

# **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT VISION FOR A NEW CITY IN SOUTHERN DEKALB**

## **THE PHILOSOPHY**

The ideas below represent plans to stimulate and encourage economic development and planned growth in the southern part of DeKalb County. Traditional economic development is business centered (what matters to business) and does not take into account community residents. Residents are generally considered as obstacles, often fighting against development. Traditional economic development also considers land use almost primarily from a zoning perspective and not from an asset-based perspective; i.e., how can nearby parks, waters, attractions, environment, etc. be used. For example, a new city can take recreational amenities such as parks and public golf courses and make them more tourist friendly (or take dormant facilities such as an unused golf course and make it a high quality, reasonably priced attraction), which will serve to make the area more attractive to people and businesses.

The approach taken by Kathryn Rice, Ph.D. combines several perspectives – economic development (wealth building) with planning (land-use building); community (resident interests) with business (commercial interests); and an environmental (asset-based focus) with land-use perspective (zoning focus). It is a new model to stimulate economic revitalization, planned growth and community involvement, each of which at this time in southern DeKalb are underdeveloped.

## **CONTEXT**

There are 6 districts in a proposed new city in southern DeKalb. Each district will contain a Community Area Planning Unit (CAPU) based on the City of Atlanta's Neighborhood Planning Units where residents organize and are officially recognized by the City to provide input to the city regarding decisions about primarily planning. CAPUs will be a part of a new city charter and will receive technical assistance from the city ensuring their participation. The leadership should ensure that the CAPU is functionally geared toward neighborhood asset development to ensure the assets' maintenance and quality. This will contribute to economic development continuity.

Another key point about southern DeKalb is that it already enjoys many of the assets pointed out by Harvard professor Michael Porter regarding the strategic assets of many inner city locations. Southern DeKalb was a bedroom community to the City of Atlanta. While it still would not be defined as an "inner city", a good portion of it is city-urban. Southern DeKalb is urbane in much of its area but it also includes considerable unused land space.

The following approach is not designed to be linear and sequential. Rather, the following approach outlines a set of actions that must occur for success (the vision) to occur. While there are some steps that must precede others, much of the following should occur along parallel paths.

## THE APPROACH

### ***Phase 1: Determining Central Targets for Growth***

To maximize the money available for stimulation of development, each of the six districts in the new city should choose one central location. This would be akin to what is generally described as the Central Business District. All initial planning, funding, economic development, and community efforts will be targeted toward this area. This is not a bottoms-up or trickle-down approach; the goal is a ripple-out effect. The planning department of the new city will utilize their expertise to select up to 3 areas in each district that might best fit what will be a central planning district. With the assistance of the new city's Planning Department, the citizens of that district will select one Central Planning Area. People will enjoy a central commercial area that reflects their landscaping and desires. Businesses will enjoy less competition initially. Residential areas will not be subject to retail/commercial/industrial effects and will preserve their greenspaces. Local government will maximize the use of its public dollars.

### ***Phase 2: The District Based Art Approach***

When residents like their area and are attached to it, businesses are much more likely to also be attracted to it. Due to several factors including the impact of the 2007 recession, low property values, a local government that seems inattentive to code compliance and littering, and constant negative media attention, most southern DeKalb residents at this time, do not feel positively about their area.

To stimulate community involvement, the Planning Department with the help of artists (preferably local) will engage in art development – a single structure, painting, sculpture, garden or created entity that is a unique, creative reflection of that community. The primary purpose of this created piece is to help the CAPU get started, change the mindset of current residents, attract prospective residents, and initiate the development of a central business/theme area.

The development of this piece is to take place over months starting from the initiation of the CAPU. It will be financially supported (to a limit) by the new city. The development of this piece will be the activity that assists the CAPUs in encouraging, attracting and getting community involvement. As revealed in Richard Florida's studies, the development of these 6 artistic, cultural pieces will contribute to economic development in their area.

### ***Phase 3: The Contract***

In return for benefitting and beautifying their community, the community will agree to a contract to promote economic development (to be agreed to prior to the execution of Phase 2). In theory, this contract is similar to an overlay district; however, it is less restrictive. In exchange for support for Phase 2, the community will agree to:

- retail/commercial/industrial development in the Central Planning area
- support for MARTA and/or alternative transit-oriented-development in southern DeKalb
- a fast track permitting system for approved commercial or industrial uses

The formation of a Business Alliance can work to develop the processes that will lead to an expedited permitting process and to communicate the new city's progressive measures to the business community at-large.

#### ***Phase 4: Business Attraction***

The new city's Department of Economic Development, in tandem with the new city's Development Authority (if one exists), will develop an economic development strategy based on six districts and their Central Planning area. That strategy will include:

- attraction of innovative, first responder companies in targeted industries
- identification of companies in industries that fit the profile of a strategic economic development direction
  - o industries that are already strong in the new city
  - o industries that can be strong given the strength of industries in nearby counties, cities or communities
  - o industries that the new city can develop based on its natural and strategic assets and environment. In particular, the new city will emphasize "green" initiatives such as green efficient or green energy industries (an element for which DeKalb County is already known and which county neighbors are already targeting).
- an approval process that facilitates business development
- financial tools that accommodate business development, particularly innovative, first responder companies
- the support and involvement of key ancillary agencies that will facilitate development – police, fire, planning, infrastructure, water/sewer, workforce development, etc.

#### ***Phase 5: Education and Workforce***

K-12 education is not the purview of the city. Nevertheless, its status greatly affects economic development and quality growth. Therefore, the new city will liaise with the DeKalb Board of Education on a regular basis. If possible, the new city will seek to supplement K-12 efforts through innovative, efficient after-school programs that focus on basic reading, writing and math.

The new city already enjoys a significant professional population. Building on that, the new city will work with Quickstart and existing university and community colleges in the new city to implement the latest workforce development methods to match business needs with workforce development and training.

## THE VISION

At the end of this process, the new city will look like an international city populated by citizens of all hues and cultures with a multiple business strategy focused on “green.” It will represent a creative, attractive, planned growth city with an artistic, intelligent and involved citizenry.

*Demographically*, due to its emphasis on art and transportation, population growth will increase in its technical, creative and international populations. A younger and more educated population will be attracted to the new city’s emphasis on the environment and green industries. Community involvement will be encouraged and required thus attracting more motivated, high quality residents. Southern DeKalb will become more diverse and more affluent.

*Businesswise*, due to its size and diversity, and also due to its targeted central planning area growth strategy, the new city will have simultaneous but differing growth in six spots. Based on existing and potential economic strategies, on the western and northern side, the new city will be more urbane, retail-oriented, international, and green focused. On the eastern and southern side, the new city will remain suburban but it will also be more commercial and industrial with a wider footprint for green, commercial industries.

When it comes to *environment, land-use and planning*, at least for a period of time, southern DeKalb will look like a city with planned growth. It will be built on a foundation of art, for which all great cities are known. Everyone is attracted to beauty, form and intelligence. And southern DeKalb has the benefit of being next door to one of the major growth entertainment complexes in the United States.

*Educationally*, southern DeKalb will be at the cutting edge of local government-public school partnerships. The existing distance between two entities whose outcomes are dependent on each other (businesses and governments hire graduates; schools depend on interaction and partnerships with businesses and government) is unacceptable. The new city will be a forerunner of partnering with public and charter schools.

In summary, southern DeKalb will have six, varying growth spots that will look like a wheel with residential areas surrounding a central commercial hub at the centre. It will be a new model that utilizes a community-business, economic development-planning, environmental-land-use approach to development. Southern DeKalb will be the symbol of innovation, green industry, planned economic growth and revitalization, and citizen involvement. It will be an international city, which many will try to model.

(The above Vision/Plan originates from Kathryn T. Rice, Ph.D. for the development of a new city in southern DeKalb, Georgia.)