

# Atlanta Beltline Rail: A Blueprint for Transit Funding

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Construction of rail transit on the BeltLine must be implemented faster than MARTA's current 30-year timeline to support affordability, improve mobility, and prepare for anticipated growth in metro Atlanta.**

The original BeltLine vision was an 'emerald necklace' of parks, trails, and rail to improve mobility, affordability, and livability for everyone. Yet 20 years after the Atlanta BeltLine idea was adopted by city leaders, not a single mile of track on the 22-mile rail and trail loop connecting to MARTA rail has been laid. The current 'trail only' construction strategy precludes transit-oriented development that would keep housing prices affordable.

Due to MARTA's claims that there isn't enough money to fund BeltLine transit (note: rail is not even scheduled for completion by 2050 in regional transportation plans), BeltLine Rail Now published a white paper in January articulating a path forward while presenting how other cities have funded their transit. The paper is available at [www.beltlinerailnow.com](http://www.beltlinerailnow.com).

Why is rail on the BeltLine so important? The transit portion of the Beltline is one of the most effective ways to address Atlanta's big problems of low infrastructure investment in previously segregated communities, displacement of long term residents from the 'concrete only' trail portion of the Beltline, and the biggest problem of all: a severe lack of affordable housing.

Transit addresses these issues by unlocking greater density in multi-family housing, and allowing more units to be built to address the shortage of affordable housing. Studies (as well as the law of supply and demand) demonstrate that building more housing stock will relieve pressure and reduce prices for housing. Inclusionary zoning and transit-oriented development laws are required as well.



With transit-oriented development, area residents are less likely to own a car, resulting in fewer cars per household and reduced traffic congestion. Rail transit completes the 'green necklace' vision that brought Atlantans together in support of the Beltline. If the 'trail first' approach to construction continues, the Beltline will become a concrete necklace with prefabricated concrete parking decks.

A frequent criticism of MARTA is that *it doesn't go anywhere* - a complaint handily addressed by the transit component of the Atlanta Beltline. BeltLine rail creates a hub and spoke transit system that provides connectivity to six existent MARTA rail stations, adds four new infill stations, and provides new transit connectivity to 24 nodes in 45 neighborhoods. Once completed, Atlanta's transit solution will provide access in every quadrant of the city.

BeltLine Rail Now estimates that it will cost \$2.5 billion to build the Beltline Rail project on the 22 miles of the Beltline. (A summary of our funding proposal is available on our website.) \$2.5 billion may sound like a large sum of money - but for infrastructure projects, it's relatively small. Most cities in the United States spend far more on transit and other investments to improve the mobility and livability for its residents. Atlanta spends similar amounts on roads and interchanges: a single highway interchange in Atlanta at I-85 and U.S. 400 is projected to cost \$2 billion.

## How Rail Transit Supports Affordability and Sustainability

Households in communities with access to transit and a mix of jobs and services spend just 9% of their household budget on transportation, compared with a national average of 19%.

Center for Transit-Oriented Development

Low-income households can spend as much as half of their income on transportation, compared to less than 10% for high-income households.

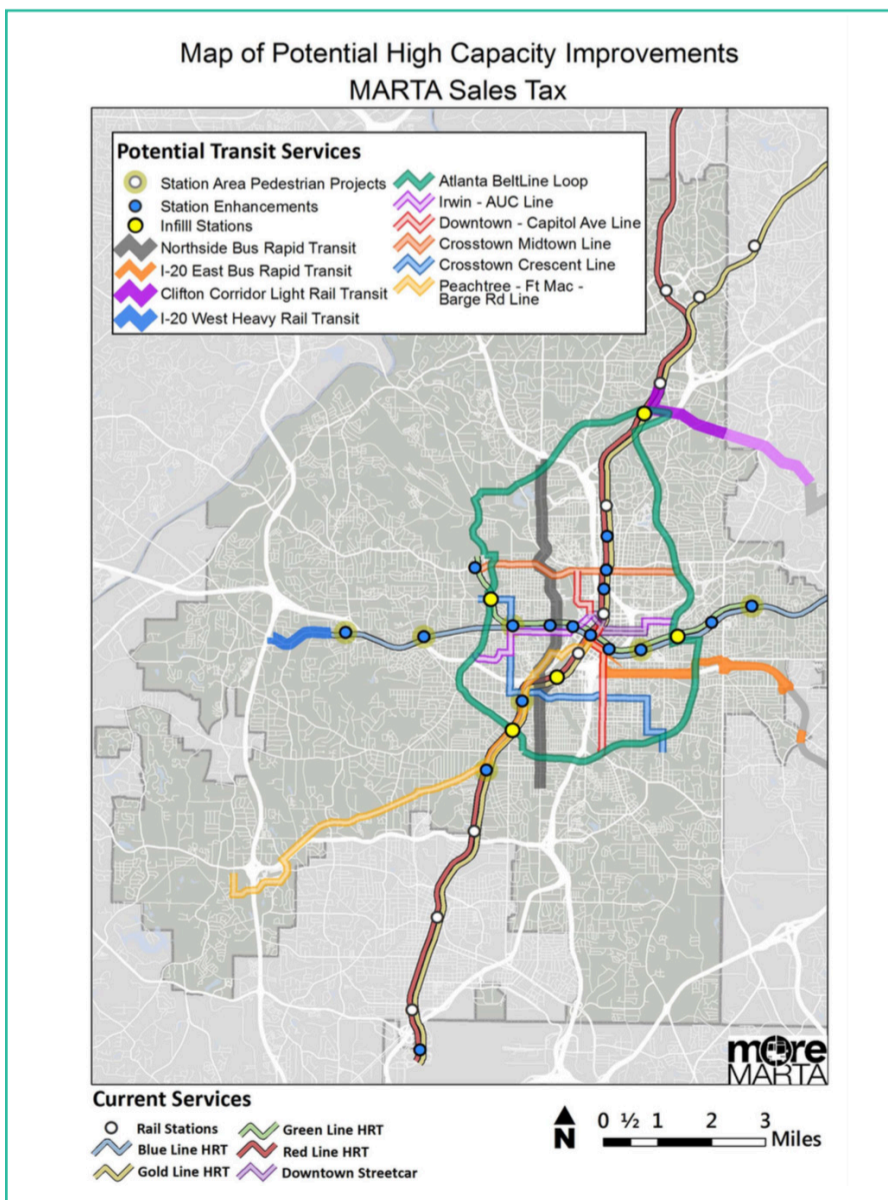
Center for Neighborhood Technology/  
Virginia Tech

Employers are increasingly interested in transit and housing. In recent years, Atlanta has benefited from companies moving into the city seeking better access to MARTA and shorter commutes for workers.

Urban Land Institute, AJC

In addition to building tracks for the 22-mile transit loop, infrastructure improvements are required that will deliver benefits beyond those of new transit. Specifically, the project will widen BeltLine bridges to accommodate both the trail and transit, advance engineering studies, and acquire rights-of-way. These actions can be conducted largely by local funding to advance BeltLine transit, while preparing for competitive federal funding. The project also calls for four infill MARTA stations to provide seamless transfers for transit-supportive development. Building these regionally significant multi-modal hubs first will provide logical connection points for constructing transit in contiguous phases, and adhere to the BeltLine's promise of connecting neighborhoods across quadrants of the city - ultimately as a continuous trunk line loop.

Despite our estimated \$2.5 billion price tag to complete Beltline rail, the 2050 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) has allocated less than \$900 million in combined local and federal funds spread out over the next 30 years in disconnected phases. This is a glaring failure to accomplish the unifying mission of BeltLine Rail.



*This map is from MARTA's fact sheet about where the transit sales tax referendum money would be spent. The Beltline rail portion is indicated with a bold green circle. The referendum passed in November of 2016 with 71% of voters supporting. Five years later, not a single mile of new track has been laid.*

**“The commitment to build transit is the ultimate expression of faith in your community. It says your hometown has a future, and its people believe enough in that future to make investments that will outlast them, while paying dividends today.”**

Kevin DeGood,  
Transportation for America:  
“Thinking Outside the Farebox:  
Creative Approaches to Financing Transit Projects”

The Atlanta Beltline was originally designed as a transit project, not an instrument for land ownership windfalls and outrageous developer profits, paid for by citizens incurring sales tax increases. Light rail transit, a path for bicycles and pedestrians, and connections to MARTA rail at the compass points were the core of the initial vision. This vision is why two sales tax referendums passed in 2016. At the time, we and other citizens didn't see other ways to pay for the rail component of the BeltLine. Extensions of these referendums are unlikely without the fulfillment of the promise of transit on the Beltline.

Some say that public transit investment is not a viable option due to the drop in ridership from the pandemic. Obviously this is short-sighted. There has been no exodus from cities to suburbs, and as soon as people return to offices and other outings, transit ridership will return. There is simply no way to accommodate the huge influx of new residents into the city predicted by the Atlanta Regional Commission without transit.

In Atlanta, we are the beneficiary of unique geography and urban history that makes that makes possible the vision of an emerald necklace of neighborhoods, parks and mixed use developments via transit. And while rail was a main feature, the transit component was always in service of the higher ideals of equity, affordability, and sustainability. This project and the wonderful outcomes of mobility, car free sustainable living, and affordable housing remain within our grasp, but only if city officials and the citizens who elect them recommit to the Atlanta Beltline's entire vision.

**BeltLine Rail Now respectfully requests that city council members and the mayor provide the requisite leadership to MARTA so as to deliver the entire BeltLine vision.**

**We also invite citizens interested in a more sustainable city to work with us toward this goal!**