

## **Inspiration, Insights Greet Metro Atlanta Leaders in Detroit**

Many of the more than 120 metro Atlanta leaders who visited the Detroit region for the 2017 LINK trip, questioned the Atlanta Regional Commission's choice of destinations. But in the end, they appreciated Detroit's cautionary tale, and even more the determination and positive spirit of its leaders and residents.

From early discussions about politicians kicking the can down the road, to tours of blighted neighborhoods, and finally presentations about the future of transportation, participants found inspiration in the "Detroiters" they encountered.

"There was a very positive energy. It was inspiring to see all these people who cared so much about their city," said LINK participant Amol Naik, head of Policy in the Southeast for Google Fiber. "And how much race plays a factor in everything, and how open they are about it. I felt better about where we are in Atlanta, and I want to go back to Detroit to see more of it."

While there was much to learn, and many innovative ideas were shared, LINK participants seemed most interested in the following key areas for applying their learnings in Atlanta:

- Innovations for reviving neighborhoods
- Openly discussing race and equity issues
- The future of transportation

### **Reviving Vacated Neighborhoods**

As Detroit's population plunged from almost 2 million in the 1950s to fewer than 700,000 today, vacant lots and deteriorating homes became the norm for many of the city's once-proud neighborhoods. But that's changing, as vacant lots become parks and urban farms, and salvageable buildings become homes once again.

Elected officials, the business community, and a collection of nonprofits have worked together to bring all of this about. The national trend of young professionals moving to urban communities, as well as the growth of Wayne State University, have also played a large role in the city's revival.

Even so, those leader were quick to stress that the turnaround is far from complete. They also note the constant struggle to ensure equity and prevent gentrification as it continues. "Those who supported Detroit in its downturn must share in its revival," said Rodrick Green, a trustee of Superior Township.

### **Still Wrestling with Race and Equity Issues**

The Detroit region remains very segregated, with a predominantly black city ringed by mostly white suburbs. The matter of race and an equitable revitalization was part of almost every panel discussion, and was featured prominently in several. Detroiters confirmed that racial issues continue to complicate the task of rebuilding the region.

However, Green suggested that frank conversation is leading to better relationships. "We have to begin to trust each other," he said. "It's just us. It's not us versus them. This infighting has to stop. Let's work together on issues that affect us all."

### **Transportation at the Heart of Revival**

As the Detroit region is trying to reinvent itself, the auto industry that built it is doing the same. The trip's final panel discussion included several experts in automotive technology and how it impacts cities and regions. According to Mark de la Vergne, chief of mobility innovation for the city of Detroit, local governments are behind the curve on planning for the new technology.

"It's a challenge about how you make infrastructure decisions for tomorrow," he said. "It's crazy to think that what's under the ground is going to be what ends up attracting companies and attracting the talent. But it's the truth."

The problem is that no company or government can be completely certain of what the best infrastructure is today, much less what it will be in 10 or 20 years.