

2021 Atlanta Candidate Full Survey Responses



LILIANA BAKHTIARI GRADE: A+ SCORE: 108

ATLANTA CITY COUNCIL DISTRICT 5

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1. Do you mention BeltLine rail or other mass transit on your website?

"Yes"

2. I have a transit-transportation advisor on my campaign staff.

"I will in the near future"

3. I consider light rail along the BeltLine.....(check as many as apply.)

"long overdue., a vital part of Atlanta's transit plans., a solution to traffic and air pollution., the way we can increase density and affordable housing., a way to focus density and new development in areas designed for density and transit., part of the solution to reducing parking around the BeltLine., crucial to bringing transit equity to historically under-served communities."

4. Atlanta's Streetcar Plan (including the BeltLine light rail loop) is seen as the start of a comprehensive light rail network. Is building that network -- including the BeltLine -- a top transportation/transit priority for you? How high on your list of priorities is it?

"Among my Top 3"

5. The Streetcar East Extension currently in engineering evaluation by MARTA will result in the first build of rail on the BeltLine. What are the most important fixes to the streetcar that you would urge MARTA to make as it is extended and travels 1.4 miles of Beltline to Ponce City Market?

"Improve and create access to MARTA rail stations in both directions., Install priority signalization technology so that the streetcar is prioritized over other traffic., Close portions of streets to cars downtown and in O4W so that pedestrians and cyclists are safer in the shared right of way."

6. MARTA's current timetable calls for completing the 2.25 mile streetcar extension to Ponce City Market in 6-7 years. What best describes your position?

"I'm going to work to push MARTA for a faster timetable."



7. The 2019 More MARTA Program names both the transit projects and their type (light rail, bus rapid transit, rail station improvements, etc.) Do you support implementing the More MARTA Program?

“Yes”

8. Do you agree with MARTA’s timeline of sometime in the 2045-2050 range to complete More MARTA?

“No”

9. When should light rail on the city-owned parts of the BeltLine, often referred to as the “J”, be completed? These are sections A, G, D, B, and C in the More MARTA map.

“2030-2035”

10. The right of way for the 6.5 mile remainder of the 22-mile loop on the NW side of the BeltLine is not yet acquired by the city. What best states your thoughts on closing the loop? Check all that apply.

“We need to reach agreement to secure the right of way with the railroads as soon as possible., We need state DOT and legislators to broker a deal with the railroads., Without this northwest section, the BeltLine won't reach its full potential.”

11. Please feel free to elaborate on your answers above to more fully reflect your thoughts and your vision for transit in Atlanta and specifically for BeltLine rail.

“”

12. The BeltLine rail project gained international attention because of its potential benefits while connecting communities, delivering a world-class transit system and reduce car dependency. Critics say The City of Atlanta and MARTA deliver too little, too late. Can you paint us a picture of the vital role BeltLine rail will play in helping Atlanta deal with its anticipated growth and other significant challenges?

“The short answer is that Beltline Rail can be an equity driver during this time of projected growth. We are rapidly growing, which means we need more housing to accommodate all income levels and family sizes, and we also need transit expansion to relieve gridlock in our city. Beltline Rail is a key piece to that puzzle, and will allow for low and middle income communities to more easily commute to employment hubs and amenities that they currently do not have access to. Additionally, by relieving people of the expenses associated with owning a car, those communities will have more resources to afford the rising cost-of-living in Atlanta.”

13. In your view, how does reliable transit, and specifically BeltLine rail, improve quality of life?

“Quality transit creates an even playing field for families and individuals of all backgrounds and income brackets. It is a key driver in accessibility to more employment opportunities and amenities that low and middle income communities, as well as our disabled communities, currently cannot access. Additionally, quality transit has the potential to diminish car dependence and usage, cutting down on congestion, vehicle safety concerns, and pollution. With fewer cars on the road, our pedestrians and cyclists will be safer, and our air cleaner. Beltline Rail specifically has the potential to connect neighborhoods that have historically been segregated,

and left without an efficient or reliable way to traverse the city. Reliable and quality transit helps everyone, from tourists to legacy residents to employers and beyond.”

14. Wherever the BeltLine trail is completed, property values rise dramatically, causing displacement of long-time residents at an alarming rate. BeltLine rail was imagined to be built simultaneously to the trail, and envisioned to help residents stay where they are. On the east side it is too late, but most of the rest of the trail is not yet built. We can still accelerate transit construction, particularly on the south and west sides. Do you see yourself as leading on this issue?

“Yes”

15. In addition to transit, what zoning and housing policies are needed to reduce the rate of displacement?

“We are currently building housing at a 20,000 unit deficit, the slowest we have built since the 90s, and what we are building only serves certain people. We are overwhelmingly building single family housing and large 20+ unit developments. We need to address the missing middle by expanding the types of housing that can be built by right, especially multi-family units up to 12-plexes, and we need to upzone particularly around transit corridors. I support Councilmember Farohki’s MR-MU zoning policy, but it must be expanded to include Buckhead and Southwest Atlanta. I would also support limiting exclusionary single family zoning. Something I have been speaking with residents about is really crunching the numbers on how many units of housing we need to build over the next 20 years in each of our neighborhoods, and establishing benchmarks for those goals and neighborhood master plans that take those goals into account now. Atlanta is going to grow, but we can decide how we want to grow if we plan proactively. As our next councilmember I will work with our neighbors to identify where to densify, what type of density to zone for, and how to implement it in a timely fashion for each neighborhood so that we can meet the benchmarks we need to catch up on our housing shortage. Distributed evenly and equitably across the city, and coupled with real investment in transit development, we can really bring a vision for that growth into sharp focus. While many will argue that development is the very thing that has pushed out so many of our neighbors, in actuality, I believe that the reason we have seen so much displacement is due to our housing shortage. It’s basic supply and demand. We need to increase our housing stock and diversify available housing types in order to counteract displacement. Additionally, we have great tools in place to help legacy homeowners stay in their homes that just need to be expanded. I would support expanding our tax exemptions to higher levels, from \$30K to \$50K, but most of those exemptions are only for our seniors. I would also support the creation of a tax exemption based on means, freezing property taxes for a homeowner once the property tax exceeds a certain percentage of their overall income. These tools coupled with greater housing stock can help us grow equitably, and avoid displacement.”

16. More MARTA is the largest transit expansion program in the city's history. Will you press for re-examination of ridership estimates using industry-standard best practices that include a variety of ridership models?

“Yes”

17. If not, why not?

“”

18. What have you done to champion BeltLine rail? When? What will you do next?

“First of all, I have championed Beltline Rail by showing up and supporting the organizations working to push this initiative forward, including BRN, which I have supported since its creation. I also worked behind the scenes in preparation for Secretary Buttigieg’s visit to Atlanta to be sure that the Beltline Rail plans made it into his hands. The Biden Infrastructure Bill is a huge, once in an administration opportunity for us to finally secure funding to complete the loop and have true multimodal connectivity between our neighborhoods. As our next councilmember, I will continue to leverage my connections with our Senators and Congresspersons, our state officials, and regional partners to push these initiatives forward. This will include making sure that the plans are shovel ready once federal dollars are released, and holding the MARTA board accountable with new transparency policies, and city implemented benchmarks and reporting.”

19. Adding four Infill MARTA stations to the existing rail network would maximize efficiency and connectivity and spark transit-oriented development. Though MARTA studied them in 2007 and ABI includes 3 of the 4 in its 2018 BeltLine sub-area master plans, they are not in the More MARTA plan. These proposed stations are at Boone Blvd. (W), Hulsey Yard (E), Murphy Crossing(S), and Amour (N). Should funding be prioritized to study them again?

“Maybe”

20. How does Transit Equity figure into your candidacy? Will you urge MARTA to demonstrate a commitment to it by conducting the engineering study required to build rail on the south and west Beltline segments as soon as possible?

“Equity is the steering force behind all of my platform’s policies, including transit. We need to make sure that we are starting our transit expansion in the communities who need it most. It is important to acknowledge that communities of color are often the last to receive amenities, even the basics like crosswalks. Statistically 16% of Atlantant’s cannot afford the costs associated with car ownership, and the majority of those people are our black and brown neighbors. Additionally, these folks are increasingly being pushed to the outskirts of our city, away from existing MARTA lines, and away from employment hubs. Although I am running to represent the Southeast part of Atlanta, each vote that I cast on council will affect the whole city. As our next councilmember, I will advocate for beginning beltline rail development in Southwest Atlanta (where we already own the right of way for rail) and will push for funding to be used to secure the rest of the west and northwest right of way on the beltline loop. These parts of our city need the transit most urgently, and it should be approached as such.”

21. How will you ensure the entire BeltLine vision -- which features light rail transit, trail, and green railbed set in a greenway of trees and plants -- remains intact? What



steps will you take so Atlanta's residents -- not just developers-- get the maximum benefits?

"I am proud to say I was endorsed by Ryan Gravel, and I speak with him regularly about how we can push MARTA, ABI, and the city to make sure we move the full vision of the Beltline forward. In its current form, the Beltline services tourists and privileged communities more than average Atlanta residents. We must be sure that we push for equity, including adjusting the SSD, TAD, and overlay policies to create more affordable housing along the Beltline, create conservation zones for greenspace, and of course push for transit to be prioritized. In the words of Ryan Gravel himself, "we cannot expect the Atlanta Beltline to live up to its promise until we implement transit. Transit is the reason the project got off the ground in the first place and it's the thing that makes the Beltline work for everyone."

22. How will you ensure that Atlanta Beltline Inc., which understands the entire BeltLine vision, has both enough decision-making authority and accountability to achieve it?

"Since the IGA was already negotiated, there is not much the Atlanta City Council can do to give ABI more authority. Where we have more power is through accountability. As our next councilmember, I will push for ADOT to create its own benchmarks to Beltline projects, including timeline, housing goals, and greenspace allotment. I will advocate for quarterly reports from both ABI and MARTA to be sure that we stay on target. Additionally, I will use my platform to educate the public on Beltline plans and progress, and what they should be asking of both ABI and MARTA. Council's powers are limited, but with the power of the platform, we can mount a public pressure campaign for our goals."

23. How can the city council Transportation and Community Development committees do a better job advancing BeltLine rail? Do you hope to serve on one of these committees? Please elaborate.

"If elected, I would love to serve on one or both of these committees. As our next councilmember serving on these committees, I would push for clear benchmarks for Beltline rail projects. I would set a standard for regularly calling the MARTA and ABI boards before council for progress reports quarterly at minimum. I would also venture to overhaul the transparency around the MARTA Board selection process, including financial disclosures for board members, and limits on campaign contributions to the Mayor. It is crucial that we start setting an accountability framework, and I will take the lead on doing so as our next councilmember."

24. In 2016, voters overwhelmingly approved the More MARTA tax to complete BeltLine rail and other transit projects by a historic margin of 71%. More than \$250 million has been collected in More MARTA sales tax so far. In addition to no progress on actual transit construction, the public hasn't seen leadership, accountability or transparency from the City Council and the Mayor's office. What do you think the reasons are for this? (Check all that apply)

"Atlanta BeltLine Inc. did not advocate for the transit part of the BeltLine., Gentrification caused many to think the BeltLine was the problem, which eroded support for rail., MARTA did not understand the project's urgency and put it on the

back burner., The Council needed strong mayoral leadership to advance BeltLine Rail and didn't get it., There were not enough champions for BeltLine rail in the City Council., There was not enough cooperation among the council, Mayor, ABI, and MARTA."

25. Is an accelerated delivery of transit under More MARTA primarily a leadership issue or a money issue?

"Some of both, but more a leadership issue."

26. Please explain what you would do to resolve this?

"First, as our next councilmember, I will be a vocal advocate for rail on the beltline and will work to reframe perspectives around beltline rail development to shed light on the equity baked into these projects. Next, I will support expanding the SSD. From an equity standpoint, we need to expand it to include single family home owners. The current model burdens our small businesses and burdens renters, and we need to distribute that burden equitably. Also, money is time. If we distribute it more widely, we have more money in the mix, and can move up the timeline to hopefully get Beltline rail completed faster. Additionally, With the Biden infrastructure bill coming down the pipe we need our Beltline projects to be shovel ready. That includes plans for completing the loop so that we can use those federal funds to purchase right of way for beltline rail in the northwest side of the loop, but also having plans for completing the J ready to go, since we already own the right of way for rail there. But the biggest adjustment needs to be accountability for the MARTA Board. I will advocate for all city appointments to the MARTA board be vetted by the Office of the Inspector General and voted on by the full City Council. I would also advocate for personal financial disclosures for MARTA Board appointees, and would disqualify candidates who had contributed an aggregate \$1000 to the Mayor within the last 2 years, or who currently hold city contracts. It is important that we ensure that MARTA Board members are not buying their way onto this influential board, or receiving the position out of special interest. Finally, we need clear benchmarks for the More MARTA program complete with an accountability framework that enables enforcement, with consequences including re-evaluation of funding and potential dismissal of steering board members. It's time for the city to act as an equal partner along with ABI and MARTA, and that starts with leadership."

27. What additional sources of local funding would you support?

"Amend the BeltLine SSD to use funds for BeltLine rail construction., Renew the TSPLOST with specific funds designated for BeltLine rail., Seek parking revenue from public parking/parking taxes., Amend SSD to include Single Family properties and the parts of Buckhead and SW Atlanta that have been excluded."

28. The Biden Administration has made funding transit a priority. Atlanta could see hundreds of millions in federal transit funding. Do you agree that building light rail on the south and west sides should be the next BeltLine build priority? (The yellow highlighted areas on the map) Why or why not?

"Yes, since we already have the right of way for rail in this segment it is the closest to shovel ready and most likely to receive federal dollars. However, we should start

on the westside in the areas that need it the most. I believe that equity is the real driving force behind the Biden Administration's goals, so we must adjust our plans accordingly."

29. Why do you think Atlanta and MARTA are not in line to receive billions in federal funding from the Biden Administration that cities like Phoenix, Los Angeles, St. Paul, Washington DC, San Jose, will in the 2022 budget? How would your leadership ensure Atlanta doesn't miss these opportunities?

"While Secretary Buttigieg recognized the Beltline as exactly the type of project that our federal dollars hope to support, we have not done a good job prioritizing our projects properly. Up until now, prioritization has primarily been steered by political expediency rather than equity. The federal bill is premised on building equity, through fully formed plans, including jobs plans, affordability initiatives, and transit expansion. The Beltline vision has all of those pieces, but we have had a bad track record of prioritization and sequencing of projects. If we push equitable development to the forefront of our plans, we will be more successful in securing these federal dollars."

30. Do you believe the More MARTA-Atlanta IGA should be amended to require approval by the City Council?

"Yes"

31. If yes, please outline legislation that you would introduce if elected. If no, please explain your position.

"Currently, the IGA between MARTA, The Atlanta Beltline, and the City gives authority over the More MARTA program solely to the MARTA Board. While their committees answer to the Mayor, there is no re-evaluation process or accountability process should the Board fail to execute the More MARTA initiatives according to budget and plan. I will advocate for all city appointments to the MARTA board be vetted by the Office of the Inspector General and voted on by the full City Council. I would also advocate for personal financial disclosures for MARTA Board appointees, and would disqualify candidates who had contributed an aggregate \$1000 to the Mayor within the last 2 years, or who currently hold city contracts. It is important that we ensure that MARTA Board members are not buying their way onto this influential board, or receiving the position out of special interest. Finally, we need clear benchmarks for the More MARTA program complete with an accountability framework that enables enforcement, with consequences including re-evaluation of funding and potential dismissal of steering board members."

32. Is BeltLine rail the City's Project or MARTA's? Who should determine the priorities, timeline and sequencing? Check all that apply.

"MARTA, Atlanta BeltLine Inc. (ABI), The City Council, The Mayor, The City DOT"

33. Please explain your response.

"We need collaboration and communication. I think the very problem we are running into is the silos between these agencies, which is slowing everything down. The City should determine priorities based on need and equity, creating a master list of

initiatives and projects organized by priority. MARTA can establish a timeline but with benchmarks set and reported to the city, and Beltline can help us determine sequencing based on the overall vision of an equitable Beltline for all neighborhoods and based on where they are in completion of other Beltline Projects.”

34. Since others have failed, what would be your approach to make those negotiations successful? And who needs to be at the table?

“We need our state partners at the table, including our congresspersons and Senators and we need CSX at the table. CSX is under federal jurisdiction, so we need to have our federal partners advocating alongside us. Money talks, and I think with the federal dollars and the backing of Secretary Buttigieg we can broker these deals. We need to be sure that when these meetings do happen, that we have the most efficient routes, and full analysis of infill stations available to present so that the benefits are undeniable. With partners like ABI, BRN, and the Atlanta DOT providing the data, and with the money set aside, we should be more successful.”

35. What will convince the freight railroads to grant rights of way for BeltLine Rail, the Emory Clifton Corridor, and MARTA infill stations so that they can connect to existing transit?

“Basic negotiation strategies can apply here. CSX, like any other entity, has its own projects. This is not rocket science, it is just a real estate deal, and for that to be successful we need both parties to feel as though they are profiting from the deal. By bringing our federal and state partners to the table as mentioned above, we can leverage their influence and work together to find a deal that services all parties.”

