

## Staff Engagement Day

### Q&A with Councilman Andre Dickens

**Is there a plan to assist homeless in Atlanta? With closing of Peachtree/Pine, seems many more on the streets, not getting services.**

There are multiple avenues we take to address both solving the challenges of housing people, and to understanding and mitigating the social and systemic reasons that we have unhoused people. In the near term, the city is partnered with multiple organizations that provide immediate support (housing/housing assistance, food, child services) as well as providing some support directly in the form of warming centers, and community policing initiatives designed to not punish people simply for being in a tough situation.

Systemically, we work on correcting what we can in our own organizations through initiatives like removing cash bonds for minor infractions, providing pre-trial diversion through the municipal courts, and through programs like PAT3 (Preparing Adult Offenders to Transition through Training and Therapy) through the Department of Corrections.

To quickly address the issues around the closing of Peachtree/Pine, the numbers gathered annually during the Point in Time count census of unsheltered and transitional Atlantans conducted by Partners For Home has actually shown a decrease (3,572 individuals in 2017 vs. 3,076 in 2018) in unsheltered adults in Atlanta since the August 2017 closing of the facility. That is not to say that we have conquered homelessness, but that often the perception and conversation around issues within the city are not always in line with what the data supports.

**How do you advise we can assist the growing number of people who do not have a home currently living around GT?**

The best way to help those in need is always to direct them to agencies and organizations who are best qualified to provide support. That isn't to say that you should not address any immediate or life threatening conditions; e.g. food, warmth, injury, etc, but that by sending people to expert case workers training in their field of need, we have the best likelihood of a positive outcome. For homelessness, and specifically to the Georgia Tech area, is to direct them to the Gateway Center. Located adjacent to the Five Points and Garnett MARTA Stations, Gateway Center is a full service triage center where those in need are connected to beds, food, addiction recovery help, job training, and many more services. You can learn more at <https://www.gatewayctr.org/>

**Some cities are building tiny homes for the homeless. What are your plans to provide affordable homes for those in need?**

There are so many tools that we need in our toolbox to address homelessness. I think tiny homes and accessory dwelling units are a great solution to certain problems. Unfortunately,

there is no single magic bullet, and anyone pushing any specific solution as the end all be all answer either doesn't understand the problem fully, or is selling you something. I believe we need to invest our capital, and our energy into a full suite of tools to not just address homelessness, but to identify and address the pathways that lead to homelessness. These include substance abuse, inequity in the criminal justice system, shortcomings of the education system, poor mental health treatment for veterans and others dealing with trauma, and a host of other challenges. We must create focused solutions like tiny houses that fit within a larger understanding of these intersectional challenges.

With that said, I do support the expansion of tiny house zoning in Atlanta as a solution to homelessness, and housing affordability. I support innovative methods for managing housing stock and increasing housing costs through policies like the BeltLine Inclusionary Zoning legislation I authored in 2017. I also strongly support better pay and higher minimum wages, and more access to better paying jobs through programs like the TechBridge Career Program which I lead through my job at TechBridge.

**Has there been discussion in City of Atlanta about zoning modifications to allow for more tiny homes or small housing units on private property?**

Yes, this is an ongoing conversation. We adjusted zoning regulations to allow accessory dwelling units (ADUs) in R-4, R-4A and R-5 zoning designations. City Planning wanted to include all R zoned properties in this amendment but received vigorous push back from the R1, R2, R3 (larger property) neighborhoods. I support expanding ADUs while being conscientious of the needs and wellbeing of our historic neighborhoods. For clarity, an ADU is the term we use for what people typically call a tiny house. ADUs are currently capped at 750sqft, but beyond that, can be equipped with all conveniences and amenities, including a stove. Accessory structures, or what are often called guest houses, can exceed the 750sqft limitation (up to 30% of the main structure's floor space), but cannot have stoves.

**You mentioned the disparity between home cost and income. For people who want to invest in Atlanta by buying a home here but with their income (even with a good job) can't afford to live here what are your recommendations?**

That's a tricky question. Out of area investors can often lead to some of the biggest challenges we see in lower income neighborhoods, manifested in poorly maintained or abandoned homes, absentee landlords, inflated rental prices, and highly transient neighborhoods that don't build lasting community. All of these items in turn contribute to issues like crime, homelessness, and underfunded schools. That is not to say that all or even most out of area investors who purchase in Atlanta are creating problems, but that it is very challenging to manage a single, let alone multiple properties while not living in the area.

What plans are in place to assist youth in foster care, particularly during the pandemic? There are increasing numbers of children coming into care during this unprecedented time.

Foster care specifically is not something that the city charter allows us to address. We do not have a health and human services component to our municipal government, those functions are handled at the county and state levels. That said, any child living in Atlanta falls under our support network, so we extend to all children the same programs for food, education, and after school programming. We have both created new programs and augmented existing ones to better address the unique needs of the world with COVID19, and we will continue to work with our partners at Atlanta Public Schools to serve the children of this city.

**What plans are in place to help local and minority businesses with process and service improvements to attract more customers?**

We have created several programs and initiatives to address business needs, and some specific to disadvantaged businesses. As Chair of the Transportation Committee, I have been very focused on easing the burden on contractors, vendors, and businesses operating at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, and have created programs to both minimize the losses of business operators through reduced fees and penalty forgiveness, and to optimize employees' times through reducing screening times and improving procedures to protect from COVID19.

Outside of HJIA, the Mayor's Office, Invest Atlanta, and City Council have worked with the resources and funds provided by the federal government to support our local businesses, and will continue to push for more support.

**How can GT be more of a positive force or seed for reconnecting and revitalizing Atlanta, especially Midtown and surrounding areas...?**

I think one of the best things GT can do is to help students feel like they are a part of the city and our culture. So many Tech students are transplants from outside Atlanta, Georgia, or the USA, and it is important to show them how amazing this city is. Georgia Tech graduates some of the best and brightest engineers in the world, and we should do everything we can to retain that talent in the Atlanta area. Atlanta history and cultural literacy programs whether part of freshman orientation, or core curriculum could go a long way to help get students invested. Community tours of neighborhoods, organizations, or businesses could be a great way to facilitate a connection to our city, and cultural events in partnership with local art galleries, music venues, or other attractions could help build the same love for Atlanta in these young people that locals like myself have developed over decades of loving ATL.

**What are some practical ideas or suggestions that you have for an individual with limited authority that would like to impact their organizations culture?**

The best time to become impactful in your organization is the day you joined, the second best day is today. Get involved, step up, and be a leader. Sometimes this means making your voice heard and broadcasting your ideas, and sometimes this means lifting up other voices who may not be as heard as yours. The biggest impacts come from doing things

**How has your office/work team culture been developed in a supportive way during this chaotic time? What steps have been taken?**

My City Council office has always been a close knit team. We communicate daily through everything from email and phone calls to Zoom meetings, to text messages and Instagram. We collaborate on policies and legislation, and work together to plan and execute events like food giveaways with area partners. We also stay closely connected through the humor, food, community, and culture of Atlanta. With my schedule being tightly coordinated and always packed, I have trained my team to be very self-directed, and to collaborate among themselves. I believe that the most important thing that a good leader must do is to build more good leaders, and that is something that I always strive for with my teams.

**Are the technology training programs available to GT staff? Is there opportunity to partner for ongoing professional development for COE staff?**

No. For low-income unemployed or underemployed people.

**What is the most challenging thing you have experienced in your position, and what was the outcome?**

I don't like the politics. I just want to do the work.

**With COVID numbers soaring, what are the plans in Atlanta to help reduce those numbers?**

One of the challenges of being a large urban city in a relatively non-urban state is that often our hands are tied by regulations and legislation created by government representatives who aren't in Atlanta. We have attempted to create policies and regulations to stem the spread of COVID19, but have been met with swift opposition by our Governor and state legislative bodies. I would like the City of Atlanta to be allowed to self-regulate more in this area, and create policies that could be enforced for the protection of our community, but state law and Executive Orders are preemptive in many of the areas we would like to address.

We will continue to provide the public guidelines and recommendations on best practices, and to set a good example while in public on how wearing masks, and practicing social distancing can reduce the impact of this pandemic on everyone in Georgia.

**Is there a website where I can find additional info about volunteer and community programs you shared?**

There are so many places to plug in and help that it's often better to decide what causes you want to support, and how you want to get involved, and then start your search from there. Atlanta's homegrown clearing house for volunteer opportunities is Hands On Atlanta. Hit this link, sign up, and then begin your search for causes, projects, and organizations that need your helping hand: <https://www.handsonatlanta.org/volunteer>

**How has COVID affected you? Has it handicapped any of the ventures you are presently involved with?**

COVID has affected us all in so many ways, and yet everyone's experience has been so unique. Like many of you, I have a daughter who is greatly impacted by schooling from home, missing her friends, and missing out on so many things that normally happen in high school. I also worry about my mother, her health, and her isolation in this strange year. These are uncertain times and it is important that we all keep in mind that everyone is going through different situations and dealing with this in different ways.

Professionally, the pandemic certainly slowed down some of my initiatives at first as we transitioned to work from home, and shifted our legislative and community priorities to COVID19 response. That said, we found our rhythm pretty quickly, and the city council staff did a great job of moving our council and committee meetings to a digital format without a hiccup. We are in a great position now and are operating at full capacity, and my tempo is brisk and energetic to continue serving the people of Atlanta.

**Any insight into how the mayor and/or governor will handle coming holiday spikes in COVID?**

I trust that Mayor Bottoms will continue to follow the guidance of health experts and will continue to lead and advise the city on how best to protect ourselves. We will position ourselves to support local partner agencies as we did when the pandemic first arrived, and we will continue to use and promote safe practices like limiting our exposure to others, and wearing masks and maintaining social distancing while outside our homes. I hope that the Governor will also heed the guidance of medical experts at the CDC and the NIH.

**What's the city status or level for COVID? And what does that mean?**

The most recently published County Indicator Health Reports for Fulton and Dekalb Counties show an upward trend in new cases that closely mirrors the overall state trend ([Tool available here](#)). Cases are going up since Thanksgiving, and I anticipate this number will continue to climb leading into and through the holidays.

The most recent update to the [Atlanta Reopening Dashboard](#) shows that we remain in Phase 2 of reopening, and I don't anticipate that progressing into Phase 3 this year. We are encouraging citizens to continue wearing masks while outside of the home, continue practicing social distancing, and avoid gatherings of multiple people who do not live together.

**I hope the police are continuing to be supported and funded, despite some of the violence that widely circulated in the media earlier this year. What is your sense, in terms of direction the city is trying to go?**

The city is very supportive of our police, and want to give them the tools, resources, and training they need to keep our communities safe. That said, we also must always evaluate the role of police in a quickly changing world, and determine what roles are appropriate for police

action, and what needs could be better addressed through non-police involvement. Anytime a gun is brought into a situation, be it by a resident or by a police officer, the chance for someone to lose their life become a possibility. Many issues like a parking ticket, a loud party, a person drunk on the sidewalk, they need to be addressed, but they may not need a gun to be introduced into what could be a much less serious interaction.

We need more community policing, and by that I mean both that we need police who are more connected to and engaged with the neighborhoods we serve, but we also need people to be more thoughtful about what requires a police response, and what could be addressed with a civil neighborly discussion. I have frequently voted to support raises for APD officers, and for more incentives to keep them on our force, and living in our city. Local cops are better cops for our neighborhoods.

**What's the best way to organize a trash pickup campaign for our communities and perhaps the entire city?**

Finally, an easy one! The good people at Keep Atlanta Beautiful Commission has a whole slew of resources to help you plan a trash pickup day, and will even provide supplies, and will coordinate with DPW to pick up the bags of trash once complete. Read all about it here: <https://www.atlantaga.gov/home/showpublisheddocument?id=46538>

**Not sure if this topic is in your scope of work, but what's up with the poor conditions of the roads in Atlanta?**

A number of factors contribute to the condition of our roads. Most obviously, we are a high traffic city, and our roads get a lot of wear and tear. As a major regional hub, not only do we have high volume of personal vehicles, but a tremendous volume of heavy logistics trucks, and due to our rapid growth, a large amount of very heavy construction vehicles. That combined with the high demand on our road network contributes to both degradation/wear, and limited opportunities to repair without creating massive traffic disruptions.

It is also important to note that we have not invested adequately in transit infrastructure as a city, state, or nation over the last 60 years. Our lack of investment is not only apparent in the condition of our roads, but in our lack of robust public transit systems, which in turn would diminish traffic. China has almost 50,000 miles of high speed rail networked across the country providing local, regional, and national travel options at speeds close up to 200mph. We can patch potholes, and resurface roadways all we want, but until we are serious about large-scale, long-term investing in providing alternative and supplementary forms of transit, we may as well be filling those potholes with tax dollars.

**As a city official, what initiatives are you currently involved in to increase transparency in city decision making?**

Government transparency and accountability has been a top priority of mine since taking office. I wrote the legislation that created an independent procurement review office (IPRO) tasked

with reviewing the procurement process on large contracts to ensure fairness, consistency, and accountability in spending. I worked to revise how government purchase cards can be used, and to limit the scope of who can access them for use. I continue to look for opportunities to create greater accountability and transparency, and most recently have worked with our City Ethics Office to review existing practices and create a set of recommendations and policies to ensure that our tax dollars are being spent with integrity, and oversight.