks, in the town square, and in community gardens, city leaders have managed to preserve the small-city ambiance that the



## Downtown Revitalization

### Housing growth

(Units built in downtown Decatur since 2000)

Townhouses: 28 units

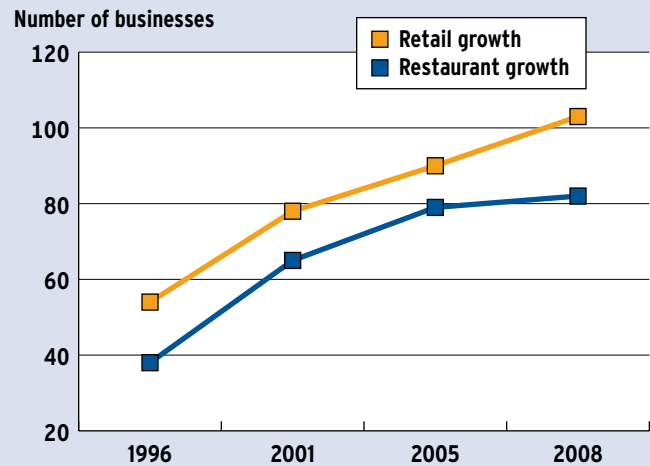
Condominiums: 600 units

Apartments: 101 units

Total: 729 units

### Retail and restaurant growth

Since 1999, downtown Decatur has added more than 100,000 square feet of new retail space, with an emphasis on locally owned businesses. The city requires all downtown development—including housing, offices, and parking decks—to provide ground-floor retail space.



public values while simultaneously encouraging the routine physical activity that keeps people healthy.

## Active Living at the Core of Local Government

The idea that a local government should act on a well-considered strategy even if it leads to uncharted territory has come into sharp relief in Decatur. In the midst of its transportation planning process, which reflected a growing consensus that Decatur should weigh health impacts in its land use and transportation decisions, the city began to consider creating an active living division with a full-time director. “As we were dealing with all of these things, the whole concept of active living was really at the top of our priority list,” Merriss recalled.

Yet when the team looked for a model in the hope of learning from another city’s experience, it soon realized it was breaking new ground. “Nobody else that we could find had ever attempted to create this kind of job,” Merriss said. “There was some leap of faith here, because we weren’t entirely sure what we were going to get. There was no model job description.” Thus, in creating the position of active living director within its management structure, the city became one of the first in America to formally designate active living as a core responsibility of local government, one that links a variety of city programs and services.

For Dan Magee, who became the city’s first active living director in December 2007, defining the job has been a dynamic process. He took on a role traditionally held by a parks and recreation director, and



**All fourth-graders get bicycle safety training in Decatur, where the city and school district have partnered to encourage kids to walk or bike to school.**

immediately started making connections to other departments and organizations that wanted to promote active living.

### Expanding Safe Routes to School

One of Magee’s first challenges came when the division took on responsibility for Decatur’s Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program in the fall of 2008. Although the federal funding for the original pilot program at two schools was running out, the city wanted to expand participation to include all three of Decatur’s elementary schools and a fourth–fifth grade academy.

In fact, the city has been focusing its attention on children and Decatur’s small school system since the mid-2000s, addressing what Mayor Bill



**Decatur's wide sidewalks are just one feature of downtown streetscapes that encourage visitors and residents to get around on foot.**

Floyd described as “the heart of our community.” In Georgia, whose 37 percent of overweight children in 2009 was the third highest in the nation,<sup>7</sup> the effort to encourage more kids to walk or bicycle to school has taken on great urgency. In Decatur, with the CDC in Atlanta at the city’s doorstep, local leaders have become keenly aware of the serious health challenges associated with childhood obesity, including high blood pressure and rising rates of type 2 diabetes, which had once occurred almost exclusively in adults. For this reason, Decatur’s SRTS program, one of the most successful in the state, is administered by the city’s active living division.

Magee attributed the momentum behind the city’s efforts to get more kids walking or biking to Commissioner Fred Boykin, an avid cyclist who led efforts to get the original SRTS funding. School officials also have been very supportive of the program, Magee added, even though the district looked to the city to budget money and staff time to keep it going. “They see the results,” he said. “They tell us the kids are more alert. They’re more ready to learn.”

The city has been able to continue the program on a limited budget, with Magee and Greg White, the active living assistant director, dedicating time to the initiative and covering limited expenses for mailings,

stickers, and food from the Active Living Division’s budget. In addition to hosting Walk and Roll to School Days, the city has a weekly walking school bus, in which adults stop by kids’ homes and lead them on a walk to school. Participation in the walking school bus has grown enough that the team needs to recruit more parent volunteers. “It really builds community,” Magee said of the SRTS program. “It ties into everything we do.”

### **Promoting Healthy Living through Urban Gardens and Locally Grown Food**

With active living clearly established as the framework for community planning, the city of Decatur aims to break new ground in coming years as it pursues the complementary goal of ensuring convenient access to affordable fresh fruits and vegetables. Magee supports the city’s efforts to promote urban gardening; he described gardening as one of the most popular forms of recreation—second only to walking—and as something that appeals to many people who might otherwise get no physical activity. Decatur started in the late 1990s with a small community garden at its downtown recreation center, which attracts a diverse group of residents. The city brings a speaker to its community garden for a monthly luncheon. Magee described this as his favorite part of the job. “There’s such a good vibe from community gardens,” he said. “We get grandparents bringing their grandkids, and working next to the 20-something residents from the condos.”

In 2009, the city convened residents of the Oakhurst neighborhood to get their input on plans for a second community garden in that neighborhood, the first being the popular nonprofit Oakhurst Community Garden. At the same time, Magee partnered with a Parent Teacher Association (PTA) group and school officials to develop a garden next to a pre-school. They planted sixteen raised beds in a city park that abuts the College Heights Early Childhood Learning Center, seeing it as a learning opportunity for the three- and four-year-olds.

Magee has since contemplated starting a community garden near public housing run by the city’s Housing Authority. He is considering possible locations within the neighborhood or at a recreation center, and has made it a priority to identify champions who can build community support, involvement, and a sense of ownership. “That’s the community that needs it most,” he said, noting these residents’ poor access to healthy foods.



In 2010, Decatur hopes to seed urban agriculture by rolling out its plans for a large urban garden—a partnership among the city, its school system, Agnes Scott College, Columbia Theological Seminary, and local restaurants—on property along the city’s south-east border owned by the United Methodist Children’s Home. With the mayor’s strong interest and support, the city reached an agreement in 2009 with the Children’s Home as part of the Decatur Agriculture Initiative (DAI) to use two acres of its property to grow fresh produce. The acreage is considerably less than the ten acres Mayor Floyd once envisioned for an urban farm, but it will enable the city to create its largest urban garden and assess the benefits. And the costs should be significantly lower than the \$150,000 that Peggy Merriss originally estimated would be needed to start an urban farm.

This garden, along with the two smaller new gardens, will help the city advance a number of goals: make it easier for residents to get affordable, healthy food; increase Decatur’s food security with a reliable source of locally grown produce; and preserve green space with sustainable agricultural practices that will shrink the city’s carbon footprint by reducing the distance that food travels from farm to table. “My dream,” said Mayor Floyd, “is that some day we would have a slow food festival,” with the objective of spotlighting healthy foods that are locally grown. “I don’t know how it would all work, but it’s totally community driven, and with this property available, the opportunities are just endless.”



**Decatur’s Scott Garden, located behind the recreation center, is popular with all ages. The city is moving quickly to develop other community gardens.**

### Active Living Advisory Board

After creating the Active Living Division in city government, Decatur’s city commissioners moved to appoint a citizens’ advisory board in March 2009, following a path they have taken for years to get policy guidance from citizens on various issues. A record number of residents applied to serve on the Decatur Active Living Advisory Board, which represents such fields as nutrition, exercise science, and medicine.

“We have nine members and they are amazing,” said Lyn Menne, assistant city manager in charge of economic development, adding that the majority are affiliated with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But while the group reflects extensive expertise in public health, she said, their advisory role is meant to be practical. “This isn’t supposed to be a think tank group that sits around and uses their PhDs to talk about what should be done. They need to help us think about how to get out and engage the average person,” she said. “You’ve got to figure out a way to connect with people.”

Initially, the city familiarized the advisory board members with Decatur’s Active Living Division and its Community Transportation Plan so that the board would have the background needed to provide direction on a variety of active living and urban agriculture goals over time.

Menne noted that the challenge with any such advisory group is to channel members’ expertise and enthusiasm in ways that produce both incremental and long-term progress. “They can burn themselves out,” she said, because an advisory group will often try to accomplish too much too fast. “Part of our job as staff is to help lay the groundwork to be successful. You’ve got to build a good foundation first, and be realistic about what you can accomplish with public policy.”



## A Community Ethos

What began as a movement to rejuvenate the downtown and strengthen residents' sense of community has now evolved into something larger. Increasingly, city staff and elected leaders have been focusing on the health implications of urban planning as part of their larger effort to create a sustainable community.

*“We’ve got to do it for future generations. The built environment affects people’s health; there’s no two ways about it. You either give them the options or you don’t.”*

In tracing the history of how these efforts evolved—from the adoption of the Decatur Town Center Plan in 1982, to the development of the Decatur Strategic Plan in 2000, and finally to the consensus that emerged around the Community Transportation Plan in 2008—what becomes clear is the priority that the city places on planning and public input.



## Long-Range Planning

City leaders have long accepted that comprehensive change takes time. They have approached planning as a long-term undertaking in which the local government needs to regularly evaluate progress, adjust its strategy and programs, and make ongoing investments. To this end, the city manager and other top city staff hold an annual retreat with the mayor and city commissioners to review progress on various priorities, consider changes, and set goals for the coming year.

Fred Boykin noted that it takes a long-term commitment to redesign the built environment so that people can get around without driving. “I definitely think we have the potential to make a difference,” he said. “We’ve got to do it for future generations. The built environment affects people’s health; there’s no two ways about it. You either give them the options or you don’t.”

Peggy Merriss added that while the extensive planning that has to go into such efforts often requires a major investment by the local government, it often brings a clear return. She described the strategic planning process, completed in 2000, as a “massive effort” that cost about \$300,000. But it paid dividends, helping the city win funding from the Atlanta Regional Commission and other sources for improvements to the downtown MARTA station, streetscape work, and other projects. “One of the things that we can point to as a result of having that plan is that we got almost \$12 million in grants and private investment,” Merriss said.

**The sidewalks of downtown Decatur bustle with outdoor dining and shopping.**





At the same time, there is the need to manage expectations, and as city manager, Merriss brings a practical perspective to how to create and implement the programs and policies necessary to support the city's sustainability and active living efforts. "At some point," she said, "you have to just start going after it one step at a time, and understand that it will be incremental progress." For example, when Decatur

*"People are willing to be engaged about the future of their community, but it is hard work. . . . You've got to go where they live and invite them in. That input is invaluable."*

didn't have the money to create a usable sidewalk on every street, she persuaded city leaders to commit to spending what they thought was feasible. They agreed to start dedicating \$150,000 as an annual budget allocation for neighborhood sidewalk construction and improvements until they reached that target. Had the city held off work on its sidewalks until it had the full \$1.5 million that planners originally estimated was needed, it might never have started.

Similarly, when the mayor started talking about developing an urban farm, Merriss had suggested that a good first step would be to include \$20,000 in the 2009 city budget to start the smaller-scale community garden on city-owned land in Oakhurst. The city started planning that garden in mid-2009, just before reaching an agreement to use part of the Children's Home property for the larger garden to be developed in 2010. "Sometimes," she noted, "you're so focused on the big problem and the money, you forget to say 'Let's just cut it into pieces, and do what we can do.'"

## Citizen Engagement

Equally important as long-range planning, Decatur has made citizen engagement the linchpin of its efforts. What stands out most is the amount of public input that the local government gathered before taking action.

The Decatur Strategic Plan 2000 marked the first time that the city had used the Round Tables concept with community groups as a basis for developing a plan, and city officials took away some critical lessons.

As much as anything, the experience illuminated the importance—and challenge—of getting the broadest possible public input. "People are willing to be engaged about the future of their community, but it is hard work," Merriss said. "You've got to go where they live and invite them in. That input is invaluable."

## Lessons Learned

After reviewing consultants' proposals, Decatur selected the winning team for its Community Transportation Plan based largely on the strength of the proposal's orientation to health and its expansive public outreach. In particular, the city manager and commissioners were convinced that the proposed focus on assessing the health impacts of various transportation options, in addition to reflecting the city's priorities, would help Decatur stand out as it competed for the funding necessary to implement the plan.

Building a foundation to attract future federal, state, nonprofit, and private investment has been a strategy underpinning all of Decatur's planning efforts. While Decatur has benefited from its proximity to the CDC—several experts who work there are residents who also help advise the city on active living—much of what the city has learned about promoting healthy lifestyles relates to basic government practices that are relevant to any issue and any community, regardless of size or geographic location. What follows is a brief review of the lessons that have emerged—from Decatur's decision in the early 1980s to invest in creating a walkable downtown to its more recent move to assess the health impacts of various transportation options.

- *Plan and invest for the long-term.* Mayor Bill Floyd attributed Decatur's success in creating a walkable downtown that has become a hub of activity to two critical elements. "You've got to be willing to plan, and that's a time-consuming, expensive process. You can't underestimate the importance of it," he noted, adding that an open and inclusive planning process is the only way to build support for change. Just as important, he says, "You've got to be willing to spend your taxpayers' money, and that's a political decision. You've got to be willing to invest in your community."
- *Celebrate short-term wins.* While it is important to define and commit to long-term goals, longtime city staff agree that it is also helpful to mark year-to-year progress and incremental changes. "I think our success is based on the fact that we've just

Restaurants such as Sweet Melissa's have thrived in downtown Decatur, where hundreds of new residents support local businesses.



kept our heads down, doing what needed to be done,” noted Assistant City Manager Lyn Menne. “It was trying to figure out ways to make small changes, to celebrate them, and to stick to the vision for the long haul.”

- *Engage the citizens.* Any community planning or visioning exercise must start with the broadest possible mix of citizens, with every age, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status represented. Decatur has a strong tradition of gathering extensive public input in any big-picture planning process. City officials recognize that it is important to take such discussions out of city hall and into neighborhoods.
- *Find new ways to communicate.* Regular communication between the city and its residents, and among city staff and elected officials, is crucial. The latter is accomplished with an annual retreat at the beginning of each year. For residents, the city has started to tap social media, joining Facebook in 2008 at [www.facebook.com/decaturga](http://www.facebook.com/decaturga). The city also launched a series of online forums—known as Open City Hall and linked at [decaturga.com](http://decaturga.com)—that it is using to gather public input on such questions as whether to continue smart growth efforts downtown and whether to support the development of a local organic urban farming program.
- *Evaluate all transportation choices.* Although Decatur has worked for decades to improve sidewalks, city officials recognize that alternative modes of

transportation never get the emphasis and attention that roads and highways do in transportation planning. To address this disparity, the Community Transportation Plan proposes a system for rating levels of service at particular intersections and roads—not just for cars, but also for pedestrians and bicycles. The system enables the city to identify areas that are especially difficult to navigate on foot or by bike.

- *Seek partners.* There’s no better example of the benefits that the city has seen from collaborating with other stakeholders than the work of its Active Living Division with city schools in promoting Safe Routes to School. Decatur’s active living director Dan Magee credits Glennwood Academy principal Gloria Lee, for example, with generating the enthusiasm that has led a growing proportion of Glennwood’s fourth- and fifth-graders to walk or bike to school. Magee also has partnered with the PTA at the school district’s early childhood learning center to develop a community garden.

## Conclusion

Decatur started promoting healthy community design well in advance of national trends, and its experience illuminates the challenges that many other local governments are beginning to face. Local governments in every region are targeting the obesity epidemic as a public policy priority. They are focusing on active

living by improving the built environment and increasing investments in sidewalks, trails, and transit. Many are promoting pedestrian-friendly design with narrow streets, wide sidewalks, and mixed-use zoning that puts homes, workplaces, shopping, and other activities in proximity.

In 2008, Decatur rolled out its new Active Living Division, and city commissioners adopted the Community Transportation Plan through which they aim to directly address the impending health crisis associated with rising obesity rates.<sup>8</sup> Embracing an explicit commitment to active living as the basis for future transportation decisions, the plan opens with a chapter titled “Pathways to a Healthy Decatur.” It includes the 71-page HIA as well as level-of-service ratings for pedestrians and bicyclists to be considered along with ratings for car traffic in prioritizing transportation improvements.

With walkability now formalized as a top goal for the city’s planning and capital improvements, Decatur is moving to promote another key component of sustainability: support for healthy eating through urban garden projects. Such projects include smaller community gardens in addition to the large-scale garden that Mayor Floyd has championed.

Merriss, who as city manager has guided the city throughout its efforts to support healthy living as a fundamental component of sustainability, sees it in practical terms.

“At some point you’ve got to do something,” she said. “I truly believe that you have to plan. But when you’ve done your due diligence and you know that you’re going to move forward, you’ve just got to do something. Just get started.”

## Endnotes

- 1 Read about the goals of the Decatur Town Center Plan, and about related accomplishments since its adoption in 1982, at [www.decaturga.com/cgs\\_citysvcs\\_ced\\_masterplans\\_towncenterplan.aspx](http://www.decaturga.com/cgs_citysvcs_ced_masterplans_towncenterplan.aspx).
- 2 Read about the Decatur Round Tables process at [www.commonfocus.org/circles/sc\\_decatur.shtml](http://www.commonfocus.org/circles/sc_decatur.shtml) and at [decatur-ga.com/client\\_resources/cgs/citysvcs/ced/sp2000/section2.pdf](http://decatur-ga.com/client_resources/cgs/citysvcs/ced/sp2000/section2.pdf).
- 3 The concept of “complete streets” involves designing roads to work well not only for automobiles but also for pedestrians, bicyclists, wheelchair users, and other nondrivers. Additional information is available at [www.completestreets.org](http://www.completestreets.org).
- 4 Some of the research produced by Georgia Tech, including the health impact assessment (HIA), can be found at [www.cqgrd.gatech.edu/projects/decatur\\_transportation\\_plan/index.php](http://www.cqgrd.gatech.edu/projects/decatur_transportation_plan/index.php).
- 5 The phone survey results and analysis were published as an appendix to the Community Transportation Plan, available at [www.decaturga.com/client\\_resources/transportation%20plan/appendix%20d%20public%20survey%20analysis.pdf](http://www.decaturga.com/client_resources/transportation%20plan/appendix%20d%20public%20survey%20analysis.pdf).
- 6 Decatur’s HIA is detailed in an appendix of the Community Transportation Plan. Read more about HIAs at this World Health Organization website, [www.who.int/hia/en/](http://www.who.int/hia/en/).
- 7 Jeffery Levi et al., *F as in Fat 2009: How Obesity Policies Are Failing in America* (Washington, D.C.: Trust for America’s Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, July 2009), 5, [healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2009/Obesity2009Report.pdf](http://healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2009/Obesity2009Report.pdf) (accessed November 30, 2009).
- 8 Sycamore Consulting, Inc., Kimley-Horn and Associates, Inc., and Georgia Tech Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development, on behalf of the Decatur City Commission, *Community Transportation Plan* (July 2007), [www.cqgrd.gatech.edu/projects/decatur\\_transportation\\_plan/index.php](http://www.cqgrd.gatech.edu/projects/decatur_transportation_plan/index.php) and [www.decaturga.com//cgs\\_citysvcs\\_dev\\_transportationplan.aspx](http://www.decaturga.com//cgs_citysvcs_dev_transportationplan.aspx).



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