

AJC Watchdog: Atlanta sex-trafficking tour reveals 'the hell of it'

ATLANTA-NEWS By Chris Joyner - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution



Kasey McClure, a former exotic dancer who founded the non-profit 4Sarah to counsel women "still in the life," talked about the dangers women face in Atlanta during a tour of the city's sex trafficking hot spots Wednesday. CHRIS JOYNER / CJOYNER@AJC.COM

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The red-and-white charter bus slowed to a crawl, pausing by a shadowy parking lot wedged between a budget motel and several down-market strip clubs a block off Fulton Industrial Boulevard.

The tour guide, former exotic dancer Kasey McClure, directed riders' attention to several parked tractor trailers. McClure, founder of 4Sarah, a non-profit that does outreach in the world of adult entertainment, pointed to some shadowy figures.

This is where it happens, she said.

Cell phone cameras flashed through the darkened windows and a cluster of rough-looking men and a couple of women loitering around the trucks suddenly had somewhere else to go.

This is the "Unholy Tour," a semi-annual bus tour of metro Atlanta's sex trade organized by Public Service Commissioner Tim Echols to raise awareness of the city's unfortunate reputation as a hub for sex trafficking, particularly of minors. Echols began the tours

three years ago and has done seven so far in Atlanta and Savannah, each featuring stops aimed at exposing the scope of the problem and what can be done to fix it.

It's a passion project for Echols, who is elected statewide to regulate utility companies.

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"I think all elected officials in this state should be concerned about something that is a blight on our state where kids are being sold and their lives are being ruined," he said.

Echols personally invited me on the tour after reading my investigative story on allegations of sexual abuse by former dancers at The Cheetah, a midtown strip club. Through their attorneys, The Cheetah denies the claims.

Echols is among those who see strong connections between Atlanta's reputation as a strip club mecca and its designation as a top city for sex trafficking.

Georgia voters appear to make the same conclusion. In November, 83 percent of voters agreed to a constitutional amendment requiring strip clubs and other adult businesses to contribute \$5,000 annually to a fund for exploited children.

Echols' tour began downtown, cruising the bus stations that organizers say are commonly used to bring minors in and out of the city for illicit reasons. From there the tour went west to Fulton Industrial, then north to strip clubs in Sandy Springs recently raided by police there.

The final leg took the group to Midtown and past some of the city's notorious adult establishments that advocates said entrap young women and men in lifestyles that lead, for some, to sex work.

Laura Lederer, an expert in the global scope of sex trafficking, described the underground economy as a "modern form of slavery."

"Survivors know the hell of it," she said.

Myth buster: johns come from northern arc

The night ride showed a gritty, often perverse side of the city. But much of Atlanta's notorious trade in sex slavery is happening online where the pimps have laptops and the girls (or boys) aren't on some street corner.

More troubling: The trade isn't supported by foreign businessmen flying in through Hartsfield-Jackson. That's the "myth" of Atlanta's sex trade, said Whitney Bexley, program manager for Street Grace, a Norcross-based non-profit that has been trying to get a handle of the "demand" side of the sex trafficking equation.

"What we all thought was going on when it was happening in our area is that it's got to be the airport," she said. "Surely it's not our men, right? It's men who are flying in, doing their business and flying back out."

Bexley said that is happening, but out-of-state "buyers" only make up about 9 percent of the city's sex trade. The rest of it is domestic and Bexley knows their ZIP codes.

Bexley said 65 percent of the buyers come from outside the Perimeter.

"And the largest percentage of the demand — 42 percent of the demand — is coming from north of the Perimeter specifically," she said.

Men in the northern arc between I-75 and I-85 are fueling a large part of Atlanta's demand for illicit sex with minors, she said. And the demand is insatiable.

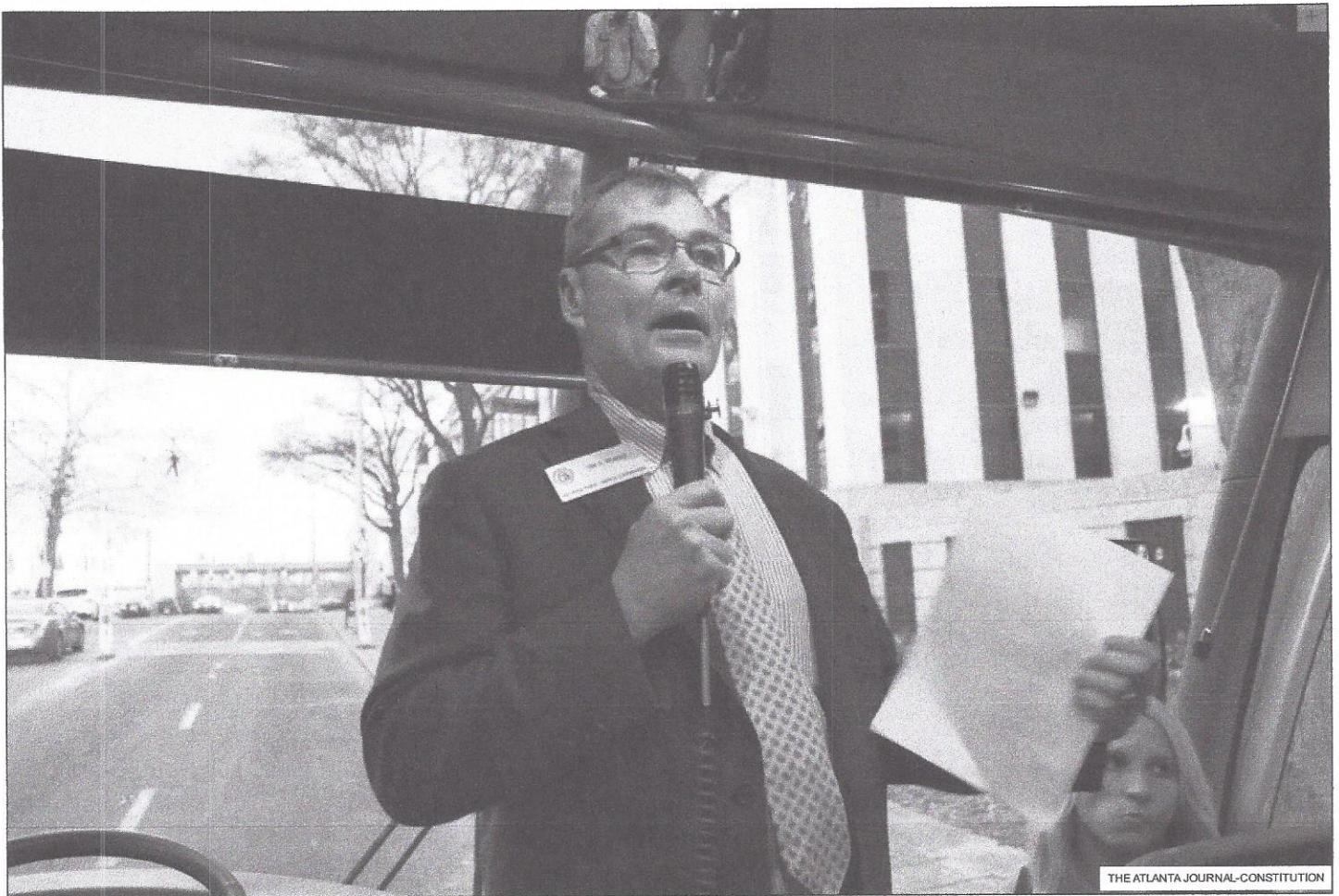
A 2009 survey estimated 12,400 men in Georgia pay for sex with an adolescent girl *each month*. The study estimated that adolescent girls caught up in the sex trade were exploited on average three times a day.

The authors of that study, Atlanta consulting company the Schapiro Group, have come under fire from statisticians and others for their methodology, with critics calling the study little more than advocacy in the guise of science.

Some of the harshest criticism came from The Village Voice, which called the study "dense gibberish posing as statistical analysis." At the time Village Voice Media owned Backpage.com, a classified listing service that has been at the center of the sex trafficking controversy.

Bexley admits the Shapiro study's numbers are disputed, but she said her non-profit's initial work on locating the demand for child sex in Atlanta track the earlier study's findings.

That the purveyors of sex with children are mostly local makes some common sense as well. An Urban Institute study from 2014 found Atlanta's sex trade generated nearly \$300 million annually. It's unlikely anything other than a fraction of that trade could be coming from out-of-towners.



For the past three years, Public Service Commissioner Tim Echols has led policymakers, law enforcement and advocates on an "unholy tour" ... [Read More](#)

'Every girl fell for my poison'

Where data — or the closest semblance of it — failed, emotion stepped in.

Jessica Neely, a preacher's kid who ended up in the porn industry and as a trafficker of girls, gave her dramatic testimony as the bus bounced from the 404 area code to the 770 and back again.

"Every girl fell for my poison," Neely said, describing how she would recruit for her escort service by looking for girls with eating disorders or crushing debt. "I went after everything broken."

The bus was packed with police from around the metro area, representatives of non-profits seeking to help, and even some judges looking to educate themselves on the back story to the damaged souls in their courtrooms.

The tour is not part of Echols' official duties, and the costs are financed by donations rather than tax money. Toward the end of the nearly three-hour tour, Echols admitted he is disappointed that he is not seeing much progress.

"I'm discouraged that we are not making a dent in this, that we cannot keep up with the perpetrators," he said. "The GBI needs more resources. We need our local FBI office dedicating more time to this. But budgets are constraining and they are doing the best they can with what they have."

Yet he wants to expand the idea, taking it to other states and to Washington, D.C. More people need to be engaged and informed, he said.

"It's important for us to continue to do these (tours) to help people get further and further involved, so they can make a bigger impact," he said.

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