

The Atlanta BeltLine will improve community health, but will it happen soon enough?

The Atlanta BeltLine is a visionary project of parks, trails, transit and urban redevelopment circling the city's core and connecting neighborhoods. It has the ability to reshape the city's urban fabric and provide much needed opportunities for recreation and active travel that can improve public health. But will it happen soon enough?

In summer 2007 Georgia Tech's Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development (CQGRD), with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and technical assistance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, released a report entitled the *Atlanta BeltLine Health Impact Assessment*. The HIA explored how changes in the built environment due to the BeltLine might affect the health of residents and visitors by examining such issues as access to parks and trails, housing, transit and pedestrian safety, and air quality.

After extensive data gathering and analysis, the research team concluded that the BeltLine would have a largely positive affect on the health of Atlantans by improving access to green space and healthy foods, creating opportunities for physical activity and increasing transportation options.

But one negative aspect shadows the project—time. Due to the funding mechanisms adopted to implement the BeltLine, some of the most health-promoting elements of the project will not be completed for decades. That means that much to today's generation will not benefit from this initiative. The study urges the City of Atlanta to continually seek alternative resources to allow elements of this project—especially parks and trails—to be realized sooner.

"The BeltLine is truly an inspiring project and the results of the HIA reinforce that view," said Catherine L. Ross, Ph.D., executive director of CQGRD and the principal investigator of the BeltLine HIA. "While the report contains numerous recommendations to improve health outcomes related to the BeltLine, the most important is speeding up its implementation," Ross said.

About HIAs

The BeltLine HIA is one of the first HIAs conducted in the United States, and evaluates one of the largest redevelopment projects (6,500 acres) in the nation. This and other HIAs are beginning to forge a renewed relationship between public health experts and planners. One hundred years ago cities were unhealthy places to live due to poor sanitation, bad housing conditions and lack of safety measures. At that time, city planners and engineers worked with public health officials to identify the root causes and find solutions, and they were successful. Today's new dialogue between health experts and planners focuses on creating places that promote healthy lifestyles and reduce chronic disease, with the HIA serving as a useful tool.

"A well-designed infrastructure can promote the health of residents of a community," said Andrew L. Dannenberg, MD, MPH, medical officer at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Environmental Health. "Health impact assessments provide a tool for city planners and public health officials to work together to identify the best ways to help community design support good health."

Priority Recommendations to Improve Health

The full report entitled the *Atlanta BeltLine Health Impact Assessment* provides extensive background information, literature review and detailed recommendations to enhance positive health impacts of the BeltLine and eliminate or reduce potential negative health outcomes (available at www.cqgrd.gatech.edu/PDFs/BLHIA_report2007.pdf). The research team has identified the following recommendations, taken from the larger report, as most critical to the success of the BeltLine.

❶ The BeltLine will promote good health. Not only should it go forward, but it should be fast tracked to realize the health benefits sooner.

The City of Atlanta, BeltLine, Inc. and others charged with making this vision a reality should be persistent in overcoming the obstacles to its implementation. Regardless of the 25-year timeframe set by the Tax Allocation District funding mechanism, Atlanta should continue to seek additional resources to pursue BeltLine improvements immediately so that today's population can experience the positive impacts of investments in parks, trails, transit and the fabric of the city.

Primary Partners: Atlanta City Council and Beltline, Inc.

❷ Integrate the promotion of good health throughout the BeltLine decision making, design and implementation phases by:

- **Appointing public health professionals, such as officials from the public health department, to the boards of BeltLine, Inc. and the BeltLine Partnership.**
Representation of the public health profession on key decision making boards can ensure that health concerns are considered throughout the project phases. They can also bring resources in the form of expertise, data and collaboration opportunities to meld BeltLine health promotion efforts with other initiatives already underway in the city and region.
Primary Partners: BeltLine, Inc.; BeltLine Partnership; Fulton County Department of Health and Wellness
- **Making health protection and promotion an explicit goal in BeltLine funding decisions and implementation priorities.** As a multi-faceted project, the BeltLine is composed of numerous discrete projects—including several neighborhood and regional parks, segments of trails, corridor improvements and other local infrastructure investments. The order in which the individual projects are implemented should take into account health impacts. Entities like the BeltLine Tax Allocation District Advisory Board and other BeltLine committees should be provided tools and information to consider potential health impacts when recommending project priorities.
Primary Partners: City of Atlanta City Council; BeltLine, Inc.; BeltLine Advisory Committees, Boards and Study Groups

- **Enhancing the development review process to explicitly include health considerations, especially those related to physical activity, social capital and safety.** The review should promote incremental improvements to the urban fabric through individual development, focusing on broad access to recreational and transit amenities and connectivity for pedestrians, bicyclists, transit users and drivers within the corridor and beyond to ensure the largest number of people can benefit from the BeltLine.
Primary Partners: City of Atlanta Planning Bureau, Atlanta City Council (to the extent that this enhancement needs to be codified)
- **Establishing shared, health-promoting performance measures (e.g. Active Living Goals) across city departments.** To ensure that the components of the BeltLine complement each other many city departments—including planning, public works, watershed management, parks and recreation, and others—will need to work together. To enable the departments to effectively collaborate to achieve the BeltLine vision, establish shared health-promoting performance measures.
Primary Partners: City of Atlanta Mayor; City of Atlanta Departments and Bureaus

③ Ensure affordable and healthy housing is provided throughout the BeltLine and establish programs and partnerships to address residential displacement.

Healthy housing refers to a housing unit that is in good condition, safe, and free from pollutants and excesses in noise, temperature, and humidity. It is also situated in a neighborhood that is safe, provides access to goods and services, and promotes active living through good design. As areas in and around the BeltLine change, the provision of affordable housing will become increasingly important. While the BeltLine TAD has dedicated funding to affordable housing, its provision and location should be monitored to ensure healthy outcomes.

Primary Partners: Atlanta City Council; City of Atlanta Bureau of Housing; BeltLine, Inc.; Atlanta Housing Authority; Atlanta Neighborhood Development Partnership; Southface; Department of Community Affairs; Progressive Redevelopment, Inc. and other affordable housing providers

④ Add more park acres and create better connected and more accessible parks, especially in the southwest planning area.

The BeltLine makes significant progress in providing park acres in Atlanta, but it will not be enough to support anticipated population growth. The City should maintain its commitment to 10 acres per 1,000 residents; therefore, planning for additional park acres in and around the BeltLine, as well as improved access to existing parks is necessary. This is especially important in the Southwest planning area, which will be relatively underserved by park acres compared to the other planning areas. Using population numbers from the 2000 Census, the Southwest will have 7.5 acres/1,000 people, compared to Northeast's 10.7 acres/1,000 people. The Southwest planning area has the largest minority population, as well as the largest number of children under age 18 and adults 65 and older, who often have the greatest restrictions in mobility, therefore nearby parks are of critical importance.

Primary Partners: Atlanta City Council; BeltLine, Inc.; City of Atlanta Parks and Recreation; City of Atlanta Watershed Department; PATH Foundation; local park conservancies

5 Develop an integrated transit system connecting the BeltLine to other metro transit services to make it an effective part of a regional transit system.

As new public transit services are implemented, establish a coordinated fare and schedule system that ensures that existing and new services work together to make transit a convenient, efficient and attractive travel option. Studies show that people who use public transportation are more likely to achieve the recommended levels of daily physical activity; therefore, making transit more convenient can improve health.

Primary Partners: City of Atlanta City Council; BeltLine, Inc.; MARTA and other regional transit providers; Georgia Regional Transportation Authority; Georgia Department of Transportation

6 Create linkages between the BeltLine and existing civic spaces, like schools, parks, libraries, hospitals and other public buildings.

Programs like Safe Routes to Schools, which has dedicated funding to create infrastructure, policies and educations to promote walking and biking to school, can help weave the BeltLine to the existing urban fabric. An integrated and well-connected urban environment has been shown to increase levels of physical activity. Such links may include transportation infrastructure, wayfinding signage, maps, streetscape improvements, and transit routes.

Primary Partners: BeltLine, Inc.; City of Atlanta Planning Department; Atlanta Public Schools; MARTA; other Atlanta civic and anchor institutions

7 Make health a component of BeltLine public education and outreach.

Implement educational interventions both onsite, in parks and along trails, and in the broader Atlanta community to encourage physical activity and a healthy lifestyle. Banners with health promotion messages, print and online information about opportunities and the importance of physical activity, and consistent messages about the how BeltLine can promote health are important to ensure that residents are aware of such opportunities. Such efforts could be extended to all of the City of Atlanta.

Primary Partners: BeltLine Partnership; City of Atlanta Parks and Recreation Department; Fulton County Department of Health and Wellbeing; DeKalb County Board of Health

8 Conduct ongoing evaluation of levels of physical activity attributed to the BeltLine.

The BeltLine can serve as a national model of how the built environment and local policies can improve public health. Travel data and data on users of parks, trails and transit, including participation in related physical activity, should be collected before and after the implementation of the Beltline in order to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of infrastructure investment and to further the field of environmental determinants of physical activity.

Primary Partners: BeltLine, Inc. and/or City of Atlanta in partnership with various area academic and research institutions

THE COMPLETE BELTLINE HIA REPORT, including specific health impacts and detailed recommendations, is available at www.cqgrd.gatech.edu/PDFs/BLHIA_report2007.pdf.