

City approves \$117 million in bonds for Beltline

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The Atlanta-Journal Constitution
August 19, 2008

For the past few years, Atlanta's ambitious Beltline project has struggled to get off the ground without much in the way of funding.

But that is all set to change. The Atlanta City Council late Monday night approved the sale of \$117 million in bonds for the Beltline, the first big cash infusion for the project, which aims to redevelop aging freight rail tracks that circle downtown into a network of transit, trails and parks.

The bonds will be backed by increases in property tax revenue along the 22-mile route.

The first bond sale was planned for 2006, but the issuance was successfully challenged by a Buckhead lawyer, who claimed the state constitution forbids school property tax money from being spent on redevelopment projects like the Beltline.

That bond sale was projected to be \$200 million. The Beltline bond sale now being prepared relies only on city and county property tax revenues.

The two-year delay caused problems for the Beltline, making it difficult for officials to hire staff, secure right of way and obtain land for future parks.

In approving the bond sale, the council also gave its OK to a five-year spending plan that includes up to \$45 million to complete the sale of a key 4 1/2-mile segment of the Beltline in northeast Atlanta owned by Gwinnett developer Wayne Mason.

Some critics have questioned the expenditure, including the city's official Beltline oversight committee, made up of community leaders and residents.

The group wants to ensure that Beltline funds are spread equitably along the entire loop, particularly in economically hard-hit areas that haven't seen much development. The northeast corridor cuts through the most affluent part of the Beltline.

The bond issue will be the first of several planned in the next 25 years projected to raise \$1 billion. The Beltline, one of the largest public works projects in Atlanta's history, has a projected \$2.8 billion budget.