
***TAG Infrastructure Talks: S02 Ep03, Moving the Ball for Metro Atlanta Mobility:
Atlanta Regional Commission***

Alan Poole:

Welcome to another episode of TAG Infrastructure Talks. My name's Alan Poole, I'm a Corporate Partner at Troutman Pepper and I'm the Vice Chair of the Infrastructure Society of the Technology Association of Georgia. Today's episode is our first episode focusing solely on transportation. We're really excited to get into this topic. And with me today I have Mike Alexander, COO of the Atlanta Regional Commission.

Mike Alexander:

Glad to be here.

Alan Poole:

And thanks very much for joining us, Mike.

Mike Alexander:

Yeah, this is great.

Alan Poole:

Yeah, excited about this. So to get us started, let's frame it properly. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and then about ARC?

Mike Alexander:

Yeah. I'm Mike Alexander, I've lived in Metro Atlanta since the 1990s. I came here to take a job in land use planning. I was a zoning administrator in one of the southern counties, Clayton County, and took a job at the Atlanta Regional Commission. And they bounced me around and I learned a lot about regional planning along these 22 years at the ARC. And now I'm currently the Chief Operating Officer. So all the long-range planning functions at ARC and all the service functions where we provide services for workforce development, aging independent services, flow through this office of the Chief Operating Officer. So I get to really work on almost all the policy issues of the ARC and it's great to make those connections in the work. And that's most unique about the ARC is the diversity of work that we do as a regional planning agency, which is often a hard concept for people to really understand, but we have a long history making these long-range plans for metropolitan Atlanta.

Alan Poole:

So tell me about the reach of ARC and its role in guiding the various counties that make up the Metro MSA?

Mike Alexander:

Yeah. So the ARC, when I mentioned these number of functions, most of these functions come to us as a responsibility to implement federal laws and regulations and often to process and program, over the long term, federal dollars, resources in particular to build infrastructure. And so one of our core functions is to make long-range regional transportation plans, which is what you and I were talking about just earlier. And we've had that responsibility now in this formal way for over 50 years. And so people always say, "Oh, we don't have a plan." And people like me are like, "We do have a plan." We've had plans since the beginning really, of the state of Georgia and the older forms of Georgia Department of Transportation.

Now, the federal government recognized the need to coordinate among communities in these metropolitan areas a very long time ago. And that's really at the heart of a lot of what we do is that coordination to get to the question that I think you're going to want us to really talk about is how do we make these regional plans? And it really is this collaboration and coordination that we do with all the governments and our state partners to come up with this plan, which is really a statement of how we're going to make big investments to help improve these systems that allow people to travel and get to and from work and all the other things that they do. It's really the best job in the world.

Alan Poole:

That's great.

Mike Alexander:

It's a lot of fun seeing these things come to fruition.

Alan Poole:

How has the ARC changed in its history? You said the past 50 years? I was a little surprised to hear it was that long.

Mike Alexander:

Oh, yeah. Well, that's just the current rules that we're implementing, but actually our history starts in 1947. And there's an old joke, "Regional planning is really about the next largest geography that you can't find a solution to." And I'm paraphrasing there, but it really makes a lot of sense because the original Fulton County, DeKalb County, City of Atlanta, geographic structure for the ARC has now grown to all our parts of 20 counties for transportation planning. So when you say grown, literally spatially we have grown and depending on the work, that geography changes. So if it's transportation planning, like I said, it's 20 counties. If it's water resources planning through the North Georgia Metropolitan Water Planning District, then it's 15 counties. And so for these different areas where we are working with communities, each geography is truthfully unique based on those federal rules or state rules that really guide us in what we're doing.

Alan Poole:

Your work is taken up by transportation and what are the other areas that ARC works in?

Mike Alexander:

Yeah. When you say that, my immediate response was 150%. Almost the majority of the work really is at least in part about mobility. The transportation work is so critical for us. When you ask people what their number one issue is, when the economy's doing well, they'll say, "Traffic congestion." And it's only when we're in a recession will that traffic congestion fall when we do our regional survey. So for most people, it is the thing that they think most about. So yeah, it's a big part of our daily work. And it's something in Metro Atlanta that I think is one of my cocktail party jokes is when you're in Atlanta and you meet another Atlantan, the first thing you talk about is your commute. "Where do you live? Where do work? What's your commute like?" And it's something that culturally binds us together as we all navigate this system because we've been so successful.

We're at 6 million people really in the MSA, the metropolitan statistical area now. And that really points to our collective economic success. And that comes with this consequence of more people on our roads driving and that again, creates these frustrations for people in the moments that they're on the highway, but we benefit from the system. We're economically so productive and it's been a big part of our growth. So it's a part of our success, but it's also a core challenge for us and making sure we're investing as much as we possibly can to address that is a critical part of the transportation work.

Alan Poole:

So if we could attempt to categorize the different areas of transportation that you cover, to me it seems to range anywhere from maintenance of what's out there, roads, bridges, to expanding roads and bridges are somehow improving them and then also getting into the area of buses, walkability, bike lanes and things like that. And if there's anything else I've missed, we could talk about that too.

Mike Alexander:

Yeah, absolutely. Freight planning. What type of improvements we make that are specific to help address freight mobility is one other part of this work. At the ARC, we don't build, GDOT builds, local governments build, we really are a planning agency. We are looking at big numbers of how much federal money's available and we're working with the local governments to put those dollars into use to do the building that they do and that's really at the heart of it.

But when you think about where that money goes, the federal government has buckets and they say, "Hey, this is money that you really can use to build trails. And this is money we really want you to put on a highway. And this is money that we want to spend on transit." And that drives really a lot of the decisions, how big those pots are. And those pots are created just to be really basic from the beginning when you go to the gas station and you fill up your car, you're paying federal taxes that get collected and then redistributed to help maintain this system. And you also pay state taxes on that as well and the state uses those resources to expand the system.

But all of it really matters, it really is an interconnected system. And making that system serve people in a way that it meets almost all uses is really one of the biggest challenges. When I say that, I mean we've got workers at the airport, they're going to leave the airport at 12 o'clock at night and they need to be able to get home. And at the same time, they're going to get up very early in the morning. And our essential workers, really, their work got illuminated during the pandemic. And for us, having systems of transportation that meet those challenges, meet the office worker, meet the parent who's trying to get their kid to school, it's a complex set of needs that we're addressing.

And it's not just about the road itself, but these things you just mentioned, having a robust transit system that allows people to get out of that single occupancy vehicle car is critical. And then giving people opportunities, like you said, bike lanes, I used a bike lane to come up to your office just a little while ago. And it was truthfully the fastest way I could get from Peachtree Center, up here on Peachtree Street in this beautiful building. So it's critical to have those options and that's what we really try to focus on is providing as many options as possible.

Alan Poole:

You're talking about goals where they're meetable. I mean, so many people talk about, "Well, why isn't MARTA everywhere, like in New York?" And maybe that's a good goal to think about someday, but it seems that you've identified other solutions, like you were saying, it's reducing car use to some extent and it actually works.

Mike Alexander:

Yeah. I mean, if you're into transportation planning and you're really following it and you understand the costs associated with expanding heavy rail and you're reasonable, you recognize it is very expensive. There are a few places in the United States, outside of New York and some projects in LA where they're building a MARTA classic train, heavy rail style expansion. It's very hard to do, it's very expensive and most communities across the United States have changed their programming to be generally more corridor focused in providing fast, high frequency bus service.

And we recognize most people when they think about transit, they're thinking about that heavy rail, but it's really about the speed it takes you to get someplace and can we carry a lot of people? And if you do it right, those costs for BRT are dramatically different. I mean, more than half and often, a lot more than half as much as if you're building heavy rails. So you can do more over the long term. And that's, on that transit side, has been really that focus is trying to negotiate in a good way what the best use of these resources are to impact the most people and provide the most service. And this is a global conversation at this point, when you're thinking about that.

Alan Poole:

You just made me think of an interesting topic that's come up from time to time for me. When the BeltLine was first announced in the early 2010s, around then, the idea was that light rail was the next big thing and now there seems to be more of a debate, is light rail better? Is BRT better? Are you guys looking at that? Do you have any positions on that?

Mike Alexander:

As a regional planning agency, it's really about working with our partners. So MARTA, like GDOT, is a builder and now some recent changes in state law helped to create the ATL and they're really responsible for putting together the regional transit plan. That gets incorporated into the ARC's regional transportation plan, but they really have a distinct function under state law to coordinate that. And a lot of the work they've been doing, similar to the work we do, focused specifically on transit is really going to talk about those mode types. But in the way we just talked about where it really does depend on the community. There's some places where it makes sense to do BRT, there's probably places, and again, I'm thinking globally about this, where light rail makes a lot of sense. And you hear in the conversations in the media right now about MARTA talking about light rail down to Ponce City Market, extending the street car and that's something we've watched for a long time.

But on Campbellton, much longer distance, we're talking about BRT. The same for Clayton, where we know we're really at a place where maybe commuter rail isn't an option, so they're focusing on BRT because that's the most efficient. And that's really two very different types of implementation strategies for the long term. So if you've been to Europe and you've ridden light rail, we all love it, but it's got a specific use case. It's more expensive than BR obviously. And when we built the downtown street car, when we really started building it, well then you're tearing up these very, relatively for the US, old streets and you're running into all these issues and basements that have been expanded underneath the road right away and things like that that you don't expect and it does impact costs, there's no way to escape that. So it's really interesting but again, trying to contain costs is a big deal in the United States.

Alan Poole:

Sure. Let's talk about how you make the regional plan. How often is the plan updated or released?

Mike Alexander:

Yeah. So the plan horizon for us is around 25 years. So the previous plan update and the plan update that we're doing now have a plan horizon year of 2050. That means that we want to have a financially constrained plan and that constraint runs out to 2050 where we're pretty certain we're going to have the money we say we're going to have out to 2050 and the Feds expect that. But it almost never stops. I mean, really if you're thinking about a four-year cycle and then we'll do updates and then we'll do major updates. I think I'm working on really my fifth major regional plan update and we call them Metropolitan Transportation Plans now per federal guidance. So really on basically a four-year schedule, you're going to be making substantial updates. But on that cycle, you're doing things in between like making new long-range regional forecasts for population and employment and lots of other core data work just to make sure you've got the information you need to make that plan and put it all together.

And then the heart of it is you are coordinating with the local governments. We have been funding, with these resources, additional dollars for them to do very sophisticated in particular county transportation plans. So all of our counties have their own plans that just like the Livable Centers initiative, have a lot of guidance on the standards for how those plans get done. And this is walking down in the weeds, but we want to have a lot of standards on those plans

because we want those plans to generate ideas and projects that we know really meet the needs of the community. And the real idea, cutting to the chase is we want those projects to be good, to perform literally, to have all the things to meet the need of that community, reduce congestion, make the system safer, and have a return on investment that those dollars are good uses of dollars at scales to do the right thing.

And then that puts them in a place where, as they go further to building the project, they know a lot more about what that project actually means. So in our world, one of the critical things we're going to look at is, do you have a really great understanding of what it's actually going to cost? So we've invested these dollars to make these plans, but the real idea is to help them save money over the long term by getting good ideas early. And then as they build up to build the project, they've got a much better structure of planning work.

So when they come to actually get the implementation dollars, we all know that's a great project, we know roughly what the costs are going to be. Hopefully there's no basements underneath the highway because you've done all the work you need to do to get there and it actually saves money. This is at the heart of it is do good planning, it just makes us more cost-efficient, which isn't shiny, but it is maybe the thing that I keep closest to my rational heart about what we need to be doing is to protect these resources and use them wisely.

Alan Poole:

That's interesting because when you think about being efficient with federal dollars, that's always on the mind of at least the Republicans on the hill and really everybody.

Mike Alexander:

We all want to be efficient with the resources, but mad respect for the people that really day in, day out and say, "Let's use these dollars wisely." I have so much respect for that.

Alan Poole:

What's interesting about what you just told me is there's, take it for granted that you want to be efficient and avoid unnecessary costs, but there's also, how far are the dollars going? How effective is it going to be? And it seems like by helping communities put together plans and maybe do pilot projects, you're testing out, you're giving more certainty to just how far the money's going to go.

Mike Alexander:

Absolutely. And pilot projects, especially from the federal government's perspective, have been a tool in the toolbox for a long time to try to test things early and figure out if they work or not. And that makes a whole heck of a lot of sense. And in our collective modern memory, we can't remember things like the Bridge to Nowhere. And most people have, I think, forgotten that stuff, but for us, it's very much something that's important back in the great recession, "Is it shovel ready?"

Alan Poole:

Oh, wow. Yeah.

Mike Alexander:

You remember that phrase?

Alan Poole:

That's a term.

Mike Alexander:

Yeah.

Alan Poole:

That's right when I started practicing, that was a-

Mike Alexander:

Now we've got a new term literally sitting here in front of you, but you probably are not saying shovel ready anymore, you're saying something. And if anybody ever listens to this from the core staff, they're going to be fussing at me right now, "How could you forget that term?" I apologize.

Alan Poole:

I'll forward the customer complaints to you.

Mike Alexander:

Yeah, that's okay.

Alan Poole:

We'll figure them out.

Mike Alexander:

We'll answer all the questions. But you can see, I mean, I'm passionate about it, I've been very interested in it because I want people to be able to live their lives in the best way possible. We don't want anybody stuck in traffic, we want you to have the mobility you need and at the least cost possible to do all the things you want to do. I mean, it's great.

Alan Poole:

Can you give me an example of something major, and the first thing that comes to mind for this is the Infrastructure Act and recent funding, but maybe in the past, a major societal event that's made you have to shift focus on a relatively short term? Maybe that's the recession, maybe it's the COVID-19 pandemic and the work from home revolution. Can you think of anything like that you can talk about?

Mike Alexander:

Yeah. All of it. I mean, I was afraid you were going to say the 85 bridge collapse.

Alan Poole:

Oh, man.

Mike Alexander:

It was one of those days for everyone, where everybody's doing what they're supposed to be doing and something happens completely out of your control. And GDOT's response in particular was just brilliant and they worked overtime with the contractors to get that fixed. There will be things that you do not anticipate. One of my favorite lines is, "You can never make a list of all the things you didn't think about." And so you're constantly trying to figure it out. And the pandemic was another case where nobody saw that coming and for us at the ARC, it was critical. We manage, at the request of the Georgia Department of Transportation, programs that you know by branding is Georgia Commute Options. And these are programs to help people to try to not use a single occupancy vehicle as their primary mode to get to work.

And so these are behavioral programs. How do you get somebody to choose a different option like an express bus or the bike? That I try to use as much as possible to practice what I preach. And one of the core ideas since the beginning of those programs in the '90s is telework. So the pandemic happens and we all had laptops at the ARC, we had been testing teams to make sure we all had everybody online and prepared to log into Teams meetings.

And of course, we went home and for us, truthfully, it was seamless. But at the start of the pandemic, we spent a lot of time through the Georgia Commute Options program, helping businesses develop quickly telework programs. We did lots of web-based training, we really shifted gears and we were doing webinars on a weekly basis on how to do this. When you think about it, there's entities that scale and when I say scale, they have a lot of employees. The City of Atlanta, where you've got people that reported to City Hall to do planning work and all these functions, not just the private sector businesses where they were built to do that in person, in those offices and they really had to change. And we were a very great small cog in the information that got generated to help people figure that out. And I'm very proud of the staff that worked on that, they really worked overtime to help people get to a place where they could do it, but do it remotely.

Alan Poole:

I think that's a great example of how holistic your organization is because it's transportation, but not transportation but really it is.

Mike Alexander:

Yeah. And we can't not talk about what land use means to transportation. I mean, this is so fundamental. The interrelatedness of this in American history, things like the G.I. Bill, the Federal Home Loan Administration, creating these markets for single family housing, especially after War II, created a very different pattern in the United States and it created a demand for these transportation resources. And at the same time, big picture, you've got things like Interstate Act and everybody in our world knows about Eisenhower and he wanted to build the interstates. Those plans existed long before Eisenhower, but you're really marrying this huge federal investment program with these other programs to allow single family housing. They were mutually supportive.

And so you've already mentioned IIJA, I mean it really is scaling, again, an investment that we really haven't seen in the modern period in infrastructure. And so that bill also changed the way we do our work to formally include us as a responsibility to include housing, not just land use patterns, but housing in our planning work. Well, that's a fundamental change that we've been trying to do for a long time because we recognize they can't be separated, you have to do, say, integrated land use and transportation plans. Because the pattern creates the demand. The land use pattern creates the demand on the transportation side. So that's very much top of mind for us, given things we would all know about how the housing market has changed in particular over the last 10 years in Metro Atlanta.

Alan Poole:

Sure. Going to the IIJA, I mean, there's so many different programs that relate to you. Can you give us a high level categorization of the different buckets in the IIJA that are most important to ARC in its constituent counties?

Mike Alexander:

Yeah. And there's lots of new buckets in IIJA, I think the number is, there's 230 different buckets, programs.

Alan Poole:

All in, across everything? My gosh.

Mike Alexander:

Yeah, 200. And so you really have to let that sink in, what that means. That's complexity. There's no way you can say that's simplicity. So we built a website and a database where you can use dropdowns to figure out who you are and then look at the different buckets and programs that you might be eligible for. At the heart of IIJA though is a Standard Federal Transportation Reauthorization Bill. The core buckets of money are the same, but they just added a lot more buckets. So there's a much bigger bucket for transit, there's a much bigger bucket for passenger rail, it really doubled the core spending on some of the highway buckets.

So we very much plused up the old buckets and then there's new buckets where you're working on things like climate change or reconnecting communities where you're trying to repair some of the fabric that was torn or ripped apart by earlier federal big investments. And that's a fundamental change in the mindset of the way those federal dollars are going to be used. And it's absolutely fascinating that we're in that place. And of course, IIJA and the Inflation Reduction Act, and I have to say it because if you say IRA, everybody thinks about two other things.

So you're thinking about your retirement right now. But that also really has... I'm starting to see, you said before we started NOFOs, Notice of Funding Opportunities that are getting published, there's a lot of additional money and some of our staff say the climate money is really starting to flow and we've got to prepare for it because our communities are going to be seeking it. Because much of that money just doesn't come to you, you have to go get it and you have to apply for it and that's a fundamental change too. There's a lot more money that we

need to go get, it's just not going to come to us, we have to go seek it and make a compelling case for why the federal government should invest in us.

Alan Poole:

Sure. And I know that there's plenty more NOFOs to come. Let's talk about today and going back to the implementation of the IIJA. How do you think the region has done capturing the funding opportunities that have already been awarded?

Mike Alexander:

Yeah, just recently we're doing well, but we did do an analysis over, I forget the back horizon, but one of our brilliant staff, a guy named David Haynes really did the numbers. And we should be getting more money in our mind. And that's not to fault anyone, it's just to say what you need to be able to show at the federal level is things like higher match. And match means when you go get a federal dollar, they don't just give you the dollar, they say, "We're going to give you 80 cents, but you've got to have 20 cents." Most of the programs we're talking about on the roadside have a 20% match requirement. They want you to have skin in the game. For transit, it's about 50/50.

Alan Poole:

Oh my goodness.

Mike Alexander:

And so if you really want to compete, you've got to overmatch. And you think about our transit resources, that historically has been a challenge for us to have capital that we could take north and ask for more capital resources. And this is a core challenge. And the state has allowed a lot more flexibility to generate those resources locally and, I mean, we're very thankful for that. But on the transit side, long term it's about local governments really deciding to invest in transit and then we'll be much better positioned when they have those resources to get up to those match levels that the federal government's looking for to get this done. And again, if you think what we talked about earlier on being laser focused on what you need, I mean, that is absolutely critical on transit. You've got to have a great understanding of what you're proposing to get those additional federal dollars and almost no transit projects in the United States work without that federal investment.

Alan Poole:

Let's move into what you're doing with housing. We were talking a little bit about housing data, some of it surprised me. And the levels of home-ownership, something around 55% in Atlanta versus around 80% in Forsyth County. Are we trying to get people to own homes rather than rent? Is that a factor in what you do?

Mike Alexander:

I mean, where a household is in literally what a head of householder to really walk out is doing for work and what those household dynamics are. Do you have kids? Do you not have kids? Are you retired or not? Matters a lot to us at the ARC. And where you're living, what type of housing

you have access to? And then what are your core economics? Are you able to save money? Are you able to pay emergency bills? Which is something we've asked about for a long time at the ARC, can you pay a \$400 cash emergency with cash? And a shocking number of people really can't. And so that put us on a path where we started thinking about wealth and wealth disparity. And the reality is, in the United States a black household on average has about 10% of the net wealth of a white household.

And for Metro Atlanta, we're very diverse, in the Core 10 County area, we're almost split perfectly between the number of white households and black households, but we've got this disparity. And in our research, what we've learned is lower, more modest income households are more dependent on home-ownership as a net in their wealth calculation. They just don't have the 401(k)s and all the other investments that higher income households do. So owning a home actually matters a lot for people to generate wealth in those lower income categories. So we know the number of people in those income brackets is falling, fewer of them own homes than they did 10 years ago, 20 years ago. So it's critical for us. So I was literally showing you this home-ownership data by county because we do want to understand if these patterns are fundamentally changing.

And it's not the end-all be-all to own a home, there are households that don't want to own a home, there are people that don't want to own a home, they don't expect to live in a place very long. We understand all that. But generally speaking, we want to make sure the economies here in Metro Atlanta are working for everyone, that if you do want to own a home, there's an opportunity to do that and build wealth because it has been such a boon generally for the United States. But some people haven't gotten to participate in that wealth building in the same way. And we just want to make sure we're providing information to our local government so that they can understand that. And in addition to that, we've built our Metro Atlanta housing strategy, a lot of data resources, that's what we do at the ARC is we over-index on information, but that information helps communities, again, to see where they are and then provide them with recommendations given everything that we can tell them about where their community is, what's the best things they can do to help address these larger housing issues.

Not just home ownership, but the supply, the affordability of it. Because like every other place, prices have gone up dramatically here in Metro Atlanta. We were so affordable for over a long term, but now it's not quite the case. And we're starting to really catch up, especially on rent prices to other metros that you would expect to be much more expensive than us. So it's a challenge that affordability has been good economics for us on recruiting businesses and helping to generate all those new jobs that we really love. So we'll continue to work on that, but housing supply is a fundamental issue. Globally and in particular in the United States, we're short about 1.5 million homes in the United States and we know there's some number here in Metro Atlanta, we don't know it exactly, where we wish we had more homes and that would've helped on the price and given more people, especially low income people, a chance to own a home.

Alan Poole:

How can we tackle that problem? How do you hope that local governments tackle that problem?

Mike Alexander:

Well, right now we like to talk about it and you may have a reaction that that's a negative, but getting everybody to a shared understanding, and that's the talking, about what these issues are is a lot of work. And so what we did last year is we formed a committee, and it's a heck of an acronym here, the Local Leaders Housing Action Committee. And they went through a shared learning process about these issues and then went through a process to think about what they could do and make some decisions about that.

And so the Mayor of Decatur, Patti Garrett, full disclosure, I live in Decatur, was committed to working on metal housing. And Decatur has in fact changed some of their zoning rules now to allow more flexibility in single family zoned areas so that you can do more different types of housing. And that's what missing metal housing is that we've done a lot of single family, we've done a lot of true multifamily, but we haven't been building duplexes and quadraplexes and different types of housing in the ways we should to meet that middle, middle income and middle type and give people more flexibility.

Alan Poole:

What's been the roadblock to that? Has it been zoning, buy-in, something else?

Mike Alexander:

Really, I think I have to take it from this perspective. It's like if we can help people to understand these issues that may be resolving the issues is more. When you buy a home, that's the biggest financial decision you're probably little likely to make in your life. And I take it so seriously, that means something to those people that have done that. And there's a lot of them in the United States. It is your home, it is your investment and anything that you perceive as challenging than that is something we've got to try to help to communicate with you. You don't want to lose value in your home at the heart of it.

And I've watched these waves of economic conditions hit our housing markets over the last 25 years and it's been tough as someone who gets to look at the information on a daily basis. And we've almost forgotten I have to retell this stuff, it's important. I can remember the Great Recession, for the first time ever, I've saw our job numbers really declining and I watched home prices really fall for the first time, we'd overbuilt. And then many people, I have to remind them, we went through a foreclosure crisis, then we went through an underwater crisis, we couldn't get the home values back up, people couldn't sell their homes because they owed more than the home was worth. And then in a very short period of time, what happened?

Alan Poole:

Up.

Mike Alexander:

Up.

Alan Poole:

Yeah.

Mike Alexander:

Crazy.

Alan Poole:

But not the supply.

Mike Alexander:

No. But what happened, that Great Recession that created all those homes underwater, where Clayton County at one time, almost every zip code was underwater, changed housing production and the ability to build large amounts of housing really fell off. And coming out, we just haven't built as much housing. We're building at about just over a third of the rate that we did in previous decades when you normalize it per capita. It's a huge change and that's why prices have gone up. But you are watching these causes when you do this work for a long time and going, "Oh my gosh, this is hard on the household." And they're very protective of those investments. So I mean, we completely understand that. So we've got to get you to see that, well, with a little bit more flexibility, you're going to be okay, your community's going to be okay, but you're going to give more people an opportunity. And that's why these learning processes matter so much.

Alan Poole:

To bring this episode to a close, I wanted to ask a couple of open-ended questions. Looking to the future. Next five years, what do you think are the biggest challenges to the metro area to meet the goals you're trying to meet in the regional planning?

Mike Alexander:

Well, I'm going to use an old Bill Bowling quote, "We're blessed with opportunity." We just talked about housing price challenges, but also underneath that, I know that places that are fast-growing have experienced the highest housing price appreciation. We have been near the top of the pack and job growth coming really out of the start of the pandemic these many years. Businesses continue to invest in Atlanta, so accommodating and continuing to be relentless on building the infrastructure we need to meet that Bill Bowling opportunity of all this growth that we're experiencing as basically a Sun Belt metro, that's very attractive, very diverse is the thing. We have to wake up every day and outrun the lion, if you know that reference, to make sure we're doing everything we can to get that growth and succeed and help our communities to be stronger and our households literally to become wealthier, but have this great quality of life. So protecting that ability to sell ourselves as a high quality of life place is why we do what we do.

Alan Poole:

Yeah. Absolutely. Next five years, if you can pick one thing that is the top of mind to change in the positive, what would it be?

Mike Alexander:

So we are going to be working a lot on the electrification of the fleet. Now, I'm an old soul, I really went all in on autonomous vehicles. Nobody is talking about fully autonomous vehicles happening tomorrow. But this transition to electric cars is, I think, here, it's real. And making sure our infrastructure, again, our core work as a planning agency, helping our communities to get chargers in the right places is something that I'm really excited about these next few years because that's what we're going to be working on. And then at the same time, if you're a lawyer, you're probably already using ChatGPT-4, these codes, these scripts are going to have an amazing impact on us and understanding that is going to be something we've got to be really focused on.

Alan Poole:

Well, you just identified two future episodes we'll want to have someone back about.

Mike Alexander:

There you go.

Alan Poole:

We actually just had a... As of the day of this recording, I just came back from a EV event thrown by a TAG Infrastructure.

Mike Alexander:

There you go.

Alan Poole:

We're all abuzz about it right now.

Mike Alexander:

Oh, you should be.

Alan Poole:

Yeah.

Mike Alexander:

I mean, it's amazing technology. If you worked on cars, like I have most of my life, you'll recognize an electric vehicle is a much better vehicle. It's a simpler vehicle in a lot of ways,

batteries are a challenge. But it's just a great time to not have to change the oil and worry about air conditioning systems and emission systems. It's going to be a lot of fun.

Alan Poole:

They can speed up a lot more quickly than a gas car too, as I understand it.

Mike Alexander:

They're a lot faster.

Alan Poole:

Well, this was great, Mike. Thank you so much. I really enjoyed this. And we'll have you or someone back soon, I think, to talk about some of this other stuff.

Mike Alexander:

Thanks for the opportunity, Alan. I really appreciate it.

Alan Poole:

Absolutely. We hope you enjoyed this episode. Please subscribe to both [Troutman Pepper](#) and the [Technology Association of Georgia's](#) Infrastructure Society list to be the first to know about new content and events. And thanks very much.

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