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Metro Atlanta Leaders Find Similarities North of the Border

With a population of just over six million, the Greater Toronto Area is the third largest metro region in North America. And while its government structure is quite different from metro Atlanta's, the two regions share many similar traits, like a growing and diverse population, a need for traffic solutions and a varied mixture of local governments that tend to think and act independently.

However, the two also have their differences. For example, 2.6 million of the Greater Toronto Area's six million residents live within the city limits of Toronto, giving the city roughly 10,500 people per square mile compared to the City of Atlanta's 3,500 people per square mile.

With these similarities and differences in mind, more than 100 LINK participants traveled to Greater Toronto in May to gain new insights into metro Atlanta's successes and struggles. Over the course of three days, the group met in two suburban cities as well as in downtown Toronto. They heard from Toronto mayor John Tory, U.S. Consul General Jim Dickmeyer and Toronto District School Board Director Donna Quan, to name a few.

While many innovative ideas were shared, LINK participants were particularly interested in following up in three key areas upon their return:

- » Transportation priorities and funding
- » Working together as a region
- » Using diversity as an asset for the region's development, government and economic competitiveness

Transportation Priorities and Funding

Even though they were in a foreign country discussing a wide variety of topics, the issue of transportation was never far from the minds of this 19th group of LINK participants. In a poll on the last day of the trip, participants deemed transportation funding to be their top priority upon their return to metro Atlanta.

Perhaps witnessing all of the options available to residents of the Toronto region played a part in that. Greater Toronto has the third largest transit system in the world with 350 miles of heavy rail. On top of that, the region also boasts 25 miles of bus rapid transit and 60 miles of streetcar. Those totals are roughly 10 times the amount of transit in the Atlanta region where we have 48 miles of heavy rail and 2.6 miles of streetcar.

Or maybe it was hearing about Greater Toronto's continued transportation investment. The Province of Ontario will invest \$80 billion in transportation over the next 10 years. And over the next 15, the Toronto region will invest \$32 billion on transit alone.



But our neighbors to the north don't have all the answers. According to the expert transportation analysts, planners in the Toronto region still struggle with a big issue that is familiar to metro Atlantans, as well: How to tie land use and transportation together in the minds of elected officials and the general public. They all agreed that the key is to have a vision and to stick to it, even if that means turning down money designated for a project that doesn't fit into that vision.

In short, the biggest lessons learned about transportation were that collaboration across political parties, business sectors, government agencies and transportation modes is imperative, as is a relentless pursuit of support and funding.

The LINK participants obviously agreed, naming transportation as their top priority despite the fact that the state legislature had just passed a gas tax increase that will provide almost \$1 billion per year in additional transportation funding.



My biggest Takeaway from the LINK trip was the regional approach that the greater Toronto area takes towards transportation planning and funding. Everyone talks about doing that, but it really felt like they walk the walk even though there are multiple regional operators and funding agencies. I wish we had heard more details about how they slice their funding pie, but I think the message that really resonated was that it's not only possible, but necessary to think regionally and multi-modally when planning for the future of transportation in our region.

– Chris Tomlinson

(pictured center with Jane Hayes on left and Martin Collier on the right.)

Work Together as a Region

The second priority for LINK participants is increasing the amount of collaboration within the Atlanta region. This theme has been a constant on LINK trips over the years, but was elevated right away in the Toronto suburb of Mississauga, when the first speaker, Sevaun Palvetzian of CivicAction, informed the participants about the progress her initiative has made in recent years.



Palvetzian's organization, formerly chaired by Toronto Mayor John Tory, brings leaders and civic groups together for a summit every four years. At the summit, they choose a few issues that can be solved by a small team. As Palvetzian said, "It's about getting big thinkers together around things bigger than any one government can handle." She said the key to CivicAction is that it is a "neutral sandbox" and is not beholden to any one group or agenda.

One example of CivicAction's work is the Race to Reduce, an energy savings competition that came out of the 2011 summit. The competition pits businesses and property managers against one another in a race to reduce their carbon footprints. It requires very little investment of time or resources from CivicAction. The group has also lobbied government bodies for more transportation funding and its Escalator Program has helped keep young people in the education system longer.

According to Palvetzian, one of the hardest things for summit attendees (some 7,000 in 2015), is to determine which issues to tackle. CivicAction helps in this process by setting ground rules. These guidelines ensure that the small staff at CivicAction isn't asked to do more than it's capable of accomplishing, and that the solution is something that can be accomplished during the four years between its selection and the next CivicAction summit.

Many LINK participants remained energized by CivicAction upon returning to Atlanta. So much so that the idea of bringing something like that to metro Atlanta consumed much of the discussion at the LINK group's recap meeting in June. At that meeting, several participants suggested that metro Atlanta needed an organization similar to CivicAction. As a result, Palvetzian will keynote ARC's annual State of the Region Breakfast on October 30 and introduce the idea to more than 1,000 regional leaders.

Like many LINK participants, I came away from Sevaun Palvetzian's presentation energized and optimistic that we would return home and create a difference-making program built from the CivicAction concept. I know it won't be easy bringing powerful organizations with different agendas together around a handful of issues. However, it's critical we do exactly that if we want to keep our region moving on an upward trajectory.

– Pat Upshaw-Monteith

(pictured on right with Mayor Jannquell Peters center and Stacey Key on the left.)



Use Diversity as an Asset

Metro Atlanta is truly a diverse place, and it continues to become more and more so. But the Atlanta region has nothing on Greater Toronto.

The motto of the City of Toronto says “Diversity is Our Strength,” and they aren’t kidding. With nearly 50 percent of its current population having been born outside of Canada, the region celebrates its many diverse communities.

According to Ratna Omidvar of the Global Diversity Exchange and DiverseCity onBoard, celebrating diversity is about more than simply accepting people from other cultures. When she spoke to the LINK group on Thursday morning, Omidvar noted that diversity has completely changed the way the region governs itself today and how it plans for the future. Diversity has even had major impacts on the way business gets done.

The police force of the City of Toronto made an intentional effort to diversify its ranks and has helped make Toronto one of the safest major cities in North America. Public school teachers have changed their curricula, banks have lowered the height of their counters in one community, and entire business models have changed as it’s now possible for several generations of a family or siblings from the same generation to jointly apply for a mortgage on a shared home.

While the Toronto area is celebrating its diversity, Omidvar’s goal is to create leadership for the region that reflects the more than 200 ethnicities represented in the population. According to her, only 13 percent of the region’s leadership are immigrants. To demonstrate the importance of doing this, she quoted studies that show, “in a group of 10, one is a token, two is an interest group and three are legitimate and have influence.”

Her group, DiverseCity onBoard is trying to increase the number of immigrant leaders in the region by providing online governance training and in-person connections with the end goal of helping the leaders get placement on volunteer corporate or nonprofit boards of directors. To date, more than 1,700 people have joined, and there have been more than 700 board appointments in more than 600 organizations. The program is being replicated in other major Canadian cities, including Vancouver, Hamilton, London and Ottawa.

Omidvar challenged the Atlanta group to find and celebrate our region’s diverse leaders. She told them to create their own version of DiverseCity onBoard and not to let the idea of the perfect be the enemy of the good – there is always room for improvement, but the important thing is to take the first step and get the program started.

LINK participants came back ready to make something happen.



In Toronto, we saw first-hand the remarkable economic and social gains that can come to a region strongly focused on leveraging and welcoming its diversity. We learned about incredible initiatives like DiverseCity onBoard and, more broadly, we saw that every sector of Toronto is intentionally focused on incorporating immigrants. The region has worked hard to create a culture that welcomes new ideas and talents, and that builds bridges between new and more established residents so that both can prosper. We’ve returned to Atlanta inspired and better connected, so that we can now roll up our sleeves and build a better future for our region. We can also take pride in knowing that Atlanta’s growing global profile and welcoming culture can soon inspire other cities the way Toronto inspired us.

– David Lubell

Other Lessons Learned

Overview of the Greater Toronto Area

Dr. Enid Slack, Director, Institute on Municipal Finance Governance, University of Toronto

Sevaun Palvetzian, CEO, CivicAction

- » 13 percent of Greater Toronto’s population is over 65, compared to 10 percent of metro Atlanta’s
- » The City of Toronto is home to 2.6 million people, compared to Atlanta’s 500,000
- » 23 percent of the Toronto region’s population regularly rides transit, compared to 3 percent of metro Atlanta’s
- » 17 Forbes Global 2000 companies call Greater Toronto home, compared to 16 in metro Atlanta

Slack spent much of her time explaining the differences in the way the two regions are governed. For example, the City of Toronto has grown largely through mergers and amalgamations of local governments, as prescribed by the provincial government. In 1998, seven local governments were dissolved and amalgamated into the current City of Toronto for cost saving purposes, despite the fact that 76 percent of residents surveyed did not want this to happen.

The Greater Toronto Area, some 6 million strong, has become very dense, primarily because in 2005, the province passed legislation creating a “greenbelt” around the outside of the area. No development can occur in the greenbelt.

You can read about Palvetzian’s CivicAction group on page 3 of this report.



Suburban Centers and their Connection to the Greater Toronto Area

Janice M. Baker, City Manager and Chief Administrative Officer, City of Mississauga

David Szwarc, Chief Administrative Officer, Region of Peel

Linda Jeffrey, Mayor, City of Brampton

As one would expect, as the population in Toronto grew exponentially in the 80s and 90s, so did the population in its suburbs. While the suburban representatives were honest about the need for better transportation networks connecting their cities to Toronto, they were also optimistic that things were being done, and seemed to enjoy a camaraderie not unfamiliar to members of ARC’s board. According to Szwarc of the Region of Peel, “Cooperation is not rocket science, but it certainly is chemistry.”



The suburban city of Markham, where the LINK group met on Friday, is home to more than 700,000 people. That’s the size of Cobb County.



Welcome from Mayor of Toronto

Hon. John Tory, Mayor, City of Toronto

Mayor Tory addressed the LINK group over breakfast on Thursday, inspiring them to focus on collaboration and action. Tory challenged the group to a continuous and relentless advocacy for the region and a regional way of thinking. He also said that, similar to Atlanta, Toronto's greatest challenge is the inequality gap. He said that "finding access to opportunity, such as transit to connect people to jobs, will spell success."

Greater Toronto: Livable By Design

Larry Clay, Assistant Deputy Minister, Smart Growth Secretariat, Ontario Ministry of Infrastructure

Harold Madi, Director of Urban Design, City of Toronto

Ken Greenberg, Principal, Greenberg Consultants Inc.

After explaining that the greenbelt was necessary to reverse the previous Toronto paradigm of "out of control sprawl," the panelists encouraged metro Atlanta leaders to continue with the "centers and corridors approach." They said that this approach allows for density in places where people expect to find it and it creates natural transit corridors connecting these centers.

They said that elected officials and the private sector are all embracing compact, walkable communities and the future is in making mixed use communities because no one wants to be in an office park with no amenities they can get to easily.

46% of people living in downtown Toronto walk to work.



Sustaining Greater Toronto's Global Economy

George Hanus, President & CEO, Greater Toronto Marketing Alliance

Janet De Silva, President & CEO, Toronto Regional Board of Trade

Michael Thompson, Councillor, City of Toronto and Board of Directors, Invest Toronto

Sheldon Levy, President & Vice-Chancellor, Ryerson University

The Toronto and Atlanta regions have very similar economies. Both have booming film and entertainment industries, and both have strong, diversified economies. Both are also home to companies struggling to find skilled labor for high-paying jobs and see this as an opportunity to provide better training and better access to jobs.

Perhaps one of the biggest lessons Atlanta leaders learned from their Toronto counterparts was about branding their region. They said that despite having suburban cities larger than several metro Atlanta counties, Toronto is the name they use to sell the region.

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Preparing Students for Success

Donna Quan, Director of Education, Toronto District School Board

With more than 250,000 students and 30,000 employees, the Toronto District school system is larger than any system in metro Atlanta. However, it faces many of the same issues. Dr. Quan talked about the shrinking middle class in Canada and how the rise in poverty and the need for socioeconomic equity in education make the mental health and overall well-being of students just as important as textbooks, teachers and curriculum. She reminded LINK participants that the greatest predictor of success is readership by third grade and suggested a K-16 model to ensure that all students are “ready for the world.”

The Toronto District School Board boasts a graduation rate of 84%.



Toronto as a World Class Region: Key Highlights & Challenges

Dr. Anne Golden, Distinguished Visiting Scholar, Ryerson University and Co-Chair, Ryerson City Building Institute

Dr. Golden referred to Toronto as the primary economic locomotive of Canada, but said that it is in need of repair, as are most major cities. She mentioned that Toronto offers a good quality of life for most, but that its infrastructure is crumbling and income inequality is growing rapidly. As for the region's economy, she noted that it is the third largest in North America and is first in the biomed and biotech clusters.

Toronto is responsible for 20% of Canada's GDP. Toronto adds 100,000 new residents each year. There are currently 130 highrises under construction in Toronto, compared to 91 in New York City.



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40 Courtland Street, NE | Atlanta, Georgia 30303
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