

Atlanta in 2057: We face serious choices for future

by MARIA SAPORTA

What kind of metro area do we want Atlanta to be 50 years from now, and what can we do to help turn that urban image into a reality?

The Atlanta Regional Commission has just launched a two-year effort to answer those questions by bringing in futurists and visionaries to help us design our future metropolis.



Glen Hiemstra

The first futurist — Glen Hiemstra of Futurist.com — spoke at last week's State of the Region breakfast, sharing his views of how metro Atlanta should look in 2057.

Hiemstra's vision was three-pronged.

First, metro Atlanta should become a "green leader."

Communities should become more sustainable by becoming more water- and energy-efficient. Investments should be made in high speed rail connecting cities throughout the Southeast and developing communities that can be served with transit.

"Set a goal to be as carbon-free as you can be," Hiemstra told the 1,000 leaders at the breakfast.

He called the second vision for metro Atlanta: "techtopia."

"Be a true innovation leader in life sciences, nanotechnology or the next generation of energy technologies," Hiemstra said. Given the amount of sun in the South, he recommended concentrating on solar energy technologies as well as biofuels. The presence of Georgia Tech, Emory, Georgia State and the other research universities gives metro Atlanta an edge with those technologies.

The third vision was "lifelong, livable communities."

Hiemstra, using ARC's numbers, said the Atlanta region will have twice as many elderly (people older than 65) in 2025 as it does today given the aging baby boomers.

Because most of the elderly prefer staying in their current homes, Hiemstra said the challenge will be to reinvent the transportation system so that there are more options. It also will mean "making our communities much more compact" so that people can walk to different activities and not have to get in a car to buy a loaf of bread.

The overarching question for Atlanta, Hiemstra said in concluding his public remarks, is: "What will make Atlanta as vital and as admired 50 years from now as it is today?"

After the breakfast, I asked Hiemstra to describe the other possible scenarios of where metro Atlanta would be 50 years from now.

He painted two such scenarios:

The "we blew it" scenario is believing the "myth that the current drought won't happen again in our lifetime, and it's back to business as usual." It would ignore the evidence of global warming and not altering our behavior.

"There would be endless, automobile-dependent sprawl," he said. And while we might develop some "liveable communities," most new development would be traditional suburban growth.

Hiemstra believes the gasoline-powered automobile will be obsolete 50 years from now, so that an economy dependent on cars running on cheap gas will fall behind other areas that have invested in alternatives. He believes \$100 a barrel oil will become the floor price, and the actual price will be much higher.

The third part of the "we blew it" scenario is assuming that we can continue to have an economy dependent on population growth as our engine of prosperity. "This is a very construction-oriented economy," Hiemstra said, adding that metro Atlanta's economy must diversify because it can't keep up this rate of growth.

The "we blew it" scenario also would continue the unhealthy daily practice that metro Atlanta has of destroying 54 acres of trees and greenspace, with 28 of those acres becoming paved with asphalt or concrete.

The other possible scenario that Hiemstra envisions for metro Atlanta is the one where we just "muddle through."

Unfortunately, he believes the "muddle through" scenario is the most likely outcome for our region "because there's so much inertia in the system."

We might be able to have isolated incidences of strategic development because he believes "it's unlikely that you will be totally stupid."

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But Hiemstra said the opportunity we have is to strive for the "more ambitious scenario."

Metro Atlanta can be more dynamic than other metro areas because "there's an attitude in this region that we



can do something rather than we can't," Hiemstra said.

So it is in our best interest for metro Atlanta to aim high.

from Google Images We can become a

leader in green technologies. That will help diversify our economy and help us become more sustainable.

We can develop livable communities that aren't dependent on the automobile by providing a variety of activities within walking distance. Those communities would be able to serve all populations, including the elderly and the working poor.

We can have a regional public transit system that would serve the entire metro area with more rail — from commuter rail, MARTA expansions and light rail as well as express and local bus service. That's a vision the Transit Planning Board will soon present for public digestion.

And we can create communities that respect our natural areas — governments that reward developers for preserving green space and enhancing developments in existing, underdeveloped centers.

As we embark in this two year, mind-expanding exercise of looking into metro Atlanta's future, let's be smart. How Atlanta will look 50 years from now depends on the decisions we make today.