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## FOR McCLARTY, DeKALB TRAFFIC ISSUES DRIVE DEVELOPMENT

IT'S NO SECRET that one of the biggest problems facing metro Atlanta is its intractable traffic congestion. As head of the Chamber of Commerce of one of the biggest counties in greater Atlanta, Leonardo McClarty is knee-deep in the trenches of dealing with the issue.

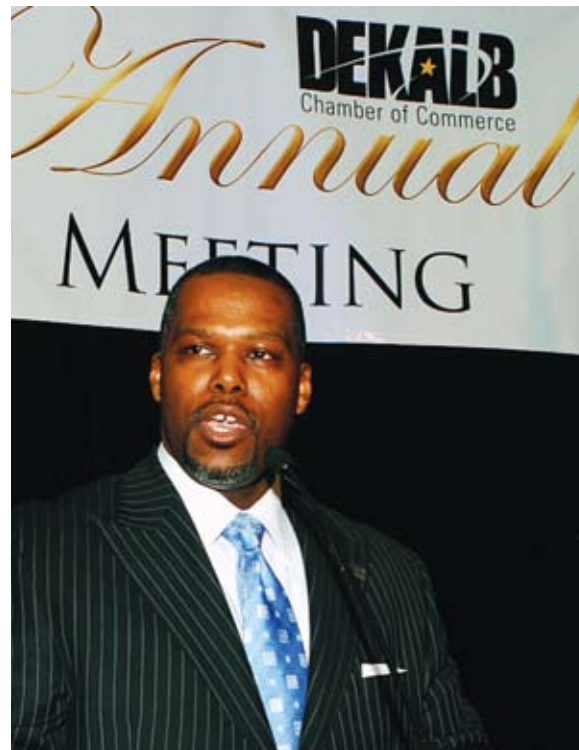
The 37-year-old McClarty, a 1996 Furman graduate, has been executive director of the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce since 2005. Located just east of Atlanta, DeKalb County was a suburb in the 1960s but is now as heavily urbanized as any part of Georgia. With about three-quarters of a million people, DeKalb is the third most populous county in the state and includes the cities of Decatur and Dunwoody, as well as Stone Mountain park, Emory University and the Perimeter Mall commercial area along Interstate 285.

Since becoming the chamber's chief, McClarty has taken a stagnant organization with declining membership and a dwindling financial base and made it viable again, according to Delores Crowell, a region manager for AT&T in Atlanta.

"He came to the chamber at a time that it was struggling, and his job was to turn it around," says Crowell, who was interim director before McClarty was hired.

McClarty, a political science major and running back on the football team at Furman, entered the economic development field after obtaining a master's degree in regional planning from Clemson. He moved up the career ranks by taking jobs in progressively larger cities before latching on with the DeKalb Chamber. In 2008 *Georgia Trend* magazine named him to its list of the state's "40 Best and Brightest Under 40."

One of McClarty's goals has been to encourage the chamber's smaller members to become environmentally sensitive in their business practices. He's made his point by organizing seminars and lunch talks about what small companies in other metropolitan areas are doing.



"It's one thing to be a Xerox or a Home Depot and to be green and have sustainable practices. They've got money for research and development, and they've got people who work in process improvement and supply chain and all of these specialties," McClarty says. "To companies that have five or six employees, it's different. We're just trying to help them understand what's out there."

Environmental concerns are also critical in the economic development component of

McClarty's job, particularly in terms of Atlanta's traffic and air quality. Because of issues like traffic congestion, and because of the constant rivalry with its much larger neighbor in Atlanta, the DeKalb County chamber director's most difficult challenge will remain economic development, Crowell says.

"It's a tough battle because we're so close to the city of Atlanta," she says. "We compete for the same customers as Atlanta. DeKalb County is so dense, there's not a lot of room to bring in new industry."

As Georgia's leaders have haggled for years — to date, without a solution — on how to pay for improvements to the region's roads and mass transit, McClarty and other business proponents have tried to persuade elected officials that without a firm plan, Atlanta could soon fall behind its Southeastern competitors, namely Charlotte, Nashville and Birmingham, in economic development.

"Traffic has gotten to the point where it dictates everything that you do," says McClarty, who lives in Tucker with his wife, Shaneka, and 2-year-old daughter. "It dictates when you take your kids to ballet or to baseball. It dictates when and where you schedule your meetings."

So while land use and zoning decisions are often topics of discussion with companies looking to move to or expand in DeKalb County, McClarty says traffic is on everyone's minds.

"One of our strengths for the Atlanta area is our roads. We've got the major interstates in I-85, I-285 and I-20," he says. "But the same thing that's a strength is also one of our weaknesses."

— ANDY PETERS

*The author, a 1992 Furman graduate, is a reporter for the Fulton County (Ga.) Daily Report. Photo courtesy Leonardo McClarty.*