Smart Growth advocates across the nation rejoiced when, on April 6, 1999, Governor Roy Barnes signed legislation creating the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority, or GRTA, widely known as “Greta.” At last, a regional agency with powers and political support to fight highway-dependent urban sprawl! GRTA was established in a crisis mode after the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency moved to withhold $600 million in federal transportation funding for the Atlanta region. U.S. EPA acted after years of worsening air pollution had steadily increased the region’s non-compliance with requirements of the Clean Air Act. To reduce polluted air by combating traffic congestion and poorly planned development, the Authority was given broad control over transportation and land use planning in the 13-county Atlanta region. GRTA instantly became a potent symbol of Smart Growth and has been popularly viewed as a constructive and winning approach to solving Atlanta’s growth problems, and as a model for other states and regions as well.

One of the Authority’s hallmarks was its broad base of support from business as well as public-interest groups. In fact, the first ideas for such an agency came from an initiative sponsored by the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce to investigate and recommend solutions to emerging problems with the transportation planning process. Corporate and real estate groups had grown increasingly concerned about the effects of growing traffic congestion and air pollution on the economy and quality of life in the Atlanta region. Business groups helped to spearhead regionwide efforts to address the worrisome possibility of traffic and regulatory gridlock. Early-on, developers, builders, and Realtors became actively and visibly involved in these efforts.

In the two and one-half years since its founding, GRTA has become a beacon for regional Smart Growth -- and a lighting rod as well. Although it has made solid progress in promoting a new regional multi-modal transportation plan that responds to its mandates, the plan has been attacked by several environmental groups. The agency’s activities have generated more regional attention to expanding the role of public transit but its only tangible product to date has
been establishment of a bus system in Clayton County, a growing suburban area hitherto unserved by public transit.

GRTA has waved the banner of compact, mixed-use, walkable, transit-friendly development but local government officials increasingly have voiced opposition to any intervention by the agency in land use decisions.

To date, GRTA has focused on reviving and expanding regional transportation improvements and services, attending to adding visible value and tangible capacity rather than brandishing its powers to redirect transportation priorities and the form of regional development.

**Prelude to Crisis: A Rapidly Developing Region**

Enjoying one of the most robust economies of any Southeastern metropolitan area, Atlanta has been growing by leaps and bounds. The Atlanta metropolitan area’s population has more than doubled since 1970; just in the last decade it increased by 25 percent to 3.2 million residents at the turn of the 21st century. And Atlanta came of age in the suburban era. It has grown primarily by spreading into once-rural areas along the major highway corridors, consuming some 50 acres of farm and forest land a day, and spawning dozens of suburban jurisdictions across the ten counties counted by the Census as its official metropolitan area. In the process, the Atlanta region became the epitome of decentralized, low-density sprawl. Today, the Atlanta region has about 1,370 people per square mile, compared to 5,400 in Los Angeles, which is widely perceived as the “capital of sprawl.” But the city itself has grown little. While in 1980, the City of Atlanta accounted for 22.4 percent of the metropolitan area population, it now is home to only 13.3 percent; suburbs in the year 2000 grew 100 times more than the city.

Like most metropolitan areas, suburban development has been shaped by the automobile. Low-density housing is matched by low-density employment centers, most reachable only by car. As a result, vehicle miles of travel increase, and so does congestion. The average Atlanta driver faced 68 hours of traffic delays in 1997 compared to 30 hours a year in 1990. The combination of delay and fuel consumption during delay cost the region more than $2 billion a year. And projected growth of one million more people by 2025 will only add to the problem. Atlantans are expected to increase their time in a car from 80 minutes per day in 2001 to 90 minutes.
The region’s vast and expanding highway system helped this to occur. Most large cities have at least one multi-lane interstate highway running through them, but the Atlanta region has three of them intersecting in downtown Atlanta, plus three major state highways, one of them a ring road 10 miles from downtown. Altogether, the Atlanta region contains over 361 miles of multi-lane highways and nearly 2,000 miles of arterial roadways. Despite the construction of a rail transit system by the Metropolitan Atlanta Regional Transportation Authority (MARTA), Atlanta’s population remains highly dependent on automobiles to get around. About 90 percent of the region’s commuters drive to work and the rate of vehicle ownership averages nearly one car per person in most parts of the region. (In the outer counties, there are 25 percent more cars than people.) The region’s residents now drive an average of 35 miles a day, more than anywhere else in the country. The fixation on cars is so great that most suburban neighborhoods lack sidewalks. The situation is complicated by the fact that the state constitution prohibits use of the state gasoline tax for anything but road construction.

Another consequence of car-dependent growth are vehicle emissions that affect the quality of the region’s air. Atlanta has serious air pollution – in 1998, 40 days of unhealthy air, the third worst on record. One of the principal concerns is ozone, formed through a reaction of nitrogen oxides, volatile organic compounds, and sunlight. Cars, trucks and buses contribute almost half of the nitrogen oxide pollution in the region. Atlanta’s air quality is also affected by meteorological and topographical conditions that cause air to stagnate over this section of the southeast, slowing the dissipation of pollution away from the region. Particularly in the summertime, therefore, the air is often unfit to breathe. Among other consequences, unhealthy air in Atlanta increases emergency room visits for treatment of children’s asthma as much as 37 percent and puts 220,000 residents with chronic respiratory problems at risk.

The EPA Intervention

The 1970 Clean Air Act gave the Environmental Protection Agency authority to regulate air toxics and requires that states meet clean air standards. Clean Air Act amendments in 1977 required that transportation plans fulfill targets for vehicle emissions reductions to avoid noncompliance with the clean air standards, and in 1978 Atlanta was
designated as being in non-attainment with the ozone standard. The designation, however, had little effect on either transportation or land use planning in the region. Clean Air Act amendments in 1990 stepped up enforcement of pollution reductions that set deadlines for EPA, state, local governments, and businesses. The first hint of Atlanta’s problems ahead came in 1996 when EPA warned that it would block future federal funds for highway construction unless substantial initiatives were undertaken to improve high ozone and smog levels. In addition, the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC, the metropolitan transportation planning agency) determined that the annual draft transportation plan failed to conform with the state’s program for achieving Atlanta’s ozone standard. The result was that only projects from the previously approved plan for FY 95-97 could be funded.

Almost immediately, ARC began work on a new regional transportation plan. In addition, the Georgia Department of Transportation and local governments focused on design and environmental documentation to complete desired road improvements already underway but threatened by the EPA crackdown. ARC adopted an interim transportation plan in January, 1998, that proposed to bring the region’s air quality in compliance with state standards by 2005. It included projects that would improve or not affect air quality but also included projects “grandfathered” from the previous transportation plan. For some, this signalled Georgia DOT’s intention to carry on past practices. The interim plan was later put on hold when it became clear that (1) it relied on use of “California” clean fuel that the state Environmental Protection Division determined was unavailable at needed levels and would raise gas prices unacceptably high, and (2) it called for a budget 40 percent higher than anticipated funding, violating the federal requirement for a financially constrained plan.

The final blow came when a group of environmental organizations sued to disqualify the “grandfathered” projects included in the plan and four months later, in another case, a District of Columbia Circuit Court invalidated EPA’s tolerance of “grandfathered” projects. The ruling effectively disallowed use in Georgia of $700 million of federal money in FY 1999-2001 until adoption of an acceptable regional transportation plan.

The handwriting was on the wall: no more money until significant progress is made in reducing air pollution through changes in transportation systems and development patterns in the Atlanta region. Atlanta’s leadership was aghast:
one businessman publicly called the federal action a “train wreck..” It didn’t help that some major businesses were
rumored to have decided against locating or expanding in Atlanta due to the transportation issues. However, it didn’t
take long to mobilize support for a radical change in regional transportation planning. Said John Williams, a developer
and chairman of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, “I think the business community relaized that we couldn’t
afford to be paralyzed by the situation, the way other cities are. To ensure that Atlanta continued to grow and be
prosperous, it became evident that the single most important issue was improving the quality of life. So we had to
work with the political and environmental communities to come up with a solution.” David Firestone, “Suburban

The Birth of GRTA

Alarmed by the impending cutoff of federal road funds and national publicity about Atlanta’s air pollution and traffic
problems, the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce convened a “Metropolitan Atlanta Transportation Initiative” in July,
1998, to investigate and recommend solutions to the evident problems with regional transportation planning. Out of
the Initiative came recommendations to overhaul the transportation planning process and strengthen public and
business efforts to understand and contribute to transportation solutions. In particular, the Initiative’s report proposed
the creation of a state authority with broad powers to deal with transportation and development issues. These
recommendations came on the heels of Roy Barnes’s election as Governor. Governor Barnes made creation of such
an authority a key legislative priority, leading to the enactment of Senate Bill 57 in March and the Governor’s signing
the bill into law on April 6, 1999.

GRTA was born with high expectations. The Authority and its 15-member board handpicked by the Governor was
widely viewed as a lean, potentially mean, and highly motivated agency that would quickly turn things around. Its
assigned mission was “to coordinate and assist in planning for land transportation and air quality purposes within [its
jurisdiction] between and among all state, regional and local authorities charged with planning responsibilities for
such purposes by state or federal law, and to adopt a regional plan based on such planning.” Georgia Code
Annotated, Title 50, Chapter 32, Section 11 (28).
GRTA was granted impressive powers to accomplish this broad objective. It has initial jurisdiction over the 13-county metropolitan region and, longer-term, over all counties expected within seven years to become or remain in nonattainment of Clean Air Act standards. GRTA’s jurisdiction would continue for 20 years thereafter. Within this area, GRTA was empowered to “plan, design, acquire, construct, add to, extend, improve, equip, operate, and maintain or cause to be operated and maintained” land public transportation systems and other land transportation projects and air quality control installations. Through this general authority the agency could build (or veto) roads and transit systems in any location in the region and allow or refuse permits to access road and rail systems from large projects such as subdivisions, business parks, and shopping centers. More particularly, the agency could:

- enter into contracts and agreements with GDOT, county and local governments, and transit systems for these purposes and provide technical or advisory assistance to state and local government;
- acquire real or personal property, if necessary through eminent domain, and finance projects, make loans or grants, borrow money, and issue revenue bonds;
- review and make recommendations to the Governor concerning all proposed regional land transportation plans and improvement programs prepared by MPOs and GDOT;
- formulate measurable targets for air quality improvements and standards within its jurisdiction;
- review and approve developments of regional impact that involve any expenditure of state or federal funds by the state or any political subdivision, agency, or authority.

The GRTA board members also sit as the Governor’s Development Council, which is responsible for assuring that local governments meet state requirements for land use planning.

**GRTA Goes to Work**

Understandably, the fledgling agency went into “pause” mode while getting organized. Joel Cowan, a developer active in civic affairs and former chairman of the commission that formulated Georgia’s state growth management
program in 1989, was named chairman of the Authority. Other board appointees represented a broad spectrum of interests. The executive director, Catherine Ross, brought on board in October, was a professor of urban and regional planning at Georgia Tech. The Authority’s first major activity came in early December, 1999, when the board met to craft strategic directions and vision and mission statements that expressed the board’s expectations for the Authority’s role in achieving transportation and air quality solutions. Its vision statement distills the major goals to be achieved: “... to provide the citizens of Georgia with transportation choices, improved air quality, and better land use in order to enhance their quality of life and promote growth that can be sustainable for future generations.” “GRTA Board Defines Vision, Mission” GRTA Latest News, March 10, 2000, www.grta.org/grta/press/press.cgi?prfile.

The vision statement called for the Authority to plan and implement a multi-modal transportation system; encourage infrastructure-efficient land use policies; promote public participation and cooperative relationships with other agencies in connecting transportation choices, land use, and quality of life; and measure its effectiveness in improving air quality, accessibility and land use.

The board’s strategic directions define more precisely the operating objectives of the Authority:

- Adopt performance goals and measures, including those for mobility and quality of life;
- Encourage design standards and guidelines to insure connectivity throughout the regional transportation system;
- Public involvement, outreach and education;
- Adopt policies for reviewing developments of regional impact and to establish the connection between land use and transportation;
- Build cooperative relationships with partners including state and regional agencies, local governments, transit agencies, and other stakeholders in the region;
- Explore creative sources of revenue and work to secure funding for the regional transportation system and establish priorities for regional transportation investments;
- Develop plans for transportation projects contained in long-range plans that only GRTA is in a position to implement, including regional bus systems, regional van pools, and light rail in the northwest quadrant of the region. “GRTA Board Sets Strategic Directions” GRTA Latest News, December 6, 1999, same website.
The vision and strategy references to connecting transportation and air quality with land use are noteworthy. Although the significance of land use patterns in reducing traffic and air pollution was not explicitly mentioned in the legislation establishing the Authority, the board’s additional responsibility in overseeing local governments’ attention to state land use planning requirements provides a powerful handle for linking local land use decisions to the Authority’s transportation and air quality mission. And Authority chairman Joel Cowan indicated his interest in tying transportation investments to land use changes and approving major developments (through the DRI review process) only if they assist in meeting transportation goals.

From the beginning, rather than establishing a powerful staff presence, GRTA expected to exercise its powers by influencing the actions of existing agencies and local governments responsible for transportation and land use in the Atlanta region. Chief among these are the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), the Metropolitan Area Regional Transit Authority (MARTA), the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT), and the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA). ARC is a council of local governments charged with regional planning and coordination of local planning. It also acts as the federally-mandated metropolitan planning organization (MPO) for transportation planning and for years has reviewed and commented on “developments of regional impact” (DRIs). GRTA immediately partnered with ARC to complete an acceptable transportation plan and program and in June, 2000, adopted the ARC-drafted Joint Land Use Strategy to guide land-use decisions in the region. GRTA also depends on ARC staff for much of the analytical work connected with its mission.

GRTA also works closely with MARTA, which runs the rail transit system, to plan for expanding regional transit services and assist in promoting transit-oriented development. GRTA is also struggling to define a constructive working relationship with GDOT, the state’s highway agency that in the past had vigorously promoted highway building as the only answer to rising traffic congestion. In the long run, as GRTA attempts to affect land use patterns, its relationship with the DCA may prove increasingly significant, since that agency is responsible for overseeing local planning according to Georgia’s growth management act.
GRTA's Progress and Frustrations

In the two and one-half years since its creation, GRTA has made some progress toward its goals. Its most immediate concern was to complete a regional transportation plan and three-year transportation improvement program that would meet federal standards and revive the flow of federal funding to the Atlanta region. Traffic congestion and air pollution was continuing to mount while GDOT sat on the sidelines waiting for approval of a plan and program acceptable to federal agencies. Turning on the federal spigot was the top priority for all concerned.

The Atlanta Regional Commission continued to evaluate revisions to the previously rejected regional transportation plan. In March, 2000, ARC adopted a 25-year plan proposing $35 billion in future road and transit improvements and a new three-year, $1.9 billion package of improvement projects for consideration by GRTA and federal agencies.

After reviewing the plan in its May meeting, the GRTA board asked the ARC to address concerns raised by federal officials and citizens' groups, such as commitments of funding for proposed transit projects and assurances of concentrated development along transportation corridors. Federal officials also indicated that computer travel projections used to evaluate the plan might have relied on incorrect vehicle speed data, raising questions about forecast levels of road congestion.

However, on June 14, GRTA, pledging to work with ARC to insure that the plan could be implemented, approved the three-year improvement program, with most of the $1.9 billion allocated to buses, trains, van pools, bicycle/pedestrian improvements, and other non-road projects. Many local governments, although not all, had provided the written assurances requested by federal officials for supporting the plan in their land use and transportation policies. A month later, after countless hours of negotiations and shuttle diplomacy, U.S. DOT announced its approval of the 25-year transportation plan and the three-year transportation improvement program after clearance from the U.S. EPA. The decision allowed GDOT to begin spending federal transportation funds on much-needed road projects in the Atlanta area.
A roadblock soon appeared in the form of threatened litigation over the plan’s approval by a group of environmental interests. Negotiations ensued and a settlement was supposedly reached in December, only to collapse on January 2, 2001, over state agencies’ refusal to guarantee long-term enforcement of commitments to changing land use patterns. The environmental groups did institute a lawsuit but the court turned down the plaintiff’s plea for an injunction to halt transportation spending until the case is settled. Meanwhile, GRTA’s board decided to pursue implementation of the plan and program regardless of the lawsuit. And soon GRTA was able to announce some positive actions:

After a year of careful preparation, the Authority signed a three-year agreement with MARTA in July, 2001, to provide operating services for local bus service in Clayton County, a transit service requested by county voters in a referendum a year earlier. The first two routes will run through the heart of the county’s employment and shopping districts and will connect to the MARTA system at Hartsfield airport. GRTA will funnel $1 million from federal funds to start the service.

Also in July, ARC released the draft 2002-2004 transportation improvement program, which proposes expenditures of $4.1 billion, the largest three-year spending program ever drafted. It includes the initial phase of the Governor’s proposed five-year funding program described below.

On the land use front, GRTA approved a GRTA/ARC Joint Land Use Strategy in June, 2000, which establishes protocols about how the two agencies will coordinate reviews of local plans and DRI projects;

GRTA also issued an interim policy for DRI reviews in September, 2000, which allows the board to review projects of regional significance for their potential impacts on transportation; enforcement of DRI review findings, however, awaits adoption of final DRI review policies, which may occur in August, although possibly considerably later; potential complicatons are increases in reviews due to reductions in the size requirements for DRIs and the rather complex and time-consuming process proposed for coordinating ARC and GRTA reviews.

In July, 2001, GRTA authorized negotiations and execution of contracts with consultants to continue planning for expansion of the rail system.

In addition to these GRTA actions, Governor Barnes created a sensation by announcing a plan in June to use $8.3 billion in state bonding power available through the State Road and Tollway Authority to get a jump-start on reducing congestion over a five-year period, more than doubling the state’s current level of investments in transportation. Although the program would allow fast-tracking of highway improvements, including a 50-mile section of the controversial “Northern Arc” outer beltway, more than half of the funds would be earmarked for mass transit, including
the state’s first commuter rail line, regional express bus service, and local bus circulator systems connecting regional activity centers.

The announcement immediately raised a host of questions from local officials about what and who would benefit or pay. Indeed, John McCosh in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution said “It was hard to discern much regional thinking among members of the Atlanta Regional Commission” in discussing the Governor’s proposal. Some county officials were not keen on state funding for buses that might go to other counties, others were reluctant to partner with the state on projects benefitting other local jurisdictions. Still others were alarmed that state funding for new buses and other capital improvements left operational costs to local governments. More fundamentally, one official questioned whether bonding would leave little money available for future projects.

In addition, the land use issue has simmered on the back burner throughout GRTA’s early activities. GRTA has significant leverage to promote land use patterns that can support the transportation systems it is charged to improve. Through its reviews of DRI projects, GRTA can veto projects that will negatively impact traffic or air quality by withholding money for road improvements associated with the projects. Although local governments can override GRTA decisions by a three-quarter super-majority vote, GRTA’s power helps to dissuade developers from proposing major projects that make regional transportation issues harder to resolve. This is a significant stick in GRTA’s arsenal, adding strength to ARC’s long-standing but largely unenforceable DRI review powers.

GRTA can also count on ARC’s and DCA’s reviews of local plans for conformance with the regional plan and state growth management requirements to promote more transportation-supportive development. ARC’s regional plan policies, for example, encourage clustering of new development, enhancing the mix of uses in activity centers and transportation corridors, and transit-oriented development.

Nevertheless, how to operationalize any process for changing land use patterns in a political culture jealous of retaining local control over land use decisions is a lingering question. One indication of local feelings was expressed by Cobb County Commission Chairman Bill Byrne soon after GRTA was formed, who said “I am concerned about
GRTA moving away from its focus on transportation and into zoning and land-use issues. A regional authority doesn’t need to create confrontation with local officials over local zoning issues.” Bill Shipp’s Georgia Weekly Newsletter, www.billshipp.com, September 13, 1999.

Interviews and References for this Paper

Report written August 2001 And actions speak louder than words: rapidly growing Cherokee County adopted an innovative plan in 1988 to concentrate development in 13 town centers that presumably might become transit-friendly. Rising opposition from landowners and zoning meetings that sometimes erupted in fistfights led the commission to back away from the plan a year later. More recently, neighborhoods in DeKalb County successfully fought plans to extend rail service into their area.

Looking Forward

Has GRTA made a difference in Atlanta’s transportation planning and services? The evidence is that the Authority’s founding shoved the transportation/air quality contretemps in the face of every politician in the metropolitan area, and that the Authority has moved the planning process off dead center. What are the chances that GRTA, for all its powers and political support, accomplish its mission to reduce congestion and air pollution? The jury is still out on that question but it has become increasingly clear that solutions will be long-term rather than overnight. GRTA has taken care to move cautiously rather than boldly to address transportation and land use issues, holding back on using its potential powers while gathering consensus on its goals. In the immediate future, the inevitable tensions arising from GRTA’s attempts to redirect regional transportation and development patterns and priorities will test its broad base of support. For example, local government officials and the development industry must be convinced to buy in to the significant changes in travel behavior and land use patterns necessary to alleviate congestion and improve air quality. In the longer term, the GRTA mission will succeed only through broadly collaborative, continuous efforts involving all sectors of the economy and community. GRTA, in other words, should not be viewed as a one-shot cure-all for Atlanta’s transportation and air quality woes.
The Georgia Association of REALTORS and its Atlanta members were aware that transportation problems in the Atlanta region could diminish economic growth and that, for REALTORS, traffic congestion had and was continuing to hurt sales. They supported passage of the bill creating GRTA, then lobbied the Governor for a place in the Authority’s roster of committees and advisory groups. Cindy Lester, an Atlanta REALTOR, has been acting as the Association’s point person in serving on GRTA’s Business and Industrial Council and participating in the Citizen’s Academy that studied a series of transportation issues. David La Craw, incoming president of the Association, and Keith Hatcher, Government Affairs Director for the Association, agree that the REALTORS are keeping their eye on where GRTA is heading, a wait-and-see posture that will allow them to evaluate all options as time goes on. La Craw observes that the GRTA concept was “fantastic” but has not had time to prove itself. Certainly, he said, the REALTORS don’t want to see anything negatively impacting property rights. But as yet, the Association has not taken an official position either supporting or opposing GRTA or any of its actions.


Georgia Code Annotated, Title 50, Chapter 32, Section 11 (28).


Interviews and References for this Paper

Interviews with:
[Scott Brady, Transportation Director, Atlanta Chamber of Commerce]
[Keith Hatcher, Government Affairs Director, Georgia Association of REALTORS®]
[Cindy Lester, REALTOR®]
[Arthur “Chris” Nelson, Professor of Urban and Regional Planning, Georgia Tech]
[Dan Reuter, Director of Transportation and Sustainability, Atlanta Regional Commission]
[Beverly Rhea, Director of DRI Review Process, ARC (by e-mail)]
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