

Connecting people to each other and the city

Civic engagement has become a habit in Decatur, Ga. Over the past 12 years, more than 1,000 people – out of a population of 19,000 - have met to decide how to build a sense of community, and to find common ground for solving conflicts.

It was not necessarily an easy decision to involve residents and local officials in dialogues, according to Mayor Pro Tem Jim Baskett.

“Reluctant commissioners were not sure what might come out of the conversations. The idea was hard to get our arms around,” Baskett said. In fact, the commission voted the effort down initially. They changed their minds when the plan was connected directly to a needed 10-year strategic plan.



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Residents started seeing changes. The city recreation department appointed a volunteer coordinator, increasing the number of volunteers connected with the city. The city also redoubled its efforts to recruit people onto boards. Decatur neighborhood associations began meeting regularly with city staff.

Subsequently, 90 percent of the strategic plan was completed by 2010. The city commission took this success into development of a 2010 strategic plan – and once again engaged residents in the planning.

There are other differences. Age, declining health, and rising property values and taxes have taken a toll on the diversity of the city. Commissioner Baskett knows there is more work to be done: “We have lost diversity since the first Roundtables, and people are exclaiming strongly that we need to take steps to keep economic, racial, and age diversity.” In fact, one of the major goals in the 2010 plan focuses on keeping diversity in Decatur.

Problems have not magically disappeared because of Decatur’s commitment to community engagement. But one major element in the strategic plans is the continued commitment to connect those who live, shop, and work in Decatur to each other and to the city. Neighbors, local government, community organizations, and schools all have a role to play.

About Everyday Democracy

A national leader in the field of civic participation and community change, Everyday Democracy helps people of different backgrounds and views talk and work together to create communities that work for everyone.

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