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OPINION: Beltline visionary gets testy with opponent as rail up for vote

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5–7 minutes

OK, I'll admit it, I'm a hater. [I disagree with Beltline visionary](#) Ryan Gravel, so I suppose that categorizes me as a crank.

Gravel believes there should be a 22-mile loop of expensive light rail squeezed onto the Beltline. I, like a growing number of skeptical grouches, [believe it's a bad use of limited resources](#).

For a generation, Gravel has been viewed as a Local Treasure [after his 1999 Georgia Tech thesis](#) about reusing abandoned rail lines kicked off what became the Beltline. But who knew the plucky student-turned-urban designer had a mean streak in him?

Case in point is Katharine Chestnut, who had the temerity to place a sign outside her Inman Park home saying “No Streetcar Now,” a placard that pointed out the proposed line would cost \$200 million for two miles, cut down 150 trees and would get no federal funding. (Actually, it's \$230 million for 2.5 miles.)

Gravel, frustrated from his 20-year wait for Beltline streetcars, posted on Instagram a picture of Chestnut's home and the offending sign. Then he added her address, a schematic of where her home sat on the street and how much it was worth.

“Dear haters, at \$1m, y'all are going to be ok,” he posted. “The Atlanta #Beltline is supposed to be for everyone, not just you.”

When someone responded it's “not cool to put someone's home on social media,” Gravel shot back that it's “not cool of them to advocate for disenfranchising half of Atlanta.”

Credit: Courtesy photo

The debate continued raged online, with several people saying “Attaboy, Ryan!” and others saying, “Stop doxxing folks who disagree with you.”

I called Chesnut, who was still hopping mad.

“I was like, ‘Really, dude? What's your problem?’ It's bullying. He thinks he can get away with it,” she told me. “His paper was written like 20 years ago. It's not the Holy Grail!”

A decade ago, Chestnut moved to a street near what would become the Beltline so her daughter could attend Grady High School (now called Midtown High School). She later opened a co-working space business on the Beltline.

She says connecting the woefully underused downtown streetcar to the Beltline would have it running up several narrow blocks of residential streets and then would preclude construction of dedicated bike and scooter lanes on the trail. Those would

separate those walking from those rolling.

If you've walked the crowded East Beltline, where the streetcars would be, you know that you're taking your life — as well as your kids' and pets' lives — into your own hands.

Weeks ago, someone stole a sign from Chestnut's home and one from her business, so she replaced them with *two* signs at home and another zip-tied to a pole at work. I asked why she was targeted on social media, she said, "Because MARTA is getting to a point to spend some big money on the project and those who are pro (rail) are trying to silence those who disagree."

On Thursday, the MARTA board will almost certainly OK spending \$11.5 million to design the extension, some 2.5 miles of double track up to the Ponce City Market.

In April, MARTA board members voted 8-0, with two abstentions, to move the project forward. But several of those members expressed wariness, [held their noses and then voted in favor](#). Those with doubts reasoned that it's Atlanta's money (from a sales tax added in 2016) and Mayor Andre Dickens wants it, so who are we to stand in the way?

Credit: Curtis Compton

Dickens told me he has no doubts about the project. I understand. Mayors want to point to stuff they built after leaving office.

As for Gravel, he told me he "certainly didn't mean to bully (Chestnut)."

He noted the home's address was visible from the street (vaguely, I must add) and the signs were public. As to adding her address and the home value to his post, he said those came from the Zillow real estate site, so I might take it up with them.

Well, OK. Still comes off like a jerk move.

Gravel has carved out a nice career as The Beltline Guy and is irked by the long wait.

He says rail has been part of the plan from the start. He insists the Beltline — which has become a long linear park bordered by condos, offices and eateries — would not even exist without the planned rail component.

Perhaps, but it has done quite nicely without rail.

Credit: Special

The city, he said, has been "committed (to the rail design) for 18 years; we've had money for seven. We're dragging our feet. I'm frustrated."

"It comes to the question, 'Are they going to build the rail or not?'" Gravel said. "The city of Atlanta and thousands of people have for years have consistently said, 'This is what we want.' "

But is spending \$230 million for 2.5 miles of rail that might not get used good policy?

“We spend billions of dollars all the time and we don’t ask questions about benefits,” he said. He noted that building an interstate link from Macon to Dublin wouldn’t make sense without being part of the massive interstate system.

“Every mile of 285 doesn’t justify itself,” he said, adding, “You have to build the whole system,” meaning the whole 22 miles of the Beltline.

“Will, the first segment have the ridership? I don’t know,” Gravel said. “You have to start somewhere.”

My guess is if they build it — and they don’t come — we will have this discussion again and again well into the days when the former Georgia Tech student is a pensioner.