

BELTLINE JOINS MARTA WISH LIST

By Julie B. Hairston & David Pendered

A proposed 22-mile loop of transit around Atlanta's intown neighborhoods acquired a pivotal new partner Monday when the MARTA board voted to add it to the authority's list of construction goals.

Without discussion or dissent, the MARTA board added an "inner core" transit project to its north, east and west line extensions. The vote allows a required second phase of study to map out the project's details.

At the same time, Atlanta City Council members began to debate their critical contribution to the proposed Beltline project, a special tax district that would help to pay for it. Some voiced serious concerns that developers would flock to the Beltline at the expense of blighted neighborhoods that the city has tried for years to stimulate, with limited success.

MARTA General Manager Nathaniel Ford said his staff is ready to launch the next step.

"This will allow us to get focused on a project that is getting the full support of Atlanta, Fulton and DeKalb residents," Ford said. "We'll be moving fast forward to complete the studies and get this project up and running."

Bryan Hager, director of Georgia Chapter of the Sierra Club, attended the meeting Monday. He said MARTA's official involvement, coupled with the city's proposed special tax district, will make the Beltline the region's showcase transit project. MARTA's long experience with federal funding will aid the \$2 billion-to-\$3 billion project's chances of winning in a highly competitive process for limited dollars in Washington, Hager said.

"Between MARTA and this [tax district], it will put the Beltline in the front of the line for [federal] funding of transportation projects in this region," Hager said.

MARTA's recently completed Inner Core Transit Study showed the loop could add as many as 90,000 boardings a day to its system.

But the Beltline being considered by the Atlanta City Council is more than transit. It also includes trails for cyclists and pedestrians, more than 1,400 acres in new and expanded parkland, and a projected \$20 billion in associated new development for the city.

Council members got their first formal look at the proposal Monday. Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin, who has said she supports the Beltline, is expected to announce her recommendation by mid-May.

For more than three hours, consultants and advocates pitched the creation of a tax allocation district to cover the Beltline and adjacent land. The district, if approved, would allow additional property taxes generated by new projects in the district to be used to buy land around the loop for parks, trails and transit.

Beltline advocates are hoping the district, which also must be considered by the Atlanta Board of Education and the Fulton County Commission, can be in place by the end of 2005.

Most questions came from council members who represent struggling neighborhoods, where residents fear they could lose redevelopment investments to the Beltline.

For example, construction is to start this summer on more than 200 residences and a retail center called the Historic Westside Village that Atlanta has nurtured for more than a decade. Councilman Ivory Young, who represents this area west of the Georgia Dome, said it is the type of development he fears would not happen if the city created a Beltline tax district.

"We don't want to go so far, so fast, on the Beltline that we lose some projects in areas that have been trying to get off the ground for decades," Young said. "I've never seen such a massive force of people in this city united around a concept like the Beltline. I just hope it isn't blind allegiance."

