

# Transit on the Beltline: *Neither Catalyst Nor Transport*

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Presented at Atlanta Studies Symposium Panel  
*“The Desire for Streetcars.*  
Is the Beltline a Rail Corridor Or a Linear Park?”

## Panelists

Prof. Mike Dobbins, Georgia Institute of Technology (School of City & Regional Planning)  
Walter Brown, Former Senior Vice President of Development, Jamestown  
Prof. Hans Klein, Georgia Institute of Technology (School of Public Policy)

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# The Project:

## The Streetcar East (SCE) Extension

- Extend the Downtown Loop streetcar
- 2.3 miles, \$230M
- Run rail on the Beltline
  
- **Should we do it or not?**
- “Yes!”
  - Mayor, City Council, Atlanta Beltline Inc., grassroots groups
- “No?”
  - MARTA?, developers, planners, grassroots groups

# The Key to the Debate: *What is Transit?*

## Vision 1: ***Transit is a catalyst***

- The Beltline vision (Gravel 1999)
- A catalyst for “smart” urbanism
  - Central city revitalization, residential density, car-free living
  - Social integration, racial harmony, connecting neighborhoods
- Much more than mere transportation
  
- Vision 2: ***Transit is transportation***
  - Connects origins and destinations
  - Justified by ridership studies
  - Expenditures subject to cost-benefit analysis
- A less visionary, more practical view

# Today's Debate: Should we Deploy SCE?

Let's ask this question in light of the 2 visions

## 1. Is SCE justified as *transportation*?

- *No*
  - High cost: \$100M per mile
  - Low benefit: insufficient ridership
  - An objective test: does it qualify for federal support? No.

## 2. Is SCE justified as a *catalyst*?

- *No*
  - We found another catalyst: Beltline as a park
  - 2.1 million annual visitors
  - Has catalyzed smart urbanism
    - Ponce City Market, New City, Krog Street, Lee+White, Milton Avenue

Transit is no longer needed for the broad goals (smart urbanism)

Transit is not justified for the narrow goal (transportation)

# What Should We Do Instead?

## 1. Deploy transit elsewhere

- Transit can still be a catalyst -- just not on the Beltline
  - Other More MARTA projects
  - North Ave., Northside Drive. Summerhill, Campbellton Rd, Clifton Corridor
- Promote smart urbanism
  - Pursue Gravel's vision city-wide, not just on the Beltline

## 2. Double down on the Beltline as a park

- Add a LIT Lane (bikes, e-bikes, scooter, skate boards)
  - Address congestion, safety problems
  - LIT is a kind of transit
    - As being done on 15<sup>th</sup> Street
- Keep the option to add transit in the future

# Summary

- Spending \$230M on the streetcar extension is
  - Ineffective transit
  - Unnecessary for urban development
- Instead:
  - Reallocate the funds
    - Other More MARTA
  - Build on the park
    - Add LIT “transit”