

# Comprehensive Plan

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Decatur, Alabama

FEBRUARY, 2018



*"Thank you ONE Decatur for striving to make our City a great place to live! I am proud of our City."*

— Participant



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# A MESSAGE FROM THE STEERING COMMITTEE

*November 4, 2017*

To the Decatur Community:

Over 15 months ago, a 40-member Steering Committee was empowered by you, fellow community members of Decatur, to chart a course for the future of our City. Through many workshops, focus groups, and online tools, over 800 people provided more than 2,000 data points for One Decatur. Additionally, thousands more people were aware of the effort through community events, social media, newspaper, and other marketing material. Our community was thoughtful, provocative, considerate, passionate and forward-thinking.

The Decatur we know today is a vibrant community spread along the beautiful Tennessee River and one of the only cities in America to be nationally recognized as a top destination for both active adults and STEM graduates. Our City's list of assets is extensive and enviable: the Alabama Center for the Arts, multiple hiking/biking trails, a growing Downtown, burgeoning arts and entertainment scene, \$20 million+ Cook Museum of Natural Science, and much more. Good news abounds as 2017 draws to a close.

However, rather than a celebration of past achievement and current momentum, the One Decatur comprehensive plan is a call to action. In order to build the city that our children and grandchildren desire to call "home" as we do, Decatur must grow its population and average household income. Inability to achieve such growth over the next decade poses a grave threat to the City's current progress as well as its long-term viability. As such, City officials have sought to navigate this crossroads moment in the City's history by seeking the community's insight as expressed in the One Decatur plan and implementing community priorities.

In addition, One Decatur encourages a new era of cooperation and coordination among local governmental and quasi-governmental entities — at both the city and the county level. As demands increase for scarce public funds, these entities must seek new and better ways to deliver essential services as efficiently as possible. Furthermore, our City leaders must ensure that Decatur's interests are represented at a level commensurate with funding provided.

Assembling the One Decatur plan has been exhilaratingly hard and fun work. Now, our community must turn its focus to action — the opportunity to build a city to which future generations can be enthused to move and call "home".

On behalf of the Steering Committee, thank you for the opportunity to serve our community. We could not be more excited to see our City reach its full potential in the days ahead, and we respectfully submit the comprehensive plan detailed in this document as a roadmap for achieving this potential.

Best regards,

Jelisa Thompson  
Co-Chair

Juanita Healy  
Co-Chair

Stratton Orr  
Co-Chair

# WHAT IS ONE DECATUR?

One Decatur is the name of a effort launched in 2016 to create a new comprehensive plan for Decatur that is rooted in community values and aspirations. This planning process identified critical needs, defined a long-term vision and goals, and identified strategies to achieve the vision. The plan serves as a guide for decision makers and the community for future development and many aspects of our City's quality of life. It is both comprehensive—taking a long-term view of a broad range of topics—and strategic—serving as a call-to-action to move the community forward. But beyond the plan itself, One Decatur marked the beginning of a movement to collectively work to address community needs.

## What is a comprehensive plan?

A comprehensive plan is the broadest public policy document for the City and sets forth the long-range vision for physical development, housing, economic development, transportation, community facilities and related topics. This plan is a tool to address community needs, prepare for change and protect what we treasure. It serves as both a business plan and guidebook for decision-makers. The Comprehensive Plan also serves as a marketing tool for the City to clearly convey the community's values and priorities.

To achieve the vision and goals, the plan includes specific actions (policies, projects and programs) and identifies timing and responsibilities for undertaking those actions. It also contains map-based recommendations that indicate the City's intent for where and how it will use land resources and design infrastructure improvements.

The plan serves as the foundation for the City's budgeting process, zoning ordinance, land development regulations, and other ordinances. It is implemented over time through many distinct decisions including annual budgeting, departmental work programs, rezoning, and subdivision of land.

## The need for a new plan.

Everyone wants Decatur to grow and thrive. The City is fortunate that our leaders have embraced proactive planning and have followed through on past plans. This plan is a continuation of that legacy.

To be effective, a comprehensive plan must be periodically updated to account for current conditions, data and new technologies. Decatur's previous Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 1999. Over the last 18 years, many of that plan's recommendations have been completed, while others are no longer supported or relevant. Recent plans have been limited to a geography or topic. This Comprehensive Plan is an opportunity to consider the City's policies and priorities in light of current needs, opportunities, and best practices.

The plan process was also an opportunity to engage our community at a new level and develop a strong sense of public ownership of the plan outcomes.



# A CALL TO ACTION

Today is a dynamic time. Rapidly changing technology, national demographic shifts, and changing market preferences are reshaping our cities. Many of the changes Decatur has experienced over the last decade present daunting challenges. But at the same time, the City has had successes addressing needs and cultivating its unique assets. This plan's actions include many small bets and a few larger, more visionary efforts to address our challenges and build upon our assets.

## Challenges to overcome

- > **Stagnant population growth.** The City's population over the past few decades has been mostly stagnant and likely has declined since the last Census. Meanwhile, demographics are changing as are community needs and preferences.
- > **Limited housing choices.** The City has relatively few options in both for-sale or rental housing, which is a major obstacle to economic development. There has been very little new housing constructed in the past 15 years.
- > **Underutilized land and weak aesthetics.** Like many cities, inefficient growth patterns have created long-term challenges to maintenance and provision of services. Further, there is valuable land that is underutilized including on the riverfront and in Limestone County. There are also several declining or vacant commercial centers located at community gateways do not convey a positive first impression of the City.
- > **Physical divisions, limited connectivity.** Physical divisions created by railways, highways and natural features makes it difficult for residents in some areas of the City to access community resources and contributes to perceptions of inequality. An incomplete sidewalk and path network restricts mobility choices and limited regional connectivity creates traffic challenges.
- > **Funding.** Changing State and Federal policies have led to have shifted many costs to cities. In Decatur, slow growth in jobs and population has contributed to funding challenges. Like many cities, Decatur must be creative to continue to provide quality services, maintain and improve infrastructure, and make smart investments.
- > **Weak image (internal and external).** Decatur is not alone in facing many of these and many other challenges, but they have contributed to creating a weak image of the City both within the community and the region.

## Assets to build upon

- > **Strategic riverfront location.** Decatur's location along one of the nation's great rivers is a tremendous asset. A number of cities, such as Chattanooga, TN, and Greenville, SC, and Montgomery, Tuscaloosa, and Florence, AL have benefitted from creating development opportunities on their riverfronts for recreational, civic, and other uses, and particularly improving the connection between their downtowns and waterfront.
- > **Part of a growing region.** Decatur is fortunate to be part of a region that is growing in population and jobs. The city has been successful in attracting a wide range of industrial employers, but there are many opportunities for Decatur to expand the number and types of industries and economic activity in the city. Further, the City can capture a larger amount of residential growth from people working in Decatur or elsewhere in the region.
- > **Revitalizing Downtown.** Downtown Decatur is increasingly attractive and vibrant. As the historic core of the City, the Downtown has received significant attention and revitalization efforts over the past 15 years. Downtown offers a unique setting that other cities in the region cannot reproduce.
- > **Historic neighborhoods.** Like Downtown, the City's historic neighborhoods are unique and attractive. There is growing demand nationally for these types of neighborhoods.
- > **Refuge and outstanding parks system.** The City offers a wide range of parks and recreational assets, ranging from small neighborhood parks to regionally competitive recreational facilities. The Wheeler Wildlife Refuge is a unique natural amenity.
- > **Growing cultural institutions.** Decatur has a wealth of arts and cultural assets for a city of its size, including programs that are entirely unique in the State of Alabama. These assets include the Princess Theatre, Carnegie Visual Arts Center, Alabama Center for the Arts, Calhoun Community College (CCC) and Athens State University (ASU), and Cook Museum.

# PROCESS & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The planning process was both intuitive and informed, shaped by quantitative research and input from the community. To ensure that the process was open, inclusive and transparent, a robust public engagement process was implemented with the help of a 40-member citizen steering committee. There were three rounds of public input opportunities throughout the 17-month planning process.

## Steering Committee

A 40-member citizen steering committee guided the public process and helped to shape the plan's recommendations. The group was formed through a public selection process that received nearly 200 applicants. Members were selected to represent the City's diverse interests. The committee acted as spokespersons for the planning effort, officially represented citizens in the planning process, and provided direction and feedback to the planning team at crucial steps. The committee held 10 official meetings, several small informal meetings and participated in community outreach events during the process.

The name One Decatur arose from the committee's early work to develop an identity and messages for the process that would appeal to the community.

## Listening and Learning Workshops (November 2016)

During the first week of November 2016, four public workshops were held at different locations throughout the City to gather input that will help to inform the direction of the plan. In an hour-and-a-half program, participants worked in small groups on two activities with trained volunteer facilitators. Following these workshops, additional input was collected through the project website. Visitors could submit ideas and identify locations on an interactive map.

Over 375 people attended the three initial workshops and more than 120 additional people contributed by means of the online activity. Based on the demographics of participants, additional small group sessions were conducted in December to obtain input from groups who were underrepresented in the initial sessions.



## Stakeholders

At several stages in the process, the planning team interviewed stakeholders in small group sessions. The stakeholders included the Metropolitan Planning Organization, elected officials, local realtors, Decatur City Schools, neighborhood organizations, economic development entities, businesses, developers, transportation professionals, and various special interests such as advocates for environmental causes, biking, and historic preservation (among others). The interviews were designed to identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities and gain insight on local knowledge.

## Summit on the Future

On April 4, 2017 over 250 participants attended the Summit on the Future at Ingalls Harbor Pavilion. The event marked roughly the mid-point of the planning process. In a two-hour workshop, participants learned about conditions that are shaping the City and its future, evaluated draft vision and goals that the steering committee developed based on previous community input, provided input on key questions to guide the plan, and worked in groups to review a conceptual map for the City's future development. During the activities, participants used their personal smartphones to engage in real-time polling and saw live results at the workshop.

## Open House

On October 3, 2017 the draft plan was presented to the community for the first time at the Princess Theater. Approximately 250 people attended. After a brief presentation that shared the basic organization of the plan and provided a brief background to the planning process, attendees viewed the display boards containing the specific actions in the plan. Each participant was given a set of sticker dots to vote for their top priority actions.

Participants also used comment cards to share feedback on any of the specific actions and indicated which actions they were interested in helping to implement.

Like the previous two rounds, feedback was collected through the OneDecatur.org website for three weeks following the open house. During that time, the presentation boards appeared in five locations throughout the City.

*"Thank you for conducting these meetings and for carrying out the tasks of developing our City's vision. This process is overdue."*

— participant at Listening and Learning Workshop



# VISION

The vision statement captures the broadest aspirations for Decatur and serves as the overall direction for the plan.

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***Thriving, unique, confident.***

*The vision for Decatur is a thriving community where everyone has opportunities to prosper, where distinct, vibrant places are enjoyed, where investment and visitors are attracted, and where pride and confidence is widespread.*

# PLAN STRUCTURE

The plan is organized into five topic areas, which reflect themes from community input. Each topic area is supported by a goal and several objectives that serve to organize the 140 specific actions detailed in the plan.

## Goals

Intended outcomes expressed in simple terms for the plan's five topic areas.

## Objectives

Subthemes within the goal that serve to organize actions.

## Actions

A project, policy, or program. The plan contains 140 actions.

### ***Creating a Quality Place (QP)***

*GOAL: Efficient use of land resources that offers distinctive and desirable places to live, work and play, includes strategic revitalization throughout the community, maintains historic and natural assets, and supports a high level of community pride.*

#### **Objectives:**

1. Promote desirable and financially beneficial development patterns
2. Improve the appearance of public and private property throughout the City (particularly gateways)
3. Encourage redevelopment along the Riverfront (and other areas)
4. Stabilize and revitalize neighborhoods
5. Establish standards to ensure that new residential areas exhibit strong neighborhood qualities including walkable blocks, integrated open space (parks), and a variety of housing options.
6. Continue to support current revitalization efforts downtown
7. Improve code enforcement tools
8. Maintain our historical assets
9. Protect our watersheds and conserve sensitive habitat

### ***Improving our Mobility (MO)***

*GOAL: A well-maintained, smart and sustainable transportation system that offers strong regional and internal connectivity, provides attractive and safe options for cycling, walking and public transportation, and supports desirable development.*

#### **Objectives:**

1. Design street improvements to balance mobility, accessibility, land use, and desired development character.
2. Improve the appearance and condition of the City's streets.
3. Increase efforts to make City more walkable and bike friendly.
4. Expand access to shared-ride transit options.
5. Improve Downtown mobility.
6. Support strategic efforts to improve regional connectivity.

### ***Advancing our Prosperity (PR)***

*GOAL: A thriving economy that offers a variety of jobs, attracts new businesses and residents, and provides a diversity of retail, entertainment, and housing options.*

#### **Objectives:**

1. Expand the number, diversity, and wage level of employment opportunities.
2. Strengthen the existing labor force.
3. Encourage entrepreneurship and expand support for small businesses.
4. Encourage a variety of housing options that are competitive and serve the needs of a diverse population.
5. Enhance infrastructure to leverage economic growth.
6. Promote a collaborative brand/image.

## Enhancing our Amenities (AM)

**GOAL:** A wide variety of modern city services, outstanding parks and recreational facilities, well-supported cultural institutions, and access to health services that support the needs of our community.

### Objectives:

1. Expand the range of public services.
2. Continue to improve the effectiveness of the City's safety services (police and fire).
3. Provide parks and recreational facilities that meet the needs of residents.
4. Maintain competitive facilities that attract tourism.
5. Improve recreational access to the river and Wildlife Refuge.
6. Strengthen support for community and cultural institutions.
7. Improve access to quality healthcare and social services.

## Strengthening our Community (CO)

**GOAL:** A united, proud, and confident community that embraces everyone, has highly competitive schools that prepare youth for success in life, and where residents and institutions are meaningfully engaged.

### Objectives:

1. Strive to make Decatur City Schools a highly competitive school system that is competitive on a state and national level.
2. Celebrate our community's diversity.
3. Encourage civic participation, mentoring and volunteerism.
4. Improve communication and cooperation between citizens, institutions, and government.
5. Improve inter-governmental coordination and cooperation.

### Achieving our Vision (VI)

The plan's final chapter describes how to use the plan and summarizes all the actions into a concise table that assigns recommended timing and primary responsibility to each.

## Other Strategies

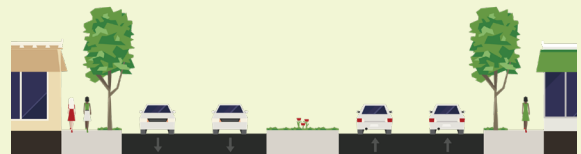
In addition to the actions within each chapter, the comprehensive plan contains a few additional policy components and strategic recommendations:

### > Future Land Use and Character Map.

(within Creating a Quality Place) Expresses the intent for how Decatur should use its land resources in the future. This map identifies character areas which integrate attributes of urban form and function with land uses. Like a traditional future land use map, this map should serve as the basis for zoning changes and land use decisions.

### > Street typology. (within Improving our Mobility)

This map integrates transportation and land use by classifying existing and future streets based on context and the needs of various users. This section of the plan should be used to evaluate the design of future street improvements.



### > Demonstration Corridors.

Five corridors representing various conditions throughout the City illustrate how improvements can address broader goals and objectives for transportation. These corridors are: 6th Avenue SE, 8th Street SE, Beltline Road SW, Moulton Street W, and Wilson Street.

### > Target Industries. (within Advancing our Prosperity)

A list of industries for recruitment and/or development in Decatur based on the City's competitive advantages, analysis, community priorities and stakeholder input.

### > Housing Market Opportunities. (within Advancing our Prosperity)

Development and marketing concepts to capture a larger share of the regional housing market based on a market study conducted for the plan.

# PRIORITIES

While all of the actions described in the plan are important, the One Decatur steering committee chose to emphasize several actions as priorities. These priorities were identified based on community input and include a mix of easily achievable steps to move the City forward as well as more ambitious efforts that would have a significant impact. The priorities are grouped into nine themes and are not intended to be in a ranked order. The numbered actions within each theme are described in detail within the plan.

## Aesthetics

Improve the appearance of public and private property throughout the City.

- > QP 1.1 Reform the City's zoning and land development codes. (also QP 2.5)
- > QP 2.1 Redefine the 6th Avenue gateway.
- > MO 2.3 Establish corridor appearance standards or guidelines.

## Downtown

Continue to support current revitalization efforts Downtown.

- > QP 6.1 Facilitate downtown development.

## Economic Diversification and Workforce Development

Strengthen the existing labor force and diversify the local economy.

- > PR 2.1 Target workforce development efforts on "skills for the future"
- > PR 2.2 Collaborate with public schools to expand vocational programming
- > PR 1.2 Diversify Decatur's Industry Recruitment Targets

## Health, Poverty, and Social Services

Improve access to quality healthcare and social services.

- > AM 7.1 Coordinate social services.
- > AM 7.4 Establish a task force on poverty.

## Housing and Neighborhoods

Encourage a variety of new housing options (including quality apartment and single family development) and maintain existing neighborhoods.

- > PR 4.1 Recruit high-value housing/mixed-use development.
- > PR 4.2 Facilitate north-of-the river development.

## Lifestyle and Cultural Amenities

Continue to develop unique community features and events that enhance the City's appeal.

- > CO 2.1 Create new arts and cultural events.
- > AM 6.4 Create a public art initiative.
- > MO 3.2 Update and formalize a plan to connect the urban trail system. (bikeways)
- > MO 6.3 Establish a bicycle and pedestrian crossing over the Tennessee River.
- > AM 5.3 Develop the trail network within the Refuge.

## Marketing and Branding

Promote a positive and coordinated brand/image to internal and external audiences.

- > PR 6.1 Conduct a summit on collaborative branding.

## Riverfront Development

Maximize the riverfront for recreation, living, entertainment, and civic functions. Improve connections between the riverfront and Downtown.

- > QP 3.2 Create a riverfront redevelopment task force.
- > QP 4.3 Create developer packages to market sites. (also PR 4.1)
- > MO 2.1 Undertake strategic improvements in demonstration corridors. (Wilson Street)

## Schools

Strive to make Decatur City Schools a highly competitive school system on a state and national level.

- > CO 1.1 Establish an education advisory group.
- > CO 1.3 Conduct a coordinated and long-term marketing effort to improve Decatur school's image.
- > CO 1.7 Conduct city-schools joint work sessions.

# HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE PLAN

The Comprehensive Plan is intended to be used on a daily basis as public and private decisions are made concerning development, redevelopment, capital improvements, economic incentives and other matters affecting Decatur. The implementation chapter includes guidance on managing and using the plan and a summary of its actions that assigns anticipated timing and responsibilities to each. While much care has been given to the plan's actions, the City should be opportunistic in pursuing other actions that would support its vision and goals. The following is a summary of how decisions and processes should align with the goals and actions of the plan.

## Annual Work Programs and Budgets

Individual departments, administrators, boards and commissions should be cognizant of the recommendations of the plan when preparing annual work programs and budgets.

## Development Approvals

Administrative and legislative approvals of development proposals, including rezoning and subdivision plats, should be a central means of implementing the plan. Decisions by the Planning Commission and City Council should reference relevant Comprehensive Plan recommendations and policies.

## Regulations

Development regulations including zoning, subdivision regulations, building codes and related ordinances should be updated to reflect the plan's recommendations. At least 14 specific actions in the plan involve regulatory reform.

## Capital Improvement Plan

The City should prepare a formal capital improvement plan (CIP) that is consistent with the plan's recommendations. A CIP is a fundamental management document that outlines projected capital needs, priorities, funding estimates and sources, and time-frames for completion.

## Economic Incentives

Economic incentives should be reviewed to ensure consistency with the recommendations of the plan.

## Private Development Decisions

Property owners and developers should consider the goals and strategies of the plan in their land planning and investment decisions. Public decision-makers will be using the plan as a guide in their development deliberations such as zoning matters and infrastructure requests. Property owners and developers should be cognizant of and compliment the plan's recommendations.

## Consistent Interpretation

City Council should collaborate with the Planning Commission to ensure clear and consistent interpretation of major items in the plan.



*A large share of implementation of the Comprehensive Plan rightfully falls to the City. However, it is not intended to be solely implemented by government. Many actions will require the coordinated efforts of individuals and organizations representing the public, private, and civic sectors of the community. An active citizenry will help to ensure those actions are included and pursued as part of the public agenda.*





**For questions regarding this plan, contact:**

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