



Beltline CEO: Problems Beltline was created to address aren't slowing down

By Thomas Wheatley
Creative Loafing
April 21, 2008

The [Beltline](#) — the 22-mile ring of trees, trails and transit planned to encircle the city — continues to take shape. Last Thursday at the Atlanta Public Schools, project planners and advocates addressed stakeholders and noted that, despite recent pitfalls and obstacles, the public-works effort is coursing ahead.

Atlanta Beltline Inc. CEO Terri Montague delivered a stirring response to a resident's comments in which he said the project was moving too fast and may not live up to expectations. She said that the problems the Beltline was designed to address were not slowing down and that the immense project would transform the city and offer it solutions. Montague said she understood that the man had probably been given broken promises for the last 30 years, but that the Beltline was different. Her comments were rewarded with applause. (I'm working on getting a video of her statement.)

Rob Brawner of the Beltline Partnership, an outfit dedicated to raising awareness and gathering private-sector participation, said that a chief concern of residents has been ensuring that today's Atlantans are given the chance to enjoy tomorrow's Beltline. Numerous groups, startled by price speculators looking to cash in on the project and a housing market rattled by the subprime lending crisis, are skeptical of what the Beltline may do to the affordability of the city's more impoverished neighborhoods — particularly those in Southwest Atlanta. In response to that, Brawner says, advocates are reaching out to partners to establish a community land trust that will create permanent affordable housing around the Beltline. On May 19-21, the National Community Land Trust Network will host a workshop at Morehouse College to examine the issue.

A second concern — one which is more abstract yet still important — involves public engagement and community input. Kristy Gilman of the Peachtree Hills neighborhood urged Montague and her staff to improve the community participation process and give residents a seat at the negotiating table. Attention to the issue has been building since the Tax Allocation District Advisory Committee, or TADAC, delivered a sharp criticism about the process in a late-February letter to Beltline planners. Residents have stated that while copious amounts of information is provided on Beltline Web sites and distributed through a variety of grassroots efforts, much of their hesitancy about the project hinges on just how much of a say the public has in how the Beltline takes shape, not how it learns about it.

WHERE THE PROJECT STANDS:

Master planning for the southeast subarea encompassing Grant Park is, for the most part, complete. The southwestern subarea, which encompasses much of Southwest Atlanta and neighborhoods hit hard by foreclosures, is slightly behind the rest of the project but continuing apace. Preliminary studies for areas in the northwest will begin soon.

The park planned to run from Ponce de Leon Avenue to Freedom Parkway is a marvel to view. Planned features include a skate park, a stormwater retention pond, and long expanses of green.

In Southwest Atlanta, a planned park will unite DL Stanton and Four Corners Parks. New amenities, such as a community center with a green roof, are planned for both. Beltline advocates hope that the new land-use concept will help the beleaguered section of the city and are envisioning local-serving retail that will help keep dollars in the community. Employment centers are planned in several points in subarea 2 that would offer diverse job opportunities for current and future residents. Southwest Atlantans are stressing that there needs to be heavy emphasis on the former.

In the northwest area of the Beltline, which today is largely an industrial and track-heavy corner of the city, planners have envisioned mixed-use, medium- to high-density developments surrounding the proposed West Side Reservoir Park. (That's a working title for the park that is poised to surpass Piedmont Park in

size.) This quadrant is one which could very well see the biggest transformation from the public-works project.

Beltline advocates and Barry Realty are evaluating the financing arrangement they have in place for a 60-acre chunk of the project's northeast section they purchased from Wayne Mason in late 2007. In the coming months, the partnership will advertise the Beltline on billboard donated by the Lamar Outdoor Advertising company. Look for Beltline merchandise as well, Brawner said. Of the partnership's \$60 million annual fundraising goal, \$28.9 million has been raised.