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Building a Night-Time Policy for Atlanta: A Data Science Perspective

On April 4th, 2022, Mayor Andre Dickens of Atlanta announced the “establishment of a Nightlife Division within the Mayor’s Office” intended to address businesses that have a “history of high crime in and around them” (“Mayor Andre Dickens’ 2022 State of the City Address as Prepared for Delivery”). This division was supposed to host quarterly training events to provide business owners and employees with security training, first aid training, and information on how to de-escalate situations (“Mayor Andre Dickens’ 2022 State of the City Address as Prepared for Delivery”). However, researching the City of Atlanta’s website suggests that only two such trainings have been held since Mayor Dickens’ announcement. There is also a lack of information about the initiatives that the Nightlife Division is working on, or insight into any progress that it has made in reducing crime. Despite the seeming ineffectiveness of this Nightlife Division, Atlanta still needs a dedicated night-time office with an appointed night mayor whose role is to deal with all the night-specific city issues, including transportation and safety concerns faced by citizens.

DOES ATLANTA NEED A NIGHT MAYOR

The current Nightlife Division in the Mayor’s Office is a part of the Office of Film, Entertainment, & Nightlife. It has been in operation since April 2022, but there have yet to be

any significant changes or effects that Atlanta has seen from the establishment of this division. However, this lack of progress could be attributed to the structure of the Nightlife Division and the lack of an official night mayor. An example of a successful night-time office is the one headed by Amy Lamé, the Night Czar of London, UK. She was appointed in 2016 and has since launched several initiatives, including a Women's Night Safety Charter. She also regularly hosts night surgeries, which are events where she and her team "hear directly from Londoners about their experience of the capital at night" ("Night Czar"). By following this example and appointing a night mayor responsible for handling night-time city issues, Atlanta could also successfully create and implement initiatives that improve the experiences of citizens working and living in the city at night.

Some of these issues that Atlanta's night mayor could address are transportation and safety concerns. Protecting citizens and combating crime is a major focus of the Atlanta mayor's office, as evidenced by the establishment of the Nightlife Division. However, reducing crime does not necessarily translate to improved perceptions of safety. Thus, as part of a proper night-time office, an Atlanta night mayor would need to consider not just reducing crime at night, but also creating educational materials, providing safety training, and improving the actual infrastructure of the city at night, especially when it comes to transportation, to foster an increased sense of safety.

As discussed in my previous essay on the intersection of data science and the city at night, there are multiple ways that data science can be applied to night-time city issues. The most notable method is through the analysis of data, which in the context of transportation and safety could mean the analysis of public transportation user data, public polling data of citizens who are out at night, and incident report data from police stations or Atlanta's 311 services. By including

a data scientist as part of Atlanta's night office, a night mayor would be able to harness the power of data to make informed decisions on how best to resolve certain issues within the city at night.

A DATA SCIENCE DRIVEN NIGHT-TIME POLICY

There are three policy suggestions that I would make for a night-time office in Atlanta: investing in software or apps to educate citizens and make reporting incidents easier; using commuter data to improve public transportation services at night; and using surveillance or incident report data to predict crime/incident hotspots to determine the best method for preventing them. Each of these suggestions could use a data science approach and may also require collaboration with different experts due to their interdisciplinary nature.

INVEST IN SOFTWARE AND APPS

The first policy suggestion is to invest in providing resources through apps and online software. For example, the night mayor could provide the training and demonstrations that were a part of the Nightlife Division's training events through online videos and websites. This would help make the information available to a wider audience, which results in better-informed citizens overall. The city could also invest in building apps that deal with safety issues, such as walking alone at night. One example that the city could model is a hackathon project made by some Georgia State University students that lets you find other students in your vicinity to walk with around campus (Wilson). Such an app could be very useful for students at night who might not feel as comfortable walking alone. Using a similar concept, the night mayor could invest in building an escort system facilitated through an app for citizens to use so they can feel safer when traveling at night. The app could also include data tracking information which might be useful for future initiatives that improve citizen safety.

Despite the potential benefits of using software and gathering data, there are some limitations and concerns that need to be considered with this suggestion. For instance, with an escort service, it would likely have to provide escorts through the police department, in order to ensure the safety of the person using the app. If this service was simply available to the public where anyone could reach out to strangers, there could be an even worse security concern if malicious persons try to use it. However, using police officers might also increase costs for the city, or have other ramifications that would need to be thoroughly considered by the night mayor before being implemented.

IMPROVE LATE-NIGHT TRANSPORTATION

A second policy suggestion would be to improve the transportation infrastructure of the city. The current main transportation service is provided through MARTA buses and trains, with trains running from 4:45 am on weekdays and 6 am on weekends to 1 am daily with a reduced schedule after 7 pm, and on reduced lines after 9 pm (“Common Questions”). Similarly, buses run only from 5 am daily to 1:30 am on weekdays and to 12:30 am on weekends, with individual schedules varying depending on the neighborhood (“Common Questions”). As a result, night-time workers are completely unable to use MARTA to commute to work if they arrive or depart roughly between 1 am and 5 am on any given day of the week. This could be detrimental for people participating in the night-time economy as well, who might be out late during those hours and require transportation. The night mayor, in partnership with MARTA, could analyze the data of train and bus users to find the most frequently traveled routes at different points during the day to determine if an increase in service is necessary. Public polling would also be useful since there would not be any data to see where late-night workers are going since current services cannot take them to those destinations between 1 and 5 am. By using public polling, the night mayor

and MARTA can be informed of what the citizens need during those hours so that recommendations can be made to increase service if necessary.

At the same time, the disadvantage of increasing transportation services is the cost, both financially and environmentally. Increased service means hiring more train and bus operators, maintenance workers, and staff to operate the buses and work in the stations. This could prove extremely difficult since MARTA has already been struggling with staffing shortages which has resulted in cancellations of even daytime bus and train services every day (Dukes). There's also the environmental impact to consider, such as air pollution, and noise pollution from running more trains and buses. However, some of this could be offset by using eco-friendly vehicles, which MARTA has already started to do by purchasing electric and compressed natural-gas-fueled buses. By investing in sustainable solutions while increasing service, the night mayor in partnership with MARTA could solve the transportation needs of Atlanta residents and workers while minimizing associated costs.

Another facet of improving the transportation infrastructure is improving the security at train stations and bus stops. Research has shown that certain demographics of riders, especially women, feel unsafe using public transportation, a feeling that can be compounded at night (Farina et al.). In one study exploring women's mobility at night in Recife, Brazil, and Brussels, Belgium, 95% of survey respondents in Recife and 69% of respondents in Brussels reported feeling "unsafe or very unsafe" waiting at bus stops and metro stations at night (Farina et al.). This was attributed to concerns over lighting, and in Brussels specifically, "the design and organization of metro stations" (Farina et al.). Speaking from personal experience as well, being in MARTA stations at night can be very intimidating. At times, I could be in the station alone with only a few other men, which depending on their appearance and actions, could make me

feel ill at ease. This is at times compounded by reading about criminal incidents or shootings that have recently occurred, similar to the shooting at the Georgia State MARTA station a few weeks ago (DiRienzo). To help Atlanta citizens feel safer when using public transportation, I would recommend that the city analyzes station population data at different points during the night to determine the best times to have police officers or MARTA security personnel on the premises to increase feelings of safety.

Once again, the downside to implementing such a policy is the cost of providing these officers and security personnel. The night mayor would have to work to find a balance between adopting these solutions in order to improve Atlanta residents' quality of life while working with the funding that they receive. It might also not be immediately clear what stations should be manned or which should be given priority. Logically, manning a station at more desolate times of the night could make more sense, but crowded stations might also equally need some police presence due to the number of incidents that might be reported. Thus, the night mayor might have to consult other experts to determine the best plan forward.

USE DATA TO PREDICT "AT-RISK" AREAS OF THE CITY

The third policy suggestion is to use data analysis to investigate police reports and Atlanta's 311 Non-Emergency Services data to find the main causes of conflict at night. One study that analyzed UK West Midlands Police crime data relating to robberies in the night-time economy (NTE) found that alcohol seemed to have a significant effect, with alcohol being involved in 33% of NTE-related crimes compared to 6.7% of non-NTE-related crimes (Wüllenweber and Burrell). If the night mayor conducts a similar investigation to find variables that might affect crime rates in the city at night, then they could be better informed when making policy decisions to reduce crimes. They might also be able to use this investigation to pinpoint

hotspots of crime, which could then lead to increased patrols in those areas to deter crime and increase public feelings of safety.

One concern with trying to mitigate crime by increasing police activity is citizens' distrust of the police, especially in the wake of the last few years' Black Lives Matter movements. There have been numerous protests calling for the defunding of the police, and the stopping of "cop city", a term referring to the planned construction of the largest police training facility in the United States here in Atlanta ("Stop Cop City"). As a result, the night mayor should consider other alternatives that have been successfully implemented by other cities, such as the Rembrandtplein Hosts of Amsterdam, who patrol the city square from 9 pm to 5 am on Fridays and Saturdays (Henley). These hosts provide directions, remind night-time city visitors of the city rules, and work to de-escalate situations without the involvement of the police (Henley). By implementing a similar program, Atlanta could improve the security of busy public areas, without constantly resorting to increased police presence.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the three policy suggestions I would make to Atlanta's night mayor would be to: utilize technology to create better-informed citizens and to provide services that could make them feel safer at night; analyze night-time transportation user data to determine if more public transportation services are necessary and to make bus stop and train stations more secure; and to investigate reported crime/incident data to determine hotspots of conflict within the city to find ways to deter crime, possibly through the implementation of a program similar to the Rembrandtplein Hosts. These three policy suggestions applied in conjunction could serve to support each other, as the apps could be used for tracking and reporting incidents that happen in the city, or be used to gather transportation riders' data, which can then be used to improve

services and security throughout the city. Consequently, by improving those services, the night mayor could help citizens travel through the city safely, thus hopefully lowering the incidents that are reported and making the city of Atlanta better, and safer for all.

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