

# **NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES**

***CITIES OF OPPORTUNITY***

***HEALTHY CITIES, THRIVING COMMUNITIES***

***POLICY AND SYSTEMS THAT PROMOTE HEALTH FOR ALL***



***CITY OF SOUTH FULTON***

***PROGRESS REPORT 2019-2020***

***NOVEMBER 2020***

## **PROGRESS REPORT OUTLINE**

1. History of the City of South Fulton (COSF)
2. History of the Cities of Opportunity (CoO) project
  - a. Why is NLC interested in equity areas?
  - b. What are the NLC Issue Areas?
  - c. Why was the COSF selected for the CoO project?
3. COSF Initial Project Roadmap
4. City of South Fulton CoO Project Progress
  - a. Zoning
  - b. Food
    - i. Georgia State University Project
    - ii. Pilot Community Gardens Project
  - c. Policy
    - i. Environmental Justice Ordinance
    - ii. Welcoming Ordinance
    - iii. Economic Development Incentives Ordinance
    - iv. Urban Agriculture Ordinance
    - v. Economic Development Strategic Plan
  - d. Stakeholders/Advocates
  - e. CDBG Funding
  - f. South Fulton City Profile 2020
5. Future Work

## **HISTORY OF THE CITY OF SOUTH FULTON**

In the early 2000's, the cityhood movement began in metropolitan Atlanta. This was an organic effort among residents of unincorporated areas to form new cities. Although the prime motivation for this movement was debated, the end result has been the incorporation of new areas of local self-governance and the move away from services provided at the County level. The first of several new Cities, Sandy Springs, incorporated in 2005 in the Northern part of the region. Between 2005 and 2015, unincorporated neighborhoods in Georgia's three largest counties—Fulton, Gwinnett, and DeKalb—voted to form their own cities.

This movement did not go unnoticed in the Southern parts of Fulton County. The 2016 Georgia General Assembly passed bill HB514 to incorporate South Fulton, and on November 8, 59% of the citizens of South Fulton voted to become a chartered city. In early 2017, South Fulton held elections on March 21, followed by runoff elections, before incorporation took effect on May 1.

Interestingly, with the passage of the South Fulton referendum in 2016, Fulton County became the first county in Georgia with no unincorporated residential areas. As a result, in 2017 Fulton County also became the first county in Georgia to cease providing municipal services such as fire, police, zoning, economic development, and code enforcement. These services are now the responsibility of the City of South Fulton.

While unincorporated, and for most of its history, the area that is now South Fulton was largely rural and agricultural land. Major infrastructure (roads, water, sewer, lighting, and broadband) did not exist significantly until the middle 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The City is diligently working to repair and upgrade infrastructure. Most development in the City has consisted of residential subdivisions. To this day, the City still has large amounts of undeveloped land. These areas are key to improving societal equity through quality planned future development.

The Fulton Industrial area borders District 1 in the City. It began development in the 1960's. This area generates more income than any industrial development in the Southeast and remains unincorporated as of today. Both the City of South Fulton and the City of Atlanta have been engaged in a prolonged legal battle over including Fulton Industrial within their municipal boundaries. Without question, the addition of this area into the City would be of great benefit to the City and to Fulton Industrial. The city would acquire additional tax revenue and an industrial complex, and Fulton Industrial would receive the services they need as the only unincorporated area in Fulton County. Fulton County government currently provides some City-type services for the area.

As a new City, we are still in the process of developing our long-term planning and policy documents. However, we have put into place a three-year Strategic Plan, which is a critical step in the creation of a new City. In that Strategic Plan, the items identified as the focus areas of our new City government are: more responsive and efficient government, healthy Council and staff teams, growing economy, higher quality of life and improved infrastructure.

## **HISTORY OF THE CITIES OF OPPORTUNITY PROJECT**

There is a realization that there are a wide range of socioeconomic and environmental factors that affect the health outcomes of a community's residents. In October 2018, the National League of Cities (NLC) launched the Cities of Opportunity program as a mechanism to strengthen the capacity of city leaders to work in a more holistic way to address these social determinants of health. NLC developed two main avenues to achieve this objective:

1. Changes in Policies, Practices and Programs: Equity in city plans and development requirements – codifying equity policies and practices into the city's master plans/plan elements and agreements with developers;
2. Improvements in Governance Structures and Processes: Structures to work across silos and sustain systemic change – accountability across city departments to align actions and support residents.

Working through those avenues to achieve better health equity within a community requires a focus on several policy and organizational areas. At the beginning of the Cities of Opportunity program, the following issue areas emerged: Economic Opportunity, Housing, and City Planning and Design, and six core capacities that undergird city actions to make sustainable change: Civic Engagement, Data, Equity, Financing, Multi-Sector Collaboration, Sustainability. In essence, the process flows as such: working within an avenue (e.g. changing a City policy), select a focus area (City Planning) in which we can work to effect change to improve the health outcomes of members of a community.

The City of South Fulton was an eager participant in the Cities of Opportunity project. As a new City, we know that we have the opportunity to set the foundation for the type of future growth that we want, and the type of growth that can have a positive impact for generations. We recognize the importance of ensuring that our City policies, programs, and planning efforts provide equity in many areas for our residents. NLC provided great feedback concerning the selection of COSF for this project:

- COSF is a new city with unique challenges, and there is an intent to “build it right to begin with,” not be tied to the attitude “this is how it's always been done here”.
- COSF application noted that while the City's population is 90% African American, 6% Caucasian, 3% Hispanic and Latino, and 1% Asian and Other, all racial groups are a priority to the City.
- COSF has a commitment to equity and an openness to many factors that affect the health of our citizens, including environmental justice.
- COSF has a notable focus on eliminating food deserts and insecurity – an important entry point to address multiple systemic issues.

## **CITY OF SOUTH FULTON INITIAL PROJECT ROADMAP**

The long-term goals for the City of South Fulton (COSF) established at the beginning of this project were to “decrease food deserts, improve economic development, and reduce environmental stressors across all race and income groups”. These were identified as the most significant issues facing our community related to health, as well as those where the City would be able to have a notable impact.

Through achieving these long-term goals, the City hopes to see measurable changes in several outcomes in the community. These include:

- increased healthy eating by all residents.
- higher quality of life through reduced commuting time to work.
- increased wealth creation for residents due to increasing property values.
- improved quality of life through upgraded and increased local retail options.
- greater sustainability of community assets.

The COSF project team developed strategies with the support of NLC staff to work towards achieving these long-term goals and seeing improvement in desired outcomes. The priority strategies were:

1. Update long-range plans and zoning ordinances to ensure uniform basic services with targeted resources for disadvantaged areas and populations.
2. Establish mechanisms to increase and sustain public involvement and 21st century planning methodologies.
3. Design and implement equitable food access strategies to address environmental justice and health concerns.
4. Enhance the economic development plan and identify key opportunities to attract corporations and other businesses to the City.

## **PROGRESS**

Because this project was based around the goal of improving long term health, the team knew that the objectives would have direct (and in some cases immediate) impact on the lives of the citizens of the community. Thought was put into what could realistically be delivered, where efforts were best directed, and what objectives had a shorter vs. longer term timeframe for completion. Even if an objective could not be completed in the timeframe of this project, it was a goal to lay the groundwork for future work. Those specific objectives for the project were:

1. Establish city-wide culture and mechanisms for authentic community engagement in planning across all districts.
2. Provide increased and more equitable access to a healthy built environment and quality of life resources including broadband, sidewalks, trails and lighting for all citizens.
3. Provide increased and more equitable access to healthy, affordable and environmentally sound food options.
4. Establish city plans, policies, practices and partnerships to support equitable and healthy economic development.
5. Increase access to jobs in the City.
6. Increase partnerships between the City's Community Development department, partnerships in District 4, community and business organizations, and citizens connected to the City and Council members.

The long-term goals and work plan could not be achieved without addressing a change in city policies, practices, programs and improvements in governance structures and processes. The following preliminary action was taken:

- A diverse matrix team that included Council, City staff (Zoning, IT, Economic Development, Communication), and community stakeholders was developed to be responsible for the outcome of the project. The community stakeholders were selected based on interviews and a survey provided by NLC. Planning staff, a council member, a legislative specialist, and a community member from an organization are members of the project core team. IT, economic development and communications staff are included on an as needed basis.
- An Epidemiologist was hired as a consultant to focus on generating data and working with IT to share data with the public on the City's website.

Working as a team within our project roadmap and long-term strategies, notable progress has been made towards our objectives. We have made progress in several areas that we will showcase below. Those areas are: Zoning, Food Access, Policy, Stakeholders/Advocates, CGDG Funding, and including a South Fulton City Profile 2020.

### **Zoning**

At the creation of the City of South Fulton in 2017, our adopted zoning code was taken from the existing Fulton County guidelines. Almost immediately, there was a strong need to have a

sense of independence from the past process and guidelines, and ownership of the future. Scheduled to be adopted by the end of 2020, the COSF has undergone an 18-month process to comprehensively update our Zoning Ordinance. The intent has been to reorganize, modernize, and make the document more efficient and user-friendly. We have made sure to adjust requirements to meet modern trends in urban planning, while ensuring that the most effective historical guidelines stay in effect. Additionally, we implemented a robust community involvement process.

### **Food Access**

In 2019, the City of South Fulton partnered with the Master's in Public Policy program at Georgia State University on a research project concerning the preservation of agricultural land use, encouraging farmers markets, and preserving farming knowledge through agricultural education in schools. The goal of this project was to conserve land for farming and conservation, and to educate students and residents on how to grow food. This would ultimately lead to helping feed families and impart a desire to work together. Related to this, our agricultural overlay was preserved and updated during the zoning revision.

Five subdivisions agreed to be in a pilot Community Garden Project that includes farmers who will teach homeowners and their children how to grow food. The same initiative is planned for a middle school. We expect the fruits of their labor in the Spring of 2021. The pilot, while in one council district, will be expanded to the other six districts with the assistance of stakeholders from every district in the city.

### **Policy**

In 2019, an Environmental Justice ordinance was passed to protect citizens, wildlife, and nature from environmental stressors. Numerous environmental health forums were held to educate the public on environmental stressors and justice. A consultant was hired to perform a health assessment in an environmentally stressed area and testing machines have been purchased for training and testing in stressed areas.

In May 2020, the COSF City Council passed an ordinance that was intended to express the goodwill to all members of our community by welcoming them to the City. This ordinance read in part, that "The City of South Fulton hereby welcomes all races, cultures, religions, ages, sexual orientations, gender expressions, and persons of all mental and physical abilities, to participate and play a key role in the City's health, development, prosperity and economic growth. The City encourages all residents, businesses, employees, and employers to value the difference in people and recognize that people with different backgrounds, skills and experiences bring fresh ideas and perceptions." There is a recognition from within that for the community to achieve equity and attain better socioeconomic outcomes, all people must be welcomed and encouraged to share their individual skills and talents. It is through working together with the most diverse population possible that we will achieve the best outcomes.

In September 2020 the City passed an ordinance establishing economic development incentives for certain types of businesses. The goal is “to promote the construction of new development and the redevelopment of existing buildings and infill development within Designated Development and Redevelopment Areas; and to support the establishment of categories of new businesses that the Council determines will (1) significantly increase the overall commercial activity within the incentive area, (2) attract the city’s residents and tourists into the incentive area and (3) recruit Targeted Businesses that significantly increase overall commercial activity within the City.” The requirements of this ordinance dictate types of community benefits that the business must provide. All incentives are negotiable in each individual development agreement, and types of incentives are listed in the ordinance.

The city passed an Urban Agriculture resolution encouraging and regulating urban agriculture in the City, also in September 2020. This is an activity that has become more and more prevalent throughout the Country. Not only does it provide residents with a means to produce healthy food for their families, it also fosters a sense of community and allows communities to repurpose unused real estate.

Additionally, the COSF has developed the City’s first Economic Development Strategic Plan. The goal was to provides a strategic, actionable plan for the economic development of the city of South Fulton, which is substantially needed. It is very important that the COSF ensure a diversity in development type and employment opportunities for the community. This plan, coupled with our Economic Development staff, gives us the knowledge and roadmap to successfully navigate into the future. This plan was formally adopted by Council in October 2020.

### **Stakeholders/Advocates**

One of the strongest results from this project was the creation of the Stakeholder Group. This group is made of up of 12 COSF citizens. There is at least one from each district. They have developed a mission, vision, and values and work in the community. They will become the major source of public engagement for the goals expressed in this plan, and until the completion of this project. Having an engaged citizenry is a major asset for our City to help improve the lives of the community. Stakeholders will be able to partner with the City to ensure the community is represented in many initiatives and have a meaningful voice when decisions are made. Some of the specific Stakeholder Group goals are:

- Work with other residents in the community to obtain feedback and work on goals and objectives determined by them and the larger community to ensure they have a voice.
- Work with the city to update its long-range planning process.
- Discuss solutions to affordable housing issues and housing challenges throughout the city.
- Help to recruit business and organization to the COSF
- Be advocates to help the city refine and change policies where needed.



## **CDBG Funding**

In September 2020, the City applied for CDBG funding in order to initiate new City services. As with any CDBG application, there needed to be a comprehensive strategy for spending the funds in ways that were most effective towards accomplishing both the overall program goals, and City specific priorities. Several of those overlap with the goals of the CoO project:

- Blight Reduction and Neighborhood Revitalization
- Economic Development and Small Business Incentives
- Fair Housing, Housing Counseling, and Legal Services
- Affordable Housing Supply and Support
- Planning & Administration

We will ensure that any work that the City completes in its CDBG program is done in concert with the goals of the CoO project, and we will ensure that our Stakeholder Group is aware of those activities.

## **South Fulton City Profile 2020**

An epidemiologist was hired to obtain data that tells the story about the city. A synopsis of the report is as follows:

The South Fulton City Profile presents a snapshot of the people, communities, and conditions that define the area. Through an extensive collection of quantitative data, the city profile aims to describe the social determinants that impact how residents live, work, and play in South Fulton.

This data will serve as the baseline for subsequent quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, and a powerful tool to educate residents, inform policymakers, and drive future planning efforts.

The analysis reviewed a broad cross-section of social determinates, including demographics, housing, transportation, health outcomes, public safety, and community amenities. The demographic and housing data were sourced from the 2014-2018 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates, provides small area unit data at the block level. Block group data was used for small unit analysis, when possible. The ACS 5-year estimates become available in December of the year following the calendar year of the data. ACS (2014-2018) 5-year estimates were released on December 19, 2019.

Maps were derived from the open-source GIS mapping database, policyMap.com, and ARC mapping group.

Overall, the review of the data revealed the following Key Findings of the City of South Fulton:

- With a population of 94,912 residents in South Fulton and an annual growth rate of 1.3%, the City is a steadily growing population.
- Demographically, residents are predominately Black/African American, Millennials with a median age 36. Approximately 5 percent of the population was born outside of the United States, mainly from West African and Caribbean countries.
- Nearly 40 percent of residents have a Bachelor's degree, and 94 percent have a high school diploma, a rate higher than Fulton County overall.
- Residents' households are mostly unmarried and relatively small, with nearly 60 percent having 1-2 person occupants. Most residents commute using their vehicles.
- The average household income in South Fulton is \$61,702 and a homeownership rate of 68.4%. The median house value for the area is \$158,300.
- South Fulton has an unemployment rate higher than Fulton County and a poverty rate of 10.7%. The percentage of homeowners and renters spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing is also higher than those in Fulton County overall.
- Most residents of South Fulton have insurance coverage. However, metabolic conditions such as obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease are a critical public health challenge for residents.
- There is a little to no access to hospitals and health care facilities within the City. Additionally, residents have limited options for grocery stores within South Fulton.

The epidemiologist will also assist the Stakeholders with their community engagement plan, share city data with citizens, hear from them about their community, and work with them to develop action plans to address their concerns. In addition to that endeavor, the Epidemiologist will be working with the IT department to ensure that the public is constantly informed about the NLC project.

A community health assessment will be conducted by the epidemiologist to obtain data in environmentally stressed areas. Some testing will occur to obtain data. The community will assist with this endeavor.

## **FUTURE WORK**

This first year of the project involved largely developing our goals and objectives. Much effort has gone into laying the groundwork for continuing this project. While some progress has been made, we are not finished. It will take at least two years beyond the end of the cohort period for the city to achieve its goals for this project. Our priorities for the future are as follows:

- Expand community gardens throughout the City and in some schools
- Develop a feasibility study for a Farmer's Market. Research is complete.
- Advance industrial development, predatory building, and other legislation to ensure policies are implemented that support this project.
- Add more businesses and organizations as stakeholders and advocates.
- Communications will be enhanced to ensure that our progress is shared with the public and that we create a voice for them.
- The Epidemiologist will work with IT to ensure a dashboard is developed to enhance communications.
- Stakeholders will receive zoning training to learn about land use and how it impacts communities.
- Affordable housing guidelines will be a Stakeholder project to assist with the City plan for the community.
- Continue to work on the city's CoO workplan and NLC model policies and practices.
- Make sure incentives are a key component of development projects.
- Complete the environmental justice work conducted by Core2Globe. Related, the health assessment and testing plan in District 4 will be a model for other Districts with environmental justice issues.

The project will provide NLC with a quarterly report on the progress of the project until all the objectives have been achieved.