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MARTA approves design contract for streetcar expansion

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The MARTA board of directors Thursday unanimously passed an \$11.5 million contract to create the final design of the Atlanta Streetcar expansion.

HDR Inc. will be the contractor tasked with envisioning the plan. MARTA is set to expand the current [2.7-mile route](#) from downtown east to the Atlanta Beltline, where it will turn north and run along the trail to Ponce City Market. The expansion will include five new stations.

The [\\$230 million extension](#), scheduled to open in 2028, has been the subject of intense controversy. Supporters say it's a way to finally make the Beltline's goal of having a transportation option come to life, while critics say it risks devaluing the neighborhoods it will run through and the aesthetic of the Beltline as it is.

The divide was on display during Thursday's meeting. Nearly all the in-person public comments came from supporters or opponents of the expansion plan.

Meanwhile, the existing streetcar has had many problems of its own. It's [often stuck in traffic](#), has [low ridership](#), and at one point faced the threat of being [shut down by state regulators](#). But supporters say the expansion is a chance to revisit and improve the transit service as a whole.

During the meeting, an amendment to the contract was proposed to outline that HDR's first task will be to provide recommendations on how to improve the already-existing downtown streetcar's operations. That's a welcome development for Clyde Higgs, CEO and president of the Atlanta Beltline.

"People perhaps think that we're just going to copy and paste the existing streetcar into the Beltline corridor," he said. "People can hold us accountable for high quality, experience-rich transit along

the Beltline."

While there were a few questions regarding the timeline for when those recommendations will be produced, no board member expressed skepticism about the expansion as a whole, [unlike in April](#) when the board first approved the plan.

HDR has worked on streetcars in more than [30 North American cities](#), MARTA says, and the agency has promised public input will be critical in the design process. That's encouraging to Matthew Peterson, a Beltline resident and member of the Old Fourth Ward Business Association, who said city officials have also emphasized that in conversations he's held with them.

But he also hopes that HDR and MARTA are open to other designs. "Obviously, the streetcar is not the best option," he said.

Jennifer Bentson, a resident along the proposed expansion who opposes the plan, said community engagement thus far has appeared to her more so as updates from MARTA and the city rather than listening to residents' concerns. She's hoping the firm will change that.

Meanwhile, she thinks as the design process moves along and it becomes more clear what a streetcar would look like on the Beltline, it could garner more opposition. "If there are other opportunities to potentially pause this," she said, "it's going to be when we start to understand what it really looks like."

Protecting the Beltline's aesthetic is also a concern for supporter Matthew Rao, who chairs the Beltline Rail Now organization pushing for the plan. He's hopeful, though, that with an active community involved throughout the process, the design will be able to do just that.

"Neighbors, residents, developers," he said, "we all want to see that the executed project reflects the highest, best standards that can be built."