

Community Restoration Project May Come at a Cost for Low-Income Atlantans

Matt Smith

Atlanta's fortunes have been tied to its railroads from the beginning. Now an old stretch of track is bringing new life – and some new anxieties -- to its inner city.

The Atlanta Beltline, a 22-mile loop of greenways around the center of town, has transformed the neighborhoods where it's been completed. Upscale restaurants and parks have replaced scrapyards and warehouses on the city's northeast side. Cyclists, joggers, and skateboarders zip around the trail day and night.

But at the same time, pricey new blocks of apartments and townhouses have gone up among the modest homes of nearby neighborhoods, producing a steep climb in rents and home prices. And many fear the same pattern is going to repeat itself as the Beltline extends south and west, where much of Atlanta's African-American working class lives. And one of those people raising alarms is Ryan Gravel, the project's originator.

Gravel conceived the project for a master's thesis in the late 1990s, identifying stretches of abandoned right-of-way that could be turned into a network of transit lines, parks and trails. But he and another member of the governing board of the organization leading the project resigned in late September, arguing the organization isn't doing enough to promote affordable housing in its path.

In their resignation letter, Gravel and Nathaniel Smith said the Atlanta Beltline Inc. is on track to support fewer than 200 affordable housing units of its goal of 5,600. They argued the Beltline's benefits "must accrue to everyone, especially those who are otherwise most vulnerable to the changes it brings."

Smith said that didn't happen when the Eastside Trail was built, so now, "a place that used to be somewhat affordable is now unaffordable for the people that lived there."

"What was initially lifted up as a great opportunity to redevelop the community, without proper policies in place, has now become a driver for increased housing prices and folks not being able to afford to live in their community," Smith said.

How to keep that from happening in other neighborhoods is a hot topic in Atlanta, from City Hall to church basements in west side neighborhoods like Ashview Heights. Residents there spent a recent Monday night discussing how to prevent rising home values from displacing their neighbors, who are overwhelmingly renters.

"What we're seeing is speculation—people buying properties and they sit on them," said Alvin Yarborough, the neighborhood association's president.

Ashview Heights lies just west of the famous, historically black colleges Morehouse and Spelman, and it was hit hard by the mortgage meltdown of 2008. The median price of a house is less than \$100,000, and homeowners make up barely 10 percent of the households. The Beltline will skirt its west side, and the construction of a new stadium to house the NFL's Atlanta Falcons is raising interest in the blocks to the east, Yarborough said.

As the Beltline is being built out, the historic West End neighborhood to the south is seeing a boom in home sales and an increasing number of young newcomers. Yarborough said that wave is a hopeful sign for Ashview Heights homeowners, many of whom remain underwater on their mortgages long after the crash—but it's making the majority of people who rent their homes nervous.

"The overall conversation is really being driven by the renters, not the owners," Yarborough said.

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Among the 25 people at the Monday night session were representatives of the Atlanta Housing Authority, the Beltline, and the city's redevelopment arm, Invest Atlanta. All three agencies are offering programs to help people buy homes in the city and keep longtime residents from being pushed out.

But those programs aren't big enough or fast enough, said Dan Immergluck, a professor at the nearby Georgia Institute of Technology who has been studying the Beltline's impact for nearly a decade. "I think it's fair to say there has been general dissatisfaction in the affordable housing community in Atlanta with the Beltline, with their affordable housing progress," said Immergluck. While the redevelopment around the Beltline has produced some affordable housing, "It's been very spotty."

"I'm totally in favor of doing projects like the Beltline, as long as they're done so they can benefit existing residents and they can provide for mixed incomes in the future," he said. But he's warned that rents in some west side neighborhoods [are already going up](#) sharply.

Immergluck emphasized that the city and the public-private Beltline organization should be working harder to amass land, require developers to build a certain percentage of affordable housing in exchange for tax breaks, and do more to keep rising tax assessments from pushing older residents out of their homes.

"If you don't do it soon and capture the land or put in place right now the inclusionary measures, the property tax measures, the market gets way ahead of you," he explained.

Atlanta's not the only city where a popular, environmentally-friendly project is raising worries about displacement and gentrification. Greenways in Minneapolis, Denver, and Chicago are facing similar concerns.

"You can't keep people from selling their home, but you also have the right to stay," said John Groene, who runs the West Humboldt Park office of Neighborhood Housing Services of Chicago, a non-profit lender in the city. The neighborhood lies along [The 606](#), a 2.7-mile stretch of rail line that's also been turned into a bike and pedestrian trail.

But the city is supporting a program of loans up to \$25,000 for rehabilitating housing within two blocks of the trail, with the loan forgiven in stages the longer the resident lives there. Property owners must make less than 80 percent of the area's median income – just under \$61,000 for a family of four – to qualify. Cook County also offers property tax breaks for longtime residents who earn under \$100,000, he said. And strictly enforcing zoning laws helps, too: If authorities make an exception for one developer, others are likely to follow.

"Everybody already sees the more concentrated development right along the 606," Groene said. "I think it remain to be seen, if it starts creeping more than a block or two away from it, how we'll respond, but it's too early to tell."

The Beltline is also bumping up against Atlanta's legacy of segregation. Historically, big projects like ballparks and freeways were carved out of black neighborhoods, which lacked the power to alter their course, he said.

"We don't have a good history in that regard," said Natallie Keiser, a senior community development associate for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which works extensively in the Pittsburgh neighborhood south of downtown. "There's a lot of suspicion, a lot of anxiety, a lot of pushback against development, because residents don't know how to ensure that development that occurs will positively benefit them."

Pittsburgh sits just north of the Beltline's planned path. Many African-American residents there know that history -- but many of the incoming, largely white newcomers to the west side don't, "and don't understand the tensions and frustrations that exist in that regard," Keiser said.

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Already-impooverished Pittsburgh was devastated by the mortgage meltdown, which left more than 500 vacant properties in its wake, Keiser said. The Casey Foundation and City Hall tried to stabilize the neighborhood, together buying up nearly 100 properties and trying to keep them secured and cleaned up. Now, the foundation is trying to encourage buyers who'll stay in the neighborhood to purchase the homes before the gentrification wave hits and helping current homeowners to fix up their properties.

"I'm constantly hammering the message that for everybody who can get control of a piece of real estate, it would be their benefit to do so," Keiser said. "The changes are coming, and there's great opportunity there."

Matt Smith is an Atlanta-based journalist who covers a variety of issues, including science, medicine, juvenile justice and related public policy issues. His work has appeared in outlets like CNN, Vice News, WebMD and Youth Today.

Editor's Note: This article is part of a new effort at Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity to feature reported journalism as part of its efforts illuminate news and trends in the field to promote a bipartisan dialogue. To submit pieces, please contact Bill Nichols at Nichols@TFreedmanconsulting.com.

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