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Transit links crucial to suburban prosperity

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Under prodding by Peachtree City Mayor Don Haddix, Fayette County leaders may soon try to secede from the Atlanta Regional Commission and cast their lot with less-urban counties to the south and west.

It's hard to imagine a more short-sighted policy. Fayette County would not only be turning its back on metro Atlanta; if experts are right, it would also be turning its back on the model of growth likely to define America's future.

The impetus for Fayette's possible secession is understandable to a degree. In 2012, voters in regions across Georgia will decide whether to impose a sales tax for transportation that will be collected and invested within each of those regions.

In the 10-county ARC, Fayette County is a relatively small player. Haddix and others believe that by aligning itself with the less populous Three Rivers Regional Commission, Fayette County might gain a louder voice in how its tax proceeds will be spent.

However, by leaving the ARC, residents of Fayette County would also ensure that their tax money is spent strengthening transportation ties to counties where they seldom travel, rather than to areas to the north where they work, shop and play. And as the rest of metro Atlanta knits itself closer together over time, to the exclusion of Fayette County, the county's prosperity and property values would decline.

However, the discomfort with being part of metro Atlanta goes deeper for Fayette County than just being a small fish in a large pond. To be honest, that discomfort is felt to a degree across the metro area.

After years of debate and delay, the Atlanta region is slowly preparing itself to accept a more urbanized development pattern in which regional transit will play a major role. And not everybody's ready to jump on board that train, so to speak. In fact, the level of suspicion with transit increases as you travel farther and farther from downtown Atlanta.

That's too bad, because changes in demography and consumer demand mean that areas such as Fayette County have as much if not more to gain from the change than more traditionally urban areas.

As we all know, the current recession has largely been real-estate driven, and its impact has been most dramatic in suburban, auto-dependent areas on the outskirts of major metropolitan areas.

That's in part because developers built too much too fast, but it also reflects a fundamental, market-driven change in what people want in residential real estate.

As the Baby Boom generation turns into empty-nesters, they no longer want or need five-bedroom suburban houses. And as their children prepare to buy homes and raise families of their own, they are far more interested than their parents were in neighborhoods where jobs, shopping and entertainment are nearby. In general, they have no interest in long commutes.

Chris Leinberger, a real-estate expert and developer who knows the Atlanta region well, says the result is "a massive oversupply of such suburban fringe development."

"Both of these huge demographic groups want something that the U.S. housing market is not currently providing; small one- to three-bedroom homes in walkable, transit-oriented, economically dynamic, and job-rich neighborhoods," Leinberger writes in a new piece co-authored with Patrick Doherty [in Washington Monthly](#).

Suburban areas, particularly those with existing city centers, can benefit from that trend. Others can encourage new development along those lines. But trying to resist the market's message just won't work.

"However they might lean ideologically," Leinberger and Doherty write, "the best hope suburbanites have for reversing their depressed home values is for mass transit lines to be extended in their communities."