

News Feature



All not quiet on the Beltline's southwestern front

Some are concerned that project overlooks low-income and elderly residents

By Thomas Wheatley

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Dr. Richard Bright folded his Beltline study-group handouts into a leather Bible case, zipped it shut and breathed a sigh of concern. The West End minister and health educator had voiced his opinion often during a meeting at the Atlanta Metropolitan College last week, much to the restrained chagrin of the consultants and moderators who hauled their maps and PowerPoint presentations from Midtown.

Bright, like many residents in southwest Atlanta, is concerned that the utopian vision of the 22-mile Beltline project overlooks the low-income and elderly residents, and will not provide long-term jobs for area residents after its construction.

"It's definitely gentrification," Bright says. "Property values have risen three times in some areas. Speculators have been buying up homes, and residents are scared because of the higher taxes. You're impacting the social and economical just to bring in people who'll pay higher taxes. That's not fair to a city."

A recent study released by nonprofit housing group Georgia Stand-Up concluded housing values in south and southwest Atlanta near the Beltline have risen sharply since the announcement of the project. Dan Immergluck, the Georgia Tech professor who did the study, suggests such proactive measures as implementing tax programs to ease the burden low-income homeowners near the area will face. Bright agreed and argued even further, proposing a tax "freeze" or exemption for all of metro Atlanta.

John O'Callaghan, president and CEO of the Atlanta Neighborhood Development Partnership, a nonprofit housing group, says residents' concerns are "incredibly reasonable." He says the success of the project will depend on whether current residents can have a stake in it. He adds that there are options for low-income residents, such as the city's oft-overlooked Housing Opportunity Fund – which provides \$75 million for rental and homeowner assistance – and hopes for a homestead-exemption increase to ease the property-tax burden. The Beltline plan earmarks 15 percent of TAD funds to go toward affordable housing, and an advisory board recently began work to manage the estimated \$240 million trust fund the earmark will generate.

Bright applauds the efforts but thinks more needs to be done to address the concerns of residents. "This could be a marvelous opportunity to develop comprehensive planning – not just a greenway – and segue all areas of life of the people," Bright says. "What I have seen so far is talk of putting up trees."

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