



TRANSFORMING

ATLANTA

By Rebecca Serna



The revitalization of a disused rail corridor in Atlanta is prompting economic development, community pride and increased connections on an unprecedented scale.

When I moved into the City of Atlanta from an inner suburb 14 years ago, my Southwest Atlanta neighborhood

turned out to be less than half a mile from what would become the Atlanta BeltLine (beltline.org). At the time, many of the city's disused rail lines were completely obscured by kudzu and refuse. In other places, homeless people lived on the tracks in encampments. Atlanta had grown away from the early days when it was known as Terminus due to its confluence of rail lines and their importance for daily life and commerce.

Today, a decade and a half after Georgia Tech graduate student Ryan Gravel laid out a simple, elegant vision for those tracks in his master's thesis, it's safe to say that Atlanta is once again being shaped by the convergence of railroad tracks and development.

The term *transformative* is used regularly to describe the Atlanta BeltLine, an ambitious work-in-progress that eventually will become a 22-mile loop of public transit, trails and parks on a former rail and industrial corridor through the inner core of the city. Progress on the 30-year project includes the popular 2.5-mile Eastside Trail, as well as three spur trails, a bridge replacement, five new parks, and the environmental and physical groundwork for future transit.

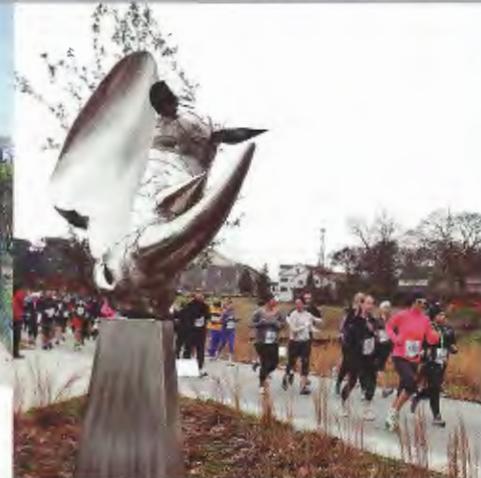
Atlanta is a city of neighborhoods with a small urban core, and the BeltLine corridor connects some 45 neighborhoods of wildly varying economics, development and characters. City residents have a tendency to think of themselves as living in one of four quadrants: the prosperous and bustling Northeast, the quirky and hip Southeast, the overlooked but culturally vibrant Southwest and the bleak but rapidly redeveloping Northwest. For decades, these areas have led separate lives, cut off by urban renewal projects and interstate highways. It's hard to overstate the potential impact of being able to travel conveniently



JIM BROWN



RYAN GRAVEL



CHRISTOPHER T. MARTIN

On the Eastside Trail: The residents of Atlanta are embracing the BeltLine for active transportation, recreation and social synergy.

crosstown between neighborhoods and quadrants on public transit or trails. It has certainly captured the public imagination.

Public enthusiasm for the idea was a key factor in establishing the basic funding mechanism for the BeltLine project—a form of tax increment financing called a Tax Allocation District, or TAD. In 2005, the City of Atlanta, Fulton County and Atlanta Public Schools approved the TAD, agreeing to freeze their tax base at the 2005 level of property tax revenue for the next 25 years. The increment, or growth, in property tax revenues will be used to create \$1.7 billion in bonding capacity over 25 years, with the rest of the project to be funded through local investments, including private contributions and federal funds.

But just how much is the project impacting the city? Go to the Eastside Trail, a BeltLine segment, and close your eyes. Even without looking at the

apartments, restaurants and small businesses popping up, your ears will give you a sense of the change. That's because every few minutes, you're likely to hear the "squeak, squeak, squeak" of a bicycle someone has pulled out of the basement after years of disuse. Atlanta hasn't always been the most walkable, bikeable city, but it's getting there in large part due to the growing influence of the BeltLine.

Fast Forward

BeltLine advocates have always had lofty goals, aiming not just for rail-trails and public transit on the route but also for economic development, parks and affordable housing. Since 1999, the project has been responsible for the addition of five and a half miles of paved trail, seven miles of hiking trail and seven new parks. And although the loop is nowhere near complete, the BeltLine's imprint on civic life,

As more and more users flock to the Eastside Trail in Atlanta, retailers, homeowners and restaurateurs along the route are embracing trailside openings and trail-facing patios.

economic development, transportation and civic pride is distinct and spreading.

First, let's talk transportation. Following a failed 2012 referendum to establish a sales tax that would fund more than \$6 billion in transportation projects throughout the region, it was easy to see the BeltLine's impact on the in-town vote. The referendum failed dismally in the rest of metro Atlanta, but passed with support from 50 percent of the electorate in the city itself.

Former Atlanta City Council President Cathy Woolard was one of the project's earliest champions. As Woolard, now a board member for Atlanta BeltLine, Inc., points out, "Among urban dwellers, it has crystallized what additional investment in transit will do for the community, because once they've been on the BeltLine, they understand very clearly how quickly and easily you can get [to] places that were previously inaccessible. It connects all these neighborhoods and helps people envision how they would conduct their life with transit."

When the Eastside Trail opened in 2012, a local television station came up

with a creative way to demonstrate the trail's immediate value. A reporter on a single-speed bike rode from one end of the trail to the other. He raced against a trail runner and a car plying the roads along the same route. The cyclist beat the other two handily. The runner was second. The driver got stuck in traffic and came in last.

The race demonstrated what has become the new reality for getting around in Atlanta. A recent Census report found increased rates of bicycle commuting in Atlanta, and anecdotal evidence points to the BeltLine as a central reason. The opening ceremony for the Eastside Trail was augmented by Atlanta Streets Alive, an open-streets event that encourages residents to get out and celebrate on foot or on bike. The trail filled up immediately, prompting some to say it could have been twice as wide and still feel full. Today, the BeltLine trail receives an estimated 3,000 users on a weekday and 10,000 users on weekends.

Despite the popularity, or perhaps because of it, the BeltLine has experienced some of the crime that is part of city life. The occasional stolen iPhone and mugging spurred the city to create a "PATH Force" of officers on foot and bike patrolling the trail.

Development Wave

Going beyond transportation to economic activity, the BeltLine has been an impetus for significant private development. As of July 2013, the BeltLine had stimulated construction of more than 90 projects along the Eastside Trail, either complete or underway, including 8,908 residential units and 870,700 square feet of commercial space. In total, this development represents \$1.1 billion of new taxable value in the tax increment finance district.

"Whenever [I] see any news story with developers talking about something new



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in Atlanta, they talk about their project in relation to the BeltLine," says Ethan Davidson, director of communications for the Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. "The center of gravity has shifted. The BeltLine is the equivalent of a waterfront destination."

And this is just the first wave. According to Gravel, now an architect for Atlanta-based Perkins + Will, while the neighborhoods not directly on the BeltLine aren't seeing this type of impact yet, they likely will.

He explains, "[Development] creates an economy around the lifestyle, and that fuels more change." He adds that most retail is still physically separated from the BeltLine. Things are changing, though; for many businesses, what was once the rear entrance has become the front door, and many are shifting operations to create a more welcoming trail-facing entrance. Businesses several blocks from the BeltLine are now advertising their proximity and access to the trail, and some are even planning to build connections to it. One such connection under consideration would link to a Kroger once considered among the city's least desirable grocery stores, but now being referred to with the moniker, "BeltLine Kroger."

Of course, there is another side to the development equation; as areas develop, affordability in the housing market becomes a concern. From the beginning, Atlanta residents in economically underserved parts of the city have worried about the potential for the BeltLine to speed up gentrification. On the Eastside, where property values were higher to start, most new housing on or near the BeltLine is expensive. That's a tribute to the trail's ability to create an immediate lifestyle change from car-centric to car-optional. People who can go easy on the driving, or even forgo private car ownership altogether—

BELTLINE CHARM

The Atlanta BeltLine is no longer Atlanta's best-kept secret. The success of the Eastside Trail alone caused the project's popularity to explode, and it shows no signs of letting up as new parts of the project are completed.

To remind everyone to be neighborly and keep the BeltLine fun and enjoyable for all, the Atlanta BeltLine and Atlanta Bicycle Coalition (atlantabike.org) teamed up to create an etiquette campaign aptly titled #BeltLineCharm. Friendly volunteers hold up signs with simple reminders about courtesy on the trails—things like moderating bike speed, staying to the right when walking and exercising pet etiquette.

So, "Slow down, sugar!" and enjoy the trail.

To see the signs, visit beltline.org/visit/atlanta-beltline-etiquette.



PHOTO COURTESY BELTLINE.ORG



perhaps using a car-share program like Zipcar—have extra income for housing. And one of the project's more ambitious goals is to build more than 5,600 new units of affordable workforce housing.

But in low-income communities, notes Gravel, "The answer isn't not giving them trails. It's about using existing tools to solve the economic equation."

On the BeltLine, the Westside and Eastside trails are fundamentally different. The city won a federal TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) grant last year to move construction forward on the Westside Trail, but little exists in the way of private development there. The Eastside is built on a generation of investment and has led to an estimated \$775 million in private investment, according to the city, while the Westside has survived 40 years of disinvestment. The development impact on the Westside will not be as immediate or at the same magnitude.

Some aren't too concerned about that—quite the opposite. "Our part of the BeltLine is very rustic, and I hope it stays that way," says West End resident and local historian Robert Thompson. "It's below street level, and in the summertime when the trees and vegetation fill in, you don't even know you're in the city. It's a tremendous asset, not just in terms of transportation but in terms of being a serenity amenity for the neighborhood."

The number one reason Thompson chose his current residence in the West End? Proximity to the BeltLine.

Big Picture

Community engagement has also undergone a shift since the early, heady days of the BeltLine. Friends of the BeltLine, a group started by Ryan Gravel and other advocates in the early 2000s, was dis-

solved as the project gained official status, but many feel the BeltLine's grassroots relit the spirit of citizen involvement at the neighborhood level.

Angel Poventud, a community activist perhaps best known regionally for his enthusiasm, and occasional critique, of the BeltLine, notes, "Before the BeltLine, neighborhoods were concerned only about what was happening in their neighborhood. The BeltLine allowed communities to think on a grander scale about vision for not only their community but all of Atlanta's communities. They're beyond excited; they're engaged. They're not only going to meetings, but creating meetings."

He cited a recent presentation given by four Southwest neighborhoods to BeltLine officials. In a reversal of the planning process norm, the residents laid out their vision for the project to officials, rather than reacting to a plan being presented to them. It was a neat shift that captured the renewed sense of citizen involvement in what's happening in the city.

Davidson first heard about the project on a visit from New York, when he was serving in Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration and with the David Rockefeller Fellows Program for the Partnership for New York City. "The BeltLine seemed like the issue I wanted to be part of. It was clear to me that this did have the potential to completely reshape and redefine [Atlanta]. I had no doubt it was going to change the city forever."

He cites the most recent Atlanta Streets Alive in the historic West End as an indication of the cultural shift that may be just as important as the infrastructure improvements. In a city fragmented into quadrants by social convention and social networks, the event not only showcased a little-known neighborhood gem to those who'd never been south of Interstate 20, but also

DID YOU KNOW?

As RTC's southern organizer in the late 1980s and early 1990s, 2014 Doppelt Family Rail-Trail Champion Marianne Wesley Fowler was responsible for the early identification of the Atlanta BeltLine as a potential rail-with trail, as outlined in her 1991 "Abandoned Rail Corridor Assessment Report" of the Atlanta Metropolitan Area.

showed people from the West End and Adair Park what could be in store for them when the Westside Trail opens.

Even coming from New York, Davidson was surprised by the level of cynicism he encountered at early BeltLine meetings. He says that people on the South Side of Atlanta, in particular, had grown accustomed to being passed over for development projects and job creation. But now that a few portions of the BeltLine have trails in place, and people are using them and making them their own, he sees "a level of hope and pride in the city that wasn't there before."

The BeltLine, as Woolard puts it, "is the one forum where it all comes together: transportation, schools, affordable housing, safety and how people feel about how things are going." In a city once divided by highways and urban renewal projects designed to separate white from black, wealthy from low income, development from homeless, a project explicitly designed to connect us is about as transformative as it gets.

Rebecca Serna is the executive director of the Atlanta Bicycle Coalition, a bicycle advocacy nonprofit in Atlanta, Ga. The Atlanta Bicycle Coalition supports the work of the Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. and BeltLine Partnership through public involvement, awareness and bike tours of the BeltLine.