

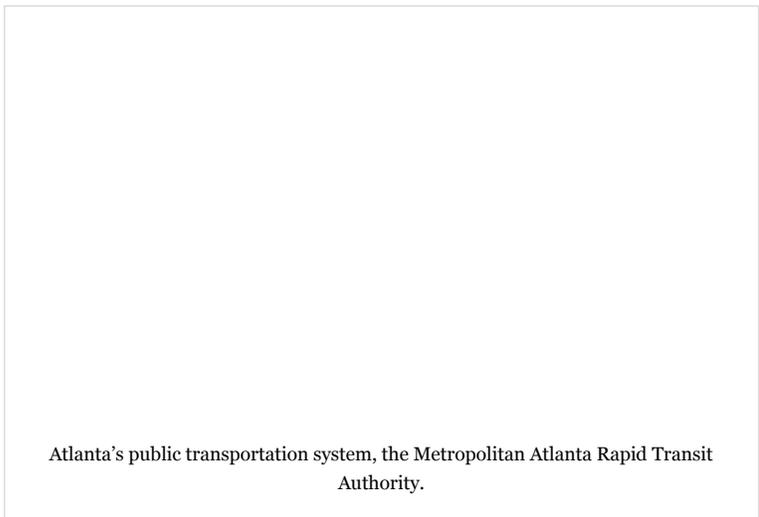


Covers US World Campus Culture Interviews Columns Red Line

Subscribe

Urban Sprawl's Poster Child Grows Up

Posted by [Quinn Mulholland](#) | Feb 28, 2016 | [Online](#), [United States](#)



Atlanta's public transportation system, the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority.

In the 1990s, urban development expert Christopher Leinberger dubbed Atlanta the poster child for urban sprawl, and "the name kind of stuck." The city's suburbs were growing at a rapid pace, adding over a million people between 1990 and 2000. With MARTA, the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, [confined within city](#) limits because of worries of the crime it would bring, massive freeways and wide parkways provided the only connections to the wider metropolitan area. Gas-guzzling cars filled the roads, ferrying suburbanites to and from their homes on quiet cul-de-sacs, past big box stores and strip malls, and through open countryside.

SEARCH ...

POPULAR ARTICLES

Rather than Cull Millions of Livestock, Let's End Animal Agriculture

Inside the ICJ: Interview with Judge James Crawford

The Evolution of Rap

How to Respond to Ahmaud Arbery's Murder

The Struggle for Global Justice: Interview with Geoffrey Robertson QC

ADVERTISEMENT

Atlanta's sprawl fueled a booming economy but also isolated its poorest residents in pockets of poverty. Those without cars faced long commutes on MARTA's underfunded, limited bus and rail service to get to their job or simply to buy food. The interstate highways that suburbanites relied upon to commute to the city demarcated racial boundaries and gutted black neighborhoods.

Real Estate Express

Save on real estate courses

Launch your career today!

Special Offer

GET

Yet since the 1990s, the city has begun to change. “The image of Atlanta is one thing, and the reality is becoming just the opposite,” Leinberger, a fellow at the Brookings Institution and a professor at the George Washington University School of Business, told the HPR. “And it’s happening very quickly.” New developments are [increasingly walkable](#), making cars less of a necessity. MARTA has proposed a significant [\\$8 billion expansion](#), which would be its first in decades. And Atlanta is in the midst of implementing [a transformative project](#) that, when complete, will convert a set of unused railroad tracks circling the city into a 22-mile corridor of parks, trails, and light rail. These changes could not only help Atlanta become a truly 21st-century city, but also could improve the mobility of those historically disadvantaged by Atlanta’s lack of transit infrastructure.

Race and MARTA

Atlanta’s history is fraught with racial tension. During the ’60s and ’70s, school integration caused massive white flight out of the city proper and into the northern suburbs of Cobb and Gwinnett Counties. When MARTA was proposed in 1965, it was to encompass DeKalb, Fulton, and Clayton Counties, which contain Atlanta and its inner suburbs, in addition to Cobb and Gwinnett. Residents of Cobb and Gwinnett, however, refused to allow MARTA into their communities.

“The white people in the suburbs saw MARTA as a way for black people to come to their counties, and they didn’t want it,” *Atlanta Magazine* writer Doug Monroe told the HPR. The common refrain among suburbanites was that MARTA stood for “Moving Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta,” he said.

RECENT ARTICLES

Interview with Dr. Gaurab Basu II: A COVID-19 Response Guided by Science
May 14, 2020

Interview with Dr. Gaurab Basu I: Equity in a Pandemic
May 14, 2020

“Overseas Chinese” Are Canadians Too
May 13, 2020

In the Time of COVID-19, Women Demand More: An Interview with Melissa Boteach
May 13, 2020

Agtech is all the Buzz: An Interview with Ellie Symes on

Georgia Tech history professor Ronald Bayor explained to the HPR that in addition to hostility from suburbanites, MARTA also faced opposition from Republican representatives in the state legislature: due to factors like racism and Atlanta's black-majority population, lawmakers "from all these rural counties [had] hostility towards Atlanta, generally." As a result, MARTA is one of the only transportation systems in the country that do not receive state funding. MARTA's financial reliance on cash-strapped counties and lack of state support prevented it from expanding like other cities' transit systems.

There are some signs that popular opinion is shifting, even in the northern suburbs. A poll conducted this year showed that [63 percent](#) of likely Gwinnett voters support a MARTA expansion into their county. And a January poll conducted by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* [found that](#) a similarly large statewide majority supported improving and expanding public transportation, although little more than a third were willing to pay higher taxes to fund transportation projects.

Driving Marginalization

Underinvestment in public transportation in Atlanta has gone hand in hand with the construction of huge interstates that specifically targeted black communities. Bayor said highways were used not only to separate black and white communities, but also to destroy prosperous black communities. The city "tore down the black neighborhoods in those areas that the highways were coming through," he noted. "In some ways, it would have made more sense to move the highway west into desolate areas, but they preferred to go through black neighborhoods, for that purpose of getting rid of them."

In a Vox [article](#) published this May, reporter Joseph Stromberg expands Bayor's premise, arguing that a big part of the push for new highways was "the federally supported program of 'urban renewal,' in which lower-income urban communities—mostly African-American—were targeted for removal." Even relatively vibrant black neighborhoods were considered "blighted" and paved over to make

with Eric Symes on
The Bee Corp
May 13, 2020

MEDIA

Harvard College Democrats and Harvard Republican Club: The Importance of Political Discourse

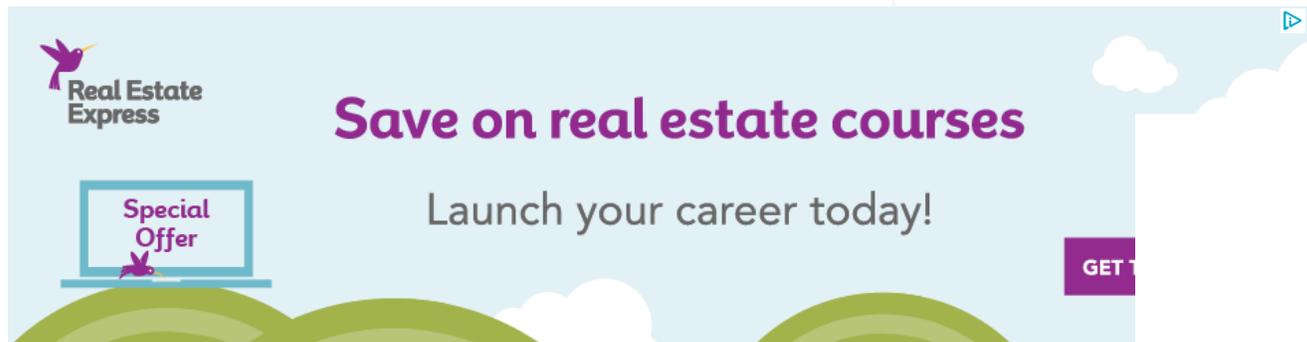
Humans of COVID-19 Podcast: Coronavirus in India

Humans of COVID-19 Podcast: Global G.L.O.W.

COVID-19 Campus Move-Out: A Harvard Student's Story

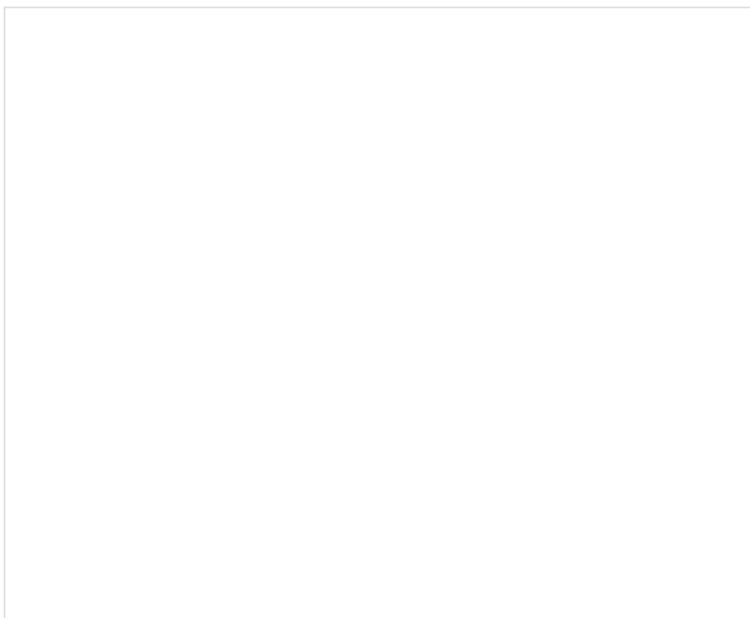
Interview with Former Vice President of Panama Isabel de Saint Malo

way for urban freeways. In fact, one of the areas most devastated by the construction of the highways, according to Bayor, was the neighborhood around Auburn Avenue, which *Fortune* magazine had [described](#) as the “richest Negro street in the world” in 1956.



In addition to drawing racial boundaries and damaging black neighborhoods, these interstates also facilitated white flight by enabling many Atlantans to live in the suburbs and commute to work downtown. But as the city grew and sprawl expanded, so did traffic and congestion. A 2011 [Brookings Institution report](#) showed that almost four-fifths of jobs in Atlanta require a public transit commute lasting over 90 minutes, ranking the city 91st out of 100 large metro areas. And a [Texas A&M study](#) from this year found that Atlantans lose \$1,100 in wasted fuel and productivity every year.

Effectively, increasing sprawl and reliance on cars formed a positive feedback loop. The rise of interstates and driving as the primary means of transportation necessitated [thousands of parking lots and decks](#), both in the suburbs and in the city, that pushed stores and housing farther away from each other. This, in turn, further necessitated cars as a primary mode of transportation, feeding back into the sprawl.



In recent years, Atlanta has installed many bike lanes, as well as a streetcar system downtown.

Leaving the Station

Leinberger does see development in the city beginning to change, however. He estimated that about half of new developments, both in the suburbs and the city, are walkable and high-density, and that proportion is growing. "Looking at the future indicators [and] this real estate cycle that we're currently in, you seem to have a U-turn," he said.

Part of the reason for the uptick in walkable, high-density development is increased economic growth in areas with access to public transit. Charlie Harper, a Republican strategist and transit proponent, pointed to companies like State Farm and NCR Corporation that are relocating offices from the suburbs to areas in the city near MARTA stations. "Access to transit was a huge part of their decision to leave Gwinnett County," Harper told the HPR.

Shop Today

Classic, Speciality and
Combo Packs Available.

Flavor God

Companies value transit for many reasons. One, according to Harper, is to attract talented young professionals: "Folks who are in the tech industry generally tend to be younger, and millennials very much favor transit." Another, according to Leinberger, is their image: companies want "to make a statement that they're progressive, they're forward-looking, and their location needs to reflect that. If they're in a business park, they're viewed as stodgy and out-of-date."

MARTA chairman Robbie Ashe agrees with Harper and Leinberger. "There is a growing recognition that a robust public transit network helps attract new companies to Georgia," Ashe told the HPR. "It helps folks who are looking for jobs, and looking to commute and transport themselves without everybody driving in single-passenger vehicles."

Ashe said MARTA is also pursuing transit-oriented development, whereby housing units, office buildings, grocery stores, and recreational centers are built around MARTA stations. "We're never going to be as dense as New York City. And I don't think people down here want to be as dense as Manhattan," he said. "But transit and dense development feed off of each other, and they create a mutually

reinforcing cycle.” In fact, according to [an op-ed](#) by Brian Lombardo in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, “every \$10 million invested in public transportation results in a \$30 million gain in sales for local businesses due to increased foot traffic and decreased congestion on roadways.”

Political Tracks

In spite of the potential for economic growth around MARTA stations, Republicans in the state have historically opposed public transit expansion. This, however, is beginning to change. Prominent Republicans from [Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle](#) to [State Sen. Brandon Beach](#) have voiced support for boosting funding for public transportation, making the group of proponents increasingly bipartisan.

Harper, the GOP strategist, said Republicans are getting behind transit as a tool for economic development. He argues that transit proponents need to stop advertising it as a bonus for poor people and instead market it as a boon for everyone. “Yes, poor people will have a probably heavier reliance on transit than other people that probably have other options,” he said, “but if you’re going to build a true backbone of a system that’s going to service this region, the fact is, it can’t be looked at as a way to move poor people. It’s got to be a way to move all people.”

Georgia House Minority Leader Stacey Abrams (D) agrees. “At the initial phases of rapid transit in the metro Atlanta area, [public transit] was seen as an option for those who couldn’t afford cars, as opposed to what it should be, which is a way to move people around and get them to their work as quickly as possible,” Abrams told the HPR.

She was encouraged by passage of House Bill 170 in last year’s legislative session. Although it didn’t explicitly allocate any state funding for mass transit, the bill allowed individual counties to put the question to their voters of whether to increase the sales tax to fund MARTA expansion. “The willingness of the legislature, led by a Republican majority in the House and a supermajority in the Senate, to embed into legislation funds for bond capacity for transit—funds that would allow counties to work together to fund transit—is a far cry from where we were in 1972, when there was a wholesale rejection of not only transit, but any state governmental obligation for transit,” Abrams said.

Despite this increased bipartisanship surrounding the issue, the effort to expand MARTA recently hit a bump in the road—or the tracks, if you will. On February 26, State Sen. Beach, who authored SB 330, a bill that would have authorized MARTA to pursue its proposed \$8 billion expansion, [announced](#) that it failed to make it out of the Senate Rules Committee and would not be receiving a vote.

Ashe, however, is confident that MARTA's strong financial footing—the agency just finished its third consecutive year with a budget surplus—will continue to grow the agency's coalition of allies in the state legislature. In a statement released after SB 313's failure, Ashe [said](#) that while he was disappointed, "We remain committed to MARTA's transformation from good to great, and providing first-in-class service to the millions of customers we will serve this year." Embracing MARTA expansion could mark a significant turning point in Atlanta's ongoing effort to bring its transit infrastructure up to par with other cities, spur economic growth, and connect long-isolated communities to new jobs and opportunities.

Correction, September 22, 2015: Due to an editing error, an earlier version of this article misstated the length of the Atlanta BeltLine and misidentified the bill that would have authorized a MARTA expansion. The article has been updated to reflect these mistakes.

Image Credits: Quinn Mulholland

SHARE: [f](#) [t](#) [in](#)

[< PREVIOUS](#)

[NEXT >](#)

[Spring 2016 IOP Fellows Interview: Anne Hawley](#)

[Academy Awards of Merit: The Legitimacy Issue of the Oscars](#)

Designed by [Elegant Themes](#) | Powered by [WordPress](#)

[About](#) [Submissions](#) [Advertising](#) [Comp](#) [Contact Us](#) [Donate](#) [Masthead](#) [Log in](#) [f](#) [t](#) [ig](#) [in](#)

