



Georgia's Transportation Crossroads

Why the Peach State Should Invest in
Public Transit for the 21st Century

Georgia PIRG
Education Fund



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Phineas Baxandall, Ph.D., U.S. PIRG Education Fund
Sarah Payne and Elizabeth Ridlington, Frontier Group

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Executive Summary

Georgia is in a transportation crisis. Roadway congestion wastes time and energy, tailpipe pollution causes health and environmental problems, and our oil dependence only grows.

Expanding public transportation can provide more Georgians with alternatives to driving, while addressing these problems and laying the foundation for an efficient transportation system for the 21st century.

Public transportation already helps hundreds of thousands of Georgians get where they need to go. Beyond saving consumers time and money, transit systems take cars off the road, cut air pollution, provide a dependable way to get around or help in a pinch, and jump-start economic growth.

But Georgia's transit systems, despite their importance, are disjointed, underfunded, and fall far short of their potential. Scores of good transit projects are waiting in the wings, while the problems affecting our transportation system only multiply.

Georgia must adopt a new course and develop a vision for transit in the 21st century that will fix the state's historical shortchanging of transit. By funding

and executing key public transportation projects, such as those identified by the Concept 3 and Connect Atlanta plans, we can drive growth and foster healthier communities statewide. In a time of increasingly limited public funds, Georgia must spend its transportation dollars where they have the most impact. For that reason, the state must reshape its transportation planning and funding priorities to address its decades-long underinvestment in transit.

Georgia's car-centered transportation system is leading us to drive more, use more gas, spend more on fuel, lose more time stuck in traffic, and create more global warming pollution than a decade ago.

- Georgia residents drove roughly 109 billion miles in 2008, more than 50 percent more miles than they drove in 1990.
- By 2007, drivers in the state were consuming 19 percent more fuel annually than they did in 1997. The price of gasoline jumped 91 percent

over the same period, causing Georgians to increase the money they spent on gasoline by more than \$6 billion.

- Atlanta drivers lost 135 million hours to traffic congestion in 2007, a 49 percent increase from 1997. The wasted time and fuel cost Atlanta \$3 billion in 2007.
- Georgia's transportation network increased its carbon dioxide pollution by more than 37 percent between 1990 and 2007.

Despite many shortcomings, public transit in Georgia is already paying dividends by saving money, reducing congestion, and cutting global warming pollution.

- In the Atlanta region alone, public transit saved 88 million gallons of oil in 2006, translating to consumer savings of \$230 million at the pump.
- In 2007, public transportation prevented more than 10.5 million hours of traffic delay in Atlanta and saved the area economy more than \$225 million in wasted time and productivity.
- In 2006, Georgia's public transit systems together avoided 670,000 metric tons of global warming pollution. This is the equivalent of removing more than 130,000 cars from the road.
- More Georgians are taking advantage of these benefits. Nearly 9 percent more passengers rode Atlanta's MARTA system in 2008 than in 2007.

Georgia needs to rethink its transportation system for the future and invest in efficient and clean public transportation. There are many

worthwhile transit projects that can meet transportation needs in the state.

A 21st century transportation system for Georgia should include *(not in order of priority):*

- **Better Transit in Metro Atlanta**
 - **Commuter rail service to Athens, Bremen and Macon:** Commuter rail service between Atlanta and Macon would connect two growing regional hubs. A Bremen/Douglasville line would expand access to rapidly developing suburbs, and the "Brain Train" from Atlanta to Athens would link an increasingly busy bioscience corridor and thousands of university students and professors with downtown Atlanta – as well as with each other.
 - **Light rail service along the Atlanta BeltLine:** Ringing the city with a belt of light rail would draw together neighborhoods on Atlanta's perimeter, focus future development, make transit a viable alternative for trips along the BeltLine by eliminating the need to first travel into downtown, and serve as the backbone for a robust transit system in the future.
 - **Improve local transit service and provide better transit connections:** Expanding the MARTA system, building new light rail lines and increasing bus rapid transit service can fill gaps in the local transit network while improving connections between transit services, making it easier for passengers to reach a wide range of destinations in the metro Atlanta area.

- **Build a streetcar along Peachtree Street:** Clean, electric streetcars can help revitalize downtown districts. On Peachtree Street, a streetcar can help renew the downtown and address growing residential and commercial demand for efficient local transportation, while also bolstering Peachtree’s reputation as Atlanta’s most notable destination street.
 - ***Transit Between and Within Other Cities***
 - **Improve transit in smaller cities:** Improved transit in smaller cities and suburbs, using a variety of transit systems such as light rail, bus rapid transit, and express bus services, would give residents local transit options beyond the automobile.
 - **Expand intercity passenger rail service:** Regional passenger rail service can connect people and activity centers around the state, linking cities such as Albany, Dalton, Savannah and Valdosta with Macon and Atlanta.
 - ***High-speed Rail***
 - **Build a high-speed “bullet train” network for the Southeast:** High-speed rail along federally-designated corridors would connect cities like Atlanta, Macon and Savannah with each other and with out-of-state points like Birmingham, Chattanooga, Charlotte, and Greenville, while providing a rapid alternative to travel through congested highways and airports.
- To address our transportation crisis, Georgia needs bold vision and a smart plan. The state should:**
- *Lay out a clear and compelling vision for transit in the 21st century.* With a strong vision and commitment to invest in transit as the sensible way forward, Georgia can build an integrated public transportation network to meet transportation needs and solve problems for residents in cities and towns around the state.
 - *Provide stable funding to make the vision a reality.* Georgia uses state budget funds to pay for highway and road projects, but is one of the only states in the country that leaves counties to raise the capital for transit. As a result, transit in Georgia has been underfunded for decades. A bold new vision for transit in Georgia must be paired with dedicated, adequate and sustained funding from regional as well as state-level sources.
 - *Urge Congress to enact a new federal transportation funding law.* The new law should prioritize investing new capital in public transit, fixing existing roads and bridges rather than building more highways, and spending taxpayers’ money more wisely by using federal dollars to invest in high-priority transportation solutions.
 - *Reform state allocation of federal transportation dollars.* Georgia should focus federal money on a statewide list of priority transportation projects, rather than dividing up the majority of the funds among the state’s congressional districts.
 - *Coordinate with other Southeast states to develop better public transportation infrastructure throughout the region.* Collaborating with both local and state decision-makers on a regional high-speed rail system would be an excellent start.

Introduction

Georgia's prosperity owes a great deal to the investments we have made in our transportation network.

In 1836, Colonel Stephen Harriman Long drove a stake into the ground to mark the terminal site of the Western and Atlantic Railroad for the State of Georgia. The city that became Atlanta started around that stake, which Long placed near what is today the Five Points area of downtown. Businesses began to develop outward from the railroad's Union Depot, and continued to do so as increased rail traffic moved a growing volume of people and goods through the city center.

Within 50 years of the city's founding, 10 major railway lines passed through Atlanta.¹ Its status as a railroad hub enabled Atlanta to quickly surpass older cities such as Charleston and New Orleans to become the South's preeminent city.

Later on, Georgia, like much of the rest of the nation, staked its future on the car as the transportation mode of the 20th century. Since World War II, Georgia has built an impressive network of highways that have opened new opportunities for business, housing and recreation throughout the state – enriching individual lives

and helping to fuel our prosperity.

Today, however, Georgia's automobile-centered transportation system is showing signs of strain. Georgia's population continues to boom, while sprawling development patterns are leading residents to spend more time and money getting around by car than they did 10 years ago. Instead of enjoying a reputation as the South's capital of business, learning and culture, Georgia is increasingly known across the country and around the world for out-of-control sprawl, marathon commutes, pollution and gridlock. Where once Georgia's transportation network fueled our success, it now threatens to limit growth.

The question now facing Georgia is how to build a transportation network that meets the needs of the 21st century. Across the country, cities like Atlanta that have grown up around the automobile—fast-growing cities such as Charlotte, Denver, Dallas and Salt Lake City—are coming to recognize that the answer lies in investing in clean, modern public transportation.

High-speed intercity trains, commuter rail and subway lines, light rail and bus rapid transit systems—all of these forms

of public transportation have the advantage of moving large numbers of people quickly and efficiently while reducing our dependence on oil and fostering the kind of compact, walkable development that is increasingly in demand—and on which the future growth of Georgia’s urban areas must depend.

Cities that have embraced 21st century public transit have had to overcome longstanding biases against public transportation as well as real hurdles in obtaining necessary funding, particularly during times of economic trouble. So too must Georgia. Our state’s transportation funding system strongly and unduly favors highways over public transportation, leaving worthwhile transit projects sitting on the drawing board for years, and sometimes decades.

Now more than ever, when transportation funds are increasingly limited, it is time for Georgians to commit to building a balanced, modern transportation system that can sustain our economy and protect our environment over the long haul. This report outlines projects and a plan to help make this vision of 21st century transit a reality.

Over the past two centuries, Georgia has consistently encouraged state-of-the-art investments in transportation to spark our economy and improve our quality of life. The choices we face today are no different. To maintain Atlanta’s status as a world-class city, keep our economy competitive, accommodate future growth, ease congestion and protect our environment, Georgia must invest in a bold new vision for public transportation. Now is the time to act.

The Case for More and Better Public Transportation in Georgia

Over the past two decades, Georgia residents have driven more miles, cementing our dependence on oil and causing household expenditures on gasoline to rise. Traffic congestion has gotten worse, costing the Peach State millions of dollars in lost productivity and wasted fuel. Most Georgians continue to lack

alternatives to driving – in fact, investment in transit and levels of service have actually declined in many parts of the state. But while Georgia’s transit systems struggle to provide even basic levels of service, bus and rail service continues to provide significant economic and environmental benefits to the state.



Heavy traffic wastes Georgians’ time and money, pollutes our air, and increases our oil dependence.
Photo credit: Drouu, under license from sxc.hu

While Georgia faces massive transportation challenges, improving public transit can help the state address these issues and should be a top priority for public officials today and in the years ahead.

Travel Trends: More Driving and Higher Transportation Costs

Georgians drive far more than they did just a decade ago, both in terms of total miles and miles per person, leading to higher gasoline consumption and expenditures and increased congestion in the long term.

Total miles driven in Georgia reached approximately 109 billion miles in 2008, a 55 percent increase over 1990.² While most of this increase can be attributed to a 49 percent increase in population, part of the change also results from a 4 percent

increase in the number of miles driven per person.³

This trend has changed in recent years. Rising gas prices and the economic downturn have reduced how far individual Georgians drive each year. Annual driving per person peaked at 12,800 miles in 2001 and has since declined to 11,245. However, Georgians are, on the whole, driving far more than they were even a decade ago. (See Figure 1.)

Increasing vehicle travel has taken a toll on Georgians' pocketbooks. From 1997 to 2007, the amount of gasoline used by drivers in Georgia increased by 19 percent, due to the fact that state residents drove more miles and increasingly relied on less fuel-efficient SUVs and trucks rather than cars.⁶ (See Figure 2) At the same time, the price of gasoline rose by 91 percent.⁷ The result is that Georgians spent \$12.5 billion on gasoline in 2007, more than double the amount they spent (in inflation-adjusted terms) in 1997.⁸ In 2007, the average Georgian spent \$1,290 on gasoline.⁹

Figure 1. Total Miles Driven in Georgia Annually⁵

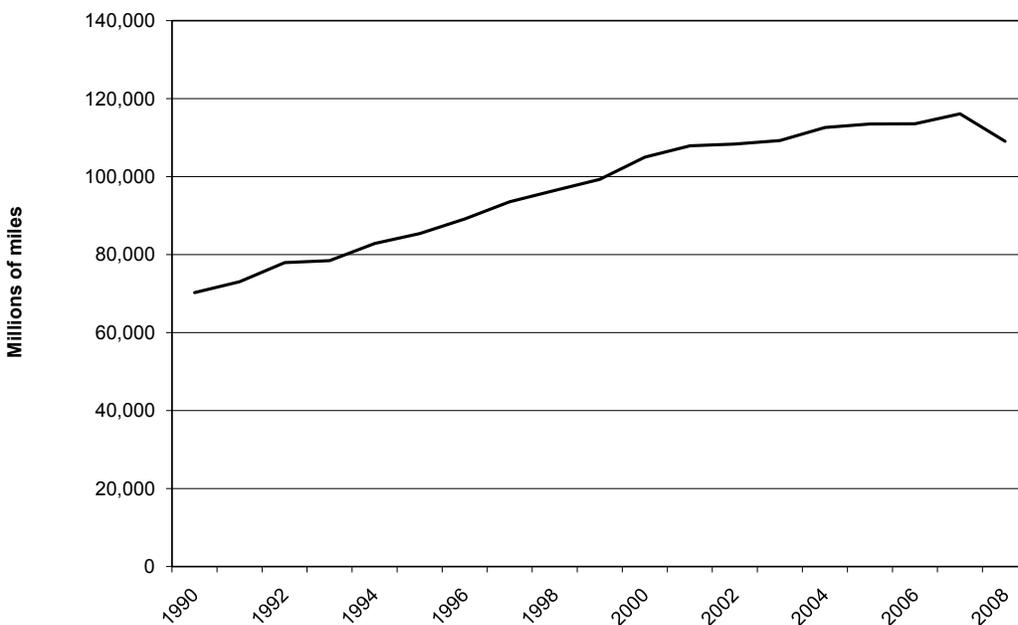
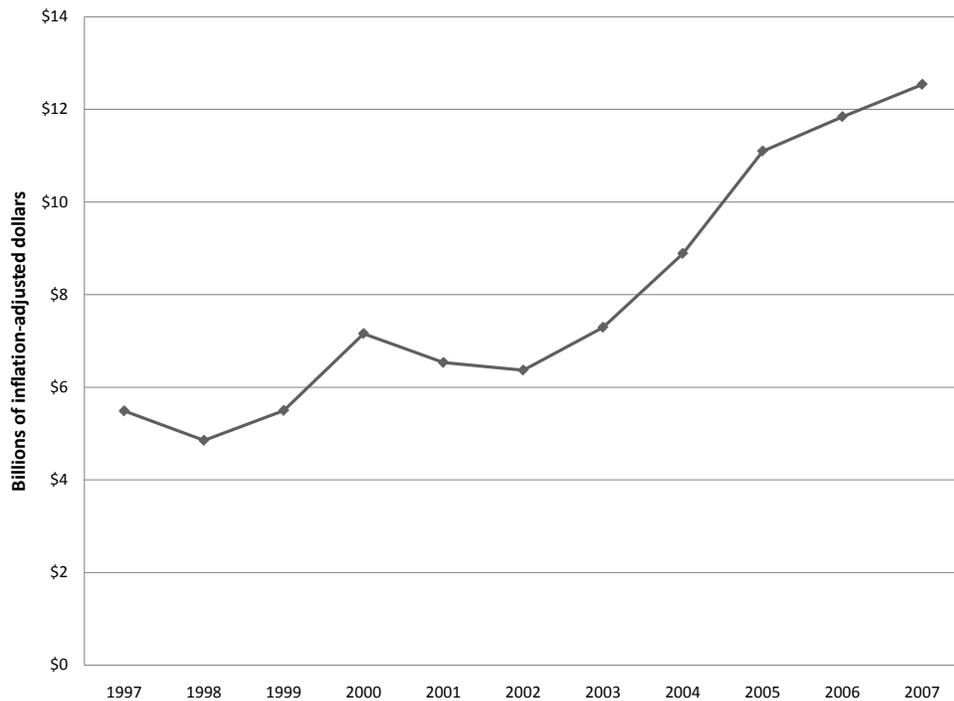


Figure 2. Gasoline Spending Is on the Rise in Georgia¹¹



The additional problem posed by high gasoline consumption is that Georgia relies heavily on imports from beyond state and national borders. Not only does this expose Georgians to the fluctuations of the global oil market and spikes in the price of gasoline, but it also means that the money residents spend on fuel leaves the state. For the most part, money spent on gasoline does not create jobs in Georgia or support the state's economy.

Increased travel on Georgia's roads has also led to worsening traffic congestion, and a number of road-based projects have attempted to deal with the problem. The I-285 Perimeter highway, for example, has been expanded many times since it opened for use in 1969, from an original four lanes of traffic (two each way) to as many as 12 lanes (six each way) in some places. Yet the greatly expanded I-285 loop remains one of the busiest and most frustrating-to-drive corridors in Atlanta. And, on

I-285 and other highways – such as I-85 and I-75 – problems are compounding as time goes on.

Drivers in metropolitan Atlanta, for instance, lost 135 million hours to traffic congestion in 2007, 49 percent more hours than in 1997.¹² This congestion in turn imposes real costs on Georgia's economy. Between the cost of wasted time and wasted fuel, congestion cost the Atlanta area approximately \$3 billion in 2007. This does not count lost economic opportunities as businesses and skilled workers decide to locate elsewhere rather than contend with Atlanta's bad traffic.

Rising vehicle travel has also increased Georgia's emissions of global warming pollution. In 2007, Georgia's transportation network emitted 37 percent more carbon dioxide than in 1990.¹³

Across the nation, worsening congestion and the rising cost of driving are among factors that led 22 percent more people to

choose public transit in 2008 than in 1998.¹⁴ But Georgia has failed to take advantage of the increasing demand for transit – or to provide many Georgians with the alternatives to driving they desire.

In Georgia, in contrast to what occurred elsewhere in the country, transit ridership rose just 2 percent from 1998 to 2008. Ridership trends seem to indicate that people will take transit when service is made available. In Atlanta, for example, the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) carried 83 million passengers on the subway in 2008, a 7 percent increase compared to 1998.¹⁵ Over that same period, MARTA increased rail service by 5 percent.¹⁶ Compared to 2007, MARTA use increased 8.6 percent in 2008, the greatest increase on any U.S. transit system for the year.

In Marietta, which is served by Cobb Community Transit, ridership increased 97 percent from 1998 to 2008, while service increased 83 percent.¹⁷

In Athens, where more transit service became available, ridership increased from 1998 to 2008.²⁰ In Augusta, meanwhile, service declined and ridership declined.²¹

Yet despite rising demand for expanded public transportation services, cuts loom on the horizon. For example, MARTA, already reeling from a \$60 million budget shortfall in 2009 that triggered widespread service cuts, is struggling to address an expected \$120 million shortfall for fiscal year 2011.²² The 25 percent reduction in MARTA's budget would force the agency to slash service.²³

The Benefits of Transit in Georgia

Even with limited service compared to other large metropolitan areas, public transit in Atlanta and other Georgia

cities is already helping to address the challenges of high transportation costs, traffic congestion and global warming pollution. In the Atlanta region alone, public transit saved 88 million gallons of oil in 2006 that otherwise would have been burned in vehicles, saving consumers \$230 million at the pump.²⁴ These cost savings were based on an average gasoline price in 2006 of \$2.68 per gallon.

Public transportation also plays an important role in reducing traffic congestion. A 2009 study by the Texas Transportation Institute estimated that public transportation prevented more than 10.5 million hours of traffic delay – equivalent to about 1,200 person-years – in the Atlanta metropolitan area in 2007, saving the economy more than \$225 million in wasted time and productivity.²⁵ In addition, public transportation is helping to reduce global warming pollution in Georgia, averting about 670,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide pollution in 2006.²⁶ This is the equivalent of removing more than 130,000 cars from the road.²⁷

Public transportation provides a host of other important, if difficult to quantify, benefits. Transit provides a source of mobility to the poor, elderly, children and disabled, many of whom cannot afford a car or cannot drive. Investments in transit have helped spark the economic revitalization of areas around transit stations, helping to create vibrant communities that are less dependent on the automobile. Transit riders are free from the responsibilities of driving, meaning that they can use their time to read, chat, catch up on the day's news or, in an increasing number of transit vehicles elsewhere around the country, use wireless Internet to check e-mail or do important work.

Every day, Georgia residents count on transit to get where they need to go. And even those of us who don't take transit every day can rely on it in a pinch – during periods of major road construction, when the

car is in the shop, or when gasoline prices are high. In short, public transportation is a vital resource for Georgia, one that will become even more important in a world of higher oil prices and increased concern about congestion and global warming.

Yet, Georgia's transit network falls far short of its potential. The lack of state funding has left transit systems to struggle to maintain adequate levels of service. Despite the state's growing population and increased transportation needs, multiple transit systems have reduced their service levels in the past 10 years.²⁸ Atlanta is the second largest American metropolitan area without any commuter rail service, meaning commuters who need to travel from

the suburbs to downtown have little choice but to drive. Commuters, for example, can either drive to an inner perimeter station and then take a train or bus on somewhat limited routes, ride standing-room-only express buses with limited hours and service, or drive. With such poor alternatives, driving (and, too often, driving alone) is the most frequent choice.

A new vision for transit in Georgia, backed by consistent investment for expanding service, can help the Peach State capture more of the benefits that public transportation has to offer, while also helping people find alternatives to driving and addressing the state's growing traffic, pollution and oil dependence problems.

A 21st Century Transportation Vision for Georgia

Atlanta is one of America's world-class cities. It has served as host of the Olympic games, proudly claims one of the world's busiest airports, and for a generation has been among the fastest growing cities in the country.

Yet, Atlanta's public transportation system falls well short of world-class status. Atlanta is the second largest city in America without any form of commuter rail service.

While the metro area's existing public transportation systems provide many important benefits, transit services are woefully underfunded and, in many cases, are being cut rather than expanded. Public transportation options outside of the Atlanta metro region are generally even more limited, leaving many Georgians with no transportation options other than the car.

With a commitment to build modern, 21st century public transit, Georgia can revitalize its transportation system and solve key problems. Commuter rail, light rail, subway, bus rapid transit and high-speed regional rail together offer a logical solution for cutting congestion, saving consumers money, reducing oil dependence,

and cleaning up air in the Peach State.

The projects listed in this section are *not* in order of priority. Transit investments must be evaluated on a range of criteria, from their impact on air quality and global warming emissions to their potential to spark economic development and improve quality of life. Investments in high-speed rail, for example, deliver different benefits to different constituencies than investments in improved bus service for inner-city neighborhoods.

All of the projects described here, however, are part of an integrated vision for the future of public transportation in the state – a vision that Georgia should strive to make happen through strategic investments in the years to come.

Goals of Improved Public Transit in Georgia

Any transit investment strategy for Georgia should have a blueprint to guide it—a set of goals that state constituents and decision-makers wishes to achieve. The state

should set a target of, by 2030 at the latest, completing investments that would achieve the following goals:

- 1) Fix Atlanta's struggling public transportation system to adequately serve the more than 50 percent of Georgians who live in the metro area. Build more and better local transit options using a combination of subway, light rail and bus infrastructure. Invest in commuter rail services to connect workers and employers more efficiently across a broader area.
- 2) Develop local public transportation networks in cities and towns across Georgia using a combination of transit services to provide appealing alternatives to driving.
- 3) Integrate transit and land-use planning wherever transit projects exist. Use sustainable and connective transit-oriented development to combat sprawl and create a healthier future for Georgia's communities and economy.
- 4) Develop long-distance alternatives to highways. Use regional rail to connect cities within Georgia, and high-speed rail to connect major Georgia hubs with activity centers in other states.

Achieving these goals will create a Georgia that is more economically vibrant, less dependent on oil, less impacted by traffic on the roadways, and capable of meeting the transportation challenges of the 21st century.

Commuter Rail

Commuter rail plays an important role in linking the suburban areas of many American

cities to downtown cores – alleviating congestion on major highways leading to and from city centers and reducing the need to devote valuable downtown real estate to parking.

Of the 13 largest metropolitan areas in the United States, Atlanta is the nation's second-largest city to lack commuter rail.²⁹

In the Atlanta region, commuter rail could be implemented after upgrades are made to existing freight rail lines. Though freight rail traffic in the region is already quite heavy, a study of seven corridors from Atlanta to nearby towns and cities shows that commuter rail is feasible and could be successful. Three key commuter rail lines are discussed below.

Griffin Line – Atlanta to Macon

Like Atlanta, the town of Griffin grew up around a railroad in the middle of the 1800s. But today, its historic downtown is congested with traffic as an over-taxed road infrastructure struggles to serve the needs of 23,500 residents. Griffin is also located between Macon, Georgia's sixth largest city, and the major transportation hub of Hartsfield-Jackson Airport.³⁰ At just under 40 miles from downtown Atlanta, many metro-region commuters call Griffin home.

Area residents and officials in cities like Griffin and Macon have long advocated building a commuter rail line from Atlanta. While alleviating highway traffic for numerous communities between Atlanta and Macon, the line could also ultimately serve as a jumping-off point for passenger rail service south to Columbus.³¹ And in addition to improving regional flow, such as cutting traffic and saving consumers money, the Griffin Line could also provide a direct rail connection to Hartsfield-Jackson Airport for communities south of the S7/Airport MARTA stop. With many commuters and travelers to serve, MARTA estimates that a new Atlanta-Macon Griff-

fin Line could expect 1,700 to 4,500 passenger boardings each day.³²

Given the line's clear public benefits, in June 2008 Governor Sonny Perdue announced that his administration would work with federal and local authorities to fully fund the Atlanta-Griffin commuter line, the first of its kind in the region. At the time, Governor Perdue said he opted to move forward on the Griffin line rather than on other options because \$80 million in federal funding was available if the project moved forward and because there were fewer barriers to an agreement to share freight tracks with the Norfolk-Southern Corp.³³

A long-term commuter rail vision should logically extend the Griffin line to Macon, which is both a major city in its own right and would benefit from better public transportation access to the Atlanta airport. A rail line linking Atlanta, Griffin and Macon would not only better meet commuter needs, but could also serve as a focal point for further transit service expansion in the corridor.

The "Brain Train" – Atlanta to Athens

Georgia is home to a growing coterie of academic and scientific institutions. These centers of thought and innovation are attracting talent, stimulating the economy, and boosting demand for services like public transportation.

Georgia's burgeoning bioscience industry is a prime example. Made up of various fields that include medical technology, pharmaceuticals and bioengineering, the Georgia bioscience industry expanded by 38.4 percent between 2001 and 2005 – five times the rate of average employment growth in other industries statewide.³⁴ To produce this increasing number of skilled-labor jobs, bioscience companies capitalize on Georgia's low rents and cost of living – and on the state's considerable intellectual and technical talent.

This talent is fostered in part by Georgia's

large base of strong academic institutions. In the greater Atlanta region alone, more than 45 colleges and universities combine with institutions such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the University of Georgia's new Paul D. Coverdell Center for Biomedical and Health Sciences to train a skilled technical workforce and support creative research. Programs such as VentureLab, a project of the Georgia Research Alliance, help researchers develop business plans for the innovative ideas that are incubated in the area's academic settings.³⁵

One tangible result is the developing Bioscience Corridor on the 43-mile stretch of GA-316 between Lawrenceville and Athens, where a number of bioscience companies have recently opened for business. But, so far, the growth equation is missing a key factor: convenient, reliable transportation connecting students and staff of these institutions to residential neighborhoods and business districts.

A commuter rail line between Atlanta and Athens would help move people to and from these hotbeds of activity. The so-called "Brain Train" is expected to serve between 3,000 and 10,000 riders daily, depending largely on the number of trains in service during peak-use hours.³⁶ The proposed line would run on existing freight track of the CSX railroad, reducing right-of-way and construction costs, while also giving commuters more transportation choices. Ultimately, an Atlanta-Athens line would also likely help reduce congestion on GA-316, with the added benefit of cutting pollution that damages air quality and threatens respiratory health in the communities that abut the highway.³⁷

With stops at Georgia State University, Georgia Tech, Agnes-Scott College, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Emory University, Mercer Atlanta, Gwinnett Tech, Georgia Gwinnett College, the cities of Winder and Bogart on the GA-316 bioscience alley, and the University

of Georgia, the Brain Train will serve an audience looking for better transit options and play a role in helping the corridor continue to thrive.

Bremen/Douglasville Line

The city of Douglasville is the seat of one of the fastest growing counties in the nation. Between 2000 and 2007, Douglas County's population grew by more than 30,000 residents – a 35 percent increase that made it America's 44th fastest growing county.³⁸ Traffic along Interstate 20, the direct line from Douglas County's bedroom communities to downtown Atlanta, has increased in lockstep.

As Douglas County, and Carroll and Haralson counties to the east, continue to grow, the area's transportation infrastructure will need to be expanded to meet demand. Rather than investing exclusively in new and expanded road capacity, the region should begin to develop transit services that will provide current and future residents with more travel options.

A commuter rail line from Bremen, in Haralson County, to Atlanta, via Douglasville, is an important element of that transit network. By sharing tracks with the existing Norfolk-Southern railroad, which is already in talks with the Georgia Department of Transportation, a commuter rail line could help commuters save time and money covering the 50-mile trip from Bremen to downtown Atlanta.³⁹ Possible station sites on the line include Bremen, Temple, Villa Rica, Douglasville west, Austell, Mableton and downtown Atlanta.⁴⁰ Such a line would parallel I-20 and U.S. Highway 78, helping to ease traffic on those highways and providing an alternative for commuters.

The creation of new transportation options will become even more important as population and employment continue to grow in the corridor. By 2030, more than 300,000 people could live near the Bremen-Douglasville corridor, and more

than 50,000 jobs could be located near its stations.⁴¹ A recent study projected 1,600 to 4,600 daily peak-hours passenger boardings in 2030, depending on the number of round-trip trains operated each day.⁴² If land use patterns change so that more compact development occurs near the rail line, actual ridership could be greater.

Light Rail

BeltLine Light Rail

For decades, Atlanta's development has followed a patchwork quilt pattern, creating pockets of homes and commercial areas with little or no connection to surrounding areas – and this makes Atlanta an often frustrating city to navigate.

The BeltLine project can begin to change that, however, while making Atlanta a more livable city. The creation of more than 1,200 acres of new parkland within just a few miles of downtown will create a ring around the core of Atlanta. Twenty-two miles of light rail will join the new parks and trails to link more than 45 previously unconnected neighborhoods.⁴³ Because the rail and trails will provide walkable access to housing and businesses, the combined result will be development that is focused in smarter, more efficient patterns. Planners expect that in the next 20 years, 50,000 new residents could settle in the area served by the BeltLine, helping to revitalize neighborhoods across Atlanta.⁴⁴ Further, the transit, paths, and green space envisioned for the BeltLine will help to ensure that growth does not contribute to Atlanta's traffic and air pollution problems.

In addition to driving smart growth, the light rail line can also serve as a backbone for a robust transit network, providing important connections to other transit routes. The BeltLine's approximately 40 stations,

for example, would include connections to MARTA's existing subway system at four locations, likely Lindbergh Center to the north, Ashby to the west, West End to the south, and Inman Park-Reynoldstown to the east.⁴⁵ The BeltLine will also link to the proposed Peachtree Streetcar (see next section).

The creation of a transit ring to complement MARTA's existing subway lines will also be a boon to commuters, since it will prevent commuters who need to start and end their trips on the same side of the city from travelling all the way into downtown. A worker in Decatur trying to go to Medical Center north of downtown, for example, would not first have to go west into Five Points and then backtrack to the northwest, meaning that public transportation could become a real, time-efficient option for thousands of additional commuters.

With many important public benefits – from more focused development to its backbone role in promoting more efficient travel throughout Metro Atlanta – the BeltLine should be a clear priority in the effort to overhaul the city's public transportation system.

The Peachtree Streetcar

Peachtree Street bustled with streetcars during the first half of the 20th century. Residents and businesses alike benefited from easy access to reliable public transport, and Peachtree rose to prominence as a main Atlanta thoroughfare. But, by around 1950, streetcars were wiped from Atlanta's roads as cars became more affordable and more families moved to the suburbs.

Through all the changes that have occurred in Atlanta over the years, Peachtree Street has remained the city's heart and soul. In 2000, the Peachtree Corridor was the single largest employment center in the city of Atlanta. At that time, more than 50 percent of all jobs in the city were located in the corridor – and its workforce is expected

to continue to grow by nearly 30 percent in the coming decade.⁴⁶ Commercial and retail space is also expected to increase, from 59 million to 75 million square feet, and the residential population is expected to more than double, reaching beyond 75,000 by 2020 as families and individuals seek out housing in close proximity to transit and other urban amenities.⁴⁷

Peachtree Street is precisely the kind of vibrant urban area that can provide a model for future development in the Atlanta region. But the reality of Peachtree Street today falls short of its potential, with more cars bringing more traffic congestion and a lack of convenient, comfortable transportation options that allow residents, workers and visitors to take full advantage of all that Peachtree has to offer.

To encourage and accommodate the future growth and vitality of the Peachtree Corridor, business and community leaders have called for the restoration of streetcar service along Peachtree Street – this time provided by clean, modern streetcars of the type that have recently proven to be popular in cities such as Portland, Oregon,



Streetcar traffic was a common sight on Peachtree Street during the first half of the 20th century, and well before: shown here is an early, horse-drawn Peachtree streetcar, circa 1882. Still a major thoroughfare today, Peachtree would once again benefit from electric streetcar services.

and Seattle, Washington. Streetcars play a different role in the transportation system than commuter rail, light rail or buses. Instead of carrying large numbers of people to a particular destination, streetcars help people *get around* in densely developed urban areas. A Midtown worker might use the streetcar to get to a restaurant for lunch, a visitor might use the streetcar to visit Atlanta's signature destinations, or a Peachtree Street resident might decide that she can give up her car because the streetcar takes her most of the places she need to go. As a result, the street can accommodate more activity with fewer cars. And because the streetcar would operate on electricity, it would help to reduce air pollution from cars, trucks and buses along the corridor.

The Peachtree streetcar is part of a broader plan to remake Peachtree Street with wider sidewalks, bike lanes, and new parks – making Peachtree a world-class “destination street” that would enhance Atlantans' quality of life and serve as a magnet for visitors to the city.

The electric Peachtree Streetcar would not only help build an urban space worthy of international acclaim in the heart of Atlanta, but would also serve the local transit needs of a rapidly growing commercial and residential base. Returning to its historical roots, Peachtree can be revitalized as a city corridor where residents, workers and tourists come to live, work and play; a place where they can easily circulate through districts with broad sidewalks, bike lanes, and a convenient streetcar that is both quiet and clean.

MARTA North Line Light Rail to Windward Parkway

Driving on Georgia Highway 400 from downtown Atlanta to North Point or Windward Parkway would test the patience of almost any commuter. Despite multiple widening projects over the years, the major north-south corridor is notorious for traffic

among the thousands of people who travel it daily. At its worst point, near I-85/Exit 87 connecting to GA-400, congestion slows traffic to an average of 14 miles per hour for an incredible 29 hours each week. This bottleneck is the most severe in the region, and makes the list of the top 300 worst highway bottlenecks in the United States.⁴⁸

With major activity centers like Buckhead, Perimeter and North Point located along its route, traffic on GA-400 is only growing. Of the three main transportation arteries (Georgia Highway 400, Interstate 75 and Interstate 85) radiating northward from Atlanta's urban core, the GA-400 spur carries the highest volume. In fact, the Transportation Planning Board expects 240,000 daily trips on this corridor alone by 2030, with nearly 1,000 more trips per square mile than either the I-75 or I-85 spurs.⁴⁹

The present MARTA system helps address travel demand by providing rail service as far as North Springs, with service on the 85 and 140 buses extending out to Windward Parkway. But the high ridership on those bus routes, along with the high traffic volume on GA-400 as far as Cumming, means that a high-capacity transit route could play an important role in serving local needs and alleviating congestion. With projected 375 percent commercial growth along GA-400 over the next two decades, the time to invest in such a high-capacity transit link is now.⁵¹

To meet this challenge, the city should invest in a rail MARTA extension to high-growth and high-demand areas along GA-400, from the existing North Springs station to Windward Parkway.⁵² And to make the most of the rail expansion, future development in the region should be focused around the new transit stations.

For decades, transit-oriented development (TOD) has been used to create thriving urban and suburban corridors in modern cities. Its basic idea is both simple and sensible: mixed-use zoning around a major

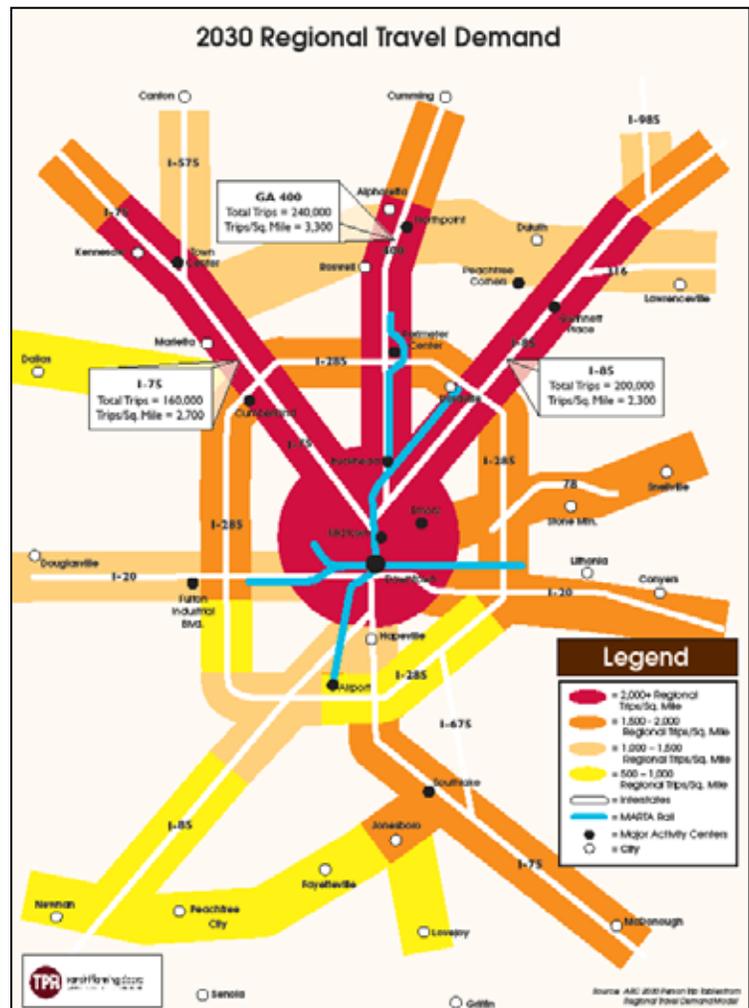
transit station (like a MARTA stop) encourages compact, walkable development that is good for people, businesses and the environment. In the TOD corridors of cities like Portland, Oregon, and Arlington, Virginia, and in Atlanta’s own Lindbergh Center, a combination of mixed business and residential buildings, easy transit and pedestrian access, and attractive public spaces fosters growth but not sprawl – and strengthens community identity. Atlanta, like many cities renowned for sprawling development, can use TOD concepts to springboard smarter, more appealing growth, especially in its suburban and exurban centers.

Communities on the MARTA North Line would benefit from transit-oriented development. Not only do these communities need a purposeful strategy to deal with the massive commercial growth expected along the corridor by 2030, but existing zoning laws, population densities and transit demand make several North Line “cluster” areas especially favorable for TOD. In particular, a December 2006 North Line TOD study by the Atlanta Transportation Planning Board identified Holcomb Bridge, North Point, Old Milton, and Windward Parkway as likely high transit ridership centers that are also poised to maximize the benefits of transit-oriented development.⁵³

These potential stations are centers of projected commercial and industrial growth, but have not yet been heavily developed. Planners anticipate that the number of acres dedicated to commercial use along the North Line route will more than double by 2020 and that acreage occupied by industrial users will nearly triple.⁵⁴ Focusing commercial and residential development around transit stations can reduce the potential for new sprawling development in the region and enhance both the transportation system and quality of life in the area.

The concept plan for TOD at a future

Figure 4. GA-400 from downtown Atlanta to Northpoint/ Alpharetta is projected to be the most heavily traveled corridor by 2030.⁵⁰



North Point station – which planners believe is one of the most promising sites along a North Line extension – includes 4,900 residential units that are a mix of single family homes, condos, townhouses, and apartments, as well as 55,000 square feet of retail and restaurant space to serve new residents.⁵⁵ The remainder of the project would be developed into more than 1 million square feet of office space. Construction of the new development would occur in stages over the next 20 years.⁵⁶



Light rail service throughout greater Atlanta can help meet growing travel needs and reach economic development goals. Photo credit: LYNX light rail in Charlotte, NC. Doug Letterman, under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 from Wikimedia Commons

Establishing walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods in the vicinity of a North Point line would not only break the pattern of sprawling development that is all too common around Atlanta, but would also help relieve the traffic burden in one of Atlanta's busiest corridors.

I-75 North Light Rail to Cumberland, Marietta, and Town Center

Communities northwest of downtown Atlanta currently have no rail service. MARTA's existing rail lines travel east, north, northeast, south and west, leaving the entire northwest quadrant of the metropolitan area with few convenient alternatives to driving. And while the I-75 corridor is already busy, projected growth will worsen congestion. By 2030, the I-75 corridor is expected to draw 160,000 trips daily, equal to 2,700 trips per square mile – the second-highest density of trips in the metro area.⁵⁷ Building a light rail line from downtown Atlanta to Town Center would help the area meet growing travel needs and reach economic development goals.

Anticipating the I-75 transportation crunch, a variety of groups are investigating solutions for the corridor. Self-taxing business groups called Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) are already operating free shuttle services to help customers and workers cope with workday traffic during the busy holiday shopping season and investing millions to make the case for area transit.⁵⁸

The Georgia Department of Transportation has taken up the problem as well. In 2007, the DOT completed a draft study of transportation improvements for the I-75 North corridor.⁵⁹ However, that study did not include light rail but instead focused on express bus service. The most robust transit scenario included in that study entailed buses sharing high-occupancy vehicle lanes, with traffic volume managed through tolls to try to maintain bus service reliability. Buses would make stops at five locations from Town Center to Cumberland, as well as at the MARTA Arts Center station before continuing on into downtown.

While improved bus service would provide some relief for commuters who do not want to fight traffic, light-rail transit offers several advantages over bus service. A light rail line could serve as a focus for future development in the region, combating sprawl and reducing the number of residents who need to use a car. Light rail lines also often have higher capacity than bus rapid transit lines, leading to the potential for greater shifting of ridership from I-75 to the transit system. Light rail is also the option preferred by local business leaders.⁶⁰

Regardless of which option is chosen, more and better transit service in the I-75 corridor would address an important transportation need for the Atlanta region. Light rail, however, has the most potential for changing traffic and development patterns in the Cumberland, Marietta and Town Center corridor.

I-85 North Light Rail to Gwinnett County

Gwinnett County residents have long been skeptical about the notion of hooking themselves into Atlanta's rail transit system. In 1990, for example, Gwinnett residents overwhelmingly rejected a plan to bring MARTA rail service into the county.⁶¹

But times are changing in Gwinnett. The county's population has more than doubled since the first MARTA vote, growing from 350,000 residents in 1990 to 750,000 in 2006.⁶² The county's highway network has been unable to keep up with the demand, with road capacity increasing just 2 percent since 1991.⁶³

With more county residents seeking alternatives to jammed roadways, transit is getting a second look. The county began operating Gwinnett County Transit in 2000 and now offers six weekday express bus routes to downtown Atlanta and five local routes on Monday through Saturday.⁶⁴ The new service has proven to be very popular: despite limited service, Gwinnett County Transit has the fifth highest ridership of any transit system in the state.⁶⁵ Local business leaders are even more supportive of investing in transit because they understand its potential for boosting economic development.⁶⁶

Gwinnett County – and all of metropolitan Atlanta – would benefit by linking the county into the region's transit system through a light rail connection along I-85. Currently, MARTA provides rail service only as far northeast as Doraville, just outside the county. Multiple options for extending rail to Gwinnett County have been discussed. One alignment would extend rail approximately 11 miles from the Doraville station to the Gwinnett Place mall.⁶⁷ Constructing such a line would cost up to \$2.5 billion as a heavy rail subway line or as much as \$650 million as light rail.⁶⁸ An estimated 21,000 riders would take the train each day.

In July 2008, county residents in the Republican and Democratic primaries voted on a non-binding resolution that asked if they would be willing to support a modest sales tax increase to help fund extension of MARTA into the county.⁶⁹ The measure failed narrowly, a defeat attributed to concerns about having MARTA provide the service more than opposition to rail transit.⁷⁰

The need, and desire, for better transit in Gwinnett County is clear – and the slim margin of the July resolution's defeat suggests that Gwinnett County should continue to explore ways to bring rail service to the county.

Heavy Rail (Subway) Extensions

MARTA West Line to I-285

The I-285 Perimeter is one of the most important transportation links in the Atlanta region. The MARTA West Line is a similarly important link in the transit network. Yet, the two busy transportation facilities, while close in proximity, do not connect, with the West Line terminating just a mile and a half from I-285.

MARTA has proposed closing this gap by extending the West Line as far as I-285, with a further bus rapid transit connection designed to serve the busy I-20 corridor west of the Perimeter.

Expanding MARTA West services would make the line more useful overall by connecting it to other high-use routes, and it would help reduce time and money lost to congestion. Additionally, a MARTA study concluded that pairing a westward subway extension with express buses on bus-only highway lanes (also called “bus rapid transit” or BRT) is not only popular with businesses and residents in the Fulton area, but also is the most cost-effective option of



MARTA's Peachtree station. Expanding subway service to meet the I-285 perimeter would make the MARTA West line more useful and help reduce time and money lost to congestion. Photo credit: Diego Sinning, under license from sxc.hu

several west-Atlanta transit schemes.⁷¹ The MARTA Board voted for this combined subway and bus expansion in 2004, and the Transportation Planning Board incorporated the plan in the Concept 3 vision it had developed by August 2008.⁷²

Sensible from both a passenger and an economic perspective, the westward subway and bus extensions should be a focus of improvements to the MARTA system.

High-speed Rail and Other Regional Transit Options

Region-wide Bus Rapid Transit and Express Buses

The metro Atlanta region already uses buses to help alleviate congestion. In addition to the conventional bus routes that serve thousands of residents each day, “express buses” play an important role in moving large numbers of commuters to

and from work in a convenient and efficient way. The I-75 (Lovejoy) corridor express bus line, for example logged over 1,600 express-bus rider trips daily by February 2008 and ridership is projected to increase 50 percent (to as much as 2,300 trips per day) by 2030.⁷³

Atlanta business owners have been early supporters of better bus services. Self-taxing business groups, called CIDs locally, have banded together on multiple occasions in recent years in attempts to tackle Georgia’s growing traffic woes – which are decidedly bad for business – and many view buses as a viable solution. A Buckhead CID, for instance, currently contributes roughly 30 percent of the Buckhead Area Transportation Management Association operating budget and helps fund the “buc,” a free shuttle bus service with 26 stops in the commercial Buckhead area.⁷⁴

Expanding bus services would be an important next step for improving transportation region-wide. Dedicated traffic lanes could help cut travel time further, such as the proposed high-occupancy vehicle lane for the I-20 West Line expansion.⁷⁵ With many existing routes already running standing-room-only service, each individual bus trip also effectively removes upward of 40 air-polluting cars from the road. And BRT and express bus services would overlap and intersect with current and future transit lines, serving as quick connectors between hubs or providing local stops to deliver commuters closer to home.

Improved Transit in Small Cities and Suburbs

Automobile-related problems like high energy costs, unhealthy air, and global warming pollution do not limit themselves to big cities like Atlanta. These are issues that impact people across our state, but that can similarly be addressed in smaller cities and suburbs by rethinking transportation investments.

In a number of these towns, regional transit authorities already provide services that thousands of Georgians depend on every day. From the CAT in Savannah to Metra Transit in Columbus, transit systems – often bus-based – are helping individuals well beyond metro Atlanta meet basic transportation needs.

In Athens and Marietta, for example, both transit service and ridership increased between 1996 and 2006.⁷⁶ A number of cities and towns, such as Valdosta, are planning and implementing transit programs to help their citizens cope with transportation challenges. In these communities, buses further add both an important service and an attractive amenity. Not only can they help give low-income and elderly individuals greater independence, job opportunities, and the option to participate more in community life, but they also add inexpensive backup transportation for families and workers, and appeal to prospective residents and employers.

Smaller cities also capitalize on the benefits of transit-oriented development with the opportunity for smarter growth in the

21st century. The potential for improved public transportation exists not only in hubs like Atlanta and Savannah, but in cities and towns across the state – and the goal of broadly extending transit benefits to more Georgians should figure centrally in the state’s plans to address the transportation crisis.

Southeast High-speed Rail

Around the world, in countries from France to Japan, high-speed trains provide quick, convenient connections between major cities. These “bullet trains” rapidly move passengers between major transportation centers, typically at speeds of 90 mph and above – in some cases reaching 220 mph.

High-speed rail, however, has been neglected in the United States for years, despite its many advantages. For inter-city trips of less than 500 miles, high-speed trains can be nearly as fast – and in some cases even faster – than car or plane trips, especially when the time spent getting to and from airports and through airport security is factored in. Moreover, because high-speed trains run on electricity, they



Electric high-speed rail moves passengers efficiently over long distances, saving time and cutting pollution. Three of ten federally-designated high-speed rail corridors pass through Georgia. Photo credit: Remus Eserblom, under license from istockphoto.com

can help reduce our transportation system's dependence on oil.

Americans have only one true high-speed rail line: Amtrak's Acela service between Boston and Washington, D.C. Acela's ridership is booming, and the line has demonstrated that it can contribute strongly to Amtrak's revenues.⁷⁷ Its services are efficient, offer passengers more space and comfort than airplanes, and provide key business amenities, such as power outlets for laptop computers and cell phone access.

In the 1990s, the Federal Railroad Administration designated 10 transit corridors for developing a national high-speed rail network. Three corridors pass through Georgia, connecting Atlanta, Macon and Savannah with points in Alabama, Florida and South Carolina. Further proposals from Georgia's Department of Transportation could expand high-speed rail elsewhere in Georgia, providing service, for example, on the busy I-75 corridor between Atlanta and Chattanooga, TN. The proposed Georgia-Tennessee train could speed travelers from downtown Chattanooga to the Hartsfield airport in just 60 minutes, cutting road travel time in half and eliminating airport wait time as well.⁷⁸

Momentum has been shifting toward creation of high-speed rail in America. In January 2009, a coalition of transportation officials from Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina released a report which demonstrated that a high-speed rail line between Charlotte and Macon is feasible, and in places trains could travel at speeds of up to 150 miles per hour.⁷⁹ The American Reconstruction and Recovery Act, passed in February 2009, provided \$8 billion dollars in high speed rail funds to 31 states, including funds for separate studies of possible future high-speed rail connecting Atlanta to Birmingham, a line connecting Louisville, Nashville, and Chicago to Atlanta, and a route from Macon to Jacksonville.

While transit solutions like expanded bus and subway service can help cut congestion in metro Atlanta's crowded roadways, high-speed and other passenger rail services connecting Georgia's urban areas can help reduce inter-city highway traffic and airport congestion, and also benefit the local economy. A 2008 study of a proposed high-speed rail in California, for example, found that a bullet train would produce a number of economic benefits to the city of San Francisco, including tens of thousands of permanent jobs, more than 100,000 construction-related jobs in the short term, increased statewide tourism revenues, and billions of dollars in savings from the economic costs of time Bay Area commuters spend stuck in traffic.⁸⁰

The Georgia Rail Passenger Program (GRPP), a regional rail plan proposed in 2001, was a first step toward high-speed rail for our state. Its vision includes commuter rail lines from Atlanta to cities like Athens and Macon, inter-city passenger rail throughout the state, and high-speed rail connections between Georgia's major cities and beyond. On-board amenities such as wireless internet could draw a core business clientele, helping professionals maximize their commute or business travel time. Families could travel longer distances more comfortably and less expensively, and even non-riders would enjoy the cleaner air, reduced global warming pollution, and freer streets that Georgian high-speed rail would encourage.

The combined services of the proposed plan could transport 10.7 million commuters and 2.1 million inter-city riders annually in 2030.⁸¹ The Atlanta-to-Chattanooga high-speed rail portion of the project is in early environmental impact review, with a complete study of the project expected in fall 2009.⁸²

However, progress on the GRPP has moved in fits and starts – in part for lack of funding. Some plans have suggested renewing a CSX railroad lease on the

state-owned Western & Atlantic Railroad as a possible method to generate revenues, while others maintain that counties should be responsible for operating expenses.⁸³ Whatever the case, Georgia needs to find dedicated funding to make the positive vision contained in the regional rail plan a reality.

In addition, Georgia should fight for federal high-speed rail funding that would enable the state and region to begin building out the Southeast's high-speed rail network

and commit to providing state funding for its share of the project. Other states and regions are already laying the groundwork for this funding: California voters, for example, adopted an initiative in November 2008 to provide \$10 billion worth of funding for construction of a bullet train between San Francisco and Los Angeles. With other regions, including the Midwest, working on high-speed rail plans of their own, Georgia needs to move forward quickly or risk being left behind.

From Vision to Reality: Policies for Better Transit in Georgia

Georgia's existing transportation system clearly cannot meet the state's 21st century needs. A broad and ambitious vision for public transit will help the state develop a healthier economy, cleaner air, and stronger communities.

The question, though, as always when it comes to transit issues in Georgia, is how to pay for it.

Georgia's current transportation funding system is well-suited for building highways. Funding from the state gas tax is dedicated to road and bridge projects, while most federal funding is dispersed across the state with little thought of which projects provide the biggest "bang" for the buck. In a time of increasingly limited public funds, Georgia must spend its transportation dollars where they have the most impact. For that reason, the state must reshape its transportation planning and funding priorities to address its decades-long underinvestment in transit.

To achieve a 21st century transportation system for Georgia – and to reap the many benefits of expanded public transportation – we need a 21st century means for planning and funding transportation projects.

Federal Government

The main federal transportation funding law – the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) – expired in the fall of 2009, and was temporarily extended by Congress with allocations from general revenues. It is possible that the coming federal bill will be the most sweeping reform of federal transportation policy in nearly two decades. America's aging transportation network is increasingly in need of costly repairs. Meanwhile, amid rising gasoline prices, Americans are now experiencing the downside of the highway-centered investment policies of the last few decades – which leave too many Americans with few transportation choices. In short, the status quo cannot continue.

Georgia officials must demand a 21st century federal transportation funding law. The new law should require a large investment in needed improvements to transit systems and intercity rail, while focusing federal highway investment

on the need to maintain and repair existing infrastructure.

Federal money should then be used in a targeted and strategic way to encourage transportation investments that minimize oil dependence, congestion, environmental pollution and sprawl, and encourage the development of compact, livable communities where driving is an option, not a requirement.

Such a dramatic shift would benefit Georgia by providing additional resources for needed transit projects, including some that have remained on the drawing board for years. In addition to pushing for new federal transportation priorities, Georgia should also work aggressively through existing avenues to obtain federal funding for transit infrastructure projects, including high-speed passenger rail.

Regional Coordination

At the crossroads of North-South and East-West traffic, Georgia is the hub of the Southeast region. From its central location, Georgia is well positioned to provide the vision and leadership for a 21st century interstate public transportation network and help springboard growth in a healthier Southeast.

Making the regional transportation system more efficient is good for the region as a whole – and good for Georgia. **Georgia should take a lead role in improving the Southeast’s transportation system by coordinating the development of modern public transportation infrastructure with our neighbors to the north, west, and south.**

State Policy

The good news for Georgia is that a sizeable part of our state’s public transit future

lies within our control. Making several key changes in state policy can have a strong and positive impact on how we meet our growing transportation needs.

Strategy #1: Provide dedicated state funding for transit

Georgians have good ideas about how to meet our transportation needs with public transit, but these ideas are frequently held back by a lack of funds. Around the state, planning documents detail the benefits of public transit and propose viable projects, but repeatedly add the caveat, “*pending funds.*”

Many states provide at least part of the money necessary to build and operate transit systems. Georgia, on the other hand, is one of only a handful of states which fails to provide a dedicated funding source for public transportation. MARTA, for example, the nation’s 9th largest urban transit system, is the largest such system that receives no state funding.

Without state support, Georgia’s transit network depends on the federal government, local governments, and even businesses for funding just to make ends meet. Expecting local governments to bear these costs alone is unfair and counter-productive because:

- Georgia as a whole benefits from the investment in public transit – through cleaner air, clearer roads, economic development and other benefits. Transit investments that grow the economy of the metropolitan Atlanta region, that connect Georgia’s cities with those in other states, or that improve the ability of residents to get to jobs and education have long-term economic benefits for all Georgians. It is only right and proper that all Georgians pay their fair share for those benefits.

- Local governments are unlikely to invest capital resources in major transit projects that would benefit residents across the state. Asking local government to pay for transit that benefits everyone would be like asking individual counties to separately pay for sections of highway that run through their unique jurisdictions. It slows the process and delays the benefits of better transit at time when the state needs it badly. Regional special purpose local-option sales taxes (SPLOSTs) are an important local tool in jumpstarting key projects, but the state should not use them as a substitute for state-level funding.

Georgia will never realize the benefits of transit until the state embraces a more rational system for funding public transportation. **To capitalize on the economic, social and environmental benefits of transit, Georgia should designate an adequate and long-term state-wide revenue stream to public transportation.** A question likely to be on the ballot in 2012 will give voters the opportunity to consider providing more stable funding. Individual counties will be allowed to vote on a one percent dedicated sales taxes for transportation.

But, while regional funding is important, it should not be substituted for the kind of additional, statewide funding that Georgia needs. To deliver transit for the coming century, more must be done at the state level.

A number of different revenue stream options could help Georgia fund its public transportation investments. Other funding sources used across the country include transportation-based taxes and fees, such as a gas tax, parking tax, rental car tax, tire or vehicle battery tax; tolls from publicly owned toll roads or revenues from congestion pricing; and development fees like development impact, storm water, and real

estate transfer fees. Georgia should review all the available options to identify potential funding sources for transit and even consider whether the state constitutional provision that dedicates revenue from the gasoline tax solely to highways and bridges makes sense in light of the state's 21st century transportation needs.

Across the country, the public has demonstrated that it is willing to support increased funding for public transportation. In November 2008, 70 percent of transit ballot questions around the country were victorious, undaunted by a declining economy.⁸⁴

Of course, state lawmakers should expect some guarantee of good use in exchange for the badly needed funds. The state should conduct a comprehensive audit and review of existing transit systems and administrative agencies to eliminate wasteful spending, with added accountability measures over each transit project's lifetime.

Strategy #2: Reform state allocation of federal transportation dollars

Current state law makes specific requirements for allocating Georgia's federal transportation funds. Eighty percent of federal dollars are divided equally among the state's 13 congressional districts. The remaining 20 percent is spent on state-wide transportation priorities identified by the state government. While helpful in its aim to provide funding for both local and state-wide projects, the law also may not serve Georgians' interests because:

- It means less money for more expensive projects that would deliver major benefits across many congressional districts.
- It assumes that the best transportation solutions for each district will all cost the same amount of money, even

though this is unlikely to be true. Some districts are small, densely-populated and urban, while others are large, sparsely-populated and rural. Each congressional district has unique transportation needs, and the various solutions to meet these needs will have different price tags. Assuming otherwise creates uneven transportation budget surpluses and shortfalls – which do not benefit Georgia as a whole.

Moreover, the current funding structure is a recipe for bad governance, giving local representatives more incentive to earmark funds for their own counties rather than improve transportation broadly for the state. **To avoid this pitfall, state lawmakers should amend the transportation funding law to better reflect statewide needs.** Possible amendments could include shifting the 80-20 balance of the existing law, creating a need-based funding application process, or dedicating a larger share of flexible federal transportation funds to public transit projects.

Conclusion

The state of Georgia has grown around its transportation infrastructure. Unfortunately, that infrastructure is no longer meeting our state's growing needs. And, with time and money lost in traffic, poor air quality, deepening oil dependence, and rising global warming pollution, more of the same, familiar transportation strategy is simply not good enough.

However, by investing in a vision for 21st century public transportation, Georgians can help grow a smarter future for our economy, a safer future for our children's health, and a cleaner future for our environment.

This vision is already being nurtured in plans across the state. The projects listed in this report form a starter "to-do" list for public transit, but more can and must be accomplished. Georgia cannot fail to take advantage of the solutions public transportation offers. We must invest now in mobility that will help ease our transportation problems.

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