Principle B of Decatur’s 2010 Strategic Plan states “Encourage a diverse and engaged community.” A 2014 baseline report showed Decatur losing its diversity replacing an aging African-American population with younger, affluent mostly white families. There had also been complaints of racial profiling by the police. In 2014 the City Commission adopted the Compassionate Cities Charter and a resolution designating Decatur as a Welcoming City with Welcoming America, an organization focused on welcoming immigrants and refugees. The Better Together Initiative was designed to address these issues in our community.

Decatur saw the need for a community visioning process around the issues of equity, inclusion and engagement, ultimately funding a plan with less tangible goals than a traditional transportation or facilities master plan. With changing demographics and complaints of racial profiling, does Decatur still value and welcome diversity? If so, how can we achieve it? We invited a group of 19 residents and business people representing a diverse mix of races, ages, faiths, neighborhoods and incomes (later named the Leadership Circle) to work with city staff to design a visioning process to engage the community in conversations across differences as well as an inclusive outreach effort, especially to those who feel marginalized.

The Leadership Circle identified three focus areas that addressed both the Strategic Plan’s broad directive and the pressing issues the community currently faces: An Equitable and Inclusive City – cultivating relationships across differences and creating conditions for all community members to thrive and participate fully in city life; Racially-Just Community Policing – improving relationships between community members and law enforcement by addressing racism, bias, and privilege to ensure all community members, especially people of color, are treated in a just way with equity and respect; and Diverse and Affordable Housing – preventing displacement of existing residents and supporting the development of a variety of housing types and prices.

The group reviewed established city communications tools with an eye toward equity; leveraged their diverse connections to target under-represented groups; and focused outreach activities on face to face connections. Ultimately the demographics of the overall participants mirrored the current demographic of the city including teens, seniors, refugees and a significant number of people who have lived here five years or less.

The Better Together process and Community Action Plan included cultivating partnerships to ensure a collaborative and sustainable effort. Welcoming America, a national nonprofit organization headquartered in Decatur, partnered with us, providing guidance based on their work with cities across the country. Together we secured $25,000 in grant funding from the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta. These early partnerships provided a foundation for engaging additional partners.

The Leadership Circle hosted a meeting for organizations identified as having an interest in taking the lead or partnering on some of the ideas and programs emerging from the community action planning process. The goals of the meeting were to create connections among potential partners, share learning from the process, and harvest group wisdom to support the implementation of the Plan. About 35 people representing non-profits, educational institutions and faith-based organizations attended, many of whom had participated in some aspect of the Better Together initiative. Most were actively working with diversity, inclusion and equity. They affirmed the challenging nature of this work and the need for continuous maintenance. The group also acknowledged the tremendous opportunity to build on the Better Together initiative and pledged to be a part of the implementation.

Decatur hired two consulting firms: The Art of Community, to design and facilitate what became a year-long community process, and PlaceMakers, to lead outreach and communications. Addressing diversity issues is tough and complex so the Better Together process had to be intentionally designed, planned and communicated in order to provide an opportunity for people representing the diversity of the city to come together and hear a broad perspective of community experiences, both good and bad. Costs included $109,000 for the Art of Community, $12,000 for PlaceMakers, and $10,720 for printing and postage. We received a $25,000 Civic Engagement Grant from the Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta allowing us to increase our civic engagement outreach including sending out two direct mail postcards to all 10,000 households and purchasing an EZ Texting Plan to reach a different demographic. The visual identity and the written communication needed to be intentional, welcoming to all and visually inclusive to reflect the purpose of the Initiative and the strong existing city brand that identifies our community.

The tangible outcome included a community-driven Better Together Community Action Plan for Equity, Inclusion and Engagement with 60 action items for individuals, organizations and local government to undertake together and independently to cultivate a just, welcoming, inclusive, equitable and compassionate city. The 3-year Plan contains measurable action items serving as a road map for implementing community change by clarifying what will be done, who will do it, and how and when it will be done. Approximately 800 citizens contributed a combined total of over 1,300 hours resulting in the largest citizen participation process since the 2010 Strategic Plan. The community survey designed to gauge perceptions about what makes Decatur welcoming or not generated 724 responses; more than 250 people attended a 5-hour community conversation across differences; over 120 people attended a 2-hour preview meeting; 224 people reviewed the list online; and 75 people attended a training workshop for facilitators.

As the first outcome of the Community Action Plan, the City Commission established and appointed a Better Together Advisory Board to oversee implementation and to continue community conversations across differences, thus institutionalizing the Initiative and the Plan. Over thirty people applied to the Board, the largest and most diverse number of volunteers to apply for any Decatur board. While the board officially started its work in January, 2017, implementation of key action items began in 2016 including fair and impartial training for the police department, a Better Together update on implementation at the 2016 State of the City address, successful advocacy for the General Assembly approval of homestead exemptions for low and moderate income seniors and a City Schools of Decatur property tax exemption. The Community Action Plan is a 3-year plan but institutionalizing it immediately ensured the city will continue its ongoing focus on equity, inclusion and engagement beyond the 3- year Plan.

One significant obstacle was an objection from those who believe they are welcoming who questioned spending significant taxpayer dollars on such an initiative. We recognized it early and designed our communications in part to address those concerns. The name and tag line set an optimistic and welcoming tone while also tying it to goals and actions in our strategic plan. “Better Together: Building our Capacity to Thrive” comes from Robert Putnam’s follow up to *Bowling Alone* and is about how communities are more productive and more resilient when their degree of community connection is strong. It gave us a framework to talk about the merits of the initiative. The Better Together logo utilizes the City of Decatur logo with the Better Together name and tagline below it visually reinforcing a strong Better Together foundation on which to build community in Decatur. We used photos of the planning team to reinforce the diversity of the group and to serve as an invitation that all are welcome at the community table. Another obstacle was overcoming suspicions of those who doubted the sincerity and efficacy of the initiative. We continue to stay aware of and wrestle with this as we implement the Plan.

An analysis of the program reveals that conversations across differences can be difficult but they provide a proactive way to establish trust in shared community values rather than being reactive in the face of an unexpected community crisis. An intentional outreach to establish creative, collaborative partnerships provides a model for the city going forward and the components created and utilized such as the Talking Across Differences Toolbox, Community Asset Map, Leadership Across Differences Training workshop, intentional bringing together of a diverse group of citizens and government staff to create a planning committee representing a mix of races, ages, faiths, neighborhoods, and income levels to help guide an initiative, an outreach process to include those who might not feel welcome at the community “table,” the creation of a designated Advisory Board to spearhead implementation of a Community Action Plan and continued emphasis on citywide conversations across differences are tools we can continue to use.

Alicia Philip, Director of The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta said, “the initiative is grounded in solid research and planning and a clear roadmap with defined and innovative action steps...it is a great example of the power of collaboration and engagement among concerned citizens, city officials and law enforcement.” Ed Lee, Director of The Emory University Barkley Forum, who gave the City its 2016 Georgia Speaker of the Year award said, “The Better Together campaign continues to develop opportunities for creative conversations about and across differences that will make disagreements generative and our myriad of differences a wellspring of social innovation. Decatur understands that communities that disagree, listen and empathize together will intellectually, culturally and economically grow together.”