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OPINION: Beltline rail: Will spending \$230 million screw up a good thing?

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5–7 minutes

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The added tax was estimated to bring in \$2.7 billion over 40 years (that's 540 billion half-pennies) and the plan was called More MARTA because, well, the name explains the intent.

But lately, Atlanta leaders have added a question mark to the "More MARTA" moniker because it seems nothing is getting built despite more than \$400 million being generated in the past six years. In fact, Atlanta [city leaders have demanded an audit of More MARTA](#) to see where the money is being spent. Or isn't.

MARTA initially said city officials were "playing politics" but [warmed up later in the week](#).

Earlier, MARTA had unveiled a trimmed-down list of projects to reflect what is doable in the near future given the fiscal realities. The list had nine projects, half the original wish list. The Campbellton Road and Clifton Corridor (Emory and the CDC) projects, which were originally light rail, were downgraded to less expensive bus rapid transit proposals.

The only light rail project left on that list [is the Streetcar East Extension](#), which would add a couple of miles of tracks up the

Beltline to the popular and upscale Ponce City Market. The current estimate for this is \$230 million. I say "current," because [the price tag will assuredly bloat](#).

The term "Streetcar East Extension" is actually an optimistic term for "Let's Do Something, Anything, to Somehow Make the Downtown Streetcar Boondoggle Work." It might also be a case of "Throwing good money after bad money and hoping something positive happens."

The current streetcar, which opened downtown in 2014, has long been a way to get some air-conditioned quiet time, because if you ride it you're often alone. The hope is that if you stretch the current streetcar route to the Eastside Beltline then you might actually get some butts in seats.

How many? No one knows for sure. Colleen Kiernan, MARTA's assistant general manager, external affairs, told me ridership models are being updated so there are no reliable projections. "It's all conjecture at this point," she said, adding better numbers should come in weeks.

In fact, MARTA has chosen not to ask for federal funds for the streetcar expansion and is instead seeking grant funding for other transit projects in the city.

That seems to be evidence that the feds would not see this project to be the best use of *their* limited funds. But Atlanta still does.

Now, the idea of a streetcar on the Beltline had bubbled about for more than 20 years since Georgia Tech student Ryan Gravel

dreamed up the idea of building light rail on old unused train lines around the city. The idea is pleasant because everyone likes streetcars.

The Beltline has taken off, spurring billions of dollars of development, including restaurants, bars, retail establishments and (mostly) high-end apartments. Lots of them.

One wonders if a new line would bring ridership and, if it did, would those aboard mainly be young urban professionals riding to their yoga classes or perhaps frat bros heading to a Beltline brewery for some tasty IPAs.

Rather than becoming a transportation corridor, the Beltline has become a wildly popular linear park, a destination bringing folks from all over the city to ride bikes, walk their dogs, head to eateries or just wander about in the fresh air. Many days there are pedestrian traffic jams. Add bikes and scooters [to this and things can get dangerous.](#)

There's a good argument being made to skip building the pricey streetcar route on the Beltline and simply pave that unused space with added lanes for bikes and scooters. There'd be a lot better movement of the humans already there. And the savings could be spent on other needed transit projects.

Putting streetcars there could squeeze the Beltline even more than it is

Gravel has been publicly disappointed by the dearth of affordable housing.

Recently, he tweeted, "Rather than stopping transit on the #Beltline, which was the vision from Day One and the reason our efforts garnered support and funding to build what we see today, let's put a #moratorium on housing for entitled rich people who want to ensure it only works for them."

The idea trotted out by advocates like the [Beltline Rail Now!](#) group is that a rail line would allow working class folks to get where they need to go. The group's website has the terms "equitable" and "civil rights" on its home page.

Mayor Andre Dickens has pledged support for the streetcar expansion to the Beltline because, well, who can be against equity and civil rights?

Several City Council members, like Amir Farokhi, still support the expansion.

I asked whether \$230 million on an unproven transit corridor is prudent.

"Your argument is a little incomplete," he said. "There is affluence on the Beltline but it doesn't mean there isn't a need for workers to get to their jobs at restaurants or other businesses."

He circled back to the "Is it worth it?" question: "It's fair to ask. But it's important to be ambitious and do big things in this city, especially since the status quo is not working for some people."

It's a heckuva big bet. A \$230 million roll of the dice.