



Atlanta Regional Business Coalition

Overview

The Atlanta Regional Business Coalition is a coalition of 16 chambers of commerce encompassing 13 counties and representing 25,000 business members. It has a partner relationship with the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce; both offices are housed in the same building. Other members in the partnership include Central Atlanta Progress (a downtown business-led organization) and 14 county-based chambers representing Cherokee, Clayton, Cobb, Conyers-Rockdale, Cumming-Forsyth, DeKalb, Douglas, Fayette, Greater North Fulton, Gwinnett, Henry, Newnan-Coweta, Paulding and South Fulton counties.

The Atlanta Regional Business Coalition brings research capacity and a voice to regional sustainable development in metropolitan Atlanta. The Coalition's three regional priorities — transportation, water, and land use — are relevant to its suburban-oriented chamber members. The Coalition plays a complimentary role with the region's other major business-led civic organization, the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. The Coalition serves a slightly different role by representing more suburban business interests and concerns. Its membership core is small- to mid-size employers from the region's suburban counties. The Atlanta Regional Business Coalition was founded in 1998.

Regional Priorities

Since its inception the Regional Business Coalition (RBC) has played a supporting or lead role on air quality, transportation, water and land use issues in the region. In 1998, for example, the Coalition chose air quality as its top priority. It created an "Air Quality Primer" for its member institutions to explain air quality problems in business terms. The Primer provided employers with a tool to quickly assess the emissions produced by their businesses as well as a list of options for action.

The Coalition has also played a leading role in water quality issues. The Coalition and the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce created the region's Clear Water Initiative, a group of regional business and civic leaders focused on the region's wastewater capacity and storm water runoff problems. The

ORGANIZATIONAL SNAPSHOT

Type of Organization

Exclusively business-led

Unit of Membership

Company/organization

Number of Members

2003: 16

1998: 11

Membership by Company Size

Small Companies: 0%

Mid-sized Companies: 0%

Large Companies: 100%

Dues Determined by

N/A

Annual Dues Paid by

Largest Member Companies: \$70,000

Smallest Member Companies: \$10,000

Annual Operating Budget

2003: Less than \$500,000

1998: Less than \$500,000

Staff Members (FTE)

2003: 2

1998: 2

Board Members

2003: 45

Regional Priorities

Water, Transportation, Land Use

RBC LEADS IN EFFORTS TOWARD QUALITY GROWTH

The Regional Business Coalition, according to its most recent newsletter, promotes land use and development that is “profitable, environmentally sound, sustainable, and makes efficient use of infrastructure.” RBC has taken this promise to heart, committing \$25,000 and considerable staff time to review the zoning codes and regulations of 26 local planning departments. RBC staff compared the region’s overall planning strategy, as adopted by the Atlanta Regional Commission, with each local planning statute. The questions RBC wanted to answer: Is there a convergence between the local and regional strategies? Do the local plans promote quality-growth practices such as mixed-use development, sidewalks, and green space residential development?

What the analysis initially found was not surprising: The local plans contained language that supported and even promoted these quality-growth principles. Upon further review, however, the analysis found that local plans were rarely implemented or did not have much impact on a day-to-day level in each municipality or county. Developers deal with wide variance county-by-county, which impacts their bottom-line. Local planning organizations, on the other hand, lack staff capacity to carry out land use analyses and initiatives to the full extent possible. As a response, RBC is using its chamber audience to educate and broker new roles for the chambers in local land use planning and quality growth.

members of the Clear Water Initiative convened in 2000, and a year later, their recommendations created the region’s first water district, the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District. Underlining the Coalition’s central role, the Water District appointed a sizeable number of Coalition members to its Board of Directors, Executive Committee and basin advisory councils.

On the transportation front, RBC co-sponsored the region’s first conference on “bus rapid transit” (also known as “road rail”) in 2003. The Coalition also played a supporting role in the creation of the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority, an effort led by the Metro Atlanta Chamber.

The Regional Business Coalition’s most recent effort has been its “quality-growth audit” of 26 local government zoning codes and development regulations. The audit compared the Atlanta metro region’s overall planning strategy and smart growth principles with county and municipal codes. The Coalition is using the audit’s conclusions to help each of its member chambers overcome local obstacles to quality growth. (See box at top.)

Structure and Operations

Suburban chamber leaders founded the Atlanta Regional Business Coalition in 1998. It has grown from an original membership of 11 chambers of commerce to 16 members

that span the region. The chief executive and two member companies from each chamber of commerce serve on the Coalition's Board of Directors. The total RBC Board is 45 members.

The organization's annual budget is less than \$100,000, down from a high of \$400,000. Roughly 60 percent of its budget is from dues and 40 percent from private-sector contributions. The organization does not expect its budget to increase substantially. There has been some discussion among coalition leaders about applying for 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-exempt status from the Internal Revenue Service. The main reason would be to help the organization raise funds from foundations that grant only to nonprofits.

Two staff members support RBC's programming and administration. RBC has had strong executive directors that have led the organization and served business leaders on regional issues. The current Executive Director, Eric Meyer, announced February 2004 that he is moving to Charleston, S.C., to become Land Use Director of the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League. With a paired back staff and small budget, the RBC Board will meet to discuss what role it wants to play going forward.