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**Symposium on Urban Sprawl:
Local and Comparative Perspectives on
Managing Atlanta's Growth**

**GEORGIA STATE'S ROLE IN REVITALIZING
DOWNTOWN ATLANTA***

Carl Patton†

To the extent that a strong, vibrant central city counteracts sprawl, I think Georgia State University has been a player. We have played a role in revitalizing downtown, and some people might even say that we kept the lights on during bad times. But I think Georgia State's role is more than that. If you look at the figures, you will see that Georgia State University has a tremendous impact on the Atlanta urban area. We pump two million dollars a day into the center of this metro area where much of the infrastructure is already in place.

Historically, many universities, even those located in the center of cities, have tried to separate themselves from the community. Sometimes they have done so with gates and fences. Georgia State did that with catwalks and platforms. Historically, our master plan was to build these platforms and catwalks to separate the university community from the city. The university would be an isolated set of buildings above the common people below. Today our philosophy here at Georgia State is quite different. If you look at our academic plans, our strategic plans, and our fiscal plans, you will see that we have flipped our historical philosophy: now we have a goal to be a

* This essay is an edited transcript of President Patton's remarks at a symposium on urban sprawl, co-sponsored by the Georgia State University Law Review and the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, on February 1, 2001. The transcript has been modified to reflect a print rather than an oral presentation.

† President, Georgia State University. Before coming to GSU, President Patton was a senior administrator at the University of Illinois, Urbana, the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and the University of Toledo. He has practiced planning and policy analysis in Maryland, Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Georgia and has consulted to universities, higher education institutions, real estate development firms, and civic associations. He is also involved in various civic activities in Atlanta, including chairing Central Atlanta Progress.

part of the community, not apart from it. Georgia State will make development decisions that are good for the city if they also fit our academic needs. But underlying this development theory is the fact that we have 33,000 students seeking degrees, and they must come first. We must meet our students' academic needs and provide them with a high quality campus life. So we have developed a ten-year master plan for growth to transform Decatur Street into a pedestrian friendly main street corridor. The idea is that we will remove our catwalks and platforms and make it easier for our students, faculty, and staff to be a part of the urban environment.

Included in this concept is the idea of putting large windows in our buildings. For example, when Georgia State purchased the Rialto Theater, it simply had brick walls. We opened it up with large glass windows so that people could see in and we could become a part of the urban environment. We have also built a new student recreation center that has an entire glass wall along Piedmont Avenue. The Aderholt Learning Center and our new science teaching laboratory will also incorporate large windows and glass walls. All of these buildings have the same concept of being open to the street to allow people to view what is happening at the university and to allow our people to see the city. This is a physical expression of being part of the community. It fits well with the other things Georgia State does to strengthen this link such as engaging in service projects and meeting the needs of our community through research.

Of course, when you open up your campus to the community, you very suddenly will have other issues. One issue is campus safety and the perception of safety. Georgia State has one of the safest campuses in the state. In fact, the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* monitors the daily crime rates that we put on our Web site. When the newspapers report these statistics, they often refer to them as "mundane campus crimes." Long commute times are also an issue. They are certainly a consequence of sprawl. So we have tried to adopt some of our university policies to discourage driving. We now offer deep discounts on MARTA cards for our students, faculty, and staff. We are also looking at other incentives such as lower parking rates for people who carpool. We are trying to concentrate our activities downtown and bring people to campus for a longer stay to reduce commuting back and forth. We are trying to make

this an environment that will be pleasant and encourage people to visit so that students and faculty will spend more time on campus.

One problem we face here at Georgia State is that we are landlocked. Even though we are landlocked, we focus our expansion downtown rather than in the suburbs. We have opened a new Alpharetta center, but it was simply moving an existing center from near Perimeter Mall further north into Alpharetta. So we have 2000 students there compared with more than 30,000 students on the downtown campus. We have tried to expand our downtown campus where land has been available and affordable. Because downtown is experiencing a revival, it is becoming increasingly more difficult and more expensive to find space. Some people will say that we have been our own worst enemy in terms of creating the land value in the downtown area, but this is the reality we face today. With this reality in mind, we created our master plan with the concept of increasing the density on our campus by replacing our old, inefficient buildings rather than seeking to expand our campus.

I think it is important to correct a misperception that some people may have that the state builds our buildings. In fact, public-private partnerships are alive and well here at Georgia State. Private sources provide a large percentage of our funding. The six building projects that I have been involved with have involved more than two hundred million dollars in construction costs. Of that two hundred million, only twenty-five percent of that amount came from the state. So developing downtown these days requires creativity, and it certainly calls for private fund raising and other strategies. We even obtained a piece of land from the city of Atlanta by trading credits that they could use for city employees to take courses here at Georgia State. That's a pretty good deal, right? We got the land, and we might even get smarter city employees out of this deal. I say that from standpoint of sometimes having to negotiate with the city for development permits and other needs. We have also traded real estate with other landowners, and we have entered into non-recourse bond issues through the city to develop these buildings. An important thing to remember is that only twenty-five percent of the total construction funding comes from the state of Georgia.

This development really is not development for development's sake because our central vision here is to create a sense of place at Georgia State. As I mentioned earlier, our key focus is on our "Main Street." We plan to narrow Decatur Street to two lanes of moving traffic where it passes through campus and create passenger drop off lanes and wider sidewalks. The idea is to welcome pedestrians and to encourage our faculty and students to walk in the community. I think this is a key concept of creating vitality in downtown that will result in a core that can build inward.

We also plan to provide affordable housing for the university community because bringing housing downtown will also encourage walking in the downtown area and create vitality. We have two thousand students who live in university buildings, and those students come to campus primarily on MARTA or a university shuttle. We are now in the process of negotiating for the construction of four hundred units of loft-style housing near campus. This housing will be built immediately adjacent to our campus with the concept of creating more life, activity, and vitality on our campus. The project will be another non-recourse bond issue with no cost to the university.

Georgia State is not alone in the process of trying to create a vital community core that might in turn reduce the effects of sprawl. There are certainly a number of other organizations involved. Let me mention some of the things that are working in and around campus. Certainly the loft conversions and the new housing developments downtown have been a tremendous benefit to Georgia State. For example, a group called Centennial Olympic Park Area, Inc. (COPA) has been creating housing around Centennial Olympic Park, and in the next several years there will be another thousand units of housing built around the park.

I would also be remiss not to mention the downtown ambassadors who patrol the streets in easily identifiable teal jackets and pith helmets. This is a group funded by private businesses in the downtown area to add additional support and security for the people who live in, work in, and visit the downtown area. In addition, Georgia State has adopted Woodruff Park from the city, and we are trying to improve the conditions there. In Woodruff Park and in Centennial Olympic Park, activity programming is bringing more and more people

downtown. One of the best Fourth of July activities now is at Centennial Olympic Park, bringing 100,000 people into the city. The idea is to get more people to come downtown and stay longer.

We are doing a lot to counteract sprawl, but there is more that can be done. I fall in the camp of believing that we should not be paying the price that we are for sprawl and that we ought to reuse the infrastructure that we already have in our city to increase the density. I think the first thing that we need is more housing. We certainly want to see the area around Centennial Olympic Park filled out with high-density housing. I think that is a positive thing that will bring more people to the center of the city, and I have even made a proposal that the next mayor should have his or her official residence built atop Five Points MARTA station. If the mayor were living at Five Points, it would send the message that living downtown is a very positive thing.

I also think we need larger scale developments. We have seen some loft conversions that add twenty, thirty, or fifty units, but to get the numbers of people that we need to live downtown, we must have huge developments with hundreds of units in each. So at one end, we need large-scale housing developments, and at the other end, we need the mid-scale developments such as small shops and restaurants that can revive activity on the streets. Those of us who live downtown, those in our university community, and those who love to be downtown know that the streets in this area still roll up at about five o'clock in the evening. We need more shops, events, and walking opportunities downtown. Again, if we are going to have a vital core to this city, we must encourage people to walk among the destinations.

What are we doing here at Georgia State? Well, we are trying to get more people to walk on the streets, we are removing many of the platforms and catwalks, and we are opening our windows to the community. Georgia State is trying to be a part of the community, not apart from it. While these actions are not being taken primarily to reduce urban sprawl, I think they will help keep people in the city and indirectly help to reduce sprawl. I think they will help reduce the number of people who commute and help keep the center of the city a viable place to live and

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work. We have tremendous unused infrastructure in the center of our city. Georgia State is choosing to reuse that existing infrastructure so that we do not have to build more facilities further and further out.