



Mobilize the Beltline

Choices and Challenges

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For a version with links and citations, go to betteratlantatransit.org/save-the-beltline.

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SUMMARY

We want more transit. And we love the Beltline. **That's why we're urging MARTA and the city to rethink transit on the Beltline.**

The proposed streetcar is inequitable, unneeded and wasteful. It also threatens everything that has made the Beltline a success.

Our leaders must consider whether they want to commit the bulk of the city's transit dollars for the next 30 years to a project with so much downside. At the same time, we have an opportunity to make the Beltline even better and to fund an urban transit system that actually works.

Better Atlanta Transit is a coalition of transit advocates, environmentalists, planners, business people, academics, equity leaders and community activists. We back equitable, effective and sustainable mobility for all Atlantans.

The streetcar would work against those values. It would consume the lion's share of Atlanta transit dollars for an entire generation, while projects that would do more for both mobility and equity would continue to go unfunded.

The streetcar would forever alter the Beltline – we think for the worse. Greenspace will disappear. Tracks and barriers will constrict pedestrians, cyclists and other travelers. During and after construction, access onto and across the Beltline will become much more difficult, jeopardizing jobs and the small businesses that contribute a sense of place to the Beltline.

Imagine a better path. Literally.

Imagine connecting all Atlantans to the Beltline by funding transit that helps people get to the Beltline. Imagine a city that makes it easier for Atlantans – whether on foot, bike, wheelchair or scooter – to get around their communities, reach rapid transit and travel that last half-mile to their destinations in the healthiest and most environmentally friendly way possible.

Imagine the Beltline living its best life as an active transportation corridor by leaning into the idea of micromobility, which empowers all people – no matter their means or abilities – to enjoy the benefits of a human-scaled greenway. Imagine a second path on the Beltline, separating pedestrians, wheelchairs and dogs from bikes and other wheeled vehicles.

A project in search of a problem to solve.

For two decades, ardent activists and bureaucratic inertia have pushed Beltline rail along. But the streetcar is based on a 25-year-old vision, not a transit need. The truth is that it's never stood up to the rigorous study needed to move forward on a \$2.5 billion transit line.

What little evidence we have points to paltry ridership. More pedestrians and cyclists use the Eastside Trail today than are projected to ride the streetcar in 2040!

Far from advancing equity, the streetcar would serve an elite ridership. Funding is doubtful beyond the first phase, which will serve the second wealthiest stretch of the Beltline.

The streetcar loop may never be completed.

In 2016, Atlanta residents approved the half-penny More MARTA sales tax to invest in transit across the city. Before the vote, the list of potential More MARTA projects topped 70.

In 2018, that was winnowed down to 17. Then, in 2023, MARTA scheduled only nine “Tier 1” projects to go forward this decade. The other eight? Later, if there’s money left. Five of the original 17 were for the streetcar. But even they wouldn’t complete the 22-mile loop.

A likelier scenario: We’ll be left with a streetcar stub that serves the upscale east side and crowds out pedestrians and cyclists, while parts of town that actually need transit go wanting.

The signals are flashing red.

On the route to the Beltline through the King Historic District, two sets of tracks will be crammed down residential streets that are too narrow even for one. King District residents are furious.

On the Beltline itself, a 40-foot-wide strip will be cleared of trees, meadows and public art to make way for tracks, barriers, platforms and overhead wires.

The tracks and barriers will make it more difficult to get onto the Beltline or to cross it to shop, grab a bite or just hang out. Restaurants and shops fear losing business because customers will have a harder time reaching them, both during and after construction.

We have excellent alternatives.

Here are two ideas worth considering:

Wheels and heels. Why not give pedestrians (including wheelchairs, children and dogs) their own lovely path through the trees and meadows? The existing path could be enhanced and given over to bikes, scooters and the like — creating a safe, efficient micromobility corridor. Without cramming in a streetcar, there could be room for a separate running track and other amenities. In the future, there might even be space carved out for small autonomous pods

Transit *TO* the Beltline. The Beltline streetcar won’t reduce demand for parking near the Beltline or improve access to underserved communities. Only transit to the Beltline will do that. The More MARTA project list includes nearly a dozen potential transit crossings that could deliver passengers to the Beltline. Most of those lines also would connect transit-dependent neighborhoods to jobs and key destinations.

It’s time for a new direction.

Atlanta has more urgent transit needs than an extravagant project for well-to-do neighborhoods. There are better ways to enhance the Beltline as an innovative mobility corridor.

Mayor Andre Dickens has taken a courageous step by ordering a review of mobility on the Beltline. His proposals for four new MARTA heavy-rail stations along the Beltline and a BRT route along North Avenue and Hollowell Parkway are promising.

But we believe it’s time to go further. MARTA and the city must halt the Beltline streetcar and free up resources for projects that actually solve our transit needs. All of us must consider anew what the future holds for both the Beltline and mobility in Atlanta.

Transit and mobility in Atlanta

MORE MARTA IS OUR BIG SHOT

Atlantans voted in 2016 for the More MARTA half-penny sales tax to fund transit projects and expand bus service within the city limits. It's providing \$2.7 billion toward the largest intown transit expansion since MARTA heavy rail began operating in 1979.

Through the magic of financing, most of that money will be spent over the next decade. But the sales tax will be in place until 2057.

State legislation enabling the tax bars the city from holding votes for any additional similar taxes during that period. So, for the next 30-plus years, it will be difficult to get a new round of major local transit funding. More MARTA must be treated as this generation's best shot at improving transit. It's imperative that MARTA direct this money to make a real difference in the ability of Atlantans to get to destinations without a car.

MORE MARTA HAS BEEN WHITTLED DOWN

More than 70 projects made the original list of those that might be funded by More MARTA. In 2018, 17 were selected for actual funding. But MARTA took forever to get going on the projects, and costs escalated after the pandemic. So, in 2023, the MARTA board whittled the list down to nine Tier 1 projects. Some of the Tier 2 projects could get funding if money is left over. But it's doubtful that much More MARTA money will make it past the first phase.

It hasn't helped that MARTA misused \$10 million to \$70 million in More MARTA funds. That raises new questions about the resources available to complete More MARTA projects.

GEORGIA DOESN'T FUND TRANSIT

MARTA is the largest transit system in the country that doesn't get significant funding from its state government. That's poor public policy, and it needs to be changed. For now, however, it's a political reality at the state level. There are many more needs than dollars, which underscores that we must spend that More MARTA money wisely.

FEDERAL FUNDING IS CRITICAL

More MARTA projects are nearing shovel-ready status as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act makes billions in federal grants available. Opportunities for matching funds abound – especially for buses and fixed-guideway bus systems, such as bus rapid transit, and for “light individual transportation (meaning bikes, scooters, etc.). With a new administration less friendly toward transit entering the White House, however, that window could close soon.

Federal grants can stretch local transit funds dramatically. The formulas often provide three federal dollars for every two local dollars. Some are less generous, some even more.

Because the first segment of the Beltline streetcar didn't qualify for federal funds, local taxpayers will foot the entire bill of that project. It makes more sense for More MARTA money to be spent in a way that leverages opportunities for federal funding – *and quickly*.

MAYOR DICKENS' ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER

Last spring, Mayor Dickens directed his administration to advance five transit projects that didn't make More MARTA's Tier 1 list: Four heavy-rail infill stations at MARTA rail intersections with

the Beltline and a 10-mile bus rapid transit line on Hollowell Parkway and North Avenue. The crosstown BRT and two of the proposed infill stations are noteworthy because they would improve access for underserved, transit-dependent neighborhoods.

His administrative order also mandates a review of whether the Beltline streetcar remains the best approach. It was rooted in a recognition that the Beltline rail loop may not be affordable, while other projects could better serve neighborhoods that actually rely on transit.

Why Beltline rail won't work

A DESIRE NAMED STREETCAR

Most Atlantans agree that we need a greener, more equitable, more connected city. Over the last two decades, passionate Beltline streetcar advocates have poured those aspirations into a single project.

First, it was argued that only rail could draw development to the Beltline. When development arrived without the streetcar, we were told it was the one key to solving our transit and equity challenges. It must be rail. It must be built now. And it must take precedence over all other transit projects. And with a grass track, it will enhance the greenspace of the Beltline!

Ironically, Beltline rail has become a stand-in for the many goals it actually hinders.

It will be a step back for equity, because the Streetcar East Extension (the only funded segment to the Beltline streetcar) will primarily serve wealthy eastside neighborhoods. It's not good for transit because it diverts billions of dollars from less expensive projects that would serve more people. And the streetcar would certainly detract from greenspace, biking, walking, existing small businesses and the Beltline's great creative culture.

Streetcar boosters have been single-minded and effective. They've tied Beltline rail to laudable values. But, as you'll see below, the boosters' gauzy claims are quite the opposite of reality.

CONTROVERSIAL FROM THE START

Light rail on the Beltline was first proposed in Ryan Gravel's 1999 thesis for his master's degree in planning and architecture. When pitched publicly in the early 2000s, it was embraced by some Atlanta residents who were rightly clamoring for transit. But, even then, a variety of factors made the Beltline impractical for mass transit.

Its circular layout makes it less efficient for longer trips because most destinations are best reached via routes that are as direct as possible. (While many great transit systems do feature "ring" lines, they're generally built to connect existing lines that already crisscross those cities – not *before* the low-hanging fruit of arterial connections are completed.)

The Beltline route would circle Midtown, but not serve it. The More MARTA project with the highest passenger capacity — the only streetcar — would fail to provide transit to and from intown Atlanta's densest housing, employment and health services district.

Twenty years ago, the main rap against Beltline transit was that it wouldn't serve a transit need. That's still the case. Despite increases in housing and some offices on the East Side, there isn't the density to justify a streetcar. Atlantans use the Beltline for short trips best addressed by the modes currently available on the Beltline, such as walking and biking.

Today, such “active transportation” has been enhanced by the availability of e-bikes and other personal electric vehicles, as well as bike and scooter sharing. In fact, more pedestrians and cyclists currently use the Eastside Trail than are projected to ride the streetcar in 2040!

It’s not even clear that Atlanta Beltline Inc. can physically complete the streetcar loop. After 20 years of trying, ABI officials haven’t figured out how to route the streetcar through the Beltline’s northwest quadrant and over various other gaps along the route. A major selling point – that the streetcar will “connect 45 neighborhoods” falls apart without the full loop.

PROJECT IN SEARCH OF A PURPOSE

In fairness, the case for fixed rail on the Beltline never was that it would meet a transit need. The original argument was that a rail line would be necessary to steer economic and community development along the abandoned train corridors that ringed the inner city.

That turned out to be a flawed assumption. Without a streetcar, the Beltline has attracted plenty of new development. More than \$9 billion and counting. The growth started on the east side. But development is now spreading all around the loop to places like Bankhead, Capitol View, Pittsburgh and West End. Clearly, rail wasn’t needed to bring development.

So, if it’s not needed for transit or development, what’s the point of the Beltline streetcar?

THE STREETCAR EXTENSION EAST

The Streetcar Extension East includes the first phase of the Beltline streetcar. It would carry the Atlanta Streetcar from its current terminus in the Old Fourth Ward, along narrow residential streets to the Beltline at Irwin Street.

It would then travel 1.3 miles along the Beltline to Ponce City Market. The cost is estimated at \$230 million. That’s probably optimistic. But it represents a far larger commitment – just the first segment of the planned 22-mile streetcar loop likely to cost more than \$2.5 billion.

As of Fall 2024, the extension is well into its design work. Construction, slated to start in 2026, will turn the Eastside Trail’s most popular segment into a work zone for up to three years.

LOOP? WHAT LOOP?

Another 13.7 miles along the Beltline’s Southeast, Southwest and Northwest sections remain on More MARTA’s Tier 2 project list. The preliminary budgets for those sections are outdated, and it’s not clear that any More MARTA money will remain once the Tier 1 projects are completed. Seven miles of the Beltline aren’t on either the Tier 1 or 2 list, partly because it’s unclear that ABI can find a route through various obstacles. So ABI’s promise to “connect” 45 neighborhoods with the streetcar and to promote equitable development just isn’t on a trajectory to be fulfilled.

Given the extension’s low ridership projections and the need for transit in other parts of the city, it seems most likely that Atlantans will be left, at least for many years, with that 1.3-mile Beltline streetcar stub – a monument to a project that didn’t address a transit need in the first place.

TRANSIT FOR THE ELITE

For the most part, the Beltline won’t serve the people who need transit and use it regularly. That’s because the SCE will travel through Inman Park, Poncey-Highland and the Old Fourth Ward, and end at Virginia-Highland. Those neighborhoods comprise the second wealthiest “subarea” along the Beltline.

Even if MARTA somehow came up with funding for more of the streetcar, the next section would most likely complete the Northeast quadrant by going through Virginia-Highland, Morningside and Ansley Park – the only subarea wealthier than the first segment.

SO MUCH FOR GREENSPACE

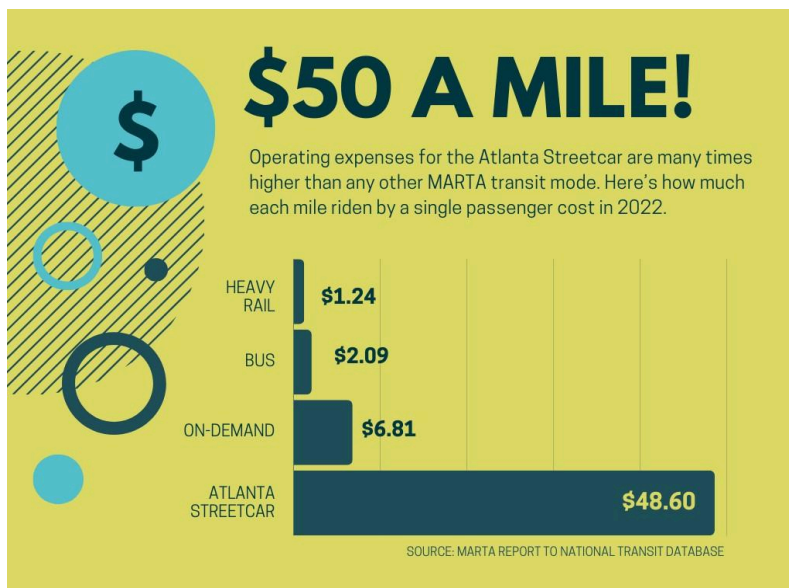
Trees and meadows are among the Beltline’s most treasured features. Nowhere is that more true than along the Eastside Trail, where in 2012 Trees Atlanta began cultivating its remarkable Atlanta Beltline Arboretum.

The greenspace performs important ecological roles by gobbling up carbon, cleansing the air, filtering runoff water and reducing flooding. Visitors to the Beltline benefit directly, too. Not only do trees significantly lower temperatures along the trail, but psychologists and biologists increasingly agree that the “biophilic” benefits of time spent in nature are real: Greenspace reduces the stress of city life, supercharges health and healing, and just makes us happier.

It’s not an overstatement to say that the streetcar will obliterate that greenspace. By our count, at least 225 trees, totalling 2,600 caliper inches, will be lost along the 1.3 miles of the Streetcar Extension East alone. With more extensions, the losses would multiply.

Trees Atlanta manages 46 acres of planted space and 39 acres of natural areas along 13 miles of the Beltline. Where the streetcar is built, most of those trees and meadows will disappear.

Destroying greenspace to build a streetcar stands environmentalism on its head. Transit should be a higher priority along existing streets where there are actual transit needs and where it can supplant carbon-belching cars – rather than carbon-gobbling trees.



GOOD MONEY AFTER BAD

One need not travel far from the Beltline to see how a streetcar project can go terribly awry. The existing Atlanta Streetcar shuffles, mostly empty, between Centennial Park and the King District. On an average weekday, it carries around 900 people. That’s a third of its ridership projections — 10 years ago.

Conceived by past city leadership, it was dumped on MARTA in 2018. It’s astoundingly expensive to run: While heavy rail cost \$1.24 per passenger mile to operate in 2022, each passenger mile on the streetcar set MARTA back \$48.60. The streetcar may gain some efficiencies by extending the route. But ridership expectations aren’t robust for the SCE either, so the total operating shortfall is likely to grow into an even larger burden.

A predicted streetcar-driven boom along Auburn and Edgewood avenues never materialized. Many Old Fourth Ward businesses didn’t survive the construction period.

The outlook for businesses along the Beltline may be worse. Restaurateurs and other owners are dependent upon foot traffic. They're concerned that the streetcar will limit access to their businesses both during and after construction, while limited ridership won't bring new customers. They fear that at the same time the destruction of greenspace will diminish a feature of the Beltline that has contributed to its popularity.

RAIDING THE KITTY

Faced with the enormous cost of the Beltline streetcar, the special interest group Beltline Rail Now came up with a plan in 2021 to make up for the shortfall: Raid every imaginable source of funding for local transit.

While the plan included funding for the four infill stations (which at the time, it supported), BRN's bottom line estimate of the combined cost of the streetcar loop and the stations came to \$2.5 – the same as our conservative estimate for the streetcar loop alone today.

The plan proposed hiking the streetcar's More MARTA allotment from \$570 million to \$930 million so that money can be used to back \$600 million in federally backed loans. That would mean even less money for projects that actually would serve transit needs.

It also called for steering \$500 million to the streetcar from the Beltline Tax Allocation District (which currently funds affordable housing, trail construction and other ABI projects); asking Beltline area property owners to tax themselves \$500 million; and grabbing \$150 million in Atlanta Transportation Special Local Sales Tax revenue. T-SPLOSTs typically support many transportation improvements, including bike lanes, sidewalks, operations and maintenance.

Finally, the plan banks on \$1 billion in federal funds – an optimistic assumption considering that MARTA didn't deem the Streetcar Extension East a likely candidate for federal funding. It's not clear that the streetcar will qualify for any substantial federal grants – much less a billion dollars.

If federal funding doesn't materialize, one of two things will happen: The streetcar will be left as a partially completed stub. Or there will be a push to divert even more money from more urgent transit needs and to strain even more city priorities.

SINGLE-MINDED ADVOCACY TRUMPS THE PUBLIC INTEREST.

As much as streetcar boosters avoid the topic, Beltline rail is competing with other projects for a finite pot of money. It's inescapable.

That was clear in 2018, when MARTA planners determined that part of the streetcar's allotment shouldn't make the final cut of More MARTA-funded projects. BRN responded with a fierce campaign to reverse the decision. MARTA's board yielded to the pressure.

But a bigger share for one project meant a smaller share for the rest. One outcome: Although its projected ridership was five times that of the Streetcar Extension East, the long-awaited Clifton Corridor streetcar was converted to lower-cost – and lower-capacity – bus rapid transit.

At least the Clifton BRT, which will run from the Lindbergh MARTA Station to Emory University, is still alive. Dozens of other worthy projects aren't getting any More MARTA money.

The Beltline streetcar hasn't made it this far because of its potential as equitable transit. Rather, a well-organized group pushed for it fervently. Without such well-connected, organized advocates, more promising transit projects faltered in the quest for funding.

Among the ones put on the back burner or cut entirely from more MARTA funding were transit lines along Hollowell Parkway and North Avenue, Northside Drive, Peachtree Street, and Tenth Street, as well as the four MARTA heavy-rail infill stations and transit through Atlanta University Center.

One hopeful development: The infill stations and the North Avenue/Hollowell Parkway BRT line might be saved by Mayor Dickens' April administrative order. He directed city officials to move those projects forward – although how they'll be funded remains unclear.

HISTORY VERSUS MYTHOLOGY

Advocates place the Beltline streetcar on a pedestal not afforded more needed transit projects.

They claim the rail line must be built because it was the “founding idea” of the Beltline. But it wasn't. Six years before a rails-only version was proposed in Ryan Gravel's thesis, Atlanta City Council adopted a plan to connect new parks and cultural amenities via trails on the old “belt line” rail corridors.

The 2005 Redevelopment Plan, which set the overall direction of the Beltline, called for trails, parks and housing to be tackled ahead of transit, stressed that transit projects off the Beltline were just as important, and didn't even specify rail as the modality.

Advocates also argue that voters approved the Beltline streetcar, often pointing to the 2016 More MARTA referendum. That ignores the fact that the streetcar wasn't on the ballot. The sales tax was instead tied to a list of 70-plus transit projects. Other projects — not the Beltline streetcar — were featured in MARTA's promotional materials for the referendum.

Even if these claims were accurate, they shouldn't lock us into building a massive project that isn't justified on its merits.

Longtime streetcar boosters are frustrated at rising opposition. But sometimes things change. That's what happened with the Stone Mountain Freeway in the 1960s and '70s, and the Presidential Freeway back in the 1980s. Ordinary Atlantans have often organized to defeat projects that turned out not to be in the public interest — and to develop superior alternatives.

Twenty-first century solutions

OUR TOP TRANSIT PRIORITY MUST BE VIBRANT, AFFORDABLE NEIGHBORHOODS.

Housing prices are the urban crisis of our day. Comfortable, efficient, inexpensive mobility is an important part of the solution.

When Atlantans can reach work and other destinations without a car, two things happen: Some no longer need to spend money on an automobile, and many are able to cast their housing search across a wider set of neighborhoods.

Atlanta Beltline Inc. is finally making some progress toward its affordable housing goals. But it's an uphill climb. It wouldn't be so steep if people had access to and from neighborhoods beyond the Beltline.

A short streetcar line shuttling residents between the upscale neighborhoods on the east side won't make life more affordable for most Atlantans. But transit can enhance affordability if it connects residents of more affordable neighborhoods to jobs, shops, services and amenities — such as the Beltline!



ATLANTA NEEDS A MOBILITY PLAN.

In 2015, Atlanta Beltline Inc. was given the task of developing a transit plan for the city. Naturally, ABI decided it would be great to center a 52-mile streetcar network on ... the Beltline.

That plan was always poorly conceived and unrealistic. Now, it's obsolete.

Fewer than three miles of the streetcar network have been built, and there's only funding for an additional 2.4 miles. The rest either has been converted to bus rapid transit or has no realistic prospect of funding. Yet, amazingly, ABI's Streetcar System Plan still stands in as the transit portion for the city's transportation plan.

We need to take a deeper look at where we're going, not only with transit but with mobility writ large. We have an opportunity to plan for the future by developing a modern plan that incorporates mass transit, along with more efficient and less expensive

new technologies. We need a roadmap that takes the situation on the ground into account and examines technical advances that would allow MARTA to stretch its investments.

Here's the good news: It so happens that the Atlanta Regional Commission is sitting on a \$2.4 million grant that the city could use almost immediately to update its Comprehensive Transportation Plan. The city needs to jump at this opportunity to develop a full-fledged, forward-looking mobility plan.

Planning need not delay Tier I More MARTA projects that make sense according to conventional criteria, such as ridership and equity. But the flawed Streetcar East Extension shouldn't move forward without a serious examination of its efficacy as part of a larger system and without a look at what's the best way to improve mobility along the Beltline.

INFILL STATIONS

In March of 2023, Mayor Andre Dickens revived a longstanding proposal to build infill stations at four points where MARTA heavy rail crosses the Beltline. The new heavy-rail stations would provide access to the 34 existing stations, as well as the bus hubs at those existing stations. By increasing the number of rail stops in the city, MARTA would enhance its utility as an urban system – akin to more successful transit agencies, such as the Washington, D.C., Metro.

The two westside stations (at Murphy Crossing and Joseph E. Boone Boulevard) would serve low-income neighborhoods where more connectivity to transit is needed. All four stations (including the sites at Krog Street and Armour Yards) are at promising locations for residential and commercial development. The stations would also do far more to provide access to the Beltline than a Beltline streetcar.

While MARTA has examined the concept in the past, more preliminary work needs to be done. Dickens' order mandates that the city and ABI work with MARTA to plan the stations.

Some sites (notably Krog Street) present significant challenges that could increase the cost. A big question is whether the stations would qualify for federal funds. But, overall, the infill stations could prove an efficient way to leverage existing assets for maximum benefit.

TRANSIT TO THE BELTLINE

If I'm trying to get to the Beltline from Grove Park or Buckhead, a streetcar along the Beltline isn't going to help me. Nodes along the Beltline that have been zoned for higher density will be best served by transit to the Beltline – not on it.

A significant challenge for Beltline district walkability is the explosion of parking decks and lots in the area. But, again, people aren't parking near the Beltline because they can't ride a streetcar *on* it; they're driving *to* the Beltline and parking there.

Fortunately, transit to the Beltline is very feasible. One potential example is the proposed 10-mile bus rapid transit line along Hollowell Parkway and North Avenue. The route, which Mayor Dickens boosted in his April administrative order on transit, would connect rapidly growing, affordable neighborhoods on the west side to Midtown, Georgia Tech, two MARTA stations and two intersections with the Beltline.

Two BRT lines that connect to the Beltline – in Summerhill and along the Clifton Corridor – are already moving forward. So is an arterial rapid transit line along Metropolitan Avenue. But other projects should be part of the conversation, including the Peachtree Street BRT and Northside Drive arterial rapid transit.

The Bankhead MARTA station already provides connectivity to the Beltline, which could be improved with a proper path. Combined with the four infill stations mentioned above, all those projects would bring the number of rapid transit lines to the Beltline to 12 (caveat: this includes two instances where two intersections are close together and could be redundant). That would go a long way toward making the Beltline accessible to all, while also serving the broader transit needs of many neighborhoods.

Look at it this way: If transit reached the Beltline at intervals of two miles or less, riders would be able to reach within one mile of any location on the Beltline, where a level path and various micromobility devices will make that last mile easier. That's connectivity!

LEAN INTO THE BELTLINE'S BEST LIFE.

People are already using the Beltline for transportation. They're walking, running, biking, e-biking, scooting, hovering – you name it. A 2022 PATH Foundation count of pedestrians, cyclists and other users found around 5,000 people crossing both Irwin Street and Ponce De Leon Avenue on an average weekday.

Twenty years ago, nobody knew electric bikes and rideshare apps would extend the reach of micromobility and give people a fast, healthy way to get around on short trips.

On the east side, there needs to be more room for walking and biking. One option: Create a separate, well-landscaped, shaded walking trail on the right of way currently reserved for the streetcar. That could be replicated as other segments become more popular. This “wheels and heels” approach would be safer for pedestrians and wheelchairs, and it would make bike travel more practical. Besides, aren't walking and cycling healthier than sitting in a streetcar?

MICROMOBILITY AS AN EXTENSION OF TRANSIT

Micromobility has broader applications than just on the Beltline. And it isn't happening in a vacuum: Consulting firm McKinsey & Co. estimates that e-bikes and other forms of micromobility will become a \$550 billion industry by 2035.

Although slower than many peers, Atlanta is finally building a network of buffered bike lanes to go along with plans for more separate paths. The city has partnered with the PATH Foundation to design a TrailsAtl plan that integrates paths with transit. By offering last- and first- mile connections, paths and buffered bike lanes can serve as transit extenders. By making shops and services more accessible to nearby residents, they can revitalize neighborhoods. An added benefit: They can make our city a safer, healthier, more pleasant place to live. Think of it as extending the "Beltline effect" to other parts of the city.

Importantly, Atlantans are ready to get behind this approach. Not only do they say so in surveys, they're acting on that desire: Applications for rebates the city now offers for e-bikes are far exceeding their availability.

WHAT ABOUT PODS, AV SHUTTLES AND ROBOTAXIS?

We're on the cusp of a mobility revolution. From Zoox to Waymo, BEEP to Via, autonomous vehicles are hitting the road across the U.S. Granted, they're usually pilot projects. But we'd be foolish to throw billions of dollars at our transit system without considering how robotaxis, AV shuttles and on-demand services might change travel patterns and passenger demands.

Atlanta is next in line for many of these technologies, which offer potential advantages over conventional modes. We're particularly hopeful about the opportunity to expand microtransit, similar to the MARTA Mobility vans that connect passengers with limited mobility to destinations.

In such an environment, flexibility is key. There's an advantage to investing in systems that are light on infrastructure, just as there's a disadvantage in sinking hundreds of millions of dollars in locking our city into systems that might soon be outmoded.

BRT IS A PROMISING STEP FORWARD.

One way to serve more people is to build bus rapid transit lines along established routes. Bus rapid transit is more like a streetcar than a bus but rides on rubber wheels instead of tracks. Building BRT also takes about half the time and way less money than a streetcar. No wonder the Federal Transit Administration has shifted to favor BRT over fixed-rail in grant applications.

As noted above, some of these BRT lines are already on the way. The one from downtown through Summerhill to the Beltline is scheduled for completion next year. Campbellton Road and Clifton Corridor undergoing design. This is progress!

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The challenges we all face can feel overwhelming. From local issues like housing affordability and mobility to broader crises such as climate change and the seeming ability of our government to even tackle such challenges. At the same time, ingenuity, technology and grit are creating unprecedented opportunities – but only if we are willing to grapple with them by being honest about our limitations and open-minded about solutions.