



IMPROVING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN ATLANTA

# Recommendations

Center for Civic Innovation | September 14, 2021

# NPU Initiative

The NPU Initiative is a comprehensive study & review of Atlanta's historic Neighborhood Planning Unit (NPU) system led by the Center for Civic Innovation (CCI).

**CCI believes that residents should have their voices and needs heard and valued in city decision-making processes.**

Over the course of the Initiative, we have evaluated the purpose + roles, power + communication, structure + processes, and roles + capacity within and across the NPU system.

**We reviewed these aspects of the System through the lenses of effectiveness, equity, accountability, and restoration for residents and other stakeholders.**

The 14 recommendations presented today are a culmination of 2+ years of conversations, data, and key findings from the NPU Initiative.

# Advisory Board

Joseph Drolet	Citywide League of Neighborhoods	NPU N
Eunice Glover	APAB Ad Hoc Committee	NPU I
Shawn Harris	Georgia Tech College of Design	NPU E
Erica Holloman	West Atlanta Watershed Alliance	NPU S
Sagirah Jones	Atlanta Bicycle Coalition	NPU X
Leah LaRue	Department of City Planning	NPU J
Bithia Ratnasamy	Atlanta Housing	NPU W
Debbie Skopczynski	APAB President	NPU F

We have also consulted with Bunnie Jackson-Ransom and Leon Eplan.

# Public Engagement Process



- Phase 1: Relationship Building, Strategy Creation, and Conversations
- Phase 2: Data Collection + Analysis
- Phase 3: Coalition Building + Recommendation Co-Design

# Data & Information Sources

We have been very intentional about the types of information that we've collected and how we analyzed the information about the NPU system's intent, purpose, structures, processes, policies, communications, power, capacity, and support. We've gathered info from the following sources:

- Interviews: 60+ stakeholders
- Survey: 600+ complete responses
- Archival information
- NPU "World" Tour
- NPU recommendations to BZA, ZRB, and LRB & final outcomes
- Ideas + working sessions

# Recent & Upcoming Engagement Dates

## **July 17: Atlanta Planning Advisory Board (APAB) Meeting**

- Presentation of Key Findings for Feedback + Input

## **August 17: Advisory Board Meeting**

- Presentation of Draft Recommendations for Feedback and Input

## **August 26-27: COO, Department of City Planning Commissioner + NPU Team Meetings**

- Presentation of Draft Recommendations + Proposed DCP Tactics for Feedback + Input

## **September 9: Advisory Board + Coalition Meeting**

- Presentation of Recommendations

## **September 14: City Council Community Development/Human Services (CD/HS) Committee Meeting**

- Presentation of Recommendations

## **September 16: Public Presentation + Publishing of Final Report & Recommendations**

- 4:00pm virtual event – visit [npu.civicalanta.org](https://npu.civicalanta.org) for details

# Recommendations for the NPU System

# NPU System

## State of Georgia

### Executive

- Department of Community Affairs (DCA)

### Legislative

- General Assembly

### Judicial

- Courts

- City Charter
- Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP)

## City of Atlanta

### Executive

- Department of City Planning
- Other Offices & Departments

### Legislative

- City Council

### Judicial

- Solicitor & Court

- Code of Ordinances
- Law Department Opinions

## BACEs\*

- Atlanta Planning Advisory Board (APAB)
- Board of Zoning Adjustment (BZA)
- License Review Board (LRB)
- Zoning Review Board (ZRB)

\* Boards, Authorities, Commissions, etc.

## NPUs

### Neighborhood Planning Units (NPUs)

- Neighborhood, Civic, Business, and Homeowners Associations

- Bylaws
- Rules of Order
- Small Area Plans

## “Residents”

- Residents
- Property Owners
- Business & Organizational Representatives

**Other:**  
Counties, Atlanta Public Schools, Invest Atlanta, etc.



# Summary of Recommendations

1. Align on purposes and goals of the NPU system.
2. Maintain an agreed-upon, reciprocal, and comprehensive evaluation system.
3. Increase funding for personnel and other resources for DCP and the NPU Team.
4. Advocate and facilitate on citywide matters.
5. Ensure all residents are aware of the NPU system.
6. Set clear expectations on legal requirements and any necessary standard operating procedures.
7. Engage NPUs in identifying, planning, and prioritizing on all proposed projects and programs in each NPU.
8. Ensure that all NPUs and the neighborhoods within them have current small area plans.
9. Align on and transparently share the process and life-cycle of applications, legislation, etc. that go through the NPU system.
10. Provide digestible and holistic information.
11. Provide written feedback/correspondence to NPUs after final decisions.
12. Equip NPUs with information about the demographic, institutional, organizational, and grassroots resources within an NPUs geography.
13. Equip NPU leadership with the information and training they need.
14. Explore new meeting and organizational structures.

# Recommendation 1:

**Purpose + Roles**  
Power + Communications  
Structure + Processes  
Capacity + Resources

**Effective**  
**Equitable**  
**Accountable**  
**Restorative**

**Align on purposes and goals of the NPU system**, including neighborhood organizations and APAB, so that all stakeholders within the system can perform their roles effectively within it.

- Lead: Mayor + Council
- Partners: NPUs, APAB, DCP, neighborhood organizations, etc.

## *Tactics:*

- *Schedule a series of community engagement activities to understand the roles and responsibilities of NPU stakeholders in terms of power, communication, capacity, etc.*
- *Host mediation sessions*

# Purpose of the NPU System/Process

## 1974 ordinance

“It is hereby found and declared that in order to be truly comprehensive, **City plans must be responsive to the needs and concerns of citizens; that a plan which allows for diversified and responsive citizen involvement must be developed within the scope and content of the Atlanta City Charter**; and that it is in the public interest to adopt this proposed plan by incorporating it as a new Chapter of the City Code.”

## 1979 ordinance

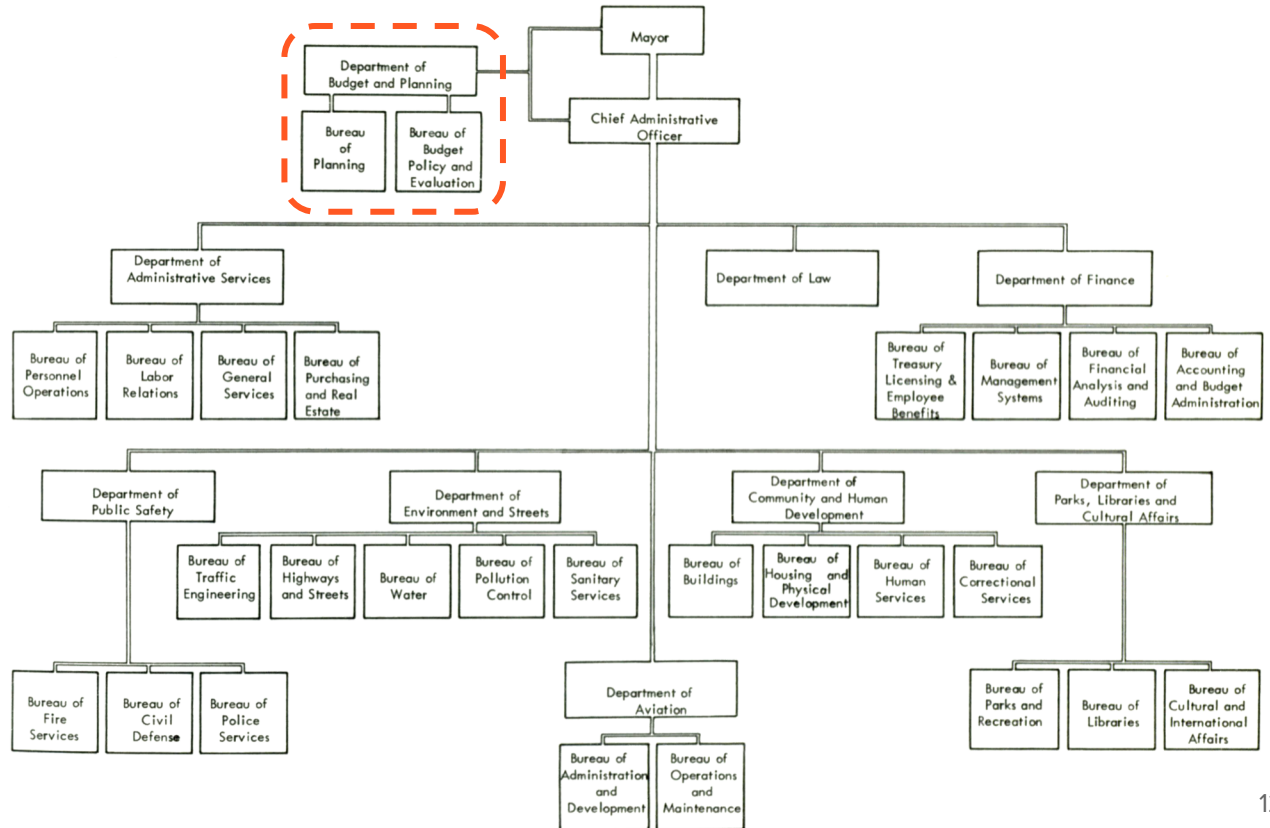
*– this section of code remains unchanged in 2021 and is still found under the heading “Budget and Planning”*

“The Council finds that it is in the public interest for the City of Atlanta to have an organized program of neighborhood planning. It is the purpose of this article to provide an opportunity both for the citizenry formally **to provide input into the comprehensive development plan** of the City of Atlanta and **to provide a means by which information concerning the operation of City Government** can be provided to the citizens of Atlanta. Further, it is the policy of the City of Atlanta **to coordinate the recommendations of neighborhood planning units with the formulation of the City’s budget, both capital and operating**, in order that the comprehensive development plan be an effective policy guide for the orderly development of the City.”

Recommendation 1: Align on purposes and goals of the NPU system.

# 1976 City of Atlanta Organizational Chart

The NPUs were part of the **Department of Budget and Planning**, sitting at the highest level of the City's administration.



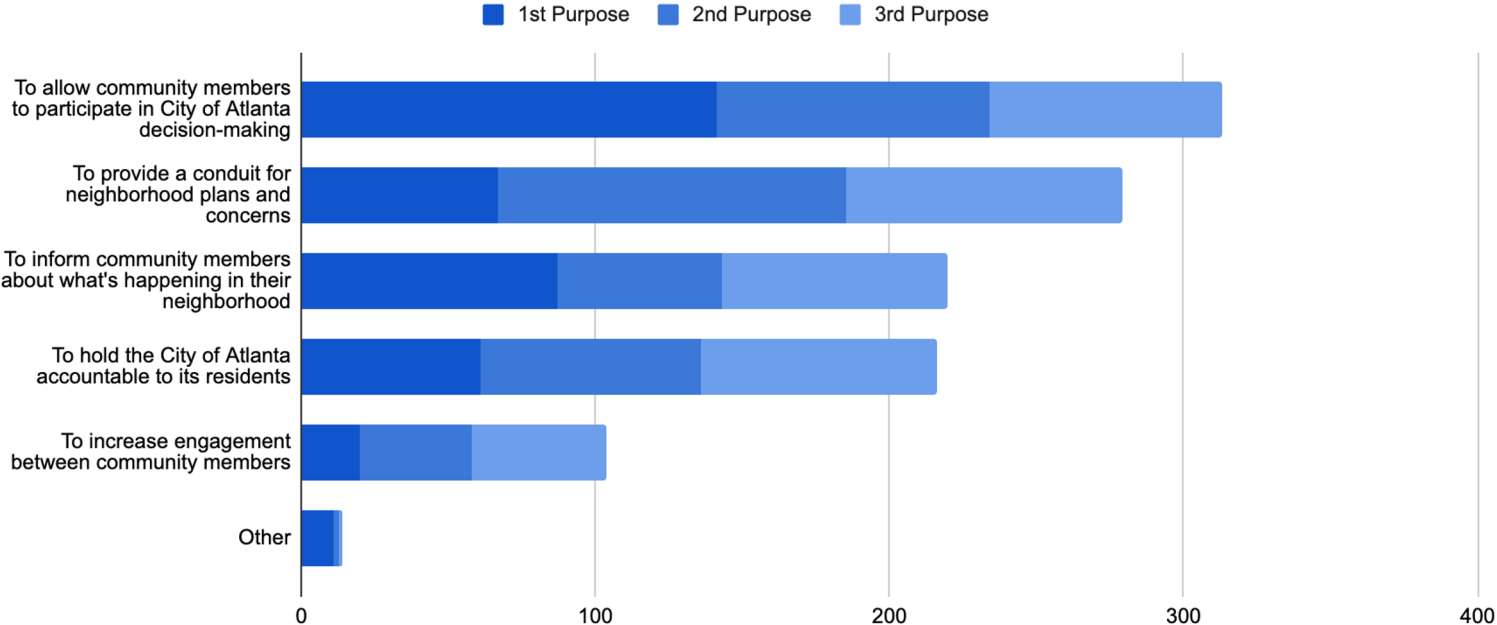
Source: 1976 Comprehensive Development Plan

Recommendation 1: Align on purposes and goals of the NPU system.

# What stakeholders told us.

## What are the main purposes of the NPU system?

Survey respondents were asked to choose their top 3.










# Misalignment on Roles

## Role of the NPU Planner






### NPU Planner responses

From your perspective, how would you define your role as a neighborhood planner in the NPU system? (Check all that apply)

	<u>count</u>	<u>percent</u>	
Liaison	11	79%	
Technical Assistant	6	43%	
Facilitator	4	29%	
Educator	4	29%	
Advocate	3	21%	
Mediator	1	7%	
Organizer	0	0%	
Other	2	14%	
total (n=)	14		

### NPU Leader responses

What is/are the role(s) of the neighborhood planner/NPU team in the NPU system? (Check all that apply)

	<u>count</u>	<u>percent</u>		<u>delta</u>
Liaison	6	67%		12%
Technical Assistant	7	78%		-35%
Facilitator	1	11%		17%
Educator	6	67%		-38%
Advocate	0	0%		21%
Mediator	1	11%		-4%
Organizer	0	0%		0%
Other	0	0%		14%
total (n=)	9			

## Recommendation 2:

Purpose + Roles  
Power + Communications  
Structure + Processes  
Capacity + Resources

Effective  
Equitable  
Accountable  
Restorative

**Maintain an agreed-upon, reciprocal, and comprehensive evaluation system to evaluate effectiveness and equity across the NPU system for all stakeholders involved on a regular basis so that the NPU system can be improved over time.**

- Lead: DCP
- Partners: APAB, NPUs, City Council

### *Tactics:*

- *Determine what metrics need to be tracked and the regularity of reporting and evaluation*

# NPU System Evaluations

## Recent 'plans' to evaluate or enhance:

- **2017**
  - Atlanta City Design
  - Resilient Atlanta Plan
  - various candidate campaign statements
- **2018**
  - CD/HS Goals & Objectives (2018)
- **2019**
  - One Atlanta: Housing Affordability Action Plan
- **2020**
  - 20-O-1003 ordinance proposal by Councilmember Antonio Brown

## Realized evaluations:

- **1978-79**
  - City Council Development Committee with support from GSU Professor John Hutcheson
- **1985**
  - Planning with Neighborhoods national study of 51 neighborhood planning programs with a more in-depth look at 5, including Atlanta
- **2019-21**
  - CCI NPU Initiative



# Recommendation 3:

Purpose + Roles  
Power + Communications  
Structure + Processes  
Capacity + Resources

Effective  
Equitable  
Accountable  
Restorative

**Increase funding for personnel and other resources for DCP and the NPU Team** to proactively identify, evaluate, and assist in overcoming NPU shortcomings, provide immediate solutions to NPU problems, and support NPUs in conducting business as described in other recommendations.

- Lead: Mayor
- Partners: Council

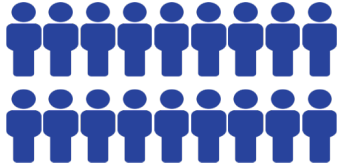
## *Tactics:*

- *Quantify current spending on NPU system activities as a baseline and include as a line item in the City's annual operating budget*
- *Apply for federal and philanthropic grants related to civic/community engagement*

### Recommendation 3: Increase funding for personnel and other resources for DCP and the NPU Team.

# NPU Support

City staffing dedicated for the NPU System has significantly fluctuated over time.



**1976**

The City of Atlanta's neighborhood planning division started out with a dedicated staff of 18 – thanks, in part, to federal funding – responsible for NPU coordination and CDP development.



**1985**

NPU staff was pared down to 2 – a coordinator and assistant.



**2021**

Today, the NPU Team has 4 staff members and 1 vacancy. There is also an NPU Planner assigned to each NPU, but that role is a small fraction of their overall job.

*"[NPU Chair], a lawyer, also said he and other NPU representatives who have certain business and professional skills can function without planners. They are also able to use their personal office staffs to perform NPU-related communication tasks once done by planners." – AJC story, 1985*

*"What are we supposed to do? We have no staff, we have no money, right? We get a grant every year – a grant. So we had to sit here and write for it. I spent about \$1,200 to get a postcard into every mailbox inside of the NPU. That was like a third of my budget – just to get one postcard. I really feel like we are a bit of a neglected rump of a department of the division of the City." – NPU Leader, 2020*

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13. Equip NPU leadership with the information and training they need.
14. Explore new meeting and organizational structures.

# Thanks!

## **Public Presentation of Recommendations**

virtual event on Thursday, September 16 at 4:00pm

visit [npu.civicalanta.org](http://npu.civicalanta.org) for details