

Now Atlanta Is Turning Old Tracks Green

By **Robbie Brown**

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ATLANTA — Until last year, the old railroad tracks that snaked through east Atlanta were derelict. Kudzu, broken bottles and plastic bags covered the rusting rails.

But these days, the two-mile corridor bustles with joggers, bikers and commuters. Along a trail lined with pine and sassafras trees, condos are under construction and a streetcar is planned.

The Eastside Trail, as the path is known, is one of the first legs of an ambitious proposal that has been in the works since the early 2000s — to transform 22 miles of vine-covered railroad into parks, housing and public transit around Atlanta.

“We are changing Atlanta into a city that you can enjoy by walking and riding a bike,” Mayor Kasim Reed said. “We have been so car-centric that you didn’t experience the city in an intimate way.”

But the Eastside Trail is only a start. And while some civic boosters, among them Mr. Reed, are calling for the pace to accelerate (he wants to see the entire loop paved and streetcars installed within a decade), the fulfillment of the grand plan, called the Atlanta BeltLine, is not assured.

Countless obstacles remain — from purchasing land, digging up decades-old tracks and routing the trail around operating trains and freight yards. But the greatest challenge is financing. The city and a host of nonprofits have raised \$350 million through private donations and property taxes on the \$2.8 billion project.

Voters last year rejected a penny sales tax that would have allotted \$600 million. And a special property tax, created in 2005, has generated less revenue than expected before the market collapse. Last week, the State Supreme Court heard arguments from a group of taxpayers who say school taxes have been spent unconstitutionally to pay for part of the BeltLine.

In Chicago, an elevated three-mile path is being built atop an old freight line. Seattle is turning 13 miles of track into bike trails. Four million people a year travel on New York's version, the High Line, which runs along an elevated platform above Manhattan.

In total, more than 21,000 miles of railroad track has become paths across the country, according to the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. The nonprofit group says 9,000 more miles are available to be converted.

The BeltLine would be the most expensive rails-to-trails project, urban planners say. It would add 40 percent more parks to Atlanta. Only 4.6 percent of Atlanta is parkland, compared with 25 percent in New Orleans and 19 percent in New York.

Some of the old railroad tracks still remain. Rich Addicks for The New York Times

"Projects like this come along very rarely," said Christopher B. Leinberger, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who specializes in urban redevelopment. "If Atlanta finds money to add rail, the BeltLine will be one of the most important transportation projects of the 21st century."

The BeltLine links 45 neighborhoods. The 14-foot-wide path spans wealthy and poor parts of Atlanta, running through dense urban areas and lush woods, within a two- to four-mile radius of downtown.

The idea began humbly, as a graduate thesis at Georgia Tech. In 1999, a student, Ryan Gravel, proposed an overhaul of the railroad corridor. He expected the 120-page academic paper to gather dust at a campus library, he said.

Instead a city councilwoman, Cathy Woolard, who later became the Council's president, heard about the proposal and seized on it. She forged an unlikely coalition of environmentalists, transit officials, local artists and real estate developers. The city began buying the railroad corridor in 2007.

"People want to live in a city where the design makes sense," Mr. Gravel said. "It's not only changing the physical form of the city. It's changing the way we think about the city."

Construction along the Eastside Trail has boomed. The largest real estate project is a 2.1 million-square-foot former Sears distribution center that is being converted into apartments, restaurants and a rooftop miniature golf course.

Skip Engelbrecht owns an antique furniture store, Paris on Ponce, that backs up to the Eastside Trail. He said business has increased tenfold over the past two years as the trail opened.

"It's unreal. We used to worry about homeless people back there and now it's like a boardwalk," Mr. Engelbrecht. "We're planning a new entrance in the back, maybe a coffee shop someday. It's hard to imagine this was all an old railroad."

