



Fulton County Taxpayers Foundation

Non-Profit Advocate Of Lower Property Taxes In Atlanta/Fulton County

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A Way to Save the Beltline TAD

(and leave Atlanta better off in the bargain)

By Michael Dobbins, FAIA, AICP

Former Commissioner of Planning and Community Development for the City of Atlanta



A Preface to Michael Dobbins's "A Way To Save The Beltline TAD (and leave Atlanta better off in the bargain)" by Barbara Payne, Executive Director of the Fulton County Taxpayers Foundation:

To proceed with the \$2.8 billion Beltline Tax Allocation District (projected cost prepared by the Atlanta Beltline and shown on the Beltline's own web-site) during the worst economic recession since 1929, will result in many serious financial problems for the City of Atlanta and the City taxpayers. The City's own Feasibility Study by a committee of professional planners Chaired by the highly- respected Dr. Catherine Ross, Director of the Center for Quality Growth & Regional Development, Georgia Tech, concluded that "The amount of revenue to be generated from the Beltline Tax Allocation District is expected to cover only about half the funding of what will be needed." The following article was written in 2005, but still remarkably important today. Every Atlanta resident and taxpayer is urged to read the following article by Michael Dobbins, former Commissioner of Planning, City of Atlanta, and currently Professor of Practice, College of Architecture, Georgia Tech.

A Way To Save The Beltline TAD

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After months, even years, and hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of escalating lobbying, the Beltline TAD (Tax Allocation District) is still facing an uphill legislative climb in the City, School Board, and County Commission. Even if it passes, it could be a narrow victory leaving the City more divided over issues of substance than it has been in years. How can this be, and what can be done about it?

On the first question, in a word, citizens from across the City, as occasionally and fortunately occurs, are paying enough attention to the proposal to raise serious and legitimate concerns and criticisms about the TAD proposal. This citizen uneasiness about its flaws and unaddressed issues should be fully and forthrightly answered.

The Three Components of the Atlanta Beltline

The Beltline has three components: a park and greenway system that would organize and provide connectedness among new and existing city parks and neighborhoods; a transit line projected as a continuous ring around the City's central core; and a framework for encouraging new, higher density development in the neighborhoods divided by the Beltline.

The three components are being put forth as a package, as though somehow they have to be thought of as interdependent, which is not necessarily the case. The problem is that while the green part of the proposal (the least expensive) has almost universal support, the transit part (the most expensive) is put forward with no evidence that it will work, and the development part has been skewed to quite high densities largely to justify the transit part,

Tax Increments

In its earlier versions, the Beltline TAD Feasibility Study showed that the biggest piece of the tax increments would occur from development that would happen anyway, as the market for the intown living choice continues to grow and the largest available and most affordable parcels of land are ranged along the Beltline. The second biggest tax increment would be generated by additional new development stimulated by executing the park and greenway component; it has been repeatedly shown that development adjacent to well-managed park systems increase their marketability and so their value. The smallest increment would be contributed by development responding to the transit component. These findings didn't make their way into the TAD Feasibility Study, but they are available in Atlanta Development Authority's archives. *Executive Director's Note: The TAD Feasibility Study stated: "The amount of revenue to be generated from the Beltline Tax Allocation District is expected to cover only about half the funding of what will be needed."*

The Problems of the Transit Component

So we have a TAD that would pass handily if it focused its purpose on the park and greenway component which generates the biggest increment for the least cost. But instead this clear boon to the future city is dragged down first by a transit concept, the most expensive investment projected by the Beltline TAD, unproven and judged to be highly problematic by the recent Beltline Transit Panel report available on Atlanta Development Authority's website, adatlanta.com. And the green opportunity is even more burdened by projections of future development densities, generated to justify the transit, creating incongruous and bloated development intrusions throughout the otherwise largely stable, livable, mostly single-family neighborhoods where the Beltline passes.

What's Wrong With The Transit Concept?

There are three related problems. First, for transit to work it has to connect "origins", like home to work, shopping and events. Most of the new higher density development projected to occur along the path of the Beltline is residential, yet most of the people living there would be trying to get to where most of the City's destinations are concentrated in Downtown, Midtown, and Buckhead. These very high density concentrations are all by-passed by the Beltline. Second, the concept suggests that since the Beltline crosses MARTA rail at five locations, the connection to where people are trying to get can be accommodated by transferring to MARTA at these crossing points. The problem is that where the Beltline crosses the path of MARTA rail is typically a half-mile or more to the nearest station. This means that either the Beltline has to find ways to make significant detours to get to an existing station or new MARTA stations have to be built at the crossings. The former would add significantly to the cost and travel time.

The latter would add greatly to the cost as well and assumes that these particular projects would make sense for new transit investment from MARTA. In any case, the trip to major concentration of destinations provided by MARTA would require a transfer, often a serious deterrent to transit ridership. A further connectivity problem is that while the Beltline is always represented as a continuous loop, in fact, it has several significant and challenging gaps that would have to be bridged.

Third, the planned pumping up of densities along the Beltline is supposed to justify transit on the one hand and is supposed to be justified by the provision of transit on the other. No one expects the projected transit to be in place for at least ten years or to be complete within twenty five years (optimistic numbers at that). If densities are permitted in anticipation of transit being the solution to the traffic generated, then, for many years cars on the existing roadway systems will have to accommodate this growth. This problem is compounded if the transit “solution” proves not to get people where their daily travel patterns take them.

The Need for A Systematic, City-Wide Integrated Transit

By focusing transit attention solely on the Beltline, the opportunity to put forward a more systematic city-wide approach, shaped by the needs, complexities and realities of transit, has been languishing.

The Beltline TAD would use up most of the remaining City Tax Digest otherwise available to support TAD financing for other projects for many years to come. Thus corridors like Metropolitan Parkway, Lee Street (including the remarkable southside redevelopment opportunity at Fort McPherson), Campbellton, Cascade, RDA, MLK, Simpson, Bankhead, Marietta, Northside, Peachtree, Piedmont, Ponce de Leon, Memorial Drive, Glenwood, Boulevard, Jonesboro, and Pryor, not to mention Cleveland, Bolton, and Moreland, will all look and function about the same for years to come for lack of any reliable City source of redevelopment funds. Since these corridors are our most traveled and will continue to be, regardless of any outcome for the Beltline, it seems a lost opportunity to preclude a program and funding source to spruce them up with appropriate new development while providing places that are pleasant to travel through.

Impact of Beltline Development on Downtown, Midtown and Buckhead

Downtown, Midtown and Buckhead are places that either welcome or at least tolerate high density mixed use development, with infrastructure that can better support such development; in short, where such development belongs. The Downtown, Midtown, and Buckhead high density developments will find themselves competing with Beltline proposals on cheaper land, like the towers on Piedmont Park, or the 10-12 story development proposed from City Hall East to Highland, etc. around the Beltline. Atlanta could find itself giving away the store in zoning rights, well beyond what the market can reasonably be expected to absorb.

What Can Be Done To Save the Beltline TAD (and leave Atlanta better-off In The Bargain)?

First, the Beltline TAD area could be reduced to a size that would fund the strong points of the Beltline concept. These are basically the acquisition and development of the park and greenway framework, the connectivity to existing sidewalk and street systems that provide its access, and the assurance that the housing that gets built provides affordability for a significant percentage of the new units. The effect of such a Beltline TAD downsizing would be to free up something over a half billion dollars of bonding capacity for other future opportunities as suggested above. The data base for the Beltline TAD parcels is sufficiently flexible to rather quickly accommodate a downsizing strategy, so that time need not be lost in approving it.

Ironically, the most substantive and the most tangible and productive partnerships for implementing the Beltline concept to date have focused on its most popular and least expensive component, the park and greenway system. This component focuses attention on the greatest city-wide problems for which the Beltline concept offers a constructive, even quite magical, solution. That is, the provision of green space, and a way for neighborhoods to share in the appreciation of this green space. Here we have a consensus and wheels are already turning to get it done. Why don't we let this clear winner roll forward without burdening it financially and politically with an overblown development component and an untested and probably unworkable transit component?

Let's drain the bath water and save the baby!

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-Submitted to the Fulton County Taxpayers Foundation by Michael Dobbins, FAIA, AICP, former Commissioner of Planning and Community Development for the City of Atlanta

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