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# As more walkable places emerge, Atlanta is 'becoming a really cool city'



Maria Saporta ([https://saportareport.com/author/maria\\_saporta/](https://saportareport.com/author/maria_saporta/)) • October 7, 2013 8:01 pm

By Maria Saporta

The Atlanta region has had an unusual relationship with Chris Leinberger, a real estate developer who is an astute observer of cities and metropolitan areas.

It was Leinberger who back in the 1990s that Atlanta was the fastest growing human settlement in the history of the world in terms of the amount of acres being consumed by its growing population.

“You have been the poster child of sprawl,” Leinberger was fond of telling Atlantans over the past few years. “You used to be Hot'lanta. Hot'lanta is no longer hot.”

Leinberger had been one of the biggest proponents for metro Atlanta to invest in public transit and the one percent regional transportation sales tax referendum that failed on July 31, 2012. He argued that for Atlanta to be competitive in the new economy, it had to invest in alternative modes of transportation.



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At the time, Leinberger said Atlanta had a dearth of walkable urban places (his studies at the time estimated there were seven) and an overabundance of drivable suburban places.

content/uploads/2013/10/DSCN5223.jpg

Front of bicycle parade at Sunday's Atlanta Streets Alive (Photos by Maria Saporta)

But the market was demanding more and more walkable communities — places where they did not need to get in their cars to go to work, shop, play, sleep, worship and enjoy life and the outdoors.



Over the past year, Leinberger, a senior fellow with the Brookings Institution who also is a distinguished scholar at George Washington University's School of Business, has been taking a deeper look at Atlanta and its walkable communities.

“It shocked me that this much walkable activity was taking place,” Leinberger said, adding that since 2008 “60 percent of all development delivered to the market took place” in existing or emerging walkable urban areas.

(https://s3.amazonaws.com/saportakinsta/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/DSCN5234.jpg)

A view of a closed-to-cars Virginia Avenue at Atlanta Streets Alive

In all, the study identified 27 existing walkable areas in metro Atlanta — most of them within the City of Atlanta — including Midtown, Buckhead, Lindbergh, Inman Park, Atlanta University Center, Sweet Auburn, and Georgia Tech.

But there also were several outside the city limits — downtown Decatur, downtown Roswell, downtown Marietta, Sandy Springs, Perimeter Center, Emory and Cumberland's core.

The emerging walkable urban places — or WalkUps — include North Point, Town Center, Perimeter West at 400, Doraville, Brookhaven and Hapeville among others.

There also is a third category called “potential WalkUps,” and they include Kensington Station, Turner Field, Ft. McPherson, College Park, Serenbe, and East Windward among others.

The point Leinberger made during several presentations on Thursday, Oct. 3 is that Atlanta has changed and is changing from the land-grabbing metropolis of the 1990s to a more urban environment in response to market demand.

“We have seen the end of sprawl in Atlanta,” Leinberger said definitively. “The suburbs are not dead. This is the urbanization of the suburbs.”

Leinberger has been a truth sayer for the Atlanta region — one who has held great sway on how we view ourselves.



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At the end of the bicycle parade on Highland Avenue



(<https://s3.amazonaws.com/saportakincontent/uploads/2013/10/DSCN5232.jpg>)

Bicycles along Virginia Avenue at Sunday's Atlanta Streets Alive

What makes his observations so powerful is that he backs them up with data. How did he make the claim we were the poster child of sprawl? “For every 1 percent of population growth, you had 8 percent land consumption,” Leinberger said.

And what about now?

Sixty percent of all real estate activity since 2008 has taken place in existing or emerging walkable urban places. The 27 existing

walkable urban places account for .55 of 1 percent of the region's land mass. The nine emerging walkable urban places account for another .33 of 1 percent. Q

That means that 60 percent of the growth has occurred on less than 1 percent of the land. [\(https://saportareport.com/\)](https://saportareport.com/)

The shift in land use also has tremendous implications for the future of our transportation systems.

In the Leinberger report — The WalkUP Wake-Up Call: Atlanta — that was released last week, a key message was how our region needs to re-invest in transit.

“Metropolitan Atlanta has been under-investing in the rail transit transportation infrastructure that greatly assists the walkable urban development the market and economy is now demanding,” the report stated. “Investing in rail transit in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is as important as building of freeways in the 1960s and 1970s was for the economic growth of the Atlanta region 50 years ago.”



<https://s3.amazonaws.com/saportakins/content/uploads/2013/10/DSCN5241.jpg>

Cyclists head towards Boulevard with downtown skyline in background

More compact communities also are more easily served by transit. But walkable communities need safe, wide and attractive sidewalks bordered by trees and benches and street-level retail and public art. Burying power lines, planting flowers, preserving historic buildings, creating inviting public places for people to gather, designing safe bicycle lanes, having a streetcar travel along our major urban corridors — such as Peachtree Street — are all elements of creating a walkable environment.

As Leinberger has told us, these are not just ways to make Atlanta a prettier and more attractive city. Creating walkable urban places will make Atlanta — both inside and outside I-285 — an economically viable region for generations to come.

“I’ve been saying you ain’t hot anymore,” Leinberger said. “You’ve got the potential to be hot again.”



Jim Durrett, executive director of the Buckhead Community Improvement District who participated in the Leinberger study, was walking along Virginia Avenue Sunday afternoon during the Atlanta Streets Alive event when it was closed off to cars and turned over to pedestrians and human-powered vehicles — bicycles, skateboards, wagons, strollers...

As he walked by with a really big smile on his face, Durrett said: “If we’re not careful, Atlanta will become a really cool city.”

It’s already happening....



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**Maria Saporta ([https://saportareport.com/author/maria\\_saporta/](https://saportareport.com/author/maria_saporta/))**

Maria Saporta, Editor, is a longtime Atlanta business, civic and urban affairs journalist with a deep knowledge of our city, our region and state. Since 2008, she has written a weekly column and news stories for the Atlanta Business Chronicle. Prior to that, she spent 27 years with The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, becoming its business columnist in 1991. Maria received her Master’s degree in urban studies from Georgia State and her Bachelor’s degree in journalism from Boston University. Maria was born in Atlanta to European parents and has two young adult children.

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**Lewis • October 8, 2013 11:19 am**

**I am surprised that East Atlanta is not included as a walkable neighborhood given the proximity of housing to the retail district. If the need for a grocery store is included in the category, the I would see East Atlanta as at least in the potential walk up section.**

👍 0 🗨️ 0

Reply

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**NM in College Park • October 8, 2013 12:13 pm**

**Great piece! I've used that phrase often – “Atlanta is becoming a really cool city” – and it's good to hear that idea put into a piece like this.**

👍 0 🗨️ 0

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**pfreet • October 11, 2013 9:23 am**

**“You have been the poster child of sprawl,” Leinberger was fond of telling Atlantans over the past few years. “You used to be Hot'lanta. Hot'lanta is no longer hot.”**

**100,000 people per year move to metro Atlanta. Almost all of them settle in the outer suburbs. Forsyth was the 7th fastest growing county in the US between 2010 and 2012. Atlanta is still quite hot, just not your definition of hot.**

👍 0 🗨️ 0

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**LarryHerkimer • October 12, 2013 2:14 pm**

**pfreetWhile Forsyth may be growing, the Forbes article you cite shows it still lags Atlanta/Decatur significantly. The Forbes article shows Forsyth grew 7% over the last two years. Forsyth has a population of +/- 188,000. A seven percent growth over two years means Forsyth added about 13,000 people over two years. Population growth trends are for the greatest population growth in the urban areas with close-in suburbs growing the next fastest and the farthest counties growing the least. The Leinberger Report shows it. Also, here's an excerpt from an Atlanta**

**Business Chronicle article from April last year referencing the most recent Census report** “Crunching some local numbers, from 2000-2010, Cobb, Fulton, Dekalb, and Gwinnett Counties added an average of 42,779 people per year, while the 14 counties on the edge of the region added an average of 57,425. From 2010-2011, however, the close-in counties added 55,168 people (up 29 percent from the 2000-2010 rate) while the edge counties added 21,077 (down 63 percent). At a finer grain level, growth in Fulton and Dekalb outpaced Gwinnett and Cobb last year by 26 percent, a stark reversal of the prior decade’s patterns.”



It doesn't mean anything bad about Forsyth or good about Atlanta. It just means the data are showing (just like most major urban areas across the U.S.) people are desiring to live more closely to cities than they have in the recent past.

👍 0 🗨️ 0

Reply

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**Burroughston Broch • October 14, 2013 8:56 pm**

**LarryHerkimer**

**Believe the population counts from the US Census, not estimates by Forbes, ARC, and the City of Atlanta. Remember just before the 2010 census when the City and the ARC were estimating 500,000 residents in the City of Atlanta? Remember when the real count came in at 421,000, a meager gain of 1,000 over the 2000 Census? Remember Mayor Reed threatening to sue the Census Bureau? Ever hear any more from that idle threat? Let's wait until 2020 before we start bragging.**

👍 0 🗨️ 0

Reply

Report



**LarryHerkimer • October 15, 2013 11:20 am**

**Burroughston Broch**

**It's not about bragging. I'd only brag if everyone was moving just to be close to me and that ain't the case! I know people can get emotional about this stuff which is why I added that it didn't mean anything bad about Forsyth or good about Atlanta. The bottom line is that growth is trending more toward urban centers with close in suburbs second and the exurbs seeing the least growth. The population numbers I cited are Census numbers from an Atlanta Biz Chronicle article (and Maria's article as well). And while people are moving closer in each area still has it's good points and future challenges, More exurban counties like Forsyth have lots of cheap land and cheap housing. Those are pros but they'll have to be smart and try to develop town centers and create suburban neighborhoods that are walkable. Gwinnett and Cobb have the advantages of lots of inexpensive housing and relatively good schools. If you're middle or lower middle class with multiple kids then Gwinnett or Cobb are a slam dunk. The challenges they have is retrofitting neighborhoods to make them more walkable. Lawrenceville and Marietta have both developed nice squares and town centers. These**

counties will also need to develop more commercial to increase their tax base. They'll also have to deal with the fact that they now have more citizens living in poverty than ever before (it was just recently that for the first time in our history more people in poverty live in the suburbs than live in the cities).

For Atlanta the pros are strong corporate and commercial tax base and a growing population. The challenges for Atlanta is their terrible mass transit (which they're trying to address with the beltline) and terrible, terrible schools. The residents there have just recently woken up to the school issue and they'll improve but that's a long row to hoe. So it's not about bragging or right or wrong. It's about understanding future trends and adapting to them. Those municipalities that address these issues smartly will thrive while those that don't will suffer.

👍 0 🗨️ 0

Reply

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Midtownner • October 17, 2013 1:53 pm

That's great. By all means, PLEASE stay out in Forsyth, We'll muddle through without you here intown.

👍 0 🗨️ 0

Reply

Report



Rickster123 • October 18, 2013 3:25 pm

People are moving back to the center of town in droves. All you have to do is drive around the intown neighborhoods. It's mind boggling.

👍 0 🗨️ 0

Reply

Report



Rickster123 • October 18, 2013 3:27 pm

People are moving back into the city in droves. All it takes is driving around the different intown neighborhoods to notice how many more people are walking around, how much more development there is, etc. Its mind boggling. Never thought I'd see Atlanta become a walkable town in my lifetime, but its unfolding before my eyes, and I am happy about it.

👍 0 🗨️ 0

Reply

Report



Question Man • October 25, 2013 10:37 pm

What have you been smoking? Rampant boosterism has always been Atlanta's long suit, but can window dressing and a tip of the hat here and there make up for woefully deficient leadership, vision and commitment?

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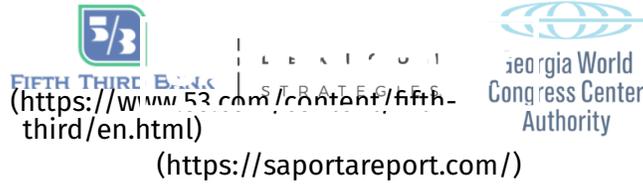
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