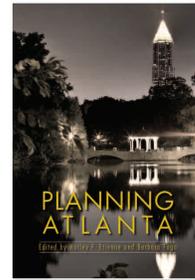


# Emerald Necklace, Southern Style





*Planning Atlanta*  
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An excerpt from a new Planners Press book explains how the BeltLine is emerging as a premier addition to Atlanta’s public realm.

By Alexander Garvin

AT THE START OF THE 21ST CENTURY, residents of many American cities, including Atlanta, spent more and more time on longer and longer stretches of highways going to and from sprawling agglomerations of single-family houses. Atlanta is unique among the nation’s large cities, however, in deciding to create an alternative lifestyle around a major public asset.

In 2005, Mayor Shirley Franklin created the BeltLine Partnership to promote a combination of park, trail, and transit to replace the ring of railroad lines that encircled the city about one and one-half to three miles from its center. The city council followed by approving the BeltLine Redevelopment Plan and a tax allocation district to pay for it. The following year Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. (ABI) was established to implement the project.

Already people—and development—have flocked to the year-old Eastside Trail.

PHOTO BY RICH ADDICKS/THE NEW YORK TIMES



The century-old Bellwood Quarry will soon become Westside Reservoir Park, Atlanta's largest park.

The new BeltLine “Emerald Necklace,” as I call it, will include more than 20 new or expanded parks occupying 1,300 acres connected by 33 miles of multiuse trails, and 22 miles of new transit lines. It is already having a huge impact on Atlanta.

As of this month, more than \$360 million from both public and private sources has been spent on the Atlanta BeltLine program, including five new open parks, 200 additional acres of new parkland, and seven miles of new permanent public trails. This huge investment has already resulted in 8,908 new privately financed residential apartments and 870,700 new square feet of commercial properties completed within the BeltLine corridor, representing more than \$1 billion in privately funded development, according to various public documents collected by ABI.

More important, upon its completion, the BeltLine will have supplanted the city's interstate highways as the focus of daily life for hundreds of thousands of Atlantans.

### The model

Converting unused rail lines into recreational trails has been gaining traction since 1986, when the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy began operation. At that time there were only 200 rail-trails in the U.S. By 2013, there

were eight times as many, covering more than 20,000 miles.

The Atlanta BeltLine, however, was not conceived primarily as a recreational facility. In its first incarnation, in a 1999 Georgia Tech master's thesis by Ryan Gravel, AICP, the rail lines that would become the BeltLine were reimagined as a transit corridor that tied together the 45 communities encircling downtown Atlanta.

Where most people saw separate rights-of-way owned by the Norfolk Southern Railroad, the CSX Railroad, and the Georgia Department of Transportation, Gravel saw an opportunity for a continuous public realm. At first, people questioned the idea. Rights-of-way ranged in width from as little as 45 feet to as much as 200 feet. Many sections would require extensive regrading and retaining walls. Other sections were crossed by creeks and low-lying floodplains or sewer and storm-sewer infrastructure. At five locations the rail lines did not even connect.

Despite the physical and engineering obstacles, the idea gained support because the concept was so appealing and its potential to transform Atlanta was so beguiling. The BeltLine gained vital support from then city council president Cathy Woolard and Mayor Franklin.

James Langford, Georgia state director

for the Trust for Public Land, was the first to help push the BeltLine concept into reality. The Trust, a nonprofit foundation established in 1972, says that it has been involved in more than 5,200 projects to date. In 2003, TPL studied the 50 largest American cities. Atlanta ranked low in public parkland with 3.8 percent.

Seeing the BeltLine as a way to expand Atlanta's public parks, Langford organized a steering committee to look for land along the transit corridor Gravel had identified. Langford raised funds from the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, the Keneda Fund, and the Morgens West Foundation to pay for the committee's efforts and to commission Alex Garvin & Associates (my firm) to analyze Atlanta's green space challenges and opportunities.

### Land hunt

Our team began by searching for properties that could be reused as parks. We scoured maps, aerial photographs, property records, and geographic information systems data to determine ownership and land values. We also searched for the best real estate development opportunities along the BeltLine to be sure that, once they were developed, they would generate the taxes to pay for maintaining the entire system.

Members of the team hiked, climbed, and even crawled along the entire BeltLine right-of-way and took several helicopter flights to get a deeper understanding of the relationship between the rail corridor and surrounding communities. On the first of those helicopter rides I identified the still functioning, 100-year-old Bellwood Quarry as a great potential site for a large new park. Two years later, the city acquired it for what will become the Westside Reservoir Park, Atlanta's biggest park.

In December 2004, TPL published our firm's report: a 141-page proposal for *The BeltLine Emerald Necklace: Atlanta's New Public Realm*. We confirmed TPL's conclusion that whether BeltLine transit happened in the distant future or never at all, the BeltLine would be a great success if it used pedestrian and bicycle paths to connect city parkland and to create a framework for in-fill development that could accommodate Atlanta's population growth.

Much more important, we identified major opportunities for new parkland, for expanding existing public parks, and for private development that could become prime residential or commercial destinations. The paths (and the transit lines, when they emerged) would allow residents to get to and use every type of recreational facility, producing a park system that eventually would become the envy of cities with many times the amount of parkland.

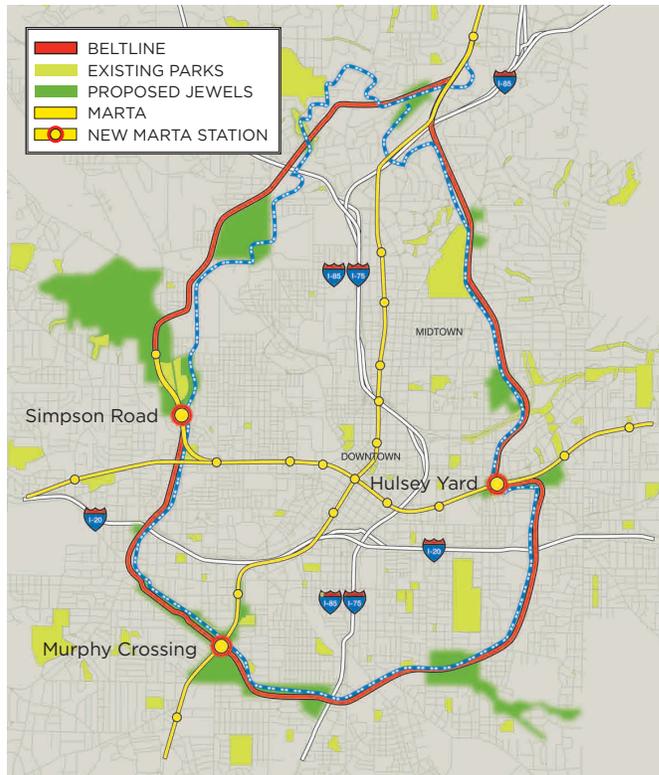
Several of the proposed parks, in particular Boulevard Crossing, Murphy Crossing, and the parks in the Old Fourth Ward, had green fingers that extended fairly far into surrounding neighborhoods, tying the BeltLine into surrounding community life.

### Transit links

The BeltLine's potential for improving mass transit remains one of the least understood components of the BeltLine plan. MARTA, the local transit agency, already provides excellent service to and from the city's major destinations: Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, downtown, Uptown, and Buckhead. However, it does not provide service to a great many of the city's residential neighborhoods.

The plan proposed modifying the three MARTA rail lines that crossed the BeltLine to facilitate transfers.

Five years after approving the BeltLine, the city initiated the Atlanta Streetcar Expansion Strategy. When the initial 2.7-mile



Combining major new, expanded, and existing parks with the BeltLine trail and anchoring the combination at intersecting MARTA stations was first proposed by Alexander Garvin in 2004 in a study published by the Trust for Public Land.

Atlanta Streetcar Project begins operation in 2014, it will service the core of downtown Atlanta. Upon completion, ASES will provide supplementary east-west connections across the city and tie the BeltLine directly into downtown Atlanta—and MARTA.

### Challenges

However laudable these goals for the BeltLine may have been, they required huge amounts of money and community support to come to fruition. While my firm was creating the plan for the BeltLine, the Atlanta Development Authority hired EDAW Inc. (now AECOM) to study the feasibility of tax increment financing and to manage a process of community engagement.

EDAW had considerable experience in Atlanta, having been responsible for the city's Centennial Olympic Park and Freedom Parkway, which connected downtown Atlanta with the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum.

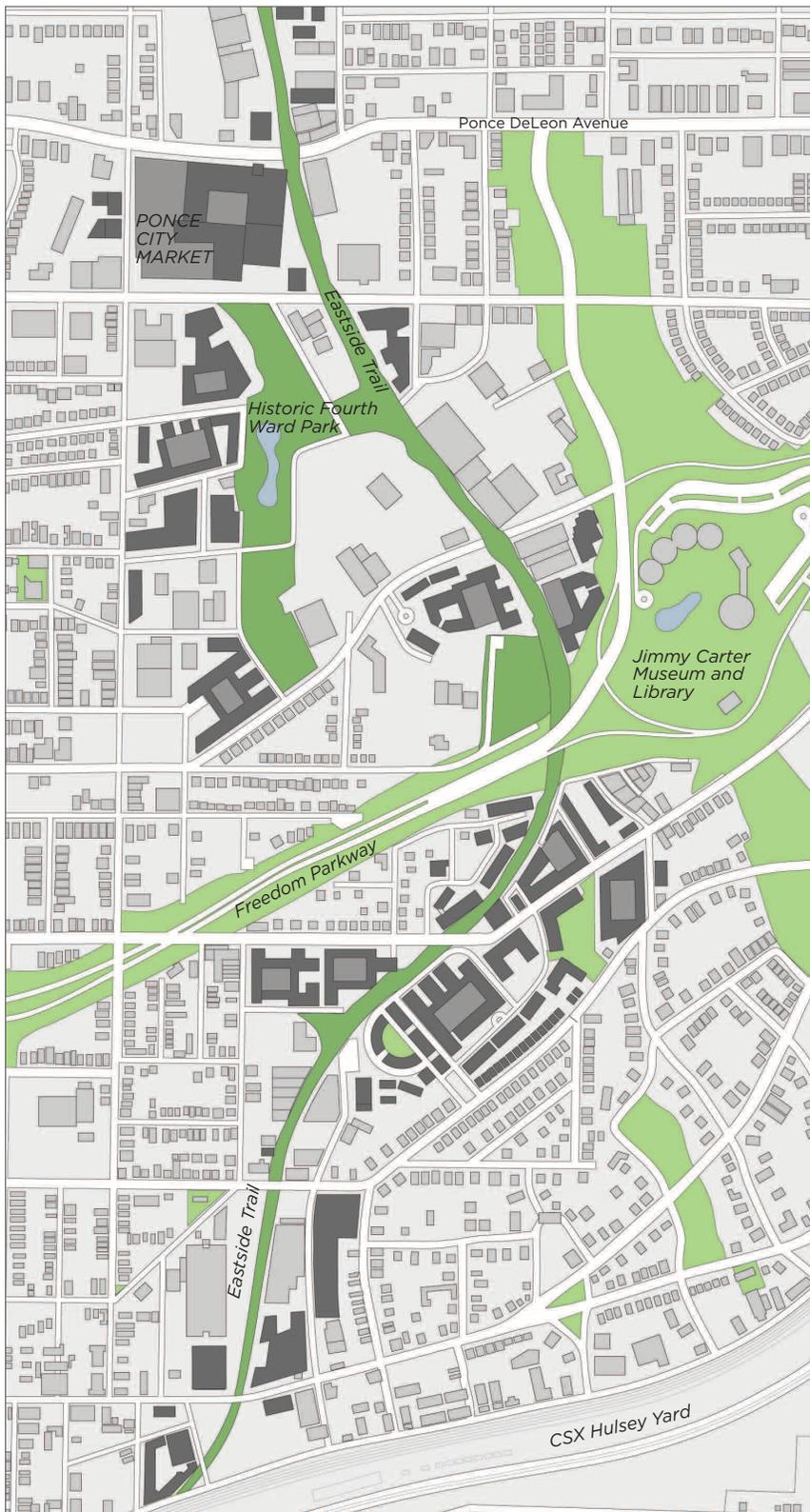
To build support when the BeltLine came up for a vote at the city council in late 2005, Barbara Faga of EDAW led an elaborate public participation process. More than 120 public meetings were held in every community along the proposed route. As Faga later vividly explained, "The fact is that if we'd had to go door to door, we would. Public process is not for the faint of heart."

The 2005 estimates commissioned for EDAW's feasibility study concluded that the total project development cost in 2005 dollars would be between \$1.5 and \$2.2 billion, including right-of-way acquisition and the development of trails, transit, open space, infrastructure, and workforce housing. (ABI's 2013 estimate was about \$4.8 billion, indexed to inflation and to estimated delivery dates.)

As with any major municipal capital investment, it would have to be financed with long-term bonds, rather than out of annual revenues. Project proponents thought that the income stream to cover debt service payments on the bonds should come from the properties that received the benefit of the BeltLine. But the city government depended on revenues from those taxes to pay for police protection, sanitation services, and every other government service.

The solution was a tax allocation district in which any increase in property taxes (ostensibly the result of capital investment) would go to pay debt service on BeltLine bonds, while the city continued to collect the existing taxes that it received earlier in order to continue providing the usual government services.

The city of Atlanta, Fulton County, and Atlanta Public Schools (all of which depend on real estate tax revenue) approved the



## A BeltLine Snapshot

Recently opened projects connect existing assets and have spurred new ones.

- EXISTING PARKS AND PARKWAYS
- BELTLINE PROJECTS: (Eastside Trail and Historic Fourth Ward Park)
- EXISTING BUILDING STOCK
- NEW PRIVATE MARKET DEVELOPMENT

MAP BY OWEN HOWLETT AND ALEXANDER GARVIN

6,500-acre TAD in 2005 with a 25-year life. Starting in 2030 those governments would get the usual taxes plus the taxes generated by the TAD.

Three lawsuits challenged the legality of the use of tax increment from the TAD. One eventually led to an amendment to the Georgia Constitution to allow diversion of tax dollars from the school system to non-educational redevelopment. The other two lawsuits were dismissed by the Georgia Supreme Court last year.

Despite the lawsuits and loss of revenue while litigation was under way, ABI says the TAD has generated \$150 million of the roughly \$362 million invested in the BeltLine so far.

A funding setback occurred in 2012, when metro Atlanta voters rejected the Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (known as T-SPLOST). Since then, BeltLine transit, streetcar service from the BeltLine, and passenger transfer stations between the BeltLine and MARTA remain dependent on federal funding and other sources.

### Revenue streams

EDAW's 2005 Atlanta BeltLine Redevelopment Plan estimated that the project would generate \$20 billion to \$30 billion in private development on nearby properties. This, in turn, would produce between \$2 billion and \$3 billion in new taxes (the 2013 estimate is \$1.45 billion), which would be enough to pay for BeltLine projects without federal and state funding or individual donors. These calculations were a convincing rationale for approving the TAD.

Reflecting public sentiment, a subsidized housing component has been added to the BeltLine. As of August 2013, 15 percent of total net bond proceeds, or \$8.8 million, has been raised for the Atlanta BeltLine Affordable Housing Trust Fund. According to ABI, these funds have been used to create 263 units of housing either through home ownership assistance to persons of low income or developer subsidies for affordable housing, or for the purchase of land that has been leased to developers of assisted housing.

By mid-2013, ABI put the total remaining cost of the BeltLine at \$4.393 billion.

### Yes, they will come

People who live along developed sections of the BeltLine are benefiting. Residents of



Atlanta's Historic Fourth Ward Park has been a gathering place since the 1860s. Thanks to the BeltLine, it's now part of a network of green spaces.

all types encounter one another, skate, jog, sit on benches, picnic, or just wander. The parks and trails that are already open have greatly augmented the opportunities for recreational activities and increased the amount of time that nearby residents devote to exercise.

Overall, the BeltLine's major achieve-

ment is the extraordinary private market reaction to what is still a very small part of the entire BeltLine, scheduled for completion in 2030. Since 2005, within a half-mile of the Eastside Trail alone, private real estate development that is finished or under way represents an investment of about \$775 million, according to the city's BeltLine strate-

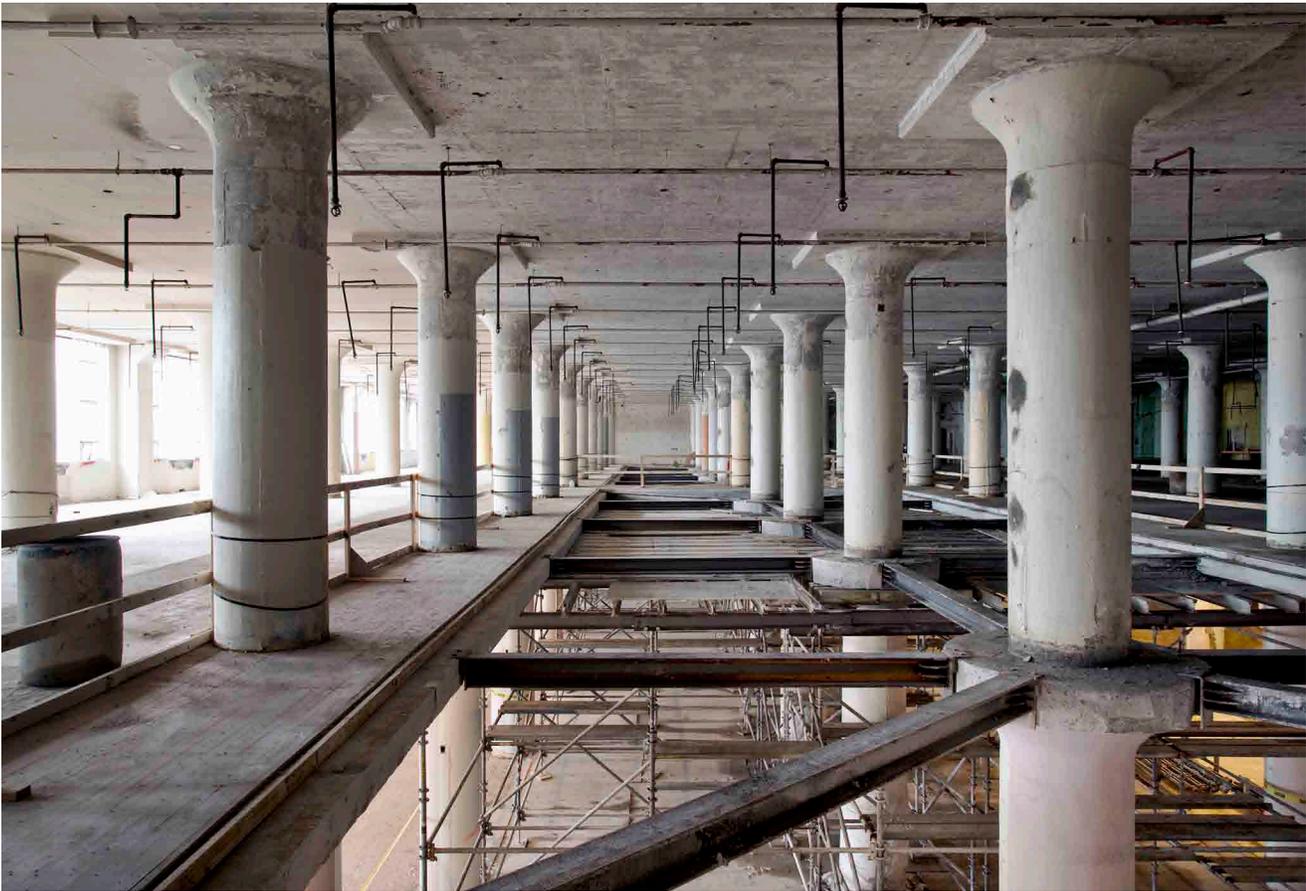
gic implementation plan.

The largest of these projects is the Ponce City Market, the conversion of a two-million-square-foot Sears Roebuck building. When it opens in 2014, the market will include 300,000 square feet of stores and restaurants, 450,000 square feet of office space, and 260 residential units.



*“Whether it’s friends popping in or the mounted police riding by, we’re happily distracted by all the activity and connectivity the BeltLine has brought to our neighborhood, and we love it! We see art installations going in, fun runs, and lantern parades. Working here, we’re reminded every day how vibrant Atlanta is.”*

JOHN BENICICH, PRINCIPAL, SQUARE FEET STUDIO, AN ARCHITECTURE, PLANNING, AND DESIGN FIRM



At 1.1 million square feet, Ponce City Market (rendering top) is the city's largest adaptive reuse project ever. An old Sears, Roebuck & Company distribution center is being turned into a mixed use development with retail, offices, entertainment, and housing. Photographer Blake Burton has been charting the transformation of this local landmark for several years.

RENDERING COURTESY BELTLINE.ORG; BOTTOM PHOTO BY BLAKE BURTON, WWW.BLAKEBURTONPHOTOGRAPHY.COM

Some of its stores and restaurants will be directly accessible from the BeltLine, among the first of many anticipated over the next 17 years. Consequently, the new mixed use public realm that will emerge on the Atlanta BeltLine will be very different from New York City's High Line or any of the many other single-function trails that have replaced railroad rights-of-way.

Most of the \$775 million private development along the Eastside Trail is residential. What is astounding about this amount of housing investment is that much of it

started during an economic downturn and other projects have started during 2013, when more than 29 percent of the mortgages in metropolitan Atlanta are still in arrears, three times the *Wall Street Journal's* estimate of the national average.

These residential and commercial projects are the harbinger of massive, widespread, and sustained private investment that can be expected during the life of the TAD. In the years ahead, as the BeltLine's implementation continues, new residences, stores and restaurants, and

community facilities will open along the emerging Emerald Necklace, and most important, transit will supplant the city's interstate highways as the focus of daily life for hundreds of thousands of Atlantans.

Alexander Garvin is a practicing planner and professor of urban planning and management at Yale University, where he has taught for 46 years. He was a member of the New York City Planning Commission for 10 years. The third edition of his book, *The American City: What Works, What Doesn't*, was recently published by McGraw-Hill. This article is excerpted from *Planning Atlanta*, to be published this April by APA Planners Press.

## ON A RELATED TOPIC

### At the Beginning

By Ben Smith

Mass-mailing a graduate student thesis to a bunch of elected officials isn't the best way to sell a plan for reinventing a city. But when the history of Atlanta's BeltLine gets written, sometime after the project's 2030 completion, that's exactly how the story will begin.

It will end, if all goes right, with rail and a multiuse trail encircling downtown Atlanta, 1,300 acres of new and restored parks, thousands of units of market rate and affordable housing, redeveloped industrial wasteland, and the transformation of a quarry—where zombie attacks and B-movie flicks currently get filmed—into a reservoir.

If the story ends happily, it will be about how a centerless city reclaimed its center, increased its density, and reversed its perpetual pattern of sprawl through the revival of a moribund 19th century rail corridor as part of a tiered system of public transit.

"When you look at what's happening around the country, there's nothing quite like it," says Ryan Gravel, AICP, whose 1999 Georgia Tech master's degree thesis launched the project. "There are big transit projects and there are big park projects. There are none that combine transit and trails and parks and affordable housing and economic development and public art."

The project has changed Gravel's life as well. Thirteen years after shopping his thesis to dozens of Atlanta leaders, Gravel is now a senior urban designer with Perkins+Will, the Chicago-based



Ryan Gravel didn't think the trailblazing idea he posed in his masters thesis ever would come to fruition. But the BeltLine is on track, with the Eastside Trail portion (above) already done.

architectural firm designing the BeltLine. He is also a board member of the nonprofit Atlanta BeltLine partnership.

Gravel says he sometimes looks back in disbelief at the improbable journey that turned his idea into a reality. He was skeptical even after getting elected officials on board and joining them to pitch the

idea at neighborhood meetings. "I thought it was an interesting discussion," Gravel says. "I never imagined in my wildest dreams that it would happen." It almost didn't.

Gravel, though, sent a copy of his thesis to Cathy Woolard, who was then a freshman Atlanta city council member.

## ON A RELATED TOPIC

*“This project has a broad constituency. . . . Some people like it because of the transit. Some people like it because of the trails. Others like it because of the parks, or the public art. But they all see it as part of a larger vision. That’s what makes it politically durable.”*

RYAN GRAVEL, SENIOR URBAN DESIGNER, PERKINS+WILL



The BeltLine is already a popular route for organized runs—and the public art along the way gives participants something unexpected to look at.

Woolard recalls noticing Gravel’s thesis after returning from chairing a transportation committee meeting during which she discovered the city had no current transportation plan.

“I was pretty upset,” Woolard says. “I was sitting at my desk kind of pondering this dilemma and opening mail when I came across this big envelope.” Upon opening it, Woolard says she saw the BeltLine map and recognized part of it immediately. The stretch that ran through her district was the abandoned railroad line that her constituents frequently complained about, the one littered with trash and inhabited by vagrants.

“Traffic and pollution are sacrificing the things that made Atlanta attractive to investment in the first place,” Gravel wrote. After Woolard read Gravel’s solution—to convert the BeltLine into a 45-station rail system—she invited him and some of his classmates to a meeting. “I don’t have a clue in the universe how to make this happen,”

Woolard recalls telling them. “Let’s figure out a way.”

Woolard was elected city council president in 2001. That’s when she decided to “use my bully pulpit and my staff to promote [the BeltLine],” she says. Woolard and other supporters pitched the idea to political leaders and civic and business groups, and they succeeded in getting it added to the city’s and the Atlanta Regional Commission’s long-range plans, making it eligible for \$23 million in funding if it ever became available. At a 2003 meeting of the ARC, Gravel heard two supporters refer to the BeltLine plan as “our project.” That’s when he knew it would happen.

In 2004, the Trust for Public Land’s Emerald Necklace study added an elaborate overlay of parks and green space to Gravel’s original concept, greatly ramping up the momentum. Another boost came with the creation of the tax allocation district in 2005.

There have been some bumps along

the way. In 2006, the project suffered a significant setback when developer Wayne Mason backed out of a proposed deal in which he would give a portion of his land to the city in exchange for rezonings that would have enabled him to build high-density residential properties beside the rail line. In the face of neighborhood opposition, the city rejected the project—and later bought Mason’s portion of the BeltLine.

In January 2009, Amtrak sought to condemn the northeast corridor of the BeltLine, but backed down after a fight with local officials and supporters. Then in 2012, voters rejected the T-SPLOST, which would have enabled the project to be completed five to 10 years ahead of schedule, according to BeltLine officials.

Despite those setbacks, “this project has a broad constituency,” Gravel says. “Some people like it because of the transit. Some people like it because of the trails. Others like it because of the parks, or the public art. But they all see it as part of a larger vision. That’s what makes it politically durable.”

Every Saturday morning, Atlanta BeltLine officials run free bus tours of the route. The three-hour tours cover it all: from the affluent neighborhoods the rail line passes through in Buckhead and Midtown to the crime-ridden and abandoned stretches of Bankhead on the Westside that proponents hope will be revitalized by the project. The bus tour also passes by joggers and cyclists on the BeltLine trail. Visitors see Fourth Ward Park, a green space with walkways and a waterfall built around a two-acre lake that serves as a detention pond and a solution to a once persistent flooding problem.

They also visit the Bellwood Quarry, which is to be redeveloped into a reservoir. The quarry and surrounding field, which have served as sets for episodes of AMC’s *The Walking Dead*, will be redeveloped into Westside Reservoir Park.

Ben Smith is a freelance writer and former politics and government reporter for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.