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Governed by gridlock

With our leaders driving blind, ordinary Atlantans need to steer the region toward transportation solutions

BY DAVID GOLDBERG

The Metro Atlanta Chamber put on a nifty dog-and-pony show the other day. It featured muckety-mucks from three of our "competitor" regions who described how they'd passed regional referendums to pay for ambitious transportation plans.

It was inspirational. But the show also brought home the degree to which our own region is gridlocked by a lack of forward-looking leadership.

Folks from San Diego and Phoenix described how they worked together to create voter-worthy regional programs to quickly fix freeway bottlenecks, extend light rail, install rapid bus lines and build reversible interstate lanes.

The metro area that stood out, though, was Denver. Denver's leadership came together behind a vision for a world-class rail and rapid-bus system that will support future development, and voters embraced a tax to pay for it. Most impressively, that vision won out even though the governor actively campaigned against the funding measure.

The big lesson: You don't need a governor to get moving. Indeed, the metro area that waits around for the governor to fix its transportation mess is screwing itself. That's abundantly clear in metro Atlanta.

Ten years ago, I wrote a series for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution called "Gridshock," which noted that for the first time since World War II, metro Atlanta was without a grand plan for transportation: MARTA was completing its planned lines, while the highways had been expanded under "Freeing the Freeways." Planners warned that rapid, poorly planned growth would swamp our road system.

Nearly all local leaders agreed that metro Atlanta urgently needed a visionary transportation plan and a regional funding source. They said the existing revenue and mindset at the Georgia Department of Transportation couldn't get the job done. But everything was on hold because the governor wasn't on board. That was Zell Miller -- the rational one, not today's homely version of Ann Coulter. Miller had declared himself opposed to new taxes, and his famously limited agenda didn't include metro Atlanta's traffic or air quality.

His successor, Roy Barnes, inherited a road-funding crisis because metro Atlanta had run afoul of the national Clean Air Act. To his credit, Barnes created the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority to ride herd over both transportation and development, and to serve as an umbrella for a truly regional transit system.

Unfortunately, it was all about Roy. Barnes made sure GRTA would answer only to the governor. After creating the agency, he sat on it, vowing aggressive action after his re-election. But one reason some people didn't trust Barnes enough to re-elect him was that he talked smart growth but turned around and backed the controversial Northern Arc highway. Principle, it seemed, was trumped by a need for campaign contributions from the asphalt-and-sprawl lobby.

Sonny Perdue has acted even more subservient to the highway lobby. Running against Barnes, he opposed the Northern Arc, yet he has empowered road-building interests to an unprecedented degree. His deceptively named Congestion Mitigation Task Force forced the region to adopt a funding formula that favors massive road projects -- double-deck I-285,

anyone? -- and is sure to squeeze out alternatives to driving. That's no surprise, since the idea came from the highway lobby's front group, Georgians for Better Transportation.

Perdue's other big move was to start privatizing our highways. Private investment in transportation could be a good thing. But that isn't what's happening with two projects announced thus far. In one, we have the global investment firm Goldman Sachs hired on as a transportation planner (!) under a multimillion-dollar contract paid for by public money. In the other, the I-75/I-575 mega-project, Perdue has sanctioned heavy borrowing so that private companies can charge us tolls: Unbelievably, the project is to be partially funded by \$520 million in bonds, to be repaid with our tax dollars.

Meanwhile, the tiniest baby step toward an alternative to life lived in the glow of taillights -- a modest commuter rail project on the Southside -- has been the subject of endless political chicanery and delay. Under Perdue's thumb, GRTA has been reduced to running suburban commuter buses that clog Midtown's streets.

Mark Taylor, near as anyone can tell, would be little better. His only transportation-related move has been to call on the governor to suspend the gas tax, a campaign ploy that is dumb however you slice it: Lower the tax temporarily and you get less revenue for long-term solutions, while lulling people into a false sense of security about the future of cheap gas. Otherwise, Taylor has been largely silent on metro Atlanta's main quality-of-life issue.

My point here isn't to engage in a roads-versus-transit debate. We need both. But more than that, we need a consensus on solving Atlanta's transportation, development and pollution problems, and a sense of urgency about it. And our leaders need to put the future of metro Atlanta ahead of campaign contributions from special interests.

Apparently, neither Perdue nor Taylor grasps the nature of the emergency or how far behind we are in addressing it. But their would-be constituents do. Growth-harried residents, especially in the congested suburbs, are desperate to hear from someone who displays a credible grasp of what it will take to preserve our quality of life.

Politicians who tune into that vibe -- not with platitudes but with bold solutions -- win dividends. That certainly worked for Tim Kaine, a Democrat who got himself elected governor of Virginia last year largely by winning over voters in rapidly growing suburban and exurban districts such as Loudon County, once a Republican stronghold.

He did so not by promising highway building alone -- voters there are too savvy to believe that loosening the belt makes a fat man thin -- but by articulating the need to manage development at the same time you make transportation fixes.

Voters here are just as sophisticated, but our politicians aren't inclined to treat us that way. Regardless of who wins this fall, we need to press forward with a realistic but bold plan for building the world-class transit system we need on a compressed schedule. We also must provide a large pot of money for all the intersection, streetscape, bicycle, pedestrian and other improvements that need to be completed to maintain quality of life in the heavily populated core of the region. And we must all be prepared to pay for those improvements with a new revenue source, such as a half-cent sales tax.

"We had waited too long for the state to act, and we got tired of waiting," a Denver speaker explained at the Chamber session."

The gubernatorial wheel-spinning, DOT backsliding and road-lobby railroading have gone on long enough. It's time to grab our bootstraps and drag our own selves out of the mud.

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