



CASE STUDY

Atlanta Beltline

Green City

Built Environment

Climate Issue

- Atlanta has experienced rapid growth since the 1990s, leading to urban sprawl, car dependence, and a lack of public transit connectivity.
- Increasing access to multi-modal, low-carbon transportation options can mitigate the climate impacts of Atlanta's sprawling urban form.
- Many neighborhoods, particularly low-income communities and communities of color, lack access to green space.
- Connected parks and green infrastructure can increase access and improve climate resiliency for surrounding neighborhoods by reducing urban heat and flood risk.

Political, Social, and Institutional Triggers

- Rapid urban expansion in the 1960s and 1970s led to the construction of highways and freight rail lines that carved through historically Black neighborhoods, reinforcing segregation, disinvestment, and spatial inequities.
- Unchecked growth has produced a sprawling urban form and high levels of car dependence. By the early 2000s, $\frac{3}{4}$ of Atlanta's workers lived and worked in the suburbs.
- In 1999, Georgia Tech graduate student Ryan Gravel proposed the idea of transforming defunct rail lines into a multi-use, connected system of trails, transit, and public space.
- With community support and grassroots organizing, the Atlanta City Council passed legislation to formally establish the Atlanta Beltline initiative in 2005.

The Atlanta Beltline initiative was launched in 2005 to transform a 22-mile loop of defunct freight rail into connected green space, transit, housing, and economic opportunity.

More than 2 million residents benefit from 24 miles of trails, 470+ acres of green space, 4,200+ affordable housing units and 29,000+ jobs.

The project serves as a model for urban redevelopment, demonstrating how cities can transform existing infrastructure into sustainable, multi-use public space.

Including the Excluded

The Atlanta Beltline reconnects 45 historically fragmented and industrial neighborhoods. This has improved access to public green space and catalyzed inclusive economic development.

- By expanding opportunity for active recreation, outdoor gathering, and everyday movement, the Beltline has improved public health and mental well-being.
- Over time, the project has been responsive to community concerns about affordability and gentrification, implementing programs to ensure that long-term residents benefit from economic development.
- Initiatives to promote affordable housing include inclusionary zoning, a Legacy Resident Retention Program, and an Affordable Housing Trust Fund, among others.
- The city has developed programs to support small businesses, particularly women- and minority-owned businesses, as well as workforce development initiatives.

Enabling Factors

Strong governance institutions and a robust community engagement process have contributed to the sustained success of the Atlanta Beltline over the last two decades.

- Atlanta Beltline Inc. (ABI) serves as a dedicated, quasi-government agency charged with implementing the Beltline project. ABI plays a key role in facilitating collaboration across city agencies and external partners.
- The Beltline has been funded through multiple long-term sources, including a Tax Allocation District (TAD) which captures increases in property tax revenues in the surrounding areas.
- From public and private sources, \$776+ million has been invested, catalyzing \$10 billion in private development.
- Public participation has driven the planning and development process from the beginning, building trust and establishing strong partnerships through ongoing community engagement and transparency.
- Community engagement has been institutionalized through legislative mandates, including the creation of a Citizen Participation Framework.

The Atlanta Beltline was a 2025-2026 finalist for the WRI Ross Center Prize for Cities, a global award celebrating and spotlighting transformative urban change. Information was self-reported by finalists. Learn more at prizeforcities.org, wri.org/cities, and yse.to/atlantabeltline.



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Ongoing Barriers to Success

Affordability concerns and risk of displacement

- Some communities have been distrustful of the initiative, raising concerns about gentrification and displacement.
- Mechanisms to deliver affordable housing were not in place in the early years of the project. Property values rose significantly along the Beltline corridor, contributing to displacement in low-income and Black communities.
- In 2018, the city implemented inclusionary zoning requirements for new multi-family developments nearby.
- A Legacy Resident Retention Program was established to provide property tax assistance to long-time homeowners.

Funding gaps

- The Beltline was originally envisioned as a transit corridor, with 22 miles of light rail. Because of funding constraints, little progress has been made on the transit component.
- Additional investment is needed to achieve the full vision of low-carbon, multi-modal transportation.
- Increased construction costs during the pandemic delayed timelines for trail completion. In 2021, a Special Service District (SSD) was created to generate additional revenue through a levy on commercial properties.
- The TAD is set to expire in 2030, creating a need for long-term funding. Currently, the city is developing a proposal to extend the TAD to secure funding for transit initiatives.

Sustaining & Scaling Up

Strong institutional foundations and a collaborative governance structure have enabled the project to adapt to challenges and community concerns. It has been sustained and scaled up by:

Gaining public buy-in

- Engaging local communities in a dynamic, participatory planning process throughout the project lifecycle.
- Delivering tangible benefits through access to high-quality public spaces for recreation, art, and community use.
- Promoting inclusive economic development by helping local small businesses access affordable commercial space.
- Establishing programs to ensure affordability and prevent displacement of long-term residents.

Withstanding administrative turnover

- Developing collaborative multi-selectoral partnerships across government, businesses, and nonprofits.
- Securing stable funding through innovative financing mechanisms, combining public and private investment.

Scaling up, out, and across

- Accelerating public and political support for additional trail networks across Atlanta.
- Serving as a global reference point for sustainable urban transformation, inspiring cities across the U.S. and globally.

IN A NUTSHELL

- Urban sprawl and spatial inequities have created unequal access to green space and mobility in Atlanta.
- The Beltline has transformed underutilized infrastructure into a vibrant hub for recreation, active transportation, local businesses, and community programming.
- New green infrastructure and high-quality public spaces have delivered benefits for mental and physical health, economic development, and sustainable urban growth.
- Participatory planning and transparency have contributed to public buy-in and a strong sense of community ownership.

WHAT CAN YOUR CITY DO?

REIMAGINE how existing infrastructure can be retrofitted for sustainable, inclusive urban redevelopment.

INVEST in multi-use green infrastructure that combines parks, public space, and active transportation.

EXPLORE innovative funding strategies to drive investments in sustainable infrastructure.

ENGAGE communities in participatory planning and design to align projects with local needs.

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