Urban Land Institute
Atlanta

Technical Assistance Program

Advisory Services and Recommendations for the South Cobb Redevelopment Authority and the Atlanta Regional Commission through its Lifelong Mableton Initiative to attract investment and development of property located in the center of Mableton in accordance with the Lifelong Communities Plan and Cobb County's redevelopment objectives for the Mableton area.

Lifelong Communities
places individuals can live throughout their lifetime

April 2012

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ULI – The Urban Land Institute

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) was established in 1936 and has over 30,000 members from more than 90 countries. It is one of America's most respected resources of information and knowledge on urban planning, growth and development. ULI is a non-profit research and education organization. Its mission is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. To encourage an open exchange of ideas and sharing experiences, ULI membership represents the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines, working in private enterprise and public service. Among its members there are developers, builders, property owners, investors, architects, planners, public officials, brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, academics, students and marketing and brand identity experts.

ULI Atlanta

With over 1,000 members throughout Georgia, Alabama and Eastern Tennessee, ULI Atlanta is one of the largest District Councils of the Urban Land Institute. We bring together leaders from across the fields of real estate and land use policy to exchange best practices and serve community needs. We share knowledge through education, applied research, publishing, and electronic media.

Technical Assistance Program (TAP)

Since 1947, the Urban Land Institute has harnessed the technical expertise of its members to help communities solve difficult land use, development, and redevelopment challenges. ULI Atlanta brought this same model of technical assistance to the Metropolitan Atlanta area. Local ULI members volunteer their time to serve on panels. In return, they are provided with a unique opportunity to share their skills and experience to improve their community.

Through Technical Assistance Program Panels, ULI Atlanta is able to enhance community leadership, clarify community needs and assets, and advance land use policies that expand economic opportunity and maximize market potential.

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The Panel is also grateful to have the benefit of input from the many stakeholders and residents who attended the session, including: Keehren Baah, Eddie Barber, Former Governor Roy Barnes, Robert Benson, Denis Blackburne, Eddie Canon, Ben Clopper, Mandy Elliott, Beth Hawks, Michael Hughes, David Knight, Robin Meyer, Helen Poyer, Sharon Qin, Ed Richardson, Melissa Roberts, Evelina Sterling, Ford Thigpen, Jerry Thompson, Woody Thompson, Lorien Tripani, Phil Westbrook, David Wilkerson,

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ULI Atlanta would like to thank the panelists, moderator and TAP committee for their time, energy and passion for ULI.

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Panelists & Sponsors: (front) Dana Johnson (sponsor), Sharon Gay, Bill de St. Aubin (2nd row) Colleen Kiernan, Michael McLaughlin (back row) Stephen Arms, Brendan Barr, Betsy Sheppard, Ellen Mendelsohn, Laura Keyes (sponsor)

FOREWORD: THE PANEL'S ASSIGNMENT

Despite its rich history, cultural resources, large tracts of developable land, and easy access to Interstates and employment centers, the Mableton area has fallen behind in development compared to other parts of the Atlanta region. Portions of the Mableton area are now dilapidated and in disrepair, and yet, residential occupancy in the area remains high. At the request of the South Cobb Redevelopment Authority ("Sponsor"), the Atlanta District Council of the Urban Land Institute ("ULI") convened a Technical Assistance Panel ("TAP") to seek advice and recommendations for attracting investment in and development or redevelopment of a site in unincorporated Mableton in Cobb County, Georgia. The site at issue contains one 21+ acre parcel (which is the largest remaining undeveloped parcel in the area) and a number of much smaller, individually owned parcels.

Site History

The project site is located 15 miles west of downtown Atlanta in the historic Mableton area, one of Cobb County's oldest identified areas. A rail line bisects the area and has contributed to the diversity of land uses in the area. A focal point of the area is the Mable House, built in 1843, which today serves as a museum and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Cobb County Register of Historic Places. The historic Mable House is now part of the Mable House Complex, which includes the Mable House Arts Center and the Barnes Amphitheatre, and it remains a key component of redevelopment plans.

The Town of Mableton was incorporated for a brief period between 1912 and 1916. Although the town gave up its charter in 1916 in exchange for Cobb County funding needed infrastructure improvements, the historic area has retained the essence of a small town and its original gridded street pattern. After World War II, Mableton was one of the fastest growing census tracts in the area.

However, communities go through cycles, and Mableton is not immune to that. First there was agriculture, then some growth, followed by a boom period, depressed period, and then redevelopment. Mableton is now in the redevelopment period. The Mableton Lifelong Communities Plan envisions a redeveloped town center to revive the small town feel.

Former Governor Roy Barnes reflects on the history and development of Mableton

"After the war and beginning mid 1950s white flight was rampant and we were one of the first white flight communities and were one of the fastest growing census tracts in the US. The Barnes family had a dairy and a store. Floyd Road was newly paved. Development took everyone, including the County by surprise, and officials responded with the first comprehensive zoning in the late 1950s. Houses were 1000-1200 square feet, ranch type with a carport. CW Mathews was cutting a road in Whispering Pines where half-acre lots were selling for $950. There was a 114-acre lot on the east side of our property that sold for $7500. Communities go through cycles. First, agricultural, then some growth, followed by a boom period, depressed period, redevelopment period. Smyrna was just like South Cobb. What we have to offer here is very close in, and there's still some land that can be developed. A five-acre tract is a lot of land close in, but as gas prices increase, infill will happen. The financial crisis has scarred a generation in the same way the Depression did. We're behind in mass transit. 'Americans will always do the right thing, after they've exhausted every other option,' as Churchill once commented."

Project Area Profile and Facilities

Cobb County, like the rest of the Atlanta region and the country, is experiencing a dramatic increase in its older adult population. The Lifelong Mableton Initiative encompasses a part of central South Cobb County with a very diverse population and some of the lowest household incomes in Cobb County. The majority of Census tracts in the South Cobb planning area have a 55+ population of 30%, with some areas reaching as high as 60%. Both African American and Hispanic minority populations are significantly represented in South Cobb County. Overall, Cobb County has the second highest percentage of Hispanic residents in the 10 county Atlanta region. (U.S. Census 2008 data).

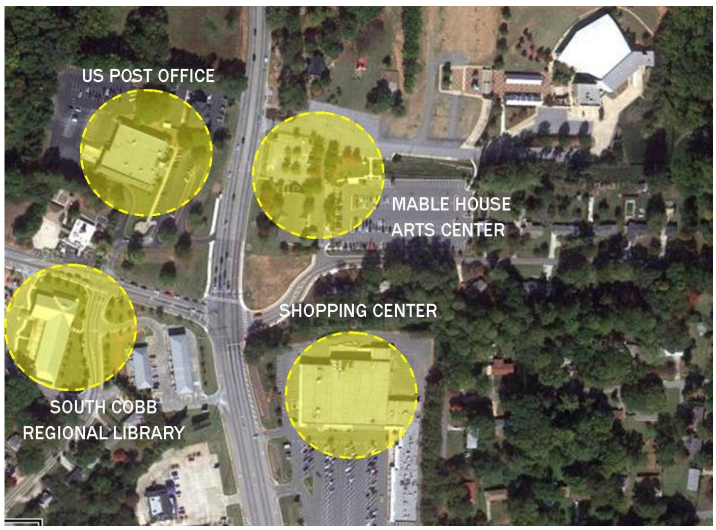
Previous Planning Efforts and Programs

The Mableton area was selected as a study area because it has been a focal point for community improvement over the past decade. During the suburban development years, there was no private investment in the Mableton "downtown" area, resulting in a development ring around Mableton. In the last 10 years, Cobb County, the Development Authority, and the Redevelopment Authority have been working to leverage public and private dollars. The Cobb County Commission adopted a form-based zoning code, so all a developer needs to do is to create a development plan and get it approved.

The Atlanta Regional Commission ("ARC") received a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Aging, which helped build the framework and create the Lifelong Mableton Initiative that is now established. Mableton was chosen because of its sense of place, commitment to community, and civic leadership. When the process, Cobb County held a seven-day Design Charette with developers, state and county officials and community-at-large to promote redesign and redevelopment in the South Cobb area using ARC's Lifelong Communities Principles. To support and add to this TAP, the Lifelong Mableton Initiative sought to re-engage the Design Charette participants. A survey tool was employed with the help of AARP. The survey was given to the stakeholders rather than the general citizenry. There were 68 respondents who ranked the importance of different elements of lifelong communities. What emerged as the most important were schools, community celebration, healthy food, information about transportation options, and 55+ communities.

The Current Vision

The master plan for the Mableton area incorporates the seven core Lifelong Communities principles: (1) Connectivity, (2) Pedestrian Access and Transit, (3) Neighborhood Retail and Services, (4) Social Interaction, (5) Dwelling Types, (6) Healthy Living, and (7) Consideration for Existing Residents. The master plan re-imagines the space around the existing South Cobb Regional Library, the post office, and the Mable House Arts Center to create better connections, pedestrian access and a public park so that the current auto-dependent facilities can act as a town center and gathering place for residents.



The master plan also proposes redesign of Floyd Road, a major arterial through the Mableton area, to

include a direct pedestrian and bike path connection to the grocery store and other retail amenities. It also connects the community to the Silver Comet Trail, the longest walking and bike path in Georgia. A diverse mix of housing types designed to be accessible to people of all ages and abilities is planned for the heart of the district. Clustered around a town green, these diverse housing types will provide the long-time residents of Mableton an opportunity to stay in the same neighborhood in housing that is market appropriate. The mix of younger and older households throughout the plan ensures that the community will be able to take advantage of the symbiotic relationships of the working population and the retired population.

Development of the area provides an opportunity to re-imagine what it means to live as a community and recognizes that preparing for the future older adult population will improve the quality of life for all. The goal of the TAP was to build upon the work initiated in the Lifelong Communities Mableton Concept Plan, the South Cobb Town Center: Lifelong Communities Charette, and the South Cobb Implementation Strategy to discuss and develop strategies to promote investment and redevelopment of the project site.

Panel's Assignment

The Panel, composed of experts from a variety of disciplines connected with land use and real estate development, including land planning, construction and development, market analysis, economic development, and marketing/branding, convened for a full day on April 11, 2012. Panel members were selected with the intent of convening a robust array of professional expertise relevant to the Sponsor's objectives. All Panel members were volunteers and were not compensated for their time.

The TAP focused on the following key objectives:

1. Provide feedback on the market opportunities in Mableton, focusing on:
    a. the kind of development best suited for the area in the near term (2 – 3 years) and mid-term (3 – 7 years);
    b. what development (type, location, structure, etc.) would be most impactful (*i.e.*, is there a catalytic project); and
    c. what economic development strategies and incentives may be required to stimulate such development. This will include private sector feedback on the adopted form -based code;
2. Identify development impediments other than economic factors (*e.g.*, land assemblage problems) and recommend strategies for overcoming such impediments; and
3. Recommend strategies for marketing Mableton to attract development, specifically including using branding concepts.

Prior to the program, Panel members reviewed background materials compiled by Sponsor representatives and representatives of

ARC. During the program day, Panel members took a tour of the project area and worked with Mableton community leaders and key stakeholders through a series of interviews to learn about the history and current conditions of the area and discern the direction in which the community should head. The following persons participated in the stakeholder interviews:

1. **Developers**
   Denis Blackburne
   David Knight - Walton Communities
   Beth Hawks - Acquisitions for John Weiland Homes

2. **Key Property Owners and Government Agencies**

   Eddie Barber – Barber Cemetery
   Former Governor Roy Barnes – owner of largest part of undeveloped land in the study area
   Robert Benson – Cobb County School District
   Eddie Canon – Cobb County Parks & Recreation
   Helen Poyer – Cobb County Library System
   Jerry Thompson – owner of Martin's Restaurants (corporate headquarters in study area)

3. **Business and Civic Organizations**
   Ben Clopper – Mableton Improvement Coalition
   Lorien Tripani – South Cobb Arts Alliance
   David Wilkerson – State Representative
   Woody Thompson – District Commissioner

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below represent the primary issues discussed and outlined at the end of the TAP program. They were developed following the discussions and interviews throughout the program day with community leaders and stakeholders. The recommendations should be used to guide decision-making about next steps in planning and implementing redevelopment efforts for Mableton.

Leadership

Find a champion - Identifying leadership is key to making Mableton successful. A lot of groundwork has been laid to transform Mableton, and Mableton may be the County's number one redevelopment project, but now Mableton needs its own leader – someone to champion Mableton without the distraction of competing interests from other parts of the County. Mableton needs someone who can provide vision, inspiration, and leadership. At present, there is simply no guiding force that would be the one to sell Mableton when the brand is created and the marketing plan developed.

Create a leadership structure - An organizational structure must also be created to implement the initiatives – someone to get the work done.

Consider creating a township – Incorporation is clearly not the answer for Mableton at this time, but consider whether a township might be appropriate.

Marketing and Branding

The good news is that, with the state of the economic climate today, there is time to create a brand and marketing plan. Mableton is not too far behind neighboring communities in getting this done, but it must be done quickly or Mableton will be far behind the competition when the economy rebounds.

Form a Marketing Advisory Action Committee - Now is the perfect time to assemble a marketing advisory action committee that can work on the overall branding efforts for Mableton. The first step is to identify the team members who have the expertise to establish the overall brand and write a comprehensive marketing plan and budget. There are potential committee members who are already involved in the community and are working within the local Chamber of Commerce and civic and other organizations, such as the recreation department, who are already promoting the benefits of living, working and enjoying the lifestyle available within the local Mableton community. A total of 8 to 10 committee members should be adequate for this work. A recommendation would be to rotate half of the committee members each year and add new members who agree to serve for 12 months. That will be helpful in keeping the group fresh without overtaxing any of the volunteers. The effort of establishing the marketing advisory action committee could be done fairly quickly within 30 to 45 days. A committee chairperson who can commit to a minimum of 12 months as leader should be the first committee position identified.

Write a brand positioning statement - Once the committee is assembled, there are several steps which could be taken quickly. A brand positioning statement should be written about the vision and values that Mableton repre-

sents to current and residents, businesses, etc. The brand positioning statement should represent the core of what and who Mableton is and what the community desires to be in the future. The brand positioning statement will be the first step in "telling the Mableton story". Copy will need to be written for a website that will include the benefits, values and attributes associated with Mableton.

Hold an envisioning session - Once several potential taglines are established, an "Envisioning Session" should be scheduled for the key stakeholders of the brand. The Envisioning Session will assist in testing the positioning statement and potential positioning taglines among the stakeholders. The ultimate goal is to unite as a team behind the Mableton brand and begin the strategy of writing the detailed marketing plan and budget. The committee may choose to work with an outside marketing firm who specializes in branding and advertising and can conduct the envisioning session.

The brand positioning statement will allow the team to discuss ideas for a brand positioning selling tagline for Mableton. The tagline represents the market position that Mableton desires to claim. For example, several taglines that are very memorable are:

- *Nike, Just Do it.*
- *BMW, the Ultimate Driving Machine*
- *American Express, Don't Leave Home Without*
- *Avis, We Try Harder*
- *Apple, Think Different*
- *Miller Lite, Tastes Great Less Filling*
- *Chevy, Like a Rock*

Create and implement a marketing plan and budget – After forming a marketing advisory action committee and developing the Mableton brand, the next step is to create and implement a marketing plan. The marketing plan should include developing a website to promote events in Mableton and provide information to the public, coordinating a social media strategy and perhaps a blog, identifying targets for marketing and a plan for reaching those targets, such as brokers, sales agents, and developers. A funding mechanism is key for both creating and implementing a marketing plan, and the marketing plan must include budgets and timelines for action.

Part of the marketing plan should include a new domain name, new website and social media campaign. The website should be the core marketing tool that presents the overall brand to its viewers and the benefits all the Mableton community offers. The website statistics should be reviewed frequently to review key statistics like number of website visitors, the amount of time visitors are staying on the site, what pages they are viewing and where they seem to need more information. The social media tools can be employed including a blog which is housed on the website and presents fresh content about all of the activities, services, etc. that are offered in Mableton and South Cobb County. These blogs and posts can be written and loaded on a daily/weekly basis. The blog can feed directly to social media outlets like Facebook, Twitter, Google+, etc. Other tools including Pinterest, Linkedin, etc. can be utilized as well. Outside vendors may be sought to assist in the plan's implementation and should be asked to work within the budget.

In addition to the internet marketing efforts, other strategies like events, promotions, traditional media advertising, outreach program for real estate brokers and agents and people who influence people on where to move their business or choose a new area to live in should be utilized to bring the community of Mableton "to life". A comprehensive public relations program can also be an integral part of the overall marketing plan to assist in communicating to

the target audiences the success the Mableton community is having. The community garden, local concerts, races/ runs, etc. are successful press-worthy stories today's consumers appreciate and like to read and hear about.

The marketing plan should we reviewed each year and adjusted accordingly to meet any new goals or objectives set forward by the advisory committee.

Recruit brand ambassadors – You need brand ambassadors or people to carry out the marketing plan and "sell" Mableton. Roy Barnes is a great cheerleader for Mableton; considering hiring him as a brand ambassador or at least bringing him into the leadership structure in some fashion.

Deal with the negative perceptions – Fix what you can about the negative perceptions about Mableton. For example, if the negative opinion and concern about crime is really related to other areas of South Cobb rather than the Mableton area, figure out a way to create your own brand identity..

The key to the launch of the Mableton brand is to focus on the major assets and values that are most important to the target markets, prepare and implement a marketing plan and budget that will reach those target markets and be consistent in the program and its daily action steps.

Market Analysis

A study of both the supply and demand factors within a community must be undertaken in order to understand what the market can support. Once that has been analyzed, you can begin to refine the vision for the community. It does not do any good to have a vision for Mableton that is not supportable by the market. Commissioning a study helps everyone understand the facts rather than relying on perceptions. It also helps explain the realities to the community and leaders, who have often formed their own opinions about what the area needs. Changing existing perceptions is one step in the road to changing the reality.

Commission a market analysis - First, undertake a market analysis covering the next 5 to 10 years for the study area. The study conducted by Zimmerman/Volk Associates, Inc. issued in February 2009 simply did not go far enough because it only looked at residential property. The analysis also relied on 2008 data, and there have been dramatic shifts in the residential housing market in the last four years, so the information in that study is no longer reliable. Plus, market studies need to be updated every five years anyway. The new market analysis recommended should cover single family residential, multi-family residential, senior housing, retail, and culture/entertainment. This study should indicate what is really supportable in Mableton over the next 5 to 10 years. It should also provide information on rental and home sales prices and the absorption rate. The market study can be used as a marketing tool with potential developers, investors, and industry. The study should also help identify a catalytic site for development.

Study catalytic site - The next step is to take a more in-depth look at the catalytic site to determine the phasing elements of such a project that could attract other investors and developers. Attracting additional investment and development will help performance levels be achieved at the first site. This in-depth study should reveal how many and what type housing units should be built at the catalytic site, the target prices of the units, and identify the target market for the housing units. Providing this due diligence to a developer up front removes some of the entry costs/barriers for developers who are not necessarily looking to finance studies.

Development Approach

Develop a sense of place - Mableton is a bedroom community. Embrace that and understand that people are searching for community and a sense of belonging. If you can deliver that sense of place, the private investment will follow. A town center can be placemaking in that it brings civic uses together into a destination for residents. You should begin placemaking by leveraging the library, the Amphitheatre, and the Arts Center. Having pride of place will help prepare for development several years down the road when the time is right.

Embrace an infill strategy – Infill can be a bigger headache since you have to deal with multiple developers and developments instead of just one big development, but the form-based code will ease some of that pain. An infill strategy allows work to be done by a number of individuals, so you do not have to recruit a major developer. It is also a lower risk proposition. A mistake or poorly executed idea on a small piece of property is not as devastating to the community as a poorly developed big parcel. Plus, any kind of development, however small, that gets started is going to bring some momentum and create a positive buzz. Activity breeds activity, and most developers need to have some idea of what the area is going to look like before they want to get on board.

Utilize the form-based zoning code for marketing - Zoning is one of the biggest barriers to development. The form-based code is a real asset here and should be a part of any marketing materials.

Consider if land banking is appropriate or necessary - Land banking is a possibility for assembling land and holding on to it for future development, but it needs to be backed up with a "seed" or an idea. The seed might be a town center, or even two town centers. Roswell has two town centers, and that might be appropriate for Mableton. Several tracts are already somewhat assembled and primed for development, including the Barnes property, the retail along Bankhead Highway, and the commercial area along Floyd Road, so land assemblage may not be as big of a problem here as some believe.

Adopt a multigenerational approach - A multigenerational approach should be taken for residential development to attract young families as well as the senior demographic. Seniors will gravitate toward their adult children. The area that seems to make the most sense for senior development is near the Amphitheatre since it is closest to the most amenities.

Focus on moderate-income development – Development targeted at moderate-income individuals seems to make the most sense for the area.

Infrastructure Design and Improvements

There is not likely a demand for development in Mableton at this time, but that could change quickly. The County has taken a lot of steps, such as adoption of the form-based code, to be ready for development when it occurs, but there is more that can be done.

Work on road design - Consider designing roads within the study area to accommodate street parking to reduce the costs to a developer for off-street parking. Also look at a complete streets design which ensures that transportation planners and engineers consistently design and operate the entire roadway with **all users** in mind, including

bicyclists, public transportation vehicles and riders, and pedestrians of all ages and abilities.

Consider a regional storm water detention strategy - A regional storm water detention strategy would take a major burden off of developers instead of dealing with it on a parcel-by-parcel basis. There are also economies of scale, and it can be better for the environment. Regional storm water detention can also be used as an amenity where it includes parks and trails. Look at Smyrna and the Old Fourth Ward as examples.

Improve access points and signage - Study what can be done to improve the access points to make it seem easier to get to Mableton from I-20 and I-285. Improving the signage from the interstates can also contribute to the branding effort.

Development Tools

The reinvigorated redevelopment authority is a great start to have an organizing structure for implementing development tools, but it also needs a revenue stream.

TAD – Revive efforts to adopt a Tax Allocation District ("TAD") that would be effective December 31, 2012. If it does not get done this year, you lose a whole year. Property values are low right now, so now is the time to implement a TAD. A TAD also sends a message to the development community that Mableton is serious about development and open for business. While there has been some negative press about TADs, if a TAD were used to fund regional retention or sidewalks, the perception is that it should be well received. A TAD is not going to create magic right away, but once development starts coming to you, you can issue debt. Look at the redevelopment power in the Georgia Redevelopment Act to issue debt for soft costs on public or private land. This could be incorporated into the redevelopment plan that would be needed under the TAD.

CID – Evaluate the impact and feasibility of a Community Improvement District ("CID"). A CID does not have to be huge, but it could generate some revenue to pay for the market analysis or way-finding signage. It is also a way to get commercial property owners together and organized, which could be useful in implementing some of the other recommendations. Look at the CIDs for the Fulton Industrial area or the Airport/Hapeville area for examples.

Community Improvement District

- Has been used successfully around the country to revitalize center cities
- CID funds can augment existing services such as public safety and they can also be used to leverage additional public and private funds. Conservatively, CID funds can be used to leverage such funds at a ratio of 4 to 1.
- A CID is a geographically defined district in which commercial property owners vote to impose a self-tax. To enact a CID, a simple majority of affected property owners holding at least 75% of the assessed property value of the area must vote affirmatively
- The Georgia Constitution specifies that funds collected through a CID may be used for seven types of applications:
    - ◊ Water
    - ◊ Public transportation
    - ◊ Street and road construction and maintenance
    - ◊ Parks and recreational areas and facilities
    - ◊ Storm water and sewage
    - ◊ Parking, terminal and dock facilities

Special District Power – Explore the special district power, which could be created by general law (like the Regional Transportation Referendum) or can be created by local legislation at the County level. The hotel/motel tax is levied this way. The Cobb County fire district is a special district. The purpose of the special district would be to provide enhanced government services, which would be a revenue stream for the Sponsor. Any special district created needs to be community-based, transparent, and accountable.

MARKET POTENTIAL

The South Cobb area has a high percentage of 55+ residents. The trend toward a higher percentage of older residents is expected to continue with an estimated 85% growth in the older population between 2005 and 2030. This tremendous shift will transform the region and challenge every aspect of community life: healthcare, transportation, employment, housing, recreation and leisure, economic development, infrastructure expansion, and education. It will affect the way public and private services are delivered, homes are built, even the way streets are crossed. The challenges of helping older adults maximize their independence and dignity for as long as possible requires skills, policy changes, funding and program shifts beyond the traditional aging network.

At the same time local governmental agencies are confronting the needs of the growing older adult population without the expertise that is required. Community infrastructure planning and development often occur in absence of input from the service delivery system, a practice that continues to perpetuate silos that fragment communities. If the service delivery system could demonstrate its ability to wrap itself around the development of a community designed to accommodate all ages, a true model for aging in place—a "lifelong community"—would emerge. The best long-term strategy for Mableton is to adopt a multigenerational approach instead of focusing just on senior services.

There are amenities and infrastructure in the area that can significantly aid in building a Lifelong Community, including a public transit system with many routes in South Cobb, the Mable House Cultural Arts Center and Amphitheater, the South Cobb Community Center, Lions Park, Silver Comet Trail, WellStar Cobb Hospital, two established senior centers, a library, a post office, and significant retail that includes grocery stores, drugstores, restaurants, and local businesses.

MABLETON STRENGTHS & CHALLENGES

The following findings are the product of the Panel members' tour of the site and the stakeholder interviews conducted throughout the program day.

Strengths

Proximity to Atlanta and Access to Major Roads

One of Mableton's greatest asset is its proximity to interstates and major roads. There are a number of exurban dwellers that are looking to move closer in to Atlanta, and Mableton is in the ideal location for such buyers. In addition, Mableton is very close to Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, which is a great attraction for the large number of people that work in or around the airport as well as those business people that travel a great deal.

There is also a significant amount of undeveloped land remaining in the area, which is rare for an area this close to downtown Atlanta. As people move closer in to Atlanta, they also accept smaller houses and higher density. Mableton is at the perfect crossroads to offer proximity, density, and land ready to develop.

Arts

Mableton has become something of a mecca for arts in South Cobb through the Mable House Arts Center, the historic Mable House, the Barnes Amphitheatre, and the South Cobb Arts Alliance ("SCAA"), a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the visual arts, performing arts, and local heritage of Mableton. SCAA has made great strides for the area through a dedicated group of volunteers. Many of the activities at the Mable House Arts Center and the Amphitheatre are organized and run by SCAA. When the Amphitheater was struggling, SCAA started a concert series themselves. They have attracted concert promoters, and local churches and Six Flags have also started using the event space. Exhibits at the Arts Center change every few weeks, and the exhibit openings have become community events.

The Mable House Complex serves a mixed demographic group, and attendance ranges from school groups to senior citizens. There is a theater series for grades 6 to 12, but older adults tend to be the majority of table/season ticket holders, though younger families are starting to get involved.

Library

The new South Cobb Regional Library has been a major draw for the area since it first opened. The library has the highest rate of computer use compared to all other Cobb County libraries. In addition, 44,000 people out of 60,000 in the radius around the library hold library cards. This high use by residents may be because many area households do not have access to computers or books, except through the library. The library also serves all segments of the population and offers GED classes, adult reading programs, and one-on-one tutoring. The library staff are "navigators" of information, and people come to the library to learn how to use new technologies.

Access to Silver Comet Trail

Through sidewalks, you can get to the Silver Comet Trail from just about anywhere in Mableton. The Silver Comet Trail is a great amenity for the area and the most-used park in Cobb County.

Form-based Zoning Code

Development has begun to occur in the area since the adoption of the form-based code. Three public projects are underway that are beginning to implement the code. Floyd Road has a multi-use trail and a planted median underway; slip lanes will be added in a future phase. The road connection between Old Floyd Road and Church Street will culminate in a Savannah-style square, and a clock tower will be the focal point of the new school. In addition, some individuals are already starting to consolidate property in the area for future development.

Support from Cobb County

The County is providing great incentives to develop and has been taking steps over the last 10 years to transform Mableton. Adoption of the form-based code and engaging ARC's Lifelong Communities Initiative are great first steps.

Volunteer Associations

One of Mableton's best assets is its volunteer organizations. Without its own governmental structure in place, Mableton is really dependent on these volunteer organizations. Even where a city government is in place, it is generally through the work of organizations that an area becomes a success.

In addition to SCAA described above, the Mableton Improvement Coalition ("MIC") is a volunteer group of residents working to promote the area. While it originated out of a zoning proposal and still works on zoning issues, the organization has branched out into other areas needing improvement. The MIC works through an economic development committee to attract new business to the area, although it does not have any real authority. It also serves as an information clearinghouse in the absence of a city government or organized homeowners associations. It is involved in Mableton Day, sponsors Boys & Girls Club, and sponsors adopt-a-mile improvement zones along Floyd Road.

Challenges

Poor Reputation

While Mableton has the same services as Smyrna, it is gained a negative reputation, so homes in the Mableton zip code are simply not worth what they should be. Unfortunately, there is a perception by many that they will be accosted on Bankhead Highway, despite the fact that the crime statistics do not support that perception. The South Cobb Aquatic Center is a great attraction, but some residents will not consider going because it is located on Six Flags Drive. Much of the negative opinions really relate to the Six Flags area, and Mableton got saddled with the poor reputation of the Six Flags area when there was no one rebutting the misperception. The negative reputation sometimes makes it difficult for Mableton to leverage the assets it has. Many area residents would like to get out of Mableton and into Smyrna, which is further along in its development. Yet, Mableton has much closer access to Atlanta, which Smyrna cannot offer.

In addition, Mableton has also had to fight a reputation for being "redneck." The perception is that this has changed some, particularly with the two John Weiland subdivisions, but more work needs to be done to change this attitude.

Schools

While development has certainly cooled due to the economy, not all development has dried up. Some developers are looking to develop infill areas with great schools. Unfortunately, this does not include the Mableton area due to real or perceived problems with the area schools. The quality of the school district is one of the most important considerations in deciding where to live, both for those who have children that will enter the school system, as well as those without school-age children since the quality and reputation of the schools affects property values.

Russell Elementary School, Floyd Middle School, and South Cobb High School are all Title I schools, meaning that 40% of the attendance area or enrollment are low-income families. Nonetheless, test score rankings exceed the state average scores for Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) Floyd Middle School had trouble for a few years, but it is now making adequate yearly progress benchmarks. Some families take advantage of the magnet program to go to school in other parts of the County. All of the schools have parent-involvement programs, such as Dad's clubs, PTAs, etc., and the engagement of parents seems to be growing.

A lot of infrastructure changes have been made to improve the schools. The brand new Mableton Elementary School brings together Sky View Elementary and Mableton Elementary under one roof. South Cobb High School also had a huge addition of a 9th grade center, which gives the school a facelift and a much better feel coming in. Challenges remain, however, for the high school.

More work could also be done to improve community relations to combat the negative opinions about schools. It is also obvious that whatever real problems exist with the schools should be ad-

dressed. It will always be a challenge to sell residential property as long as the area schools have poor reputations. Intergenerational relationships could be nurtured, such as partnering with a senior community. Perhaps additional after-school programs could be created.

Lack of Clear Leadership Structure

Mableton is at a disadvantage because it has no guiding force. It is not a city and does not have its own government leadership. Cobb County generally, and particularly the South Cobb Redevelopment Authority, have taken great efforts to support and promote Mableton, but they also have a constituency that is much broader than just Mableton. So, at the end of the day, there is no one who is dedicated just to Mableton.

Mableton does not need to be a separate incorporated area. It does not need to add the problems that incorporation brings to its plate. It also probably does not have the tax base to support incorporation. Usually a city is formed when there is development coming in order to gain control over it. The other reason is when there is a disconnect between the area and the county. A township bill could work for Mableton. Only one or two services need to be provided for a township, and there would be a staff to provide the area leadership needed. A public/private partnership could also help bridge the gap between the people who have been here a long time and any new people coming in. When there are changes in demographics, you can lose the history of the area – the sense of place.

Regardless of the structure, Mableton does need a more unifying structure and coordination of efforts by groups working in the area that a city government or business coalition often provides. The resources of the existing volunteer organizations are simply stretched too thin to provide the unifying structure and cohesive leadership the area needs.

There is also an identity problem. Most of the real leadership structures serve South Cobb County, such as the Sponsor, the South Cobb division of the Chamber of Commerce, and the South Cobb Business Association, but even within South Cobb, there are vastly different dynamics, demographics, and goals. The Austell and Six Flags areas are very different than the Mableton area, and it is difficult for one organization to serve all of these purposes and goals. Mableton needs its own vehicle for marketing and branding Mableton, and, at present, there is no organization that has the leadership, structure, and funding to serve this function.

Lack of an Identity

Before you can really promote Mableton, community leaders need to figure out what the product is that it wants to promote. What is Mableton? There are too many mixed messages right now, and there is not a clearly defined product. What story do you want to tell? You need to find a common thread. Are you embracing the history and marketing a historic small town? Are you trying to more like East Cobb and promoting a new town? Is Mableton to be an arts community? Or a retirement community?

The message of history and the arts is jumbled right now and confusing. The historic Mable House seems to be getting lost in the midst of the Amphitheatre, the Arts Center, and the arts programming. You do not have to abandon one aspect of the community, but you need to find a clear, defining identity -- a brand -- to help potential buyers and visitors know who and what you are. There also seems to be a disconnect between how ARC describes its purposes with the Lifelong Mableton Initiative. Sometimes it sounds more like it is the structure/framework for a community that works for all ages, but other times, it seems driven by senior services. This is also contributing

to the identity problem.

Improving way-finding for getting to Mableton and throughout Mableton will also help create the identity of the area. Way-finding is key to helping people get around once you have gotten them to Mableton.

Many of the different organizations are using social media to promote their events and venues, but there is not a coordinated effort or a unified message going out.

Community Activities

There are simply not enough activities in the area at present to attract first-time homebuyers in the 29- to 35-year old age group. In addition, communities need to offer activities for the young adult renters in their early to mid-30s. A true lifelong community needs to include all age groups. Residents that develop an interest in the community early on will want to invest there when it comes time to buy a home or even retire. Right now, there is not enough retail or the right mix of retail to keep the young adults interested. Residents are leaving Mableton to visit Inman Park, Vinings, and similar areas where they can eat and walk around. If there were more entertainment and retail opportunities in Mableton, those dollars could stay in Mableton to support the local economy.

Mableton competes with the East/West Connector, and there is a lot of significant development going on there. Veterans Memorial Highway looks tired and is badly in need of sprucing up. The two John Wieland Homes subdivisions have helped, but more needs to be done. Mableton could have a first class shopping area that could work its way up Veterans Memorial Highway. There are simply no shopping or retail districts at present that coalesce the community.

Local Spending

To support more retail and a greater retail mix, more people need to be living and shopping in the area. In addition, there needs to be a larger percentage of residents in the middle- to upper-income brackets. The more money people have to spend, the more they will spend. More often today, people are buying food and making other purchases on their way home from work, and Mableton is simply missing out on this spending. There are not enough dining or shopping opportunities to attract residents or others passing through Mableton on their way elsewhere. However, the human infrastructure is not in place yet to adequately support additional retail. Much of America has been over-developed in terms of retail, and retail models have changed as a result. Most national retailers are taking a more conservative approach to make sure the market is in place before entering a community.

MABLETON OPPORTUNITIES

Development Incentives

There was some mixed opinion about land banking and whether it is the right fit for Mableton. Land banking is a great opportunity where governmental organizations are able to take advantage of cheap land prices. Despite good land prices, however, it has become much harder for developers to buy large tracts of land and then sit on it until the time is right to develop due to the carrying costs. Developers generally do not have the funds it requires to buy all of the land up front, and financing is too difficult and expensive these days to pay the debt service to hold onto the land until the time is right for development. Many developers are purchasing land on a takedown schedule over time.

If there is an ability of the Sponsor to buy land and hold it, that is the best way to consolidate and assemble land until the time is right for a developer to buy and develop it. By assembling and controlling the land, the Sponsor can also help to ensure that development will occur consistent with the vision for the community.

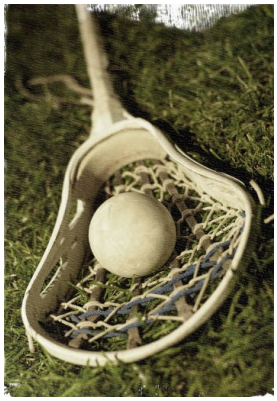
However, land banking does not work if the governmental entity has to buy the land at market rate. In addition, if land banking is pursued, you must make sure that there are no encumbrances on what the land must be used for if your ultimate goal is to sell it to a for-profit developer. For example, if park bonds are used to buy the land, the land must be used for a park.

You must also examine the reason for the land banking. If the purpose is to provide public services, such as parking or storm water retention, those kinds of services could be provided by the County on a regional basis to minimize the responsibility of the private developer with respect to public services.

Public Transportation

Mableton can leverage its bus system. There are few areas that are serviced by an extensive public transportation system like the Cobb County system. Unfortunately, despite efforts to improve sidewalks and walkability, the Atlanta area simply is not walkable as a practical matter due to the heat in the summer. The public transportation system is a good selling point that many people overlook.

Recreation



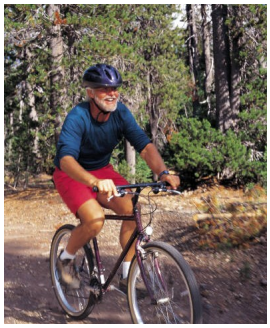
The stakeholders discussed a number of ways Mableton can use recreation to promote and brand Mableton. Recreation leagues and tournaments can draw large crowds and yet they have low capital expenses. The City of McDonough hosted a youth baseball tournament for ages 10 to 14 that drew hundreds of baseball teams. There is a tournament in East Cobb and one in Central Cobb that are big draws, but South Cobb has not yet capitalized on this.

More could be done to promote and support lacrosse, which is the fastest growing sport in the area. Football and soccer have leveled out. Wallace Park is the largest park close to Mableton (5 miles away) with sports fields. It is getting a facelift through the SPLOST program. It would be great if a recreation center were located across the street from the new school. A YMCA was on the list of projects for SPLOST funding, but it was one of the first things that came off the list as the list got pared down.

Building Community

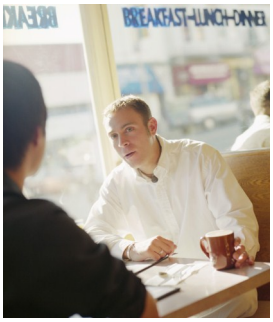
Many buyers are looking for that small town feel, which Mableton can offer. They want the small town look and feel but without the exurban commute to employment. Through the Lifelong Mableton Initiative, a one-acre community garden has been established, and a consortium hosts a farmers market on Thursday mornings. Mableton can continue to build on its small town appeal with more events like these.

Destination



Due to the access to the Silver Comet Trail, Mableton could be a destination if there were more amenities in the area. It would be great if people could come to Mableton on a Saturday to go biking, visit a farmers market, and eat at a local restaurant. Many Cobb County residents view East Cobb as the primary area for attracting services, but Mableton is gaining traction through the Mable House Complex and the arts community.

Town Square



A new town square is the most likely project that could be a catalyst to spur other development as well as create a sense of place. The town center vision needs to be broader than just the property right behind the school; it needs to go all the way down Floyd Road. Right now, there are pockets of public facilities but no way to connect them. There needs to be some type of retail anchor to support a town square, and then development will grow around it. There could be higher density around the town square. Exurban people moving closer in to Atlanta generally accept smaller houses. County facilities and the hospital will need to have a presence in a town square. The town square concept is getting away from the swimming pool and tennis court subdivisions of the past several decades and instead utilizing walking trails and community parks and gardens for recreation and public space.

Leverage Existing Assets

Mableton has some great public assets already that should be further leveraged to provide additional activities attractive for younger residents (20s to 30s) and to help develop a pride of place. These assets include the library, Amphitheatre, historic Mable House, Mable House Arts Center, and access to the Silver Comet Trail. The Amphitheatre needs more visibility, and the imposing retaining wall may be holding the Amphitheatre back from its full potential. Consider reworking this site to open up the space more.

IMPLEMENTATION

To help prioritize the next steps in implementing the TAP recommendations, below is a plan of action suggested by the TAP.

Short Term (6 months – 1 year)

- Identify a champion to provide inspiration, vision and leadership
- Form a Marketing Advisory Committee
- Commission a full market analysis covering single family residential, multi-family residential, senior housing, retail, and culture/entertainment
- Pass a TAD to be effective December 31, 2012

Medium Term (1 year – 3 years)

- Create an organizational structure or a point person that is dedicated fulltime to implementing the vision and working with leadership
- Develop the Mableton brand by writing a positioning paper and/or holding an envisioning session
- Create and implement a marketing plan, including identifying a strategy for funding marketing efforts
- Recruit brand ambassadors
- Conduct a more thorough market analysis study of a catalytic site and use the information to market the site to developers
- The form-based code is a real asset; incorporate it into marketing materials
- Begin to develop pride of place by leveraging the assets you have now – the library, the Mable House Complex, and access to Silver Comet Trail
- Work on infrastructure design for on-street parking and regional storm water detention strategy
- Improve way-finding from major roads as well as within Mableton
- Evaluate the impact and feasibility of a CID
- Explore the power of a special district

Long Term (3+ years)

- Improve access from interstates

CONCLUSION

While there is not likely any demand for development in Mableton right now, that could change quickly, and Mableton needs to be poised to attract development when the economy begins to rebound. Cobb County has begun to lay the groundwork for redevelopment, but a lot more work is required before Mableton is ready to attract significant development.

The good news is that Mableton has the potential to be the ideal candidate for future development. There are a number of exurban dwellers that are looking to move closer in to Atlanta, and Mableton could be very attractive to these buyers. Mableton is far closer to Atlanta than most competing areas, like Smyrna, and it has good access to major roads and the airport. There is also a large amount of undeveloped land remaining in Mableton, which is a huge asset. The adoption of the form-based code and the support of Cobb County also make Mableton attractive for development.

But, Mableton is not yet the attraction it should be and could be. Mableton does not yet have a sense of place, and it lacks a clearly defined identity. There are too many mixed messages, and people are confused about what Mableton is. Mableton needs a brand – a concise story that engenders the right message, image, and identity that Mableton wants to project.

Mableton also suffers from a poor reputation at present. Some of the negative reputation is legitimate, but the rest is based misperception. Creating the right brand and getting that message out will help dispel the myths. It is also obvious that work needs to be done to address the real problems, such as schools. Since the quality of the school district is one of the most important considerations in deciding where to live, it will always be difficult to sell residential real estate in an area where schools have poor reputations.

Another disadvantage for Mableton is that it has no guiding force, no champion of its own. Since the Mableton area is not supported by an official city structure, there is a great need for a more unifying structure, cohesive leadership, and improved coordination of services. Mableton needs its own vehicle for marketing and branding Mableton without competing interests from other constituents. There is no organization at present that has leadership, structure, and funding to serve this function.

Despite these hurdles, Mableton has a great story and history and has the ability to offer the small town feel and sense of place that many buyers desire. The arts environment, the library, the Mable House Complex, and access to the Silver Comet Trail are great assets for Mableton that need to be built upon and leveraged. Mableton has strong volunteer organizations in place that are already working to make Mableton engaging. These organizations are a great asset because it is ultimately the work of organizations like these that can make Mableton a destination. Mableton is an engaged community, and it now needs to organize around a new identity and vision to create its next chapter.

PICTURES FROM THE DAY

PANELISTS BIOS

Bill de St. Aubin graduated from Georgia Institute of technology in 1985 with a Masters in Architecture. He then worked as an Architect for Rosser international before joining Sizemore group in 1993. He is currently a senior partner at Sizemore Group, LLC and guides the firm's business development strategies while providing expertise on Sustainable Planning and Architecture to the development industry. He is a founding board member of the Atlanta Chapter of the Congress for New Urbanism and a subject matter expert for the United States Green Building Council (UGBC). Bill has published several papers, conducted seminars and received design awards for his work in sustainable town planning and architecture.

Mr. de St. Aubin lives in the East Cobb Community with his wife, Sandi, and their two children.

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Stephen Arms has managed a wide range of real estate projects throughout North America. His experience includes most major property types as well as having overseen every activity related to the development and asset management process. Stephen began his career in real estate as Development Manager for the pre Olympic renovation of the Woodruff Arts Center. Prior to his full time commitment to Marthasville Development in 2002, Stephen oversaw development and program management activities throughout the Southeast for CB Richard Ellis.

Marthasville was created to focus on horizontal and vertical development projects with a special emphasis on sustainable, mixed-use, historic, and moderate to high-density housing projects throughout the Southeast. The firm's goal is to create or contribute to real places.

Stephen has acted as a "catalytic developer" on numerous projects including City Side at Town Center and Riverview Landing (both located in Cobb County), other New Urbanist projects in the southeast, as well as smaller infill projects. Working on polar ends of the development spectrum helps by ensuring that neighborhood scale is appropriate given a site's context and at the same time that the details of "walkable urbanism" are extended into the front door of stores, offices, and residences.

Stephen holds a Bachelor's degree from Louisiana State University and Masters in Business Administration degree from Emory University. Stephen is a Certified Public Accountant and is or has been a volunteer for numerous industry, governmental and non-profit organizations, including the Fulton County Arts Council, Brain Injury Association of Georgia, Atlanta Regional Commission, Department of Community Affairs, and the Urban Land Institute.

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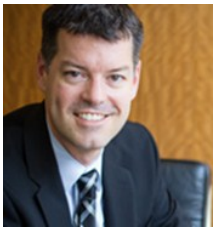

Brendan Barr joined NorSouth as Assistant Vice President of Development in 2006. Now, as Vice President, Brendan works on the origination of new projects, including feasibility determination, site acquisition, deal structure and oversight of the design development process. He also represents The NorSouth Companies in various government, industry and community meetings. Brendan's experience includes new construction, urban in-fill and adaptive reuse projects in the multifamily and for-sale industries. Prior to joining NorSouth, Brendan was a Development Manager for ROSS Development and Investment in Bethesda, Md. Here, he was responsible for the day-to-day oversight of projects, including zoning, design, permitting, marketing and all pre-construction and construction activities. Brendan also spent six years with Forest City Enterprises, Inc., a national development and management firm of residential, commercial, retail and hospitality real estate. A graduate of the University of Rhode Island, Brendan also earned a MSRE from Johns Hopkins University. He is an active member in the Atlanta district of the Urban Land Institute, and lives in Atlanta with his wife, Kristen, and son.

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Sharon Gay is a partner in the Public Policy Department of the Atlanta office of McKenna Long & Aldridge LLP. She concentrates her practice in state and local government law, particularly in the areas of tax allocation district financing and other economic development incentives, transportation, land use and zoning, and public-private partnerships.

Sharon is recognized as a key player in pioneering the use of tax allocation district financing in Georgia. She has worked with local governments and developers throughout the state to create tax allocation districts to provide funds for community redevelopment. During the 2008 session of the Georgia General Assembly, she coordinated the lobbying effort to obtain passage of a resolution authorizing a constitutional amendment to restore the ability of local school districts to participate in tax allocation districts. That amendment was approved by the voters in the November 2008 election. Sharon then drafted the bill and led the successful effort to re-enact the Redevelopment Powers Law in the 2009 legislative session.

Sharon is active in civic and charitable organizations and has served on numerous boards and commissions. She currently serves on the Finance Committee of Citizens for Transportation Mobility, the Board of Trustees of Reinhardt University, the boards of the Historic Fourth Ward Park Conservancy and Georgians for Passenger Rail, and is a member of the Transportation Policy Committee of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. She previously chaired the board of Atlanta Neighborhood Development Partnership and was a founding board member and Vice Chair of the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority. She is a graduate of Leadership Atlanta and the Regional Leadership Institute. Sharon has been named by Georgia Trend as one of Georgia's "100 Most Influential People."

Sharon is a graduate of Vanderbilt University and the Emory University School of Law. She and her husband, Neil Schemm, reside in the Inman Park neighborhood of Atlanta.

Michael McLaughlin has over 30 years of planning and economic development experience in both the public and private sector. He is an Urban Designer that has focused on solving complex commercial and neighborhood development issues in cities across the Southeast and several locations across the country, and including projects in Europe and Central America.

Past Senior positions have included working with Winter Development, Robert and Company Architects and Engineers, Fulton County Planning and Economic Development, Lord, Aeck and Sargent Architecture, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. A primary focus of his work has been related to downtown and neighborhood redevelopment.

A resident of Virginia Highland since 1987, Michael gained considerable experience as the owner of a development company that focused on preservation of historic structures in and around his neighborhood for approximately 12 years until 2007.

Michael became the Planning and Economic Development Director for the City of Morrow in the summer of 2010.

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Ellen Mendelsohn is a manager in the Commercial Real Estate Consulting practice in the Atlanta office of Reznick Group. She provides market-based strategies for acquisitions, development, and community revitalization. Ellen advises public and private sector clients to ensure their investments are supportable in the marketplace as well as financially feasible. Prior to joining Reznick Group, Ellen was Vice President of Economic Development at Central Atlanta Progress. She developed and executed collaborative initiatives that enhanced the real estate development climate in Downtown. Ellen led the economic development efforts to prepare for the future Atlanta Streetcar by analyzing local zoning codes, market demand, property values, available incentives, and underutilized parcels along the route. While at CAP, Ellen was loaned as a project manager to the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, where she focused on the design, construction, public financing, and operations plan of this upcoming 70,000 square foot cultural facility in Downtown Atlanta. Ellen previously worked as a project manager at RCLCO where she analyzed opportunities for developers and communities throughout the Southeast.

Ellen graduated with a bachelor's degree in sociology from Emory University and a master's degree in City and Regional Planning from Georgia Tech. Ellen sits on both the Management Committee and Advisory Board of the Atlanta chapter of the Urban Land Institute and chairs the organization's Center for Leadership program. Ellen graduated from the 2010 class of LEAD Atlanta, a program of Leadership Atlanta focused on improving the city, and she continues her involvement as a program day co-chair for subsequent LEAD classes. She volunteers a historic Downtown Atlanta tour guide with the Atlanta Preservation Center, and she sits on the Advisory Board of the Emory Alumni Association's Atlanta Council.

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Betsy Sheppard, Founder and President of Gilbert & Sheppard Group based in Atlanta, Georgia, is a 30 year veteran in the marketing, advertising and public relations industry. A graduate of Georgia Southern University, Betsy has worked primarily in the residential real estate/housing industry during her career. Betsy has served as Chairman of the Board for the Atlanta 50+ Housing Council and has served as a board member for the Atlanta Green Building Council, Atlanta Sales & Marketing Council and the Council on Elder Abuse & Neglect. She is currently serving on the Board of Trustees for the Thanks Mom and Dad Fund. Betsy was recently awarded the 2010 Chairman of the Board Award from the Greater Atlanta Homebuilders Association. Gilbert & Sheppard Group, a full service marketing and advertising consulting firm, has won numerous national, regional and local marketing and advertising awards. The company is a member of the South Carolina and Georgia Homebuilders Association and the National Association of Homebuilders.