

Parker leaves MARTA, an agency he helped revive, for Goodwill

ATLANTA-NEWS By David Wickert and J. Scott Trubey - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution



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MARTA CEO Keith Parker. BOB ANDRES /BANDRES@AJC.COM

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MARTA CEO and General Manager Keith Parker, who helped revive an agency on the brink of insolvency as well as the fortunes of mass transit in metro Atlanta, announced Tuesday he will step down from his post.

Parker will become president and CEO of Goodwill of North Georgia, MARTA announced Tuesday.

MARTA CEO looks at ways to improve, expand transit service



Channel 2's Aaron Diamant reports

MARTA board Chairman Robbie Ashe said the agency will conduct a nationwide search for Parker's replacement. The board is expected to name an interim general manager Thursday.

MARTA also announced it has named Arthur "Rob" Troupe — a former executive with infrastructure and design firm HNTB Corp. and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority — as deputy general manager.

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In an exclusive interview with The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and Channel 2 Action News, Parker said he's been approached about many jobs in recent years, but felt the time was right to make "a significant change." And the new job will allow him to stay in Atlanta, a community he said he cares about a great deal.

Parker said MARTA will be fine without him.

"When things are going great in an organization like this, the CEO gets way too much credit, because it's a team effort," Parker said. "When things are going poorly, the CEO gets far too much blame."

Parker served nearly five years as MARTA's chief executive and is widely credited with turning around a troubled agency. When he arrived in December 2012, it was hemorrhaging millions in red ink a year and was held in such low regard by state lawmakers and others that the prospect of expanding it seemed laughable.

Five years later, MARTA has more than \$240 million in reserves. It's expanded into Clayton County and is preparing an Atlanta expansion after voters approved a \$2.5 billion sales tax measure last November. What's more, the General Assembly is discussing state funding of mass transit – a prospect that also seemed unlikely just a few years ago.

Legislators have showered praise on Parker in recent years, and it's unclear what his departure could mean for the future of transit talks.

"Keith Parker turned MARTA around during his tenure as CEO," House Speaker David Ralston, R-Blue Ridge, said Tuesday. "In doing so, he changed the trajectory of transit in Georgia for the better. I wish him well in his new position.

"I am confident MARTA will find an equally exceptional successor, and we look forward to welcoming him or her into our on-going, statewide conversation on transit through the House Transit Commission," Ralston said.

Hala Moddemog, the president and CEO of the Metro Atlanta Chamber, said Parker and his team improved the system and "built trust and gained confidence across the private and public sectors."

She called the top MARTA job "one of the most desirable transportation posts in the U.S.," citing the system's expansion plans. Moddemog said the chamber is "confident that they will recruit an incredible replacement who will keep the momentum going."

Under Parker, access to MARTA became a central part of many businesses' relocation decisions.

State Farm started a multi-tower complex in Dunwoody and integrated the train platform into the first of its buildings near Perimeter Mall where it plans to locate 8,000 workers. In Midtown, NCR, Kaiser Permanente, Interface and Worldpay were among the companies that cited access to transit for major expansions in the city. Even luxury automaker Mercedes-Benz said MARTA access was central to its pick of a site in Sandy Springs for its new North American headquarters.

In 2015, when Kaiser made its announcement to locate 900 high-tech workers at its Midtown office, Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed noted the shifting dialogue about transit and MARTA in particular.

"The best thing happening around the transit conversation in our state is that it is becoming totally nonpartisan, primarily because of the emphasis of the business community," Reed said. Business moves, Reed said at the time, make transit "a nonpolitical conversation. It makes it a decision about whether you want to continue to have the kinds of wins we are having."

In a statement Tuesday, Reed touted his partnership with Parker which helped lead to the system's expansion plans in the city. Reed said Parker "set a new standard" for the role of MARTA's GM.

Beyond its financial improvement in his tenure, Parker's team helped boost MARTA's reputation.

"I have a Breeze card at the very top of my wallet," said Ken Ashley, an executive director in Atlanta at real estate services giant Cushman & Wakefield. "Prior to Keith's arrival it wasn't at the top. It wasn't even in my wallet."

Ashley, who helps major companies find and lease office space, said under Parker's leadership, Corporate America signaled their vote of confidence in MARTA by increasingly choosing sites near its train stations.

Ashley said Parker helped make MARTA "a trusted brand."

"More and more business people here in Atlanta are using MARTA for more than just the airport, which in and of itself is a minor miracle," he said.

Beyond improving the agency's financial performance, Ashley also credited Parker with the little things: improving customer service, launching a better smartphone app and modernizing the system.

"The concept is if you mind the pennies the dollars will take care of themselves," Ashley said. "By paying attention to the details of the operation and delivering a great customer service the customers will come."

Not everyone was smitten by Parker. He ruffled the feathers of some employees when he and the board outsourced paratransit service to a private company. The move was later overturned by an arbitration board, but MARTA has appealed.

Stanley Small, an officer with the Amalgamated Transit Union, said he did not always agree with Parker's handling of the budget. But he credited Parker for keeping the agency afloat and accumulating reserves.

"We wish him well. We didn't resolve all of our major issues," Smalls said. "Hopefully, whoever his successor is will come in with their sleeves rolled up, ready to go to work."

MARTA did not announce Parker's departure date. He will assume his Goodwill Industries post sometime this fall.

Goodwill's current president and CEO, Raymond Bishop, will retire in October after 27 years of service. According to the organization's 2015 tax return, Bishop earned \$971,148 that year, plus \$25,000 in additional compensation.

Parker makes \$369,220 as MARTA's CEO. Neither he nor Goodwill would say what he will earn in his new job. But Parker said he will make less than his predecessor.

Troupe will report to MARTA Sept. 18. He will report to the interim general manager. MARTA said both will work with Parker "to ensure a seamless transition."

Staff writers Greg Bluestein and Richard Halicks contributed to this report

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