

GEORGIA TECH RESEARCH

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News Release

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TACKLING THE TOUGH ISSUES:

For Immediate Release

-- INCREASINGLY, POLICYMAKERS

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TURN TO PROFESSIONAL MEDIATORS

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Atlanta's new historic preservation ordinance marks a victory for the planners who slogged through months of controversy to find answers. It also demonstrates the success of mediation techniques that have become increasingly attractive to city planners, legislators, and special interest groups faced with tough public policy decisions.

The ordinance was drafted after Atlanta called on mediation experts from the Georgia Institute of Technology and the University of Virginia.

These mediators practice a relatively new communication science that calls for collaborative decision-making. In recent years, they say, the demand for mediation skills has grown as community organizations and interest groups seek a stronger voice in public policy decisions.

Mediation became popular in the mid-1960s as a method for solving minor legal disputes such as divorce. More recently, the technique has gained acceptance in the public policy arena. An estimated 40 public policy mediators currently provide assistance with multi-party conflicts, says J. William Breslin, a managing editor for Consensus newsletter published by the MIT-Harvard Public Disputes Program. Today, mediators tackle issues ranging from airport noise to solid waste management, affordable housing, and economic development.

"If you think about how policy was made in the late 1950s and early '60s, in general, local communities and residents didn't get directly involved in issues such as economic development and historic preservation," says mediator Michael Elliott, a Georgia Tech professor.

But that trend has changed, Elliott says, and public officials are beginning to recognize the value of collaborative decision-making.

Atlanta's historic preservation debate began heating up in the spring of 1986, when three apartment buildings were demolished despite opposition from preservationists. Meanwhile, the Urban Design Commission proposed an expansion of designated historic districts -- a plan that met with mixed reviews from city residents and developers.

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The stage for conflict had been set. In early 1987, a special task force sought help from Elliott and Gregory Bourne, co-directors of the Southeast Negotiation Network, part of Georgia Tech's Center for Planning and Development. Also serving on the mediation team were Richard Collins and Elizabeth Waters of the Institute for Environmental Negotiation at the University of Virginia.

No one ever said it would be easy. Indeed, Bourne says, issues at the heart of a dispute can lead to some tense moments during the course of negotiations. But the structure of formal mediation helps guide participants through controversial issues.

"An innovative system was developed for dealing with one of the very difficult problems facing many communities around the country -- how to deal with the issue of economic hardship caused by a landmark's designation," Bourne says.

Several phases of planning were critical to the decision-making process. First, the conflict was stabilized and analyzed. The mediation team interviewed dozens of interested parties to define the various sides of the issue. They sought panel participants who would firmly defend a cause without becoming inflexible about the best methods for achieving goals.

Once negotiations got underway, participants gathered in large group meetings to review facts and discuss the issues. Later, they met face-to-face in smaller work groups to iron out tough conflicts. "We made a decision-making body that would reach solutions based on consensus, rather than by voting," says Elliott.

In early 1988, participants agreed upon a "single negotiated text --" a plan for action reflecting the consensus of the group. Finally, implementation plans were established, and a new ordinance was signed this year. For their efforts, the mediation team received a "Meritorious Planning Process" award presented by the Georgia Planning Association.

Bourne and Elliott served as mediators during Atlanta's historic preservation crisis. In other words, their skills were enlisted only after a dispute had developed.

They are taking a slightly different approach to the problem of waste management in Georgia. By promoting policy dialogue among lawmakers, environmentalists, recycling proponents and others, they hope to find solutions before the situation reaches a stalemate. Bourne and Elliott helped organize the Georgia Waste Management Roundtable, a statewide study program operating through the Southeast Negotiation Network.

Any potentially controversial issues can be addressed through a collaborative process, Bourne says. The team offers courses around the country to help business leaders, policymakers and administrators who must negotiate and manage public conflicts.

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