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MY VIEW

Role of the northern suburbs is changing

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The Atlanta region will continue to face significant growth over the next 25 years, adding 2.3 million residents and 2 million jobs. With more growth than ever on the south side, the northern suburbs, in particular Cobb, north Fulton and Gwinnett counties, will need to manage growth much smarter than in the past.

Water quality and quantity, air quality and traffic congestion will demand more transparent, cost-effective and coordinated solutions. Unlike the prior three decades, during which the northern suburbs encountered primarily residential growth, they are now becoming major employment centers, with more than half of the new jobs in the region coming to the north side. Making our air quality and transportation concerns more complicated, these jobs will be filled from within their counties, from Atlanta and now from the exurbs as residents look for affordable housing.

Just as residents of the urban core used to complain about the suburbs causing traffic congestion as they received the cars without the property tax, the three northern suburbs will face congestion from every direction. Transit, once roundly criticized in the suburbs as unnecessary, is now essential for improved quality of life. Unlike any other area of the region, planning and zoning will need to clearly define the urban, suburban and rural areas of the northern suburbs in order to maintain the rural and suburban character, while encouraging mixed-use development where it can be accommodated by the infrastructure — primarily adjacent to the interstates.

Along with the new, varied types of housing (subdivisions, senior housing, townhouses and condos), the emerging demographics warrant special attention as the nonwhite population is rising rapidly. High growth rates for African-American, Asian and Hispanic populations will eclipse the Caucasian population, which shows little or no growth. The north side must embrace this emerging diversity to assure the same high quality school systems and business-friendly communities.

Additionally, suburban amenities and fiscally conservative budgetary policies are no longer sufficient to maintain quality of life. While our hospital systems face significant financial constraints as indigent health care costs and Medicare/Medicaid cutbacks increase each year, our residents will expect the same

level of care as found at university health centers. New cutting-edge cancer treatments and open heart surgery centers, such as those found at Kennestone Hospital, are essential to maintain the viability of our suburban health systems. It is no longer acceptable or economically feasible for our insured residents to head to Piedmont, Northside and St. Joseph's hospitals for high quality health care.

In addition to the construction of senior centers, dog parks and environmental education centers, quality of life enhancements such as the Gwinnett Arena and the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre are becoming more common. The north side is now a destination — not just a low-crime, low-tax bedroom community. College graduates and the creative class now yearn to find jobs and housing near these cultural assets.

Water quantity and traffic mobility, rather than consumer desire, will determine the success of the northern suburbs. Conservation pricing and retrofits of pre-1993 water fixtures, along with the outcome of the water litigation, will determine whether the Atlanta region has sufficient water resources to accommodate the expected growth. In addition to the previously approved traffic management measures such as additional HERO units, traffic light synchronization and ramp metering, we will need public-private ventures, truck-only lanes and additional funding to improve our transportation system.

When a Cobb County resident can travel to Clayton County faster than to Gwinnett County, we face a huge hurdle. East-west access is nonexistent most times of the day, with I-285 and the northern end of I-75 and I-85 resembling a parking lot.

Thank goodness for our CIDs and our proactive chambers of commerce constantly pushing us to be the best we can be. With regional planning and state assistance, we can solve our infrastructure problems and improve our outstanding quality of life in the northern suburbs. Long-term solutions must be utilized to confront the exurban pressure, rather than short-term fixes aimed at the next electoral cycle.

The entire region is interdependent as never before, with Atlanta, suburban and exurban leaders needing a broad vision to enhance the quality of life for our children and our children's children.

Let's hope our elected officials and residents are ready for the challenge.

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