

METRO

Hard look at Dallas fuels desire to change: Atlanta leaders learn how Texas metropolis deals with challenges.

Staff

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DALLAS -- More than 100 key Atlanta leaders concluded their four-day trip to Dallas with a deeper understanding of their main peer and competitor--along with a host of ideas for how to intensify the rivalry.

Among those on the annual LINK trip, few expect the insights to bring immediate changes in planning or policies back in Atlanta. But they do say the close examination of Dallas has jolted their desire for change into a higher gear.

Addressing metro Atlanta's challenges depend not only on political leaders, but the persistence of the LINK group -- made up of a collection of business, transportation, development, political and philanthropic leaders, said Emory Morsberger, president of the community improvement district at Stone Mountain.

"We are the people who have to make this happen," Morsberger, a veteran of many LINK trips and a participant this year, said while digging into a thick steak at a restaurant in Dallas' West End. "If somebody doesn't keep trying to move the ball forward, it doesn't move forward."

The trip, primarily funded by private sponsors, was organized by the Atlanta Regional Commission. This was the 20th LINK trip, but it was the second time that LINK has done Dallas and Fort Worth. A lot has changed in the 15 years since its last look at the Big D.

For one thing, Atlanta's presumed economic superiority has evaporated. Dallas has scored strong job growth, a series of corporate relocations and -- perhaps most surprisingly--added regional transit system that includes light

Emory

Morsberger, an economic official in Stone Mountain: "If somebody doesn't keep trying to

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rail.

Yet the contrasts are so interesting because Atlanta can learn from the city, said Andrew Feiler, president of MDI Strategies in Atlanta. "Atlanta and Dallas, in many ways, are stunningly similar."

The size of the regions, the reliance on a huge airport, the relationship with a reluctant state government, the mix of global corporate headquarters and thousands of small businesses make the regions look alike in some critical ways. And that means any good idea in Dallas is worth looking at for Atlanta, Feiler said.

And the best example is 5.2-acre Klyde Warren Park, created when the city built and sodded a covering over a highway that slices through the heart of the city. "That is one of the stand-out things about this trip because it is replicable and relevant to Atlanta." In Atlanta, there is talk of covering the Downtown Connector to stitch together Midtown and downtown. There is likewise discussion -- and preliminary planning--of a similar, larger covering above Ga. 400 as it passes the Buckhead MARTA station.

Tara Green, president of the group that runs the park, said it cost \$97 million to build the recreational area three years ago and several million dollars a year to maintain and run it. The facilities include a reading room, free yoga classes, a children's playground and concerts.

The project, which borders a huge arts district, was just one of the moves Dallas would not have made if things had been going smoothly, Green said. "I believe that what helped Dallas was having that kick in the pants when we lost that major corporate relocation to Chicago."

But the ambition and cost have been rewarded, she said. "We have a million visitors a year. And there has been a 15 percent increase in property values around the park during the past year."

Perhaps as important as specific projects are ideas.

"You go to another city to learn," said Bill Bolling, chairman of the Food Well Alliance and former longtime director of the Atlanta Food Bank. "You want to learn what the power dynamic is and you want to know how things get done."

Among the tips from speakers who addressed the group:

|Don't believe the naysayers. For instance, the park had many opponents, the LINK visitors were told by Kevin Moriarty, chair of the Dallas Arts District and artistic director of the Dallas Theater Center. "People said, 'Think of the weather. They won't go outside. They won't walk. It won't work.' "

|Nurture a sense of civic responsibility. "If you have financial resources here, you feel that you have an obligation to make things better in the city," Moriarty said. "The expectation is, if you are going to benefit from this city, you are going to give back." To build the \$350 million performing arts center, 150 families gave at least \$1 million each, he said.

|Think of your neighbors as part of your team. Many LINK participants seemed surprised to learn that the lion's share of municipalities in Dallas-Fort Worth had signed a pact not to compete against each other for companies -- the kind of internecine struggle that moves jobs from one neighbor to another, usually at a cost to taxpayers, but adds nothing to the region's economy. "That is a zero-sum game," said Andrew Taft, president of Downtown Fort Worth, Inc.

|Moreover, you should see your neighbor's success as being good for you, said Ken Barr, former Fort Worth mayor. "A win for Dallas is a win for Fort Worth and vice versa. If you look at all the big projects (here) over the years, the common factor is collaboration."

Collaboration also is key in addressing problems, said **Timothy Bray**, director of the Urban Policy Research Group at the University of Texas.

It is a mistake to ignore poverty, joblessness, illiteracy or crime across town, he said. "I take no solace in knowing that your end of the boat has a hole in it."

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