

# Cities work to appeal to younger generation

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LAWRENCEVILLE -- As Joe Allen kicked off a session of Friday's Partnership Gwinnett summit, he quoted a statistic that three out of four young professionals see living in a "cool city" as more important than a good job in deciding where to live.

So instead of looking to business leaders on how to attract the young labor market, Allen began a discussion with city officials.

"The next generation is following their heart," said Allen, executive director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District. "Our generation followed the job. ... (Millenials) are a little more fickle about where they live and work."

With the summit focused on bridging the generation gap, leaders in Duluth, Snellville and Suwanee talked about their role in the local economy by drawing young professionals.

For Eric Van Otteren, Snellville's economic development director, that has meant empowering young people to create their own jobs.

Van Otteren has worked with Brookwood and South Gwinnett high schools to create entrepreneurship programs that have created 24 companies and twice that many jobs. It's a concept that had a local school board member asking about how to create a curriculum for the entire system.

Suwanee community and economic development manager Denise Brinson said her 15-year-old daughter recently told her mother she would not live in a neighborhood like her current one when she is older.

While the subdivision has 11 miles of walking trails, it doesn't connect to the girl's hangout, and those are the kind of connections young people are looking for these days, Brinson said.

Luckily, Brinson said, Suwanee's leadership has embraced a new way of life above the old suburban landscape.

"If we catered to our bubbles, we would have 50 football fields around our city," she said, talking about opening up to ideas like the city center filled with concerts and activities like a beer festival, which drew complaints from conservative folks but appealed to young adults.

"When I was 20, the last place I wanted to move was a 'great place to raise a family,'" Brinson said of the title given to Suwanee in a Kiplinger ranking. "We love that (No. 3 ranking) but it's not our slogan."

Brinson said the values of the younger generation are echoed in the desires of Councilman Dick Goodman, a 70-year-old retiree who rides a bicycle to City Hall and wants a fun place to get involved. "We're evolving," she said.

In Duluth, leaders have also looked at ways to open the city to diverse populations, both in ethnicity and age.

Mayor Nancy Harris talked about recent efforts at "place-making" to add attractions like a concert venue and fine restaurants to the downtown area.

Plus, the city's efforts at creating a public art project and commission builds its reputation as open and authentic, she said.

"We are working on our retro charm," she said, adding that a culture of outdoors is also growing to embrace the younger generation.

While leaders are focusing on appealing to the younger generation, they noted some challenges, like the lack of a major transit system for people who want to live car-free.

But they are doing their best to speak the language of their young residents, embracing Facebook, Twitter and other technology to get them engaged, the panelists said.

"This is the Twitter generation. If you can't reach them in 160 characters, they aren't interested," Van Otteren said, showing his age, since Twitter no more than 140 characters. "Kids today are moving at a rate and pace far above what we are."