

The Beltline and Beyond — blueprint for transit project's next CEO

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By Guest Columnist MATTHEW HICKS, associate legislative director for the Association County Commissioners of Georgia on economic development and transportation policy.

In 2003, a goal was set by those working on the BeltLine to have transit started on the corridor within ten years. It was a lofty target considering that every day brought obstacles and looming doubts about the overall project's viability.

Yet every hurdle was overcome and soon problems were welcomed as opportunities to prove the BeltLine could happen. Each challenge only made proponents work harder and more proudly as they made a vision that was bigger than any of them come to life.

Today, it is easy to say that early hard work has paid off. With half the BeltLine right-of-way virtually acquired and negotiations finally beginning with CSX railroad (the remaining owner), the transformative construction of the project can begin.

The last three years produced an ambitious and comprehensive planning effort, marked the start of necessary environmental assessments, taught us the parameters of acceptable public-private partnerships and confirmed the core funding of the project through the tax allocation district. The next challenge is selecting a new leader of the Atlanta BeltLine Inc. (ABI).

ABI was created in 2006 and is the entity charged with planning and implementing the creation of the Beltline. Its first chief executive, Terri Montague, is leaving and the ABI board has engaged an executive search firm to help find a replacement by October. The future chief executive officer has a full plate waiting.

Perhaps the most important duty will be to protect the integrity of ABI, whether it is honoring commitments made to residents along the northeast section or ensuring equitable implementation efforts in the southwest.

In addition, the new leader will have to show tangible results quickly, capitalize on the grass roots energy along the corridors, develop a strong government relations strategy, complete acquisition or sharing of the CSX corridor, make transit happen sooner than later and ensure the organization is functional and efficient.

ABI's next CEO will have to manage those challenges all while operating in a very tough economic climate that is impacting not just bond sales and the project's funding but public priorities. The new leader must capitalize on the true strength of the BeltLine to succeed: The people and neighborhoods alongside it.

In its initial days, the power of the BeltLine was the organic nature by which it grew and overcame adversity. Volunteers from all over the city and several in very surprising places came forward and joined forces to confront perceived problems. That unrefined collaboration among Atlanta residents and city officials created a sense of shared ownership and destiny. It also created momentum.

The next CEO must continue that tradition and cultivate the home-grown energy sprouting all along the BeltLine by engaging residents in serious, nontraditional ways that promote co-ownership and collective responsibility. Such ownership by the public can enable greater accomplishments than we can even envision today.

The next head of ABI will also be operating in a novel political setting, with a new Mayor and several new council members. The next administration's support of ABI will be crucial, as will be the versatility of the CEO to work within whatever new political framework emerges. Only through working together can they marshal the public confidence and resources necessary for the initiative.

Another challenge waiting extends well beyond the corridors of the BeltLine to the state and regional levels where leadership is desperately needed to guide future development.

Few realize that the BeltLine is only another in a series of major redevelopments in the metro Atlanta area such as Atlantic Station, Aerotropolis, Doraville GM site, Fort McPherson, and multiple multimodal stations at the Gulch downtown, airport and Armour Yard.

Because of its magnitude, the BeltLine has the potential to connect all of these redevelopments in some way and serve as an example of what carefully planned and citizen-led redevelopment really looks like. Integration with other regional efforts is also crucial to resolving potential differences between projects and giving this region the layered investment of public transportation it needs, including light-rail in the urban core, MARTA expansions, regional bus lines and commuter rail.

The new head of Atlanta BeltLine Inc. has a tremendous opportunity to shape the future of Atlanta and, in fact, Georgia by positively channeling the united spirit and energy that is propelling the project towards reality. In doing so, the value of a real, multimodal transportation program, along with all of the other fascinating components of the BeltLine and their role in the state's economic development, can be demonstrated.

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