

Atlanta breaks ground on major Beltline project

By Greg Bluestein
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Officials behind Atlanta's most ambitious project in decades chose a fitting spot for its Wednesday kickoff: A neglected industrial plot dotted with debris in the shadows of construction towers cobbling together a flashy new high-rise.

Proponents of Atlanta's Beltline project hope that transforming unused railroad tracks ringing the city into a 22-mile loop of parks and paths will also lead to a new round of job growth and economic redevelopment in blighted neighborhoods.

And while the financial turmoil has raised fears that the plan could be delayed as the city tightens its belt, the project's boosters seemed eager to pronounce the Beltline alive and well.

"The Beltline is always going to have challenges, but these elements are moving forward," said Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin. "As soon as the credit markets, the funding markets in Washington and New York settle down, we'll continue to move forward."

The project's organizers have already delayed plans to sell \$120 million in bonds, but city council member Kwanza Hall said Wednesday the city will try again next week in hopes that the bond markets will calm.

"It's a little blip," Hall said. "But it's not going to stop us."

Supporters say the plan could propel Atlanta from the bottom of the pack of major cities in green space to square in the middle, while at the same time generating economic development by linking together affluent and struggling, isolated neighborhoods.

Urban planning experts are closely watching how the project plays out, saying it could serve as a blueprint for so-called smart growth developments across the country.

Atlanta officials chose to break ground on the project at a sprawling gravel lot just east of downtown where the 35-acre Historic Fourth Ward Park will soon stand. About a dozen developers have snatched up land around the industrial area anticipating a boom.

City officials had originally proposed a \$40 million stormwater tunnel project at the site, but reconsidered when community organizers and developers drafted a \$30 million plan with a stormwater detention pond at the center.

The entire Beltline project is expected to cost \$2.8 billion over 25 years, and officials say it could ultimately add more than 1,200 acres of greenspace, 33 miles of trails and light rail to connect 45 city neighborhoods.

But it faces a number of immediate hurdles, including a November ballot question that asks Georgia voters if school tax revenues can be used to help economic redevelopment efforts. The Beltline and other redevelopment efforts rely on the subsidies to fund construction.

The message on Wednesday from Beltline supporters, though, was one of hope and optimism. Standing on the concrete slab of some long-forgotten building, one speaker after another praised the project before a crowd of businessman in suits and residents with dogs and bicycles in tow.

Rob Hunter, Atlanta's commissioner of watershed management, had perhaps the loftiest ideals. He said the project could be an example of how cities should take a broad approach to redevelopment projects amid the new financial landscape. "This is really a new paradigm for how the city has to operate," he said.