



PROPERTY LINES

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Atlanta's Beltline, a transformative urban redevelopment, struggles with affordability

Can the city's revolutionary rails-to-trails project work for everyone?

BY **PATRICK SISSON** | OCT 3, 2017, 1:38PM EDT



A couple walks along the Atlanta BeltLine as the midtown skyline stands in the background in Atlanta in 2012. The Atlanta BeltLine is an urban redevelopment project that aims to turn an old 22-mile railroad corridor that rings the city's in-town neighborhoods into a network of trails, parks, affordable housing and, eventually, transit. | AP Photo/David Goldman

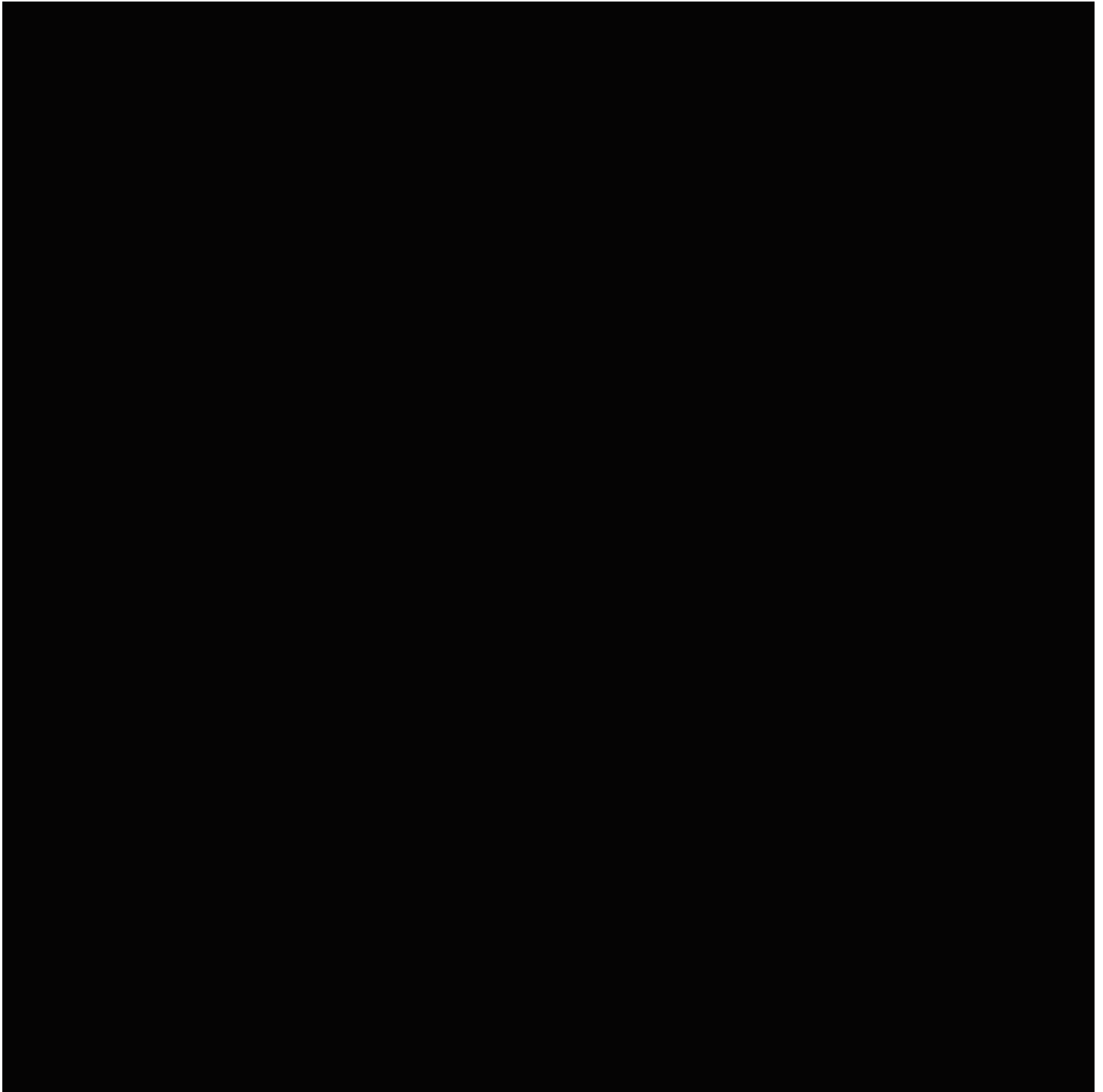
In an era of [High Line-style park projects](#) and urban development, [Atlanta's Beltline](#) stands out as perhaps one of the biggest urban regeneration experiments of them all.

A [far-reaching plan](#) to transform 22 miles of unused railway into a ring of parks, paths, [public art](#), and urban greenways that knit together the fast-growing Atlanta metro region by 2030, the new greenway has already shown incredible impact on both investment and development, as well as the city's collective imagination.

Even opponents of some aspects of the far-reaching plan admit that it's been an engine for economic growth. But within that success lie the twin specters of decreased affordability and displacement, which have made the Beltline an important case study for not just the region, but the nation.

As the project expands—last Friday, the long-awaited [\\$43 million Westside Trail](#) portion officially opened, running through traditionally African-American neighborhoods that have long been underinvested and underappreciated—the adaptive reuse concept is running headlong into issues that have plagued other, similar projects, like [New York's High Line](#) and [Chicago's 606](#), and a wave of urban redevelopment across the country. How can we develop an equitable city for everyone, and both draw development while preserving and even expanding affordability?

“If Atlanta can figure out a way to assertively reduce the [wealth divide](#), it could become a model for the nation and the world,” says Michael Dobbins, the city's former planning commissioner and a professor at Georgia Tech's College of Architecture and City and Regional Planning. “But it hasn't yet.”



A couple rides bikes along the Beltline. | Shutterstock

That vision has been core to the Beltline experiment since its inception. A scheme conceived by urban planner [Ryan Gravel](#)—who nearly two decades ago, as a master's student at Georgia Tech, proposed the rails-to-trails project as his thesis—the Beltline came to fruition via a grassroots community campaign.

But now, as the project is realized under the aegis of the private, city-created vehicle Beltline Inc., which formed in 2006, it has been dogged by doubts that it will ever reach its goals of creating

both expansive and equitable development, especially for newly desirable Intown neighborhoods.

While community leaders and activists have advocated for fair housing guarantees and promises ever since the Beltline began taking shape, a [blockbuster report](#) this July by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* laid bare just how far the initiative was from meeting its own benchmarks for affordability. Halfway to completion, the Beltline has only delivered 785 affordable units, a fraction of the 5,600 affordable homes and apartments it's required to deliver, according to a law passed by the City Council.

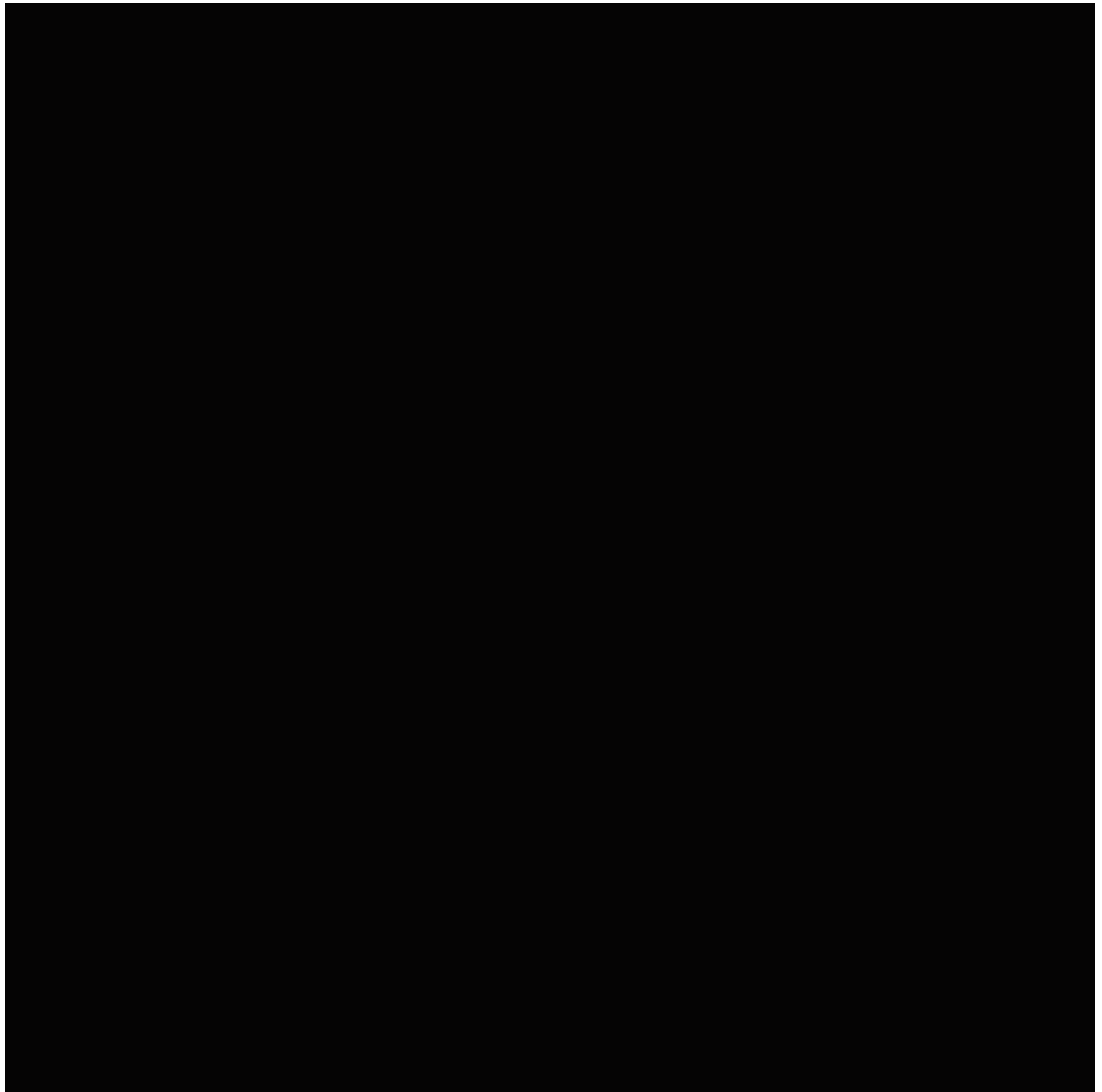
The news came after a [Georgia Tech study](#) by researchers Tharunya Balan and Dan Immergluck found that “from 2011 to 2015, depending on the segment of the Beltline, values rose between 17.9 percent and 26.6 percent more for homes within a half-mile of the BeltLine than elsewhere.” The realization of just how far behind planners and developers have fallen, and how a newly stoked market may make catching up even more difficult, led to the Beltline's then-CEO, Paul Morris, [resigning in August](#); [project creator Gravel](#) had already stepped down the previous September, citing a desire to push affordability issues from outside the organization.

“There's not one thing we need to do around affordability, there are 30 things that we need to do,” Gravel told Curbed. “The problem is not that we don't know what to do. It's that we need the political will to do it.”

But right now may be the perfect time to summon that political will. Gravel, still confident the Beltline can succeed in being inclusive and equitable, believes the project has brought attention to important issues of equality, and with the city voting for a new mayor on Tuesday, November 7, [the issue of affordability](#) has become a focus of the campaign trail.

New Beltline CEO Brian McGowan—who gives the project a “C” grade for affordability—[told CityLab](#) that, “We have this kind of laboratory along the Beltline where we can try new things and if they work, we can apply those lessons in other parts of our own city.” Can the Beltline succeed in a way that it, and other big-ticket urban-redevelopment schemes, has failed to in the past?

“This is not just an issue that affects the Beltline,” says Mark Pendergrast, a local author and journalist who wrote a book, [City on the Verge](#), about Atlanta's future. “It's a good sort of stand-in for the rest of the city and the rest of the issues that it faces. Atlanta rather notoriously does piecemeal solutions in response to dramatic issues. It's the poster child for bad planning, terrible public transit, racial issues impinging on almost every decision that's made, and gridlock and sprawl. I think the Beltline will offer exemplary examples of solutions, if they can prevent driving out the people that it's supposed to help.”



Motion blur of people walking with lanterns at night along the Beltline in the annual Atlanta Lantern Parade in the Old Fourth Ward, on September 10, 2016. | Shutterstock

Making it work on the Westside

While the Beltline has already struggled to deliver affordable housing, its biggest challenge may be yet to come in the Westside. A traditional African-American center of Atlanta—Martin Luther King Jr.'s adult home is in Vine City—its low rents and relatively low rate of homeownership make it both an attractive place for development with the coming of the Beltline, as well as a neighborhood and population in danger of displacement. Or, as one critic is quoted as saying in

City on the Verge, “Atlanta’s new ‘emerald necklace’ will seem more like a noose to [poor black] city residents.”

According to Pamela Flores, CEO of Help Organization Incorporated, a local community group that formed a [Westside Area Land Trust](#) (WALT) to combat rising prices and development, there’s a lot of fear over what may come to the neighborhood due to new development and Beltline expansion.

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So far, the Beltline has “been a boon to people who ride bikes through vibrant, gentrifying neighborhoods to 21st-century jobs,” as Dobbins wrote in a [letter](#) to the *New York Times*, but still needs to guarantee basic needs such as “access, jobs, decent housing, and improved infrastructure”—do residents need a recreational trail, or better mass transit to job centers downtown?

Immergluck found that real estate prices were rising in these areas as early as 2007, in response to future speculation, and told Curbed that due to the lower price point of much of the real estate in this area, “we might expect the percentage increases to be even larger” than the 20-30 percent he’s seen in other neighborhoods. With the opening of the new [Falcons stadium](#) on the Westside putting additional pressure on area rents, it’s no surprise the region is feeling upward pressure.

So far, the affordability challenge is being addressed from many sides, with a new set of tools and proposals. Some traditional solutions used in other metro areas aren’t possible, including rent control, which is illegal in Georgia. Many [plans and proposals](#) have focused on inclusionary zoning and setting aside affordable housing allowances for developers working on projects in these areas.

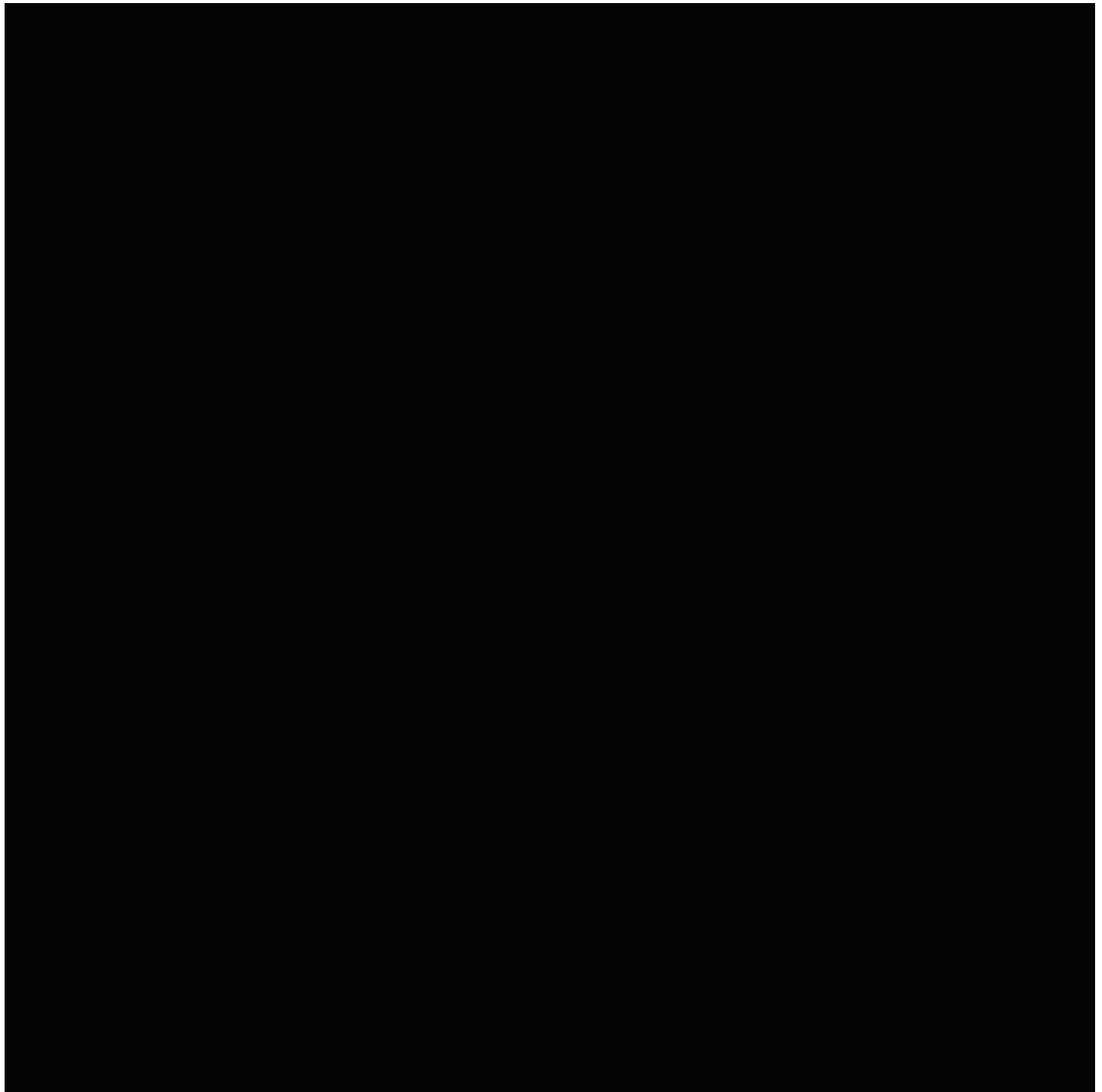
The [Atlanta Housing Authority](#) is transforming the Herndon Homes site into a mixed-income development, revitalizing University Homes and building a new affordable personal-care facility, Oasis at Scholars Landing. Atlanta Beltline Inc. says it had invested \$12.5 million in acquiring land for affordable housing by the end of 2016, offering incentives to developers to set aside affordable units and providing local down-payment assistance. And in 2015, the city council passed an ordinance requiring developers receiving public funds to set aside 15 percent of their units for affordable housing.

Why affordability is so hard

The Beltline isn't the first such transformative park project to wrestle with issues of affordability and displacement. New York's [High Line](#) has faced similar complaints since the first section of the Manhattan rails-to-trails project opened in 2009, and organizers admit more could have been done to [promote affordable housing](#) along its route. In Chicago, the 606, another rail conversion park project, impacted real estate prices along its route through the city's near northwest side, but saw the most dramatic spikes in the far west Humboldt Park and Logan Square neighborhoods, which shot up 48.2 percent since construction started in 2013, according to a report issued last year by [the Institute of Housing Studies at DePaul University](#). The Beltline has produced similar spikes: the eastside Old Fourth Ward neighborhood saw a [59 percent rent increase over 12 years](#).

"One of the things that we've seen is the economic benefits of these kind of projects are quantifiable," says Adam Ganser, VP for planning and design for the Friends of the High Line, and part of the [High Line Network](#), a group seeking to create best practices and guidelines for equitable development for similar adaptive reuse projects. "Those benefits can be leveraged for benefits both social and environmental; many of these projects include affordable housing. But those considerations need to be part of the plan early in the process to capture that value."

Ganser says that these projects are relatively new, having only popped up in the last 10 to 15 years, so there isn't a huge history here. But developers and planners are sharing ideas and beginning to learn. He points to the forthcoming [11th Street Bridge Project](#) in Washington, D.C., as a model to watch, due to its comprehensive [equitable development plan](#), including millions of dollars set aside to support affordable housing. While it's yet to be implemented, the plan, according to Ganser and others, shows how, when done well, these kinds of projects can "create a better blueprint" for developing cities.



An analysis of how the Westside Future Fund's Anti-Displacement Tax Fund will impact neighborhood housing. | Georgia Tech's Data Science for Social Good Housing Justice Team.

To help speed up the pace at which affordable housing is built in the Westside, and to protect existing owners, the [Westside Future Fund](#) was created to focus on encouraging ownership in four historic neighborhoods: English Avenue, Vine City, the Atlanta University Center, and Ashview Heights, which has the Beltline running along its western border. A philanthropic exercise—which, according to CEO John Ahmann, allows for extended investment without taking away money from the city budgets—its goal is to both build and protect the community. These four neighborhoods had a population of roughly 50,000 in 1960. Today, the population hovers

around 15,000. With an 8 percent homeownership rate and rents as low as \$400 to \$500 a month on some streets, it's an area at threat of displacement.

“There's a bigger trend of people moving back into the urban core, and the Beltline has been an amenity driving that,” says Ahmann. “The laws of supply and demand take effect, and there just isn't enough high-quality affordable housing in the city.”

To combat speculation and preserve affordability, the Fund has two main focuses. The first is protecting homeownership, which it aims to do with the Anti-Displacement Tax Fund. Qualifying homes, owned by residents making the area median income or below, can sign up to effectively freeze their income taxes. As area real estate values and appraisals go up, the Fund will pay the difference, allowing owners (and even their heirs, if they meet income requirements) to hold on to family homes. Ahmann hopes to sign up more and more of the roughly 600 homeowners in the area. For renters, the bulk of the residents in these areas, the Westside Future Fund hopes to buy up property to create affordable housing, a long-term project Ahmann has described as [“a big lift.”](#)

“How can we create an ecosystem to address that poverty? How do you create a true mixed-income community?” says Ahmann. “It's a long-term play. If all the poorer people were pushed out of this area, I don't think M.L.K. Jr. would give us a thumb's up.”

How Adaptive Reuse Impacts Rent

Location : New York, NY
Median Rent (Aug. 2017) : \$2,493
Rent Growth: Jan. 2014 - Aug. 2017 : 5.9%
Rent Growth: 2011-2014 : 9.7%
Location : 10001, NY
Median Rent (Aug. 2017) : \$3,429
Rent Growth: Jan. 2014 - Aug. 2017 : 9.1%
Rent Growth: 2011-2014 : 12.1%
Location : 10011, NY
Median Rent (Aug. 2017) : \$3,275

Rent Growth: Jan. 2014 - Aug. 2017 : 5.9%
Rent Growth: 2011-2014 : 5.0%
Location : 10014, NY
Median Rent (Aug. 2017) : \$4,030
Rent Growth: Jan. 2014 - Aug. 2017 : 7.3%
Rent Growth: 2011-2014 : 8.9%
Location :
Median Rent (Aug. 2017) :
Rent Growth: Jan. 2014 - Aug. 2017 :
Rent Growth: 2011-2014 :
Location : Atlanta, GA
Median Rent (Aug. 2017) : \$1,169
Rent Growth: Jan. 2014 - Aug. 2017 : 19.2%
Rent Growth: 2011-2014 : 6.5%
Location : 30310, GA
Median Rent (Aug. 2017) : \$983
Rent Growth: Jan. 2014 - Aug. 2017 : 12.1%
Rent Growth: 2011-2014 : 0.8%
Location : 30311, GA
Median Rent (Aug. 2017) : \$810
Rent Growth: Jan. 2014 - Aug. 2017 : -0.3%
Rent Growth: 2011-2014 : 5.6%
Location : 30314, GA
Median Rent (Aug. 2017) : \$804
Rent Growth: Jan. 2014 - Aug. 2017 : 0.6%
Rent Growth: 2011-2014 : 5.5%
Location :
Median Rent (Aug. 2017) :
Rent Growth: Jan. 2014 - Aug. 2017 :
Rent Growth: 2011-2014 :

Location : Chicago, IL
Median Rent (Aug. 2017) : \$1,291
Rent Growth: Jan. 2014 - Aug. 2017 : 10.8%
Rent Growth: 2011-2014 : 5.1%
Location : 60622, IL
Median Rent (Aug. 2017) : \$1,480
Rent Growth: Jan. 2014 - Aug. 2017 : 11.0%
Rent Growth: 2011-2014 : 6.6%
Location : 60647, IL
Median Rent (Aug. 2017) : \$1,320
Rent Growth: Jan. 2014 - Aug. 2017 : 13.8%
Rent Growth: 2011-2014 : 6.8%
Location :
Median Rent (Aug. 2017) :
Rent Growth: Jan. 2014 - Aug. 2017 :
Rent Growth: 2011-2014 :

Apartment List

What's next for the Beltline

Much of what comes next depends on the city's mayoral election, community feedback, and the collective political will mentioned by Gravel. As the race for mayor heats up, "most of the candidates have been speaking a good deal about affordable housing," says Immergluck, who adds that he's not sure how much political capital will be devoted to these issues after the election. He proposes various measures to speed up construction of affordable units, including floating a \$250 million bond to build more units (the current \$40 million city bond will only create 800 units, at a time when the city is losing 1,000 a year from natural attrition).

Atlanta's current mayor, Kasim Reed (who has served two terms and can't be re-elected), just announced the broad strokes of a plan for a \$100 million fund to buy real estate near Mercedes-Benz Stadium to preserve affordable housing, but details are scarce. Some local politicians, like Councilmember Andre Dickens, whom Immergluck says has "been a leader on this issue," has been pushing solutions like mandatory inclusive zoning along the 22-mile Beltline path (he

promoted the earlier measure approved by the city council), but Immergluck says the city needs a mayor who's equally committed.

Flores would like to see more community land trusts, like WALT, which give power to local residents, receive support from the city. She believes that her group is being “strategically avoided and ignored” by leaders like Ahmann, despite bringing “the biggest piece of the puzzle” of affordability to the table. (Ahmann says that “we have received a proposal from WALT and we are currently evaluating it. Land trusts are an important tool to maintain long-term affordability that we hope to utilize.”)

To make a real dent in the problem, Immergluck says, the city needs a formal social contract with developers in the form of a mandatory inclusionary housing policy, which will involve having them set aside significant portions of their rental units for lower-income tenants in exchange for access to compensating benefits from the city.

“The southwest and west sides, even though their values have been rising fast, are still two areas near the Beltline where acquisition prices are relatively more affordable,” Immergluck says. “If the city and the Beltline move quickly, there’s still time to acquire property at a reasonable price.”

Quickly may be the key. As the Beltline and other developments add fuel to the real estate market, money earmarked to buy and build affordable units will have less and less purchasing power. To meet the project’s vision appears to require a more extensive housing plan.

“The problem is rising taxes and rents,” says Gravel. “But you don’t hold the city down to control the rent. While I can get protective over the subject of affordability, I’m glad it’s taking on this kind of pressure, since it’s an urgent need for the city. It’s dialogue that’s good for us. And it’s the only way we’ll be able to live up to the city’s promise.”

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