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Learning from Atlanta

Others' errors can lead us to better choices

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IN PERSPECTIVE: REGIONAL GROWTH

--The Sacramento Region - meaning the counties of Sacramento, Placer, El Dorado, Yolo, and Sutter counties - will grow from today's 1.9 million residents to about 3.5 million in 2040. The logistics and consequences of putting 84 percent more people in the same 5,000 square miles are complex. It is time to seriously think about out the major changes to our region that will occur over the next 40 years, and the steps we can take now to achieve a desirable outcome.

In an attempt to jump-start such forward thinking, the Sacramento Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce has sponsored a series of travel missions to study various metropolitan areas throughout the country over the past several years. Past visits have included Portland, Austin, Seattle, and Denver. This year the visit was to Atlanta.

The Atlanta metropolitan area has been widely called the "poster child" for the anti-sprawl/smart growth movement in the United States and was an excellent choice for this year's mission because 30 years ago it resembled today's metropolitan Sacramento.

In 1970 the Atlanta metropolitan region had 1.9 million residents living on 1,730 square miles of land, and a half million lived in the central city. Now the Atlanta metropolitan region has just over 4 million residents living on 6,000 square miles, while its central city population has fallen to 400,000. It is not far fetched to envision the current state of the Atlanta area as a possible future for the Sacramento region.

In the thirty years that metropolitan Atlanta has grown from a Sacramento-like region to its present form, there is no doubt that extraordinary success has been achieved in economic terms. The benefits of Atlanta's growth include a vibrant private sector with dozens of Fortune 500 employers and corporate headquarters (like Coca Cola and CNN), the nation's busiest airport, an extensive rail transit system, and an impressive downtown skyline. The region also boasts a diversified job base in which only 12 percent of the region's employment come from government (as compared to Sacramento's current 30 percent) and an impressive median income level for residents of about \$59,000.

Twenty-seven percent of all residents are among the top one fifth of all income earners in the country. Only fifteen percent fall into the bottom fifth. The comparable numbers for Sacramento are about \$54,000, 23 percent, and 18 percent. The Atlanta region's cultural and entertainment choices include a world-class symphony and art museum, all major professional sports, and host to the summer Olympic Games. Housing is affordable and available, with new home prices on average lower than those in Sacramento. At least a dozen of its more than 35 institutions of higher education have earned national or international reputations as places of excellence.

Distressingly, a dark side has dogged the many benefits bestowed from the Atlanta region's growth. We first sensed this in a congested freeway bus ride from Hartsfield airport in the city's extreme south side to the gleaming downtown, through some of the most racially and economically segregated neighborhoods in the United States. We grew more sure of it when, once downtown, we were immersed in an automobile culture that exhibited virtually no retail shopping, and discouraged pedestrians, open markets, downtown plazas, and the streetside bustle we've come to appreciate in Sacramento's central districts. We were later to learn that in the sprawling region of Atlanta - covering more than 20 counties and 112 cities - local government officials have a notorious history of failing to consult or cooperate with one another.

According to a report from the Brookings Institution, during its growth spurt (between 1982 and 1997) the Atlanta region's population density declined by over 11 percent. The 1997 population density (or number of people living per acre) in the urban regions of Atlanta was 2.8. The comparable figure for the Sacramento region was double that at 5.6. This means that each man, woman, and child in Atlanta consumes about a third of an acre to live, work, and shop. In Sacramento these activities require about a fifth of an acre per person.

With less density, or greater sprawl, came further costs to the Atlanta region. For instance, as reported by the Texas Transportation Institute, in 2000 each person traveled an average of more than 34 miles daily by car in the Atlanta metropolitan area. This is the highest average in the nation. With all this driving, each Atlantan wasted 42 hours a year sitting in traffic congestion. The comparable figures for the Sacramento metropolitan area are 11 miles driven per day and 24 hours wasted.

In addition, Atlanta's rapid growth has done little to alleviate, and has likely perpetuated racial and ethnic segregation in the region. Central city public school enrollees are 80% to 90% African American, while over 30% of the city of Atlanta's residents send their children to private schools. The Social Science Data Analysis Network reports that if African-Americans and Latinos were to have been evenly distributed across the region in 2000, nearly 70 percent of African-Americans and 60 percent of Latinos would have had to move. The comparable required moves for the Sacramento region is 60 percent and 40 percent. In addition, over half of the city of Atlanta's non-white population would have had to move to achieve balance; for the city of Sacramento the figure was 32 percent.

The negative byproducts of Atlanta's growth reached their zenith in 1998 when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency declared that the number of days exceeding one-hour federal ozone standards qualified the region for non-attainment status.

The result: all federal highway funds coming into the region were frozen for one year. In an attempt to solve this air-quality problem - in reality a land-use and lack-of-planning problem - the state of Georgia created a regional transportation agency that was superimposed over the existing regional and voluntary transportation-planning agency. It was our observation, formed from the opinions of others we talked to while in Atlanta, that this regional agency has had few successes and is not making good headway to the ozone solution that is federally mandated by 2004.

Between 1999 and 2001, the ozone health standard was exceeded on 37 days in the Atlanta region. In comparison, the number was 15 in the Sacramento region.

The costs of failing to meet the federal ozone standard are three-fold. First, elevated ozone levels cause illness and possible death from respiratory diseases that disproportionately affect the poor, children, and the elderly. Second, businesses face competitive disadvantages in a region where strict clean-up requirements impose costly regulations. Third, the complete loss of highway funds remains a possibility.

So why has the Atlanta region found itself in this situation, a situation that our region may also face in a few decades (or perhaps in a few years in regard to ozone non-attainment)? Even more important to us, is there a possibility that Sacramento, facing similar growth pressures, will go down a similar path?

Perhaps. From our time in Atlanta, and further study, we conclude that the structure of local government in the Atlanta region is entirely dysfunctional when it comes to dealing with regional concerns. Consistent with the "home rule" political concept prevalent in Georgia (and in California), the 20 counties and 110 cities that make up its metropolitan area have consistently focused on only their own fiefdoms during the region's growth spurt.

Though groups like Atlanta Regional Commission (like our own Sacramento Area Council of Governments), Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, and other regional visionary groups (like our own Valley Vision) were in existence, and talk about the need to think regionally was as widespread as it is now in our region, concrete solutions to regional problems were never implemented until a regional concern (ozone) truly reached crisis proportions. Local jurisdictions all too often made decisions to proceed in a direction that regional planning agencies and groups stressed as counter to common interests. Even after the federal non-attainment crisis, the state-imposed solution requires too little local government cooperation.

Atlanta's band-aid to dysfunctional local government has always been that the business sector step up and use its corporate resources to produce a temporary fix on a regional concern so that it does not inconvenience business interests. That underlies Atlanta's great reputation as "business friendly," but the fixes tend to be short-lived in nature and are implemented without much public input. Such business-friendly solutions are evident in Cobb County, the most affluent suburban area, through the use of privately funded infrastructure including freeway interchanges, water and wastewater systems, whose placement are outside the vision of regional planning.

What we and others saw in Atlanta was a scenario which could very likely play out in the Sacramento region: greater sprawl, more time spent in congested auto travel, more air pollution, greater segregation by race/ethnicity and class, and overlapping layers of ineffective local governments. In fact, one of the possible scenarios for the Sacramento Region presented at the recent Valley Vision-SACOG Tall Order forum was an outcome called "paradise lost," which is approximately the Atlanta outcome just described.

On our trip to Atlanta we learned that its present state resulted from a sort of benign neglect and non-cooperation among local governments and regional entities. The lesson to us is obvious. We must think, plan, and cooperate to achieve a future that we all desire, or face what Atlantans have discovered in their present. What may be too late for them can be ample warning to us.

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