

Downtown redesign: 'Green Line' vision has MARTA, GSU cast as key players

By Maria Saporta, Kevin Duffy

An ambitious new vision for an oft-forgotten stretch of downtown would create a linear park ringed by pedestrian-friendly development, stretching from the state Capitol area to Philips Arena.

The conceptual plan, unveiled Wednesday by Central Atlanta Progress, envisions massive commercial development near Philips and CNN Center on the west end of the 94-acre site, an overhaul of the Five Points MARTA station in the middle and new Georgia State student housing on the east, all connected by green space and walkways.

But it is only a concept — and one that would require actions by a host of public and private entities to become reality. And it's not the first concept. Some elements, such as a multimodal transportation hub for commuter trains and buses, have long been on planners' drawing boards without materializing.

Highlights of the so-called "Green Line" concept, presented to CAP's board Wednesday, include:

- > MARTA's headquarters moving next to its hub station at Five Points
- > Removing the above-ground structure of the Five Points station and replacing it with a plaza
- > Building 5,000 housing units just north of Underground Atlanta for Georgia State students
- > Developing the multimodal station next to a new MARTA headquarters building as a connecting point for commuter trains and regional and intercity buses
- > Creating a new street grid over the area now known as "the railroad gulch" that would carve out a dozen sites for office and retail space near CNN Center and Centennial Olympic Park
- > Redeveloping the street-level portion of Underground Atlanta to add larger buildings that would mix office and retail uses.
- > Connecting the entire corridor with 15 acres of green space and public plazas.

CAP, an association of downtown businesses, has long fretted over the area covered by the plan. It currently includes a jumble of elevated roads, train tracks and parking lots in the gulch on the west end; the current MARTA Five Points station that many feel has become a blight; Underground Atlanta; and the vacated original World of Coke attraction.

The group hopes the new concept can spur the type of green belt development that's worked around Centennial Olympic Park and triggered redevelopment plans along the Beltline, a 22-mile freight rail corridor that someday might be a loop of parks, trails and transit.

"Most of the property in this corridor is controlled by public entities," said A.J. Robinson, CAP's president. "If everyone can share the same vision, perhaps collectively we can get something done."

Stakeholders in the plan voice general support, but it's not clear if, when or how that will translate into action.

MARTA could play a crucial role in kick-starting the plan. The MARTA board already has discussed selling its Lindbergh headquarters and locating the agency at the nexus of both the North-South and East-West lines. The Green Line plan envisions a MARTA building on the site of a long-vacant property that once housed The Atlanta Constitution.

Beverly Scott, MARTA's new general manager, told the CAP board Wednesday that she plans to establish an office at the Five Points station soon.

"Five Points is our front door," said Scott, who wants the station cleaned up. "I'm not going to ask my customers to experience anything that I'm not ready to experience."

Scott said she supports moving MARTA's headquarters to Five Points and participating in development of a multimodal station.

"I love all of the big ideas," she said. "We have an opportunity to be part of something that would not just be good for MARTA, but for the city and the entire region."

It remains to be seen, however, if her enthusiasm translates into action by the transit agency.

GSU President Carl Patton said the university needs to build 500 units of student housing each year for 10 years. He said he supports a complex along the Green Line as long as GSU is not the only player transforming the area.

Dan O'Leary, the manager of Underground, the entertainment and retail complex in the middle of the Green Line area, said "the idea of connecting the whole east-west corridor is a good idea."

But its success, he said, will depend on how the overall plan jibes with each stakeholder's individual development plans.

"What's good for downtown is good for Underground," O'Leary said. "But we do also have to look at our property's specific needs."

Underground, for example, is considering several development scenarios. They include expanding the entertainment component and building residences as part of future mixed-use development.

"More and more housing needs retail," O'Leary said.

Greg Giornelli, the city of Atlanta's chief operating officer, said the city "stands ready to partner" with others to make the plan a reality. Specifically, Giornelli said the city "would wholeheartedly support" MARTA if it decides to move its headquarters downtown.

"The potential for another 5,000 GSU students living downtown is an incredible opportunity," he said, "and is probably the single most significant event that could change the daily character of downtown into a vibrant, active center."

Norfolk Southern owns the railroad gulch. The plan calls for filling it in with new streets and viaducts in much the way Atlantic Station has been built. But exactly how, and by whom, that would be done isn't spelled out.

C. Van Baker, Norfolk Southern's assistant vice president for real estate, declined to talk specifically about the property. But he said he was briefed on the Green Line concept and was "most impressed" because it "utilizes properties and venues ... mostly public that are now underutilized."

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution owns property adjacent to the gulch area. The AJC plans to shut down its printing operation on the site by the end of next year, but it has not yet decided what to do with that space.

As for the Green Line, Charles Parker, the newspaper's vice president for legal affairs, said "anything that would enhance the energy and vibrancy of downtown we would support, as long as it's in a manner that is consistent with community interests."

CAP paid HOK about \$100,000 to develop the Green Line plan.

Tom Bell, CEO of Cousins Properties and chairman of CAP's board, said the Green Line vision should be seen as a 10-year effort.

"The whole purpose of this is to get something to happen," said Bell, who cited a "developing need" for more urban projects. "This is a place to start the conversation, and it is a conversation we need to have."



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