

Atlanta's Streetcar Investment Is Not Paying Off

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Back in July 2012, passage of the T-SPLOST transportation tax seemed essential to the Atlanta region's future, at least among certain members of the political and business elite. Georgia Governor Nathan Deal and Mayor Kasim Reed [formed a bipartisan coalition](#) in support of the \$8.5 billion, 1-cent sales tax increase, and they attracted support from [200 companies](#). They argued that the region had to combat traffic and support growth by investing in a combination of highways and transit.

But the measure went down in flames, winning [just 37 percent](#) of the vote.

It was sunk by [opposition from](#) the Senate Majority leader, who said it wouldn't help congestion; the Sierra [gtr-main-logo-400](#) Club, which said it was too focused on roads; the Tea Party, whose members hated the tax increase; and a county chapter of the NAACP, which suggested the projects selected [weren't the right ones](#).

Lee Biola, president of [Citizens for Progressive Transit](#), summed it up to me: "Roads people were put off on it being majority for transit, transit people were put off on it being about roads."

In this installment of [Getting Transit Right](#), we'll look at what's changed in the transit landscape since that vote — how advocates in one suburban county won a significant victory, and how the city of Atlanta made a misstep with its streetcar project. (You can catch up on our Atlanta transit coverage with parts [one](#) and [two](#) in the series.)

Contentious city versus suburban politics

At the heart of the T-SPLOST conflict was the intense city-versus-suburb political dynamic that has played out in the Atlanta region for decades. While residents of the city supported the tax, people living far from downtown [rejected it by a huge margin](#).

But it would be a mistake to conclude that nothing had changed since 1971, when white suburban residents gripped by racial panic voted to prevent the MARTA transit system from serving their communities. While segregation remains a major problem for Atlanta, the political dynamics of transit in the region are shifting.

Part of the reason for that has been work by MARTA to improve its own reputation. "MARTA was the most beleaguered transit agency in the country," said the agency's general manager, Keith Parker. "We've been able to make some dramatic improvements, and people see that. All those things have made people change their perspective. I've heard the most favorable opinions from the highest levels."

That includes Republicans, many of whom have historically been quite hostile to transit investment. Brian Gist of the [Southern Environmental Law Center](#) pointed out that the primary sponsor of a bill to support transit in Fulton County was a Republican whose district abuts the district of another Republican who was the bill's primary opponent. "It's becoming more complicated politically," Gist said.

Progress in Clayton County

Though regional anti-transit politics are typically associated with white residents, even some largely African-American areas have resisted transit expansion. In Clayton County, south of the city, "it was the same thing as with white Republicans," said Biola. "They didn't want poor people coming into their county, and the county was majority

Democratic and African-American.”

In the 2012 vote, Clayton residents [sided against](#) T-SPLOST, and county leaders actually [shut off all transit service in 2010](#). But transit advocates didn't give up. A coalition including Biola and the Partnership for Southern Equity's Nathaniel Smith led a grassroots campaign of the equity and faith communities to challenge the anti-transit dynamic.

Smith says the Clayton campaign was different from the 2012 effort because it was “not led by the private sector.” The coalition, he added, was a departure from “the usual story of how things are done in the Atlanta region.”

Their work helped convince county commissioners to allow a 2014 referendum on [increasing the sales tax](#) by 1 percent to fund MARTA expansion into the area for the next 33 years. “We were down to the wire,” said Biola. “Churches, others with civil rights experience got out to support it.” That November, a [massive majority](#) of county voters signed on to the first MARTA expansion into the suburbs since it was founded in 1971. Bus service began in 2015.

But poor results from the Atlanta Streetcar

Unable to assemble new funding from the state to significantly improve the rapid transit system, the city of Atlanta chose to focus [on a cheaper-to-implement streetcar line](#). The route opened in December 2014 after a [year of delays](#) and an almost \$30 million cost increase, from \$72 million to \$98 million.

The hope was that the streetcar would attract [2,000 daily passengers](#), but it's only moving [about 700 riders a day](#) as of the latest reporting. It has also faced considerable maintenance problems that have led [state](#) and [federal](#) officials to question its management.

The fact that the city runs the line, rather than an experienced transit agency like MARTA, probably doesn't help. But there are fundamental flaws in the project that no maintenance or operational expertise is likely to overcome.

The streetcar travels only 1.3 miles, from downtown to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center, so it's only useful for a limited variety of trips. It stops too frequently — six times over the course of its very short route — slowing service. And because the trains operate in lanes shared with cars, they average less than 10 mph [on a good day](#); often, they get stuck at signals and behind cars, leading to delays and [a high degree of unreliability](#).

Everyone I spoke with for this series agreed the street car line is not a model for future investment. No one wants to spend millions of dollars on projects that don't work.

When volunteers step up with small-scale interventions

In a development that's simultaneously encouraging (as a reflection of civic engagement) and troubling (as a reflection of government priorities), volunteers and advocates have stepped up to make the transit riding experience more dignified. The [MARTA Army](#) works on “scalable” interventions for the transit system. Simon Berrebi, a doctoral student in transportation at Georgia Tech who leads the group, told me his goal is “empowering residents to improve their experience.”

The Army is doing that by engaging residents directly on achievable improvements. “We opened up bus stops in the region,” he told me, “allowing people to adopt a bus stop.” More than 350 stops [have been enhanced](#) using weather-resistant signage that people in nearby communities put up and maintain, providing riders with basic information about bus schedules.

[Operation Clean Stop](#), another Army initiative, is a crowd-funding campaign designed to bring trash cans to bus stops in East Point, a city just south of Atlanta. The work has already raised \$16,000 for this community, and the results are a bus system that simply is more comfortable for people to use.

Hopefully, the inspiring volunteer energy will also spur local governments and MARTA to take care of these essential services in the future.

Grading recent Atlanta transit investments

[atl-recent-expansion](#)

A comparison of the 2012 Atlanta region transportation vote and the 2014 decision to expand MARTA into Clayton County suggests that a geographically focused transit- and equity-based coalition, rather than a regional grab bag of roads and transit, can better capture the imagination of the public and produce support for transit investment.

But in order for progress to sustain itself, the transit provided by that spending must be effective. Though MARTA has been steadily improving its reputation, the foibles of the Atlanta Streetcar have also marred the track record of recent transit investments.

What's working

- Hard work rebuilding MARTA's reputation paying off with growing support for transit region-wide.
- Coalitions around equitable transit access have yielded better results than corporate-led "all of the above" transportation funding campaigns.
- Volunteer efforts to improve bus stops illustrate demand and enthusiasm for getting the fundamentals of the transit rider experience right.

What's not working

- Inability to coordinate regionally on transit investment.
- Streetcar funding wasted on slow, unreliable service.
- Public investment in basics like bus stop schedules is lacking.

Coming next

In 2016, Atlanta residents voted to tax themselves to pay for a package of transit and transportation projects. In the next two posts in the series, we'll look at how this funding will be put to use.