

Georgia Heritage Coalition

Election Georgia: 2004

Central Theme: Georgia vs. the Downtown Atlanta Establishment

Growth in Georgia should be balanced, with all the state's regions sharing in it. That is not the case. The Atlanta region has grown at a fast pace for decades. There is now a large imbalance between metro Atlanta and the rest of Georgia, in population, economic development, and social and cultural outlook. The disparity is increasing, but not just between the metro area and Georgia. Pronounced differences are arising between the suburbs and rest of Georgia on one hand, and Atlanta inside the I-285 perimeter on the other. Concentrated growth in one small region of Georgia--and all the problems which flow from it--inflare the major political and economic issues which face our state.

The suburbs and rest of Georgia are alarmed by excessive growth in the Atlanta region, which has now almost reached natural population density and infrastructure limits. In an effort to keep local government services affordable, save the quality of life of their residents, and live within available land and water resources, metro counties are adopting no-growth and slow-growth strategies.

At the same time, Downtown Atlanta's leadership continues to pursue every strategy to thwart those efforts, and to ensure Atlanta's fast growth *for decades into the future.*

The Downtown Atlanta Establishment is not a formal organization: its "members" scoff at the notion it exists. But The Downtown Establishment is very real. For the most part it is made up of individuals from the city's elitist institutions and CEOs of large corporations. Housed in skyscrapers and attendant law firms, banks, and development firms, its members have little in common with Georgians in the suburbs, and even less with the rest of the state. It operates through such elite institutions as the Woodruff Foundation and Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, through which it usually sells its program to politicians, the public, and leaders outside Atlanta. Lately, the Carl Vinson Institute of Government at the University of Georgia has served as a kind of *Think Tank* for The Establishment, producing studies and papers to further the establishment's agenda.

For the most part, these corporate elitists hold Georgians, our history, our cultural inheritance (even our southern accents), and sentiments in open contempt, as evidenced by their efforts to suppress our confederate heritage and change the flag. The Establishment supports continued massive immigration into the country, and trade policies which result in declining opportunity, lost jobs and fewer industries for Georgians, particularly those outside metro Atlanta. The establishment benefits from low wage scales, and passes social costs for increased services, education, health care, and crime to taxpayers.

This establishment, which has no formal existence and claims it doesn't exist, has worked for years to lure people and investment to Atlanta, and indeed make it the *Big Apple South, LA East, even Miami North.* Every action it takes is geared to that overall strategy. Most of the projects it has undertaken have been either too big for Atlanta to finance or unpopular with the inhabitants. The establishment found the answer to those problems years ago: it routinely goes to the Governor

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and legislature to finance its big ideas and expensive projects with state taxpayer funds.

This alliance between rural legislative leaders and the Atlanta establishment is decades old. The World Congress Center, The Georgia Dome, the 1996 Olympic Games, all were projects funded by the legislature with state taxpayer money, for the benefit of downtown Atlanta, at the request of the Downtown Establishment.

Both sides have worked very hard to downplay the relationship. Neither wants state funds for Atlanta projects to become the subject of public conversation. That's why the UGA professor who raised the specter of "two Georgias" in the mid 1980s, was attacked for "dividing" Georgians by no less a personage than then-Governor Joe Frank Harris.

Like burglars caught when the lights come on, they know the moment "Georgia vs. Atlanta" becomes an open political issue, the party's over. The general public—nowhere more so than in the suburbs—feels almost as contemptuous toward Atlanta inside the I-285 perimeter as the Downtown Atlanta Establishment feels toward the suburbs and rest of Georgia. No legislator outside Atlanta can justify spending state money on facilities in Atlanta to his or her constituents. Not even Senators and Representatives from the suburbs, who take their cues from the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, while their constituents oppose almost everything the chamber supports.

To the establishment's and state leaders' credit, they have been very successful in keeping Atlanta vs. Georgia from becoming an open political issue.

Then Roy Barnes, the Establishment's Golden Governor, got elected. His election gave the Downtown Establishment the chance to get its two most ambitious goals enacted into law. They were: to insure Atlanta continues its rapid population and economic growth for at least the next several decades, and for the state and taxpayers of all Georgia to take responsibility for, and underwrite the costs that growth entails. To achieve those objectives, they developed two proposals.

First, they proposed a regional transportation "planning" agency which would open the door to expansion of MARTA into the suburbs whether the local populations wanted it or not, use state funds to construct it, and eventually pave the way for the taxpayers of Georgia to take over and operate the entire expanded MARTA system. It would also give the establishment an argument to lure more business: the Chamber could tell prospective businesses the area had a huge state owned and operated public transportation system. The legislation was enacted in 1999 as The Georgia Regional Transportation Authority, GRTA.

Second, the establishment sought a regional water resources "planning" authority for all the Metro counties. Its purpose was for the metro counties (and the state) to share financial responsibility for downtown Atlanta's water and sewage problems. It would give downtown Atlanta access to water resources throughout the metro counties, in almost all the water basins in Georgia, and parts

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of Alabama and South Carolina. Unlimited water resources will ensure Atlanta unlimited growth potential.

The original legislation was enacted by the Barnes Administration, and was later supplemented by several bills. This year, Governor Perdue signed on to letting the City of Atlanta tap into a state authority for local governments for up to \$100,000,000 a year in state bonds for five years. Local governments which borrow funds under this program must pay them back, but what happens if they don't?

Both initiatives caused quiet mutterings here and there, but as water has become a subject of such public concern since 2001, Downtown Atlanta vs. Georgia has gone public.

Anti-Downtown feelings have intensified as the establishment pursues additional issues. Most Georgians want the confederate emblem on the state flag. Most Georgians will happily vote for a state constitutional amendment defining marriage as a legal union between a man and a woman. The establishment opposes both these. It first got the flag changed, and prevented a referendum to let Georgians choose a flag with the confederate emblem. The Metro Chamber of Commerce opposed the marriage amendment, which recognizes marriage as a legal union between a man and a woman. The establishment's argument is the same in both cases: *the flag and the marriage amendment will hurt Atlanta's image and economy.*

Most Georgians do not like the flood of immigration into this country, but the Downtown Establishment supports more immigrants to Atlanta to "diversify" and further "internationalize" the city. Most Georgians oppose granting illegal immigrants drivers licenses and other government services, but the Downtown Establishment hasn't voiced any support for these efforts. The downtown establishment is clearly not in tune with most Georgians, but elites are seldom, if ever, in tune with the general populace.

[Georgia vs. Downtown Atlanta: The Issues](#)