



For Immediate Release

Dec 17, 2007

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**Forum: Is Metro Atlanta's Economic Future
Stuck in Traffic?**

**Corporate Relocation Experts Warn:
'Traffic Hurting Atlanta's Ability to Compete'
*Leaders from Dallas, Charlotte Say
Fast-Growing Metros Can Find Solutions***

ATLANTA – Metro Atlanta's traffic is becoming a threat to economic development, but innovative solutions can be found. That was the two-part message Monday delivered to metro Atlanta's business community by a top corporate relocation expert and business leaders from Dallas and Charlotte.

"Today we've heard from one of the nation's top site relocation consultants that traffic is beginning to play a much larger role in companies' decisions about whether to move to metro Atlanta," said Joe Leonard, chairman of AirTran Airways and chairman of the transportation policy committee for the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. "That's the bad news. The good news is, we've also heard from cities like Charlotte and Dallas that solutions can be found. We can't wait any longer."

Dennis Donovan of New Jersey-based Wadley Donovan-Gutshaw Consulting, a worldwide site selection and corporate relocation firm whose clients include Bank of America, Sony Corporation and UPS, spoke at the Chamber Monday in a forum titled, "Is Our Economic Future Stuck in Traffic?"

"When Fortune 500 companies contact me about where to relocate their companies, Atlanta is often a top choice because of its incredible strengths -- the world's busiest airport, a rich talent pool, research universities that are the envy of the nation and good weather all year," Donovan said. "Unfortunately, in too many cases those strengths are being overshadowed by one big weakness -- traffic. We're just now starting to see Atlanta get knocked out of the running at the last minute when companies are picking new cities. But what's even more troubling is that there's no way to know how many companies are failing to put Atlanta on the short list to begin with because of traffic gridlock."

Georgia is the third-fastest growing state and metro Atlanta is the fastest growing metro in the nation, doubling in population over the last 20 years and expected to grow another 2.3 million residents in the next 30 years. At the same time, the state ranks last when it comes to investing in transportation improvements, according to a recent study by the Texas Transportation Institute. That combination of rapid growth coupled with anemic investment in infrastructure is not a sustainable trend, experts warn.

“It’s important to remember that traffic is the unintended consequence of our success,” said Sam A. Williams, president of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. “We’re in this situation because of our incredible growth. It’s not anyone’s fault that we slipped behind. We just grew faster than anyone could anticipate. A lot of cities are envious and would love to be in our situation. But now we’ve got 20 years of catching up to do, and we have to anticipate the growth in the next 20 years.”

Leonard also addressed recent comments that Georgia should delay identifying new sources of funding for transportation until reforms can be completed at the Georgia Department of Transportation.

“It’s not an either-or situation,” Leonard said. “We have to do both – reform and find new money for transportation. The type of solutions we’re advocating could take two years before we see any money flow in. During those two years, we can concentrate on reforms at the same time as we’re identifying new revenue sources for transportation.”

“This is a lot like our current water situation,” Leonard added. “We can’t conserve our way out of our water crisis, and we can’t reform our way out of our transportation crisis. While we must do those things in the short-term, we ultimately need a long-term plan for both of those issues – to address permanent infrastructure needs that a fast-growing state like ours requires, such as reservoirs for water, and new road capacity and transit lines for transportation.”

Participants in Monday’s forum heard encouraging news from chamber executives in Dallas and Charlotte about how fast-growing cities can tackle their transportation problems.

“It’s about being open to new ideas, not searching for a single silver bullet to relieve traffic congestion,” said Mike Baggett, chair of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee for the Dallas Chamber of Commerce and board member of the Dallas Regional Mobility Coalition. “Roads, rail and tolls are all part of the answer.”

Dallas was one of the first cities in the South to implement a commuter rail system, and ridership is now 13 times what it was in the first year of implementation. Dallas’ commuter rail is integrated with its rapid transit network with extensive expansion plans. The region also has a tollway authority with an aggressive road-building program.

Charlotte has a new light rail system and a trolley/streetcar, and just voted to extend a half-penny transportation sales tax.

Bob Morgan, president of the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, said “combining land-use planning and transit-oriented development has to be a part of any plan for a successful metro region.”

“We’ve been told that combining light rail and transit planning will help to put us ahead of the curve,” Morgan added. “Being aggressive on transportation policy definitely strengthens your competitive advantage.”

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The Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce – with our 4,000 member companies that collectively employ more than 700,000 workers – is a catalyst for a vibrant metro region. Over the last 140 years, the Chamber has been bringing the region’s leaders together to tackle the issues that matter most to the business community: quality jobs and quality of life.