



Chattanooga, USA © Wikipedia/~Lemcke (talk)

Author: **Michael Elliott**, School of City and Regional Planning, Georgia Institute of Technology, USA

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, CHATTANOOGA

Restoring Prosperity through Participatory Planning

Chattanooga is currently the fourth largest city in the state of Tennessee, located where the Tennessee River bisects the Cumberland Plateau. The city has a population of more than 170,000 inhabitants and, since 1940, has developed as a hub for transportation and industry, when it was known as the Dynamo of Dixie. A share of more than 35% of jobs in the manufacturing and heavy industry sectors brought economic prosperity but also environmental degradation. During the 1980's serious socio-economic challenges also arose in Chattanooga, such as loss of jobs due to de-industrialization, deterioration of infrastructure, social division and racial tensions. The city choked with the legacy of old industry: a derelict waterfront, decaying industrial and commercial structures, toxic sites, and air pollution so thick that in 1969, national air pollution officials called Chattanooga the "worst polluted city" in the United States. All this caused a population decline of more than 10% during the 1980's.

The city realized the need for a new foundation for its economy and a social and environmental transformation and slowly engineered its revival by building a significant system of participatory planning. In 1982, a city appointed task force embraced an ambitious re-examination of the 35 kilometer Tennessee River corridor, by conducting public meetings throughout the community. The Lyndhurst Foundation initiated a strategic program to support Chattanooga's renewal, establishing an urban design center to popularize ideas of sustainable redevelopment.

At the same time Chattanooga Venture, another community-based organisation, engaged the full community in the task of environmental, social and economic revitalization. Six major strategies emerged from this process: (1) integrate economic and community life through the lens of sustainable development, (2) focus on visible, doable projects that promote civic leadership and build confidence, (3) build institutional capacity, (4) invest in human capital and employment opportunities, (5) invest in social capital and (6) plan the infrastructure for the future. After the implementation of these strategies, the city initiated a larger, regional process to address inter-jurisdictional coordination.

Chattanooga has undoubtedly influenced its economic, social and environmental situation through territorial planning. Substantial governmental and private resources have been invested in transforming the downtown, river-front areas, and infrastructures. As a result, the city's population has grown and it has one of the nation's strongest local economies. Unemployment has dropped to 10% below the national average. The city, once famous for its pollution, is now noted for its sustainable economy. In 1996, the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat II Conference) in Istanbul recognized Chattanooga as one of the world's 12 "Best Practice Cities", earning also numerous awards for livability, excellence in housing and consolidated planning.