

# News from Atlanta

**A Chambers of Commerce-sponsored visit yields info on congestion, gas shortages, and mergers.**

As markets closed on Monday, September 29, I stood in the studios of *CNN Headline News* watching anchor **Susan Hendricks** deliver word of the Dow's spectacular 778-point plunge. Sixty of us were in **Atlanta** for the annual **InterCity Leadership Visit**, a joint program of the **Minneapolis** and **St. Paul Chambers of Commerce**,

which takes community leaders to other metro areas for, in the words of **Metropolitan Council** chair **Peter Bell**, "the sharing and comparing of challenges and solutions" to issues such as education, transportation, and economic development. We each had chosen from several field trips, and about twenty of us found ourselves at CNN. We had been in meetings all day and only learned of the bailout rejection by the House on the jumbo video screens as we entered CNN headquarters at 3 P.M. The Dow was down 551 points. With each step, we watched the numbers jump up and down, knowing that those touring the world's largest aquarium just a few blocks away were blissfully ignorant of the unfolding events. St. Paul Chamber president **Kris Johnson** arranged the in-studio visit through **Laura Mayfield**, a CNN staffer he met when she visited St. Paul for the Republican National Convention.

Atlanta is a beautiful city, with the same unremarkable challenges many big cities face. However, we also got an inside look at a particularly Atlantan drama, the much-publicized gas shortage. During our three days there, most gas stations were either closed or had very long lines—with regular gas going for \$4.90 a gallon. Mayfield herself was down to a quarter of a tank, enough to get home and back. She got in line for

gas at 7 AM that day and waited an hour, but had to get to work without scoring a drop. She planned to try an hour earlier the next day. A leading developer who spoke to us shared a website called **FIND-GAS.COM** that offered the helpful tip that a station three blocks away had gas—and a two-and-a-half-hour wait. The situation had gone on for two weeks, and at least two more were expected.

You think we have sprawl? Metro Atlanta encompasses twenty-eight counties, 140 municipalities, and runs 110 miles north to south. Gas comes in pretty handy. Congestion is so acute the city ranks second in that dubious category after Los Angeles. We were told of a prominent CEO who moved downtown because none of his friends would drive to his house in the suburbs for dinner. According to dynamo mayor **Shirley Franklin**, there isn't a solution that does not include increased taxes.

**OUR LAST EVENT** was lunch at **Delta Air Lines**, with rousing remarks from **Ed Bastian**, newly named president of **Northwest Airlines**, who is moving here to be the "leadership on the ground in Eagan." His message was one of airline growth as well as enthusiasm for his new assignment. "I look forward to how our two communities will be brought together," he said, reminding us that Delta CEO **Richard Anderson**



is proud to say he still has two homes in Minnesota. "I can appreciate that there is a lot of concern about jobs, service, and the loss of corporate headquarters," said Bastian. "I especially understand the feelings about that." He assured the group that the "focus was on growing the airline—and the MSP hub—not shrinking it." He also said the merged company takes on no incremental debt and will have more than \$6 billion in cash at closing and more than 1,000 routes, with the two airlines currently competing in only twelve of them. "Delta customers will have seamless access to over 70 countries," he said. Asked specifically about the call center in Chisholm, he quickly replied it would remain open. "We made the commitment that no front-line jobs would be lost as a result of the merger," he explained. "Most mergers have been done out of need. Not this one. It's a strategic move to be a stronger airline in the future." ▲