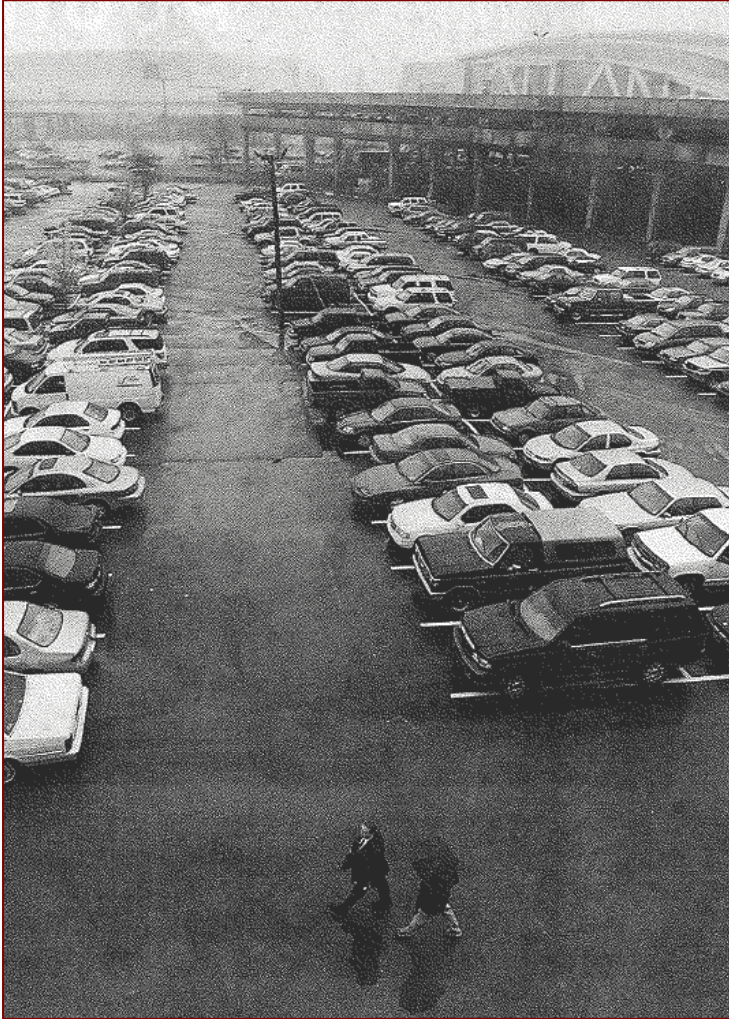


TERMINAL PLANNED FOR RAILROAD GULCH

Train depot would serve Lovejoy line

Paul Donsky - Staff
Sunday, November 27, 2005



DOWNTOWN ATLANTA'S RAILROAD GULCH is a ragtag collection of abandoned buildings, seedy parking lots and weedy patches.

But a major makeover is in the works that could turn the humble stretch between the Five Points MARTA station and Philips Arena into the centerpiece of a sprawling commuter rail and bus network --- a Southern version of New York City's Grand Central Station.

The state Department of Transportation plans to build a train and bus terminal in the gulch that may one day be teeming with passengers taking commuter trains to Griffin and Gainesville, hopping express buses to Cumming and Conyers, and riding intercity rail to Savannah and Augusta.

At least, that's the long-term possibility.

For now, the DOT has far more modest intentions of building an open-air station in the gulch, with a pair of tracks leading to and from a single destination: Clayton County in the south Atlanta suburbs.

Some details remain to be ironed out, but DOT officials are hopeful that the \$23 million terminal can be finished in about two years, with trains carrying passengers to Lovejoy in south Clayton. DOT officials estimate about 3,000 people will ride the trains each day by 2009.

"We're going to be witnessing 30 percent traffic growth, and population is going to increase by 2 million people"

by 2030, said David Spear, a DOT spokesman. "And our view is we need to look at every resource available to facilitate moving these people around the city."

The entire project --- including the downtown depot, track upgrades, double-decker train cars and park-and-ride stations along the route --- is expected to cost at least \$106 million, with the federal government covering 80 percent and the state the remaining 20 percent.

Headway made

Many hurdles have been cleared. Federal and state money is in hand. Clayton County recently agreed to help pay the commuter rail's operating costs, estimated at \$4 million a year. The DOT board, which has been divided over the Lovejoy line, signaled its support in September, voting 7-5 to back ongoing negotiations with Norfolk Southern, which owns the track.

Last month, the city of Atlanta agreed to give the DOT the old Atlanta Constitution office building in the gulch, which would be torn down to make way for the rail and bus terminal.

However, the Lovejoy line is not a done deal. The DOT board is expected to be asked to approve several Lovejoy-related contracts, giving the board's rail skeptics another chance to thwart the project.

And in a key sticking point, Norfolk Southern says it needs several million dollars in additional funds to make improvements on a segment of the line. The rail company has asked Congress for the money and says the Senate has included the funds in a spending bill that has yet to be voted on.

"We don't have extra money to put into it," said David Studstill, DOT's chief engineer. The project "really hinges on Norfolk Southern finding additional funds."

Commuter rail, long popular in the Northeast and Midwest, has never gotten a foothold in Atlanta.

The Lovejoy line would be the state's first and is sure to be closely watched by transit advocates, who see commuter rail as an enlightened way to address the region's traffic and air-quality woes, and by rail opponents, who view the project as a high-priced extravagance that won't begin to alleviate rush-hour jams.

Benita Dodd, vice president of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, said commuter rail is destined to fail because Atlanta doesn't have the density of housing or concentration of jobs to make it viable.

"It's a boondoggle," Dodd said. "We're not opposed to commuter rail, we're opposed to costly transit options that don't solve the problem of moving people from point A to point B. That's the bottom line."

Dodd said cheaper alternatives should be explored, such as van pools, telecommuting, new highway toll lanes and rapid transit bus lines that use coaches resembling train cars.

Rebecca Serna, president of Atlanta-based Citizens for Progressive Transit, said commuter rail is an important piece of the area's traffic puzzle.

"I see commuter rail in Georgia as something visionary --- we are finally planning ahead instead of just reacting," Serna said.

"We need to give people choices. We shouldn't expect everyone to want to drive to work every day."

Serna pointed out that the winning bid for a massive improvement at a single intersection, I-85 and Ga. 316 in Gwinnett County, was \$147 million --- far exceeding the cost of building the Lovejoy line and downtown station.

Pluses for Lovejoy line

Clayton may seem an odd destination for the region's first commuter rail line, given that Atlanta's biggest traffic problems are in the northern suburbs.

But several key advantages put the Lovejoy line on the fast track. First, freight lines were in place that could be converted with relative ease for passenger use. Most important, backers persuaded members of the local congressional delegation to secure federal dollars for the project.

The state DOT has been studying a second commuter rail line to Athens that would carry nearly three times as many passengers as the Lovejoy line.

The 72-mile Athens line could make stops at Emory University and across heavily populated Gwinnett County.

But first, the state must find funding for the project.

Talk of a passenger terminal in the gulch has been batted about since the early 1990s. State and local officials pushed for the creation of a so-called multimodal passenger terminal in the run-up to the 1996 Olympics, envisioning a station serving Amtrak trains, commuter rail and Greyhound buses, used by up to 1.3 million passengers a day.

But the terminal's huge price tag, estimated at as much as \$166 million including miles of new track and rail line upgrades, proved a formidable hurdle.

The big break came in the late 1990s, when Congress began allocating funding for a commuter rail line to Lovejoy using existing freight tracks.

No stranger to rail

Passenger rail is not new to Atlanta. Before the emergence of air travel and the creation of the interstate highway system, rail lines covered the state, with Atlanta as the hub.

Trains ran from Atlanta to major cities like Savannah, Macon, Augusta, Montgomery and Chattanooga, with stops at dozens of small towns along the way. Two major stations that sat at each end of the gulch were demolished in the early 1970s, including the beloved, elegant Terminal Station designed by the architect who built the Fox Theatre in Midtown.

The new gulch multimodal facility would be only a faint echo of Terminal Station. Plans call for a utilitarian two-story structure that would sit across Forsyth Street from the Five Points MARTA station, where the old Constitution building now stands. Hal Wilson, who administers DOT's transit programs, called it a "pavilion."

The station's bottom floor would lead to the train platforms at the bottom of the gulch and provide direct access to the MARTA station.

The top floor, level with elevated Forsyth Street, would have automated ticketing machines.

State DOT officials consider the Lovejoy line and the small gulch depot a pilot project, the first phase of a much larger effort.

The site includes room for expansion to handle additional commuter rail routes and intercity trains, though funding has been provided only for the Clayton line.

Long-range plans envision a sprawling complex taking over the entire gulch area, with new streets, retail shops, huge bays for commuter buses and intercity coaches, and a network of long-distance and commuter rail lines. That concept could be decades away, and, depending on funding, may never be realized.

The area is dominated by the former newspaper building, built in 1948 and now closed. The dark, graffiti-stained brick building has fallen into disrepair, with knocked-out windows and trees growing on the roof.

Preservationists have urged the DOT to save the building, calling it a prime example of modernist architecture. But DOT officials say it's not feasible to build the train platforms or offer direct access to the adjacent MARTA station without tearing down the building.

Clayton to cover cost gap

The Lovejoy line would have stations in Lovejoy, Jonesboro, Morrow and Forest Park, each with a park-and-ride lot and a small platform. Passengers would be able to transfer to MARTA at the East Point and Five Points stations. The DOT hopes eventually to extend the line to Macon.

The 26-mile trip from Lovejoy to downtown would take 46 minutes, compared with nearly an hour by car on the expressway, according to the DOT. One-way fares would be based on length of ride and would range from \$3.60 to \$5.60, with a 20 percent discount for monthly passes.

Fares are expected to cover up to 40 percent of the operating costs. The Clayton County Commission recently voted to cover the gap, projected to be \$4 million a year, after a three-year start-up period.

"I think it's a great idea," said Kim Barfield, 37, who has lived in Lovejoy for 15 years. "It might cut down on some of the traffic here and help create more jobs."

Folks worrying about the rail helping to further erode the area's small-town feel should get over it, she said.

"We've already moved away from the small-town feel," she said. "There's a whole lot of building going on here."

Staff writer Add Seymour contributed to this article.

TERMINAL TIMELINE

A short history of passenger rail in Atlanta.

- **1905: Terminal Station opens at west end of gulch, serving three rail companies.**
- **1930: Union Station opens at east end of gulch, serving four rail companies.**
- **1970: Terminal Station closes.**
- **Early 1970s: Union Station demolished.**
- **1979: The first MARTA rail service begins between the Avondale and Georgia State University stations.**
- **1991: Chamber of Commerce unveils plans for a "Grand Central Station" near the Five Points MARTA station.**
- **1993: General Assembly fails to fund the project. Former Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson pledges, "We're going to make it happen."**
- **1994: DOT releases drawings for a \$125 million terminal.**
- **1996: City buys Georgia Power building, the former Atlanta Constitution headquarters, for \$1.2 million for the station.**
- **1998: Congress includes \$21 million for the terminal in the federal Transportation Equity Act.**
- **1999: Norfolk Southern puts its buildings and property up for sale.**
- **2001: Gov. Roy Barnes' transportation plan includes \$446 million to start rail service between Atlanta and Macon and pay for the first phase of the downtown depot.**
- **2003: DOT asks Gov. Sonny Perdue to back pilot line to Lovejoy and scaled-back station.**
- **2005: Clayton County agrees to help pay operating costs for the Lovejoy line.**
- **2005: DOT board votes 7-5 to support negotiations with Norfolk Southern to run commuter rail on the company's tracks.**
- **2005: Atlanta City Council votes to hand over Georgia Power building to the DOT.**