



NCA Meeting: 2nd Reporter's Panel

Wednesday May 21st, 2014

Meals on Wheels – Commerce Drive, Atlanta GA

**Transcribed by WCA Staff, notes may not be completely accurate*

Next Meeting: July 16th with Mary Norwood, same location

Panel Representatives:

- Katie Leslie, Atlanta Journal Constitution
- Max Blau, Creative Loafing Atlanta
- Dominique Huff, Home Rule News
- Jonathan Shapiro, WABE
- John Schaffner, Buckhead View
- Maria Saporta, Atlanta Business Chronicle & Saporta Report

Panel Introductions:

Katie Leslie: From WV, went to school at New York University for singing and journalism. Worked in Baltimore and has been at the AJC for 6 years. Started in Home & Garden, worked in A1, Features, etc. Started City Hall Beat one year ago.

- Mostly covers stadium, Blank, and community benefits recently. Then came election campaigning and results. Now focusing on Turner Field and seeing what's going on with the Georgia State deal. Lots of commercial real estate news going on. Likes to focus on neighborhood point of view. Example: Jeff Fuqua is developing a Wal-Mart in Grant Park. The Grant Park Neighborhood Association was able to work with Fuqua to get more benefits for the neighborhood than they originally thought they would and worked with their district representative to do so. I hope that with Turner Field we can get more positive community engagement like that. I'm glad to have at least one example of positive community intervention.

Max Blau: Went to Emory, stumbled into journalism through music and entertainment publishing at Paste Magazine, and then stumbled into City Hall news.

- Spent time looking at all of the downtown projects occurring right now which is the most significant development since the '96 Olympics. Geographically, it stretches from one stadium to another (Georgia Dome to Turner Field), National Center for Civil and Human Rights Museum, College Football Hall of Fame, Underground Atlanta and GSU's sprawling campus. These projects can all benefit Atlanta but are being developed with different intentions in mind (unlike the Olympics, which had one end goal). What does this mean for the 30 – 40 thousand downtown residents? There is not a grocery store, people need to leave the core to get food. People live there because it's in the center, but it is a food desert. People are wondering when that will improve especially with things like the Streetcar. It's a chicken or the egg ordeal. All the projects will draw more residents (the trend of moving to the suburbs is reversing). When will downtown catch up in terms of amenities for



permanent residents compared to other Atlanta neighborhoods? Conversation should be happening as we move forward.

Dominique Huff: Worked at The Story and at the Georgia State Sentinel and East Point Neighbors. Went to GSU (for Public Administration/Public Policy) and wrote for the paper because he thought it sucked. He started Home Rule News in 2009.

- Dealing with annexation right now. Mayor Reed is going to unincorporated South Fulton. City of Atlanta gives Fulton County money for fire services (for areas that were annexed in 2006). Where is the new economic development in this area – Green Briar Mall? Southwest Atlanta has 96 neighborhoods and Family Dollar does not count as economic development. I have covered way too many Family Dollar protests and another one is coming. The City is trying to move in, stuff is happening in North DeKalb. When it comes to new development, we want to look at walkable developments and ensure that money is coming into the Westside. I ask the hard questions and get the real answers. I enjoy talking to residents because that is who has the good leads and all of the reports.

Jonathan Shapiro: Went to grad school at GSU, and undergrad at Emory. Taught social studies in Harlem after college. Worked at NPR in Portland, launched a daily regional public affairs show. Worked in Alt Weekly. Went back to NY for a daily newspaper and covered city/county government. In 2009 came back to Atlanta for WABE.

- City Beat has become more so “where is the next development? – community, where, when, how, money, etc.” Recently focused on Morris Brown, bankruptcy, city offerings, and what that means for development around community. There’s already tremendous distrust in city intentions for the area on behalf of residents. Like Katie said, when things get introduced, it’s usually already a done deal and input doesn’t matter. This is why Westside residents feel like they’re not being heard. As we get closer to the streetcar launch, what will happen to Sweet Auburn District? There’s an interest in preserving and uplifting the area but still a lot of skepticism: Will Auburn Ave ever be like it was? The type of development on Edgewood is not what people on Auburn want. Especially considering that this was the ground zero for African American businesses. Residents are saying you’ve made this multi-million dollar investment that’s coming in the summer. Despite the initial investment there is a gap in attracting developers and helping get buildings up to a certain standard to attract them. Mayor is floating that Eastside TAD might be retired. People feel that for Auburn to get to the next step, it’s based on using existing TAD money. That will be extremely controversial. The Mayor seems like he wants access to the funds, it will be interesting to see the community reaction. Reed didn’t take much community input from west Atlanta during the stadium process, so how will he respond to East Atlanta? GSU is opening a mega complex, how will that play out?

John Schaffner: I’m the only person that doesn’t cover downtown or Midtown. Buckhead View is my business, an online news service. I’m the only staff member, I also do no-pay reporting for NPR. I started out in newspaper in 1961 when we used typewriters. I ran a PR firm in Atlanta. Worked with St Petersburg Times, Palm Beach Post, Philadelphia Inquirer. I worked at the AJC. Started The Story from the Westside, we were one of the first groups to write about the BeltLine and did a 2 page spread. We talked about M-West apartments. We tried to help businesses get started along Ellsworth Industrial and Huff Road. I believe that this is the next great frontier for Atlanta. Built that to 5 newspapers, couldn’t sell advertising and disintegrated. That’s where I first learned about neighborhood



associations and NPUs. Now I focus on Buckhead. I read about everything else going on. I never gave up buying the daily newspaper. I think it's the most dynamic community in the city. Moved to Buckhead in 2007. Nobody else covers it well. Population of Buckhead has increased 27% in the past 15 years. Condos have increased 250% in 15 years. Office space square footage 46%, retail 26%. Buckhead has better occupancy of hotels than downtown. Buckhead is 20% of Atlanta in terms of population and land mass but pays 45% of the taxes. We don't get anything back for it. Every road is covered in potholes. Between 2010 and 2040, population will grow by 40% and employment will grow by 50% (according to Atlanta Regional Commission). Lots of new office towers are planned. Restoration Hardware will open their flagship 6-story store. The market is there. Buckhead doesn't want the streetcar.

Maria Saporta: Got start on neighborhood level at Intown Extra. Worked there 1 year and 3 months. Did fair share of NPU, Zoning, BZA meeting etc. The recent community benefits meetings felt like déjà vu in that regard. It's great that people still care about their communities. You would hope that with all this passion, we could have advanced further than we have as a city and a region. Left after 27 years at AJC, and joined Atlanta Business Chronicle. Started Saporta Report website in February 2009 (2 full-time jobs for the price of one). Lots of contributing writers for Saporta Report.

- Atlanta Business Chronicle believes the center of the universe is in Buckhead, they definitely cover it. It was interesting when the AJC left the city. I grew up on North Ave across from Georgia Tech, the apartments have since been torn down, as have all the other buildings I lived in. I lived in such beautiful buildings that I've watched turn into parking lots. I hope they will become something else. That block north of Fox Theater, Bell South talked about turning it into another tower. That was a great solution to save the Theater and put the building behind it. I'm a big believer in being able to measure the health of a city based on how much space is dedicated to cars. (In Washington DC, they made a commitment to make no more surface parking lots, and today every block is vibrant). We need to think of a city as a body with a beating heart, and blood flowing to every part. We aren't willing to talk about the things we need to talk about as a community. On Tuesday, at Atlanta Business League, a community leader said that the Braves were getting an inferiority complex and that's why they decided to move to Cobb County. We might as well put up an international sign. Egbert Perry thinks that soccer is going to be the biggest thing to happen to Atlanta since the Olympics. Someone said that the Braves will find out that moving to the suburbs is so 20th century. I couldn't quote that source. That's the problem with this town, nobody wants to stand up and be accounted for.
- When MARTA opened the rail, they made the decision to not bring buses downtown and it would instead be a feeder system. There is something to be said about public transit at street level. It invites people. Moving it underground removed the people and killed street retail. We used to have great public transportation until MARTA opened. What once was one bus ride that took at max 25 minutes, now you have to use transfers and the buses come less frequently and it is not easy or pleasant. The more transit options we can offer for the street life, the better off the city will be.



Questions:

Ava: Have a daughter that went away for school and now works at Georgia Tech. She is about to give up a good job and leave Atlanta. She is going to go rent a room in Hyde Park in Chicago and hang out for a while. We don't have a great university attached to Atlanta for people to hang out at. I went to Emory and live close to Georgia Tech. Maybe if you combine all the schools they could equal Harvard in Boston or Berkeley in San Francisco. How do we make a great university? Sure, Buckhead is great for people with money, and sports are fun, but for people interested in science and ideas, where do they go?

- *Katie:* I went to NYU, the second largest landholder in Manhattan, next to the Catholic Church. I think it has to do with the city resident's commitment to discourse about arts and cultural and society and architecture.

Melody: As an architect, I think that good neighborhoods are what made Buckhead succeed. It doesn't require affluence, it needs parks, and a mix of housing stock and businesses. I'd like to see that vitality across Atlanta (I live in West Midtown/South Buckhead). I don't want people to have to travel 5 miles to go to a decent park or grocery store.

- *Schaffner:* I live in a condo on Peachtree and I can walk to 2 Publix supermarkets, a slew of stores and restaurants. We sold a car. We walk everywhere. I don't walk to all the meetings, but a lot.
- *Katie:* I am not an advocate for Georgia State, but they are proposing not only sports, but housing and more.

Vincent Jones: I was born in English Avenue and live there now and consider myself a Northwest Atlantan. Our paths are interconnected because I started with the AJC as a copy in the 60s. I did some writing. When the Constitution combined, that affected Atlanta as did the election of Maynard Jackson. A lot of people thought Atlanta would fail with a black public official, most Atlantans were white. His support came from people all over the country. I was one of the first to run a haberdashery on Peachtree. People that used to come downtown for all of their shopping and the Christmas tree lighting etc., now go to Buckhead. The 60s/70s is when downtown Atlanta stopped. Ivan Allen gave me a certificate for being an Outstanding Athlete in Atlanta in 1965. Ralph McGill was one of the first people that got me interested in working for the paper. A white man retired from the job I got. I was on an executive floor with all white people. Though there were issues, people loved the city and didn't separate. At some point we did and now we're trying to recover.

Mike: We started NCA as dealing with traffic. People say that nobody helps anybody and we tried to be very cognizant of neighborhoods' need to do things for themselves but wanted to know how we could help. How do you compare communities with high poverty and crime to others with a louder voice?

Guest: One single event killed downtown. Muses refused to sell to CNS Bank and now the national bank is in Midtown. "He did more damage to downtown since General Sherman." If Atlanta could suck as well as it could blow, we would be a waterfront. I asked the Urban League to go to National Association of Colleges to educate our youth. Chairman of PWC, Ed Harris, developed quality basic education for the state. Let's suggest that APS test the teachers in their areas of instruction. If they fail, the Urban League will pay for them to train again to pass it. Lyndon Wade asked me to redraw that proposal (all his kids went to Ivy League schools). I lived in Schenectady, by the GE plant and everyone came from MIT or GT. The UGA legislature limited the growth of GT. Tech is the engine.



Guest: What do you see coming from the BeltLine in each of your areas of town?

- *Max:* I can walk to everything. It's fascinating to watch but I see a matter of affordability popping up. The prices of the apartments going into Ponce City Market are doubled than any other properties nearby. It's interesting seeing the gentrification on the BeltLine compared to Boulevard so nearby.
- *Dominique:* It's a divide in the Westside, because some community members feel like it's a ploy to push poor blacks out into the suburbs so people can turn the bungalows. We don't have the attractions, we just have a trail. Yeah, Ralph David Abernathy has a Kroger and fast-food. Who wants to get on the BeltLine and walk to Popeyes? The PathForce of APD is helping with the crime issues we were having. But we need to see if the neighborhood can stabilize.
- *Schaffner:* My issue with the BeltLine is that the point of it is to tie the city together. Tanyard Creek was one of the first trails but it doesn't go anywhere. The Buckhead area will be the last part to be built. You've got all these paths. The Buckhead CID is building a trail with GDOT along 400 to connect North Buckhead to the supposed BeltLine. Not being done with BeltLine funds.

Maria: I want to pick up a few other threads. There are lots of major universities here. But the problem is lack of connectivity. In Philadelphia, the anchor institutions have created an environment together. GSU seems to be going in a different direction and it goes away from the potential of the "Golden Triangle". Nothing will happen with Turner Field for at least 3 years. GSU has no money, Board of Regents has no money. When the City gets control of Underground, who knows what that will mean.

Shapiro: It's hard to get people to split with their car here. How are people going to get onto the road, for instance on Howell Mill where there is so much traffic congestion and apartments keep going up.

Schaffner: The quarry should have been brought online a long time ago.

Katie: TSPLOST failed. The Mayor has said that he expects counties and cities to launch mini-SPLOSTS.

Dean Royster: The Westside Communities Alliance is all about coming up with a collective collaborative model. I'm very proud of the triangle. We are working multi-institutionally. We're trying to advertise the value added in the expertise and volunteerism across our student groups. The media presents an excellent opportunity to approach the complex challenges we're dealing with and help share strategic solutions. I thank you for coming to the meeting and engaging with us. I hope we can identify a set of strategies that take advantage of what we know instead of just talking about it. We understand how we've gotten here and what it will take to get us out. We need to act like we understand that and we haven't. All of these problems are my problems. That is the commitment that all of us should have because Atlanta is at its last chance.

Melody: I was at the Waterworks fundraiser tonight. In light of the cutbacks and changes in the media industry, is it more challenging to keep these stories in the light? Waterworks doesn't affect Cobb or the Perimeter but there was a huge turnout tonight.



- *Dominique*: You'll always get yelled at for not being at the right meeting. Everybody has to wear multiple hats, do social media, do your own photography etc. I report the good stuff, not the bad stuff like AJC and I can't please everybody.
- *Schaffner*: The interest in the local papers for online services will thrive but no money will be made on them.

Mike: There has been a dramatic change in the coverage on the neighborhoods recently. Atlantic Station just sort of happened and at the opening it was all the developers. We gave them some approvals to make it happen and back then there was zero coverage or acknowledgement. Now that reporters are at everything: what was the shift?

- *Katie*: I live in constant fear of the stuff I'm not doing. For example, I could do my entire job on Proctor Creek alone.
- *Maria*: You're romanticizing it. The ABC only has 6 reporters and we put out a print weekly and an online daily. Journalism is in trouble. Who covers Department of Natural Resources? They came out with a ruling that wipes out the protection of the marshes but nobody was following it. It came out of the blue and it was a done deal. Reporting was done afterwards. There is a lot of things that the press is not watching. We're all exhausted all the time.
- *Shapiro*: We need community organizations to supplement us with material.
- *Katie*: Don't confuse a mistake in a story with an agenda. I would rather not report something than misreport something.

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