The City of Decatur is 4.2 square miles and has approximately 10,000 structures. In 2009, the City Commission budgeted to have a city-wide historic resource survey completed in response to a failed controversial effort to create a local historic district in the Oakhurst Neighborhood. The question the residents kept asking was, “How do you know this is historic?” The survey was a partial response to that question. Using the standards and procedures established by the U.S. Department of Interior, National Park Service, Historic Preservation Division and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Historic Preservation Division, the survey concluded that more than half of Decatur’s structures were contributing and it also identified 13 potential National Register and local historic districts. The city had the data but needed to educate its residents and property owners on why these structures were historic and why the City needed to identify them.

The role of a preservation commission and its staff is not solely to review and approve changes to structures located in local historic districts (although for some jurisdictions like the City of Atlanta, the sheer number of applications consumes nearly 100% of their staff resources). Public outreach and education are vital to successful preservation efforts, whether creating National Register districts or taking on the local designation of historic resources.

In 2007, Decatur determined it needed a dedicated staff person to create a preservation ethic for the city. Decatur has always valued its historic downtown and the leafy, bungalow neighborhoods, but the knowledge was intrinsic, not necessarily recognized as “preservation.” Hiring a professional trained in historic preservation was a key component to creating a branded program that established preservation in a positive framework as something that benefits the city in terms of environmental, economic, and quality of life initiatives.

Education was the first step to creating consensus to support preservation. The Decatur Old House Fair was held in 2008 (partially funded by a generous CLG grant from the GA SHPO) and is one of the few events of its kind in the country. Education seminars at the fair included researching houses, determining style, applying for preservation tax incentives, restoring wood windows (a must!), preserving historic landscapes, installing storm windows, improving energy efficiency, and creating a maintenance plan for old homes. There were...
over 30 exhibitors and preservation-related nonprofit organizations. The event had an extremely successful first year and is now in its fourth year with sessions such as “Plaster Repair” and “Restoring Wood Floors and Trim” being added. The tickets to the event are reasonably priced and the location is accessible by all forms of public transportation. The website (www.decaturolphousedefair.com) is up continuously and the presentations are available online, as is the program which lists all the exhibitors and local/national preservation resources. Residents have been given the tools they need to restore, rehabilitate, and repair their historic houses.

The City also instituted a “Homeowner’s Night,” which allows only homeowners to come in between 6 and 8 p.m. to talk to the Planning Director, Building Code Official, Zoning and Permitting Technician, and the Preservation Planner about their project. Since 50% of the homes in Decatur are historic, homeowners are also given information on preservation tax credits. In Georgia, the residential incentives are significant, including a maximum tax credit of $100K and an 8 ½ year property tax freeze on the unimproved assessed value. At each Homeowner’s Night, more residents came in looking for information on these credits. Suddenly, preservation became interesting! Additionally, Planning Department staff members have been ‘indoctrinated’ to these credits and continuously refer inquiries to the Preservation Planner regardless if their property is located in a local district. In 2010, four projects were approved for the tax credit program in Decatur, which is sizable given the number of residents and buildings.

The City also looked carefully at the list of potential National Register Districts and determined that the historic downtown should be nominated to the National Register as an important step in creating the preservation ethic. Again, turning to the Georgia CLG Grant Program, Decatur received a $6,000 grant to hire a consultant to write the nomination. Public meetings were held to inform the commercial property owners about the value of being listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Some were skeptical, but most were convinced. In January 2010, the Downtown District was approved for listing in the Georgia Register of Historic Places and is currently under consideration by the National Register staff in Washington DC. This nomination facilitated the renovation of three storefronts in the historic square that will become the new home of The Brick Store, a nationally known microbrew pub, occupies one on the turn-of-the-century retail buildings on the historic square.

Renovation of three historic storefronts on the downtown square to become the new home of the Cakes and Ale Restaurant.
the Cakes and Ale Restaurant, a national award-winning restaurant. Utilizing Federal and State tax incentives will give the property owners and restaurant owners $660,000 in credits and savings. Now all the commercial property owners are very supportive of creating National Register Districts for small commercial nodes throughout the city. The City also utilized the local preservation program at Georgia State University for student internships. One of the interns prepared the nomination for the Ponce de Leon Court neighborhood to the National Register. Ponce Court is already a local district, but a few of the homes in this small district needed substantial rehabilitation and were prefect candidates for the preservation tax credits. Public meetings were held and the owners were very supportive of the nomination. In fact, they car pooled to the National Register Review Board Hearing and took a group photo next to the historic pine trees in the district.

The City has also become a leader in Georgia for creating a city-wide program on energy efficiency and sustainability. The recommendations for this program encourage the residents to restore their old windows, to use high-quality storm windows, and to insulate and repair rather than replace and send building materials to the landfill. Decatur residents now talk about “embodied energy costs” in their blogs.

Decatur now has a strong preservation ethic despite not having created a local historic district since 2006. The property owners now know why preservation matters. It matters not only because they embrace a “greener” and more sustainable way of life, or because they value their sense of place; it also matters in dollars and cents. In 2010, the GA SHPO commissioned PlaceEconomics to determine the impact of preservation on the Georgia Economy. The results of the study (http://www.gashpo.org/Assets/Documents/Economic_impact_study.pdf) were not surprising to preservationists but certainly shocked some folks in the State Capitol. In the last decade, preservation projects such as those in Decatur resulted in over 10,000 jobs and $420 million in household income, and spurred 117,000 jobs in heritage tourism. All of these factors can be seen in Decatur as a result of education and outreach in a collaborative effort by its city employees, its elected officials, and its residents.