Early edition | Aug. 7, 2011

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Today's news

Standard & Poor's downgrades U.S. credit rating

More than $2.2 trillion in spending cuts included in Congress' down-to-the-wire debt deal didn't save the nation from its first-ever downgrade. **More top news, A2**

NATION & WORLD

Cuba flirts with change as its iconic leader ages

Fidel Castro soon turns 85. As the regime moves toward economic reforms, it's unclear how long it will outlive him and his brother Raul. **A3**

» **Say when:** The Iowa Republican caucuses are just six, or five, or four months away. **A6**

METRO

Feds' sleuthing could win prisoner new trial

Thanks to the FBI, David Peralta may get another chance to prove he was not the shooter in the killing that got him a life term. **B1**

SPORTS

» **Red hot gridiron:** Beating the deadly heat is a coaching challenge. **C1**

BUSINESS

Federal cuts could empty local offices

Deep budget cuts coming from Washington hold a particular peril for metro Atlanta: Uncle Sam is one of its top office renters. **D1**

» **Sounds delicious:** Coke is reaching teens' tastebuds through their earbuds. **D1**

LIVING & ARTS

» **Buddy system:** Residents fill each other's special needs at Marietta Emeritus. **E1**

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
Channel 2 Action News

Atlanta Forward 2012: The turning point

The Atlanta region hopes to rebuild its battered economy on a foundation of fiber optics, next-generation software and recombinant DNA. In this final installment of our eight-day special report, we examine the path to a new economy and the roadblocks to recovery we must deal with in 2012.

New era calls for new route

Future rests with high-tech, biomedical, logistics industries.

Real estate, construction in rearview mirror.

By **Dan Chapman**
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Metro Atlanta's economic future lies hidden 3 feet beneath the ground. It sneaks through downtown, skirts Buckhead and flows into Alpharetta, where it branches out to dozens of secretive high-tech companies.

Nobody talks much about the fiber-optic superhighways running under Atlanta – it's a national security issue, after all. Yet somewhere below the city, possibly in downtown, the nation's north-south and east-west Internet trunk lines intersect.

Atlanta literally sits atop a new economy, one that will rest not on the crumbling pillars of real estate and construction, but on the high-tech, biomedical and logistics industries. In Alpharetta alone, 15 companies with 19,000 employees feed off the great fiber-optic line that runs from New York to Miami. Dozens more operate in other Northside cities, including Norcross, Kennesaw, Duluth and Dunwoody.

The Metro Atlanta Chamber targets these companies – and the well-paying jobs they engender – for recruitment. Gov. Nathan Deal will unveil a Georgia Competitiveness Initiative later this year likely to promote these businesses with specific timelines for job creation

Module lab tech James O'Bryant strings finished solar cells together at Suniva. With the help of metro-based businesses, Atlanta's economic future could be tied to globalization, high-tech innovation and green biosciences. **Track a solar panel from Atlanta to China, A12**

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Scorecard: Preparing for the next wave

What tools does a region need to grow high-tech business? A well-educated workforce is mandatory, of course. First-rate colleges and a pool of existing talent also help. We compared 10 metro areas on higher ed, patents issued statewide, tech workers and other factors. **A14**