

Strengthening Atlanta's Historic Neighborhood Planning Units



ROHIT MALHOTRA
Executive Director



**CENTER
FOR CIVIC
INNOVATION
ATLANTA**

MAYNARD JACKSON, JR.

1938-2003

**"WITHOUT A STRUCTURED
INTERCHANGE BETWEEN
CITIZENS AND GOVERNMENT,
ON EVERY LEVEL, WE
CANNOT HOPE TO FIND THE
MOST CREATIVE AND VIABLE
SOLUTIONS TO THE
PROBLEMS WHICH FACE US
ALL."**





THE ROLE OF RACE

Asile Patin

Civic Engagement Manager

NPU N

Kyle Kessler

Policy & Research Director

NPU M

Nedra Deadwyler

Senior Director of Civic Engagement

NPU O

Rohit Malhotra

Executive Director

NPU M

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Betsy DiSalvo – Academic Partner, Georgia Tech
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Sagirah Jones

Leah LaRue

Bithia Ratnasamy

Debbie Skopczynski

Citywide League of Neighborhoods

APAB Ad Hoc Committee

Georgia Tech College of Design

West Atlanta Watershed Alliance

Atlanta Bicycle Coalition

Department of City Planning

Atlanta Housing

APAB President

NPU N

NPU I

NPU E

NPU S

NPU X

NPU J

NPU W

NPU F

LEON EPLAN

1928-2021

**Atlanta's First Commissioner
of the Department of Budget
and Planning**



THE NPU INITIATIVE

An Overview

**The Neighborhood
Planning Unit system
has not been formally
reviewed or evaluated
since 1978.**

THE NPU INITIATIVE

An Overview

In 2018, after 4 years of advocating for the NPU system to be strengthened, the Center for Civic Innovation (CCI) launched the **NPU Initiative as a comprehensive study and review of the NPU system**, with the goal of strengthening how people in Atlanta are heard and engaged in decisions made by the City of Atlanta.



THE NPU INITIATIVE

An Overview

Over the course of three years, CCI learned from and met with hundreds of individuals and organizations through one-on-one interviews, focus groups, community and board meetings, council sessions, and a city-wide survey.

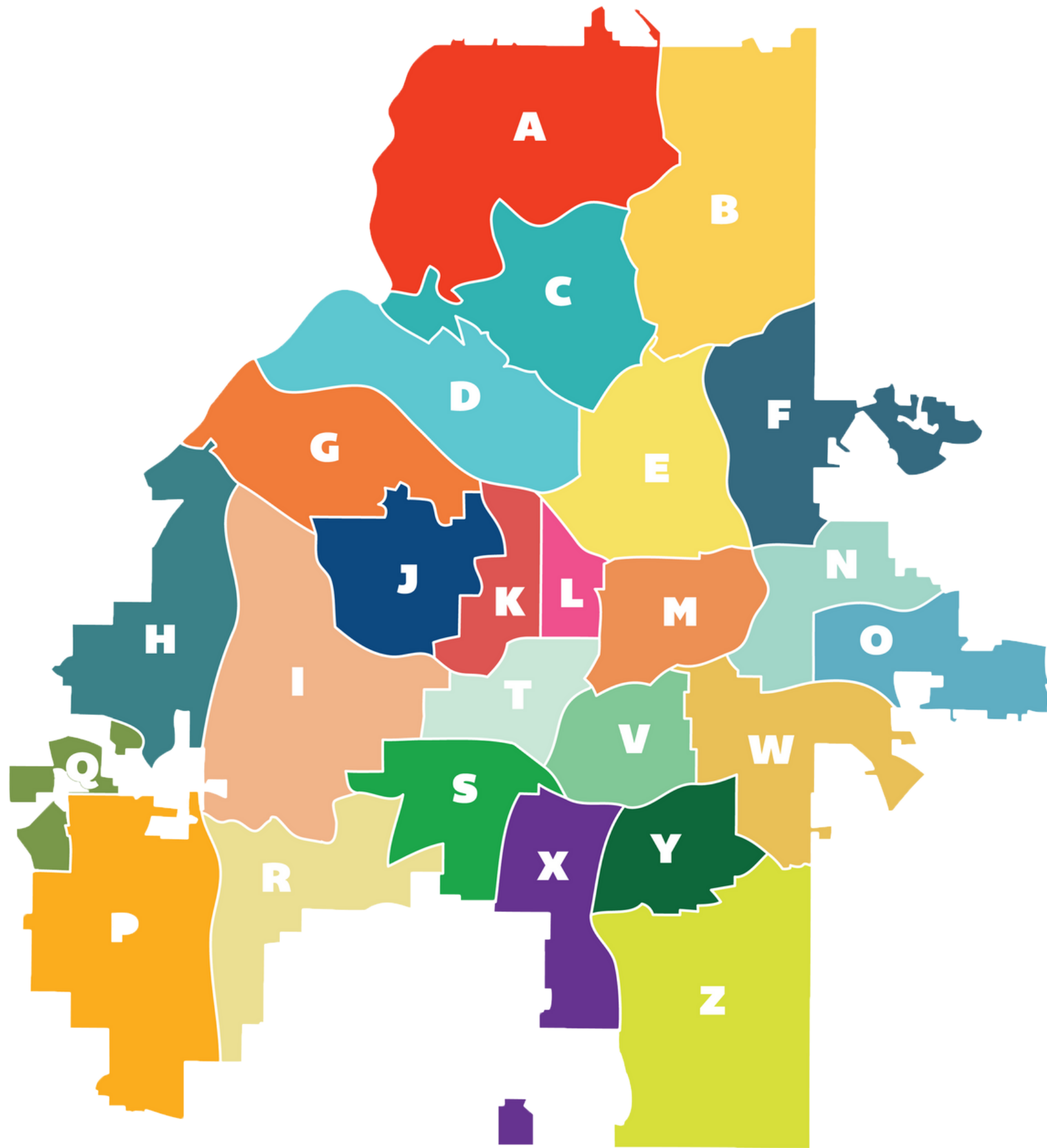
Together we co-designed 10 recommendations to strengthen the NPU system.

KYLE KESSLER

Policy & Research Director

ASILE PATIN

Community Engagement Manager



An NPU is:

- a geographic area composed of one or more contiguous neighborhoods, and
- a body of residents organized for the purpose of engaging in comprehensive planning matters affecting the livability of neighborhoods

25 NPUs, One Atlanta

There are now 25 NPUS one for every letter of the alphabet except for “U.”

Originally, there were 24 but “Q” was added in 2009.

NPU SYSTEM

State of Georgia

- Executive**
 - Department of Community Affairs (DCA)
- Legislative**
 - General Assembly
- Judicial**
 - Courts

- City Charter
- Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP)

City of Atlanta

- Executive**
 - Dept. of City Planning (DCP)
 - Other Offices & Departments
- Legislative**
 - City Council
- Judicial**
 - Solicitor & Courts

- Code of Ordinances
- Law Department Opinions

BACEs*

- Atlanta Planning Advisory Board
- Board of Zoning Adjustment (BZA)
- License Review Board (LRB)
- Zoning Review Board (ZRB)

*Boards, Authorities, Commissions, etc.

NPUs

Neighborhood Planning Units

Neighborhood, Civic, Business, and Homeowner Associations

- Bylaws
- Rules of Order
- Small Area Plans

“Residents”

- Residents
- Property Owners
- Business & Organizational Representatives

Other:
Counties, Atlanta Public Schools, Invest Atlanta, etc.

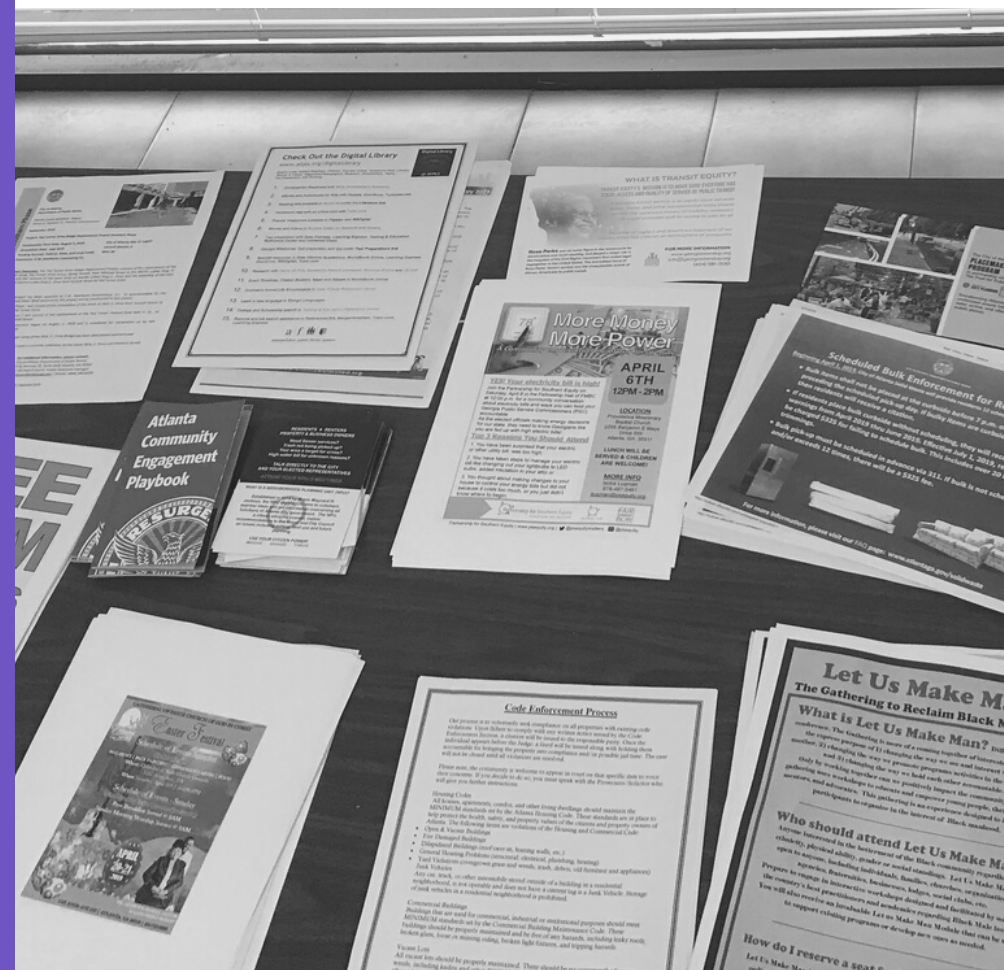
PHASE ONE: LISTEN

historical research,
discovery, listening
through meetings
and conversations



PHASE TWO: LEARN

stakeholder
interviews, focus
groups, and a
survey



PHASE THREE: LEAD

data analysis, idea
working groups,
co-designing
recommendations



DATA & INFO SOURCES

65

interviews with NPU leaders, City Council, Planners, NPU Team, and other stakeholders

10000+

survey responses (670 complete) on community engagement in Atlanta

25

NPU's visited on "World Tour" from the beginning to the end of their meetings

10

and counting years of NPU recommendations to the ZRB, BZA, and LRB

16

ideas and working sessions to co-design the strategy and outcomes of the process

47+

years of archival materials reviewed including news articles, speeches, codes, agenda, bylaws, etc.



Overview of the 10 Recommendations

We co-designed 10 recommendations
that will strengthen Atlanta's NPU
System.

RECOMMENDATION CATEGORIES

**PURPOSES OF
THE SYSTEM**

**LEADERSHIP +
CAPACITY**

**ACCOUNTABILITY
+ EVALUATION**



Strengthening the NPU System's Purpose

Challenge #1

There is **significant misalignment** between the City of Atlanta—including the Mayor, City Council, and the Department of City Planning (DCP)—the Atlanta Planning Advisory Board (APAB), Neighborhood Planning Units (NPUs), neighborhood organizations, and the general public **on the purposes and goals of the NPU system**, and therefore key stakeholders in the NPU system lack clarity and are not held accountable on their roles and responsibilities.

According to the City's Code of Ordinances

Purpose of the NPU System

“It is hereby found and declared that **in order to be truly comprehensive, City plans must be responsive to the needs and concerns of citizens; that a plan which allows for diversified and responsive citizen involvement must be developed within the scope and content of the Atlanta City Charter...**”

— preamble of 1974 Citizen Involvement Ordinance

“It is the purpose of this article to provide an opportunity both for the citizenry formally:

- **to provide input into the comprehensive development plan of the City of Atlanta** and
- **to provide a means by which information concerning the operation of City Government can be provided to the citizens of Atlanta.**”

— Atlanta City Code § 6-3011, first adopted in 1979

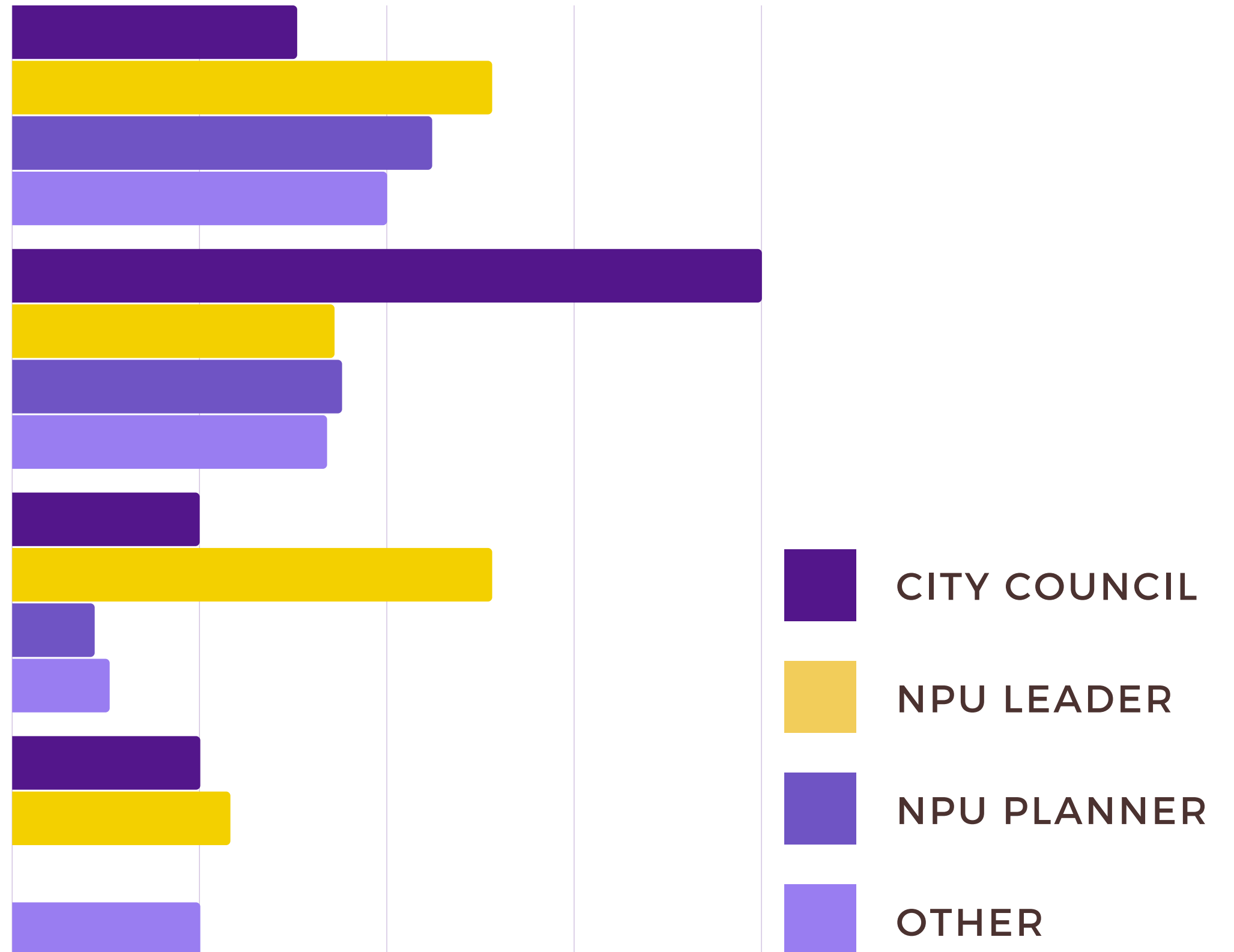
Purposes of the NPU System

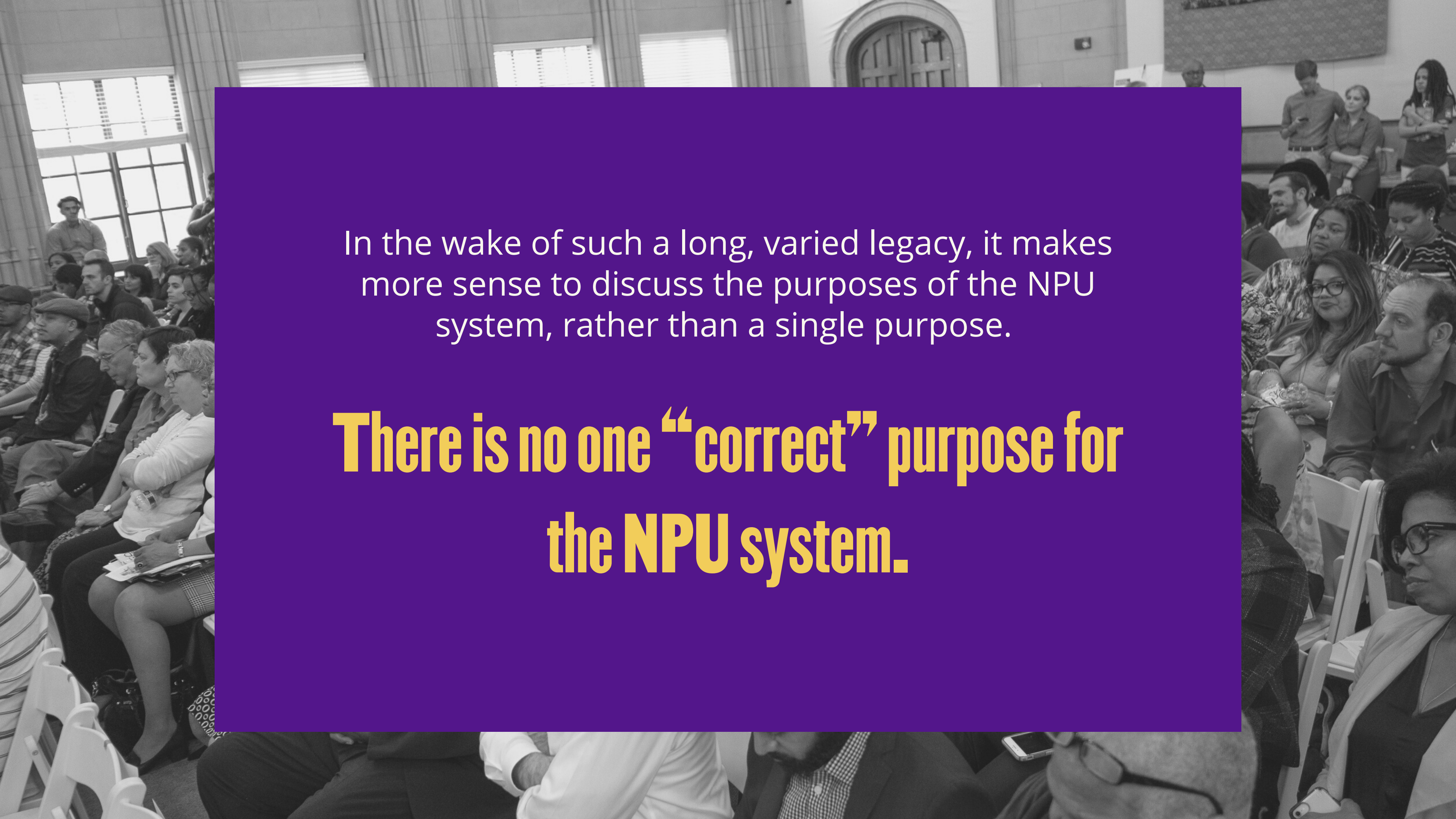
CITY OFFICIALS AND OTHER KEY
STAKEHOLDERS TO SHARE
INFORMATION TO RESIDENTS

CITY OFFICIALS TO GAIN FEEDBACK
AND INPUT ON CERTAIN ACTIONS
OF THE CITY

RESIDENTS TO PROACTIVELY STEER
CITYWIDE COMPREHENSIVE
DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

RESIDENTS TO LEARN ABOUT AND
CONSIDER NEIGHBORHOOD-LEVEL
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES





In the wake of such a long, varied legacy, it makes more sense to discuss the purposes of the NPU system, rather than a single purpose.

There is no one “correct” purpose for the NPU system.

The Mayor, City Council, Atlanta Planning Advisory Board, and NPUs must formally

**ALIGN ON AND REESTABLISH THE PURPOSES,
RESPONSIBILITIES, AND GOALS OF THE NPU SYSTEM**

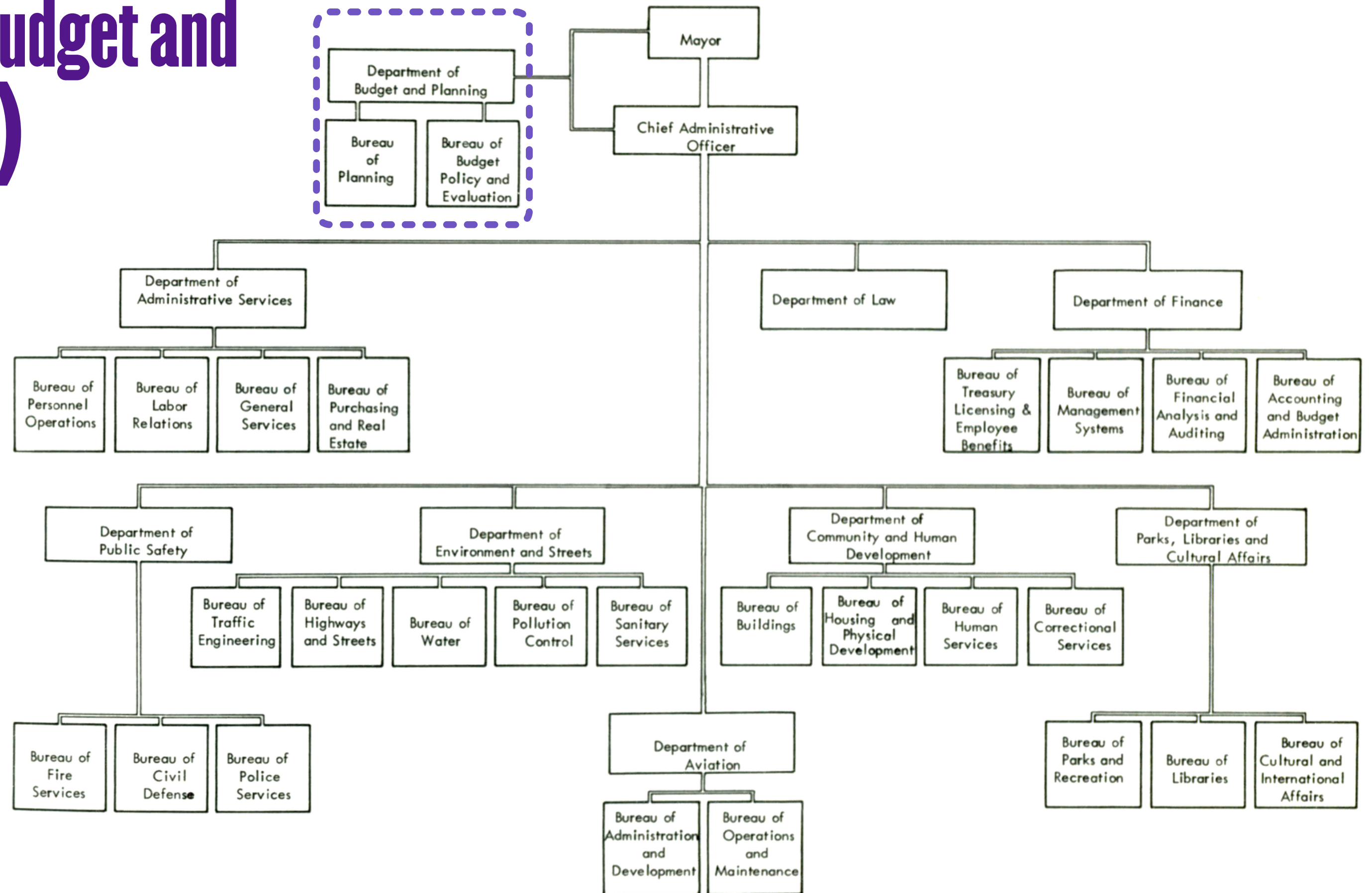
in order to identify the current challenges & future opportunities for improvement to the NPU system.

Challenge #2

The City of Atlanta often **excludes NPUs from planning processes** and budgetary decisions that impact the geographic area an NPU represents, and many Neighborhood Planning Units, ironically, are missing or have out-of-date small area and neighborhood plans; therefore the unique needs of individual neighborhoods are ignored in citywide plans, including the City's formal Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP).

Department of Budget and Planning (1976)

The NPUs were part of the Department of Budget and Planning, sitting at the highest level of the City's administration.



Department of City Planning (2021)



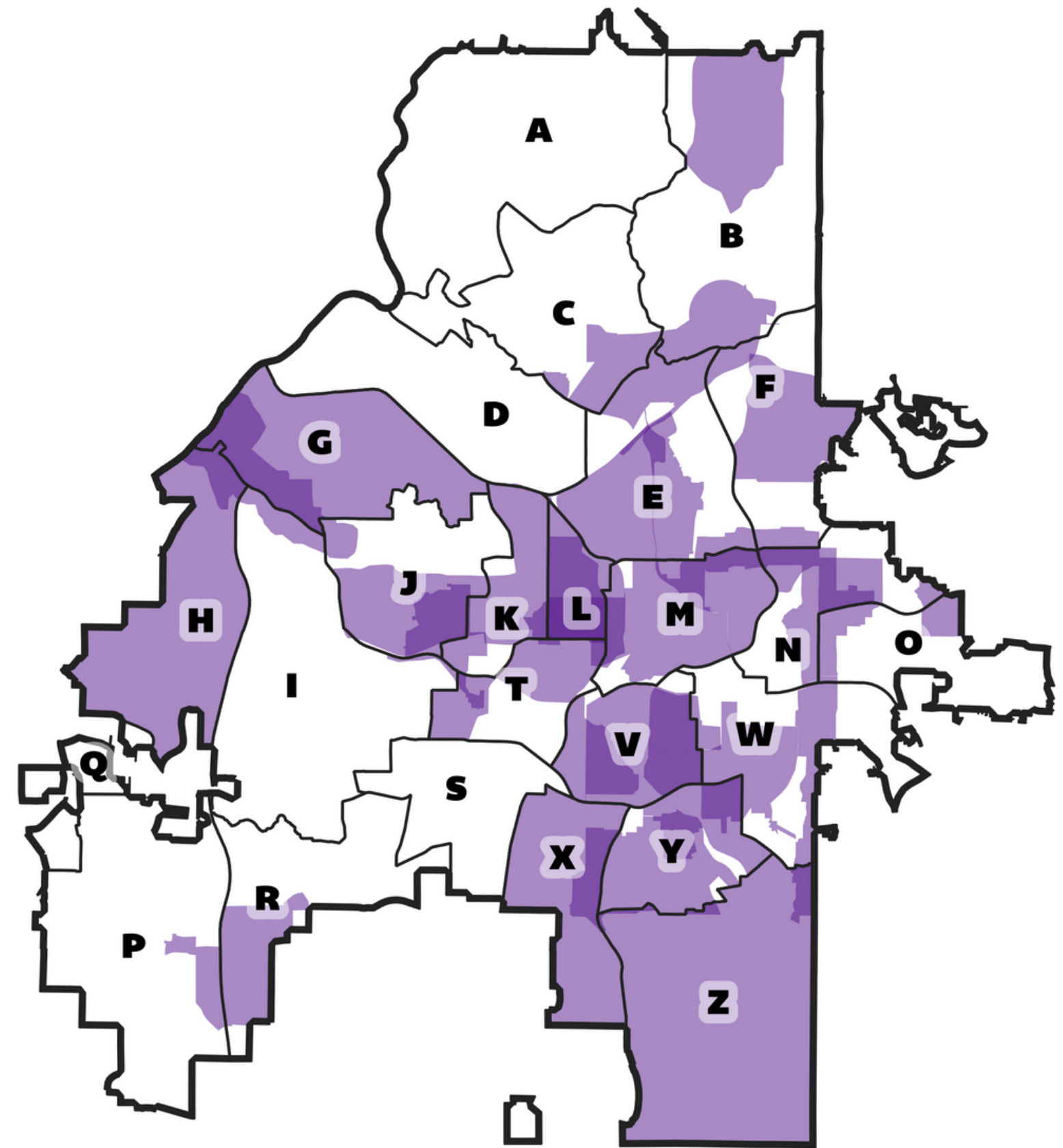
In 2021, NPUs are coordinated by the Department of City Planning (DCP), one of many departments administered by the Mayor and Chief Operating Officer. The budget process is handled by the Chief Financial Officer who's in charge of the Finance Department.

Small Area and Neighborhood Plans

According to the draft of the 2021 Comprehensive Development Plan, “These plans are outcomes of the City collaborating with diverse groups of community organizations and neighborhood groups so residents and businesses can deeper explore their local needs and opportunities, and propose policies and actions not directly addressed in the CDP.”

Despite this statement, many Atlanta neighborhoods – and some entire NPUs – have not had a plan created or updated for their geographic area in over 15 years.

“The bigger the plan, the less effective it is... they're only good if you have some sort of local organization pushing that forward... otherwise they will go back on a shelf.”
– Community Developer



The Department of City Planning must

**SUPPORT ALL NPUS IN DEVELOPING SMALL AREA AND
NEIGHBORHOOD PLANS, WHILE ALSO INCLUDING
THEIR UNIQUE INDIVIDUAL NEEDS IN RELEVANT
CITYWIDE PLANNING AND BUDGETING PROCESSES**

including, but not limited to, the Comprehensive
Development Plan (CDP).

Challenge #3

NPU leadership, City departments, and/or applicants **do not always disseminate nor present accessible, organized, and/or tailored information** for residents to understand and engage with it in a timely manner. Therefore, residents are often misinformed about, left out of, and/or disengaged in the final decisions made by the City that impact their communities.

"When we have the different departments come to our meeting, if you are not bringing new or pertinent information, there's no need to come. So I don't need you just out here to hand fliers out. If APD is coming, great report, don't bring me crime stats for the whole city. Take the little extra step and parse out the information that's just relevant to our NPU." - NPU Leader, 2020

According to the City's Code of Ordinances

(Atlanta City Code § 6-3013
Neighborhood Planning
Units.)

"Basic Information"

"The bureau of planning shall make available to neighborhood units **basic information**, including but not limited to the areas of:

- land use
- transportation
- community facilities
- programmed capital improvements
- housing
- human resources
- social and recreational programs
- environmental quality
- open space and parks, and
- citizen involvement in planning and zoning to assist them in neighborhood planning activities.

This information shall be presented in such a manner as to be readily recognizable to the residents of each NPU. This information shall be presented graphically when practicable."

“How effective do you think Planner's Reports are at NPU meetings?”



NPU Leaders

average = 2.8/5



NPU Planners

average = 3.7/5

“I can’t tell you how many times we will read an ordinance and we’ll go, ‘Huh?’” – NPU Leader

NPU leadership, applicants, and/or City departments – in or outside of an NPU meeting – must

**ENSURE THAT INFORMATION PROVIDED TO NPUS IS
TIMELY, EASILY UNDERSTANDABLE, AND TAILORED FOR
RESIDENTS TO ENGAGE WITH AHEAD OF ANY KEY
DECISIONS MADE THAT IMPACT THEIR COMMUNITIES.**

Challenge #4

Most residents in the city of Atlanta do not participate in the NPU system, which for many is because of a lack of awareness of the existence and functions of the NPU, poor accessibility of information in and outside of NPU meetings, and/or mistrust of the City; therefore recommendations that NPUs make often do not always represent the complete diversity of the communities within that NPU.

“For every person who attends an NPU meeting, there are ten people who can’t even tell you what the NPU is.”

– Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, 2019

1976 Survey on Neighborhood Planning

- **86% – interested in planning for their neighborhood**
- **89% – not aware of their neighborhood planning committee**
- **92% – had not attended a neighborhood planning meeting**

Scientific survey of 5,488 Atlanta residents conducted by the Center for Urban Research and Service in the College of Urban Life at Georgia State University

"WE ARE REACHING OUT. WE ARE OPENING UP THE PROCESS – PULLING ANOTHER CHAIR UP TO THE TABLE WHERE THE DECISIONS ARE MADE THAT AFFECT ALL OF OUR LIVES."

—Mayor Maynard Jackson, 1976

Characteristics of those who don't know about the NPU system versus those who do

(NPU Initiative Community Engagement Survey, 2020)

- **2X** MORE LIKELY TO HAVE LIVED IN THEIR CURRENT NEIGHBORHOOD FOR LESS THAN 2 YEARS
- **2X** MORE LIKELY TO BE A RENTER
- **2X** MORE LIKELY TO BE UNDER 35 YEARS OLD
- **2X** MORE LIKELY TO HAVE A HOUSEHOLD INCOME BELOW \$35,000
- **3X** MORE LIKELY TO BE HISPANIC/LATINX

Current Web Presence of each Neighborhood Planning Unit

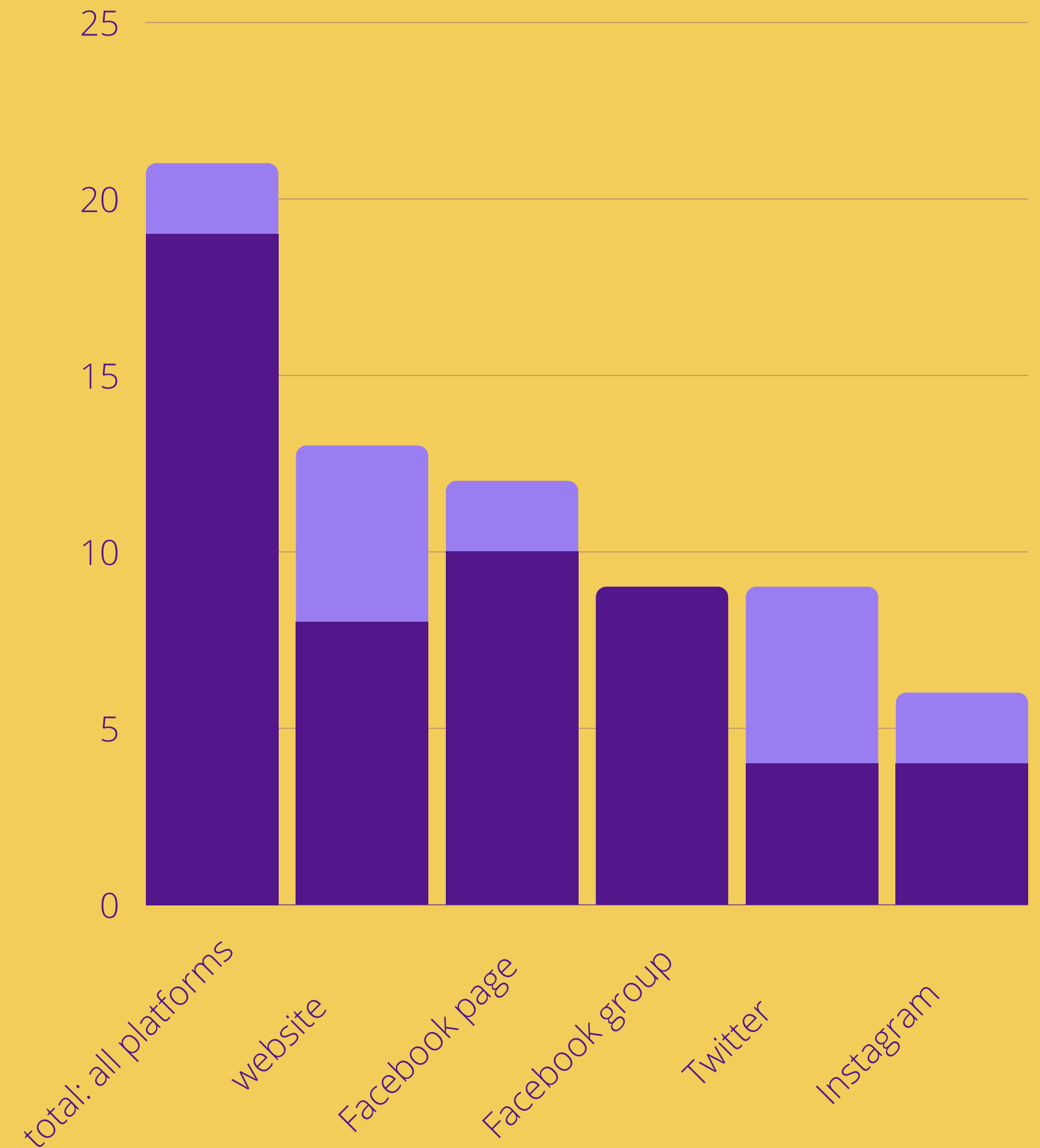
- More than **50%** had a website, albeit less than a third of them were active as of 2021.
- **50%** of NPUs have a Facebook page
- less than half of the NPUs are on Twitter and/or Instagram.
- Overall, **75%** of NPUs are on at least one web platform, but no NPU is on all platforms.



activity in 2021

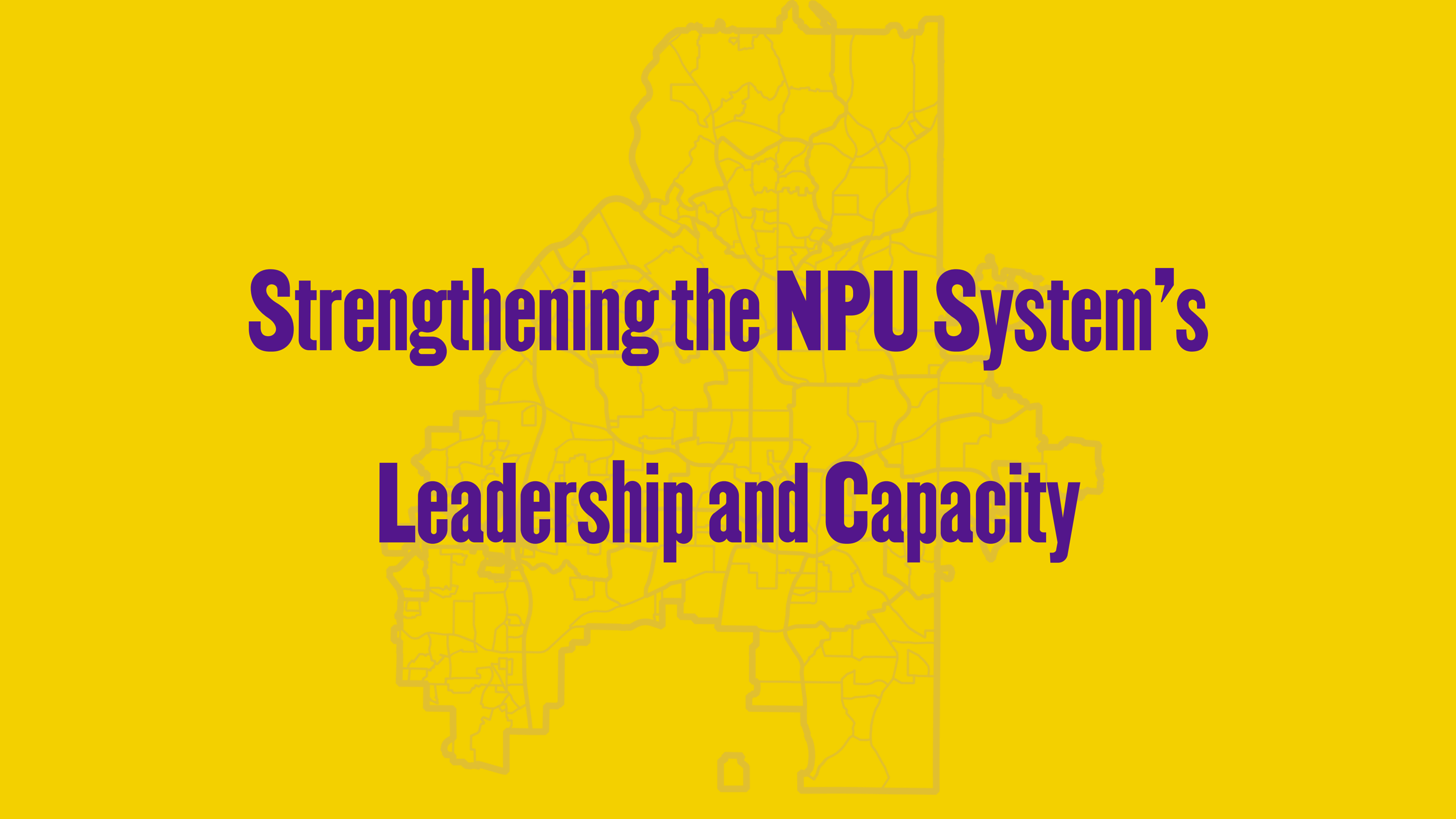


no activity in 2021



The Department of City Planning and Atlanta Planning Advisory Board must lead on a campaign and ongoing efforts to

**INCREASE PUBLIC AWARENESS OF THE NPU SYSTEM
AND ELIMINATE BARRIERS FOR ANYONE AND
EVERYONE TO PARTICIPATE IN IT.**



Strengthening the NPU System's Leadership and Capacity

Challenge #5

The Atlanta Planning Advisory Board (APAB) does not effectively execute on its responsibility to **facilitate dialogue and coordinate perspectives on citywide matters** among the individual NPU's, therefore APAB is unable to advocate as a collective voice of the NPU's to the City of Atlanta.

“How can NPUs be a venue for tough conversations about citywide issues? How can we come up with a framework where NPUs, instead of just being concerned about the neighborhoods in their NPU, are part of a conversation about citywide goals and aspirations?”

– City Councilmember, 2020

Atlanta Planning Advisory Board

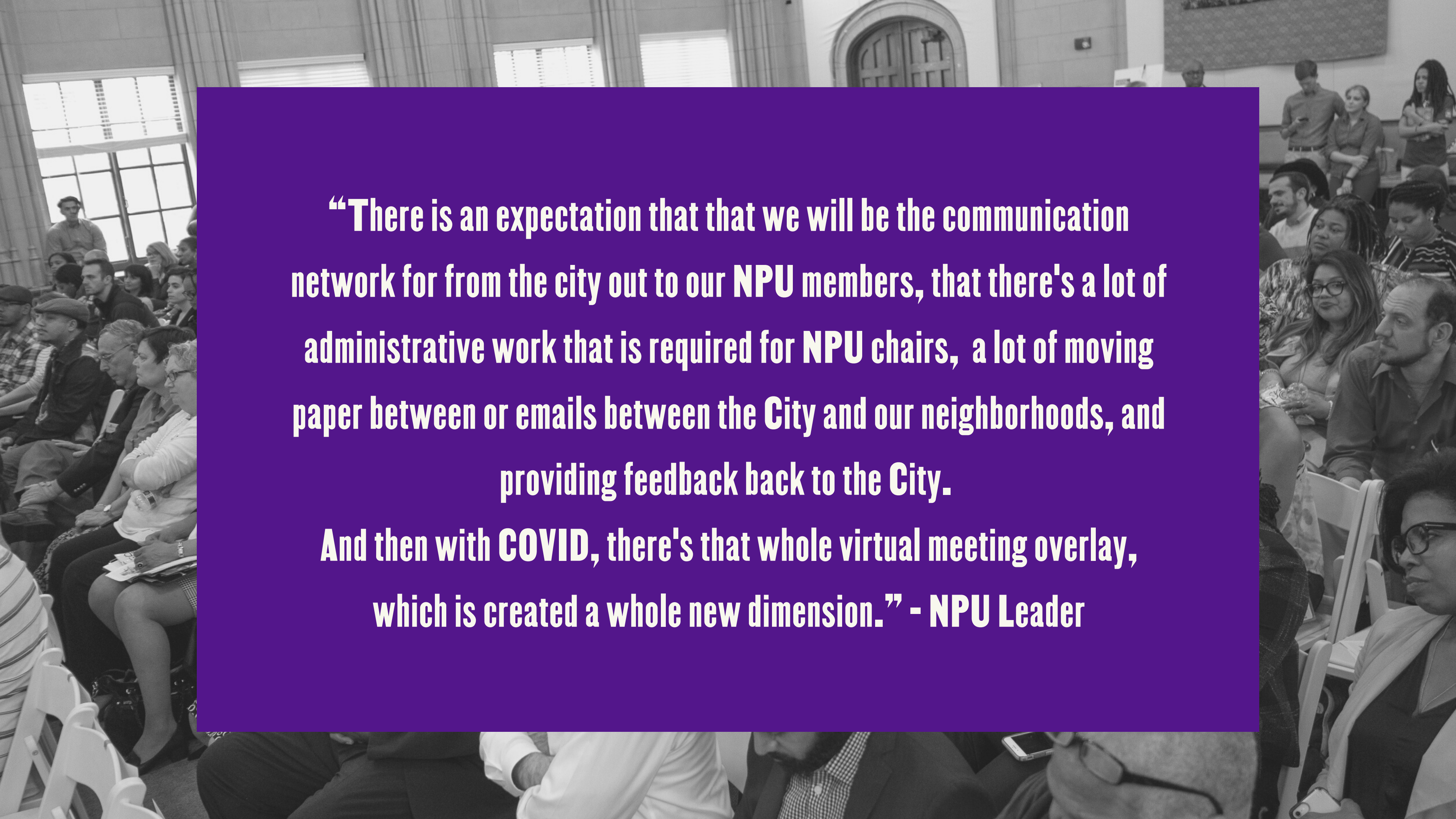
The Atlanta Planning Advisory Board (APAB) was created in 1974, by the same piece of legislation as the NPUs, to advise the City on citywide planning matters.

In addition to advising the City on citywide problems, issues, goals, and objectives for the Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP), by Atlanta City Code, APAB may also advise the City on matters relating to citizen organizations and participation in the planning process.

The Atlanta Planning Advisory Board (APAB) must
**FACILITATE AND COORDINATE CITYWIDE MATTERS
AMONG THE INDIVIDUAL NPUS AND FORM A
COLLECTIVE VOICE FOR ALL NPUS**
in their advocacy to the City of Atlanta.

Challenge #6:

The City of Atlanta **does not offer sufficient training and financial support** to the NPUs that lack resources of money, capacity, technical skills, or relationships; therefore NPUs are dependent on pro bono and volunteer services from individuals, placing an additional strain on often-neglected communities.



“There is an expectation that that we will be the communication network for from the city out to our **NPU members, that there's a lot of administrative work that is required for **NPU** chairs, a lot of moving paper between or emails between the **City** and our neighborhoods, and providing feedback back to the **City**.**

And then with **COVID, there's that whole virtual meeting overlay, which is created a whole new dimension.” - **NPU** Leader**

The perspective that stakeholders had on their own role or responsibility varied, even among people with the same role.

NPU Planner responses

From your perspective, how would you define your role as a neighborhood planner in the NPU system?
(Check all that apply.)

	<u>count</u>	<u>percent</u>	
Liaison	11	79%	<div></div>
Technical Assistant	6	43%	<div></div>
Facilitator	4	29%	<div></div>
Educator	4	29%	<div></div>
Advocate	3	21%	<div></div>
Mediator	1	7%	<div></div>
Organizer	0	0%	
Other	2	14%	<div></div>

total (n=) 14

NPU Leader responses

What is/are the role(s) of the neighborhood planner/NPU team in the NPU system?
(Check all that apply.)

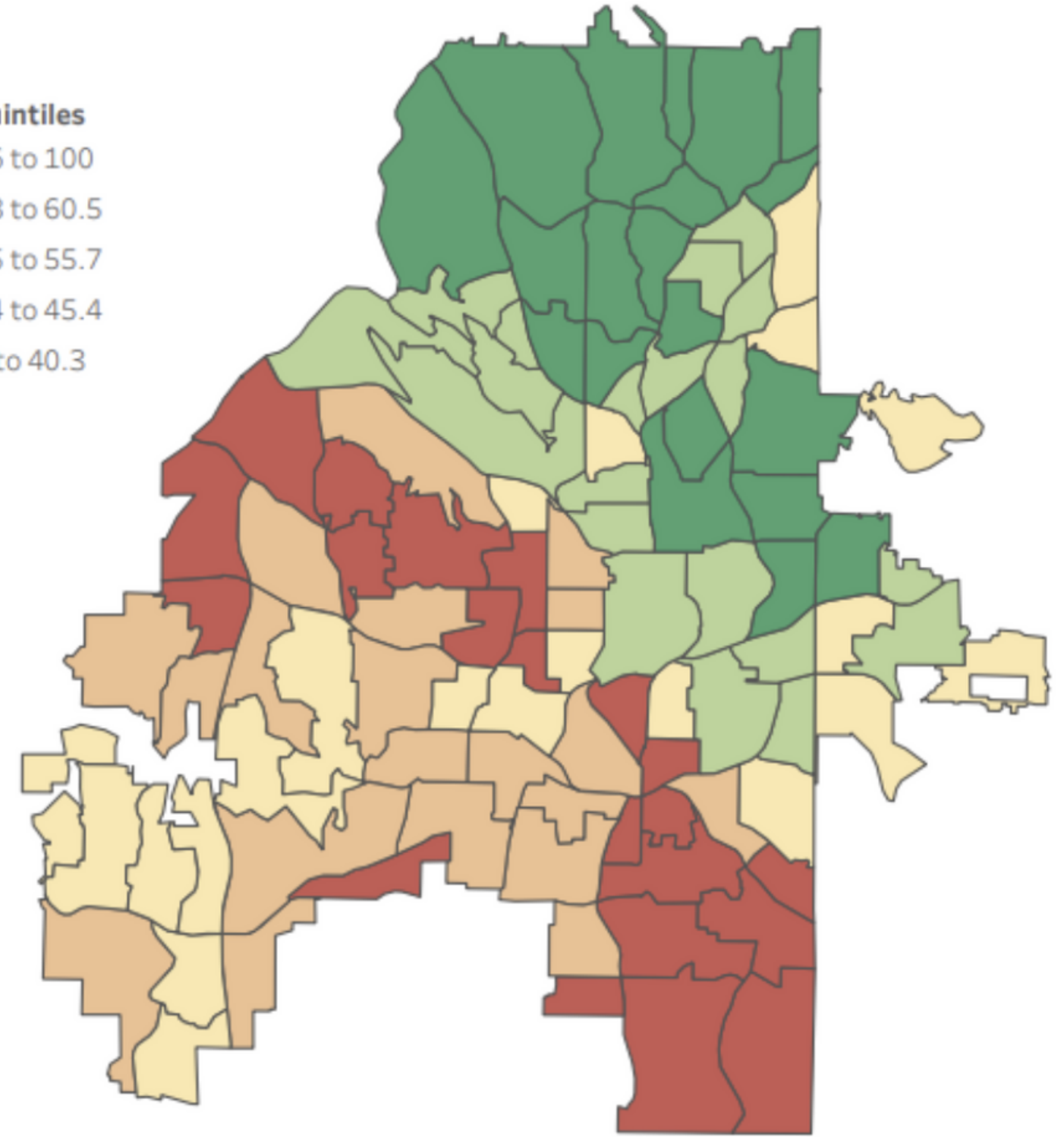
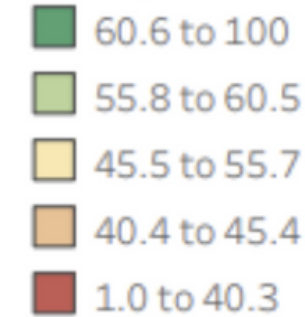
	<u>count</u>	<u>percent</u>		<u>delta</u>
Liaison	6	67%	<div></div>	12%
Technical Assistant	7	78%	<div></div>	-35%
Facilitator	1	11%	<div></div>	17%
Educator	6	67%	<div></div>	-38%
Advocate	0	0%		21%
Mediator	1	11%	<div></div>	-4%
Organizer	0	0%		0%
Other	0	0%		14%

total (n=) 9

“But not everyone, not every neighborhood has that internal resource. I've been in meetings in Buckhead where a neighborhood a very powerful attorney for a big hoity-toity law firm will come in, and they'll come in and write letters on their law firm letterhead and get things done. So there is that weakness in the system that not all, not all power is equal because of that.” - Presenters

Economic Mobility Index

Index quintiles



The City of Atlanta must

**PROVIDE SUPPORT AND MONEY EQUITABLY TO
INDIVIDUAL NPUS**

prioritizing individual leaders who are serving in often neglected communities and lack the privilege of time and/or financial resources.

Challenge #7:

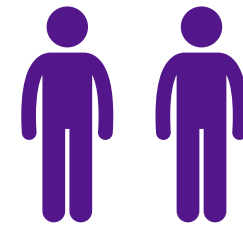
The City of Atlanta's budget **deprioritized and undervalued the needs of the NPU system**, therefore the Department of City Planning (DCP) is understaffed and under-funded for personnel and services required to meet the City's responsibility to support the NPU system.

Snapshots of City Staffing for NPU System



1976

The City of Atlanta's neighborhood planning division started out with a dedicated staff of 18 – thanks, in part, to federal funding – responsible for NPU coordination and CDP development.



1985

NPU staff was pared down to 2 – a coordinator and assistant.



2021

Today, the NPU Team has 4 staff members and 1 vacancy. There is also an NPU Planner assigned to each NPU, but that role is a small fraction of their overall job.

Thanks, NPU Team!

Leah LaRue

Tony McNeal

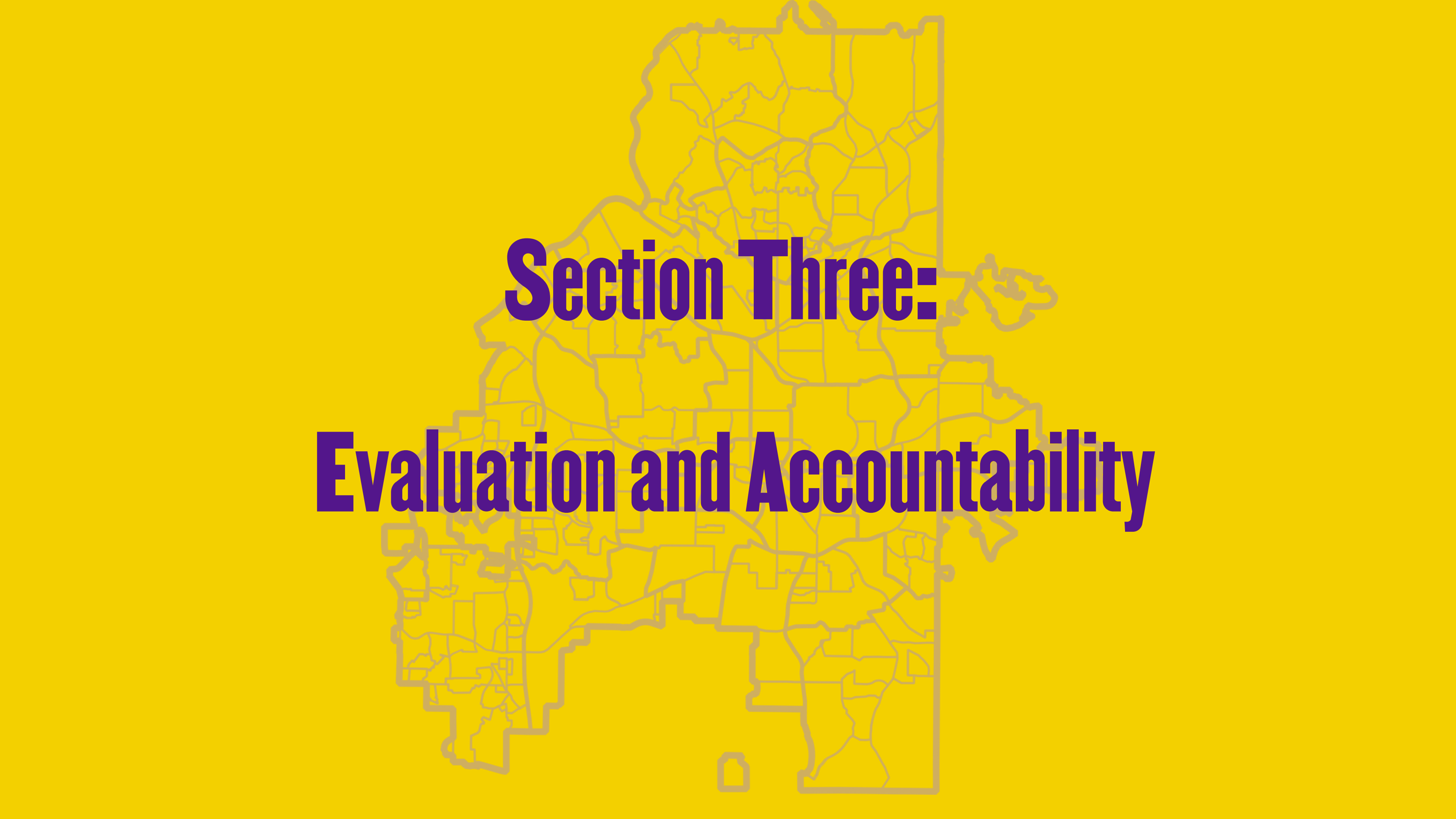
Samantha Terry

Daniel Vasquez

"We also funnel a lot of the information that's coming from the City into the NPU. Our team is small. But to be honest, we do a lot. Like we do a lot of gymnastics for the NPU system."

The Mayor and City Council must
**PRIORITIZE AND INCREASE FUNDING FOR
PERSONNEL, TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE, AND
SUPPORT SERVICES**

within the Department of City Planning, Atlanta Planning
Advisory Board, and individual NPUs.



Section Three:

Evaluation and Accountability

Challenge #8:

The City of Atlanta **does not document, coordinate, nor communicate internally about the legal requirements and standard operating procedures** of the NPU system, which extends to external stakeholders—including APAB, individual NPUs, applicants, and other adjacent parties; therefore creating conflict and confusion on process and expectations among and across key stakeholders within the NPU system.

Changes to the City's Code of Ordinances

*In addition to the NPU ordinance itself, there are now approximately **60 other sections of the City's Code of Ordinances that mention NPU system** related to notifications, recommendations, appointments, etc.*

1999 – ALCOHOL LICENSE APPLICANTS REQUIRED TO APPEAR

2000 – REVIEW AND COMMENT* ON NEW OR CHANGED FEES FOR SERVICE

* later code amendments have resulted in this being for info only

2006 – OUTDOOR FESTIVAL APPLICANTS SHALL PRESENT AND MUST RECEIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

The City of Atlanta must properly

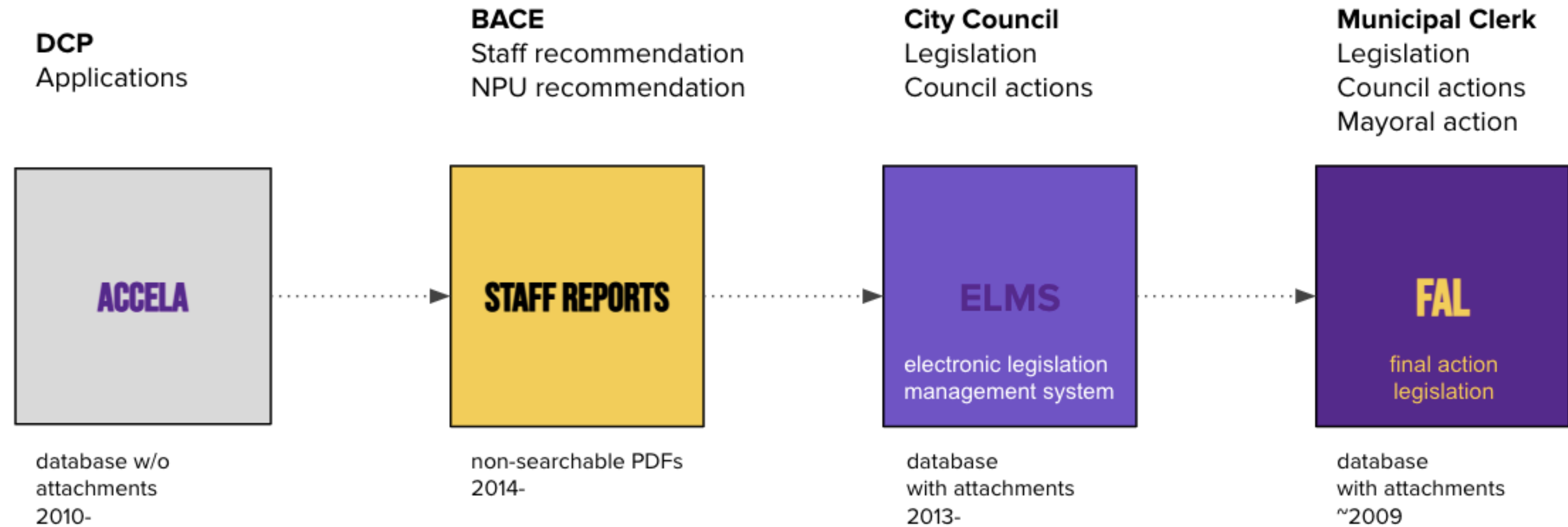
**DOCUMENT, COORDINATE ON, AND COMMUNICATE
ABOUT THE LEGAL EXPECTATIONS AND STANDARD
OPERATING PROCEDURES OF THE NPUS**

to both internal and external stakeholders to reduce conflict
and confusion, particularly for decisions that impact NPUs
directly.

Challenge #9:

The City of Atlanta **does not provide NPU leaders nor the public with proper notice, feedback, and transparency** on final decisions and the justification for those decisions on applications or legislation that was presented to be advised on. Therefore, there is a lack of accountability for poor decisions and increased public mistrust of the City.

Example Data Flow for a Rezoning Application



The Department of City Planning, City Council, and Boards,
Authorities, Commissions, Etc. (BACEs) must

**PROVIDE TIMELY, TRANSPARENT, AND PROPER
NOTICE AND FEEDBACK TO THE NPUS**

on legislation, applications, and decisions that impact them
directly.

Challenge #10:

The City of Atlanta **does not regularly evaluate the NPU system against any standard measurements**, including effectiveness and equity, therefore all key stakeholders in the NPU system lack the information required for accountability and the ability to identify opportunities for improvement.

RECENT 'PLANS' TO EVALUATE OR ENHANCE THE NPU SYSTEM:

- **2017**
 - ATLANTA CITY DESIGN
 - RESILIENT ATLANTA STRATEGY
 - VARIOUS CANDIDATE CAMPAIGN STATEMENTS
- **2018**
 - CD/HS GOALS & OBJECTIVES (2018)
- **2019**
 - ONE ATLANTA: HOUSING AFFORDABILITY ACTION PLAN
- **2020**
 - 20-0-1003 ORDINANCE PROPOSAL BY COUNCILMEMBER ANTONIO BROWN

REALIZED EVALUATIONS:

- **1978-79**
 - CITY COUNCIL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
- **1985**
 - PLANNING WITH NEIGHBORHOODS NATIONAL STUDY OF 51 NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING PROGRAMS WITH A MORE IN-DEPTH LOOK AT 6, INCLUDING ATLANTA
- **2019-21**
 - CCI NPU INITIATIVE

The Mayor, City Council, and Atlanta Planning Advisory Board must work with key stakeholders to co-design a process to

EVALUATE THE NPU SYSTEM COMPREHENSIVELY & REGULARLY THROUGH A CLEAR SET OF METRICS, INCLUDING: EFFECTIVENESS, EQUITY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND RESTORATION.

RECOMMENDATION RECAP

Strengthening the NPU System's Purpose

- The Mayor of Atlanta, City Council, and the Atlanta Planning Advisory Board must formally **align on and reestablish the purposes, responsibilities, and goals of the NPU system.**
- The Department of City Planning must **support all NPUs in developing small area and neighborhood plans**, including their individual needs in relevant citywide planning and budgeting processes, including, but not limited to, the Comprehensive Development Plan.
- NPU leadership, applicants, and/or City departments – in or outside of an NPU meeting – must **ensure that information provided to NPUs is timely, easily understandable, and tailored for residents to engage with ahead of any key decisions made that impact their communities.**
- The Department of City Planning and the Atlanta Planning Advisory Board must lead on a campaign and ongoing effort to **increase public awareness about the NPUs** and eliminate barriers for anyone and everyone to participate in them.

Strengthening the NPU's Leadership and Capacity

- The Atlanta Planning Advisory Board (APAB) must **facilitate and coordinate citywide matters** among the individual NPUs and form a collective voice for all NPUs in their advocacy to the City of Atlanta.
- The City of Atlanta must **provide support and money equitably to NPU volunteers**, prioritizing already neglected communities and leaders who lack the privilege of time and/or financial resources.
- The Mayor of Atlanta and City Council must **prioritize and increase funding** for personnel, technical assistance, and support services for the NPU system in our City's fiscal year budget.

Strengthening the NPU's Transparency, Evaluation, and Accountability

- The City of Atlanta must **document, transparently coordinate on, and clearly communicate about the legal expectations and standard operating procedures** of the NPUs internally between City departments and to all external NPU stakeholders.
- The Department of City Planning, BACEs, and APAB must **provide transparent and proper notice and feedback to the NPUs** after decisions made on legislation, applications, and policies that directly or indirectly impact an NPU.
- The Mayor of Atlanta, City Council, and the Atlanta Planning Advisory Board must **co-design a process to regularly evaluate the NPU system** through a clear set of effectiveness and equity metrics.

In 2024, the NPU system will turn 50.

**We are calling on the current Atlanta mayor,
Keisha Lance Bottoms, the City Council, and
the Department of Planning to adopt these
recommendations before the end this year.**

npu_civicalatlanta.org

Comment on the 2021 Comprehensive Development Plan - "Plan A."

atlcitydesign.com/2021-cdp

**On November 2, 2021, Atlanta will be electing a
new mayor, city council and school board.**

Learn about candidates and go vote .

voteatl.org

Strengthening Atlanta's Historic Neighborhood Planning Units

