

Decatur, Georgia: Diversity, Gentrification, and the Art of Community Conversation

BY MICHAEL MCGRATH

On August 29, 2015, about 250 people gathered at the Ebster Recreation Center gym in Decatur, Georgia, for a “community action planning” conversation known as Better Together. The participants used the electronic polling devices commonly referred to by meetings facilitators as “clickers” to give the organizers a sense of the demographic mix of the crowd and answers to a series of questions about attitudes of attendees toward the community.

The program, as described later in a lengthy report published by the organizers of the Better Together process, “consisted of a series of presentations and videos interspersed with opportunities for participants to converse with their tablemates about an equitable and inclusive city, racially just community policing, and diverse and affordable housing. Each participant had a participant guide, which included background information on the Better Together initiative; an overview of the City of Decatur (2016) at present and plans for growth; background information on the three focus areas identified by the Leadership Circle; and a resource list. Participants also received a Community Conversation Toolkit with tips for organizing and hosting their own Better Together conversations with friends and neighbors” (p. 11).

The discussion was patterned loosely on the World Café model for holding structured, small-group conversations in a welcoming environment. “People would talk in small groups and report out,” said Decatur City Manager Peggy Merriss. “I was amazed at the people that were there who I didn’t know, so it wasn’t the usual suspects, although some of those people were there, the people who were very passionate about participating in this kind of input and outreach.”

This was not the first community-wide conversation on demographic change and diversity to be

held in Decatur a city of about 20,000 a few metro stops to the northeast of downtown Atlanta. City government, community organizers, and civic leaders, in fact, have an impressive track record when it comes to using the tools of dialogue and deliberation to wrestle with weighty topics. The city also has the reputation for being innovative, progressive, forward thinking, and inclusive.

Decatur is the sort of place where firefighters collect rainwater to wash their fire trucks and where “encouraging a diverse and engaged community” is listed as “Principle B” in the city’s official strategic plan. There’s a story some residents tell with pride about the city’s inclusive attitude. In the early 1990s, when the Cobb County Commissioners in nearby Marietta passed an anti-gay resolution, the mayor made a point of inviting gay families who felt oppressed in Cobb County to “come on down” to Decatur.

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In recent years, however, this spirit of diversity and inclusion has collided with a powerful socioeconomic obstacle, one found in successful cities throughout the country, “gentrification,” the process by which rising housing costs and higher taxes displace local residents of modest means as wealthier renters and homeowners move in to enjoy the amenities of an upscale urban lifestyle and the likely appreciation of real estate values. “We’ve always been reasonably middle class, but now our median family incomes, our education levels are well above

state and national norms,” said Peggy Merriss. “At this point, some of our biggest challenges are how to maintain our diversity, which has been [an] important part of the city’s personality for 30 or 40 years—economic diversity, racial diversity . . . It’s our biggest civic conflict. It manifests itself in a number of ways.”

In the minds of some Decatur residents, gentrification was linked to another thorny issue that cities across the country are wrestling with, racial profiling by police. In December of 2013, a 63-year-old African American man was walking near his home in a leafy Decatur neighborhood, when a police car pulled up, and the patrol officer asked where the man was heading. He answered that he lived nearby and didn’t have to say where he was going, at which point the officer exited his car and asked for his I.D. The man who the police officer stopped, Don Denard, had lived in Decatur for 33 years. He held an executive position at the Carter Center, an international human rights organization founded by President Jimmy Carter and had served two terms on the local school board.

According to a police department internal investigation, Denard was stopped because of a tip off from another officer who reported seeing someone fitting his description exiting the backdoor of a nearby home, as it happened, his own home. Consequently, the department concluded that it had been an unfortunate misunderstanding, not a case of profiling, but Don Denard remained unconvinced. He organized the group called the Decatur Community Coalition and took his concerns to the Decatur City Commission. In the meantime, other allegations of profiling were coming to light.

Whether a true case of racial profiling or an unfortunate misreading of the situation by police, the incident involved a prominent member of the community who had lived in the city for decades and had every expectation that an afternoon stroll through his own neighborhood would not end in a colloquy with a police officer. To some community members, the incident was a symbolic reminder of how Decatur neighborhoods were changing. There were those who complained that the upscale newcomers were too quick to call the police when someone walking around the neighborhood looked out of place to them.

Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of communities in the Atlanta metropolitan region, the older, more urban areas known to locals as “intown” and the newer, more suburban neighborhoods sometimes referred to as “outside the perimeter,” the perimeter being Interstate 285. Decatur, Georgia, though a separate city, is considered “intown,” and unlike the outer suburbs, its residential patterns and commercial districts were defined by the trolley lines built in the late nineteenth century, not by the automobiles and highways in 1940s and 50s. This trolley track pattern of development goes a long way to explain Decatur’s compact and pedestrian-friendly character.

“Downtown Decatur is surrounded by beautiful historic neighborhoods reflecting a variety of architectural styles, including Craftsman bungalows, Victorian homes, townhouses, and new homes,” notes an entry in the *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. “The tree-lined streets and a strong sense of community continue to draw young families to the City of Decatur. New office buildings, built by developers sensitive to Decatur’s vision of maintaining its small-town character, surround the retail center and the Old Courthouse Square, which provides a link to the city’s history.”

“Decatur has a really strong sense of its own identity,” said Peggy Merriss. “I think in the last 50 years it’s had a reputation for being forward thinking, supporting transit back when Metropolitan Regional Transit Authority was being developed. We had a huge population drop between late 1960s through the 70s and 80s, primarily white flight to the suburbs. Rebounding from that when a lot of cities did not, and also being able to rebound our downtown when everybody was going to malls, we’ve been able to maintain a city atmosphere and overcome a number of challenges that a lot of people still haven’t been able to overcome. We’ve really been able to play off our assets.”

During the 1960s and 1970s, as thousands of middle-class, white urban dwellers were fleeing to the outer suburbs, a growing number of African American families, some having been forced out of Atlanta by “urban renewal” demolition efforts,

were moving into the modest, two- or three-bedroom craftsman bungalows in the Oakhurst neighborhood. Overall the population of Decatur was shrinking, from about 22,000 to a low of 16,000, but the city's African American population, as a share of the whole, was growing. In 1980, about 40 percent of Decatur's population was African American, mostly concentrated in the Oakhurst neighborhood.

Over time, however, the demographics of the city began to change again as Decatur experienced a period of revitalization and newcomers arrived in successive waves of urban homesteading and gentrification. Decatur's median family income rose from about \$44,000 (in 2013 dollars) to about \$71,000. In the Oakhurst neighborhood, the median family income nearly tripled. Home prices also rose dramatically as the older bungalows were being torn down and replaced by much larger and more expensive houses. Within a period of about thirty years, the African American share of the city's population declined from 40 percent to 20 percent.

Study Circles and Round Tables

Decatur's habit of finding new and innovative ways of holding public discussions about tricky local issues goes at least as far back as the 1990s. Racial tensions had arisen in the local schools over questions of administration and a proposed reorganization of district facilities. On one occasion, a zoning debate between local residents and a private college over a new parking structure had degenerated into a fistfight. A proposal to build federally subsidized affordable housing as part of a redevelopment project involving a historic Decatur building was drawing opposition from nearby homeowners. A local pastor made disparaging comments about the city's growing gay population.

"It seemed like the city was sort of coming unglued," recalled Jon Abercrombie, a community organizer and affordable housing advocate, "and I started looking for a better way to have the conversation." Abercrombie thought he found his better way when he heard about an organization called the Study Circles Resource Center, a nonprofit group now known as

Everyday Democracy that has helped many a community make the journey from dialogue to action when taking on pressing challenges.

The Study Circles model, in Abercrombie's description, was a

technology for bringing people together in small groups around difficult but important issues with neutral facilitators, a process where each of the small groups generate ideas. It is focused on what actions institutions could take, what actions small groups like clubs and organizations could take, and what a single citizen could undertake to make a difference on a particular issue.

After attending a Study Circles forum in Florida, Abercrombie approached the city commission about the idea of doing a dialogue to action process in Decatur. The commissioners were skeptical, Abercrombie recalls, fearing the conversation would only lead to more conflict, given the heated nature of recent discussions. Decatur's professional staff, however, came up with a source of funding, and the Study Circles idea went forward.

Abercrombie developed a "leadership map," a listing of the city's organizations and informal associations—everything from the garden clubs to neighborhood groups—to guide in recruiting stakeholders to participate in a series of round table discussion on the issues that were dividing the community. At the kick-off event, more than 450 people attended, a large number for such a small community.

Abercrombie worked with a city commissioner, the city manager, the mayor, a city marketing staff member, and a member of the city's planning staff to organize the roundtables. At the end of the process, the group came up with 400 ideas about how to improve the community and created action teams to work on implementing some of the ideas. As Matt Leighninger (2006) recounts in his book, *The Next Form of Democracy*, a symbol of the project's success was that one of its participants, a gay African American woman went on to run for city commission and won. "To many it was a sign that Decatur could resolve the kind of cultural conflict that was so apparent in nearby communities, where tensions

still simmered between old-timers and newcomers, and between people of color and their gay and lesbian neighbors,” wrote Leighninger (p. 82).

A number of ideas came out of the round tables, including some that were adopted officially as part of the city’s 2000 strategic plan. A new organization called the Decatur Neighborhood Association was created to serve as an alliance for neighborhood groups. As John Gastil and Todd Kelshaw (2000) reported in a paper compiled for the Kettering Foundation, the city also created “a neighborhood liaison position to help the alliance conduct its business. Other recommendations, such as a tax abatement plan for seniors, have not been implemented fully. Another taskforce, the Land Use Action Committee, has worked with the Land Use Commission to create a new process to make zoning decisions. Instead of having traditional hearings parading to the microphone after a presentation by a developer, they now break down into small groups and consider possibilities for development that meet the diverse needs of those in attendance” (p. 29–30).

Ten years later, the city went back to the round tables idea when it was time to kick off a new strategic planning process, a public engagement effort that ultimately involved more than 1,500 people. The process involved town meetings and facilitated conversations over a 12-month period, resulting in a shared vision of a desired future and four underlying principles: (a) manage growth while retaining character; (b) encourage a diverse and engaged community; (c) serve as good stewards of the environment and community resources; and (d) support a safe, healthy lifelong community.

The process, as described in the 2010 Decatur Strategic Plan, was as follows:

April 27 to June 5, 2010, the City of Decatur held its Round Table discussions, an important step in its 2010 Strategic Plan Update. There were three Round Table sessions. Each session comprised of 11 separate meetings held at different times and places around the city. The first session involved 741 citizens, the vast majority of whom (78 percent) returned for the second and third sessions.

Altogether, participants offered 7,894 ideas and images about Decatur’s current situation, possible future, and issues facing the city . . . The Round Tables were face-to-face meetings involving citizens who agreed to attend three sessions. The sessions dealt with different topics. Session One, from April 27 to May 1, dealt broadly with what citizens appreciated about Decatur, what they saw as problems, and what they’d like Decatur to be in the future. Session Two, from May 11 to May 15, dealt with six issue areas, from transportation and the environment to housing and healthy living. Session Three, from June 1 to June 5, dealt with connections and community roles.

For each session, the meetings were held at different times and places around Decatur. In each meeting, participants were seated in small groups of ten or so, to ensure that all would have a chance to speak. Each small group had a trained facilitator and recorder, who captured citizen comments. (p. 23).

Gentrification

Gentrification is a process that is occurring in many urban neighborhoods across the country, a process that seems to have accelerated in recent years as cities and regions recover from the 2008 housing market collapse and recession. For many cities, rising real estate values, population growth, and increased desirability is a good problem to have, but the trade-off is that residents who have lived in the community for years, perhaps decades, may find that they can no longer afford to rent, buy, or pay local property taxes.

As a local teacher who was quoted anonymously in the Better Together conversation guide expressed the quandary, “I worry that Decatur’s success will lead to Decatur’s failure. My students and their families began to look more and more homogenous. What are we doing to keep our economic and racial diversity? Do the new Decaturites value these things too? How do we make sure the people who work in Decatur (teachers, firefighters, city workers) can afford to live in Decatur? How can we make sure our elderly citizens don’t get pushed out?” but as another participant, also quoted anonymously suggested: “You cannot engineer diverse communities.”

Gentrification may be an example of what social scientists and students of deliberation call a “wicked problem,” that is, a problem in which the causes are complex and varied and the solutions required multiple stakeholders and a variety of stories over time. “Wicked problems often crop up when organizations have to face constant change or unprecedented challenges,” wrote John Camillus in a 2008 article in the *Harvard Business Review*. “They occur in a social context; the greater the disagreement among stakeholders, the more wicked the problem. In fact, it is the social complexity of wicked problems as much as their technical difficulties that make them tough to manage. Not all problems are wicked; confusion, discord, and lack of progress are telltale signs that an issue might be wicked.”

In Decatur, the problem of gentrification begins with the rapidly rising value of real estate. “Land in Decatur is about a million bucks an acre now,” said Douglas Faust, director of the Decatur Housing Authority in a recent interview. “We’re not Manhattan, but it’s a walkable community. Biking is easy. We’re near the downtown area. There’s a nice tree canopy here. There’s a fair number of historic neighborhoods and generally speaking the crime is low. It’s a fun place to be.”

By far the most powerful magnet for prospective home buyers is the stellar reputation of the local schools. Founded in the early nineteenth century as the DeKalb County seat, Decatur is one of the oldest municipalities in the region, and it has always had its own independent school district. “Our school system is the best in the metro area with the highest rankings,” said Faust, “and as a result folks are trying to figure out what to do, because the county we’re in, the school system is not as excellent. They’ll buy a two or three hundred thousand dollar home, demolish it and put up a new home, maybe a \$900,000 home. Those are the kinds of economic factors driving what is happening.”

Ironically, diversity and an urban lifestyle were among the many qualities that attracted newcomers to Decatur during its recovery years. While other Atlanta area suburbs were opposing the expansion of mass transit systems, Decatur eagerly signed up with the newly founded Metropolitan Atlanta Transit Authority. As the commercial districts of other

small cities were falling prey to shopping malls and big box retailers, Decatur officials worked hard to preserve the quality and viability of its historic downtown area. “We’ve been able to maintain a city atmosphere and overcome a number of challenges that a lot of other communities haven’t overcome,” said Merriss.

From Community Conversation to Community Action

Peggy Merriss has worked for the City of Decatur since 1983, joining the staff as director of human resources right out of graduate school and working her way up to the city manager’s office. Her entire career as a public manager has been in a city that values public engagement and innovation. “That’s how we do it here,” she said, noting that the strategic planning process in 2000 had sold her on the “how and why of community process” and “how much better it is to do a proactive community planning process than a reactive planning process.”

When the controversy over police profiling emerged along with growing concerns about gentrification, she and other staff members decided it was time to revisit Principle B of the 2010 strategic with a new planning process. The city hired two local consulting firms, the Art of Community and Place Matters, to help design, facilitate, and implement the Better Together initiative. “You had these issues that kept bubbling up to the surface, then calming down and bubbling up again,” she explained. “We felt that we needed to find a way...to build community support, build community infrastructure, for Decatur to be an equitable, inclusive, and welcoming city.”

A steering committee or “leadership circle” was formed to work with the consultants and the city. Its members were carefully selected to represent a range of community perspectives, among them Don Denard, the man who had made the allegations of being profiled, Decatur Chief of Police, Mike Booker, and Peggy Merriss. The group also included an associate dean at a local liberal arts college, a counselor at a local middle school, and a Baptist minister, among others.

The outreach for the community conversation was extensive. “We did a survey that was both online

and written,” said Merriss. “We had volunteers going out to the community for people who didn’t feel comfortable doing online surveys. We targeted 500 people to get responses back. We got over 700. We had an all-day community conversation that went from nine to four at one of our recreation centers. We sent a postcard out to every business address. We did blogs and social media and Twitter. We got about 250 people signed up to come on a Saturday to give us some extensive input on the issues they felt were really important.”

From the Better Together action planning process in 2015, six themes emerged:

- Support community participation and engagement among all members of the city’s population.
- Prioritize racially just community policing by improving relationships between community members and law enforcement and ensuring all community members are treated in a just way with equity and respect.
- Ensure the availability of diverse and affordable housing in order to prevent the displacement of existing residents and provide for a variety of housing types and prices.
- Cultivate a welcoming and inclusive retail environment for serving a diverse clientele.
- Maximize the use of public spaces for the enrichment and well-being of all Decatur residents, workers, and visitors.
- Facilitate low-cost transportation options for people of all ages and abilities.

“The community action plan,” said Merriss, “was divided up into actions that individuals can take to support these themes, steps that organizations can take to support the themes and actions the City of Decatur would take to support the themes. We then presented a draft to the community and they prioritized some of those themes. We presented a work session to the city commission. City commission accepted the action plan.”

How do you know when your community is achieving success in implementing an action plan to foster diversity and inclusion? City officials tend to employ benchmarks or measurements by which they can measure progress. But progress on complicated

issues such as demographic change and racial profiling can be difficult to assess, especially when there are powerful global forces at work. What desirable smaller community in a world-city region doesn’t have Decatur’s quandary of demographic and economic realities working against the desire for a more diverse and inclusive community?

Another question: Who is in charge of implementing and monitoring the success of the various actions steps that get kicked around in round tables and World Café meetings? At the city level, local officials are pondering whether to parcel out the various steps or goals to an existing framework of 56 voluntary citizen boards and commissions or whether to create a new Better Together Commission.

The 2014 Better Together process did not create a stand-alone “implementation committee,” as some initiatives do, but it has done something useful. Like the Studies Circles or round tables of the past, Better Together group organized the various goals and steps into a single list that divides them up between likely implementers—individuals, organizations, and governments. The final report helpfully listed some ideas about the things individuals could do. For example:

1. Create a city website to learn about local issues and the city’s decision-making process.
2. Make a point to welcome new neighbors and introduce yourself to others whom you do not know.
3. Share important community news and information through social media platforms.
4. Bring your perspective to community events, celebrations, and city governance by volunteering to serve on volunteer boards, commissions, and taskforces, planning committees, and neighborhood association boards and committees.
5. Participate in your neighborhood association.

The First Annual Oakhurst Porchfest

Every year, a local nonprofit organization called the Decatur Arts Alliance holds an arts and music festival in the central square that serves as the main meeting place for the Oakhurst neighborhood. Last year, however, the group was unable to stage the festival because the square was being renovated and was under construction. The Decatur Arts Alliance put

out a call to the community asking for ideas about an alternative to the annual festival. “That was the gold-plated open invitation,” said Scott Doyon, a community activist and marketing specialist who has lived in the neighborhood for twenty years.

Doyon and some other neighborhood activists borrowed an idea that originated in Ithaca, New York, a grassroots music festival that came to be known as “Porchfest.” The porchfest idea is simple. Neighborhood organizers put up a website asking musicians to sign up as performers and homeowners sign up to volunteer as hosts of a myriad of porch front venues. Listeners walk the neighborhood as they move from porch to porch, an hour or so at each, to enjoy an eclectic *mélange* of bands and soloists.

Since the idea first emerged in Ithaca, porchfests have sprung up spontaneously in other cities, including Napa, California; Boulder, Colorado; and Somerville, Massachusetts. Judging from the experience of Ithaca’s first porchfest in 2007, Doyon and his fellow organizers expected to get about 30 bands and individual performers signing up. Instead, they got more than 134, as well as 130 neighbors who volunteered their front porches. Although the original impetus had been a desire to replace the annual arts festival, Doyon had another reason for organizing porchfest. As he and his fellow volunteers began to plan the event, he began to think of it as a way of bridging some of the divides that were occurring in the Oakhurst neighborhood thanks to gentrification.

When Doyon and his wife had moved to the neighborhood 20 years ago, Oakhurst had seemed a funkier place where artists and young professionals who were starting out could afford a home. “The people back then were more inclined to think of themselves as working class or middle class, and now we have a lot of residents who are very affluent,” he explained in a recent interview. “These kinds of divisions are not really conducive to building community. Whether it is old people disappearing and being replaced by young people, or black people disappearing and being replaced by white people, newcomers versus old-timers, or working class by upper, upper middle class.”

It seemed possible to Doyon that these divides might prevent the community from addressing some of

the ideas that had been generated during the Better Together action planning process, “because people’s energies were going into complaining about each other,” whoever they identified the “other to be . . .” What got me excited, even though I love the idea of just a music filled day, was the prospect of an event that pulled people out of their homes and got them connecting with other people, meeting neighbors, discovering somebody who lives one block away, actually having the opportunity to bond over something shared rather than divide over some perceived difference. All that was really exciting.”

“Every relationship begins with an introduction,” he added. “What I was seeing was the absence of introductions and people letting their perceptions get in the way of forging relationships. Music is probably the thing that has the greatest possibility of everybody starting with a neutral, shared interest.”

One strength of Porchfest, in Doyon’s views, was its flexible, spontaneous, and non-institutional character. No money changed hands. There were no concert promoters, corporate sponsors, or philanthropic underwriters. “The city really didn’t have much to do with it,” said Peggy Merriss. “We basically put out garbage cans. And I think we may have put some Port-a-lets in one of our parks. We knew it was in our interests to collect the garbage and make sure people would have somewhere to go to the bathroom, but it was really a home grown initiative.”

“Supportive, but not intrusive” is one way you could describe the city’s attitude toward porchfest, which Doyon sees as one of its strengths. Decatur has no shortage of festivals. In fact, an unofficial community motto is “Decatur: a drinking city with a festival problem.” In Doyon’s view, “the city doesn’t need to be in the festival business anymore,” noting that local officials had encouraged the holding of festivals as parts of its efforts to revitalize the downtown area. “I think they’re always looking for opportunities to slowly shift the culture of Decatur from a city where the city puts on festivals for people to one where people put on festivals for each other.”

Merriss was out of town the day of the event, but she described it based on second hand reports as

“exceeding everybody’s expectations...They had a gorgeous October day. The sun was out. The temperature was perfect. It was extremely popular, and it was a huge community building event.”

One way of looking at the Oakhurst Porchfest is as an example of what Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom has referred to as “co-production,” that is, citizens working independently but complementarily with public institutions to produce a public good or service. In this case, the public good would be helping residents bridge the cultural and economic divides to work together on solutions.

Scott Doyon is cautious about attaching too much civic importance to the festival. “I’m a firm believer that community events such as porchfest, well executed, can be valuable tools towards increased connectivity at the neighborhood level, that increased interaction between residents can ultimately translate to greater empathy between people of different circumstances, and that those two things together, under the right circumstances, can add up to good things,” he wrote in an email when I contacted him for an interview. But he was worried lest the effort to be characterized as “hipster music fest organizers imagining that they could solve gentrification.”

Doyon was also cautious about touting Porchfest’s success as a showcase for the cultural diversity of his Oakhurst neighborhood. When asked about the range of music offered, he said: “We had almost everything. It was everything from your stereotypical porch music—Appalachian, bluegrass, folk, and Americana—but then there was essentially everything else. There were punk rock bands, jazz, and the Atlanta symphony sent a quartet. We had a bell choir. We had electronica, we had a Japanese drum ensemble, it might be a shorter list if you say what we didn’t have and that leads me to my next point.”

What we didn’t have in a way that reflects the true nature of the neighborhood is we just didn’t have enough people of color. When I say enough I am being reflective of the reality of the neighborhood. We didn’t have as many musicians of color or attendees of color that I would think would be appropriate given my 20 years’ experience in the neighborhood.

Doyon attributes this lack of participation by people of color to the short timeframe in which the event was organized (August to September) and the inability of organizers, given the pace and urgency of replacing the arts festival, to microsegment outreach efforts to different communities within the city, a situation he hoped to address in this year’s porchfest, which will be held in October, 2016.

“Whether there is a semblance of what I hoped for won’t be seen in any kind of measurable way for years, but in terms of perceptions,” he added when pressed on the value of events like Porchfest. “I heard any number of anecdotes from people talking about the people they met who they hadn’t previously known who were actually neighbors. There seemed to be a lot of currency in people feeling better about knowing their neighbors and feeling really good about the day. It was just a super, positive vibe, so much so that this year our operating motto is to create a day that is characterized by radical generosity and goodwill.”

Conclusion

For its part, city government has already responded to Better Together in a variety of ways. The police department undertook its own, three-year strategic planning process, one that includes a series of focus groups with a diverse group of community members. The department began to track police stops to determine whether there are racial disparities and has pledged to implement some of the new guidelines the U.S. Justice Department released in the wake of the Ferguson, Missouri, investigation. It has also been conducting a dialogue with the Decatur Community Coalition.

The city is looking for ways to encourage the development of more affordable housing, including an effort to get the state to allow annexations of nearby areas to increase the square footage of developable parcels. To reduce the property burden on low-income seniors, the city has established a \$1,000 homestead exemption from municipal taxes for homeowners who are older than 65. Legislation to expand homestead exemptions was introduced in the 2015 General Assembly but was defeated. The city is also working on the possibility of creating

“cottage court” developments of smaller clustered homes.

The high price of real estate and land values and the allure of the local schools continue to challenge officials in their efforts to honor principle B of the Decatur Strategic Plan. If anything, the relative disparity between the performance of student in the Decatur schools and those who attend school in the surrounding districts has widened. For a variety of reasons, the power of market forces and socioeconomic trends makes gentrification seem almost inexorable. When the first round tables were held in the 1990s, the African American share of the city population was about 35 percent. Today it is about 20 percent.

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When asked, given the demographic trends, whether he considered the round tables and other deliberative dialogues successful, Jon Abercrombie had this to say: “If you’re only measuring impact by whether there are greater or lesser numbers of African Americans in Decatur, I would say it hasn’t affected that. I’m not sure there is any way we have found that you can affect that except through some creative use of housing. One of the things that did come out of the round tables was strong community support for diversity, not only racial diversity but economic diversity.

This support has enabled the Decatur Housing Authority to at least preserve existing public housing units as it goes about the process of revitalizing old, dilapidated apartment buildings. “I’ve been involved in public housing in different arenas for decades,” said housing authority director Douglas Faust. “This is one of the few places where I’ve found consistent support for public housing, and I would say it is probably one of the most significant result of the series of discussions that have happened. I would also say it has increased support for families that are in public housing, educational support, and others.”

Older public housing buildings are being “revitalized” all over the country, and in many communities revitalization has meant tearing down older buildings and replacing them with fewer units. In some cases, former residents are given vouchers, so they can rent housing in other neighborhoods or communities. In contrast to these communities, the Decatur Housing Authority has been able to maintain its stock of about 440 rental units and add to it slightly by increasing density as it renovates older buildings. Within four or five years, they hope to have about 500 affordable housing units.

“I’ve worked in Charlotte, Atlanta, Birmingham, Montgomery, Tuscaloosa, Fayetteville, North Carolina, Toledo, and Chicago,” said Faust. “Most places, when you talk about revitalizing public housing, people say, ‘Great, glad you’re doing that. Then folks can go live somewhere else.’ In Decatur, we start revitalization planning here and folks say, ‘No, I don’t want Johnny, and Suzy and Billy to move away. They go to school with my kids and they’re part of the neighborhood.’ They want a minimum of families to be moved and in order to preserve diversity. Hey, I’ve done this all over the county and I’ve never had that conservation before. This groundswell of public support to continue public housing—that is different.”

This small increase in subsidized housing may seem like a drop in the bucket, but to veteran housing activist Abercrombie it’s significant. “I wish there were a simpler answer to it,” he said when asked about gentrification and the loss of diversity, “but the bottom line is we have preserved housing. We have had fewer losses than we could have had. We’ve increased housing in some areas. All of these things are encouraging, but none has completely reversed the impact of the economic realities of what it costs to build and afford a house and who can afford to live there.”

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Michael McGrath is editor of the National Civic Review.
