

## **Addendum to the Beltline Thesis**

*December 2005*

*Belt Line - Atlanta: Design of Infrastructure  
as a Reflection of Public Policy  
by Ryan Gravel  
Georgia Institute of Technology, 1999.*

Much has happened in the last six years since I completed my graduate thesis on the Atlanta Beltline while at Georgia Tech. I would like to take this opportunity to position my original thesis within the context of the current Atlanta Beltline proposal. There are three main items to note:

### 1 Change of Audience

One remarkable aspect of this proposal is that it is interesting from the standpoint of urban theory, but also from a less-academic perspective. Residents of the city simply love it for all its promised amenities. Developers, environmentalists, transit advocates, and other groups love it for all kinds of other reasons. The grassroots support built so early for the Beltline rests not on abstract theory, but on the intuitive nature of the proposal - people understand that this will be good for their community and they are looking for innovative solutions to regional problems of sprawl and traffic.

So the thesis itself concentrates primarily on architecture and urban theory. It lays out a good idea, but offers no help on how to pay for it, or how to get it approved politically. Its original audience was purely academic, and of course when I wrote it six years ago, there was no reason for it to be any broader than that.

### 2 Significant Reinvestment

In the fall of 1999 when I finished this thesis, Atlanta had seen only a trickle of new development in the industrial sites that follow the Beltline at projects like the Ford Factory Lofts and Copenhill Lofts, the latter of which had just begun construction. Since then, there has been an incredible surge of development, particularly on the east side of town from Piedmont Park south to Grant Park. Now we are seeing much larger projects, like Inman Park Village, which will double the population of Inman Park.

As thousands of people move back into the City each year, increased land values are putting pressure on

the industrial land that follows these old railroads to redevelop into fairly dense mixed-use communities. Housing costs, traffic in the suburbs as well as a desire for a more urban lifestyle are pushing those redevelopment trends to the south and west of downtown. This increase in growth is driving much of our grassroots support for the Beltline because residents see the Beltline as a strategy to manage and accommodate growth that is probably coming anyway.

Currently, development pressure is also creating new challenges for construction of the Beltline itself. For example, in order to reach the Ashby MARTA station, the original proposal showed the transit line following the vacant land on the south side of Lena Street. The houses there had been removed for the construction of the west MARTA line which runs underground. Now, however, new houses have replaced them and the only reasonable way to connect to the west MARTA line is to travel down Lena Street. This can work physically, but it needs to be addressed very sensitively with the residents of Washington Park.

Another major unforeseen challenge is the purchase of the northeast quadrant of the Beltline by Wayne Mason, a prominent developer from Gwinnett County. He is proposing to build significant new density not adjacent to the Beltline corridor, but on top of it. This challenges the very concept of the Beltline as a wide linear greenway, and has neighborhood groups prepared to fight it. Fortunately, they are not fighting against the Beltline itself, but instead are fighting in defense of its promise and opportunity which they feel is threatened by Mason's proposals. It is too early to determine what will come of this, but it was certainly not part of my original vision.

### 3 Project Evolutions

---

The Beltline thesis was focused on transit as an infrastructure tool designed to encourage economic development in Atlanta's intown neighborhoods. While transit remains the key ingredient, the project has continued to evolve, and now includes a significant and exciting new component: parks and trails.

The trail and greenway had its seed in the work done by the City's planning department and by the Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta, (CODA) with which my thesis advisor, Randy Roark was involved. In the year and a half after graduation as the thesis sat on my shelf at home, that seed took root, and by the time we introduced the concept to the public, it was considered an equal component to transit and economic development. This is

demonstrated by its mention in the original letter that marked the Beltline's public debut. It was sent by myself and two coworkers at Surber Barber Choate & Hertlein architects who felt this was too good of an idea to remain on the shelf. We sent it in the summer of 2001 to everyone we could think of including Cathy Woolard, then Atlanta City Councilmember for District Six and chair of the Council's Transportation Committee. In the years that followed, Woolard (and myself as a volunteer), championed the Beltline as "a three-part quality of life proposal - transit, greenspace and economic development."

Another big evolution of the Beltline is the added parks component. Originally, the Beltline was seen as an opportunity to simply connect existing parks, and perhaps add a few acres here and there. But at the end of 2004, the Trust for Public Land, a national non-profit land conservation organization, completed a study of the Beltline which looked at how to add 1,400 acres of new greenspace to the Beltline area, bringing Atlanta's ratio of park acres per resident to near the national average. I had the opportunity to work on the study with Alex Garvin & Associates. TPL is actively purchasing property along the corridor, and has made Atlanta's Beltline a national priority for their organization.

Other evolutions include possible route changes in some areas, spur trail connections, and the project's main funding mechanism - a tax allocation district (TAD). The TAD was first proposed by Cathy Woolard before she left office, and just last month it was approved by City Council (two more approvals are pending as of this writing).

The Beltline continues to evolve - and it should. Hopefully, together we will make it into something even better than the original vision.

Ryan Gravel

Gravel, Inc.  
535 Mellview Avenue SW  
Atlanta, Georgia 30310

404-786-9761  
ryan@gravelinc.com