



# THE BETTER TOGETHER COMMUNITY ACTION PLAN FOR EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND ENGAGEMENT

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# AUTHORSHIP

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When the City of Decatur released its 2000 Strategic Plan, included among the plan's guiding principles was, "Encourage community interaction." Beneath this broad directive was a goal that stated, "Maintain and encourage racial, ethnic, economic, cultural, and other types of diversity." The 2010 Strategic Plan placed an even stronger emphasis on diversity, with the second of its four guiding principles reading, "Encourage a diverse and engaged community."

<b>VISION:</b> <i>The City of Decatur Will Have a High Quality of Life for its Residents, Businesses, and Visitors Both Today and in the Future.</i> <small>Introduction: The City of Decatur requested a Strategic Plan that included physical and economic planning while incorporating social goals. The Vision, Principles, Goals and Projects listed below were developed through a collaboration of residents and government, business and institutional leaders. Goals and Projects are organized under the Principles that they most appropriately support. It should be noted that many of the Goals and Projects do not fit neatly under a particular Principle. In fact, many of the Goals and Projects are interrelated and could support more than one Principle.</small>		
<b>PRINCIPLE A: Manage Growth While Retaining Character</b> <small>Accommodate commercial and residential growth while retaining a small town character within an urban environment.</small> <b>Goal 1: Retain and Enhance The Existing Character Of Commercial Districts</b> <small>Project A: Refine Standards for Downtown. Project B: Develop and Adopt Standards for Neighborhood Commercial Districts. Project C: Adopt Standards for East College Avenue.</small> <b>Goal 2: Encourage A Diversity Of Business Types With Particular Focus On Small Businesses</b> <small>Project A: Diversify the Office Tenant Base. Project B: Encourage Owner Occupied Retail.</small> <b>Goal 3: Protect Existing Neighborhoods While Identifying The Potential For Selected Growth And Adopting Standards That Guide Future Growth</b> <small>Project A: Adopt Standards for New Residential. Project B: Consider Guidelines for Residential Renovation.</small>	<b>PRINCIPLE B: Encourage Community Interaction</b> <small>Develop methods to increase communications and connections between residents, businesses, institutions and governments.</small> <b>Goal 4: Maintain And Encourage Racial, Ethnic, Economic, Cultural And Other Types Of Diversity</b> <small>Project A: Diversify attendance at public events. Project B: Support and expand volunteer activities. Project C: Expand duration of and promote community publications.</small> <b>Goal 5: Reinforce Neighborhoods And Develop Connections Between Neighborhoods</b> <small>Project A: Support Decatur Neighborhood Alliance or Similar Organization.</small> <b>Goal 6: Strengthen Communication And Connections Throughout The Community</b> <small>Project A: Improve Communication between residents, businesses, and visitors while promoting an innovative, engaged, and informed community. Project B: Support New and Existing Programs that Strengthen Community Connections.</small>	<b>PRINCIPLE C: Provide Quality Services Within Fiscal Limits</b> <small>Provide housing, transportation, environmental quality and public services to Decatur's residents and visitors.</small> <b>Goal 7: Increase Opportunities For Economically Diverse Housing For Persons Who Live In The City Of Decatur</b> <small>Project A: Identify Tax Rides &amp; Other Programs To Aid Elderly. Project B: Provide Housing For People Working In The City. Project C: Develop Programs To Attract Minority Residents. Project D: Develop Programs To Improve Rental Housing.</small> <b>Goal 8: Enhance Mobility In And Through Decatur</b> <small>Project A: Actively Reduce Traffic Volume and Speed. Project B: Improve Public Transit. Project C: Improve Sidewalks and Crosswalks. Project D: Improve Bicycle Paths.</small> <b>Goal 9: Continue The Commitment To Environmental Quality</b> <small>Project A: Improve Linkages between Green Spaces. Project B: Preserve and Expand Green Space, Wetlands &amp; Trees. Project C: Study Air and Water Quality Programs.</small> <b>Goal 10: Continue To Provide Quality City And School System Services Within Fiscal Limits And Available To The Community</b> <small>Project A: Address Concerns Regarding Taxes For General Operations. Project B: Address Concerns Regarding Taxes For School Operations. Project C: Address Concerns Regarding Quality Of Services. Project D: Improve Quality Of Buildings, Public &amp; Recreational Facilities.</small>



## PRINCIPLE B: ENCOURAGE A DIVERSE AND ENGAGED COMMUNITY

Protect and expand diversity among Decatur residents, businesses, and visitors while promoting an innovative, engaged, and informed community.

A truly sustainable community is one that can adapt to a changing world by drawing on the passion, energy, and knowledge of its citizens. For these efforts to be most successful, the community should reflect the diversity found in society as a whole. It is equally important for citizens to feel that they have a stake in the future of their community and that they play an active, engaged role in making it a reality.



Naturally occurring retirement communities allow people to grow old around friends and family, in a familiar environment



Decatur should strive to be a place that is accessible and visible for people with disabilities

### GOAL 5: MAINTAIN AND ENCOURAGE DIVERSITY OF RACE, ETHNICITY, INCOME, CULTURE, AGE, FAMILY TYPE, AND OTHER KINDS OF DIVERSITY

**Task 5A** Promote Decatur as a lifelong community that is welcoming to people of all ages and supports programs that allow older residents to stay in their homes, stay in the community, and age in place. Explore options like Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORC) or Senior Village Support Networks that address this task.

**Task 5B** Continue to encourage the participation of artists and performers that represent a broad range of cultures at festivals and special events. Expand outreach efforts to encourage diverse audience attendance and find methods to measure the results.

**Task 5C** Develop an outreach plan targeting diverse population groups, including expanded marketing efforts and media outlets, to encourage diverse cultures to live, work, and play in Decatur.

**Task 5D** Support efforts to expand diversity in community leadership roles.

**Task 5E** Support programs that help elderly, low-income residents remain in the community.

**Task 5F** Adopt universal design guidelines to allow new commercial buildings, businesses, and homes to be visitable by those with mobility impairments.

Even the most able-bodied members of society will one day reach periods in their life where their mobility is impaired. Creating housing that is accessible or visitable to a wide range of citizens would benefit both current and future residents, and make the city resilient in the face of demographic changes.

### GOAL 6: STRENGTHEN COMMUNICATION AND INVOLVEMENT IN AND AMONG NEIGHBORHOODS, CITY GOVERNMENT, VOLUNTEER BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS, INSTITUTIONS, COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, LOCAL BUSINESSES, AND DECATUR AS A WHOLE

**Task 6A** Provide communication in a variety of formats to reach a broad audience. Expand the use of social media and electronic tools such as Open City Hall to encourage citizen participation.

City leaders had all of this in mind when they invited a group of 19 residents and business people to work with them to engage the community more deeply in this important work. Given the City of Decatur's documented priorities, the focus of this initiative — named "Better Together" — was not ground-breaking. The approach, however, was because it was envisioned as a way to collaboratively identify specific actions for individuals, organizations, and local government to undertake together and independently. It would also encourage and empower individuals and community-based organizations to take a lead role in making Decatur a more welcoming, inclusive, and equitable place to live, work, and visit.

The volunteer steering committee was called the Better Together Leadership Circle, and it first met in December 2014. After learning more about the themes and issues surrounding Better Together and working as a planning group for several months, the group invited the full community to join in developing a Community Action Plan. This effort began in July 2015 when the Leadership Circle released a community survey to gauge respondents' perceptions of their community and invite them to share their ideas and observations about what makes or does not make Decatur a welcoming and inclusive community. In six weeks, 724 people responded.

The next round of community participation was a facilitated conversation held Saturday, August 29, at the Ebster Recreation Center. More than 250 people attended, and the conversation centered on the broad theme of encouraging a diverse and engaged community, plus two narrower but timely topics: racially-just community policing, and diverse and affordable housing. Participants deliberated in small groups to develop specific action ideas. By the end of the day, they had generated 625 ideas.

The Leadership Circle also invited community members to review and help prioritize a draft set of action items distilled from the survey and the community conversation. **All told, approximately 800 community members invested more than 1,300 hours in the public input phase of the Better Together initiative.**

The resulting Better Together Community Action Plan for Equity, Inclusion, and Engagement enlists individuals, community organizations, and local government in a collaborative effort to make the City of Decatur more welcoming to people from all backgrounds and all walks of life.

Excerpts from Decatur's 2000 and 2010 Strategic Plans. Collaboratively created in partnership with the community, the city's ten year plans provide a prioritized to-do list for city leadership.



In a unanimous vote at their July 20, 2015 meeting, Decatur city commissioners officially endorsed the recommendations of the Better Together Leadership Circle, clearing the way for a broad community process to cultivate a more just, welcoming, inclusive, equitable and compassionate experience for all who visit, live or work in the City of Decatur.



The Plan is organized around six focus areas:

1. Support community participation and engagement among all members of the city's population
2. Prioritize racially-just community policing by improving relationships between community members and law enforcement and ensuring all community members are treated in a just way with equity and respect
3. Ensure the availability of diverse and affordable housing in order to prevent the displacement of existing residents and provide for a variety of housing types and prices
4. Cultivate a welcoming and inclusive retail environment for serving a diverse clientele
5. Maximize the use of public spaces for the enrichment and well-being of all Decatur residents, workers, and visitors
6. Facilitate low-cost transportation options for people of all ages and abilities

The plan spans a three-year period, beginning the first quarter of 2016, and it includes a set of 60 action items that support these focus areas. The detailed Implementation Plan is included as Appendix A, and includes target completion dates, prospective partners, and resources needed.

## BACKGROUND

The City of Decatur's Better Together initiative is an outgrowth of the city's 2010 Strategic Plan, the largest public planning process in Decatur's history, which involved more than 1,500 community members sharing their concerns, hopes, and priorities for their city. Over a 12-month period, they contributed to the master plan for Decatur's growth and community development through surveys, town hall meetings, and facilitated conversations, and the resulting plan reflects their shared vision for the City, supported by four guiding principles:

**Vision:** The City of Decatur will assure a high quality of life for its residents, businesses and visitors both today and in the future.

**Principle A:** Manage growth while retaining character

**Principle B:** Encourage a diverse and engaged community

**Principle C:** Serve as good stewards of the environment and community resources

**Principle D:** Support a safe, healthy, lifelong community

The current Better Together initiative focuses on Principle B, which encompasses four goals:

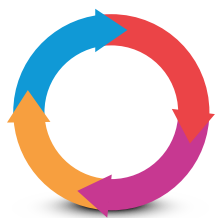
- » Maintain and encourage diversity of race, ethnicity, income, culture, age, family type, and other kinds of diversity
- » Strengthen communication and involvement in and among neighborhoods, city government, volunteer boards and commissions, institutions, community organizations, local businesses, and Decatur as a whole
- » Support, expand, and develop programs, services, events, and opportunities that respond to diverse interests, encourage community interaction, and promote a stronger sense of community
- » Promote a culture of creative innovation and expression

Encouraging a diverse and engaged community was also a priority in the City's 2000 Strategic Plan, and in recent years the City has accomplished a number of achievements related to Principle B, including:

- » Establishing a Lifelong Community Advisory Board and creating the Lifelong Community Coordinator position
- » Partnering with the Decatur Arts Alliance to host the Sidewalk Saturdays program to provide free street entertainment with a focus on international performers
- » Expanding the annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Service Project
- » Launching the Go60+ Shuttle for residents aged 60 and older
- » Expanding the homestead exemption
- » Tracking diversity of Decatur 101 participants
- » Installing community exhibits at the new Beacon Municipal Center

However, as the midway point of Decatur's current 10-year plan approached, City leaders recognized both a need and an opportunity to expand on this important work by re-engaging the broader community. Echoing language that was used in the strategic planning process, "Better Together" was established to involve individuals and organizations as partners with local government to create a shared community action plan and build the human capital to achieve and sustain the goals of Principle B.

## The Leadership Circle



In November 2014, City leaders invited a group of Decatur residents and business people to serve as a steering committee for the Better Together initiative. However, from the beginning this group was never intended to be a traditional planning committee. The invitation process was very intentional and personal, setting the tone for the upcoming conversations and shared work. Participants were encouraged to partici-

pate fully and assured that different, even controversial, perspectives were welcome. Organizers were mindful of the group's composition and particularly wanted to ensure a mix of established community leaders along with newer faces and voices. The creative and inclusive approach was different and uncomfortable for many prospective Leadership Circle members, including those on the City staff.

Ultimately, however, 19 individuals signed on, representing a mix of races, ages, faiths, neighborhoods, and income levels. (Three participants later resigned from the group due to job-related moves.)

An excerpt from the invitation to serve on Leadership Circle can be found on the facing page.

As the Better Together Leadership Circle, their job would be to develop a process for engaging individuals, organizations, and businesses in a





community conversation around Principle B and oversee the creation of the Community Action Plan for pursuing Principle B's four goals. Equally important, each Leadership Circle member also agreed to the following:

- » To commit to self-reflection, deep listening, learning, active participation, and cultivating authentic relationships
- » To shape the overall focus and process for engaging the community
- » To actively contribute his or her gifts by co-designing and co-leading the work

The City hired two consulting firms: The Art of Community, to design and facilitate what would be a yearlong community process; and PlaceMakers, to lead outreach communications. The Leadership Circle and consultants first met in December 2014.

Addressing diversity issues is tough and complex because individual experiences and perceptions frame how each person experiences and feels about community. This means that the Better Together process had to be thoughtfully designed and planned in order to provide an opportunity for people representing the diversity of the City to come together and hear a broad perspective of community experiences, both good and bad.

*As envisioned, the Circle will serve as an intergenerational and intercultural learning community, ultimately helping to steward Decatur forward. An emergent process of deep listening and learning about diversity, inclusion, equity and compassion. Together, over the coming months, we'll co-design and activate an initiative that will engage the broader community and invite them to join us on the journey.*

*When all is said and done, we'll have a broader, more complete narrative of our City and a Community Action Plan to guide next steps.*

*We invite you to bring all of who you are into this circle with the many pieces of your own story. We also invite you to bring eager ears, an open heart, and a willingness to forge meaningful, trusting relationships. Make no mistake, this will take time, so the Leadership Circle will likely meet once a month over the next 12 months. And additional leadership and engagement needs will likely emerge during that time.*

*You've been invited because you embody a vital piece of our collective story. Who you are matters. Your leadership and commitment matters. Please consider this invitation carefully to ensure your ability to commit.*

Leadership Circle invitational text.

Race, diversity, and equity are topics that are difficult for many people to discuss, especially with others whom they do not know well, so early meetings were focused on building relationships among the Leadership Circle members and hearing different perspectives from each other and outside sources. The Leadership Circle served as the laboratory for the broader community engagement process, practicing and modeling on a small scale what could be possible on a larger scale.

As is always the case when working across differences, tensions arose. Some participants in the Leadership Circle were initially distrustful of the process. Others wanted to elevate taking action over building trusting relationships. The pace was too slow and deliberate for some, while others wanted more time to reflect on the issues and build trust. These struggles were welcome in the Leadership Circle. As tensions came up, members worked with them, challenging themselves and each other.

From the beginning, Leadership Circle members agreed that a community that works, works for everyone; therefore, the Better Together community action plan and process was intended to yield a more just, welcoming, inclusive, equitable, and compassionate experience for all who visit, live, or work in the City of Decatur. They also agreed that it was important as a city to constantly reinfuse the values of diversity and inclusion and not assume that these tenets are understood or immediately embraced by everyone. Better Together would be an intentional act to prioritize long held values of being a diverse, inclusive, and welcoming community.

In addition to Principle B, the Leadership Circle's work was influenced by several recent trends and events directly related to diversity and community engagement:

- » Decatur's population has grown and changed dramatically over a short period of time, becoming significantly less racially and economically diverse. (Appendix B)
- » A surge in housing values is making the City increasingly unaffordable for older residents, young people and low and middle-income families.

- » Community policing has moved to the forefront as several Decatur residents have reported being targets of racial profiling in their neighborhoods.
- » The City recently completed its annexation plan. If the plan is approved, the City will be welcoming new neighbors — many of them more diverse than the current population.
- » In 2014, the City Commission adopted the Compassionate Cities Charter expressing a commitment to being a compassionate community. This was a significant commitment for a community located in one of the most diverse counties in the country.

Through a series of conversations about these key points, the Leadership Circle ultimately identified three focus areas that addressed both the Strategic Plan's broad directive and the pressing issues the community currently faces:

- » **An Equitable and Inclusive City:** Cultivating relationships across differences and creating conditions for all community members to thrive and participate fully in city life. This includes applying an equity lens in matters of leadership and decision-making and conducting community outreach in culturally relevant ways.
- » **Racially-Just Community Policing:** Improving relationships between community members and law enforcement by addressing racism, bias and privilege to ensure all community members, especially people of color, are treated in a just way with equity and respect.
- » **Diverse and Affordable Housing:** Preventing displacement of existing residents and supporting the development of a variety of housing types and prices.

In addition to shaping the focus areas for the Community Action Plan, the Leadership Circle also helped determine the timeline of activities and brainstormed a number of creative ideas for engaging the broader community. External factors that affected the final process included previously scheduled community events and community rhythms related to school ending and summer vacations. By July 2015, the Leadership

Circle was ready to shift its focus outward, with an eye toward engaging the larger community in a discussion around these focus areas for the purpose of developing a Community Action Plan for achieving a welcoming, inclusive, and equitable Decatur.

## The Community Action Plan

"We plan and we follow through. It's fundamental to who we are," announces [decaturnext.com](http://decaturnext.com), the website maintained by the City to provide background information and track progress related to each of its plans and major initiatives, including the 2000 and 2010 Strategic Plans, the Transportation Plan, and the Town Center Plan. [Decaturnext.com](http://decaturnext.com) also documented each phase of the Better Together initiative and the evolving Community Action Plan.

Like the Transportation Plan and the Town Center Plan, the Community Action Plan supports the current Strategic Plan. The Community Action Plan is different, however, in that it addresses a less tangible goal: a diverse, equitable, and inclusive community. It seeks to change the strategic direction of the everyday activities of the city and is a road map for implementing community change by clarifying what will be done, who will do it, and how it will be done. It describes what the community wants to achieve, what activities are required during a specified time period, and what resources are needed to be successful.

Strategic plans typically cover a decade or more and consist of broad, overarching goals supported by high-level objectives. In contrast, community action plans have a short timeframe and consist of distinct, usually finite, action steps. Strategic plans for many communities are the responsibility of the local government, while community action plans call for shared responsibility among local government and community members, both individuals and organizations. Strategic plans set the general direction; community action plans provide the details on how to get there.

The Better Together community action plan supports the City's 2010 Strategic Plan by providing recommendations and suggestions for more specific actions that will help to deliver on Principle B, "Encourage a diverse and engaged community."





# THE PROCESS

## Timeline


The Better Together initiative spanned slightly more than a year, from the City Commission's approval of preliminary plans to the Leadership Circle's presentation of the completed Community Action Plan:



# WE MIGHT EACH BE BRIGHT OR STRONG OR BOLD. BUT TOGETHER, WE CAN BE BRILLIANT.

We're cultivating a more just, welcoming, inclusive, equitable and compassionate experience for all who visit, live or work in the City of Decatur. And we're doing it together.

## BRING YOUR VOICE TO THE TABLE

 **AS A PARTICIPANT:** Share your story, listen as others share theirs, and begin to chart some common ground. Kick-off conversation, August 29, 10am-3pm.

 **COMPLETE A SURVEY:** Detail your perspective, online or on paper.

 **AS A VOLUNTEER:** Join our one-day leadership and facilitation training event to learn how to help people learn across differences, respond to complex problems, and use inclusive approaches to make an impact. Training happens August 22, 9am-5pm.

Learn more and get involved:  
[decaturnext.com](http://decaturnext.com)



## THE STRENGTH OF OUR COMMUNITY ACTION PLAN WILL BE ROOTED IN ITS "ACTION."

**IDEAS FOR FOSTERING A MORE WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY ARE IN. NOW'S YOUR CHANCE TO TAKE A LOOK.**

Hundreds of residents have contributed their ideas and now those proposed "action items" are available for your review and comment.

Visit Open City Hall online via [decaturnext.com](http://decaturnext.com) or share your thoughts in person. The 71 action items, together with comment forms, can be found at City Hall, the Decatur Rec, Ebster Recreation Center, or the Decatur Public Library.

Public comment ends  
Monday,  
November 30.



Top left: Promotional tabletop display used during outreach at community events such as Slide the City and the BBQ, Blues & Bluegrass Festival. Bottom right: Window and bulletin board flyers promoting the community review and comment period. Photos: Scenes from the community-wide conversation.





## Outreach and Communications

The City of Decatur has a well-established communications routine for engaging community members in planning processes, special events, and other community-based initiatives. Many residents and business people are responsive to the City's efforts, and historically, participation numbers have been impressive for a city of this size.

Outreach and communications strategies are most effective when they reinforce each other. Communications is about creating compelling and relevant messaging and visuals for different audiences within a community. Outreach focuses on how to strategically recruit different community members and involve them in the process.

As plans began to take shape for Better Together events, Leadership Circle members reviewed the City's communications practices with an eye toward equity and suggested that a targeted outreach effort would bring a more representative array of voices to the community action planning process. A sub-committee of the Leadership Circle met weekly throughout July and August to manage the outreach effort.

Organizers set three goals for community outreach:

1. Education — to provide diverse resident populations with informative presentations and paper media about Better Together and the community action plan.
2. Invitation — to provide a welcoming verbal, electronic and/or paper invitation to diverse residents to come to the Better Together Community Conversation on August 29, 2015.
3. Data Collection — to collect feedback from diverse residents during outreach efforts about the three community action plan focus areas.

Additionally, they met or exceeded target numbers set for the survey and community conversation. The target number for the survey was 500 people; 724 participated. The target number for the community conversation was 200 people; 250 attended.

The City's resource list, also known as an asset map, was updated to reflect all of the neighborhood groups, faith-based organizations, nonprofits, civic groups, and educational institutions in the city. Leadership Circle members made connections with various groups through short presentations at meetings as well as engaging people at popular community events.



In addition to both broad and one-to-one outreach efforts, two promotional postcards were sent to every city address, ensuring all households, regardless of circumstance, were alerted to Better Together's two key public input opportunities.

In addition to personal outreach to these groups, opportunities to participate were advertised through email, social media, poster placement, monthly inclusion in the Decatur Focus newsletter, the Decatur Minute blog, through the Decatur Next website, on multiple neighborhood listservs, and were publicized and reported on by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and the Decatur Metro and Decaturish blogs. Also, the City mailed two postcards to every residential and business address, encouraging people to participate in the process.

Between July and November, approximately 800 community members contributed a combined total of more than 1,300 hours<sup>1</sup> to the Better Together process. Specific opportunities for community involvement are detailed below.

On July 31, 2015 the Leadership Circle launched the Better Together Community Survey, which was designed to gauge respondents' perceptions about what makes the City of Decatur welcoming or not welcoming. The survey was open until September 30, and 724 people responded. In terms of demographics, respondents were:

- » Between the ages of 35 and 54 (52 percent)
- » Relative newcomers, having lived in the City of Decatur five years or less (31 percent)
- » Homeowners (87 percent)
- » Mostly white (75 percent), which is reflective of the City's population (Table 1)

Available in both online and hardcopy form, the Community Survey gathered citizen opinion from 724 people.

- » Respondents generally had a favorable impression of their city, believing it to be mostly welcoming to people of all ages, beliefs, races, sexual orientations, and abilities. However, more than half disagreed with the statement, “Decatur is welcoming to people of all income levels.”
- » When asked a series of questions regarding opportunities to participate in the community in various ways, respondents generally agreed that there were ample opportunities available to them to volunteer, serve as community leaders, participate in arts and cultural events, and attend City events. Far fewer, however, agreed that changes in their neighborhoods reflected their preferences, and they generally disagreed that, “plenty of affordable housing options [are] available to people like me.”
- » About one third of those who participated in the survey responded to the open-ended request, “Please share any additional thoughts you have regarding what does or does not make the City of Decatur a welcoming, inclusive, and fair city for all.” Common themes included concerns regarding a lack of housing for low- and moderate-income families and individuals, particularly the elderly; and diminishing racial and economic diversity evident in neighborhoods, schools, and other facets of community.



## Working Across Differences Training Session

This one-day training for people interested in supporting the Better Together process as facilitators was held on August 22, 2015 at the Decatur Conference Center. Registration was free and open to all, though participation was capped at 70 to ensure a manageable group size. Participants learned how to help people work across differences and respond to complex problems using inclusive participatory approaches. Nearly all participants expressed an interest in a longer training with more time for practicing and role playing. To date, 55 of these men and women have put their skills to use at Better Together events.



On August 29, 2015, a diverse crowd of more than 250 Decatur residents gathered to discuss issues of inclusion and fairness, devoting five hours of their Saturday to the Better Together mission.

## Better Together Community Action Planning Conversation

On August 29, 2015 the Leadership Circle welcomed more than 250 people to the Ebster Recreation Center's gym for a Community Action Planning Conversation. This event was designed to first connect community members across differences and invite them to share their experiences, highlighting both the pride and the challenges in the city, and second, invite them to contribute their action ideas for making the City of Decatur a more welcoming, inclusive, and equitable place for all. The event lasted from 10 am to 3 pm.

Participants used electronic polling devices to submit their demographic information and respond to questions regarding their attitudes toward the community and the Better Together initiative (Appendix D). Though not all participants responded to all questions, the responses recorded indicate that:

- » The percentage of older participants was much greater than in the survey, with 53 percent age 55 or older.
- » Twenty-six percent of participants had lived in the City five years or less; 21 percent had lived in the City 25 years or more.
- » Most participants were white (60 percent), though the percentage of black participants was twice what it was for the survey. (Table 1)

The program consisted of a series of presentations and videos interspersed with opportunities for participants to converse with their tablemates about an equitable and inclusive city; racially-just community policing; and diverse and affordable housing. Each participant had a participant guide (Appendix E), which included background information on the Better Together initiative; an overview of the City of Decatur at present and plans for growth; background information on the three focus areas identified by the Leadership Circle; and a resource list. Participants also received a Community Conversation Toolkit with tips for organizing and hosting their own Better Together conversations with friends and neighbors.

Following the presentations, facilitators asked participants to contribute their own action ideas for addressing the three focus areas. Participants were encouraged to think about actions that could be taken by individuals, organizations, and local government. By the end of the day, 625 ideas had been submitted. These are presented in Appendix F and form the basis for the Better Together Community Action Plan.

**TABLE 1: Racial Demographics of Survey and Community Conversation Participants v. City of Decatur**

RACE	SURVEY	CITY	COMMUNITY CONVERSATION
Asian	2%	4%	2%
Black or African American	16%	20%	32%
Hispanic or Latino	3%	1%	1%
Native American	1%	0%	0%
White or Caucasian	75%	73%	60%
More than one race	3%	2%	4%
Some other racial identity	0%	N/A	1%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Action Plan Preview Meeting

Once the 625 action ideas had been distilled down to a draft list of 71 action steps for inclusion in the community action plan, the Leadership Circle invited the community to preview the list and help prioritize the action steps. The preview meeting was held November 12 from 6:30 to 8:30 pm at the Decatur Marriott Courtyard Conference Center. Approximately 120 people attended. Most had participated in one of the earlier engagement opportunities, but about a third indicated they were participating in Better Together for the first time.<sup>2</sup>

The first half of the meeting included an overview of the Better Together Initiative and the announcement of the Plan's six focus areas that had emerged during the planning process:

- » Support community participation and engagement among all members of the city's population
- » Prioritize racially-just community policing by improving relationships between community members and law enforcement and ensuring all community members are treated in a just way with equity and respect
- » Ensure the availability of diverse and affordable housing in order to prevent the displacement of existing residents and provide for a variety of housing types and prices





- » Cultivate a welcoming and inclusive retail environment for serving a diverse clientele
- » Maximize the use of public spaces for the enrichment and well-being of all Decatur residents, workers, and visitors
- » Facilitate low-cost transportation options for people of all ages and abilities

The second half of the meeting included an interactive exercise designed to prioritize action steps by giving participants opportunities to assign points to the action steps they thought most important. Though the results should only be considered anecdotal, the action steps that scored highest were mostly consistent with the priorities previously expressed through the survey and the community conversation:

1. Advocate for the General Assembly's approval of the City's proposal to increase its homestead exemptions for low- and moderate-income seniors. (Individuals)
2. Host community forums with experts to examine how other cities have managed growth to maintain cultural, economic and generational diversity and discuss feasible options for Decatur, including those the City is currently exploring. (Local Government)
3. Require the Fair and Impartial Policing training course for all officers. (Local Government)
4. Produce a comprehensive guide that covers existing tax exemptions, forms of assistance, and other strategies for aging in place. Make it available in print, online and keep it up to date. (Local Government)
5. Establish Better Together as a permanent City initiative to nurture and sustain a culture of inclusion, equity and justice. (Local Government)
6. Establish an ongoing Better Together column in the Focus and other local media outlets to keep community members informed of progress on the Community Action Plan, Strategic Plan, and other initiatives and ways in which they can support them. (Local Government)





7. Provide City department leaders with the training, professional development and coaching needed to apply an equity lens to their work. (Local Government)
8. Host community conversations on race, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Refer to the Better Together Community Conversation Tool Kit for discussion questions and resources. (Organizations)
9. Publish and distribute a flyer with guidance for citizens on when and how to report suspicious activity and/or a possible crime. Post prominently on website also. (Local Government)
10. Convene a task force to develop a plan for workforce housing (for police officers, firefighters, teachers, and other community public servants), based on a mix of zoning strategies, financing options, and incentives that have proven successful in other communities. (Local Government)
11. Develop a Welcoming Decatur Checklist for planning city-sponsored events in order to guide organizers in creating events that are inclusive in terms of volunteer participation, entertainment, activities, and costs. (Local Government)
12. Through a relevant and compelling outreach effort, invite more people of color to participate in the Citizen Police Academy. (Local Government)
13. Make studio space available for adults and youth to create and display art. (Organizations)

14. Attend public meetings, read relevant publications, and/or utilize resources available through the City website to learn about local issues and the City's decision-making process. (Individuals)

### Public Comment Period

On November 17, the City posted the draft action item list online for public review and comment and placed hard copies of the lists with comment forms at Decatur City Hall, Decatur Recreation Center, Ebster Recreation Center, Decatur Housing Authority, and Decatur Library. Community members were informed of the opportunity to provide final comment through an email blast sent to the City's more than 4,000 e-newsletter subscribers; a post on the City's website, DecaturNext.com; and a blog post on the Decatur Minute. In addition, Leadership Circle members contacted their different constituencies to let them know how and where to comment.

Online comments were collected through Open City Hall, an online platform that the City has used previously. By the close of the comment period on November 30, 224 people had reviewed the list online and 45 had provided comments. Twelve additional people submitted their comments on paper or by email. All comments received are included in Appendix G.<sup>3</sup>

### Engaging Partner Organizations

The earliest conceptions of the Better Together process and Community Action Plan included cultivating partnerships to ensure a collaborative and sustainable



effort. Welcoming America, a national nonprofit organization headquartered in the City of Decatur, partnered with the City in early 2015 providing guidance based on their work with other cities across the country. Welcoming America and the City partnered to secure \$25,000 in grant funding for Better Together from The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta. These two early partnerships provided a foundation for engaging additional partners.

On October 15, City staff and Leadership Circle members hosted a meeting for organizations they thought might have an interest in taking the lead or partnering on some of the ideas and programs that were beginning to emerge from the community action planning process. The goals of the meeting were:

- » To create connections among potential partners, Leadership Circle members, and City leaders
- » To share what the Leadership Circle had learned from the Better Together Community Action Planning Process
- » To harvest group wisdom that could support the implementation of the Community Action Plan

About 35 people attended, many of whom had already participated in some aspect of the Better Together initiative. Organizations represented included Agnes Scott College, Compassionate Decatur, Decatur Community Coalition, DEAM, Decatur Education Foundation, Decatur Housing Authority, Decatur Makers, Decatur Presbyterian Church, First Baptist Church of

Decatur, First Christian Church, First United Methodist Church, Hathor Consulting, Interaction Institute for Social Change, Oakhurst Baptist Church, Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, Partnership for Southern Equity, Welcoming America, Woodland Gardens, Zeist Foundation, and several unaffiliated community volunteers and artists.

Most of these organizations and individuals are already actively working with diversity, inclusion, and equity. They affirmed the challenging nature of this work and the need for “continuous maintenance” as one participant stated. Another participant spoke of the importance of an inclusive city narrative and moving from “my Decatur” to “our Decatur.” The group generally agreed that Decatur had a tremendous opportunity to build on what has been started with Better Together.

From their own experiences in working collaboratively to implement plans, some spoke of the need for “owners” for each part of the plan, resources to get things done, and engaging a “backbone” or anchor organization to lead the implementation. Storytelling and accountability were described as critical elements of implementing the plan.

Working with these and other potential partners and requesting their leadership on specific action items will be essential to successful implementation of the Community Action Plan.









# THE COMMUNITY ACTION PLAN

Shifting from community engagement to creating a Community Action Plan began with the 625 action ideas contributed by those who attended the August 29 Community Conversation. Using keyword analysis, consultants first sorted the action ideas into 38 categories. Those categories were analyzed individually and then edited down to six focus areas:

1. Support community participation and engagement among all members of the city's population
2. Prioritize racially just community policing by improving relationships between community members and law enforcement and ensuring all community members are treated in a just way with equity and respect
3. Ensure the availability of diverse and affordable housing in order to prevent the displacement of existing residents and provide for a variety of housing types and prices.
4. Cultivate a welcoming and inclusive retail environment for serving a diverse clientele.
5. Maximize the use of public spaces for the enrichment and well-being of all Decatur residents, workers, and visitors.
6. Facilitate low-cost transportation options for people of all ages and abilities.

These focus areas were compared to the comments collected via the Community Survey and found to be highly correlated.

Once the action ideas were sorted by focus area, it was possible to eliminate duplicates, combine closely-related ideas, and identify ideas and comments that were unclear or unrelated to the purpose of the Better Together initiative. There were a number of recommendations for the City Schools of Decatur, which has a separate governing body from the City of Decatur; those items were relayed to the school superintendent.

Leadership Circle members, City staff, and consultants worked collaboratively to determine which ideas would be included in the Community Action Plan. Their decisions reflected community members' priorities, as indicated by the survey and feedback received through public meetings, and also factors such as funding availability (or the likelihood that grant funding or sponsorships could be secured) and interest among prospective partner organizations. In the case of ideas assigned to the City, they also considered whether those ideas were aligned with the City's existing work plan.

Ultimately, the following 60 action ideas were included in the Community Action Plan **(for the detailed implementation plan with target dates, progress indicators, etc., see Appendix A)**. The plan represents a three-year timeframe, though as with all plans, it will shift as needed in response to internal and external factors that are not yet known.



## FOCUS AREA 1: SUPPORT COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT AMONG ALL MEMBERS OF THE CITY'S POPULATION

	<b>A. Individuals</b>
1	Attend public meetings, read relevant publications, and/or utilize resources available through the City website to learn about local issues and the City's decision-making process.
2	Make a point to welcome new neighbors and introduce yourself to others whom you do not know.
3	Share important community news and information through social media platforms.
4	Bring your perspective to community events, celebrations, and city governance by volunteering to serve on volunteer boards, commissions, and task forces; planning committees; and neighborhood association boards and committees.
5	Participate in your neighborhood association.
	<b>B. Organizations</b>
1	For neighborhood associations: Develop community welcome packets with neighborhood and City information. Establish system for timely delivery of welcome packets to new neighbors. (See I.C.7)
2	Build community through conversation by organizing small, diverse groups of residents to get together socially (i.e., supper clubs, book clubs, play groups).
3	Build community through creativity and storytelling by organizing opportunities for citizens from different walks of life to share their stories in different ways, such as making and displaying art, recording interviews with each other (e.g., StoryCorps), performing in front of live audiences through open-mic nights,
4	Provide training and resources to help community members learn how to have respectful, meaningful conversations across differences.
5	Help interested community members continue to learn about issues related to race, diversity, equity, and inclusion in their everyday lives and at the national level by providing a variety of resources, including guest speakers, video/film, and books, and hosting a series of community conversations on these topics.
6	Complete organizational self-assessment of leadership and membership base and reach out to key groups or demographics that are underrepresented.
	<b>C. Local Government</b>
1	Utilize the Decatur Focus, Decaturga.com, Decaturnext.com, and other media resources to share timely information on upcoming events; provide updates on plan implementation; share tools and activities used in different settings over the course of the initiative; and highlight opportunities for community members to get involved.

2	Measure community members' attitudes and perceptions related to equity and inclusion by including relevant questions in the City's biennial community survey.
3	Ensure that all online forms and applications (e.g., MyDecaturGA app for reporting problems) are augmented with contact phone numbers as a supplement to web internet access.
4	On the City website, provide a printable calendar listing of recreational, educational, and social activities.
5	Develop a Welcoming Decatur Checklist for planning city-sponsored events in order to guide organizers in creating events that are inclusive in terms of community participation, volunteer participation, entertainment, activities, and costs.
6	Regularly update the community's resource network (i.e., asset map) to ensure a current list of organizations, places, and online resources to meet the various needs of the community.
7	Create a new resident packet and make it available on the City's web site. Encourage individuals and neighborhood associations to print and share with new neighbors. (See I.B.1)
8	Consider establishing a Better Together Advisory Board (similar to other advisory boards such as Environmental Sustainability, Lifelong Community and Active Living) to provide recommendations to the City Commission and staff and to establish, organize and implement activities that nurture and sustain a culture of inclusion, equity and justice. Establish a Better Together Network of residents, partner organizations, and community leaders to help sustain the effort and implement the plan. Explore opportunities for partnering with an anchor organization to help achieve stability and consistency.
9	Develop a means for receiving and addressing community members' concerns and complaints related to issues of equity and inclusion to ensure that problems are thoroughly documented and responded to appropriately by the correct staff person.
10	Consider incorporating an update on Better Together plan implementation during the State of the City address.
11	Work with a diverse group of citizen volunteers to develop a strategic, integrated citywide outreach plan aimed at involving a broader spectrum of community members in city life through participation in Volunteer! Decatur and on boards, commissions, and task forces.
12	Review the City's internal structures, processes, policies, and outcomes to ensure local government is equitable in its day-to-day practices and as it addresses future challenges and pursues new initiatives. Process should establish specific goals and a means for tracking, reporting progress.
13	Provide City staff with training and support, professional development on how to ensure equity and inclusion within their departments and in how they serve the community.
14	Partner with a foundation to begin a small grants program to support community members taking creative action together to further the goals of Better Together.



## FOCUS AREA 2: PRIORITIZE RACIALLY-JUST COMMUNITY POLICING BY IMPROVING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT AND ENSURING ALL COMMUNITY MEMBERS ARE TREATED IN A JUST WAY WITH EQUITY AND RESPECT

	<b>A. Individuals</b>
1	Educate yourself about racial profiling and the role citizens play in community policing.
	<b>B. Organizations</b>
1	Using resources provided by the Police Department, share information with neighbors regarding community policing and when to report suspicious activity and/or a possible crime.
2	Invite or continue to invite police officers to participate in community events in order to build relationships.
	<b>C. Local Government</b>
1	Use the existing Police Department annual report to help the community get to know its officers and the police department by continuing to include information on the number of officers, police force demographics, priorities for the year, etc. Post the report online in a timely manner and announce availability in the Decatur Focus and other media outlets.
2	Post quarterly on the department website information on arrests, stops, and related data (including demographics). Indicate how those statistics compare to DeKalb County, Metro Atlanta and/or other jurisdictions as appropriate.
3	Publish and distribute a flyer providing guidance for citizens on when and how to report suspicious activity and/or a possible crime. Post prominently on website and distribute through neighborhood associates and other media outlets.
4	Post anti-racial profiling policy and procedures on front page of the police department's section of the City website. Make sure that this information is stated in language that is simple and straightforward.
5	Through a relevant and compelling outreach effort, invite more people of color to participate in the Citizen Police Academy.
6	Provide information to residents about training officers receive, especially as related to diversity, community policing, and mental health.
7	Incorporate "Fair and Impartial Policing" training course into Department training curriculum.

### FOCUS AREA 3: ENSURE THE AVAILABILITY OF DIVERSE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN ORDER TO PREVENT DISPLACEMENT OF EXISTING RESIDENTS AND PROVIDE FOR A VARIETY OF HOUSING TYPES AND PRICES

A. Individuals	
1	Advocate for the General Assembly's approval of the City's proposal to increase its homestead exemptions for low- and moderate-income seniors.
2	Advocate for the General Assembly's approval of the City Schools of Decatur property tax exemption.
B. Organizations	
1	Develop a program for organizing and training volunteers to host workshops to assist seniors in reviewing financial options that could make aging in place more affordable.
C. Local Government	
1	Update information on the City website regarding proposed annexation to include implications in terms of growth and diversity.
2	Improve upon the City's existing density bonuses to encourage developers to build affordable condominiums and apartments.
3	Host community forums with experts to examine how other cities have managed growth to maintain cultural, economic and generational diversity, and discuss feasible options for Decatur, including those the City is currently exploring.
4	Consider establishing a task force to make recommendations for a workforce housing program (for police officers, firefighters, teachers, and other community public servants), incorporating a mix of zoning strategies, financing options, and incentives that have proven successful in other communities.
5	Produce a comprehensive guide covering existing tax exemptions, forms of assistance, and other strategies for aging in place. Make it available in print, online and keep it up to date.
6	Utilize the Decatur Focus and other existing communication channels to regularly update citizens on ongoing initiatives related to housing and property taxes.

## FOCUS AREA 4: CULTIVATE A WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE RETAIL ENVIRONMENT FOR SERVING A DIVERSE CLIENTELE

	<b>A. Organizations</b>
1	Publish a "welcoming and inclusive" handbook and distribute to Decatur businesses that interact with the public.
2	Provide ongoing training opportunities for Decatur businesses on how to offer a welcoming and inclusive experience for customers. Recognize businesses with signage or a window decal when their employees have completed training.
3	Build awareness of the various roles that people with disabilities are capable of performing and encourage business owners to consider hiring disabled individuals.
4	Encourage existing businesses to expand their inventories to help address the basic needs of older residents.
	<b>B. Local Government</b>
1	Explore the possibility of bringing a variety store to downtown (i.e., Richards' Variety Store) to expand the range of household and basic items available to residents.
2	Provide opportunities for business owners to learn about handicap access and options for modifying their places of business to be more accessible.
3	Collaborate with property owners and leasing agents to offer a diverse array of dining and shopping options, representing different cultures, price points, and generations.



## FOCUS AREA 5: MAXIMIZE THE USE OF PUBLIC SPACES FOR THE ENRICHMENT AND WELL-BEING OF ALL DECATUR RESIDENTS, WORKERS, AND VISITORS

A. Individuals	
1	Take ownership of the community's public spaces by placing trash in provided containers, picking up litter, and reporting maintenance problems through the MyDecaturGA mobile app or by calling/texting (404) 377-5571.
2	Help the City expand and diversify its public art program by supporting the Decatur Arts Alliance as a volunteer and/or financially.
B. Local Government	
1	Provide signage to direct downtown visitors to public restrooms.
2	Consider installing more seating downtown and other neighborhood commercial centers, possibly in conjunction with public art installations.
3	As the county seat for one of the nation's most culturally diverse counties, consider utilizing public spaces to honor cultures past, present, and future through art and signage.

## FOCUS AREA 6: FACILITATE LOW-COST TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS FOR PEOPLE OF ALL AGES AND ABILITIES

A. Individuals	
1	Offer rides to elderly neighbors and others who do not drive.
2	Support assistance organizations like I CARE (Interfaith Companion And Ride Express) by volunteering and/or providing financial support.
B. Local Government	
1	Publish and distribute a guide to various public and private transit options available to seniors, youth and those who are disabled.
2	Increase awareness of and access to the Go60+ Shuttle in order to better serve seniors.



# MOVING FORWARD: INDIVIDUALS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND GOVERNMENT

Like the planning process, the implementation phase is meant to be collaborative. The senior staff of the City of Decatur will assume responsibility for monitoring the plan, engaging the community, and implementing many of the action items, but there are a number of other action items for individuals and organizations to pursue independently or in partnership with others. Anyone interested in working on these action items is invited to contact Linda Harris, who directs the City's Division of Civic Engagement, Education & Communication, at [linda.harris@decaturga.com](mailto:linda.harris@decaturga.com) or 678-553-6512.

As with any plan of this nature, building and maintaining momentum will be challenging. In order to get off to a strong start, the consulting team recommends City leadership moving forward immediately on the following:

- » I.C.8. Consider establishing a Better Together Advisory Board (similar to other advisory boards such as Environmental Sustainability, Lifelong Community and Active Living) to provide recommendations to the City Commission and staff and to establish, organize and implement activities that nurture and sustain a culture of inclusion, equity and justice. Establish a Better Together Network of residents, partner organizations, and community leaders to help sustain the effort and implement the plan. Explore opportunities for partnering with an anchor organization to help achieve stability and consistency.
- » I.C.9. Develop a means for receiving and addressing community members' concerns and complaints related to issues of equity and inclusion to ensure that problems are thoroughly documented and responded to appropriately by the correct staff person.
- » I.C.13. Provide City staff with training and support, professional development on how to ensure equity and inclusion within their departments and in how they serve the community.
- » I.B.4. Provide training and resources to help community members learn how to have respectful, meaningful conversations across differences. Offer learning and training opportunities utilizing a variety of regional and national resources, including guest speakers, video/film, and books.
- » I.C.12. Review the City's internal structures, processes, policies, and outcomes to ensure local government is equitable in its day-to-day practices and as it addresses future challenges and pursues new initiatives. Process should establish specific goals and a means for tracking, reporting progress.
- » I.C.11. Work with a diverse group of citizen volunteers to develop a strategic, integrated citywide outreach plan aimed at involving a broader spectrum of community members in city life through participation in Volunteer! Decatur and on boards, commissions, and task forces.
- » I.C.6. Regularly update the community's resource list (i.e., asset map) to ensure a current list of organizations, places, and online resources to meet the various needs of the community.
- » Though not specified in the plan, also recommend that City leaders inform this important work by reviewing resources from related initiatives ongoing in the City of Decatur and similar initiatives in other cities (Appendix H).



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Atlanta Regional Commission, The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta, Decatur City Commission, Decatur Community Coalition, staff of the Decatur Conference Center, Decatur Housing Authority, staff of the Decatur and Ebster Recreation Centers, Welcoming America, and Mayor Emerita Elizabeth Wilson.

The Leadership Circle also wishes to thank all the individuals who have already volunteered to work on various components of the Better Together Community Action Plan.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Participation time is calculated as follows:

- » Community Survey: 60.5 hours. The survey software tracks time from the moment a respondent opens the survey until he or she either hits submit or closes the browser, so it is not possible to have an accurate total for the time individuals spent on their survey responses. Before the survey was released, testers took between five and 10 minutes to complete the survey. Multiplying the shorter time of five minutes by the 724 respondents results in a conservative estimate of 3,620 minutes or about 60.5 hours spent responding to the survey.
- » Community Conversation: 1,062 hours (236 participants at five hours each, less 10 percent to account for late arrivals and early departures).
- » Community Action Plan Preview Meeting: 216 hours (120 participants at two hours each, less 10 percent to account for late arrivals and early departures).
- » Community Action Plan public comment period: 2.3 hours total, calculated by the online survey platform.
- » Total: 1,340.8 hours

<sup>2</sup> Because demographic information was collected for only about half of those in attendance, it is not useful for comparison and is not included in this report.

<sup>3</sup> The online platform used for this process does not collect demographic information.