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# Race, Class, and Gentrification Along the Atlanta BeltLine

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# **Race, Class, and Gentrification Along the Atlanta BeltLine**

Natalie Camrud

In partial fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts degree in Environmental Analysis, 2016-2017  
academic year, Scripps College, Claremont, California

Readers:  
Professor Char Miller  
Professor Lance Neckar

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### Terminology:

For the historical period that parts of this thesis focus on, Atlanta was characterized by a “one-dimensional racial profile”<sup>1</sup> that solely surrounded the relationship between black and white. Until 1990, races and ethnicities beyond black and white were 1% or less each.<sup>2</sup> This is why I use the term “black” instead of “people of color” for my historical descriptions of race relations. Additionally, I chose to use the term “black” over “African American” when writing this thesis because of the resurgence of the term in conjunction with the Black Lives Matter movement, and the use of the term in my research.

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<sup>1</sup> Sjoquist, David L. *Past Trends and Future Prospects of the American City: The Dynamics of Atlanta*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009. Print. Pp.221

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 21

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## Introduction

“Where Atlanta comes together” - Beltline.org<sup>3</sup>

It is early Friday morning in August when my father and I pull the car into the Inman Park-Reynoldstown MARTA station, a stop along the east-west MARTA line in Atlanta. We are about to start a three-hour bus tour of the Atlanta BeltLine in the summer of 2016. The BeltLine project is far from complete, so walking the whole thing is impossible, and having someone else navigate my congested city while I get to sit back and take it all in seemed like the best way to see its full extent. My father has joined me on this excursion as a bonding activity. Our email confirmation firmly told us to go to the Inman Park side of the station, not the Reynoldstown side. I wonder why until I saw that the two neighborhoods are separated by a huge rail switchyard called Hulsey Yard, so it is very difficult to get from one side to the other. I ponder whether that was done on purpose long ago as a way to segregate the neighborhoods. With that famous “Hotlanta” humidity hanging low in the air, we walked to the group of people hovering around the entrance of the station, clearly waiting for a tour bus but not wanting to admit that they are taking a bus tour. Finally a small green and blue bus with “Atlanta BeltLine” emblazoned along the side pulls into the station. We climb aboard, receive our brochures and maps, and our three-hour journey begins. Our tour guide informs us that the bus will take us through 45 different neighborhoods and that we will get one rest stop on the west side. She also lets us know that we will be going through some “depressed” neighborhoods.

On paper, the BeltLine seems simple enough. An adaptive reuse of an abandoned freight rail corridor, the BeltLine is a transit-oriented development (TOD) project that will include

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<sup>3</sup> “Atlanta BeltLine.” *Atlanta BeltLine*. Web. 18 Sept. 2016.

thirty-three miles of mixed-use trails and twenty-two miles of a light rail streetcar. The BeltLine website boasts: “It is a living, breathing part of our community; not simply a means of getting somewhere, but a destination unto itself.”<sup>4</sup> It has quickly exploded in popularity with a generation of people who are keen to move from the suburbs and back into the city centers. These days, walkability trumps a fenced-in yard. Search the Atlanta BeltLine on Instagram and you’ll see people posing in front of colorful street art or looking off wistfully at the skyline; it seems picture perfect. Economically it has been a huge success as well; \$450 million has been put into the BeltLine by 2016, and it has reportedly generated three billion dollars in private investment.<sup>5</sup> However, there are many ways to measure success and money is only one of them. BeltLine brainchild Ryan Gravel said in an interview: “From an equity and affordability perspective, I think the jury is still out on whether we’re going to be a success or not.”<sup>6</sup> This project has the potential to repeat the past in terms of displacement, or it could intentionally and purposefully strive for equality and equity. Seeing the entirety of it from my bus, however, I can see that the BeltLine is so much more than the sum of its parts. It is more than trails and parks and trains. It is trying to create a common link between dozens of neighborhoods that have been racially separated for decades, usually by design. The BeltLine is not only reaching across the physical barriers of highways and rail yards, it is trying to reach back through time, to right some of the wrongs of the city’s past and to prevent the same displacement and inequality that has repeated itself for generations. The BeltLine is trying to create a sense of community in a city where you rarely interact with other people unless they are sitting with you in your car. The BeltLine’s vision is transformative, and I worry that it will not be able to achieve its goal of providing

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<sup>4</sup> “The Atlanta BeltLine: The 5 Ws and Then Some.” *Atlanta BeltLine*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Sept. 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Atlanta BeltLine Inc. *Annual Report 2015*. Atlanta, 2015. Web.

<sup>6</sup> Gravel, Ryan. Personal Interview. 6 June 2016.

Atlanta with a chance “to redefine what it is to be a neighbor, to be a community, to be a region, and to share all that it has to offer.”<sup>7</sup>

The bus does not stop during the tour, so parts of my city that are unknown to me flash past and I try to absorb everything as quickly as I can. I used to feel like I knew Atlanta, but on this day I begin to question what it even means to know a place. We head south first; south of the east-west MARTA line is much more industrial. Freight yards, abandoned and active, stretch out on either side of our bus while steel plants tower above us. Deep green trees mingle with the man-made structures, creating a vivid green and gray blur as we speed past.



*Figure 1:*  
Undeveloped areas  
along the BeltLine  
Photo courtesy of  
Natalie Camrud.

As we roll through neighborhoods and wait in the occasional but inevitable traffic, the guide rattles off some facts: Atlanta was originally named Terminus because it was the terminating point for southern freight rails and was never intended to be an actual city. Prior to 1949 Atlanta had three hundred miles of electric streetcar lines that were subsequently paved over or removed when the car soared in popularity. She also points out sustainable features of the

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<sup>7</sup> “The Atlanta BeltLine: The 5 Ws and Then Some.” *Atlanta BeltLine*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Sept. 2016.

BeltLine: on the left is the first energy cost neutral park in the city. On the right is an affordable workforce housing community that is also LEED-certified. This group of dilapidated, abandoned buildings will be a mixed-use development in ten years, trust us. Despite the large amounts of the BeltLine that are abandoned or in disrepair, I catch the excitement of my fellow bus goers as a bright future of sustainable living and healthy lifestyles is described to us. One of the brochures declares that the BeltLine is “a sustainable, walkable future for Atlanta, where diverse communities of people of all ages and backgrounds have the opportunity to live, work, play, and learn in the heart of our great city.”<sup>8</sup> Our brochure also has renderings of abandoned buildings being turned into thriving, vibrant developments while the sleek streetcar runs alongside, and I



Figure 2: The west side, Atlanta. Photo courtesy of Natalie Camrud

can almost picture it as those same abandoned buildings pass before my eyes before being whipped out of sight.

I have been to parts of the BeltLine in person, specifically the Northside and Eastside trails, and the stark differences along the BeltLine are staggering. The Eastside trail is thriving, with bikers and millennials with puppies and the occasional roller-skater. Ponce City Market, an adaptive reuse project of an old Sears building, is located on the Eastside trail and has an industrial-chic vibe, complete with exposed

pipng and original brickwork. The west side, by contrast, is merely industrial. No chic. No juice

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<sup>8</sup> *Join the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership*. Atlanta, 2016. Print.

shops or craft breweries. We pass by housing projects in disrepair and boarded up businesses. One section of the Westside trail is simply a sidewalk on an overpass. However, based on the boom felt by the east side after the trail was finished, I feel that the west side will ultimately encounter the same fate, for better or worse.

During our rest stop at a west side grocery store, I notice some wary glances from



*Figure 3:* Unfinished section of the Westside Trail. Photo courtesy of Natalie Camrud

shoppers. Am I a young urbanite who, despite having sufficient funds to afford a different neighborhood, wants to live in a place on the “raw” and “real” side of town? Am I a weathervane of

gentrification? They watch me closely to see which way the wind will blow. After our rest stop at Kroger we hop back in the bus and I’m back in familiar territory. By the time my father and I are back in our car and heading home, my image and

conception of the city of Atlanta has

greatly expanded, and so to, has my love

for my hometown. In the face of the uncertainty of the unfinished trails, abandoned buildings, and with years to go before the BeltLine is completed, there is only one thing that is certain in my mind: this city will never be the same, and that could be a wonderful thing.

## Chapter 1: Atlanta's Urban Development History

“While transportation has had and continues to have a profound influence upon Atlanta’s physical structure and social ecology, so too has the system of caste. Caste... left an indelible mark on the pattern of the city in its creation of two separate “sides” of the city, two “communities”” - Dana F. White and Timothy J. Crimmins<sup>9</sup>

Atlanta has broken bones. Very few parts of the city come together cohesively, which is a result of deliberate segregation of people and neighborhoods by race and class, the legacy of racism, the automobile, and poor planning decisions. Originally named Terminus in 1836, the tiny town was nothing more than the terminating point for a Midwest rail line in the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> The number of rail lines grew however, and Terminus became a rail hub, a passing point for the rest of the Southeast, but it was never expected to become more than that. Atlanta did not receive its official name until 1847. It was certainly not intended to become a city with millions of residents and the world's busiest airport. It was never imagined that Atlanta would someday host the Olympics. Because of Atlanta’s original purpose as a rail hub and not a city, development and city planning has largely been reactive rather than proactive, as the city has adapted to its growing population.

Another pattern in Atlanta’s development has been the deliberate separation and relocation of communities based upon race and class, and a prioritization of private benefit over the needs and desires of the public. Development initiatives often have been shortsighted, inept, or even destructive. “It (Atlanta) started out as an interesting city,” Paul Morris, CEO of Atlanta BeltLine Inc., tells me, “and then in changed in a dramatic way from the 1950s to now. It took on

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<sup>9</sup> Stone, Clarence Nathan. *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988*. Univ Pr of Kansas, 1989. Print. Pp. 13

<sup>10</sup> BeltLine Bus Tour. 5 Aug. 2016.

the character and identity of cities pretty much anywhere in the country. And those are not distinguishing qualities.”<sup>11</sup> In this chapter I will explore some of the development decisions that have led to Atlanta’s current layout and contributed to some of the problems plaguing the city. In addition, I will discuss the power structures that have operated in Atlanta and heavily influenced urban renewal and redevelopment schemes from the 1940’s to the present. For sake of simplicity, I will be giving a general overview of housing and redevelopment decisions in Atlanta in the twentieth century so that the reader has some context with which to understand the significance of the BeltLine’s redevelopment initiative, as of 2016. Although the following is by no means a comprehensive timeline of events, it captures some of the city’s essential approach to development projects.

The private sector has long dominated Atlanta, as reflected in the degree to which the city’s development historically has been run by a coalition, or regime, of private businesses and their political allies in city government. In his book, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988*, Clarence Stone defines regime in the specific context of Atlanta as an “informal partnership between city hall and the downtown business elite.”<sup>12</sup> The specific relationship between government and the private sector might change with each mayor, but overall the dynamics of that relationship remained the same. The regime took shape in 1941 with the creation of the Central Atlanta Improvement Association.<sup>13</sup> It was created partly in response to the impact of the automobile on the city. As the car became more popular, traffic was immediately an issue, leading wealthy people to flee for the suburbs in hopes of a less congested lifestyle, as well as to get away from growing integration. This white flight resulted in a

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<sup>11</sup> Morris, Paul. Personal Interview. 6 June 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 16

splintering of a central community and threatened the livelihood of the downtown business district. These factors pushed a group of business leaders and downtown landlords to form the Central Atlanta Improvement Association to help them to act on their shared interests. Unity gave them more political clout, and the city government would soon begin a habit of following this group's perspectives and lead. The association was later renamed the Central Atlanta Association and then again renamed to Central Atlanta Progress (CAP). To avoid confusion I will refer to it in its last name change, CAP. Few of the redevelopment projects in Atlanta from 1940 onward would have happened without cooperation from private interests and city government. Through CAP, wealthy private developers and owners had a significant influence in shaping the racial and socioeconomic demographics of the city, the distribution of housing, and the location of highways and stadiums. CAP, as of 2016, had over two hundred members. Its membership typically has acted with long-term views and goals, however those views have always benefitted business first before the citizens of Atlanta. The interests of the powerful have been prioritized over the needs of the people. Harvey Molotch of UC Santa Barbara compares cities to growth machines run by "land-based elites" and local and nonlocal governments, arguing: "Conditions of community life are largely a consequence of the social, economic, and political forces embodied in this growth machine."<sup>14</sup> Atlanta's history of urban development seems to underscore his argument.

Once CAP was established in 1941, for example, urban renewal or development projects in Atlanta typically served two larger purposes: they would relocate or displace black communities while aligning with private business interests of the (mostly white) elite. Earlier in Atlanta's history segregation was blatant, typically through segregation ordinances that first

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<sup>14</sup> Molotch, Harvey. "The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place." *American journal of sociology* (1976): 309. Print.

passed in 1913, long before Central Atlanta Progress was created.<sup>15</sup> When segregation ordinances were declared unconstitutional in 1917, Atlanta moved to zoning that separated black and white residents through land use, building types, and tenant categories.<sup>16</sup> “The racial zoning was an effort to oversee the migration of the black community to specific areas and to create buffers between white and black residential neighborhoods,” historian Ronald Bayor has argued; “Black residential sections were placed near the business district, near industry, and on the west side.”<sup>17</sup> Highway construction projects were also targeted toward deepening segregation and as a way to clear black residents out of certain areas. As these tactics became less blatant, they took on the form of urban redevelopment with racial undercurrents, and they became more complex.

### **Lochner Report**

One major redevelopment plan that has had lasting impacts was the 1946 Lochner report. The plan came about ten years before the interstate highway system was funded and implemented.<sup>18</sup> Central business leaders were the ones who suggested using private consultants to create this report, and then strongly supported the report when it was released. The Lochner report called for sixty million dollars of local bonds to build a north-south and east-west expressway so as to connect the center of the city with the outlying, wealthier suburbs. The goal was to link the downtown business hub with the growing suburbs to maintain a successful business district while easing traffic. However the plan had the added benefit of “slum

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<sup>15</sup> Bayor, Ronald H. “Roads to Racial Segregation: ‘Atlanta in the Twentieth Century.’” *Journal of Urban History* 15.1 (1988): Pp. 4. Print.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>18</sup> Parsons, Brinckerhoff, Quade & Douglas. et al. *Consequences of the Interstate Highway System for Transit: Summary of Findings*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1998. *WorldCat Discovery Service*. Web.

clearance” and maintaining segregation. The sites that the city chose to be demolished via expressway construction were usually poor black communities. Or, as the Lochner Report put it:

The neighborhoods through which the expressways would pass are so depreciated that much of the improvement could aptly be classed as slum clearance. Atlanta has made a noteworthy start toward replacing such dwellings with modern group housing, and the program would be given further impetus by construction of expressways.<sup>19</sup>

The north-south expressway was designed to curve around downtown, thereby separating the

business district and black neighborhoods.<sup>20</sup> The business community approved this separation and destruction because they were afraid that public housing would dampen downtown revitalization and growth.<sup>21</sup> The plan had a timeline of ten years<sup>22</sup> and the estimated cost for expressways was forty eight million dollars, while the cost for street improvements was thirteen million dollars.<sup>23</sup> The Lochner plan also included a

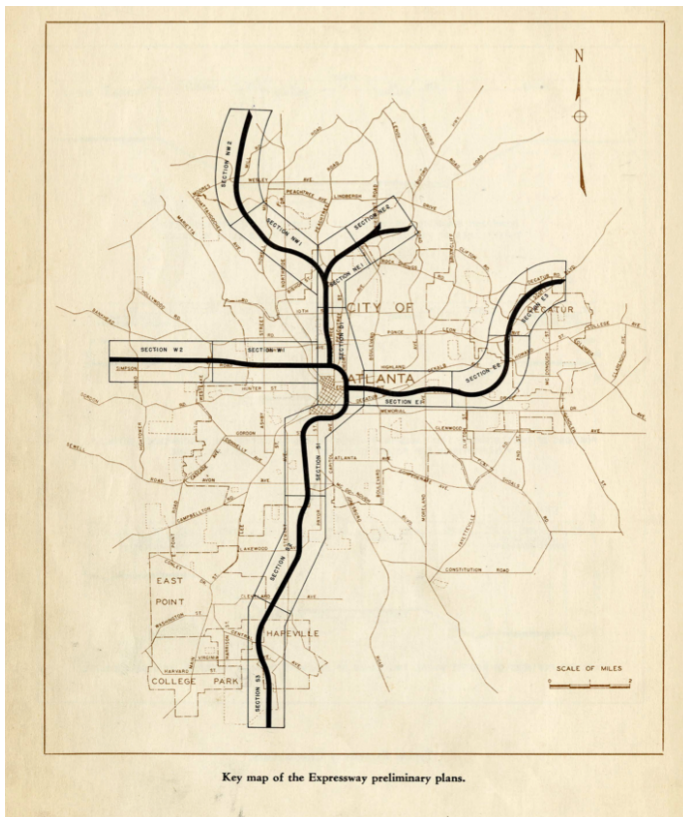


Figure 4: A map of planned expressways from the Lochner Report

<sup>19</sup> H.W Lochner & Company. *Highway and Transportation Plan for Atlanta, Georgia*. Chicago: The Inland Press Inc., 1946. Pp. 14

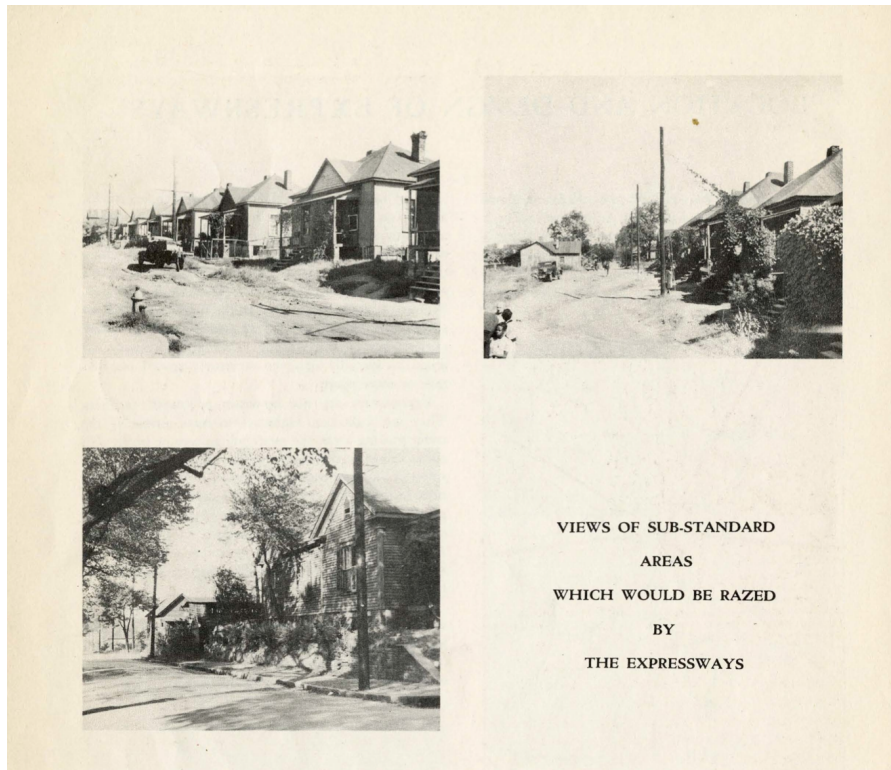
<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 32

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 32

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 32

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, XIII

transit piece, but it was largely ignored or forgotten.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, the report calls for a “belt line of bus routes be established around and at a distance of one to two miles from the central business district.”<sup>25</sup> If that transit beltline had been built sixty years ago, the city might function very differently today. The Lochner plan set the stage for Atlanta’s current transportation network; the proposed expressways still exist today as I-85, I-75, I-20, as well as some state highways.<sup>26</sup>



*Figure 5: Example of proposed “slum clearance” from the Lochner Report*

## **Federal Housing Act**

Another significant driver of Atlanta’s redevelopment came in the form of the Federal Housing Act of 1949. Part of Truman’s Fair Deal, the Federal Housing Act used eminent domain

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., XIV

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

as a main feature of its land-acquisition program. Land was acquired and then resold to developers at a reduced cost. The federal government covered two-thirds of the cost of planning, acquisition, implementation, and relocation.<sup>27</sup> Clarence Stone argues that the Federal Housing Act enabled the city of Atlanta to take land “from one set of owners and [give it] to another to alter its use. Whole neighborhoods could be changed or even eliminated.”<sup>28</sup> With the federal government encouraging and paying for projects, this opened up new opportunities for CAP to work on redevelopment. In 1950, Atlanta chose the site for its first redevelopment project, a white neighborhood called Hemphill Avenue, just north of the business district.<sup>29</sup> However, fearful of strong opposition, the project was discontinued and a new site was chosen, this time a black neighborhood south of the business district. The area had to be rezoned first and the Georgia Supreme Court ruled that use of eminent domain for redevelopment was not allowed under the state constitution. In response, Central Atlanta Progress used its political power by get the state legislature to amend the state constitution and to pass legislation enabling use of eminent domain.<sup>30</sup> This opened the door for many more future redevelopment projects. The Atlanta Housing Authority was in charge of planning and executing the project. Most of the members of the Housing Authority were also members of CAP,<sup>31</sup> so private business very much controlled the process. However, as urban renewal projects began and communities were displaced without replacement housing, it became clear that lack of housing was reaching crisis levels. A housing study in 1958 showed that highway construction would displace nearly ten thousand families who would then need new housing, showing that there was a significant need

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 38

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 38

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 39

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 39

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 42

for more public housing. Public housing and land made available for black housing development were placed purposefully on the outskirts of the city to the south and the west,<sup>32</sup> away from the business center and away from the white suburbs. A site for public housing was purchased by Atlanta Housing Authority on the eastside for 350 public housing units, but it met with great opposition from the white church nearby and the rezoning vote lost nine to eight, while a site on the predominately black westside was approved eleven to five.<sup>33</sup> This demonstrates that replacement housing for displacement projects was typically an afterthought and was not well planned beforehand, and that relocation was a form of continuing racism and segregation, putting black families on the outskirts of the city.

### **Plan of Improvement**

As white flight continued in the postwar years and deepened the segregation of black and white, Atlanta seemed destined to become a minority-majority city. CAP, in an effort to prevent this, supported the 1951 Plan of Improvement. It was designed to annex the wealthy white suburbs to the north into the city of Atlanta, thus maintaining a white majority city. The plan increased the size of the city from thirty-seven square miles to 118 square miles, encompassing a total population of 428,299. CAP played a major role in gathering support from groups such as League of Women Voters and the Atlanta Negro Voters League.<sup>34</sup> The Plan of Improvement was a double-edged sword; its purpose was to maintain a white majority city, but black leaders also supported it because it added large amounts of vacant space into the city that could later be used

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 42

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 43

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 31

for housing.<sup>35</sup> Threatened by displacement from highway construction and redevelopment, a housing crisis was looming and the Plan of Improvement, albeit a tough pill to swallow for the white-dominated CAP and the leaders of the black community, offered a potential solution for both parties. As a result, black communities were able to expand and develop some land, even though it was within the confines of segregation and racism. The westside of Atlanta had most of this undeveloped land, and since the north side remained strictly off limits to any black expansion, the westside became predominantly black and has typically remained so. As of 2016, the westside remains nearly ninety percent black, and households in the area typically have low household incomes, below forty thousand dollars a year, leaving them vulnerable to displacement again mere decades later.<sup>36</sup>

## **MARTA**

There are few instances in twentieth century Atlanta in which CAP's power was challenged, and the Metro Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) is one. The regime's power was shaken when the MARTA referendum was defeated in 1968.<sup>37</sup> The city's black population did not support the referendum because the MARTA plan failed to service their communities. This defeat was unexpected by its key supporters, Mayor Ivan Allen and the business elite; MARTA had been a part of Allen's Six Point Forward program aimed at revitalizing the city and creating growth that had gotten him elected mayor in 1962. In 1964 there was broad public support for the concept of a mass transit system. In response to this defeat, in 1969 the Action Forum was created. It connected white business leaders with black

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 30

<sup>36</sup> "Atlanta, Georgia." *City-data.com*. 2016. Web. 2 Oct. 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 74

leaders under the pretense of cultivating open discussions about community issues, however it was also an effort on the part of the business elite to gain black support for a later MARTA vote.<sup>38</sup> When Mayor Sam Massell succeeded Ivan Allen in 1970, he worked closely with businesses to create a new campaign for the MARTA system. One aspect to this new campaign was a study that CAP commissioned called Central Area Study I, which provided a detailed plan for the MARTA system.<sup>39</sup> MARTA was approved in 1971, and some of the changes made included a north-south railway as well as an east-west railway, so more communities would have transportation access.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, federal affirmative action requirements were put in place for MARTA employment and contracts. This series of events are a good example of the adaptability of the regime and Central Atlanta Progress. When it became clear that their power was no longer absolute, they quickly responded and adapted to win back voters and maintain control. It is also a good example of the power of the citizen voter as well; the power of voting forced CAP's hand and made them alter their plans to align with the desires of the broader public. This is still pertinent when faced with large-scale redevelopment projects and shows citizens in 2016 that they do have some sway over the outcome of projects like the BeltLine.

### **Presidential Parkway**

The Presidential Parkway project had been first started in 1966 as part of a Georgia Department of Transportation plan to build a new expressway on the east side of the city, I-485, running north-south and the Stone Mountain Tollway running east-west.<sup>41</sup> GDOT began

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 97

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 138

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 100

<sup>41</sup> Cash, Mary McCall. "A Tale of Two Roads: The Presidential Parkway and Georgia 400 Note." *Georgia State University Law Review* 8 (1992): 423. Print.

aggressively acquiring and clearing land, but the project was halted in 1971 after a Georgia District Court ruled that an environmental impact study must be conducted; the project was abandoned altogether in 1974 after the environmental impact statement was deemed inadequate and rejected. Upwards of 219 acres of cleared land inside the city sat empty for nearly a decade, and while many different uses were proposed, none caught on and made it past planning stages. In 1981 former president Jimmy Carter proposed to build the Carter Presidential Center on the site, and newly elected mayor Andrew Young, who had a very good relationship with the business elite, supported the idea and presented a plan that incorporated the old plans for an expressway. However, the land was still owned by the Georgia Department of Transportation, which refused to release the land for any other proposed uses for the site, such as a park or an amphitheater.<sup>42</sup> Eventually the GDOT and the Carter Center reached an agreement; the Carter Library and Policy Center would be built there as long as a road could be built as well and the GDOT could retain ownership of the land. The project cut through historic neighborhoods that were not consulted during the initial planning process, and there was fierce opposition to the parkway from neighborhood groups. Ten predominately white neighborhoods formed a group called the Coalition Against Unnecessary Thoroughfares in Older Neighborhoods (CAUTION).<sup>43</sup> The group raised \$350,000 in five years and hired a lawyer to fight the project in the courts. However, the neighborhood group lost; city council would not overturn the vote and the DOT refused to work with the neighborhoods, and the project went through. The expressway is known today as Freedom Parkway. The decision to revive the Presidential Parkway project in 1982 signaled a shift away from neighborhood and voter power and a closer relationship between city government and CAP.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 111

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 114

## Atlanta Olympics

The 1996 Olympics are most comparable to the current BeltLine project in the potential the event had to change and revitalize the entire city of Atlanta. However, despite all the promise, much of the planning, preparation, and implementation surrounding the Olympics was flawed and interpreted as a failure to local residents. The focus was more on commodification of the city as a spectacle to outsiders and tourists, rather than making Atlanta a better place to live.<sup>44</sup> Apparently even the president of the International Olympic Committee said that he would never again support a privately funded Olympics with such heavy business sponsorship.<sup>45</sup> Private power had a strong influence on public decisions, and the economic promises of the Olympics led to the uprooting of thousands of families. So argues Harvey Newman, a Public Policy analyst at Georgia State University: “Planning for urban renewal was initiated and guided largely by the private sector for the benefit of business interests. The role of government was to assist in implementing corporate decisions in the city.”<sup>46</sup> Two organizations were mainly in charge of the preparation and redevelopment for the games, the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG) and the Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta (CODA), both of which were public-private partnerships and thus were miniature regimes in and of themselves.<sup>47</sup> The Olympic games provided an opportunity to “revitalize” some of the lower-income neighborhoods near the downtown area. However, neighborhood opposition prevented CODA from receiving City Council approval for their redevelopment program and they also had

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<sup>44</sup> Newman, Harvey K. “Neighborhood Impacts of Atlanta’s Olympic Games.” *Community Development Journal* 34.2 (1999): 151–159. *cdj.oxfordjournals.org*. Web.

<sup>45</sup> Essex, Stephen, and Brian Chalkley. “Olympic Games: Catalyst of Urban Change.” *Leisure Studies* 17.3 (1998): 187–206. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*. Web.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

difficulty getting funding, so they focused on street repairs and improvement instead. ACOG's goal was to prepare the city for the athletic competitions, which also included displacement; most neighborhoods opposed the plans, but not all voices were heard or acknowledged. The site selection for different parts of the Olympic games highlights this issue. Initially, tennis was planned to take place in a more affluent area called Dunwoody. Residents pushed back and the tennis matches were moved to Stone Mountain Park. However, when the site for the Olympic Stadium was chosen in a low-income black neighborhood called Summerhill and the residents protested, ACOG stood firm. Eventually they reached a compromise; the stadium would still be built in the Summerhill neighborhood but afterwards it would be reconfigured for the Atlanta Braves major league baseball team so that it wouldn't be abandoned after the games.

Additionally, neighborhood residents received promises of job training for construction jobs on the new stadium.<sup>48</sup> This was the minimal compensation for the permanent alteration of their neighborhood. Another relocation project occurred for the creation of Olympic Village, this time it was Techwood Homes, one of the city's oldest projects. Techwood Homes was on the National Register of Historic Places and consisted of 571 units as well as a small dormitory for Georgia Tech students.<sup>49</sup> The people living there were relocated to apartment complexes northwest of the city. After the games, a mixed-income housing complex was built on the site, but very few of the original residents returned.<sup>50</sup> This process was repeated with multiple housing projects, so that before the Olympics, nearly 1,600 families had been relocated to make way for the athletes and

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Keating, Larry. "Redeveloping Public Housing." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 66.4 (2000): 385. Taylor and Francis+NEJM. Web.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

the competitions.<sup>51</sup> Although ACOG was a different group from CAP, their leaders made very similar decisions when it came to redevelopment.

## **Conclusion**

Through these decades of housing policy and development decisions, a common thread appears. The distribution of people and neighborhoods in Atlanta has always been intentional and purposeful, and the city's shape is no accident. Private businesses formed groups to unite their political power and fiscal resources to work with the city government to construct a version of Atlanta that suited their interests. As a result, urban renewal and redevelopment in the mid-twentieth century in Atlanta took the form of expressways, roads, or revitalization, while at the same time displacing black communities and relocating them away from the central business district, typically on the south and west sides. Understanding these patterns is essential because the BeltLine project cannot avoid contending with the aftermath of what the Atlanta regime built—the social inequities, economic disparities, and political disempowerment that continue to plague the city. If the BeltLine is to be successful, it must actively work to deconstruct these systems and use all tools at its disposal to identify warning signs and implement strategies to prevent displacement. History does not have to repeat itself.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 2: The Atlanta BeltLine<sup>52</sup>

“Atlanta is unique. It’s ironic that it wasn’t a place, it was originally a crossroads that evolved out of that,” Paul Morris explains to me as we sit in the Atlanta BeltLine Inc. executive conference room on the twenty-third floor of 100 Peachtree St. The room has a stunning panoramic view of the city below. Less than a mile away are Centennial Olympic Park and the Georgia Dome, both entrenched with meaning if you know what you’re looking at. It’s 2016 and the BeltLine is on the cusp of completely changing Atlanta; the only question is will the change be positive or negative, and who will benefit? After speaking with a few different players in the BeltLine, including Paul Morris and Ryan Gravel, the full breadth of the BeltLine has become apparent to me, but it has also become more complex. To fully appreciate the huge impact the BeltLine can and will have, one must first understand all of its moving parts.

The BeltLine aims to alleviate some of the biggest problems facing Atlanta today, which can be directly traced back to urban renewal and redevelopment decisions made in the twentieth century as well as the legacy of the automobile. Even in 2016, Atlanta’s past echoes in the form of terrible traffic, bad public transportation, and racially and socio-economically segregated neighborhoods. These problems have led to a sense of disconnection among residents, one of the worst traffic commute times in the country,<sup>53</sup> and poor air quality.<sup>54</sup> Atlanta regularly ranks in the top ten worst traffic and commute times in the United States.<sup>55</sup> Since the 1960s there has been

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<sup>52</sup> Camrud, Natalie. “Transit Oriented Development in Atlanta: The BeltLine as a leading example of sustainable growth and development in American cities.” 9 Dec 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Caldwell, Carla. “Atlanta traffic is getting worse.” *Atlanta Business Chronicle* 15 Mar. 2016. Web. 10 Oct. 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Miller, Andy. “State’s air quality better, but still worrisome.” *Georgia Health News*. 30 Apr. 2015. Web. 10 October 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Davidson, Ethan. “The Atlanta BeltLine: A Green Future.” *Public Roads* 75:2 (2011): pp.1 Web. 10 Oct. 2016.

a decline in social capital, or social interactions that have value and reciprocity.<sup>56</sup> The legacy of the automobile has made it so highways and roads trumped public transit and walkability, and this has isolated people and led to air pollution from emissions. Commuting in 2016 typically means driving alone in your car, rather than being in a communal space like a train and having social interactions with others. Efficient public transportation is severely lacking in the city and it is difficult to live in Atlanta without owning a car. Seventy-six percent of working Atlanta residents commute to work by car, and only fifteen percent use the Metro Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) system.<sup>57</sup> For comparison, in Chicago, fifty-nine percent of working residents commute by car while twenty-six percent take public transportation.<sup>58</sup> These issues will not resolve themselves on their own, if anything they will get worse. The population of metro Atlanta is projected to rise to eight million by 2040,<sup>59</sup> up from 5.7 million in 2016. Even if residents want to change their lifestyle, it will be nearly impossible to do so given that the entire infrastructure of the city commands them to live a certain way.

This is where the BeltLine might have a substantial impact. It provides a potential solution to many of the problems that are confronting Atlanta in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, including the severe traffic, air quality, social disconnect, and more. Because of its huge potential, the citizens' expectations and hopes for it are high; 1.3 million people used the Eastside Trail in 2015,<sup>60</sup> which at the time was only two miles long. Thirty thousand people have

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<sup>56</sup> Putnam, Robert. "Bowling alone: America's declining social capital." *Journal of Democracy* 6:1 (1995). Web. 9 Oct. 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Alex Garvin & Associates Inc. *The BeltLine Emerald Necklace: Atlanta's New Public Realm*. Trust for Public Land, 2004. Web. 9 Oct. 2016.

<sup>58</sup> "Census Bureau Reports 1.3 percent of Workers Commute by Bike in Chicago." *United States Census Bureau*. 12 May 2014. Web. 8 Oct. 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Williams, Dave. "Metro Atlanta population to hit 8 million by 2040." *Atlanta Business Chronicle* 10 Sept 2015. Web. 9 Oct. 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Fausset, Richard. "A Glorified Sidewalk, and the Path to Transform Atlanta." *The New York Times* 11 Sept. 2016. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 13 Sept. 2016.

taken the same BeltLine bus tour that I did, wanting to see the project in its entirety.<sup>61</sup> During an interview, Ryan Gravel puts it simply: “Atlanta is going to completely redefine itself.” As previously mentioned, the Atlanta BeltLine is a sustainable transit oriented development project and adaptive reuse that will provide multi-use trails and transit along a twenty-two mile abandoned freight railroad corridor circling the city of Atlanta. The BeltLine was first created as a thesis by Georgia Tech student Ryan Gravel in 1999, and has since grown into a vision of an Atlanta that has more parks, greenspace, walkability, and better transit, and in that vision all residents can participate in and enjoy these amenities. The BeltLine is not disconnected from the past though; private business interests are still very active in the city of Atlanta and the urban redevelopment projects that occur. Since the BeltLine is not located in the heart of downtown Atlanta, Central Atlanta Progress is not directly involved with the planning and execution of the BeltLine, although they do support it because the economic growth that the BeltLine is spurring will spill into the downtown area. A member of CAP told me that while CAP has not had direct involvement in the BeltLine, it is likely that members have been involved independently. The BeltLine does have some private partners, and it accepts private donations, so the “regime”-esque relationship between public and private is still alive and well. It is important to examine what the role of private business has been in development along the BeltLine and to see what kind of impact they are having, if any, on affordability, gentrification, and equity along the BeltLine. It is also essential to ask what steps they are taking, if any, to reduce gentrification and maintain affordability in BeltLine neighborhoods. But first we must examine all the pieces of the BeltLine before we can put them together into a larger picture of the significance and impact the BeltLine could have.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

## Overview



*Figure 6:* Musicians playing on the Eastside trail. Photo courtesy of Natalie Camrud

A general brochure for the BeltLine will inform you that the finished project will consist of twenty-two miles of light rail transit, thirty-three miles of multi-use trails, 1,300 acres of parks, 5,600 units of affordable housing, 1,100 acres of brownfield remediation, and thirty thousand permanent jobs, to name a few. Explaining how these features try to break down segregated neighborhoods, improve community health and relationships, and transform the city is difficult to put on a brochure or poster. But it is important to understand all of the working parts of the BeltLine in order to see some of its similarities to the past, but also to see its many differences. The Atlanta BeltLine has the potential to make life better for Atlanta residents and to lead the rest of the United States in a shift towards transit-oriented development and sustainable growth.

## History

All these trails, parks, and free yoga classes offered by the BeltLine are great, but where did they come from and what has the process been like to get here—a project that is not even finished yet has seen over a million visitors and billions in economic development? The BeltLine’s beginnings are humble; Ryan Gravel was inspired to create the idea for the BeltLine after his study-abroad experience in Paris and the newfound ease with which he was able to use public transportation to go anywhere in the city. Gravel said:

When I moved back to Atlanta, where I grew up, my daily experience moving about the city was sitting in a car in traffic. While there are lots of great things about Atlanta, that isn't one of them. I wanted to live here, and I was interested in finding ways to make Atlanta the kind of place [where] you would want to live your whole life.<sup>62</sup>

In his thesis he proposed linking multiple city neighborhoods by creating a transit system that followed along the old railroad corridor. His thesis inspired the idea for the BeltLine and he and a small group began pitching the idea all over the city, where it piqued the interest of city council president Cathy Woolard. Her enthusiasm was the support they needed and the group quickly became a grassroots organization that took on the name, Friends of the BeltLine. Paul Morris touched on this unique aspect of the BeltLine in our interview: “The BeltLine is a unique example of that,” he said, “wherein it’s an idea that gained a lot of traction through grassroots involvement and it translated into this extraordinary involvement, and neighborhoods that had never come together were willing to come together, *who were apart by design*.”<sup>63</sup> The fact that the BeltLine started from the local community level and was not the result of a political urban renewal plan distinguishes it from past projects like Presidential Parkway or those the Federal Housing Act funded. However, as the BeltLine has become more popular and larger and more complex, it moved higher up the hierarchical ladder and has begun to take on a similar structure to previous projects, where the decisions are made by a select few who may reap most of the benefits. Maintaining community involvement is crucial for the BeltLine’s overall success.

## **Trails & Parks**

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>63</sup> Morris, Paul. Personal Interview. 6 June 2016.

The only concrete manifestations of the BeltLine vision so far are a few trails and parks. While at some point there will be a connected loop of thirty-three miles of multi-use trails, in 2016 only eleven miles are open to the public, including permanent trails and temporary hiking trails. So far, the open trails are the Eastside trail, the Northside trail, the West End trail, and the Southwest Connector Spur trail. The Eastside trail is two miles long and was opened in 2012. The Northside trail opened to the public in 2010 and is one mile in length. The West End trail opened in two segments, one in 2008 and another in 2010, and is 2.4 miles. The Southwest Connector Spur trail is 1.15 miles long and opened in 2013. There are currently six new or renovated parks open to the public. As of 2016, the parks open to the public are Boulevard Crossing Park, D.H Stanton Park, Gordon White Park, Perkerson Park, and the Historic Fourth Ward Park and Skatepark, totaling about one hundred acres. Ultimately there will be 1,300 acres of new parks and greenspace, increasing Atlanta's greenspace by forty percent.<sup>64</sup>



*Figure 7: The Eastside Trail with Ponce City Market in the background. Photo courtesy of Natalie Camrud*

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<sup>64</sup> “There’s a Greener Tomorrow Along the Atlanta BeltLine.” *Atlanta BeltLine*. 2016. Web. 3 Oct. 2016.



*Figure 8: The Northside Trail*  
Photo courtesy of Jeff Milsteen

## **Transit**

“It’s always been a train. The train is from the beginning, but because we focused on building the greenway first, that is what a lot of people see,” Ryan Gravel explains to me in an interview; “the transit piece will make the BeltLine work.”<sup>65</sup> In fact, Gravel’s initial master’s thesis only called for a transit loop; the trails and parks were added later. In 2016, the BeltLine is just some chunks of trails with the dream of a train in our collective conscious. Accessing most of the BeltLine at this stage still requires a car, which defeats its ultimate purpose to reduce traffic and encourage walkability. The train is projected to be completed in 2030<sup>66</sup> and will be a bidirectional light-rail system, meaning it will only travel at speeds of fifteen to twenty miles per hour. While that seems slow, the average speed of cars in cities is nineteen miles per hour due to

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<sup>65</sup> Gravel, Ryan. Personal Interview. 6 June 2016.

<sup>66</sup> “2030 Strategic Implementation Plan: Final Report.” Atlanta BeltLine. Dec. 2013. Web.

traffic, stoplights, pedestrians, etc.<sup>67</sup> The train will have a stop in every neighborhood along the BeltLine, so about forty-five stops in total. In November 2016 there were two transit referenda on the ballot in the city of Atlanta that will directly affect the BeltLine. One was a special purpose local option sales tax for transportation, or a T-SPLOST, which would be four tenths of a penny sales tax and would bring in three hundred million dollars over five years to fund transit projects in the city, including sixty-six million dollars for the BeltLine to purchase all remaining rights-of-way for transit. The second one is a MARTA halfpenny sales tax for expansion and improvements on the MARTA system. This one would bring in around \$2.5 billion in forty years. Both of them passed, which was a huge step towards making BeltLine transit a reality, as well as improving the existing MARTA trains, stations, and buses. Once the transit piece of the puzzle is solved, then development in Atlanta can stop being so car dependent.



*Figure 9: A rendering of the completed Westside Trail. Image courtesy of the Atlanta BeltLine*

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<sup>67</sup> Morris, Paul. Personal Interview. 6 June 2016.

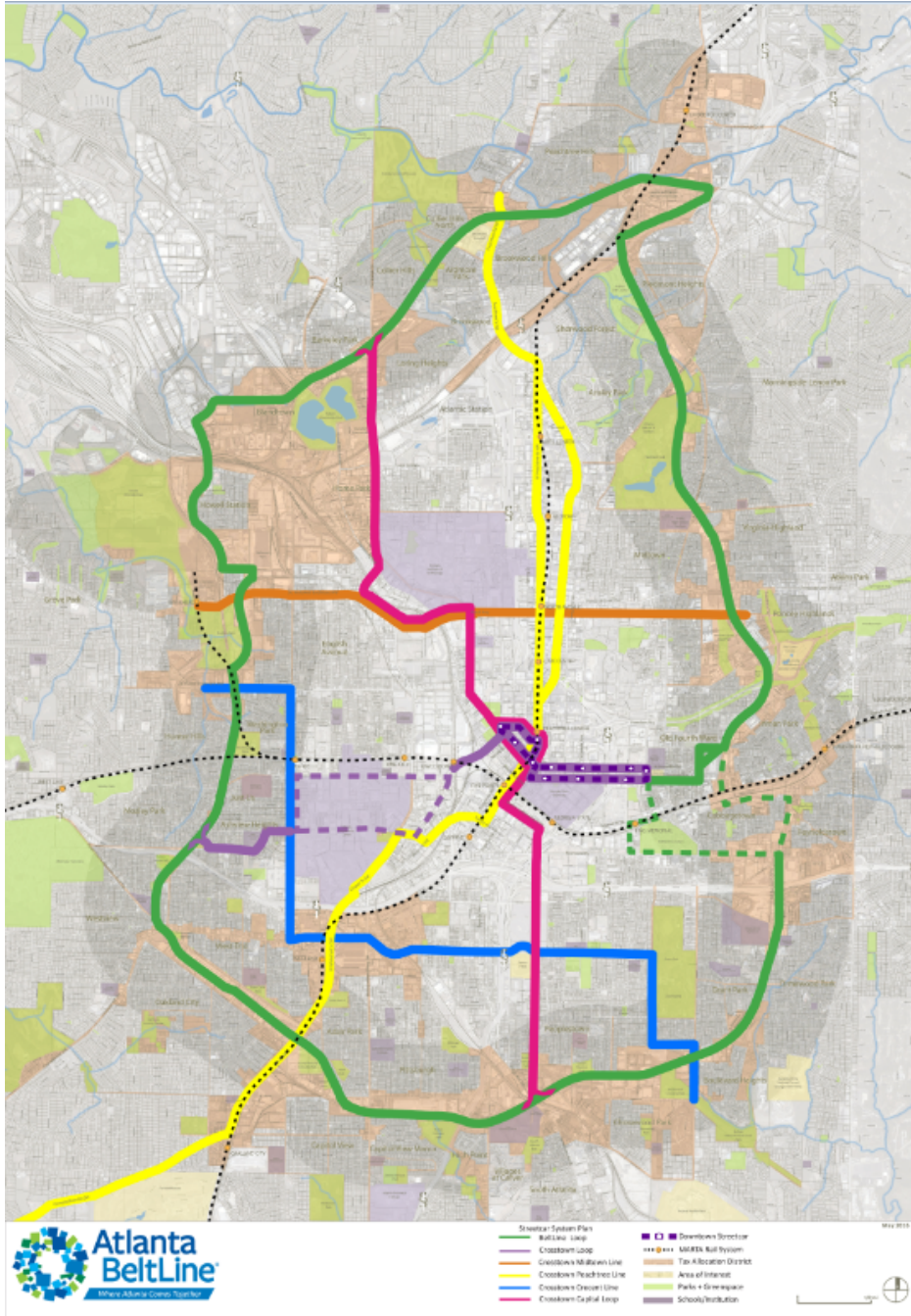


Figure 10: Once completed, the BeltLine transit will connect with the MARTA as well as the streetcar system. Photo courtesy of the Atlanta BeltLine

## Sustainability

In its most basic form, the BeltLine is a transit-oriented development project, which is a sustainable planning tool in that it discourages car use and promotes high density, walkable development. The BeltLine’s website describes the project as being “centered on transit oriented development,” and then goes on to describe transit oriented development as guiding “the growth

of vibrant, livable, mixed-use communities by applying national best practices for mixing uses, strengthening the pedestrian and bicycle realm, compact development, and managing parking.”<sup>68</sup> Beyond this core building block, the BeltLine plan incorporates many other environmentally friendly and sustainable development strategies that address land use, water, energy, as well as environmental justice. The City of Atlanta has a goal of eighty percent greenhouse gas reduction by 2050, and the BeltLine provides an opportunity to help reach that goal. Solar panels have been installed at D.H Stanton Park and Historic Fourth Ward Park, as well as LED lights in the parks. Planting trees can serve as a carbon sequestration strategy and will help reduce the urban heat island effect; so far 667 trees have been planted along the Eastside trail and many more will be planted in the future.<sup>69</sup>

Many of the sites for trails and parks are considered contaminated by hazardous substances, also called brownfields, and have needed extensive remediation. To resolve some of these issues, the BeltLine has been conducting brownfield remediation, planting native plants and using organic landscaping techniques. More than forty acres of brownfield sites have been remediated by 2016,<sup>70</sup> but there are an estimated 1,100 acres of brownfields along the BeltLine,<sup>71</sup> so the process is far from over. Brownfield remediation is a good sustainable development tool because it helps heal the land while also preventing new development, deforestation, and urban sprawl by reusing previously abandoned and contaminated spaces. One particular brownfield remediation site is the Urban Agriculture Site at Adair Park, near the Westside trail. It was originally a bus-repair facility and needed significant remediation before construction could

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<sup>68</sup> “Master Planning: The Blueprint for the Atlanta BeltLine.” *Atlanta BeltLine*. 2016. Web. 4 Oct. 2016.

<sup>69</sup> “Native/Naturalized Plants.” *Atlanta BeltLine*. N.d. Web. 4 Oct. 2016.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*,24

<sup>71</sup> “Brownfield Remediation.” *Atlanta BeltLine*. 2016. Web. 6 Oct. 2016.

begin in 2014.<sup>72</sup> This site contains an extra level of importance because it is located in a food desert, so it addresses a specific need in the community. In 2016, the site contains bioswales, rain gardens, and infiltration zones so as to properly address stormwater runoff. Other efforts to decrease stormwater runoff and increase groundwater recharge along the BeltLine include removal of impermeable pavement, which provides the added benefit of potentially decreasing pollutants washing into the Chattahoochee River. By 2016, over forty-two acres of impermeable pavement have been removed and replaced with grassy areas and other permeable surfaces.<sup>73</sup> When replacing old infrastructure, the BeltLine project has been using green demolition techniques, which has resulted in an average of ninety percent material diversion from landfills after demolition.<sup>74</sup> The materials have typically been going to sidewalks and infrastructure for new parks and trails. When new infrastructure is built, the BeltLine will also adhere to parts of the LEED and the Sustainable Sites Initiative (SSI) frameworks. The BeltLine does include environmental justice in their list of environmental priorities. The BeltLine website states their environmental justice policy as such:

The intent of this policy is to ensure that people regardless of race, age, culture, or income are duly informed about opportunities to participate in the development and implementation of ABI programs, policies, activities and projects and that they are not treated unfairly, or caused to experience disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects<sup>75</sup>

They aim to achieve this by fostering community engagement and communication, identifying and minimizing disproportionate impacts on communities, training staff on environmental justice

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<sup>72</sup> “The Urban Agriculture Site at Adair Park. *Atlanta BeltLine*. 2015. Web. 6 Oct. 2016.

<sup>73</sup> “Protecting Water Resources.” *Atlanta BeltLine*. 2016. Web. 6 Oct. 2016.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 25

<sup>75</sup> “Environmental Justice Policy.” *Atlanta BeltLine*

issues, and more. To date, the Atlanta BeltLine has held over 225 public meetings and engaged over five thousand people in the planning process. Whether or not they are successful in following through on the communities' wishes remains to be seen.

### **Awards and Accolades**

The BeltLine project has been receiving considerable attention and praise on the global level as well as the national and local level, and you cannot even be a “viable candidate for mayor” without supporting the BeltLine in Atlanta, according to Gravel. Christopher B. Leinberger of the George Washington University School of Business says that the BeltLine is “the most important rail-transit project that’s been proposed in the country, possibly in the world.”<sup>76</sup> Richard Fausset of the *New York Times* describes the relationship between the BeltLine and Atlanta residents as a “budding romance.”<sup>77</sup> Between 2010 and 2016, the Atlanta BeltLine has received thirty-three awards and recognitions for various aspects of the initiative. The project has received awards for specific parts of the project, like D.H Stanton Park, as well as the entire vision of the BeltLine. Some highlights include the BeltLine’s first international award, the Prix d’Excellence. It won this award in 2014 for the best rehabilitation project of Historic Fourth Ward Park and the Eastside Trail. Another recently won award is the InterBike’s Places for Bikes Award, which the BeltLine received in 2015 for its bike friendly development.

### **Events and Programs**

One of the core goals of the BeltLine is to engage and strengthen the community, not only by physically connecting these neighborhoods, but through programs and events as well.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

The BeltLine has focused on engaging and including the community through programs like the Adopt-the-Atlanta BeltLine program, the Art on the Atlanta BeltLine series, free fitness classes, and the Old Fourth Ward Fall Fest. Similar to the adopt-a-highway program, the Adopt-the-Atlanta BeltLine program allows people to adopt a quarter mile segment of the BeltLine to pick up litter and maintain the greenspace.<sup>78</sup> Giving people ownership over small sections of the BeltLine helps to create a vested interest amongst those people and helps to lessen cleanup and maintenance costs. The Art on the Atlanta BeltLine series is an annual temporary public art exhibition that features both visual artists and performance artists. It proves that the BeltLine is not only for transit, but can also serve as a community gathering space where people can come to enjoy art and discover all that the city has to offer. The BeltLine also offers many different free fitness classes, including skateboarding, bike-riding lessons, trail yoga, boot camp, and more. Along the same lines, the Atlanta BeltLine Running Series, titled “Run.Walk.Go!”, is as much a public-health initiative as it is a community engagement initiative. The series is in its sixth year and offers various races along the parks and trails so that people can become more familiar with the BeltLine while also getting outside and getting active. Finally, one of the biggest events along the BeltLine is the Old Fourth Ward Fall Fest, which is a free two-day festival that provides live music, food trucks, and ends with a lantern parade that drew more than sixty thousand people in 2015.

## **Initial Studies**

The process for the BeltLine has included multiple studies to ensure feasibility, to determine the environmental impact of the project, and to determine the impacts on residents. In

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<sup>78</sup> “Adopt the Atlanta BeltLine.” *Atlanta BeltLine*. 2016. Web. 6 Oct. 2016.

2004, the Trust for Public Land commissioned an Emerald Necklace-type study by urban planner Alexander Garvin, which laid out a comprehensive plan for the BeltLine. The report recommended splitting the project into two major phases; focusing on the BeltLine trail system in Phase 1 and the BeltLine transit system in Phase 2. This report shares similarities with the Lochner Report, which laid out an extensive plan for highways and transit in 1949. While both of these studies focused on transportation in Atlanta, the Lochner report prized cars over public transit. One section of the Lochner Report states: “There is every indication that Atlanta is approaching a period of great growth and prosperity. Improved highway and transit facilities are essential if the community is to capitalize on its natural assets.”<sup>79</sup> It then goes on to say that “The entire metropolitan area can be considered the terminal of this vast network of transportation arteries.”<sup>80</sup> However, in the Emerald Necklace study Garvin says: “the BeltLine will reorient Atlanta from a city framed by highways to a city framed by a magnificent public realm.”<sup>81</sup> Along the same lines of transportation is the Inner Core Feasibility Study, which was part of MARTA’s larger Alternatives Analysis (AA). The AA identified and evaluated transit improvements in Atlanta to improve mobility and connectivity.<sup>82</sup>

The most important plan concerning the BeltLine that lays out the entire plan to its completion is the Strategic Implementation Plan (SIP). Approved in 2013 by the Atlanta BeltLine Inc. Board of Directors, the plan follows the BeltLine through to its projected completion in 2030 and also includes cost estimates and funding scenarios. This plan has similarities to the Central Atlanta Action Plan that CAP commissioned in 2000, that laid out a

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., XI

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 1

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>82</sup> Atlanta BeltLine. *Atlanta BeltLine/Atlanta Streetcar System Plan: Final Report*. Atlanta: Atlanta BeltLine, 2014. Web. 10 Oct. 2016.

comprehensive plan for the transformation of downtown Atlanta with plans for implementation as well. Both plans contain specific updates and improvements to their respective sites as well as strategies for how to accomplish them.

Another study that focused on residents living near the BeltLine was the Health Impact Assessment (HIA). The HIA was conducted in 2005-2007 and helped to secure an additional seven million dollars in funding for brownfield remediation and greenspace development.<sup>83</sup> The HIA found that the BeltLine could potentially reduce air pollution emissions and human exposure to near-source pollutants by offsetting motor vehicle travel.<sup>84</sup> Some of the recommendations from the HIA included making the construction of trails and greenspace a priority over retail and residential development, adding a public health professional to decision-making boards, and ensuring that affordable housing be built.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, the HIA discovered that a much higher percentage of nonwhite households were living within five hundred feet of a brownfield,<sup>86</sup> so brownfield remediation as part of the BeltLine would not only contribute to public health improvements, but environmental justice as well.

## **Key Players**

The BeltLine project is extremely large and incredibly complex, and thus requires many active partners to ensure the successful implementation and completion of the project. The relationship between the private sector and city government, or the regime, can be viewed as a symbiotic relationship; in *Regime Politics*, Clarence Stone argues that a coalition between the

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<sup>83</sup> Ross, Catherine L. "Health Impact Assessment of the Atlanta BeltLine." *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 43.3 (2012): 203. Elsevier Inc. Web. 1 Nov. 2016.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 210

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 203

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 210

city and the private business elite is “a means for achieving coordinated efforts that might not otherwise be realized.”<sup>87</sup> Just as large-scale urban redevelopment projects in the past would not have succeeded without the combination of public and private resources and efforts, the same applies for the BeltLine.

Some of the government players in the BeltLine include the City of Atlanta, Atlanta BeltLine, Inc., or ABI, Invest Atlanta, the Georgia Department of Transportation, and more. ABI is the implementing authority branch of the BeltLine, created by the state of Georgia in 2006 as a non-profit organization. They are tasked with the oversight and management of the implementation of the Atlanta BeltLine plan. Its responsibilities include securing funding, leading the community engagement process, managing vendors and suppliers, and tracking and reporting progress to the Atlanta City Council and Fulton County. Paul Morris, president and CEO of ABI, told me that while they are a public entity, “We do some partnering directly with the private sector in joint venture development, which we do ourselves.”<sup>88</sup> They are also the ones directly responsible for meeting the affordable housing quota of 5,600 units. Atlanta BeltLine Inc. was created by Invest Atlanta, the economic development branch of the City of Atlanta.

The most visible private entity working on the BeltLine is the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership. Members of the board are upper-level business executives. It is in charge of gathering private funds, donations, and general support, so most of private sector involvement goes through them. ABP’s website explicitly states that “The public funding sources- the City of Atlanta, the tax allocation district, the US Department of Transportation and others- are not enough to complete the ambitious twenty-two mile Atlanta BeltLine loop of parks, trails, and

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>88</sup> Morris, Paul. Personal Interview. 6 June 2016.

transit.”<sup>89</sup> The BeltLine is similar to past urban redevelopment projects in Atlanta: for it to become a reality, there needs to be cooperation and participation from both sides of the regime. A fine and sustaining balance must be struck, however, to ensure that all voices are being heard and that the desires and agendas of the powerful are not being the only ones considered.

## Funding

Securing funding for the BeltLine has come from a plethora of sources, some described in the previous section. Federal and government funding has been vital, but does not cover all costs. The Strategic Implementation Plan of 2013 laid out sources of funding as follows: \$1.5

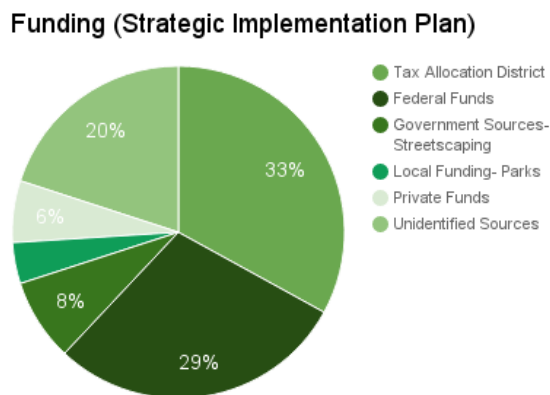


Figure 11: Image courtesy of Natalie Camrud

billion from the TAD, \$1.3 billion from federal funds, \$343 million from government sources for streetscaping, \$157 million from local funding for parks, \$275 million from private funds, and \$891 million from unidentified sources.<sup>90</sup> Large-scale urban development projects like this cannot

come to fruition without public and private cooperation and funds. In May 2015, Georgia governor Nathan Deal signed Senate Bill 4, which allows public/private partnerships for financing portions of the BeltLine.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>89</sup> “Atlanta BeltLine Partnership.” *Atlanta BeltLine*. 2016. Web. 9 Oct. 2016.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>91</sup> Atlanta BeltLine Inc. *Annual Report 2015*. Atlanta, 2015. Web. Pp.25

In 2007, MARTA approved the twenty-two mile loop of light rail transit for the BeltLine, which was an important step toward securing federal funding. In 2008, MARTA and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) began the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) of the project to determine potential impacts and to become eligible for more federal funding in the future. The Atlanta BeltLine project eventually received \$300,000 from the FTA for further design and engineering. An additional eighteen million dollars was awarded to the City of Atlanta through the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant from the Department of Transportation to develop a portion of the Westside trail.

The creation of the Tax Allocation District in 2004 was especially important for the BeltLine project. A tax allocation district, or TAD, is a financing strategy that holds property tax revenue within a specific boundary at a baseline level. Any future property tax revenue that exceeds the baseline goes towards capital expenditures within the allotted district. Usually the funds from a TAD would go towards real estate development and private developer subsidies, but the BeltLine project is slightly unusual in that the majority of the TAD funds are intended to go toward public infrastructure like parks, public transit, and local economic development projects in lower income neighborhoods.<sup>92</sup> A commissioned study showed that the revenue from the Atlanta BeltLine TAD, an estimated three billion dollars, would cover sixty percent of estimated project costs without having to raise taxes. The recession hurt the TAD, however, and a portion of estimated funds never materialized, so the new estimate is that the TAD will generate \$1.4 billion and will cover roughly one-third of the project.<sup>93</sup> Other tax funds will come

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<sup>92</sup> Immergluck, Dan. "Large Redevelopment Initiatives, Housing Values and Gentrification: The Case of the Atlanta BeltLine." *Urban Studies* 46.8 (2009): 1730. Web. 4 Oct. 2016.

<sup>93</sup> "How the Atlanta BeltLine is Funded." *Atlanta BeltLine*. 2016. Web. 5 Oct. 2016.

from the previously mentioned transit referendum that passed in November 2016, which will provide sixty-six million dollars towards BeltLine transit.

The Strategic Implementation Plan estimates six percent of total funds for the BeltLine will come from the private sector, totaling \$275 million. However, twenty percent of the estimated funding is from unidentified sources, so the percentage of private funding could increase. Any investments made into the BeltLine have spurred outside economic development and activity. “We’ve invested about \$450 million,” Paul Morris told me, “and that has stimulated about three billion in private investment.”<sup>94</sup>

### **Acquiring Land & Rights-of-Way**

One of the biggest obstacles for the BeltLine has been simply acquiring the land necessary for the project. One of the organizations that played a major role in making trails, parks, and greenspaces a reality was the Trust for Public Land (TPL), a non-profit organization that works to secure parks and open spaces for communities, especially ones located in cities. They have partnered up with the BeltLine project and have so far acquired thirty-three pieces of land for the BeltLine.<sup>95</sup> TPL identifies land that could be used for parks or conservation and then purchases it for future projects. It is a non-profit, with fifty-six percent of their fund sources coming from donations from individuals, corporations, etc.<sup>96</sup>

Getting land for the transit system has been more difficult than the trails and parks aspect. The BeltLine corridor was, and in some places still is, owned by three entities: The Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT), CSX Railroad, and Norfolk Southern Railroad. This mix

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<sup>94</sup> Morris, Paul. Personal Interview. 6 June 2016.

<sup>95</sup> “Atlanta BeltLine.” *Trust for Public Land*. N.d. Web. 5 Oct. 2016.

<sup>96</sup> “2015 Annual Report.” *Trust for Public Land*. 2015. Web. 5 Oct. 2016.

of public and private ownership has required multiple negotiations and deals to ensure purchasing rights-of-way for transit. One private developer who supports the BeltLine vision placed the northeast quadrant of the corridor under contract in the early 2000's. Another step in the right direction happened when the GDOT gave Atlanta BeltLine Inc. exclusive rights to lease their BeltLine properties.<sup>97</sup> However, the rest of the future transit line has proved more difficult to obtain. One of the reasons is that having the right-of-way does not always mean having ownership; so one tract of land may be managed and owned by different groups. Another complication is that lease agreements between railroad companies and property owners along sections of the BeltLine are not public records, and are therefore more difficult to acquire. This means that each parcel of land along the BeltLine must be negotiated rather than purchasing all the necessary land at once. Additionally, the rights-of-way along the corridor vary in width; some are as narrow as thirty feet, which is not enough for both a transit system and a multi-use trail. This means that additional land may be needed in order to ensure the complete connection of multi-use trails along the entire BeltLine loop. Unlike the Federal Housing Act of 1949, the land the BeltLine is acquiring is already owned by railroads and, so far at least, they are not securing land through eminent domain and tearing down neighborhoods or communities. At the time of the Strategic Implementation Plan in 2013, roughly sixty percent of rights-of-way had been secured. However, since the transit referendum passed in the city of Atlanta in November 2016, the BeltLine should secure the additional funding needed to purchase the remaining rights-of-way and close the loop in the near future.

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<sup>97</sup> "Agreements Advance BeltLine Transit and Trails." *Atlanta BeltLine*. 9 July 2009. Web. 5 Oct. 2016.

## Similar Projects

The BeltLine project is unique, like a snowflake, but there is a blizzard of transit oriented development projects in the US, each with different sets of conditions, plans, and strategies. The BeltLine is essentially building upon the Emerald Necklace framework, which has roots in Haussmann's renovation of Paris, as well as Frederick Law Olmsted's work in Boston and Chicago. However, attempting an Emerald Necklace concept was much easier to complete in the nineteenth century. A complete demolition and overhaul of large-scale infrastructure is rarely possible in the United States, so the BeltLine, and other TOD projects, have to work within and around some existing infrastructure, thus making each of them very different. To provide some context of the BeltLine's place in the long list of TOD projects, I will discuss the Midtown Greenway in Minneapolis, and Fruitvale Station in Oakland. While neither of these are quite at the scale of the BeltLine, they share

some similarities and can provide inspiration to the BeltLine project.

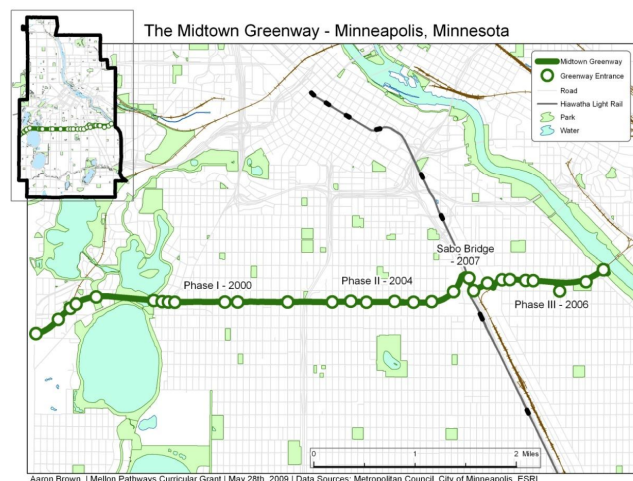
### Midtown Greenway

Just like the BeltLine, the Midtown Greenway is a system of multi-use trails that follows along an old industrial railroad corridor in

Minneapolis, Minnesota.<sup>98</sup> The

project also promotes many similar

goals as the BeltLine, such as linking different neighborhoods and increasing walkability and



Map 1 – The Midtown Greenway in southern Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Figure 12: Map of the Greenway. Image courtesy of Aaron Brown.

<sup>98</sup> Brown, Aaron. "A Greenway Runs Through It: The Midtown Greenway and the Social Landscape of Minneapolis, Minnesota." *Geography Honors Projects* (2010): Pp. 8

access to greenspaces. The 5.5-mile stretch is very popular; it has the highest rates of bicycle traffic in the Twin Cities besides the University of Minnesota.<sup>99</sup> In 2013 the Greenway was even named the best urban bike trail in the nation by *USA Today*. The Greenway was begun in 2000 and was finished in 2007. Like the BeltLine, the Greenway constructed trails first; one side of the land is being held for future transit when funding has become available.<sup>100</sup> While the Greenway has achieved similar goals as the Atlanta BeltLine, it is building upon a much older and already established park system in the Twin Cities. The current Greenway merely cuts through the middle of the south Minneapolis loop to connect to the Mississippi River and St. Paul.

### Fruitvale Station

Oakland's Fruitvale Station project was actually initiated by the local community after they protested the construction of a multi-level parking garage for the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) station. Working with the Unity Council, a nonprofit that works with low-income communities, they opened up a dialogue between BART and the Oakland community, and the Fruitvale Transit Village was born. A \$100 million, twenty-acre mixed-use transit oriented development site with retail, forty-seven units of affordable housing, a medical clinic, a daycare center, community spaces, and more.<sup>101</sup> Forty-seven affordable housing units are too few given the sizeable demand, however, due to budget issues the developers could not build as many as planned. Fruitvale Village Phase II includes plans for ninety-two more affordable housing units and 183 market rate units.<sup>102</sup> As of 2015, there were sixty-eight units of affordable housing.<sup>103</sup>

Fruitvale Station is a good example of a transit-oriented development project that was sensitive

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 24

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 55

<sup>101</sup> Jacobson, Justin, and Forsyth, Ann. "Seven American TODs: Good Practices for Urban Design in Transit-Oriented Development Projects." *Journal of Transport and Land Use* 1.2 (2008): pp. 68. Web. 6 Oct. 2016.

<sup>102</sup> "Fruitvale Village Phase II (Planned)." *The Unity Council*. N.d. Web. 6 Oct. 2016.

<sup>103</sup> *Fruitvale Transit Village Project*. The Unity Council, Bay Area Rapid Transit, City of Oakland. Web. 6 Oct. 2016.

to affordability and the specific needs of the community living around the project site. It is also a testament to the power of neighborhoods or communities who come together to create better living spaces on their terms. Examining TOD projects like the Greenway, Fruitvale Station, and others compared to the BeltLine is important to see where similarities lie and where the BeltLine can improve.

## **Conclusion**

The completion of the BeltLine is a feasible and realistic vision for the future and has the potential to address multiple issues in the city of Atlanta that range from car dependability to air quality to public health. When you break the BeltLine down into its individual parts, its complexity becomes apparent, but you cannot help but be hopeful because the BeltLine is trying to tie all these pieces together into a unifying vision of a healthier, happier, and more sustainable city. The BeltLine is encouraging a shift in the way many Atlanta residents live and is a significant step towards making the sustainable city of the future a reality. Reclaiming and repurposing old infrastructure is a model any city can emulate since there are no shortages of abandoned railroads, factories, and brownfield sites across the nation.

In many ways the BeltLine has distinguished itself from past tactics of urban renewal and redevelopment that have created disparities and inequalities in the structure and layout of most American cities. There is, at the very least, an awareness of issues of affordability and environmental justice, there is more community engagement and involvement in the project, and rather than trying to segregate communities based on race and income, the BeltLine is trying to link all these communities together. However, there are also some similarities to the past; the leadership and governing powers operate the BeltLine project in a way that is reminiscent of the

urban regime of decades past. Funding, resources, planning inputs, etc., are coming from the city government and private businesses. Because the BeltLine has private partners and donors, private business is contributing to the BeltLine project, but not in the same way as previous urban redevelopment projects like Presidential Parkway. Because of the BeltLine's grassroots' beginnings, its' intent is to benefit the public rather than the elite few. The BeltLine will only become a reality if this symbiotic relationship between government and private interests remains in balance and cooperates. The regime must tread a careful line so that the BeltLine benefits the citizens of Atlanta rather than the elite.

### Chapter 3: Affordability and Gentrification on the BeltLine

“Because its origin was inclusive of all communities, we really need to judge its success based on those metrics and whether it supports everyone.” - Ryan Gravel<sup>104</sup>

Scrolling through Instagram comments is the 2016 version of a Townhall meeting; everyone in the community can chime in. On the Atlanta BeltLine’s Instagram account, the voices discussing housing affordability range from respectful critics to raging citizens. “How can born and bred citizens of Atlanta have a voice in the construction of future progress of the Beltline?” asks one user. “I love @ryangravel’s idea of this project but I stand by his decision to part ways from the organization because of the values it hasn’t upheld. What can individuals of this once quaint and beloved city do to ensure that we remain in it?” Another quips: “whichever way you look, the belt line is avoiding its commitment to affordable housing! #stepupbeltline #dobetteratl” These voices rising up from the masses show that social media can be a source of grassroots organization and mobilization, and it also shows that affordability is a pressing issue for many people living in Atlanta. It has become clear that affordability will either make or break the BeltLine. These issues of affordability are not only being voiced by the public, but by the BeltLine leadership as well. In the fall of 2016, Ryan Gravel and Nathaniel Smith resigned from the board of the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership over concerns that the board was not pushing for affordability hard enough. In a joint letter they said:

We believe that the primary accountability for the Atlanta BeltLine is not private funders, civic partners, or to organizational leadership, but to the people of Atlanta who have given the most to make the project possible...Understanding this accountability is

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<sup>104</sup> Gravel, Ryan. Personal Interview. 6 June 2016.

essential, because we believe that who the Atlanta BeltLine is built for is just as important as whether it is built at all<sup>105</sup>

In this chapter I will discuss how affordability is being affected along the Atlanta BeltLine, and what the leadership is and is not doing to secure it.

One of the most difficult, and most crucial aspects of any sustainable urban redevelopment project is maintaining affordability in the project area and adjacent neighborhoods. “We worry about that [affordability] and deal with it every day,” explains Atlanta BeltLine Inc. CEO Paul Morris. From the standpoint of simple economics, it is easy to see why this is so difficult to achieve. Urban development projects like the BeltLine typically make a place more pleasant to live and provide more amenities, thus driving up demand and prices, forcing people out who could originally afford to live there. Yet ensuring that all residents and communities can participate in and live a sustainable lifestyle is a component of environmental justice and displacement must not be shrugged away as a casualty of economics. Additionally, the state of Georgia does not currently have any rent control laws in place, leaving many low-income renters without any kind of protection or safety net.<sup>3</sup> “The problem is financial,” Ryan Gravel said during our interview, “and the answers have to be addressed as financial problems, and there are lots of tools that we could use. Some of them already exist and are already available, some of them we would have to create.” Some examples include mandatory inclusionary zoning and private equity vehicles. While the BeltLine is employing some strategies to combat rising prices and oncoming gentrification, there are more things they could be doing, which I will discuss later.

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<sup>105</sup> “Ryan Gravel and Nathaniel Smith Resign from BeltLine’s Fundraising Arm over Affordability Concerns.” *Creative Loafing Atlanta*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Sept. 2016.

During my interview with Paul Morris it is clear that affordability is a tense subject at Atlanta BeltLine Inc. Although neither party utters the word “gentrification,” it hangs in the air between us. Paul Morris tells me: “Everybody gets to use [the BeltLine] and benefit from it. Sure, there are the consequences of the free market coming into play that hasn’t been in any way governed effectively, and has meant certain people have been pushed out. And this, no one likes.” But then he points out the friction between increased livability and increased prices that make affordability difficult to maintain. “Without some of that prosperity we wouldn’t get to see things like Ponce City Market happen, which nobody wants to go away. And so they really struggle with that conflict.”

The discussions I had with Paul Morris, Ryan Gravel, and many others highlight this conflict. The concept of the BeltLine is fantastic—who does not want more walking trails, parks, greenspaces, and environmentally friendly features? The problem arises when people of low-income or marginalized communities can no longer afford to live in these gentrifying areas and get pushed out so that only a select few can enjoy these amenities. However, Ryan Gravel argues that “the answer is not to not build trails and grocery stores and transit and parks, the answer is not to hold communities down just to keep them affordable.” So the answer falls onto a tightrope walk filled with tension, between creating incredible amenities and developing living spaces for people, while ensuring that all communities have the opportunity to have access to these amenities and live there if they choose. If the BeltLine wants to connect forty-five different neighborhoods successfully, then they need to maintain the essence of each of those original neighborhoods. It cannot just become forty-five homogenous neighborhoods of wealthy millennials. “We need to be proactively and urgently in affordable housing... if we want a

diverse population in the future,”<sup>106</sup> Ryan Gravel explains to me. The BeltLine promotes affordable housing as one of their main project components, but 5600 affordable units is “a drop in the bucket compared to the need,” according to Gravel. Most of the people involved with the BeltLine project are aware of the problem and they want to keep gentrification from happening, but the question is *how*? What is the BeltLine already doing to combat gentrification, but more importantly, what are not they doing? What could they be doing? This is a time-sensitive matter and leadership must act fast to stop the tidal wave of gentrification heading towards the BeltLine. If they are successful in maintaining some equity and financial accessibility, it will distinguish this project from countless others that ignored gentrification or actively encouraged it. If not, then the BeltLine will just become another transit oriented development project that can only be enjoyed by the wealthy.

## **Overview**

If you want to maintain affordability, you first need to define it. Housing affordability refers to units of housing that are affordable to the section of society that earn below the median household income. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines families who need affordable housing as those who spend more than thirty percent of their income on housing.<sup>107</sup> Take New York City as an example, which is the quintessential city dealing with an affordable housing crisis. The median household income in NYC is \$50,711<sup>108</sup>, while the median rent in NYC is \$3,185 per month.<sup>109</sup> This comes out to rent being seventy-five percent of your

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<sup>106</sup> Gravel, Ryan. Personal Interview. 6 June 2016.

<sup>107</sup> “Affordable Housing.” *U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development*. N.d. Web. 7 Oct. 2016.

<sup>108</sup> “Median Income: NYC Neighborhoods.” *WNYC*. 2010. Web. 6 Oct. 2016.

<sup>109</sup> Mai, Jessica. “What the median rent in New York City buys you in 25 big US cities.” *Business Insider* 6 Apr. 2016. Web. 6 Oct. 2016.

income, which is a far cry more than thirty percent of the median income. In Atlanta the median household income in 2013 was \$46,485 and the median rent was \$963.<sup>110</sup> In relation to some other desirable major cities, Atlanta is borderline affordable. This could very rapidly change however, and mixed-use projects like Ponce City Market on the Eastside Trail are showing that the changes are already underway. Studios at Ponce City Market start at \$1,400 per month. For affordable housing along the BeltLine, the definition of “affordable” for rental units has been determined to be households who earn below sixty percent of the Area Mean Income (AMI). For ownership units, the goal is set at those who earn below 100% of the AMI.<sup>111</sup> The 2013 median household income in Atlanta was \$55,733.<sup>112</sup> Since the Area Mean Income will change over time, the BeltLine definition of affordable will change as well.

### **How affordability is being affected**

Changes in housing prices are already occurring, and Atlanta is running out of time to slow down rising prices or set aside affordable units. Some areas around the BeltLine remain affordable because as of 2016 they have not seen any trails or parks built. However, places along the Eastside Trail have become significantly more expensive. The Eastside Trail runs through the Old Fourth Ward, which was once the area with the most Section 8 housing in the Southeast.<sup>113</sup> In 2009, it was the third highest crime zone in the city. The area has changed drastically; crime rates dropped to nearly nothing, and prices rose and retail and developers started moving in. A mere plot of undeveloped land in this neighborhood in 2016 costs \$500,000, but in 2013 it sold

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<sup>110</sup> “Atlanta, Georgia.” *City-data.com*. 2016. Web. 7 Oct. 2016.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 18

<sup>112</sup> “Atlanta Metro Area Income Down from End of Recession.” *United States Census Bureau*. 18 Sept 2014. Web. 15 Oct. 2016.

<sup>113</sup> Henry, Scott. “Down on Boulevard: Positive changes might finally come to Atlanta’s lawless street.” *Creative Loafing* 19 May 2009. Web. 15 Oct. 2016.

for \$145,000. Another home for sale within walking distance to Ponce City Market is selling for \$700,000, but it sold for \$317,000 in 2011. Gentrification is occurring rapidly; even mere speculation and planning of the BeltLine caused some spikes in housing costs. A study done by Georgia Tech Professor Dan Immergluck examined this issue in greater depth. He collected data on home sales in the BeltLine area from 2000 to 2006 and compared the timing with discussion of the BeltLine project and the announcements in local news outlets. He found that home sale prices in the BeltLine and within one-eighth of a mile increased by fifteen percent annually over the six year period, prices in the one-eighth to one-quarter mile buffer increased by 10.5% annually, prices one-quarter to one-half a mile away increased by 14.7% annually. The median sale prices for homes one mile to 1.5 miles away rose by 9.8% annually and the price of homes 1.5 to two miles away rose 8.6% annually.<sup>114</sup> He concluded that announcements for the BeltLine project led to greater demand for housing in these areas, showing that physical development is not necessarily the first step in undermining affordability, but that the mere plans for improvements can begin raising prices in a community.

### **Current affordable housing projects**

The BeltLine does have some affordable housing projects already created. One example of current affordable housing is the Lofts at Reynoldstown Crossing. In December 2011, the BeltLine held a one day sale of affordable housing for twenty-eight loft homes, and by the end of the day all twenty-eight homes were under contract, showing how popular and how needed these homes were. Some of the developments that contain some affordable housing units are Ponce City Market, which contain fifty-two workforce units. Stanton Oaks is another community that

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

ABI renovated and contains forty-three rent-assisted units. ABI contributed another \$1.5 million from the BeltLine Affordable Housing Trust Fund to the creation of the Reynoldstown Senior community, which consists of seventy homes. Finally, they have partnered with Jerusalem Homes, which is Atlanta's oldest and largest provider of permanent low-income housing. Jerusalem Homes work with low income and homeless people, as well as families affected by HIV and AIDS.<sup>115</sup>

As of Fall 2016, there are 250 more units in the development stage. An additional 425-600 units are planned for the next three years. Atlanta BeltLine Inc. works with multiple partners to create affordable housing, and they have plans to develop others themselves. "It's to the point that we'll buy properties and build our own," Paul Morris explains to me. Some of ABI's partners include the City of Atlanta, Invest Atlanta, the Atlanta Housing Authority, and Habitat for Humanity. Since 2006, Atlanta BeltLine Inc. has built 550 affordable workforce housing units in the Tax Allocation District, out of their target of 5,600. They have also achieved one thousand ABI and Invest Atlanta-supported affordable workforce-housing units in the Atlanta BeltLine Planning Area. As of fall 2016, this brings the total of completed affordable units to two thousand, with hundreds more in the planning stages.<sup>116</sup>

### **Strategies being employed**

The BeltLine seems to be one of the few transit oriented development projects that is actually making an effort with affordable housing and that offers assistance programs for housing along the project area. Other projects like the Minneapolis Midtown Greenway and the High Line in New York City don't have affordable housing programs to speak of. In 2007, the

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<sup>115</sup> "Affordable Housing: Rent a Home." *Atlanta BeltLine*. 2016. Web. 17 Oct. 2016.

<sup>116</sup> "Affordable Housing: Overview." *Atlanta BeltLine*. 2016. Web. 17 Oct. 2016.

Atlanta BeltLine Affordable Housing Advisory Board (BAHAB) was established as a way to oversee the affordable housing program and to ensure implementation. In 2008, the Atlanta BeltLine Affordable Housing Trust Fund was approved by the City Council and was given \$8.8 million in Tax Allocation District Bond proceeds, which helped construction efforts. Ordinance 05-0-1733 requires that fifteen percent of net Tax Allocation District proceeds go towards affordable housing.<sup>117</sup> The Atlanta BeltLine and the Atlanta BeltLine Affordable Housing Trust Fund (BAHTF) have spent \$12.5 million to date on affordable housing projects. In September 2016, Atlanta BeltLine Inc. announced that they are planning to float fifty million dollars in new bonds for the BeltLine, with fifteen percent, or \$7.5 million going to affordable housing.<sup>118</sup>

Some of the strategies that the BeltLine uses for the affordable housing projects are down-payment assistance, tax exemptions for homeowners, and homestay exemptions for seniors. Another deceptively simple strategy that Paul Morris and Ryan Gravel mentioned is creating supply, which artificially keeps down demand since there is no shortage of housing.

For down-payment assistance programs, the BeltLine launched a partnership with the Federal Home Bank of Atlanta to provide rehab work for homeowners and down-payment assistance for lower income residents who wish to live along the BeltLine. As part of its affordable housing strategy, the Atlanta BeltLine Housing Initiative Program will assist homebuyers with up to twenty percent of the purchase price of the home. If homeowners wish to renovate an existing home, the program will provide up to \$25,000 for repairs and renovations to help homeowners remain in that home. To be eligible for these particular programs, households must earn under eighty percent of the Area Median Income. In 2016, for a household of one, this

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>118</sup> Stafford, Leon. "Plans to Make Atlanta Beltline Homes More Affordable." *ajc*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Oct. 2016.

would be \$37,840; for a household of four it would be \$54,000 and a household of eight would be \$71,300.<sup>119</sup>

For tax exemptions, the BeltLine offers a few different options. One is a basic homestead exemption, which provides a savings of eight hundred dollars. For seniors, the exemption increases by two hundred dollars, resulting in a total of one thousand dollars. Additionally, they offer a homestead freeze for seniors, maintaining the assessed value of the residential property based on the previous year's value. It remains in effect as long as the senior in question occupies the home. Finally, they also offer tax exemptions for surviving spouses of firefighters or peace officers.<sup>120</sup>

### **Strategies that could be employed**

All the programs mentioned above seem to be beneficial, but there is more that could be done in Atlanta. There are strategies that are not being utilized and that could have a significant impact on maintaining affordability along the BeltLine. Some approaches and resources that could be used are mandatory inclusionary zoning, speeding up the transit component, creating more supply, working with the Atlanta Land Trust Collaborative, private equity vehicles, and real estate investment trusts.

One simple strategy would be for the BeltLine to rapidly build more housing in an attempt to create enough supply so that there is not as much demand, which would lower prices. This might be easier said than done, however. When I broached the subject of affordability and housing to Paul Morris, he explained Atlanta BeltLine Inc.'s predicament and one of the major reasons why they have not met their quota:

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<sup>119</sup> "Atlanta BeltLine Housing Initiative Program." *Atlanta BeltLine*. 2016. Web. 15 Oct. 2016.

<sup>120</sup> "Affordable Housing: Resources." *Atlanta BeltLine*. 2016. Web. 17 Oct. 2016.

The intention was that fifteen percent of everything we receive through the tax allocation district would go to affordable housing. The problem with it was that fifteen percent didn't materialize because the TAD didn't perform. The economy crashed and the TAD collapsed. A three billion dollar funding stream turned into less than one billion. This last year we had about seventeen or eighteen million dollars when it should have been fifty-four million. So you can appreciate the material difference that has had on this particular subject [affordable housing] as well as the other things we are equally responsible for.<sup>121</sup>

The 2008-2012 economic crisis affected all funding for the BeltLine, slowing down development and progress in nearly all aspects of the project. Because of this, it has been difficult for them to keep up with the demand for housing and they are now in a game of catch-up. Since it seems unlikely that they will be able to keep up with demand, they should turn their attention to other tactics to maintain affordability.

Mandatory inclusionary zoning is another method that could prove very successful. Essentially, mandatory inclusionary zoning is when governments either require or encourage developers to create affordable units in any new development.<sup>122</sup> These zoning laws also usually specify how many affordable units must be built, the median income level for qualification, and how long the units can remain affordable. Developers are then provided with incentives such as tax abatements, faster permitting, waiving of fees, etc.<sup>123</sup> Brian Lerman, Editor in Chief of the *Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review*, argues that inclusionary zoning is an essential strategy; "To fill in the void left in the absence of a constitutional right to housing,

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<sup>121</sup> Morris, Paul. Personal Interview. 6 June 2016

<sup>122</sup> Lerman, Brian R. "Mandatory Inclusionary Zoning - The Answer to the Affordable Housing Problem Note." *Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review* 33 (2006): 385. Print.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

inclusionary zoning works toward providing affordable living spaces in otherwise unaffordable areas.”<sup>124</sup> According to Lerman, the three main benefits of inclusionary zoning are its higher success rates compared to voluntary inclusionary zoning, alleviating social problems such as crime, and decentralizing poverty.<sup>125</sup> This kind of strategy for affordable housing could be very helpful because, while the mandate is handed down from the government, it is the private sector who bears the cost. It is very difficult to get private developers to include affordable units on their own, usually because it lessens their profits. “It’s very difficult to find private sector entities willing to contribute funds. They will not give money to build housing, especially affordable housing,” Paul Morris told me. Additionally, mandatory inclusionary zoning is important because it creates affordable housing without relying on the government for funding or implementation. Paul Morris explained that the “pace with which we see demand for neighborhood revitalization is greater than the pace with which the public sector is willing to provide the subsidy to create the affordability.” Here, we see the Atlanta Regime rear its head again. The public sector is unwilling or unable to move fast enough to maintain affordability, but the private sector needs prodding from the public sector. This symbiotic relationship between public and private comes together nicely in mandatory inclusionary zoning, which is why it has so much potential. Legislature along the lines of mandatory inclusionary zoning has been discussed by city leader’s recently; on October 17, 2016 Atlanta City Councilman Andre Dickens introduced a series of proposals aimed at the construction and preservation of affordable housing.<sup>126</sup> The proposal states that any new development along the BeltLine with five or more units has to include ten percent of the units at sixty percent Area Mean Income, or fifteen percent

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> “Councilmember, Advocates: Beltline Developments Must Include Affordable Housing.” *Creative Loafing Atlanta*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Oct. 2016.

of the units at eighty percent of the Area Mean Income for thirty years. Developers can opt out of building affordable units, but they must pay \$150,000 for each affordable unit they do not build toward a trust fund for affordable housing.<sup>127</sup> If this proposed legislature passes, it will not go into effect until mid 2017, but this shows that affordability is becoming part of the discussion and that there are steps being taken in the right direction.

Speeding up the transit component is another way to aid in affordability, both in terms of housing and general costs of living. As Ryan Gravel pointed out, transit provides people with the opportunity to live without a car, which eliminates car payments, repairs, insurance, gas, etc. A study done by AAA in 2015 found that an average vehicle driven fifteen thousand miles per year costs about \$725 a month, or \$8,698 per year.<sup>128</sup> In Georgia, the 2014 annual miles per capita was 12,828 miles. Additionally, housing developments built next to transit will cost less because developers can build a smaller parking garage or parking lot, thus saving money. Reducing the size of a parking garage, for example, means that the people living at that development will not have to pay for its construction and upkeep. So supporting the transit piece of the BeltLine is a way to aid affordability. While it is not a short-term solution (the transit isn't expected to be fully completed until 2030), it shows us that long-term affordability could be possible.

Another affordable housing program that could be employed is to work with the Atlanta Land Trust Collaborative. The Atlanta Land Trust Collaborative (ALTC) is an organization that seeks to ensure affordability through community land trusts. In a land trust collaborative strategy, a person owns their home, but not the land underneath it. The land is owned and managed by the Community Land Trust, which is typically a local non-profit or neighborhood

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> AAA Association. *Your Driving Costs*. USA: AAA, 2015. Web. 18 Oct. 2016.

organization.<sup>129</sup> This makes purchasing and maintaining the property more affordable. These land trusts operate on a ninety-nine year ground lease. This kind of strategy works at a more grassroots, neighborhood level, rather than a top-down strategy like mandatory inclusionary zoning. One third of the board of ALTC are neighborhood organization representatives, while another third is non-profit organization representatives, and the final third are public/private sector representatives. As of Fall 2016, they have thirteen Community Land Trust units with three homeowner units and ten renter units. Through the City of Atlanta, ATLC has provided four million in funds for HOME Investment Partnership Programs and Neighborhood Stabilization Programs. In one neighborhood they have secured thirty properties for permanently affordable housing.<sup>130</sup> Its website also says that they are expecting a combined portfolio of 118 permanently affordable units over the next two and a half years. However, this tool, according to Gravel, is “floundering because the city isn’t using it.” While the Atlanta Land Trust Collaborative is listed as a resource in the BeltLine’s affordable housing web page, perhaps they could be doing more by giving more funds to the organization.

Another tactic being utilized elsewhere to save affordable housing is through Private Equity Vehicles. These are entities that use private money to acquire affordable housing properties and then make small investments to improve the properties, either through rehabilitations of the buildings or community programs. This provides some returns to investors while maintaining affordability. Reports show that the returns to investors range from six to twelve percent.<sup>131</sup> Some examples of where private equity vehicles have been employed is the Northpointe apartment complex in Long Beach, California. The property was one of many

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<sup>129</sup> “How it Works.” *Atlanta land trust collaborative*. N.d. Web. 18 Oct. 2016.

<sup>130</sup> “About Us.” *Atlanta land trust collaborative*. N.d. Web. 18 Oct. 2016.

<sup>131</sup> Stockton Williams. *Preserving Multifamily Workforce and Affordable Housing: New Approaches for Investing in a Vital National Asset*. Washington, DC: Urban Land Institute, 2015.

acquired by Avanath Capital Management, and it provides improvements like new washing machines and a new basketball court. The group has seen a six to ten percent cash return on their projects.<sup>132</sup> Another example is the Housing Partnership Equity Trust; they acquire properties that serve households making more than sixty percent of the Area Mean Income and currently have 2,500 units in their portfolio. In 2015 they paid out the first round of dividends totaling \$1.32 million to their investors, which include Morgan Stanley, Citi, and Prudential Financial.<sup>133</sup> This is a tactic that, again, utilizes the powers of the private sector. While private business owners may have had detrimental effects on Atlanta's housing history in the twentieth century, their resources can be used as a positive force in the case of the BeltLine.

## **Conclusion**

Prices have not been rising uniformly around the BeltLine due to the various stages of construction, development and speculation. This pattern means that while some areas have already been affected by gentrification, there are others that are still affordable. According to Ryan Gravel, "The south and the west, they need to protect long-term affordability, but that's really it. On the Eastside... it may be too late to protect any existing housing but we can still build new affordable housing."<sup>134</sup> While it seems unrealistic to expect every original resident of the BeltLine neighborhoods to be able to stay, that doesn't mean the BeltLine should not attempt to do everything in its power to help as many people as they can. Every inch of the BeltLine will see some new private retail and housing development to some extent, so planners and developers must consider all possible options for aiding in affordability. "I think whether we built it (the

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<sup>132</sup> Pyati, Archana. "Private Equity is New(ish) Player in Affordable and Workforce Housing Finance." *Urban Land Institute*. 22 Dec. 2015. Web. 11 Nov. 2016.

<sup>133</sup> <http://uli.org/uli-connect/private-equity-newish-player-affordable-workforce-housing-finance/>

<sup>134</sup> Gravel, Ryan. Personal Interview. 6 June 2016.

BeltLine) should be a given, but how we build it and being conscious and thoughtful about who benefits from it is really important,” said Ryan Gravel. The Beltline’s proponents need to prioritize improving the lives of the community currently residing in an area, not to push them out to make way for wealthier residents. It would not only be an example of environmental justice, but mobility justice, a term mentioned by Paul Morris. Giving public transportation access to people to cannot afford a car opens up opportunities for better employment, which not only benefits local communities, but the entire city. If we want a BeltLine that is meant for all people to enjoy, then ABI leadership cannot sit back and let the market-driven forces of gentrification push some people out.

## Conclusion

“After all, in the end, what does the intent of our action really matter if our actions have the impact of furthering the marginalization or oppression of those around us?” - Jamie Utt<sup>135</sup>

Through my research, I have come to the conclusion that for Atlanta and the BeltLine to realize their full potential and create an extraordinary place for citizens to live, then there needs to be a deep understanding of how and why Atlanta has been developed in the past. The city’s urban development history reveals a pattern in which marginalized communities have been subject to the oppression of dominant powers, whether that means the private business elite in the twentieth century, or the forces of gentrification in 2016. Housing projects were demolished in the twentieth century under the guise of revitalization, but with the underlying purpose of segregating communities. The Lochner Report emphasized “slum clearance” as a main feature of the project, the 1949 Federal Housing Act encouraged displacement and urban improvements by providing federal funds, and the Atlanta Olympics displaced thousands of people because of the promise of money flowing from tourism and business. However, the circumstances surrounding the BeltLine are different in some ways; the powers that heavily influenced past revitalization projects, mainly Central Atlanta Progress, is not a direct player in the BeltLine, and the project was started from the bottom-up at the grassroots level, rather than a top-down government legislature or an official report. So while the goals of the BeltLine are different, these same marginalized communities who experienced social injustice in the past may suffer as the rest of the BeltLine is built, as gourmet restaurants and high-end retailers move in, and prices skyrocket. The BeltLine is not intentionally pushing out communities for the economic benefit of the elite

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<sup>135</sup> Utt, Jamie. “Intent vs. Impact: Why Your Intentions Don’t Really Matter.” *Everyday Feminism*. 30 July 2013. Web. 4 Nov 2016.

like in decades past, but the displacement that will occur “naturally” through economics will still have the same effect of segregating and isolating vulnerable and marginalized communities. Even if the BeltLine does not mean to displace people, the consequences of the displacement will be just as socially unjust and painful as past projects like the Lochner Report and the Olympics, and there is no excuse. While the intent is different, the outcome is the same. But the answer is not “to not build trails and grocery stores and transit and parks, the answer is not to hold communities down just to keep them affordable,” as Ryan Gravel aptly observed. Instead, the leaders of the BeltLine and the city must be cautious and conscious of the impacts of this development and revitalization. Making deliberate efforts to maintain affordability along the BeltLine and keep these spaces open to all people would be a conscious attempt on the part of Atlanta’s leadership to alter some of the harmful patterns of displacement that communities have experienced for decades. The BeltLine leadership must not ignore urban development decisions made in the twentieth century, but rather acknowledge the mistakes that were made and the harm that was done, and then deliberately work to heal some of those wounds. Looking back at our past reveals to us how far we have come, and how far yet we have to go.

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