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# PARTNERS IN PROGRESS

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**U**ntil a few years ago, city hall was at the center of what was happening in Decatur, Georgia. City government played a major role in implementing new programs and new activities. That was fine. Someone had to do it. This did not, however, produce a sense of ownership in the community. People tended to sit back and "let government do it" and had no real sense of participation or control. Decatur is showing that, like the words of a song by Bob Dylan, "The times they are a'changing." Here are some examples.

## Meeting the Needs of Children

Decatur's Teenage Pregnancy Task Force is responsible for trying to break the teenage pregnancy cycle that leads to further deprivation and poverty. This group realized that by the time these children became teenagers, it was usually too late to change their self-image and their behavior.

The city school system was concerned about a group of children identified as "at-risk." This means that they come from an environment and background that predisposes them to have difficulty in school and to become candidates for many problems later in life. The school system was searching for some way to intervene with these students to give them a better chance in life.

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The Decatur Recreation Department was searching for some way to expand its award winning, nationally recognized, after-school program to elementary schools where many of the students were economically disadvantaged. This was a problem because the city requires that the programs be self-supporting, and not enough parents could afford the fees to justify keeping the program.

## A Partnership for Problem Solving

Out of this was born the Oakhurst Project—a partnership of parents, the Teenage Pregnancy Task Force, the school system, the Recreation Department, various social agencies (both governmental and non-profit), and a private business partner, a local bank. Everyone stepped outside of the bureaucracy and began to work together to address comprehensively the needs of the children. Some parts of the program are after-school care, after-school homework assistance, health care, and social service follow-up to help deal with family problems. Last year, this program won a national award from the American Medical Association.

United Way has been so impressed with this community-based program that it has now committed money for three years to assist the various agencies in the program and to expand it to a second elementary school. United Way sees this as a model for community-based problem solving. Did city government come up with the idea? No. Did city government pay for the program? No. It put in some seed money, as did the other agencies and the bank. Did city government take the lead? No. It went to the table as a partner, not as a leader. This partnership has produced a spirit of cooperation which allows people to focus on helping children rather than protecting their turf.

## Other Changes

Another example of change in our local government is the Decatur Business Association. The old Decatur Commerce Association was formed by a group of business people to keep the city from doing things to them and to complain that the city was not doing enough for them. The new Decatur Business Association has joined in a partnership with city residents, city government, and the Downtown Development Authority to work for the common good. This has meant special events in the downtown area, beautiful new street name signs, and a unified voice for the business community—the business community as a full partner in the life of Decatur.

A few years ago, it would have been unthinkable that the business community and city government would publish a joint newsletter. We know that it is unique in the state and I suspect that it is unique in the country.

Working together in partnership, we have recognized our common goals. We have recognized that a strong business community is good for the residential community and that a strong residential community is good for the business community. We are all in this together.

In the past, the city commission has sat as judge and jury in deciding neighborhood zoning issues. The city still has to make that final decision, but the process is different now. The city tells the neighborhoods that they have to work in good faith with developers. It tells developers that they need to bring solutions, not problems. It is a "shotgun" marriage, a forced partnership, but it works.

The Police Division recognized that they could not solve the drug problem alone. They met with neighborhood groups that wanted to take their streets back from the drug dealers. They walked up and down streets, knocking on doors, telling people that they needed their help. A partnership was formed. People gave information to the police and the police took action. I give credit for the 30 percent reduction in crime in Decatur in 1990 to this partnership between the community and the police.

The Decatur Housing Authority was con-

cerned about drugs in public housing. They did not just say, "Send us more police." They worked with the tenant association to develop drug education programs, parenting classes, counseling services. They worked with the Recreation Department and others to provide alternative activities. And they worked with the Police Division to obtain federal funding to improve the police presence in the area. This is another partnership that is making a difference.

The city and the county are forging new relationships. In the discussions about expanding and improving the Decatur library, the city recognized what a tremendous asset this would be to its residents. To make the project work, the city gave the county an acre of land that was probably worth \$500,000. We have recognized that there is too much to be done to waste our time fighting. We will have progress through partnership.

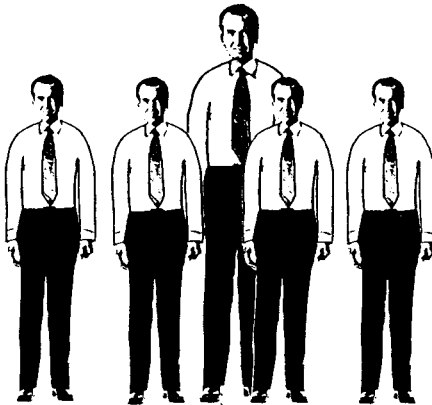
### Government That Helps Things Happen

Those of us in local government management have egos and we like to think that we are important. Managers like to believe that we have solutions and that we can solve prob-

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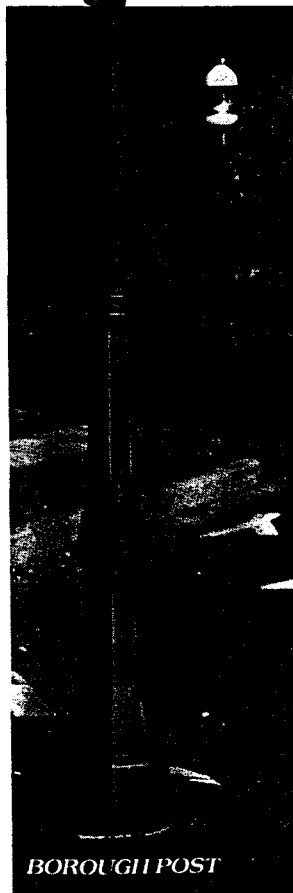
lems. The truth of the matter is that there is little we can do by ourselves. Government is not supposed to be what happens. Government is supposed to help things happen. The purpose of the school system is not to employ teachers and maintain buildings. The purpose of the school system is to prepare all our children for productive lives. The purpose of the Housing Authority is not to collect rent and pay staff. The purpose of the Housing Authority is to provide safe and decent housing for those who could not otherwise afford it.

We are blessed in Decatur with public institutions that understand their real purpose. I think back to the mission statement developed by city employees a couple of years ago. "Our mission is to work with the citizens of Decatur to meet the needs of the community while serving all with respect and integrity."

There is a lot packed into that mission statement but there are two things that I particularly like. One is the concept of working "with the citizens," working in partnership. The other is the concept of service; that our role is to help people.

We are blessed in Decatur with people and organizations that are willing to join us in this new partnership-tenant associations, community groups, the Decatur Business Association, public and private agencies, DeKalb County and individual businesses and citizens.

As for the "State of the City," Decatur is alive and well, vibrant and vigorous. That is not because of what the manager has done. That is not because of what the elected officials have done. That is because of what we have done as partners in progress! PM



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