

# Why Atlanta's BeltLine is the model for "new paradigm" city building in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In one holistic, collaborative project, the BeltLine solves Atlanta's core problems — lack of transit and greenspace — and provides a myriad of short- and long-term social, economic and environmental benefits. Cities around the nation can benefit from studying Atlanta's approach to sustainability through collaboration, and the federal government can lead the way by providing vision, incentives and resources.

Atlanta's BeltLine is the most ambitious, wide-ranging urban redevelopment project currently underway in the United States.

It is literally transforming Atlanta by transforming its physical landscape.

The cornerstone of the project: reclaiming a system of railroad tracks that encircled Atlanta since before the Civil War but was then set aside with the ascent of the highway system and trucking industry.

Along the 22 miles of rail are all the things that make up today's typical American city — unused land, empty buildings, brown fields, industrial parks, busy intersections and residential communities.

By reclaiming this track system and the land around it, the BeltLine is creating a continuous corridor of transit, parks, trails, greenspace and development that connects a total of 45 in-town neighborhoods and promising business centers. It also links directly into existing rail and other public transit systems.

The BeltLine, therefore, literally connects Atlanta to itself, converting unproductive urban land into productive land and greenspace while managing growth as never before. The result is a healthier, more vibrant, economically viable "new-paradigm" city.

## What is "new paradigm" city building?

The "new paradigm" sees cities as they truly exist today: the economic drivers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Cities today are highly interconnected with one another, home to 83% of our population and the producers of almost our entire gross domestic product. Public policy thinkers agree that for our nation to reach its potential and compete globally, cities must first do the same. This requires visionary leadership from all three sectors — public, private and philanthropic — with the federal government at the helm. (See sidebars for additional information.)



*'We are no longer Jefferson's nation of rural hamlets and small towns, with economies that are internally focused and self-reliant... Our challenge is to get comfortable in our new metropolitan skin and alter the way we govern so that our metro communities can achieve their fullest potential as our engines of national prosperity.'*

**Bruce Katz**, VP and Program Director, Metropolitan Policy Program, Brookings, at The Summit for American Prosperity

When all three sectors collaborate to do three things — **invest in transit, commit to sustainability and reward innovation** — as they have in creating Atlanta's BeltLine, cities will experience stronger economies, healthier environments and higher overall quality of life.

## The BeltLine organizes future growth around transit options and greenspace.

People want to live close to transit, parks and greenspace. By providing more transit options, 1,300 new acres of greenspace and 11 miles of trails extending into surrounding neighborhoods, the BeltLine is attracting developers to land adjacent to these new features rather than to land away from the city center. People will follow, migrating permanently from outlying areas where 5 million people live into the city where less than 500,000 people live.

This means Atlantans will ultimately drive less, use less fuel, get more exercise and breathe cleaner air. The overall lifestyle in a new-paradigm city is healthier and more vibrant than what's possible with urban sprawl.

An **affordable workforce housing fund** is a central component of the project. **Historic preservation, brownfield remediation, land use guidelines and solutions** for people who may be negatively impacted by new development are also important elements of the project, as is **public art** and an **arboretum**.

(Very simple map)

*"The Beltline Emerald Necklace provides Atlanta with an opportunity which far exceeds that of any major American city: to create a city-wide system of parks and transit, to create stronger, more attractive communities, and to actively shape a new and improved public realm framework that will positively impact residents' quality of life for generations to come."*

**The Beltline Emerald Necklace: Atlanta's New Public Realm**, a Trust for Public Land study conducted by Yale University professor Alexander Garvin

## The BeltLine is a cooperative effort with bold leadership, clarity of vision and a smart investment strategy.

Vision, leadership and community buy-in are key to creating a successful plan. Literally thousands of people are dedicated to the effort, from Atlanta's mayor and other key visionaries to leaders in government, philanthropy and business, plus community members who show up time and again at planning sessions. The BeltLine is truly a team effort.

From the beginning, the BeltLine project has adopted new-paradigm thinking by seeing Atlanta for what it really is, both positive and negative. It acknowledges population growth is inevitable, natural resources are limited and silo thinking is ineffective. Conversely, it understands that

### **FUNDING EXAMPLES:**

- Tax increment — 5 years: \$144 M, 25 years: \$1.7 B
- Other local funds committed in 5 years: \$157 M

### *Streetscapes, Sidewalks and Roadway Transportation Infrastructure Investments*

- Local investment 2006-2010: \$21M
- Federal investment 2006-2010: \$21M

### What do most American cities look like?

**Too many cities are fragmented, disconnected and unprepared for inevitable growth.**

Sprawl causes traffic that clogs roadways, pollutes the air, wastes time and gas, and promotes a sedentary lifestyle. At the same time, remnants from the industrial age, including contaminated land, fuel urban blight or, at least, the perception of it. Globalization is partly to blame for our cities' problems, too.

### What do healthy, vibrant cities look like?

**Healthy cities are connected, synergistic and sustainable.**

People can get around easily, afford to live there, find good jobs, receive the education and training they need, and enjoy a healthy, active lifestyle because they have access to greenspace, clean air and healthy foods.

### What will happen if we don't change how we think about U.S. cities?

**The problems we already have will intensify.**

This will make them harder to solve. What's worse, antiquated silo-thinking and "one-off" solutions are short-sighted, don't pool talent or resources and often inadvertently exacerbating other problems, all of which will keep cities from competing globally.

transformational investments save money and deliver sustainable, exponential results that would be impossible to achieve otherwise.

**Atlanta is already reaping significant benefits.** The Tax Allocation District (TAD) has been approved, major collaborative projects are moving forward and, to date, over \$1 billion in private development has been permitted. In addition, Atlanta jumped in the U.S. sustainable city ranking from 38<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> in one year according to SustainLane.com. Communities are buzzing with excitement and new ideas.

All three sectors working together result in short- and long-term social, economic and environmental benefits.



• **KEY SOCIAL BENEFITS: Provide 5,600 affordable housing units at a cost of \$25M funded by a 15% set aside from TAD bonds;** advance social equity; connect disparate and diverse communities; provide transit so people can get around easily, find and keep good jobs, and have access to essential services, education, healthy foods and greenspace; promote healthier, more active lifestyles; reduce of childhood asthma and obesity; improve overall quality of life, sense of belonging and pride in community.

• **KEY ECONOMIC BENEFITS: Generate \$20 billion of economic development, including 30,000 new jobs and 48,000 temporary construction jobs;** substantially improve the tax base of BeltLine and surrounding areas; establish innovative incentives to jumpstart development and other projects; stimulate growth of new businesses; establish an affordable housing trust fund; preserve and revitalize neighborhoods; save taxpayer dollars through integrated infrastructure planning.

• **KEY ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS: Reduce carbon footprint by 665,000 metric tons each year;** reclaim brown fields; provide green infrastructure; encourage environmentally responsible and sustainable development; promote green building standards and renewable energy solutions through zoning regulations; create massive urban recycling project that reduces waste; save energy and natural resources.

#### **COLLABORATIVE EXAMPLES:**

- *The BeltLine is converting the **Bellwood Quarry** into a reservoir that increases Atlanta's back-up water supply from two days to 28 days while developing the surrounding area into a new 150-acre park, one of the city's largest.*
- *The city saved \$10 million when it converted what was to be a Department of Watershed Management underground tunnel into a 15-acre park with an attractive water feature at the **park at North Avenue**.*

Has the new-paradigm for city building proven itself?

#### **Absolutely.**

In Japan, Germany, Korea and other countries, creating change through a collaborative, asset-based approach has resulted in healthier, more competitive "world-class" cities. In addition to Atlanta, U.S. cities that have undertaken major transformational projects have enjoyed success when they incorporate activities like community input, early "quick wins," creative local financing and federal funding.

Who's responsible for providing city-building leadership?

#### **We all are.**

By adjusting how we see and think about our cities, individuals at every level of government, philanthropists and leaders in business and communities can embrace a paradigm that seeks to leverage strengths and capitalize assets through smart, proactive collaboration. It's up to the federal government, however, to set and reinforce the strategic vision because cities have limited budgets and must follow top-down laws and regulations.

## Adopting the “new paradigm” approach to city building in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is well worth the effort.

The US Census Bureau reports that by 2050 our nation’s population will have grown by another 120 million people — that’s 40 percent.

### It’s time to ask hard questions and take bold action.

Big-city mayors from around the country appealed to the federal government for help by appearing before the U.S. Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs.

*“If we invested differently, could we create greater tax revenue returns from development? Could we create less air pollution and more opportunities for physical activity, thus reducing healthcare costs? Could we lower our dependence on foreign oil and reduce the costs associated with our need for this resource?”*

*Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin, who delivered a statement on the “Condition Of Our Nation’s Infrastructure: Local Perspectives From Mayors.”*

The answer, of course, is we can invest in sustainability and enjoy higher returns as a result. We can change our collective behavior through collaborative planning and action. We can build a healthier, more equitable and globally competitive society by improving our cities.

Hundreds of highly respected public policy thinkers agree, including these experts and organizations:

*“The BeltLine is truly an inspiring project and the results of the HIA reinforce that view.”*

**Catherine L. Ross, Ph.D.**, Executive Director of the Georgia Institute of Technology’s Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development (CQGRD) and principle investigator of the BeltLine Health Impact Assessment (HIA)

- **Bruce Katz** and others at Brookings, The Blueprint for American Prosperity: Unleashing the Potential of a Metropolitan Nation, [www.brookings.edu/projects/blueprint](http://www.brookings.edu/projects/blueprint)
- **Kaid Benfield** and others at the National Resource Defense Council, [www.nrdc.org](http://www.nrdc.org)
- **Neil Pierce** of the Washington Post Writers’ Group [www.postwritersgroup.com](http://www.postwritersgroup.com) and Citistates Group, [www.citistates.com](http://www.citistates.com)
- **Jonathan Rose** at Jonathan Rose Companies, [www.rose-network.com/buildinggreen/index.html](http://www.rose-network.com/buildinggreen/index.html)
- **Enterprise Community Partners**, [www.enterprisecommunity.org](http://www.enterprisecommunity.org)
- **US Department of Housing and Urban Development**, Homes & Communities, [www.hud.gov/offices/cpd](http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd)

#### OVERSIGHT EXAMPLES:

- *Regulatory framework for compact and transit-supportive development.*
- *Regulations that anticipate, manage and require quality development.*

## Key BeltLine Events

- 1999** — Grad student stirs excitement by proposing Atlanta link neighborhoods via abandoned “Belt Line” tracks; city council president champions idea
- 2004** — Trust for Public Land commissions **study of greenspace opportunities** along BeltLine
- 2004** — Mayor commissions feasibility study for BeltLine **Tax Allocation District (TAD)**
- 2004** — Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) conducts **transit study**
- April 2005** — City creates **BeltLine Partnership (BLP)** to galvanize private and public support, and support work led by Atlanta Development Authority (ADA)
- November 2005** — City Council approves **BeltLine Redevelopment Plan**
- June 2006** — 138-acre **Bellwood Quarry** acquired for combined reservoir/park project
- July 2006** — City council approves **Five-Year Work Plan**, created with input from 10,000+ community members
- Sept. 2006** — **Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. (ABI)** begins operations to oversee BeltLine implementation
- ??? 2006** — ABI creates **BeltLine Affordable Housing Advisory Board (BAHAB)**, one of five community engagement groups
- Feb. 2007** — City adopts **BeltLine Overlay Zoning District**
- ??? 2007** — BLP kicks off **\$60 million capital campaign** led by mayor and key business leaders
- June 2007** — GA Tech and CDC deliver **Health Impact Assessment (HIA)**
- July 2007** — Master planning for first five (of 10) BeltLine subareas begins
- May 2008** — Master planning for second five BeltLine subareas begins
- August 2008** — County Commission approves TAD and development incentive funds commence

## What can government and philanthropic leaders do today to adopt the new paradigm for city building?

- 1) **Invest in Transit** — To leverage interconnectivity, manage growth and compete on the international stage, **make “transformative investments” in transit solutions within cities.**
- 2) **Commit to Sustainability** — To meet the long-term needs of our citizens, economy and environment, **plan with the future in mind.**
- 3) **Reward Innovation** — To encourage the creation of strategic partnerships, diverse growth opportunities and cost savings, **fund ideas that promote synergy.**

	INVEST IN TRANSIT	COMMIT TO SUSTAINABILITY	REWARD INNOVATION
FEDERAL GOVERNMENT	Provide the crucial <i>vision, leadership</i> and <i>resources</i> to capitalize on the economic strength of individual cities	Establish “rules” and “tools” that promote <i>positive</i> growth in cities, build a strong middle class and <i>preserve</i> rather than harm the environment	Fund <i>diverse</i> , resilient solutions for economic development, especially small businesses, and encourage <i>cross-silo collaboration</i>
PHILANTHROPISTS	Invest “at scale” through larger, long-term grants and lending practices that encompass broad swaths of geography and focus on ways to bring people together	Influence the growth and health of our cities by supporting smart, long-term “systems change” that leads to improvements that benefit this <i>and</i> future generations	Fund projects that merge human and place-based capital into a single, more realistic city-based “metro model” that will deliver far greater results than one-off or temporary solutions
STATE & LOCAL GOVERNMENT	Invest in transit solutions that enhances quality of life by connecting neighborhoods, revitalizing green space and improving affordability	Take the lead in setting a <i>broad-view agenda</i> for “city-building,” focusing on protecting and building long-term social, economic and environmental assets	Fund <i>coalitions</i> and <i>partnerships</i> that are working collaboratively to solve problems and ensure healthy growth as population inevitably increases

*Cities are our lifeblood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When cities thrive, regions thrive and the nation thrives. This is the core idea behind the new paradigm for city building, of which Atlanta’s BeltLine is an exemplary mode. The transformation of Atlanta’s urban framework will last for generations and benefit millions.*



## Partners in City-Building

**Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. (ABI)**, a quasi-governmental organization responsible for: defining and ensuring execution of BeltLine plan; project management; community engagement process; coordinating public and private partner activities; securing federal, state and local funding.

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Phone: 404-614-8300  
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[www.beltline.org](http://www.beltline.org)

**BeltLine Partnership (BLP)** is a private, nonprofit organization responsible for: fundraising; raising awareness and advocate support; mobilizing private resources to support the BeltLine Plan; educating and enlisting partners to address social concerns raised by BeltLine development.

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50 Hurt Plaza, Suite 910  
Atlanta, GA 30303  
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[info@beltlinepartnership.org](mailto:info@beltlinepartnership.org)

The two above entities work with the **Mayor’s Office, City of Atlanta** departments, the **Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA)**, the **Boston Consulting Group** plus philanthropic organizations, including:

- **PATH Foundation**
- **Trust for Public Land**
- **Trees Atlanta**
- **Georgia Conservancy**
- **Park Pride**
- **Blank Foundation**
- **Woodruff Foundation**
- **Community Foundation**

Community members and Neighborhood Planning Units (NPU) participate in study groups and planning committees as part of the BeltLine’s **Citizen Participation Framework**.