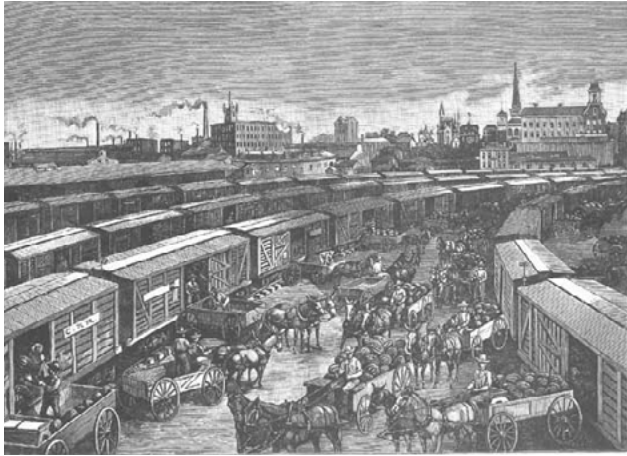


Carpe Diem: Georgia Prepares to Seize Its Mobility Future



Atlanta's growth and development have always been fueled by transportation, from its mid-1800s bustling railyards to its busy highways and airport today. The local-option sales tax vote this summer will once again direct mobility to the forefront of the region's future.

By Rich Sampson

Six months is a lifetime in the transit world. As two full seasons come and go in communities of all kinds, transit operators will provide thousands – if not hundreds of thousands – of trips, and people will go to work, medical appointments and reach scores of other essential destinations on buses, trains and vans, among other modes. But if those communities are in Georgia, the next eight months will more profoundly impact the area's mobility options than any other period of time in recent decades.

On July 31, 2012, voters across the state will head to the polls and decide on instituting a one-cent sales tax to support transportation projects in 12 different regions in Georgia. If approved, the sales tax would raise more than \$10 billion in investment over a decade for transit and road projects, and represent a commitment to mobility found in few places in the nation. As important as each individual transportation project is to achieving a more connected and productive Georgia, the process by which voters are educated and empowered to support the sales tax campaign is equally crucial to the state's long-term connectivity and livability. And nowhere is this important

decision more profoundly important than in Georgia's largest metropolitan area, Atlanta.

The impending vote of Georgians on state-wide transportation investment also reflects a growing and important trend in public policy: providing voters in a community, region or state the opportunity to directly approve or reject new revenues to support long-term mobility enhancements. In metropolitan regions like Denver, Colo., Salt Lake City, Utah and Dallas, Texas, voters have approved large-scale transportation programs to expand and improve both transit and road infrastructure, while other communities like Kansas City, Mo.,



and Cincinnati, Ohio have done the opposite. Regardless of the outcome, the willingness of state and local officials to schedule votes on transportation investment reflects the inability of federal leaders in Washington to achieve any long-term or predictable agreements on how to support transportation investment and the glaring need to address community mobility to maintain and strengthen local and regional economies.

A History of Mobility

The Atlanta region has always been a nexus for mobility connections. Before the area had any sizable population, a series of railroads came together at a point originally called Terminus. The Georgia Railroad initially dubbed the settlement Atlantica-Pacifica, to highlight the coast-to-coast destinations linked through the hamlet, which was ultimately shortened to Atlanta. Due to the burgeoning railroad traffic

to and through the small city, Atlanta's population skyrocketed from just 30 in the 1840s to more than 9,500 by 1860. And although U.S. General William Tecumseh Sherman famously burned the city to the ground in 1864, by 1868 Georgia had relocated its capital to the city, after the railroads had quickly restored population and economic activity to the region.

Over the next century, Atlanta grew to become one of the largest cities not only in the South, but the entire nation. Today, with more than 420,000 residents within the city's limits and another 5.3 million in the surrounding region, it's the nation's ninth-largest metropolitan area. Reflecting not only the area's skyrocketing population, but also its history as a transportation pioneer, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport is now the world's busiest airport for passenger travel. But while its population growth was exceptional, the development of its local transportation options was rather typical. Like most American cities, Atlanta began first with horse-drawn streetcars, which were then upgraded with electric power, only to see them replaced entirely by buses by 1950. In 1966, the Georgia General Assembly created the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) to serve as the region's public transit provider.

"Intolerable levels of traffic congestion in metro Atlanta were first predicted in a 1946 study of the region by H.W. Lochner, Inc., a Chicago firm that showed the beginnings of regional leadership on transportation because

it was paid jointly by Atlanta and Fulton County,” said David Pendered, who’s reported on Atlanta’s urban affairs since 1982 and now is managing editor of SaportaReport.com.

“Lochner recommended the region build a network of highways and an extensive system of passenger rail and bus routes to serve the region’s expected population boom,” Pendered said. “Regional leaders built most of the highway portion of the Lochner plan, but not the transit network that Lochner recommended.”

MARTA was tasked with not only fusing the services of privately-owned bus lines in the region, but also develop a rail rapid transit system. In 1972, the agency won a one-cent sales tax in DeKalb and Fulton counties to construct a two-route heavy rail network and support its local bus operations. Construction began on the rail system in 1975, and service began on the system’s first segment in 1979. Today, the rail network – simply known as MARTA – includes four distinct routes serving 38 stations across 48 miles of track and carrying more 260,000 daily riders. Meanwhile, MARTA’s bus system is composed of 91 routes moving more than 220,000 passengers each day. MARTA’s rail system is currently the nation’s eighth busiest, while its bus operations are the 14th largest in the nation.

“Keep in mind that MARTA had been created in 1966, but it didn’t have any local funding mechanism, so it was just a paper organization with no clout,” said the late former MARTA General Manager Alan Kiepper. “It couldn’t



Members of the Atlanta Transportation Roundtable – the body charged with determining the region’s mobility priorities.

propose anything and it lived on subsidies from the local governments. But now, with the sales tax, which by the way was strongly supported by then-Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter, MARTA was a real opportunity.”

(To read our full interview with Alan Kiepper, click here – ed)

A Vote to Change Atlanta

Despite the solid foundation established by MARTA’s bus and rail networks, much of the system was inaccessible by large swaths of the region beyond DeKalb and Fulton Counties, and sometimes even within that service area. Meanwhile, a lack of stable investment from state and local sources caused low levels of

service in some neighborhoods and communities, and largely failed to leverage the value of the rail system to drive economic development. But despite a significant and growing need for improved mobility resources, advocates for better transportation options met with resistance from local leaders and at the polls whenever a specific project was proposed.

The problem, according to Pendered, has been conflicts between the region’s jurisdictions on where investment should be located, along with the classic transit versus roads dilemma.

“The political process that drives the construction of transportation systems did not



The Atlanta-Macon commuter rail project depends on investment from voters in three of Georgia's 12 regions.

provide for transit to be extended outside the two core counties whose residents voted to pay a one percent sales tax to build and operate MARTA,” says Pendered. “As a result, most of the people moving into the region bought a home in one of the countless new communities that have been built near a highway. This is the reason some people here say we don’t have unplanned sprawl and traffic congestion, we planned our sprawl and traffic congestion.”

These factors created a climate impervious to dialogue on specific transportation projects,

often even those for road or highway construction. A new vision for improving mobility conditions was needed not only in the Atlanta region, but across the state – one that stitched together Georgia’s patchwork of communities and jurisdictions with both new transit and roadway infrastructure instead of allowing individual projects to act as wedges between them. Gradually, elected officials and community leaders realized they would need to formulate a comprehensive, multimodal effort with a range of transit and road projects to serve the entire state.

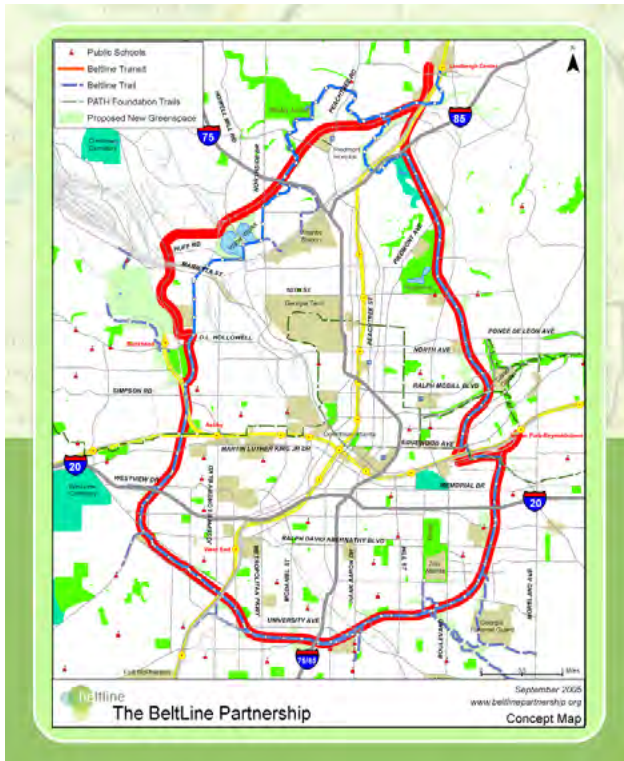
In June 2010, the Georgia Assembly passed the Transportation Investment Act of 2010, which was signed into law by Governor Sonny Perdue, creating 12 independent regions based on the state’s existing Regional Commission boundaries. In each region, voters will decide upon a one-cent sales tax within each area to support transportation projects for a decade. The outcome will be determined by a simple majority of votes in each region, meaning each individual measure will pass if the voters in the whole region approve, not subject to the approval of voters in each specific county in a region. Moreover, the 12 regions can approve their plans independently, regardless of what happens in the other regions. So, if the Atlanta region’s voters approve the investment but their counterparts in the Macon region do not, the revenue stream for the Atlanta region is still legitimate.

Earlier this year, the state’s economic analysts forecast the likely revenue for each re-

gion. Based on that number, a Transportation Roundtable composed of a county representative and mayor from each county in the region would determine which transportation projects would be supported by the sales tax revenue if the measure was passed by voters.

The sales tax vote – dubbed T-SPLOST by Georgians, or special local-option sales tax for transportation – will be included with already-scheduled local and state primary elections across the state on July 31. The date was selected as a political compromise, removing it from both Georgia’s presidential primary vote on March 6 and the full national election next November. This fall, the 12 regional Transportation Roundtables released their respective lists of transportation projects in order to properly inform the electorate. In all, the Transportation Investment Act and the T-SPLOST votes represent a radially different view of how to invest in transportation in Georgia.

“Road construction in Georgia is governed by the state Department of Transportation, which is overseen by a board that reflects the influence of rural parts of the state,” Pendered said. “Like a lot of states, Georgia has a history of handing out road projects to political patrons, and most of those folks have needed farm-to-market roads in rural areas. But even if the board wanted to favor metro Atlanta or other urban areas with road or transit projects, it is limited by a fuel tax that is one of the lowest in the nation. Rather than raising the fuel tax statewide to pay for statewide



transportation improvements, the Legislature in 2010 opted to continue its policy of having voters decide if they want to raise their local sales tax to pay for various public projects such as roads and transit. In 1975, the state allowed each county to call a referendum to raise the sales tax by one percent to offset property taxes. In 1985, the state allowed each county to call a referendum to pay for roads, bridges, schools and the like with an additional penny sales tax. The T-SPLOST is an extension of this concept, but tweaked to cover a larger geography.”

Gordon Kenna, Chief Executive Officer of Georgians for Passenger Rail, agrees. His organization has been working to reconnect the



The Atlanta BeltLine

As the primary railroad nexus in the southeastern United States, the Atlanta region has always faced the challenge of train congestion on tracks through the city’s center. In response, the various privately-owned railroads developed short-cut routes to more easily move trains across and between their respective lines. Today, with freight rail traffic largely consolidated on the tracks of just a few railroads, those previously independent shortcuts will serve as a new connected system of parks, trails, neighborhood and business districts, and rail transit routes.

The Atlanta BeltLine – overseen by the tandem of the Atlanta BeltLine, Inc., development entity and the nonprofit Atlanta BeltLine Partnership – is a 22-mile collection of in-use and abandoned railroad rights-of-way in and around Atlanta, connecting 45 distinct neighborhoods (see map in left column – ed). Several parks and trails have already been established through the community-based initiative, and many more are under development along the corridor. If voters in the Atlanta region approve T-SPLOST investment next July, the BeltLine will host both light rail and streetcar infrastructure, offering radial connections throughout the region and linking with five MARTA rail stations, along with numerous local and regional bus routes.

Along with important objectives for mobility and green space, the BeltLine project also prioritizes economic development, affordable housing, historic preservation, public art and brownfield remediation. For full details on the BeltLine, [click here](#).

state's communities with high-speed, inter-city and commuter rail service for more than a decade, and successfully led the effort to include investment for a commuter rail project between Atlanta and Macon in the approved local-option sales tax plans in the Atlanta, Three Rivers and Middle Georgia regions.

“Transportation is not a monolith, and every region has different needs,” says Kenna. “The Transportation Investment Act and the T-SPLOST present opportunities to re-envision our priorities and find areas where there’s consensus to move forward.”

The Importance of Communicating

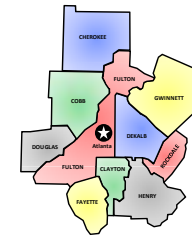
Although the various votes to approve T-SPLOST investments represent a mammoth stream of revenue to support transportation projects and services, the forward-thinking intention of the effort is irrelevant if Georgia’s voters do not agree. As a result, the elected officials and community leaders driving the campaign have begun a multi-faceted outreach effort to explain the benefits of the investment to voters.

With the approvals of the project lists by the various Transportation Roundtables, proponents of the transportation investment measures now have concrete actions and outcomes to bolster community support. In the Atlanta region, the \$6 billion estimated to be generated through T-SPLOST revenues will produce hundreds of transportation capital projects – for both highways and transit – of which more than \$2.9 billion will be dedicated to 13

transit projects. The transit investment would upgrade and expand the MARTA rail system, begin work on the Atlanta – Macon commuter rail line, construct light-rail and streetcar routes and reinstate bus service in Clayton County while improving it in Gwinnett County. All told, it would mark the largest single investment in transit in the state’s history, and its greatest share of resources in relation to new roads and highways, with around 50 percent of the available revenues directed to transit.

Armed with the detailed list of projects, a diverse set of advocates are fanning out in the region to make the case to voters, and are utilizing a host of communications tools and strategies to spread the message. Just as the region’s mobility needs are varied, so too are the methods necessary to reach various communities and constituencies. For the tech-savvy students and professors at Emory University who would benefit from a light-rail line to their campus, local transit advocacy group Citizens for Progressive Transit utilize social media venues like Twitter and Facebook to spread the latest developments on the project. Elsewhere, the Livable Communities Coalition organizes neighborhood meetings to discuss the impact of the planned BeltLine light-rail and streetcar route on housing in Atlanta’s low-income communities. At the same time, the Metro Atlanta Chamber – the region’s Chamber of Commerce – is mobilizing its 4,000 member companies to support the economic benefits from new and improved roads as well as transit. And while these and many

Transportation Investment Act Final Report - Approved Investment List Atlanta Roundtable Region



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The transportation projects to be supported by T-SPLOST investment in the Atlanta region were released by the Atlanta Transportation Roundtable in this October report.

other groups arrive at transportation policy issues from various directions and motivations, a sense of common ground is becoming firmly established among T-SPLOST proponents in the region and throughout Georgia.

“The biggest decision we will face in the next 20-30 years is voting yes for the 10-county transportation referendum,” said Dave Williams, vice president of Transportation, Metro Atlanta Chamber. “Never before in

Georgia has a region been able to vote on its transportation future, and our competitors are watching us closely.”

Still, the lists assembled by the regional Transportation Roundtables are far from perfect to any particular advocacy group. Suburban leaders outside of Atlanta and Fulton and DeKalb Counties worry that transit projects are focused largely on rail lines serving the region’s dense urban core, sacrificing other needed road projects elsewhere – and ones that are needed to carry transit buses. Meanwhile, environmental advocacy groups like the Georgia Chapter of the Sierra Club fret about half the funds being devoted to new roads or highway upgrades, a percentage they feel is still too high. But would their opposition to the local-option sales tax revenue pose substantial setbacks to encouraging greater use of transit, biking and walking? For many, the effort is a challenging exercise in long-term commitment.

“The Transportation Investment Act passed in 2010 after years of failed attempts to address transportation funding in Georgia,” says Colleen Kiernan, Chapter Director for the Sierra Club. “Instead of being transformational, the Atlanta Regional Roundtable list is a hodgepodge of badly needed transit investment and business-as-usual road expansion. By trying to appeal to everyone, even those who will never support new taxes, the list fails to inspire any major constituency. The most compelling argument proponents have is that the referendum must be supported because

there is no Plan B. The Sierra Club strongly supports expanded transit and sustainable travel options, but not if their benefits are outweighed by worsened sprawl and air pollution due to massive additional road building. The Georgia Chapter is currently weighing the pros and cons of this proposal, and we will be adopting a formal position based on that assessment.”

Months in Motion

For transportation advocates, business leaders and elected officials across Georgia, the next several months will be a recurring string of education, interaction and persuasion. The vote on T-SPLOST funding next July repre-

sents not only a potentially new identity for mobility in the state and in its largest metropolitan region, but also a very public experiment in democracy: issues will be raised, objections heard, concerns addressed and, ultimately, the people will have their say. And although the outcome is of profound import to all involved, the process may be just as beneficial over the coming years and decades. ■

The Atlanta BeltLine is a mix of rail corridors utilizing both active and abandoned freight rail rights-of-way, connecting existing MARTA heavy rail lines and potential new crosstown light-rail and streetcar routes.

