

# VISION 2020: Key to Regionalism in the Atlanta Region

*Harry West*

## **The Genesis of VISION 2020**

VISION 2020 recognizes that the face of leadership has changed drastically in Atlanta. The region ranks as one of the nation's most successful economic centers with excellent prospects for the future. Historically, a strong sense of community purpose has driven this success. During the 1960s and earlier, a small group of influential business leaders based in downtown were able to rally the entire community around bold initiatives to take Atlanta to the next visionary plateau. Public officials, executives, and civic leaders worked together to make Atlanta "the city too busy to hate," a major league city, and the world's next international city. During the 1970s and 1980s, in particular, the region attracted an influx of newcomers from diverse backgrounds. It also saw the emergence of influential commercial centers throughout the suburbs. These two trends combined to transform the region's population and its leadership structure.

In the late 1980s the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) faced a series of controversial issues ranging from a second airport plan to proposals for stronger growth management. It became clear that residents did not share a common vision of the future and that the region's splintered leadership too often acted at cross purposes. Beyond these pressing problems, ARC members recognized that new and emerging

societal, economic, and technological trends were reweaving the very fabric of regional communities across America. This new era, vastly different from the past, renders many old assumptions obsolete. Now and in the future, innovation, collaboration, and inclusion are cardinal to meeting the growing challenges and opportunities facing the nation's urban centers.

As a regional planning body made primarily of key local elected officials, ARC's leadership recognized that ARC had gone about as far as it could alone. They explored ways to involve others from the business, civic, and non-profit sectors in a common quest to develop a world class region. In 1991 ARC's board and staff undertook concurrent efforts to design a regional leadership program and develop a visioning project that embraced the entire regional community.

## **Building Regional Leadership**

First ARC gained the support of the Metro Business Forum to establish a Regional Leadership Institute (RLI) that would bring together leaders from all sectors in all areas of the Atlanta region. The Forum is an umbrella organization of chambers of commerce in seven of the region's ten counties, and its members include the chief executive and top leaders from each chamber board. In 1991 it was chaired by George Busbee, Georgia's governor from 1975 to

1983, who quickly became a champion of the RLI and later was a member RLI's second class.

The Metro Business Forum and ARC joined forces as co-sponsors of RLI, with both organizations contributing seed capital to get the first program under way in September of 1991. Since then ARC staff have coordinated recruitment and program development for six RLI classes. More than 250 leaders have completed an intensive, one-week program of classes and team-building exercises. Each year a distinguished faculty of regional and national experts gives participants a broad view of the region's problems, issues, and challenges. The educational program is paired with opportunities to share and learn from each others' experiences.

Upon completion of RLI, participants can choose to join the Regional Leadership Foundation, a membership organization for graduates of RLI. Created in 1994, its mission is to act as a springboard for leaders to work together to help resolve regional issues. The ultimate goal of both RLI and RLF is creation of a regional network of leaders who view themselves as a civic force for positive change in the region.

### **Phase I: Creating a Shared Community Vision**

Initially, VISION 2020 focused on creating a shared community vision for the Atlanta region's development through the year 2020. This first phase involved two years of intensive research and unprecedented community outreach by ARC and its community partners, including the Regional Leadership Institute. It began in July of 1991 when ARC staff completed the first draft of a prospectus outlining a multi-year visioning process. In October 1991, with the backing of ARC's board and encouragement from community leaders, ARC began to build

a steering committee to lead this project. Former Governor George Busbee agreed to chair the steering committee and personally recruit its members. Also in October 1991, ARC contracted with a public relations firm to assist with initial communications support materials and strategies for the VISION 2020 project.

In December of 1991, a press conference in midtown Atlanta announced the formation of VISION 2020 and its steering committee of illustrious business and community leaders. Governor Busbee and other members of the steering committee were instrumental in helping ARC secure funding for the exceptional costs of VISION 2020. ARC contributed all staff resources as part of related projects financed with local dues. In early 1992, the Georgia Power Foundation contributed a start-up grant of \$75,000 to VISION 2020. Subsequently, the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation awarded a grant of \$625,000 to carry Phase I to completion over a three-year period.

To begin the process, ARC engaged an independent research firm to conduct a Delphi survey of regional and national experts on a variety of critical issues and trends relevant to the long-term development of the region. In May 1992, ARC used its annual Outlook Conference as the first public event to showcase VISION 2020. It attracted more than 800 public and private leaders, more than double the number attending the conference in prior years. Outlook '92 released the results of the Delphi survey and featured keynote speaker Glen Heimstra, a leading futurist and strategic change consultant from Seattle. He made a compelling case for the power and importance of vision and challenged attendees to create their preferred future for the Atlanta region.

During the summer of 1992, the VISION 2020 steering committee worked with others in the community including the Regional

### VISION 2020 STEERING COMMITTEE

**George Busbee**  
Retired Partner  
King & Spalding

**James B. Carson, Jr.**  
Chairman and CEO  
Carter Commercial Real Estate  
Services

**John Clendenin**  
Chairman  
BellSouth Corporation

**Ann W. Cramer**  
External Program Director  
IBM Southern Area

**A. W. (Bill) Dahlberg**  
Chairman  
The Southern Company

**Dr. Charles R. Hatcher, Jr.**  
Director  
Robert W. Woodruff Health  
Sciences Center  
Emory University

**Ronald Hogan**  
Chairman and Acting CEO  
St. Joseph's Hospital

**Henry (Hank) M. Huckaby**  
Director of the Physical  
Research Program  
Georgia State University

**Terry S. Parker**  
President  
GTE Telecommunications  
Products and Services

**Raymond Riddle**  
President  
National Service Industries,  
Inc.

**Dr. Jane E. Smith**  
Program Director  
The Atlanta Project

**Larry D. Thompson**  
Partner  
King & Spalding

**Roland Vaughn**  
Chief of Police  
City of Conyers

**Rand Wentworth**  
Director  
The Trust for Public Land

Leadership Institute, the ARC board, city and county managers, local planning directors, and local finance directors to develop draft "future statements." This work outlined what might happen if the region does nothing to change its current course and what it could become with ambitious intervention.

In October 1992, more than 500 citizens—including elected officials, private citizens, business leaders, high school students, and experts from a variety of fields—attended a VISION 2020 Regional Congress. The purpose of the congress was to bring together a cross-section of the region's citizens to react to the initial future statements and to begin building a vision for the future. Attendance, interest, and participation exceeded all expectations. Those present engaged in lively and thoughtful discussions in both plenary and break-out sessions focused on different aspects of the region's future. The Institute of Community and Area Development at the University of Georgia facilitated the Regional Congress

and most of the meetings of the steering committee and other groups during 1992 and early 1993.

### Phase I: Community Outreach

In late 1992, ARC selected the public relations firm of Pringle Dixon Pringle to help carry out the heart of the VISION 2020 project, a public outreach campaign to involve the entire regional community in creating a shared vision of the future. ARC based its choice on several factors, including Pringle Dixon Pringle's track record for successfully executing community service projects—such as the campaign that revived Zoo Atlanta and the "Pennies from Heaven" fundraising campaign for The Atlanta Project. In addition, the firm's bid, the lowest of all the bids, reflected a great deal of pro bono work they and their subcontractors committed to VISION 2020.

The public outreach campaign ran from January to May 1993. Its primary purpose was to inform citizens about their future

options and alert them to the opportunity to help mold the future of their region. It focused on two key public involvement programs. The first was the creation of the VISION 2020 Speaker's Bureau. Speakers drawn primarily from the steering committee and members of RLI delivered more than 100 presentations to civic, community, business, and government organizations, including public housing tenant associations and homeless shelters. Members of RLI also sponsored a series of twenty-three community forums in strategic locations throughout the region. These forums provided more than 2,000 grassroots citizens an opportunity for direct involvement in formulating the vision for their future.

In March, local network affiliate WAGA-TV broadcast a live townhall meeting to hundreds of thousands of viewers during prime time on a Thursday evening. More than 300 citizens participated in the studio audience and two satellite locations. Local business and civic leaders authored a series of seven guest editorials on VISION 2020 issues published by the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. A special VISION 2020 program involved hundreds of youth through Junior Achievement. Other activities included an array of radio and television interviews, public service announcements, and free billboard advertising.

The townhall meeting publicized a special newspaper supplement and public opinion survey, which ran in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* on the following Sunday. In addition, the supplement and survey ran in the *Atlanta Tribune*, in Chinese in the *Chinese World Journal*, and in Spanish in *Mundo Hispanico*. The *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* also delivered the survey, along with an excerpt of the supplement, as part of its REACH edition targeted to nonsubscribers. Combined, these newspapers reached more than 1.5 million

people with information exploring the issues and decisions facing the region. ARC staff and VISION 2020 volunteers also delivered copies directly to hard-to-reach audiences including non-English speaking citizens and homeless persons.

The community's contribution to this first phase in cash and pro bono contributions totaled more than \$2 million, not counting donations of thousands of hours of time.

## The Shared Vision Unveiled

ARC staff carefully studied and synthesized all data, ideas, and suggestions received through this massive outreach effort. The most stunning discovery of Phase I was the common values shared by citizens from different cultures and income levels. VISION 2020 found that all people are interested in the same basics for their families and communities. These simple but profound elements include a sense of personal safety; a strong educational system; job opportunities; a clean environment; cooperation among governments, chambers of commerce, and other institutions; and harmony among people of different races and cultures.

Finally, after months of outreach efforts and comments from thousands of citizens, "A Shared Vision for the Atlanta Region" was complete and ready for its unveiling at ARC's Outlook '93 Conference in May 1993. The 1,200 people who attended viewed the vision through a printed report and a video produced with the help of WAGA-TV. Futurist Glen Heimstra again addressed the Outlook participants, this time in a video message, encouraging them to help take part in making the vision a reality. He congratulated the community on completing the monumental task of creating a vision but reminded the crowd that the really hard work was still ahead—implementation.

## **Phase II: Making the Vision a Reality**

Phase I focused on giving every person in the Atlanta region an opportunity to voice their opinions, hopes, and dreams about the future. That was no easy feat since the region's ten counties of 3,000 square miles are home to almost 3 million people. Building a shared vision for future development is an unusual and laudable accomplishment. However, bringing life to that vision is the truly difficult part. The purpose of Phase II was to involve a diverse cross-section of the community in creating initiatives and action steps as well as to acquire community support to take that vision to reality.

Phase II began with a search for a method to build community consensus on a way to implement the community's vision. The method chosen was the collaborative process developed by the National Civic League (NCL), headquartered in Denver. In June of 1993, ARC sponsored three two-day training sessions on community collaboration for 150 key regional leaders. The training, led by NCL staff, helped to prepare a core group of people to lead the implementation process using a method of collaboration and cooperation.

With this training as a starting point, the VISION 2020 steering committee began work on Phase II in the fall of 1993. They first established initiating committees around ten key issues that regional citizens considered critical to the future. For each committee, they selected ten to fifteen individuals based on their diverse perspectives related to each issue. The issues covered the spectrum, including diversity, economic development, education, environment, governance, health, housing, human services, public safety, and transportation.

In January 1994, Chris Gates, now president of NCL, conducted several training

sessions for the initiating committees. During the same visit, he delivered the keynote address for a VISION 2020 breakfast at the Atlanta History Center to kickoff the work of the ten initiating committees. He explained NCL's model and its strategic purpose of bringing diverse perspectives and intellect from all areas of the community to bear on building better communities.

Over four to five months, the ten committees adapted the NCL model to deal most effectively with local views and concerns about their specific issue areas. They also identified and recruited about 100 people with diverse perspectives from all parts of the region to serve on each of the ten groups. Their charge was to examine the community's vision and create action plans to address the critical issues. To assist the work of the collaboratives, ARC contracted with a local firm, Leadership Strategies, Inc., to help ARC staff adapt the NCL model, to manage the process, to train ARC staff and community volunteers in facilitation techniques, and to provide a core group of professionals to serve as lead facilitators of the VISION 2020 collaboratives.

The Outlook '94 Conference in May launched the collaborative process and released ARC's 2020 baseline forecasts of population and jobs. In collaboration with the Georgia Tech Research Institute, ARC produced an innovative, award-winning video that combined motivational messages with computer visualization of the small area forecasts and selected region-shaping development policies. The community would now have a chance to alter those forecasts through "trend-bending" action plans. By June, all ten VISION 2020 collaboratives had begun their year-long task of determining what barriers stand in the way and what actions are critical to achieving the community's shared vision for the future. Nearly 1,000 citizens met at least once a

month, sometimes more often, to finish this critical work.

Leadership is the single most important factor in this community collaborative process. The initiating committees recognized this by carefully selecting and recruiting widely respected leaders who could provide strong but inclusive leadership to chair each collaborative. Their official duties went beyond simply chairing meetings to include planning each meeting in detail, adjusting the process as needed, and encouraging members to stay involved. They also organized committees to work in the following areas: research, to bring needed information to the deliberations; membership, to be certain that all concerned perspectives were at the table; and outreach, to involve others and gain community awareness and acceptance of recommendations emerging from the collaboratives.

## Phase II: Community Outreach

While they worked, the VISION 2020 collaboratives reached out to the larger community to check their work, refine their directions, and build civic will for needed changes. Outreach included speaking engagements, community forums, guest editorials, and many other activities. VISION 2020 held another Regional Congress in February of 1995 to report progress and to involve the larger community. WAGA-TV again produced and aired a live television townhall meeting to discuss critical issues facing youth in the future. The education collaborative involved every school in the Atlanta region in a project called "The Future through Young Eyes." Students discussed the future and contributed art, poetry, essays, and videos depicting the world they envision in the next century.

### VISION 2020 COLLABORATIVE CHAIRS

*Diversity*

**Joy Berry**

Executive Director  
Georgia Human Relations  
Commission

**Alicia Phillipp**

Executive Director  
Metro Atlanta Community  
Foundation

*Economic Development*

**James R. Lientz, Jr.**

President  
NationsBank of Georgia

*Education*

**George Thompson**

Center for Leadership-School  
Reform

**Patricia L. Willis**

President and Executive  
Director of Corporate Affairs  
BellSouth Foundation

*Environment*

**Steve O'Day**

Partner  
Smith, Gambrell & Russell

**Connie Wiggins**

Executive Director  
Gwinnett Clean and Beautiful

*Governance*

**Kenneth M. Gregor**

Retired, Manager of MARTA

*Health*

**Dyanne D. Affonso**

Dean, School of Nursing  
Emory University

**Frank Houser**

Columbia/HCA

*Housing*

**Mark Fitzgerald**

Executive Director  
Greater Atlanta Home Builders  
Association

**Chris Hardnett**

Director  
DeKalb County Community  
Development

*Human Services*

**Ann W. Cramer**

External Program Director  
IBM Southern Area

*Public Safety*

**Harold Clarke**

Retired, Chief Justice, Georgia  
Supreme Court  
Troutman and Sanders

*Transportation*

**Donna Fisher**

Gwinnett Homeowner's Alliance

On Sunday, June 25, 1995, a special sixteen-page newspaper supplement called "The Regional Dialogue" appeared in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. The supplement focused on efforts by VISION 2020, the Regional Leadership Institute, and the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta to involve citizens in creating a great future. It featured a second public opinion survey to test ideas emerging from the VISION 2020 deliberations.

The special insert was a gift to the community provided by a partnership of the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, the *Clayton News Daily* (a suburban daily), and Southeast Newsprint. This was the first time known that two competing newspapers have partnered a joint community service project of this scale. Southeast Newsprint donated the forty-one tons of paper needed to print "The Regional Dialogue." The supplement and survey, which reached hundreds of thousands of citizens, represented pro bono contributions of more than \$300,000 in services, newsprint, and donated space.

### **Bringing It All Together**

It became apparent early on that the ten VISION 2020 collaboratives would need to address the cross-cutting and duplicative issues shared among them. In May of 1995, leadership from each collaborative met to synthesize the work of all ten. Altogether eleven major sets of actions emerged from the collaborative process. These groups of initiatives addressed topics from transportation and land use to cultural arts.

In June 1995, ARC held a celebration breakfast to present the synthesized initiatives of all ten VISION 2020 collaboratives. As a small token of appreciation, participants received VISION 2020 lapel pins to signify the work accomplished and to remind the community of the challenges and

opportunities that lie ahead. The celebration breakfast launched the work of action planning teams formed to work through July to put the final touches on the eleven sets of initiatives. The action planning teams completed initial implementation plans on schedule for a total of forty-one initiatives.

ARC's 1995 Outlook Conference on September 8 unveiled the results of the four-year VISION 2020 process. The report, "A Community's Vision Takes Flight," set forth the framework for accomplishing the forty-one initiatives. A standard format outlined the purpose of each initiative, key action steps, the lead organization and other partners, a generalized description of timing and resource requirements, and a contact for additional information. In December ARC will publish a comprehensive report covering milestones of all ten community collaboratives and, when available, more detailed and updated action plans. Both reports are, however, simply snapshots of works in progress. Together they give leaders and citizens a clear and executable plan for achieving the region's full potential in the future.

To assure that the plans lead to action, VISION 2020 established an implementation committee composed of all collaborative chairs and two representatives each from the VISION 2020 steering committee, the Regional Leadership Foundation, and the Atlanta Regional Commission Board. The 23-member committee, chaired by George Busbee, began work in July to give direction to the action planning teams and to oversee and monitor production of the VISION 2020 framework plan released in September. The implementation committee, for at least the next year or two, will approve and coordinate organizations to lead implementation of specific initiatives and foster interest in those initiatives that falter. This committee anticipates setting a

sunset date for its transitional work after they have determined, in concert with the regional community, the best way to assure the long-term success of VISION 2020.

At the same time, ARC's board passed a resolution accepting the work of and affirming its commitment to VISION 2020. The resolution also recognizes ARC's responsibility to assist other organizations involved in implementing key initiatives and to monitor and report on implementation activities. As part of this process, ARC is taking the lead on a set of VISION 2020 benchmarks to provide an annual picture of regional well-being and to measure progress toward achieving the goals of VISION 2020. The benchmarks will alert regional citizens to the need for change when trends take a negative turn, and they will serve as milestones for community celebration when targets are achieved. Finally, to provide a guide for other regions, ARC has contracted with an independent consultant to document and evaluate the VISION 2020 process. The chief purposes are to determine lessons learned, thank participants, and elicit ideas on future directions for VISION 2020.

## **Funding Phase II and Beyond**

ARC returned to the foundation and corporate community to fund the second phase of VISION 2020. In early 1994, the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation offered VISION 2020 another generous donation to help fund this effort. At that time, the Phase II budget for exceptional out-of-pocket costs exceeded \$1 million. Foundation managers supported the budget but felt that Phase I had generated sufficient interest and support for ARC to seek corporate and community funding as well. The Woodruff Foundation donated \$500,000 for Phase II and offered an additional challenge grant of \$250,000 to be matched by corporate funding.

During the first half of 1994, ARC staff explored a number of corporate solicitation strategies with members of the VISION 2020 steering committee and ARC's board. Under the leadership of board member John Williams, chairman and CEO of Post Properties, ARC prepared a comprehensive prospectus covering not only VISION 2020 activities but also other unfunded projects identified as imperative by the VISION 2020 process. Following the advice of experienced fundraising professionals and volunteers, ARC staff produced a set of support materials that spelled out the tangible end products of this work program and the benefits of specific interest to regional businesses. The identity chosen for the fundraising campaign was "MISSION 2020: to move the region from vision to reality."

Other preparations included developing a list of businesses considered to be good prospects for ARC's fundraising. The list featured many of the region's responsible corporate citizens and others whose interests match ARC's mission and the objectives of MISSION 2020. Starting with the most promising prospects, Mr. Williams or Governor Busbee made appointments and visited targeted corporations and foundations with ARC's director to make the case for MISSION 2020 and ask for a specific level of funding. Prior to the appointment ARC sent personalized letters introducing MISSION 2020. Then during the visit, the ARC delegation presented each prospect a set of prestige-quality printed materials to support their personal appeal. By the end of 1994, the Woodruff challenge grant was matched by corporate contributions totaling almost \$1 million from Georgia Power, UPS, NationsBank, Trust Company Bank, Wachovia Bank of Georgia, Post Properties, BellSouth, and Georgia Pacific.

ARC's preparation for this fundraising program began several years ago with early

efforts to involve the private sector in its annual Outlook Conferences, the Regional Leadership Institute, expanded committees of the board, and other outreach efforts. Beyond preparation, once again *leadership* was the key to ARC's success in its maiden voyage into corporate funding. Although ARC carefully targeted businesses who knew and appreciated ARC's mission, every contributor was clearly most influenced by the personal testimonial made by either Governor Busbee or Mr. Williams.

To reinforce the confidence of contributors, ARC committed to keep separate accounts of these private sector funds and established a board of trustees to oversee the expenditure of funds and completion of the work program. Once the agency has a proven track record for performance, private sector funding of portions of ARC's ongoing work program may become routine.

## In Conclusion

The release of the VISION 2020 plan serves as a beginning for long-term positive change in the Atlanta region. Prominent agencies and corporations have taken the lead on some initiatives, while teams of community leaders are pushing others forward. United Way has opened its planning process to its entire donor community using survey and outreach methods that mirror VISION 2020's. The agency also is committed to integrating VISION 2020 concerns and initiatives into its strategic plan. United Way serves as an outstanding example of many new partnerships formed to work on either specific VISION 2020 initiatives or complementary community efforts.

The four-year project has endeavored to tap the community's vision, energy, and commitment to excellence. It has produced a cadre of leaders interested in making this community the best it can be. Barriers are

beginning to come down. Strangers are becoming friends. Relationships are forming that will help Atlanta compete as one cohesive region in the global economy of the twenty-first century. Most importantly, VISION 2020 has helped to build a new civic infrastructure and contributed to a systemic change in community decision making in the Atlanta region.

Through VISION 2020 the community has begun work on a set of benchmarks to measure how well the vision is doing. The benchmarks will serve as only one of many ways that VISION 2020 will keep the community informed on regional progress and persistent problems. What happens from this point forward represents the true test of VISION 2020's effectiveness. Hopefully, VISION 2020 will signal the end of complacency and herald the arrival of a sharp sense of urgency. Ultimately, VISION 2020's success will mean that the entire regional community works together, not only to plan for the distant future but also to accomplish the important trend-bending actions needed today. ☀

**Harry West** recently completed twenty-two years as an employee of the Atlanta Regional Commission, serving as its director. He is currently directing the VISION 2020 project. Throughout his career, Mr. West has been selected to participate in various planning and leadership groups including Leadership Atlanta, Leadership Georgia, and, most recently, the Regional Leadership Institute. He also serves on the policy board of President Carter's major initiative, The Atlanta Project, and he is co-chairman of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games Transportation Support Group. Mr. West is a native Georgian. He has lived and worked in the Atlanta region for the past thirty-two years. He received his Masters of Public Administration from The University of Georgia in 1969. That same year, he became county manager for Fulton County and was the youngest man in the state to serve in such a position.