

A Climate Conversation with Doug Hooker, Executive Director of the Atlanta Regional Commission

Summary

What does the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) do, and how is the organization helping advance climate solutions in the Atlanta area? Blair Beasley of Drawdown Georgia talks with Doug Hooker, executive director of the ARC, about the climate initiatives the commission supports, from Climate Conscious Communities to green transportation alternatives to building resilient infrastructure, and the challenges the region still faces in reducing emissions and adapting to a changing climate.

Key Takeaways

- The ARC serves as a convening table for local elected officials across the 10, soon to be 11, county Atlanta region, with a broad portfolio spanning transportation and water supply planning, aging services, workforce development, and homeland security coordination.
- ARC's mobility services group helps employers set up alternative commuting programs, including telework, which saw explosive growth during the pandemic, alongside long-range planning for mass transit and a regional trails plan that could become one of the largest connected trail systems in the nation.
- The Climate Conscious Communities program, launched about 11 years ago as Green Communities, uses voluntary certification and friendly competition between local governments, rather than funding, to encourage cities and counties to adopt more sustainable practices and, more recently, climate education strategies.
- Doug Hooker identifies political will and funding as the two biggest barriers to climate-friendly infrastructure, and describes ARC's role in using research, polling, and best practices to show elected officials there's often more public support for climate action than they realize.
- Hooker is most proud that ARC's staff kept innovating on climate work even before the commission's board had reached political consensus on climate change, technically advancing the work within existing policy so that once political will caught up, the organization could move faster.

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Blair Beasley: Thank you so much for joining me today for this conversation, we're really grateful for your time. I thought I'd start with a general get-to-know-you question before we dive into your leadership at the commission. In preparing for this conversation, I went back and listened to your remarks at the 2019 Georgia Climate Conference, where you were introduced on the main stage as, and I'll quote, "probably the best example of a renaissance man you will ever meet."

Doug Hooker: I didn't say that.

Blair Beasley: So before we talk about your great work at the Atlanta Regional Commission, I was hoping you could tell us a little more about yourself, and the path you took to leading the commission.

Doug Hooker: I'm a Georgia native, born in southwest Georgia, in Moultrie, but I grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio. I came back down to Georgia for school, at Georgia Tech, met my wife there too, and have lived and worked in Atlanta since 1972. I trained as a mechanical engineer, and started my career with Georgia Power Company. Interestingly, for about three or four years before I left the company, I was the alternate energy technology policy analyst, alongside my full-time job as a design engineer, and later as a project manager. So I got exposed to, and learned a lot about, alternative energy technologies back then, and I've kept up a life of learning, and loving the possibilities of getting to a non-carbon, or at least a much lower-carbon, future.

I'm trained as an engineer, as I tell people, but I have the heart and soul of a musician. I played a lot of instruments in high school, and have continued, or actually resumed, playing one late in life that was always my favorite, the oboe. That's a little bit about me.

Blair Beasley: Well, I saw that you've led the Atlanta Regional Commission since 2011, and you all do a ton of interesting work. But for those who aren't familiar with the commission's work, can you describe the organization and what it does?

Doug Hooker: I think the simplest description of the Atlanta Regional Commission is that we're a table, an organizational vehicle through which local elected officials across the 10, soon to be 11, county Atlanta region can come together and talk about possibilities for how we grow and thrive together in the future. That includes conversations with partners from the private sector, the philanthropic sector, and the nonprofit sector. We have a very broad portfolio of activity: we do long-range planning for transportation and water supply management, we coordinate aging services and services for older and disabled adults across the ten-county region, we do workforce development training, and we do homeland security coordination for several of the core jurisdictions in the region.

Blair Beasley: The work of the commission, as you're starting to describe, intersects with the lens of climate change in so many ways, from building resilience to the impacts of a changing climate, to actually reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Since Drawdown Georgia is really focused on how we can reduce emissions in the state, I thought we could start there. Maybe tell us a little about how the commission supports climate-friendly transportation, like mass transit or biking or pedestrian options, since that ties directly back to some of the solutions in Drawdown Georgia.

Doug Hooker: Absolutely. Part of our role as the long-range transportation planner is to help craft strategies that get people out of driving alone. We have both an operational role and a planning and infrastructure role. On the operational side, our mobility services group runs a suite of services that helps employers and employees look for alternative ways of commuting to work, including telework. We had our biggest single experiment, and a huge amount of growth, because of the pandemic, organizations, for-profit, nonprofit, and governmental alike, were calling us for technical consultation to get programs set up, or to expand programs they already had. That's a huge amount of work we do.

Then, in the long-range planning area, in addition to roads, highways, and bridges, the typical things we have to plan for, we do a lot of planning for mass transit, as well as bicycle and pedestrian trails. In fact, we have a regional trails plan the commission board adopted about two years ago, a major update, and it looks like within the next seven to ten years we'll have a regionally connected trail system, potentially one of the widest and largest regional trail systems in the nation, if we can see all the anticipated projects through to fruition. We're very hopeful about that, and with the new emphasis in Congress on expanding transportation alternative funds, specifically funds that help slow down or reduce greenhouse gas emissions, we're hopeful there will be a lot more federal funding for trail planning and expansion.

We've also worked to slow the outward sprawl of the Atlanta region, so now we have, in suburban and urban areas across the region, north, south, east, and west, these smaller but very significant concentrations of urban mixed-use development. That program, which we began in 1999 as an experiment, was a first in the nation, and it's become award-winning and extremely competitive. It's not directly vehicle-related, but the relationship between vehicles and land use is inexorable, the two are tied together, and that program has really slowed the growth in the number of trips people take, and made those trips shorter. So in a small way, that's also helped us attack the growth in greenhouse gas emissions.

Blair Beasley: I know some of your work also touches on this idea of resilience, how do we make infrastructure and the built environment more resilient to a changing climate? I'm curious what kinds of programs you're working on in that space, and what kinds of impacts are top of mind.

Doug Hooker: Under my tenure, we've always preached trying to be interdisciplinary in our approach to work, so I encourage my colleagues to look for opportunities to work together to meet mutual needs, because a community isn't just transportation, or just natural resources, or

just workforce, or just aging, it's a complex stew of all those things, and more. We started our resilience work pretty aggressively about four years ago. About three years ago, our transportation planning and modeling teams, working with our natural resources team and stormwater experts, developed models that let us project, based on past rainfall patterns and future weather and climate predictions, where the worst rainfall is going to cause the most problems, whether that's flooding, or eroding infrastructure, the land underneath road surfaces, the road surfaces themselves, and so on. As a result, as part of our transportation planning grant cycle, we now encourage and incentivize projects that can show a strong element of resiliency in their design and implementation. It's the kind of thing everyday people wouldn't necessarily think about, but it's the kind of thing that can create systemic change over long periods of time, which we feel is probably our most important role.

Blair Beasley: That's great. One thing I'd heard a bit about, from some of your colleagues and some reading before this conversation, was your Climate Conscious Communities program, can you tell us more about that, and how it works?

Doug Hooker: Sure. We actually started this program about 11 years ago, as Green Communities. We were trying to encourage and incentivize local governments to think more holistically about sustainability, sustainability isn't just a building thing, the whole community can get engaged in it, and we wanted local governments to be the champions and the voice pushing sustainability efforts within their communities. We didn't have money to give out, it was all done through a manual, a suite of guidelines and best practices we learned from other governments and from environmental nonprofits who helped us develop the whole guideline series. What we were really leveraging is that local communities have pride, and local elected leaders have pride, and there's a bit of friendly competition among them, when one of them earns a good designation, another one wants to find a way to get that same designation. So we tried to leverage that soft competitive spirit through this program, and it's worked. We now have green certified counties, green community certified cities, and several up for recertification, since we require them to either maintain their level or exceed it.

Over the last three years, the team started talking about turning this from just Green Communities into something that also educates people on climate change, and what strategies they can use in their communities to do their part, individually or collectively, in small ways, to address climate change. We're excited that it's actually been well received, a lot of communities, through their planning directors, transportation directors, or city councils, have expressed more interest in this program. So we're thinking, again, about setting a tone for long-term, collective change.

Blair Beasley: Yeah, that's great, I think this whole concept of beneficial competition can be really powerful.

Doug Hooker: Yeah. There's nothing like watching a mayor walk into a conversation with a couple other mayors and say, "Hey guys, guess what, we just got this," and the others go, "Wait,

how did you get that? We want that, I've heard about that." It's fun to watch them in that friendly, competitive way, it's constructive, not destructive.

Blair Beasley: Absolutely. So we've talked a bit about opportunities you've either seized or created to move this forward, but I'm curious if you can talk about some of the challenges you face trying to make our infrastructure more climate-friendly, both building resilience and reducing emissions.

Doug Hooker: The first, and for me always the biggest, challenge in a democracy, which we obviously live in, is political will. I forget who said it, but change moves at the speed of trust, and a lot of political leaders, primarily elected leaders, have to believe, first, that their constituents want something, and that enough of them want it, that if they propose a policy or move in that direction, they're not going to face a huge political backlash for it. Frankly, they like their jobs, they want to keep them, they try to stay safe. So political will is the first thing, and very often, what we can do, through our research, our polling, and best practices, is show mayors that there's probably a larger reservoir of interest and will for a certain kind of change than they realized, or believed existed, enough that they can begin to embrace it and feel safe leading their community in that direction.

The other thing is always funding, I don't care what anyone says, governments have limited resources, because we have limited resources to give them, there's only so much we're willing to be taxed, and so only so much they have. The challenge, and the possibility, of governing is balancing all the competing needs in a community against the resources you actually have. So to the extent people are willing to impose more fees on themselves to pay for more resilient, climate-focused infrastructure, or willing to change the underlying business model, thinking differently about how we generate revenue and where it comes from, that's another way we can create change. But those are systems changes, so first, political will, second, revenue, and third, systems change, helping people realize there are different ways to approach paying for things, and disincentivizing other things too. You want to incentivize what you believe is healthier, more climate-conscious infrastructure, and disincentivize the things we may have traditionally thought were wonderful, but that research and science now tell us aren't so wonderful after all. We don't need more roads, more highways, more concrete, per se, we need to better manage and leverage what we already have in place, and find other things to do besides just building more.

Blair Beasley: You've announced that you're going to retire from the Atlanta Regional Commission next year, and I know a lot of people have asked you to look back on your time leading the organization and comment on what you're most proud of. But I thought we'd mix it up a little, and ask what you're most proud of specifically when it comes to how ARC has advanced climate mitigation and resilience since 2011.

Doug Hooker: I guess what I'm most proud of is that we, as a staff, never let ourselves be stymied in our ability to work and innovate just because of a lack of political consensus on our

board around climate issues. When I started this job in late 2011, 2012, if we'd honestly asked our board to embrace climate change and global warming, and begin addressing policy around it then, it would have been a dogfight. So we recognized that political reality, okay, they're not ready for that, we're not going to ask them to do something that would make them feel stressed, tense, or embarrassed. But that doesn't mean we had to stop doing our work. That was the realization, that as the leader of a very competent, caring, and compassionate staff, there was a lot we could do technically, even before policy formally changed, to begin adapting our work within the policies we already had. I'm very happy that we were able to do a number of things, and continue to pioneer a number of things, even before there was the political will to formally adopt that perspective. Now that the political will has changed, and we're able to talk about it openly with the board, that just means we can move a little faster. So, in that regard, yes, I'm very proud of a lot of what we've done.

Blair Beasley: Well, that's great, and I really appreciate your time and for sharing your insights today, and for serving on the Drawdown Georgia Leadership Council. We're really grateful.

Doug Hooker: Well, thank you for having me, and thank you for the honor. I appreciate it.