



*House of Representatives  
Study Committee on the Revitalization of the  
Atlanta State Farmers Market*

**Final Report**

**Chairman Valencia Stovall  
Representative, 74<sup>th</sup> District**

**The Honorable Debbie Buckner  
Representative, 137<sup>th</sup> District**

**The Honorable Robert Dickey  
Representative, 140<sup>th</sup> District**

**The Honorable Penny Houston  
Representative, 170<sup>th</sup> District**

**The Honorable Tom McCall  
Representative, 33<sup>rd</sup> District**

**The Honorable Scot Turner  
Representative, 21<sup>st</sup> District**

**The Honorable Sam Watson  
Representative, 172<sup>nd</sup> District**

**Ms. Bonnie Wilson  
Southerland Food Service**

**Mr. Don Barnett  
Market Grocery**

**November 1, 2018**

Prepared by the House Budget and Research Office

## Introduction

The House Study Committee on the Revitalization of the Atlanta State Farmers Market, created by House Resolution 1471 during the 2018 Legislative Session, was tasked with making recommendations to further the market's usefulness. Committee members attended four meetings to study the conditions, needs, and issues facing the Atlanta State Farmers Market.

The committee was chaired by Representative Valencia Stovall (74<sup>th</sup>) and included eight additional members: Representative Debbie Buckner (137<sup>th</sup>), Representative Robert Dickey (140<sup>th</sup>), Representative Penny Houston (170<sup>th</sup>), Representative Tom McCall (33<sup>rd</sup>), Representative Scot Turner (21<sup>st</sup>), Representative Sam Watson (172<sup>nd</sup>), Ms. Bonnie Wilson with Southerland Food Service, and Mr. Don Barnette with Market Grocery. The House Budget and Research Office staff member assigned to facilitate the meetings was Mrs. Morgan Hall. The Legislative Counsel staff member assigned to the committee was Mr. Blake Travis.

The committee held four public meetings. Two meetings were held at the Atlanta State Farmers Market, one meeting was held at Clayton State University, and one meeting was held at the Georgia State Capitol. During those meetings, the committee heard from the Georgia Department of Agriculture, the Georgia Department of Transportation, the Georgia Department of Economic Development, and the Georgia Farm Bureau, together with testimony from public and private organizations.

The following individuals presented testimony to the committee:

### **August 16, 2018**

Mr. Matthew Kulinski, Georgia Department of Agriculture; Mr. Gary Black, Commissioner of the Georgia Department of Agriculture; Mr. Keith Parker, Parker All Natural Growers Group; Ms. Bonnie Wilson, Atlanta Produce Dealers Association; and Mr. Bob Barnette, Market Grocery. The public provided comments.

### **September 12, 2018**

Ms. Christi Owens, Georgia Department of Audits and Accounts Performance Division; Ms. Kimberly Nesbit and Mr. Tim Owens, Georgia Department of Transportation Office of Program Delivery; Ms. Beth Bailey, Director of Sales and Promotions of the Clayton County Convention and Visitors Bureau; Ms. Tracie Sanchez, Georgia Department of Economic Development; Mr. Charlie Fiveash, Managing Director of Lee and Associates; and Mr. Shannon James, President and CEO of Aerotropolis Atlanta Alliance. The public provided comments.

## **September 27, 2018**

Mr. Alex Bradford, Georgia Farm Bureau; Mr. George Nakos, Professor at Clayton State University; Ms. Tracie Roberson and Mr. Don Williams, Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA); and Ms. Melanie Biersmith, UGA Extension Georgia 4-H. The public provided comments.

## **October 2, 2018**

The committee met to discuss and agree on the recommendations to be set forth. There was no testimony or public comment heard.

### **Background:**

The Atlanta State Farmers Market was established in 1959 and has since grown into a 155-acre facility to accommodate a variety of farmers and crops. Historically, the market has been a place for farmers to come and sell their products directly to the consumers or to be packaged for transportation elsewhere. As time has progressed and technologies have evolved, it is now a concern the market is not operating to its fullest potential. Many feel the lack of a public presence is the reason for the decline at the market, while others attribute the decline to a change in the way farmers do business.

### **Committee Findings**

The Georgia Department of Agriculture currently is responsible for all of the state farmers markets in Georgia, including the Atlanta State Farmers Market. The market was set up for 20<sup>th</sup> century agriculture, meaning farmers would come to the market with a truckload of produce, with the intention to sell it all that day. While some farmers still operate that way, the industry has evolved. Most ship their products to the market, so the products can be redistributed to grocery stores, restaurants, and other destinations. This process has allowed the Atlanta market to embrace its “terminal” status, as it is one of only thirteen terminal markets in the United States.

The Atlanta market operates seven days a week, 24 hours a day. The 155-acre campus contains produce space, a grocery store, a florist, food service, retail, and a garden center, as well as space for seasonal items to be sold. This market is unique, as it allows the public to enter the market and shop on-site. Currently, the market is operating at a profit, bringing in approximately \$6.6 million per year and expensing approximately \$3.2 million per year<sup>1</sup>. While the profit margin is stable, expenses have been steadily increasing each year. Currently, all revenue is remitted back to the state’s general fund, leaving the markets with

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix- Georgia Department of Agriculture

no recurring budget. In order to mitigate that challenge, bond funding has been increasing to keep up with maintenance and the building of additional cold storage facilities.

With so many different entities at the market, there are competing goals. However, the main goal is to continue to serve farmers. There is an increasingly long list of tenants wanting additional cold storage. The Department of Agriculture is working to accommodate those tenants with the construction of four additional cold storage facilities at a cost of \$2.4 million, with more tenants still on the wait list<sup>2</sup>.

Maintenance and upgrades are another concern, primarily from a food safety perspective. There are standards and protocols each business on the market must abide by, meaning the Department of Agriculture has a responsibility to their tenants to make sure the facilities are up to industry standards. In 2010, \$290,000 in bond funds were appropriated to do a complete study of the market, including the plumbing system, electrical grid, sewer, and ages of the roofs.<sup>3</sup> The study led to a strategic plan to help the department maintain the facility. There is also an on-going discussion about whether to continue allowing public access to the market. The citizens around the area have indicated they use the public areas, while there is a growing concern about maintaining a safe environment for the public. This includes food safety from the business standpoint, as well as overall safety due to the transport vehicles and traffic flow of the market.

### **Economic Development**

During the testimonies heard by the committee, economic development for the Forest Park area was a large concern. The Clayton County Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) testified before the committee that they were once housed on market property in the past and had created a welcome center now known as the Georgia Grown Welcome Center. The CVB organized multiple events on the market and has maintained a relationship with tenants; however, in 2007 the space was relinquished by the CVB to the Atlanta Produce Dealers Association. It was discussed in the meeting that the CVB would commit to promote any events held at the market. In addition to promoting events, the CVB recommended several enhancements that could be implemented, including a separate entrance and exit to the market for the general public, a fresher “look” for the market, annual events, re-opening of the restaurant, and more educational opportunities for children.

Following the CVB, Ms. Tracie Sanchez with the Georgia Department of Economic Development addressed the committee. Ms. Sanchez spoke primarily about the resource teams within the department. A resource team views the property, the surrounding

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<sup>2</sup> House Bill 684

<sup>3</sup> HB 947- Bond 397.701

community, and the goals of the entity being evaluated, and then prepares a plan for the entity to accomplish its goals and promote itself within the area. Ms. Sanchez did not make any recommendations at the time of testimony. She indicated the earliest a resource team could evaluate the market and the surrounding area of Clayton County would be in 2019, with a specific time waiting to be scheduled. Afterwards, recommendations would be made as their analysis is completed.

The committee also heard from Mr. Charlie Fiveash, representing Lee and Associates, and Mr. Shannon James, representing Aerotropolis Atlanta Alliance. Both came to speak to the committee about public-private partnerships. Mr. James stated his particular interest in partnering with the market is to help them find employees for their workforce, as well as partner in economic development and educational opportunities. Mr. Fiveash discussed opportunities for private companies to partner with the state, including ideas such as a job center, a learning center for students, an agriculture logistics center, and a history center. Mr. Fiveash's suggestions led committee members to question why the state of Georgia is still owns and operates the Atlanta Farmers Market. When asked, Mr. Fiveash said he thinks many private enterprises would step forward to take over the market.

### **Transportation**

The committee heard testimony from the Georgia Department of Transportation about a pending project concerning the intersection of Forest Parkway and Frontage Road. According to the testimony given by Ms. Kimberly Nesbitt and Mr. Tim Evans, this intersection is going to be the start of a two-year project, which concerns the Atlanta State Farmers Market due to its proximity to the market and Interstate 75. This will be a two- to three-year project, but the end result should bring ease for the companies moving produce to and from the market. The project is currently on hold until additional funding is secured.

The committee also heard testimony from MARTA's representatives Mr. Don Williams and Ms. Tracie Roberson. They came to discuss the Clayton County Transit Initiative, which includes transportation modes throughout the community that would help the public travel to and from the farmers market. Bus Route 195 currently runs on an hourly basis; however some questioned if the route could be run on a more frequent basis. Williams testified that increased ridership through the addition of retail, office, and residential space would allow the authority to run the bus more frequently. Many members of the committee asked also about the possibilities of a Park-N-Ride and a rail station location at or near the market. Williams' response detailed an extensive cost that would be associated with the construction of such infrastructure, showing it would be more practical to build a multi-use parking deck for commuters and market-goers, alike.

## **Education**

The committee heard from Mr. George Nakos, a professor of marketing at Clayton State University. His students performed a market study on the Atlanta State Farmers Market in the fall semester of 2017, which he presented to the committee on September 27<sup>th</sup>. The study outlines strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and ideas for growth. Some of the ideas for growth included an increase in advertising, improvement of aesthetic appeal, more consumer-driven events, and increase the emphasis on the origin of the products being sold.

Additionally, the committee heard from Ms. Melanie Biersmith, who works on the Georgia 4-H program within the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Office. She discussed the program's successful "Center Education". This form of educating students happens in spaces outside of the classroom. Currently, the program's primary users are students in fourth through eighth grade, with day time courses and overnight studies. These courses have taken place in areas such as Camp Jekyll, Rock Eagle, and Burton 4-H Center on Tybee Island. Ms. Biersmith suggested using this program at the Atlanta State Farmers Market to teach students about where their food comes from and agriculture.

## **Committee Recommendations**

Upon review of the information presented, the House Study Committee on the Revitalization of the Atlanta State Farmers Market recommends the following:

### **1. Allow the Georgia State Farmers Markets to Keep Earned Revenue**

The study committee recommends allowing the state run farmers markets to keep a percentage of the revenue they earn, which will add cash flow the markets can use for maintenance and repairs. It would also allow the Georgia Department of Agriculture to improve the look of the market, making it more appealing to prospective business operations and the public alike. In making market improvements, the committee would like the Department of Agriculture to upgrade the signage, including the main gate sign and directional signs within the market.

### **2. Create a second campus for the Atlanta State Farmers Market**

The study committee was presented with ideas to use the market to increase tourism and education for the community in the surrounding areas. The committee would like the second campus to have a climate-controlled area, as well as an educational space for students to learn about produce and where their food comes from. It should include a diversity in food options which mirrors the growing number of ethnic cultures. The committee recommends such an educational program to be run by the Georgia Department of Agriculture, in conjunction with Georgia Grown businesses and local teaching institutions. This space can be part of

the 155-acre campus the market already occupies, or it can be off-site in close proximity to the market.

**3. Rework Traffic Flow**

The market currently has two sections, an upper and lower section. Originally, the upper section was intended for transport vehicles and the lower section was intended for the public. With increased industrial use in the lower section of the market, the committee recommends a change in the current traffic pattern for the safety of all who visit the market.

**4. Add On-site Security**

With safety in mind, the committee recommends the addition of full-time security to the market. There should be at least one security guard at each entrance, as well as an officer who travels throughout the market.

**5. Create Public-Private Partnerships**

The community surrounding the farmers market has expressed interest in making the facility more appealing to the public. To do this, it would take more funds than the state can allocate. In creating a public-private partnership, the community can work with the Georgia Department of Agriculture on projects outside of the state budget. The committee recommends this process be evaluated every two years. If the partnerships are successful, the committee would like to explore the possibility of privatizing the entire market.

**Mr. Speaker, these are the findings and recommendations of your Study Committee on the Revitalization of the Atlanta State Farmers Market.**

**Respectfully Submitted,**

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Valencia Stovall". The signature is written in black ink on a light yellow rectangular background.

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**The Honorable Valencia Stovall,  
Representative, 74<sup>th</sup> District,  
Chairwoman**



## Appendix

<b>Georgia Department of Agriculture Summary of 2018 Farmers Market Income (Loss) October 05, 2018</b>			
	<b>2018 Revenue</b>	<b>2018 Expense</b>	<b>Net Profit (Loss)</b>
Atlanta	\$5,607,345	\$2,218,383	\$3,388,962
Augusta	\$22,439	\$198,585	\$23,854
Cairo	\$6,645	\$11,484	\$(4,839)
Columbus	\$878	\$12,028	\$(11,150)
Cordele	\$101,645	\$253,262	\$(151,616)
Ellijay	\$6,750	\$0	\$6,750
Macon	\$142,533	\$300,085	\$(157,552)
Moultrie	\$163,936	\$84,903	\$79,033
Savannah	\$164,394	\$284,472	\$(120,078)
Thomasville	\$194,211	\$169,925	\$24,287
Valdosta	\$48,824	\$13,705	\$35,119
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$6,659,602</b>	<b>\$3,546,833</b>	<b>\$3,112,769</b>