

Develop Beltline densely

Get on board: Mass transit needs sustainable level of ridership to succeed.

By Jim Durrett
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An old joke has it that metro Atlantans would drive from their bedrooms to their kitchens if they could.

Gas at \$4 a gallon may finally be changing that. Long commutes, frequent traffic delays and now real pain at the pump have turned driving Miss Daisy into a joyless, wallet-sapping bore. Suddenly, things like a train to Lovejoy and Griffin and more X-Press buses for commuters — both ideas recently endorsed by Gov. Sonny Perdue — have fresh momentum.

So does the idea of moving closer to town, and that makes the planning under way for the Beltline timely.

We've spent the past 40 years building suburbs that are beginning to look unsustainable at \$4 a gallon. How can we make sure that we now build an Atlanta — and a metro Atlanta region — that is increasingly sustainable?

Buses and trains are part of the answer. Perdue's endorsement of such projects is heartening. But the rest of the long-term solution is simple: Put more people closer to the places they want to go — work, schools, shops, restaurants, parks and entertainment. Then give them the option of taking transit to get to the places they can't walk to.

The Beltline promises two important things. It gives the city a plan for dealing with population growth: Where will Atlanta put its share of the more than 2 million new residents expected in the metro region over the next 25 years? In fact, Atlanta's share of that growth may increase as more people do the math at \$4 a gallon.

Second, the Beltline provides a way to move people around once they're in town. It can help make Atlanta sustainable. Now is the time to make sure that we make the Beltline sustainable.

Again, people are the answer. Riders, I mean. Enough of them.

One form of transit proposed for the Beltline is "light rail" — something between a trolley and a MARTA train. But bus routes will also interlace the Beltline district and connect with light rail stops, and connections with MARTA trains are planned. The secret to making the trains and buses run frequently is having people within walking distance — a half mile or less for light rail, a quarter mile or less for buses.

If potential riders are scattered too sparsely along the Beltline, ridership will disappoint. Poor ridership will affect service, which will affect ridership, and so on. How can we make sure that doesn't happen?

Urban planners have rules of thumb as to how many people are generally needed to make different kinds of transit work. For example:

- > Bus service once an hour: three to four dwelling units per acre.
- > Bus service twice an hour: 4 1/2 to six dwelling units per acre.
- > Frequent bus service: 7 1/2 to 10 dwelling units per acre.
- > Light rail: nine to 12 dwelling units per acre.

These are modest numbers. At 10 dwelling units per acre, we're still talking about stand-alone, single-family homes with room for alleys behind. Of course, the numbers above are averages. When you take into account the parks, vacant land and other nonresidential sites along the Beltline corridor (a half mile on either side of the 22-mile route), you can see that some spots along the Beltline will need apartments, townhouses or condos to make up the difference.

But that's what planning is for. It will be up to area residents, property owners and planners to come up with ways to make everything fit.

My point is, let's not lose sight of the goals. Let's design a Beltline corridor that can sustain a light-rail-plus-feeder-bus system that makes the future Atlanta — the core of our region — a workable, livable place. In fact, let's do better than minimum. Let's shoot for the high end of the range and ensure that the Beltline is a vibrant, busy, exciting, safe place.

We can do that without ignoring the concerns of existing neighborhoods. Mayor Shirley Franklin, who has been one of the Beltline's strongest proponents, has pledged that neighborhoods will be protected as redevelopment plans are drawn. Beltline officials repeat the same pledge.

There's no reason to doubt it. Done right, redevelopment that accommodates a lot more people can be made to blend effectively — even gracefully — with existing neighborhoods. It has been done elsewhere. It's being done elsewhere.

We can do that here, too. The result will be a city that offers more residents, in more of its neighborhoods, a workable alternative to driving everywhere. It'll be a city that offers a mix of housing in a variety of neighborhoods, each with convenient access to a working transit system that lets them depend less and less on their cars. It'll be a city we like even more than the one we live in now.

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