

# ATLANTA BUSINESS CHRONICLE

## Editor's Note: Atlanta mayor aims to turn the page with the governor's office



*A rendering for Centennial Yards, a project that would be a major part of Downtown's future.*



By Douglas Sams – Editor-in-chief, Atlanta Business Chronicle - Sep 25, 2022

The mayor can't fake a good relationship with the governor. It must be authentic.

So says Atlanta's 61st Mayor Andre Dickens, a Democrat leading a blue city of just under 500,000 in a historically red state of 10.8 million.

Dickens and Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp share economic development goals in common, like luring high-paying jobs to the state. But the dynamics driving the state economy are different from those shaping the urban core. Well outside the city, Georgia has seen a boom in e-commerce and

an automotive manufacturing sector shifting toward electric vehicles. In Atlanta, Dickens runs a city known for the headquarters of Fortune 500 mainstays such as Delta Air Lines Inc., and The Coca Cola Co., and burgeoning outposts for West Coast tech giants Google LLC and Microsoft Corp.

Those expansions reflect a wave of revitalization sweeping across the city since the end of the Great Recession. It created thousands of apartments, lured white-collar jobs to the BeltLine and sparked new towers for companies such as Norfolk Southern Corp.

Many of the biggest economic development wins during that period were negotiated by the teams of the mayor and governor. Dickens told the Chronicle last month the relationship and the jobs it brings are “the heartbeat of the state.” He aims to strengthen cooperation between the offices.

Kemp, who faces Democrat Stacey Abrams in the fall election, and former Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms clashed over the response to the pandemic and how to deal with spikes in crime. At times, it drove a wedge between them.

Dickens told the Chronicle he wants the governor’s office to see the city as a partner. “If we are going to attract business, it has to be done together,” he said.

Dickens is also navigating a potentially choppy Atlanta economy, one the pandemic is making even more unpredictable, complicating narratives of the past several years, such as the rebirth of U.S. cities. Consider this nugget from this week’s cover story: While Georgia is adding new residents at a higher clip than most other states, the urban core is seeing a net loss of people and cash, according to an analysis of U.S. Census data.

Dickens’ priority is the ongoing revitalization of the urban core and to counter anything that threatens it, said John Boyd, founder and principal of the Boyd Co. Inc., a site selection firm in Boca Raton, Florida. One of the largest single urban redevelopments is Centennial Yards, the proposed rebirth of the city’s Gulch, a collection of downtown parking lots below State Farm Arena.

The tech sector gives Dickens and projects like Centennial Yards hope. It has the largest 12-month job growth of any sector in the Atlanta economy, said Georgia Tech economics professor Tibor Besedes. Year over year employment is up about 12%, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Tech giants in Atlanta have also taken a long-term view about their growth in the city.

The impacts of Microsoft’s planned Westside campus will ripple across the Atlanta economy for years. The technology units of companies such as Nike and Airbnb have also been filling new office space in West Midtown. Even with potential momentum from the tech sector, it's worth noting the city's development boom is expected to slow the rest of the year and into 2023 amid rising interest rates and the higher cost of debt.

In Atlanta, Dickens can look back on history to see how the path for urban revitalization often intersects with the governor's office. A model for big city urban turnarounds is Andrew Young, a civil rights hero whose work in economic development was also legendary, Boyd said. Sam Massell is another mayor whose approach inspired Dickens. Speaking after Massell's death earlier this year, Dickens said, "He drew circles and never drew a line," a metaphor to describe Massell's ability to find common ground.

Dickens said he speaks monthly with Kemp about shared goals, and he checks in on the roughest days. Dickens calls it the human side of public office. Some days probably are rougher than others. Atlanta deals with challenges that other big cities face including rising crime rates. Dickens also had to confront the Buckhead secessionist movement. Rumbblings from the wealthy district that it's still overlooked by the city got louder this month. Buckhead remains an important center for the city's commercial real estate, insurance and finance jobs.

"Economic development is all about leadership," Boyd said. "This effort to have a better relationship with the governor's office, this idea of turning the page, is viewed as a positive by the business community. There's no question about that."