



**NATIONAL  
HOUSING CRISIS  
TASK FORCE**

**GOVERNANCE >>>**

**RESPONDING TO A CRISIS: LESSONS  
FROM ATLANTA'S HOUSING STRIKE  
FORCE**

**ACCELERATOR  
FOR AMERICA**



DREXEL UNIVERSITY

**Nowak Metro Finance Lab**

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# Responding to a Crisis: Lessons from Atlanta's Housing Strike Force

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## Summary

Local governments across the country have recognized the need to use their own tools and powers to address the housing crisis in their communities. This is true in major coastal cities, small towns, rural communities, and even in cities that have, traditionally, been considered affordable. Convening local public agencies, quasi-public entities, and civic sector partners is a necessary step to delivering a comprehensive approach to the housing supply and affordability crisis.

Atlanta's **Housing Strike Force** is the city's housing crisis response team and provides a model for how localities can organize for success. Led by Mayor Andre Dickens, it includes the senior executives from every major public agency that touches housing or manages public land that could support development. Together, this group has reformed lethargic systems, deployed innovative housing solutions, and begun reshaping how affordable housing is delivered at the municipal level.

Governments at all levels have developed effective models for responding to crises, whether pandemics or natural disasters: establishing centralized command structures, setting clear mandates, and empowering interdisciplinary teams of officials. Atlanta's innovation lies in applying this crisis response model to the housing sector at the local level.

## The Challenge This Tool Solves

Cities, counties, and states are at the forefront of addressing the current housing crisis in innovative ways. Many of these innovations, however, fall outside the purview of the Mayor's Office, often originating from public housing authorities, economic development agencies, and the civic and private sectors. Advancing these innovations requires the engagement and coordination of a wide range of public agencies, including transit authorities and local school districts. Bringing together public agencies in monthly meetings focused on housing goals provide a mechanism for overcoming siloed decision-making and fragmentation at the local level.

## Types of Communities That Could Use This Tool

Atlanta's Strike Force model can be adapted by dozens, if not hundreds, of localities in the U.S. and provide a new, common platform for addressing housing challenges. Given the regional nature of housing markets, Atlanta's efforts could also inform the creation of multi-jurisdictional, county or regional strike forces that enable collaboration on this critical issue.

## Expected Impacts of This Tool

By providing an organizing blueprint for localities across the country, the Strike Force model can accelerate the production and preservation of affordable housing. In Atlanta, it has already resulted in considerable progress towards the City's goal of producing 20,000 affordable housing units.

## Background

When Mayor Andre Dickens assumed office in 2022, Atlanta's housing crisis was reaching a critical point. Rapid population growth continued to outpace housing production. A growing number of residents were facing a housing market that was [increasingly out of reach](#). Mayor Dickens campaigned on creating 20,000 affordable housing units over eight years, but his team projected that even under optimistic assumptions, only 15,000 would be delivered.

Like many cities, the housing ecosystem in Atlanta in 2022 was highly fragmented. Permitting, operating subsidies, entitlements, gap funding, resident emergency resources, and land ownership were all managed across numerous public agencies. More than a dozen public entities controlled land holdings. This fragmentation resulted in lengthy delays, conflicting requirements, a general lack of coordination, and increased development costs.

Atlantans were becoming the victims of this broken housing ecosystem, and the Dickens Administration concluded that meeting its housing goal required a coordinated crisis response. The Housing Strike Force emerged as the city's organizing solution.

## Proposed Solution: Housing Strike Force

Launched in early 2022, Atlanta's Housing Strike Force is led by the mayor and consists of 13 members, including the senior executives of all local public entities that impact the housing ecosystem. Some members have direct responsibility for preserving or expanding housing supply, including the leadership of the public housing authority and the planning department. Some have indirect impacts on the housing system, including the leadership of the school system and the transit authority. A list of members can be found in the Appendix. The full Strike Force meets quarterly to review progress toward the 20,000-unit goal, discuss upcoming projects that will require deeper coordination, and address challenges agencies are facing. Additionally, staff participate in biweekly project pipeline meetings, working together to assess and advance new projects, as well as monthly strike force check-in meetings. The Strike Force's true value stems from day-to-day collaboration between agencies that now work together to troubleshoot and move projects forward. The strike force has cultivated a collaborative environment where the relevant agencies work hand in hand, often on calls or meetings multiple times a day, problem solving and coordinating resources to move projects forward. Just three years into the mayor's

eight-year affordable housing goal, Atlanta has delivered or begun construction on over 11,000 of the 20,000 targeted units.

In addition to the Housing Strike Force, the Mayor's Office established a new housing team reporting directly to the mayor. While the city's Housing Department is focused on existing programs and policies, this new team is focused entirely on the 20,000-unit goal, and operates across agencies, designs new initiatives, and leads implementation. Its members include urban planners, architects, and policy experts, all empowered to move quickly and test new approaches. Together, the Strike Force and central housing team form the organizational backbone of Atlanta's crisis response, this new team is focused on this goal.

The Housing Strike Force places a high premium on goal setting and continuous measurement. The housing team built an [interactive tracker](#), publicly available and sourced from every agency delivering affordable housing. Each strike force meeting starts with a status of the path to 20,000 units.

## Diffusing and Scaling the Housing Task Force

With the strike force in operation for several years, Atlanta's leadership has identified eight key lessons that can guide other cities considering to bring a unified, crisis response approach to housing policy and implementation.

### *Set the North Star*

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Establishing a clear and measurable goal helps guide policy decisions and coordinate action. For Atlanta, that north star was creating or preserving 20,000 affordable housing units in eight years, a figure grounded in recent needs assessments and articulated during the mayoral campaign. Initial analysis revealed that maximizing current programs like the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program and the city's Inclusionary Zoning Ordinance would still fall short of the established goal by 4,000-5,000 units. Recognizing that gap allowed the city to rethink its approach and pursue systemic change to reach its goal.

### *Unleash the Coalition and Move Fast*

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Atlanta's housing coalition, which includes public, private, and philanthropic partners, had been building for years, and proved critical to the early successes of the housing crisis response. Groups like [HouseATL](#) and previous administrations, including that of former Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, had already laid important groundwork.

Instead of spending the first year developing a new plan, the Dickens Administration chose to move quickly by implementing the most actionable elements of previous plans. Even though the crisis response would eventually require the city government to go above and beyond those plans, delivering on the good ideas that already had broad support helped to quickly unite the coalition and get things moving right away.

## ***Leverage Public Land***

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With the coalition engaged and a new structure in place, the strike force got started on its biggest opportunity: unlocking public land. Building affordable housing on public land has been included in every affordable housing plan released in Atlanta for the last 20 years. The problem was that, prior to 2022, very little new housing development on public land was actually underway. The city government had little granular understanding of what the public sector owned. The Strike Force started by categorizing actionable real estate assets as either “Ready-to-build” or “Catalytic” opportunities. The catalytic opportunities tended to be larger and more complex, so the city team got to work on those in the background while easy those that were site-ready were advanced right away.

The city team also began feverishly looking into how the best cities in the world manage their public land assets. Housing staff talked to cities all over the globe and centered in on the century-old successes found in many European cities and one inspiring story of the recent revitalization of the [port in Copenhagen](#). It became clear that Atlanta needed to level-up its public land game to accomplish the Mayor’s housing goals. To do this, the Mayor’s team partnered with the housing authority to build a [public development corporation](#) to lead development of key publicly owned assets with mixed-income housing. The new corporation was given a small portfolio of land, the power to provide tax exemptions, and access to a \$38 million construction financing fund. Less than a year after launch, the new corporation is one of the leading edges of innovation in Atlanta, with initial projects including one of the first [office-to-residential conversions](#) in the city and a [fire station and mixed-income housing](#) project in Midtown Atlanta.

## ***Reset the Toolbox, Borrow Successful Models***

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The Strike Force conducted a full review of the tools available across the city agencies to identify what was working, what wasn’t, and where gaps remained. The evaluation led to the refinement of existing programs and the development of new ones. When the team encountered gaps, it looked outward to other communities for successful solutions.

One such gap was construction financing. Many of the projects stalling out in the pipeline were not able to get the secondary (mezzanine) construction loans they needed to close on their deals. It turned out that the Housing Opportunities Commission in Montgomery County, Maryland had faced the same issue and had recently created [a successful mezzanine construction loan](#)

[product](#). Atlanta adapted the model to local conditions, establishing its own construction loan fund to support housing projects. By borrowing successful ideas and applying them strategically, the city avoided unnecessary reinvention, and accelerated implementation.

## ***Leverage Overlooked Powers***

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Many cities possess legal authorities that have fallen into disuse yet remain highly relevant to today's housing challenges. In Atlanta's case, the Georgia Housing Authorities Law of 1937, last amended in 1951, offers untapped tools such as the power to provide tax exemptions for affordable housing and the ability to innovate with building code regulations that have been largely unused for 70 years. The Strike Force revisited this statute, and identified ways to put it to work in modern contexts. The first modern usage of these powers was used by the new public development corporation to unlock the [first post-COVID office-to-residential conversion](#) in Atlanta. Leveraging long-standing but underutilized powers helped the city cut through regulatory barriers and unlock pathways for development.

## ***Secure Early Wins***

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Quick, visible successes build momentum and demonstrate credibility. Early in the administration, for example, the city faced rising rates of unsheltered homelessness, a visceral and tragic symptom of the national housing crisis. The new Administration knew that traditional construction timelines were too slow to meet urgent needs. The Strike Force identified modular construction as a faster alternative and deployed it on city-owned land. The resulting 40-unit project was completed in four months, the fastest multifamily delivery in Georgia history. Securing this win helped solidify support among partners and Atlantans alike, while proving that government can move swiftly and effectively under the right structure. The [Melody](#) showed that the city agencies can move faster and cheaper while maintaining quality. The city government paid for full project costs on a bet that the coalition would engage if the project could prove the model worked. The response has been overwhelming, and the Dickens Administration is now moving forward with an effort to deliver several similar projects by the end of 2025.

## ***Increase Public Sector Risk Tolerance***

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While cities like Atlanta traditionally acted along the periphery when addressing the housing crisis, solving complex challenges such as large-scale affordable housing production often requires the public sector to lead by example. Atlanta's new tools and early wins were made possible, in large part, because of a deliberate decision to take risks. The public sector needed to raise its risk profile, better utilize its ability to be more patient, and consider other public benefits than pure profit when making a real estate investment.

The city demonstrated this by acquiring 2 Peachtree, a 41-story vacant office building downtown. The scale and location of the project made redevelopment risky, and the city stepped in where the private market would not. The current state of downtown and the sheer size of the building made it risky to redevelop. The private market needed to see that the new administration was serious about turning things around downtown before they were willing to invest. So, the Dickens Administration, in partnership with Invest Atlanta, the city's economic development authority, bought the building. The project is now set to deliver over 600 units of housing. Moreover, the move catalyzed more than half a dozen other office conversions nearby, signaling that Atlanta was serious about addressing the challenge. Public investment, used strategically, can de-risk pioneering efforts and encourage follow-on capital.

## ***Build Long-Term Solutions While Addressing Immediate Needs***

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Crisis response requires attending to immediate needs while also building new solutions that make future responses more effective. When rising interest rates threatened to derail dozens of affordable housing projects in 2023, Atlanta acted quickly. Through a public-philanthropic partnership, the city helped raise [\\$300 million of public and philanthropic funds](#) to close deals on more than 2,000 units.

But this effort wasn't just about emergency triage. It also seeded new tools, including a mezzanine loan fund, infrastructure financing, and a common application and [expedited permitting processes](#) to shorten timelines. These systems now form the backbone of a more resilient housing finance ecosystem. By pairing emergency action with strategic system-building, Atlanta transformed short-term crisis response into a catalyst for long-term housing stability and innovation.

## **Building a Strike Force**

Atlanta's Housing Strike Force was initially built using existing staff and leadership across multiple agencies and city departments. Mayor Dickens committed much of his own time, as did his senior team, and asked for a commitment of time and existing resources (i.e., land, tools, staff availability) from strike force participants. Building the 12-person housing team in the mayor's office allowed the work to get started while the Dickens Administration made the case for the funding needed to move projects forward.

Since the launch of the Strike Force, the city government in Atlanta has generated substantial new resources to the crisis response: it has issued \$150 million in city-backed bond funding, allocated \$37 million from housing trust funds, partnered on a \$200 million philanthropic raise, allocated over \$75 million in tax increment financing to affordable housing, and supported multiple tax incentives to help with operating subsidy to enable long-term affordability. Each of

these new commitments, as well as the use of other sources, are deployed in tight coordination through the collaboration of the Strike Force. Without first putting the strike force in place, it would have been difficult to build adequate political support or effectively deploy new resources.

Meeting Atlanta's north star of 20,000 affordable units by 2030 will require continued effort, but with a high-functioning Strike Force, strong leadership, and aligned partners, Atlanta is well on its way.

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*Appendix: List of Positions and Agencies Involved in the Housing Strike Force*

1. Mayor of Atlanta
2. City of Atlanta COO
3. City of Atlanta Chief Policy Officer
4. City of Atlanta Senior Housing Policy Advisor
5. City of Atlanta Planning Commissioner
6. MARTA General Manager & CEO
7. Atlanta Fulton County Recreation Authority Executive Director
8. Atlanta Public Schools Superintendent
9. Atlanta BeltLine President & CEO
10. Atlanta Housing President & CEO
11. Invest Atlanta President & CEO
12. Metro Atlanta Land Bank Executive Director
13. Atlanta Land Trust Executive Director