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The Georgia Regional Transportation Authority: A New Experiment in Regional Cooperation

The Georgia General Assembly recently passed legislation creating a transportation superagency with sweeping powers to address transportation and air quality problems in the Atlanta region. Whether the new agency will be able to effectively solve Atlanta's problems remains to be seen. But whatever the outcome, the Georgia initiative represents a rare example of regional cooperation.

The newly created Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA) will be responsible for coordinating most aspects of transportation and regional planning in the Atlanta metropolitan area. The agency will have broad powers over all major transportation and development decisions. It will have authority to review and make recommendations to the governor on all proposed regional transportation plans and programs and have final say over road, rail and major development projects throughout metropolitan Atlanta. Only a three-fourths vote of the jurisdiction in which the project is located will be able to override the Authority's decisions. GRTA will also control all state and federal transportation spending within the region and have \$2 billion in bonding authority.

The GRTA is governed by a 15-member board, but the real power belongs to the Governor who can hire and fire any of them at will. During his campaign for governor in the fall of 1998, Governor Roy Barnes frequently reiterated the need to strengthen Georgia's planning laws and made GRTA his number one priority of the legislative session. The legislation creating the Authority passed both houses overwhelmingly and was delivered to the governor for his signature only two months after it had been introduced. The ease and speed with which the bill was approved on a bipartisan basis reflected the unanimous conviction of Atlanta's political leadership and the business community that the problems facing the region had reached crisis proportions and would jeopardize Atlanta's continued

economic prosperity if not addressed rapidly and forcefully on a region-wide basis.

Atlanta's problems stem from its rapid growth. The region's population of 3.1 million has doubled since 1970, and its urbanized area has spread dramatically, with the city of Atlanta now making up less than 10 percent of the metro area. With 303,000 building permits issued from 1990 to 1997, Atlanta was third in the nation in home construction. The region's reliance on the automobile has created a major air quality problem. All of the 13 counties comprising the metro area are currently in violation of the federal ozone standard. A lawsuit filed by the Sierra Club has caused 61 highway projects in the metropolitan area to be put on hold. Under the terms of federal transportation legislation, the region could lose more than \$1 billion in federal transportation funds over the next five years if it is not brought into conformity. Traffic congestion is an equally urgent problem. Despite an ambitious highway expansion program in the early 1990s, the roads are saturated with traffic, with more than half of the area's workers commuting from one county to another. As a result, residents drive an average of 37 miles a day, even more than Los Angeles residents who average 21 miles a day. The median commuting time is 30 minutes, and is expected to rise to 45 minutes in the next decade.

But whether the authority's actions can significantly modify Atlanta's physical environment is an open question.

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Restructuring this auto-oriented region in the image of New Urbanists and "Smart Growth" advocates would be a daunting challenge. Visions of high density pedestrian-oriented "transit villages" with stores on the ground floor, apartments above and a rail transit station within walking distance, will not be easily translated into reality in this spread out region built for the automobile.

Writing in the current issue of *The Taubman Center Report*, a publication of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, researchers Arnold Howitt and Alan Altshuler conclude that most of the available measures for cutting transportation demand – such as improved transit service, ridesharing, congestion pricing and transit-oriented development – have limited potential for reducing vehicle miles of travel. Even a dramatic shift in public investment priorities may not have the desired effect on air quality and travel patterns. "In combination, strong land use and transportation policies might gradually increase densities and reduce vehicle-miles of auto travel over many decades," wrote the authors, "but this would require sustained political will...of a type that has rarely been observed in American government." ("The

Politics of Controlling Auto Air Pollution," *The Taubman Center Report*, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1999).

That is why Atlanta's experiment in regional cooperation will be watched closely. The conventional wisdom says that any proposals to replace suburban governments with some form of regional governance are doomed to fail because local governments would never agree to surrender their power over land use. It is further claimed that the idea of regional cooperation and tax sharing will not be accepted because urban officials do not want to risk competing for the votes of suburban residents, and suburban residents do not want to pay higher taxes to help solve the problems of central cities. If the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority succeeds in its mission, it will send a powerful message that in contemporary Metropolitan America, where the lines between urban and suburban problems are increasingly blurred, regional cooperation is both necessary and politically astute.