



The Story of PPA

This represents an important interim step in the PPA process and is part of the effort to maintain openness and to communicate our work to the public.

This is not the final product. The final product will only come after the steering committee retreat and after the Athens community has an opportunity to review and comment on the steering committee's recommendations.

PREFACE

There are several themes that permeate the recommendations developed by our community during the Partners for a Prosperous Athens process. First and foremost, it is very obvious that Athenians have a long-term commitment to improving the quality of life for all community members. At all levels, our community wants to help and it wants to help in meaningful ways. As proof, one need look no further than the overwhelming approval of SPLOST for improving our city and schools.

Although the various PPA committee “stories” that follow address many barriers that contribute to our high poverty rate, there seems to be one underlying challenge. This challenge is our “culture of fragmented response” to poverty and our community’s “focus on process and talk” without follow-through. Each committee’s story calls for a “culture of comprehensive, collaborative action and accountability for community results.” The message is clear—we must change the status quo.

Almost every “story” from the PPA committees focuses on the need to develop a comprehensive strategy—a comprehensive health care strategy, a comprehensive housing strategy, a comprehensive education reform strategy, and so on. While every community institution can justify the programs they operate (i.e. many patients receive free medical care, individuals receive housing assistance, families are counseled, people attend workshops, and program participants are getting jobs), the negative indicators for the community stay constant. Our kids continue to drop out of school, many in our workforce continue to be unskilled, businesses are locating in other communities, and our poverty level remains the same.

Obviously something isn’t working. By themselves, our institutions and our systems are unable to address these big community issues, and inadequate results are accepted as the status quo. This discourages people from serving on community boards, wastes limited resources, and creates a disempowered, disenfranchised citizenry. The PPA process has shown that people are not apathetic, though they may be cynical. People have doubts that meaningful, systemic changes can occur to address the serious issues behind the committees’ recommendations. History has shown that tough talk is much easier than tough action.

Our biggest challenge is to lead this community into a “culture of collaboration,” working together towards a greater vision. We must demonstrate our willingness to embrace new ideas, share power, become involved, demand excellence, and, where necessary, consider the appropriateness of new ways to govern.

The 155 PPA recommendations offer a path to prosperity for every person in this community. They tell a story of how the people of Athens are coming together to face real issues and offer creative solutions. Clearly, the people are ready for tough action.

ECONOMY COMMITTEE STORY

An important story told by this committee's recommendations revolves around the connection between the community's quality of life and the economy. These recommendations speak to valuing and fostering businesses that pay living wages and health benefits; businesses that see leadership potential in the individuals filling even entry level positions; and businesses that attend to the environmental health of the community. This committee sees potential in our community's food systems—its markets, gardens, and high school greenhouses—as an opportunity for entrepreneurs to contribute to overall community health and economic sustainability. And, finally, this committee sees that building hope through youth leadership, entrepreneurship, and economic self-sufficiency is a key in changing the culture of poverty.

The recommendations make it clear that Athens is part of a regional economy, and that Athens is the economic leader in the region. Businesses look at regional strengths and weaknesses, not just county-specific strengths and weaknesses, when locating a new business in a community. This is also true when businesses make decisions about retention and expansion. The recommendations encourage all those involved in and interested in economic development and business retention to jointly develop a comprehensive plan to recruit, retain, and expand business in our county as well as to reach out and play a leadership role in creating an economic development entity to actively market the region to prospects meeting our criteria.

The committee has identified the importance of entrepreneurship and supporting small businesses as a means to create new economic opportunities, particularly for families in poverty. These recommendations address barriers including a lack of coordination among business development agencies and the zoning, taxation, and capital issues that thwart small businesses. The committee suggests that support for entrepreneurs must include mentoring, culturally competent engagement strategies, and creating new business capital opportunities and ongoing technical assistance. All of these opportunities must be part of a regional, strategic economic plan.

THE WORKFORCE STORY

The recommendations related to Workforce Development tell a story about the workforce needs in Athens-Clarke County. First, it has become common knowledge that one of the reasons vaccine manufacturer Novartis did not choose Athens as a site for its new plant was our inadequately skilled workforce. Contacts with other employers have indicated that they, too, have a difficult time finding skilled workers in Athens. Soft skills seem to be a particular problem. In addition to the problems with our current workforce, our high dropout rate in Athens makes employers very concerned about our “emerging” youth workforce. Knowing the above information, our community is telling us several things.

First, these recommendations are telling our institutions that our high dropout rate and unprepared workforce are unacceptable, and that we all need to accept responsibility and do things differently. These recommendations emphasize that not all students have the same academic needs and some students may become more successful by learning a skill rather than going to college. Trade schools and technical skills need to be incorporated throughout the education process. We can no longer separate the responsibilities between education and workforce training. There needs to be a seamless pathway between high school, post-secondary, and workforce education, as well as a comprehensive program for retraining adults as the needs of the workforce change.

These recommendations emphasize that employers and schools must share a common mission—getting people into the workforce. The School System, Athens Tech, the University of Georgia, the Department of Labor, ACC Government, Athens Area Chamber of Commerce, and the Faith-Based Community must develop a comprehensive and integrated workforce strategy. This strategy must be proactive and industry-specific to address current and anticipated economic opportunities in Athens.

These institutions must share responsibility for training adults as well as middle and high school students. We have to recognize that our traditional workforce strategies and our traditional public school system have been unsuccessful in preparing large numbers of persons in poverty to get and keep a job. New collaborations among all education, employment, and workforce resources must be developed to achieve the desired results with shared accountability.

THE EDUCATION STORY

These recommendations seem to tell the story of public education in Clarke County. We start with our learning that our schools do not effectively teach children living in poverty. CRCT scores are in the bottom quartile in every category when compared to other counties in the state. Our graduation rate for African-Americans is approximately 53%, and for Hispanics it is approximately 35%. Knowing this information, our community is telling us several things.

First, our community recognizes that addressing the issues of poverty is a community issue, not simply a school system issue. Our community recognizes the commitment and hard work of our teachers and staff, but also that they cannot do it alone. The concept of using schools as “community centers” acknowledges the importance of connecting all of our resources in a holistic manner and serving our families as we serve our students.

Second, our community wants to be proactive and acknowledges that the earlier we address the needs of children in poverty, the more likely we are going to be successful in the long run. High-quality, early childhood education for all children, particularly those in poverty, or near poverty, will be a major determinant of our ultimate success.

Third, our community is also making it very clear through its recommendations that governance and expanded opportunities are issues that this community will have to address if our families and children are to be successful. Recommendations focused on charter schools, community schools, new partnerships with the university and other community groups demonstrate the need to find different solutions for different children. These recommendations also address the importance of finding an expanded governance model that shares the accountability of schools to a greater segment of the community.

Fourth, our community is saying that our schools need to play an expanded role in workforce development. Schools must become a key community institution in developing a quality workforce, not only for K-12 students, but also for students who have left the system, or adults in need of new training. We need seamless education and workforce systems that meet the real needs of our community and emerging workforce.

Fifth, our community is saying that mentoring is necessary at every juncture of our journey. We need to find mentors to work with administrators to learn from those who have recreated their communities. Students need mentors to broaden their vision and believe in themselves. People moving into the workforce need mentors to teach them how to be good employees. The overall message about mentoring is we have to solve this poverty issue together and we each have strengths we can share with one another.

HEALTH COMMITTEE STORY

The Health recommendations seem to emphasize that our current healthcare infrastructure is not set up to efficiently address and manage the healthcare needs of our citizens.

- Athens is experiencing a growing demand for healthcare services, and, at the same time, the number of uninsured persons continues to increase. Much of the demand from the uninsured is being handled by the emergency rooms and paid for by taxpayers and increasing medical costs. St. Mary's and Athens Regional spent \$47 million in indigent care last year. The free clinics in town are no longer accepting new patients because they are over capacity. The recent closure of Elberton's obstetrics center points to the ever increasing demand on Athens' services.
- Continued reductions in payment rates by Medicare, Medicaid, and health insurance, combined with increasing operating costs, are reducing the ability of people with insurance to access healthcare. The under-insured cannot find services they need and free clinics will not take anyone with insurance.
- Athens has a growing Hispanic population in need of care. There is a lack of translation services and a need to create culturally accessible medical care.
- We have a growing population in need of chronic care. Preventable chronic conditions further strain our health care system as well as our economy. Blindness resulting from untreated diabetes contributes to a loss in the workforce.
- Accessing affordable specialty care—dental, mental health, pharmacy, and physical/occupational therapy—is difficult in Athens.
- And, funding and collaboration amongst providers is lacking.

The recommendations of the Health Committee focus on the importance of the hospitals, health clinics, doctors, pharmacists, Medicaid providers, employers, and healthcare policy makers to develop a comprehensive health care plan that seeks to address preventive and chronic healthcare issues in our community, rather than implementing strategies that encourage fragmented services and high cost late-stage care for serious health conditions that perhaps could have been prevented or addressed at an earlier stage. One Stop Health Care Centers, a local health insurance plan, and a specialty-care referral network may be part of the solution.

Through these recommendations the community also focuses on the importance of proactively addressing the teen pregnancy issue. Despite some progress, teen pregnancy is a serious health issue that not only impacts the young mothers and children, but also encourages the continuation of poverty. The committee recognizes that new strategies in the areas of sex education as well as building self-esteem and academics are critical.

Accessible Healthcare is also of great concern to the committee. Nurses in schools, transportation to healthcare, and culturally competent services, including services in Spanish, are required. One thing is clear- creating a comprehensive strategy to provide affordable health care to the un- and under-insured is critical not only to the future health of our citizens, but also to the health of Athens' economy.

HOUSING AND TRANSPORTATION STORY

These recommendations reflect the critical role of affordable housing and reliable transportation in breaking the cycle of poverty in Athens-Clarke County. Most obviously, reliable transportation is necessary for holding a steady job, and home ownership is how most Americans build equity that they can pass on to their children. Many Athenians living in or near poverty do not have access to either of these tools for moving out of poverty.

ACC is designated as a “housing stress” county, meaning that over 30% of households are either cost-burdened, overcrowded, or lack complete plumbing or kitchen facilities. Many forces have combined to create this problem, among them historical lending practices that were blatantly discriminatory and land use planning that has not sufficiently taken housing affordability into account. There has been insufficient coordination among housing service providers, and over-reliance on ever-shrinking federal funds. Rising property values, increasing numbers of relatively affluent students in the housing market, and housing-related regulations (or in some cases, their lack) also contribute.

This lack of affordable rental and homeownership opportunities has meant that many families move constantly, do not build equity, and have difficulty building safe, stable communities. Furthermore, as property near the University of Georgia becomes ever more desirable, lower cost housing is pushed further away from central ACC, away from jobs, services and access to public transportation.

Access to public transportation is important because the cost of owning and maintaining an automobile can eat up a large percentage of a family’s income. But even for those who can use Athens Transit, its limited schedule and routes – a function of its inadequate funding – make it difficult to get to jobs, schools, and other services, many of which are located beyond its reach.

Furthermore, certain groups have particular housing and transportation needs that require specialized solutions. These groups include people with disabilities, seniors, homeless people, recent immigrants, and formerly incarcerated people.

This committee calls for the development of a comprehensive strategy to address the full spectrum of housing needs in our community. Attention must be given to retaining and building affordable rental housing as well as homeownership opportunities. We must develop mixed-income neighborhoods and stabilize existing tight-knit low-income communities. Different models of homeownership, like the community land trust model and resident-controlled mobile home parks – solutions that have come from people directly affected by these issues – must be considered and “Not-In-My-Back-Yard” attitudes must be addressed.

Furthermore, because of the regional nature of our economy, we need a regional and truly multi-modal transportation system. We need to expand the mission, services, and funding for ACC’s public transportation system, which will require changes to state law; and improve conditions for cyclists and sidewalk users as well.

Finally, ACC must secure dedicated sources of funds to support a comprehensive plan for affordable housing and an effective regional transportation system. Without sustainable funding, housing and transportation will continue to be barriers to breaking the cycle of poverty for many Athenians.

DEPENDENT CARE STORY

The Dependent Care Committee tells a story about an overlooked and neglected population in our community. Although the Athens-Clarke County community provides many services to older adults and persons with disabilities through multiple service providers, the growth of this population, and its impact on caregivers (usually family members), far exceeds the capacity of current services. In Athens alone, there are 10,800 individuals over the age of 60 with over 1,543 living in poverty. The Area Agency on Aging Gateway staff has a waiting list of services for Clarke County. Currently there are 98 people waiting for Meals on Wheels, 25 caregivers requesting respite (short-term time off), and over 50 needing homemaker/personal care services. A person may be on the waiting list for an average of 8 months or more. These numbers exclude those who have not even tried to access services.

The Dependent Care Committee focused their attention on the needs of this growing population of elderly and disabled adults as well as on the needs of this population's family caregivers. The committee's first recommendation was to train Certified Nursing Assistants for the purpose of providing support to older adults and people with disabilities. This would create more qualified employees for needed services, offset the burden experienced by family caregivers, and develop a new workforce strategy to recruit and train persons living in poverty to get jobs serving in their community. Since these skills can demand top dollar, the key to making this recommendation truly effective will be to create a sustainable mechanism to pay CNAs to provide their services to low-income elderly and disabled adults.

The barter system was recommended as a low-cost, creative means of addressing the needs of elderly and dependent adults and the needs of family caregivers. This recommendation brings to light that many of the needs of elders and disabled persons are not met with traditional services; examples include the need for assistance in grocery shopping or a ride to the bank. This recommendation also acknowledges that many older adults and people with disabilities have something in turn to offer their community and addresses the need to coordinate the vast volunteer resources available from our entire community.

This committee's work calls our community together to ensure that now and in the future, older adults, people with disabilities, and family caregivers are no longer marginalized, that their needs are addressed, and that their skills are valued.

SERVICE PROVIDERS

The Service Providers' recommendations emphasize the value of having a comprehensive strategy to address the holistic needs of individuals and families in poverty. Service providers are working very hard and successfully with their individual targeted populations. However, despite this "targeted success", there is no community-wide approach to reducing poverty in Athens. There is a recognition that a goal of service providers is to help families overcome poverty and not simply provide individual services.

The recommendations focus on developing a collaborative strategic planning process, finding new models for funding solutions to community needs, and building a decision making process that empowers marginalized Athenians. Organizations may need to develop new collaborations to become more accessible, meet needs more efficiently, and address gaps in existing services. Service providers recognize that this is a very challenging task, and new infrastructure will be necessary. One-stop-service centers and "open door" polices, where each organization is prepared to connect their clients to other services seamlessly is critical. The importance of developing a Community Foundation and a comprehensive Volunteer Center would be important as we maximize our community resources to reduce poverty and empower our citizens and organizations.