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Campaign mounts against Atlanta BeltLine rail

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MARTA

A rendering of the Atlanta Streetcar East Extension stopping at Ladybird, a popular bar and restaurant along the BeltLine's Eastside Trail.

Prominent business leaders on the Atlanta BeltLine are rejecting MARTA's plan for rail along the trail. They may even be willing to consider providing financial support in return for an enhanced design.

City leaders, residents, real estate firms and other businesses are forming a committee to examine rail on the Atlanta BeltLine, according to sources with knowledge of the matter. It's unclear who all will be part of the campaign. The opposition is sparked by an upcoming extension of the Atlanta Streetcar to the Eastside Trail and waning public trust in the agency to complete well received projects.

"I am afraid we will execute something that we regret," said Mike Greene, vice president of development at Portman Holdings, which is building an office district along the proposed streetcar route.

Greene added: "There was a picture in people's minds when we voted on BeltLine transit in 2016, and there is the design being shown today. We need to reconcile those two different visions."

MARTA is eager to connect Downtown Atlanta to Ponce City Market. Under the 2-mile extension, the streetcar would continue along Edgewood Avenue, flow up Auburn Avenue and enter the BeltLine corridor at Irwin Street. It's poised to run past Portman's

Junction at Krog District, Ladybird and New City Properties' Fourth Ward office and residential development. The project is now entering final design.

Business leaders are wary of the potential effects on the BeltLine, such as the ability for pedestrians to access properties divided from the multi-use trail by streetcar tracks, speed at which vehicles will travel, loss in retail sales during construction and overall aesthetic value of the design.

Ryan Gravel laid out the original vision for the BeltLine as a rail corridor to broaden transit access in Atlanta. Supporters say that still needs to happen to manage the city's growth, provide equitable transportation options and bolster use on days with unfavorable weather.

At least five companies are willing to contribute to the design process by providing ideas or funding to execute a well crafted plan. Greene and other executives hope to meet with MARTA officials to relay their concerns and gain clarity on project details. Atlanta Beltline CEO Clyde Higgs hopes to overcome "anti-transit rhetoric" by pushing the agency to come up with an attractive design.

"MARTA's first priority is always safety," said a MARTA spokesperson in a Wednesday statement. "The proposed alignment takes into account the established public access areas and provided crossings with safe access in mind. The current design considers a vehicle speed of up to 25 mph as well as line of sight and grade in all aspects of the alignment."

The push to organize against rail coincides with an upcoming audit of the More MARTA Atlanta program. Atlanta officials called for a review of the program after MARTA shared a list of nine priority projects. The rest of the expansion will be placed on the back burner, a decision necessitated by high construction costs. The agency will host three public input meetings to provide updates and answer questions about the program.

The eastward streetcar extension, supported by Mayor Andre Dickens, made the cut as a priority to complete by 2028. A westward extension of the streetcar to the BeltLine and four light rail routes are poised to be revisited in later years. An ill-received route on the Eastside Trail could complicate the challenge of bringing rail through other portions of the BeltLine, Greene said.



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