



Supporting Quality Public Transit in Atlanta

January 2018 Newsletter

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GEORGIA LEGISLATORS MULL TRANSIT OPTIONS

A University of Georgia poll conducted for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution suggests that 72% of Georgia voters want a dedicated state fund to expand mass transit. The state's current transit involvement is limited to subsidizing the Xpress regional bus system and making occasional grants to local transit agencies. But a legislative panel has spent the past year studying the possibility of a statewide transit plan, and as the Georgia General Assembly began its 2018 session, House Speaker David Ralston declared that transit legislation is more likely this year than even before. The study panel is expected to release its recommendations shortly. Some legislators argue that if the state starts providing regular funding to transit agencies, it should get more control over how those agencies operate. MARTA Chairman Robbie Ashe recently suggested that if the state's funding comes in the form of capital grants, it could exercise sufficient control simply by deciding which projects get funded.



A REMEDY OVERLOOKED

In addition to transit funding and governance, another issue facing the Georgia General Assembly this year is the steady decline of rural Georgia's population and economy. A number of remedies have been proposed. One plan would even give tax breaks to people willing to move into rural counties. Gov. Nathan Deal wants to spend \$25 million to expand and improve small-town airports. But an obvious strategy is being overlooked. More people would move to rural Georgia if they could maintain easy access to Atlanta and its economic opportunities. More than ten years ago, the state Department of Transportation developed a plan for regional passenger trains linking Atlanta with smaller cities across the state. If the legislature had funded the plan, small-town Georgians would be able to jump on a train today and return home by evening. And Atlantans would find it easier to travel and spend money

outside the metro. With many parts of rural Georgia in deep decline, this plan is worth a second look.

DID MARTA FUMBLE THE POSTGAME?

UGA Bulldog fans were disappointed by the outcome of the College Football Championship game at Mercedes-Benz Stadium. There also was disappointment over postgame MARTA service. Even though MARTA ran extra trains, there were complaints that trains and platforms were overcrowded, crowd control was inadequate, and malfunctioning doors stalled departures. MARTA said the doors wouldn't close because riders were blocking them, and in some cases using emergency releases to open them back up. Even so, the transit agency apologized for the inconvenience, adding, "Each and every one of MARTA's 5,000 employees remain committed to getting it right."



These railcars were state of the art when MARTA service began in 1979. Now MARTA is making plans to replace them (Bob Krone photo).

MARTA: RAILCAR CONTRACT WITHIN SIX MONTHS

Regardless of whether mechanical malfunctions played any role in service issues after the College Football Championship, MARTA is getting closer to replacing most of its aging train fleet. It's been soliciting bids for 250 new railcars, and Board Chairman Robbie Ashe says the agency expects to award a contract within six months. MARTA's current heavy-rail fleet consists of 316 cars, some of them dating from the beginning of service in 1979. Ashe is promising that the new cars will be more comfortable, with better heating and air conditioning. There's also been talk of equipping some of the cars with pantographs, allowing them to pick up power from overhead wires instead of the third rail. That could make it easier to extend MARTA rail service into Clayton County without the expense of an elevated track.



Smaller, more maneuverable buses provide service on Marta's Community Circulator network. (MARTA photo).

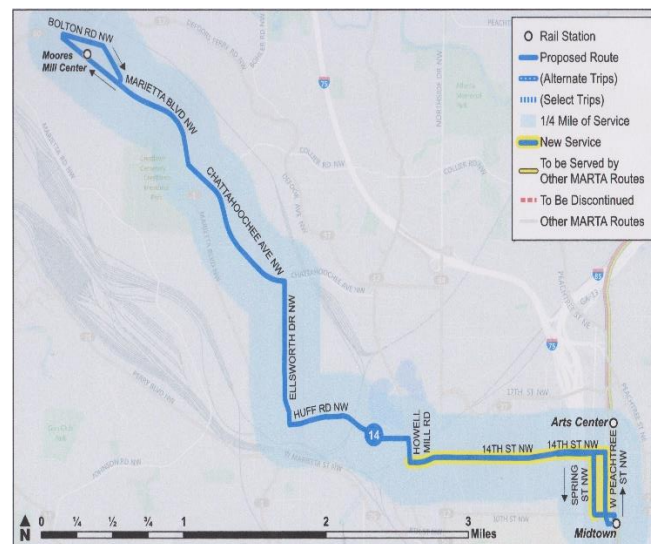
MARTA TO EXPAND CIRCULATOR NETWORK

MARTA plans to expand its Community Circulator bus service, launched last year to provide "last-mile" connections linking major rail and bus routes with lower-density neighborhoods. The service uses downsized 23-seat buses –

more fuel-efficient and easier to maneuver on narrow residential streets -- to shuttle riders to and from connections with the rest of the MARTA system. Community Circulator buses carry route numbers in the 800's, and three such routes already exist: Route 800 in Clayton County, Route 823 in DeKalb County and Route 865 in Atlanta. Pending final approval, MARTA plans to create five more Community Circulator routes on April 14th. Four of them would replace existing standard bus routes: Route 13 would become 813 Atlanta Student Movement Boulevard; Route 53 would become 853 Collier Heights; Route 56 would become 856 Baker Hills/Wilson Hill Meadows; Route 67 would become 867 Harland Terrace/Dixie Hills. MARTA also plans a new Circulator route – 850 -- linking the H.E. Holmes rail station with the Collier Ridge Apartments.

OTHER MARTA ROUTE CHANGES

MARTA also proposes some other revisions on April 14. The biggest change involves Route 1 from Moore's Mill Center in northwest Atlanta. Instead of running to the North Avenue rail station, it would run to the West End station, with a new Route 14 covering portions of Route 1's former alignment, and providing new service on 14th Street before ending up at the Midtown station. In a similar destination-swap, Route 26 from Bolton Road would run to Five Points instead of the North Avenue station, and conversely, Route 51 from the H.E. Holmes station would run to North Avenue instead of Five Points. There's also a significant change in Clayton County, where Route 181 buses running between Hartsfield-Jackson Airport and Riverdale would use Washington Road instead of Roosevelt Highway. MARTA also plans more minor revisions to some other routes. You can find the full list at <http://www.itsmarta.com/public-hearings-meetings.aspx>.



MARTA's new Route 14 would cover part of Route 1's old alignment while bringing new service to 14th Street on its way to the Midtown rail station (MARTA map).



(Brightline photo)

A “BRIGHTLINE” FOR ATLANTA?

Brightline passenger train service began in Florida this month, and Atlanta may have a special stake in how things work out. After years of planning, the sleek new trains began rolling between West Palm Beach and Fort Lauderdale on Jan. 13. The line is to be extended to Miami this spring, and it’s eventually supposed to go to Orlando and possibly Jacksonville. Unlike other U.S. passenger train lines, Brightline is owned and operated by a private, for-profit company that thinks it can succeed without government funding. A Brightline official told a Florida newspaper that the company is interested in expanding the concept to other routes, including Atlanta-Charlotte. The only current passenger train on that route is Amtrak’s Crescent, which stops at Charlotte in the middle of the night during its overnight trips to and from the Northeast. There has long been talk of establishing high-speed Atlanta-Charlotte passenger rail service, but progress has been slow. The Georgia Department of Transportation was supposed to complete a study last year, but at last report, the release has been delayed until later this year. Any line from Atlanta could connect with a high-speed line planned for the Charlotte-Washington, DC corridor, which in turn would connect with Amtrak’s Northeast Corridor to New York and Boston.

NOT JUST A “LOCAL PROJECT”

Despite President Trump's campaign promise to repair America's infrastructure, the Trump Administration has handed a severe setback to plans to repair and expand a vital rail link to New York City. It's backed out of an Obama Administration agreement to help fund a new railroad tunnel under the Hudson River. In a letter announcing the decision, the Federal Transit Administration referred to the tunnel as a "local project." But in addition to hosting New Jersey commuter trains and Amtrak’s Northeast Corridor service, the tunnel has a very national role. It's used by a number of long-distance trains including all four Amtrak trains serving Georgia: the Crescent, the Palmetto, the Silver Star and the Silver Meteor.

TRANSPORTATION CAMP SOUTH 2018

Transportation Camp is returning to Atlanta. Transportation Camp South 2018 will run from 9 am to 5 pm Feb. 24 at Georgia Tech. Co-sponsored by CfPT, the annual event brings planners, scholars and activists together for a day of learning, debating, connecting and creating. While the day kicks off with scheduled presentations, later sessions are proposed and conducted by conference participants. Registration is \$25 (\$15 for students), and it includes a light breakfast, a box lunch and a T-shirt. You can learn more at TransportationCamp South on Facebook.



About 100 people attended Transit Camp South last year (Jim Dexter photo).

ALL STOPS

A new 1.7-mile light-rail line has started service on existing tracks between downtown Denver and that city’s Five Points neighborhood... Three cars derailed as Amtrak's Silver Meteor was backing into the Savannah station early this month; nobody was hurt.... The huge snowstorm that pummeled the East Coast earlier this month forced Savannah’s Chatham Area Transit to suspend bus service for five days.... MARTA finances improved for the fifth straight year in 2017, with income exceeding expenses by \$34 million... MARTA’s Interim General Manager and CEO Elizabeth O’Neill says crime was down 14%, "making MARTA one of the safest large transit systems in the country"... Former MARTA senior director of operations Joseph Erves has been sentenced to 33 months in prison for his role in a false invoice scheme... MARTA recently conducted an online survey to get public input on a proposed transit oriented development next to the East Lake station... Metra Transit in Columbus is considering route changes to increase efficiency... Augusta Transit Director Patrick Stephens has announced his resignation, citing an unspecified job opportunity elsewhere... Southeastern Stages has closed its 67-year-old Augusta bus station and moved its stop to Augusta Transit’s Broad Street bus terminal... Megabus has discontinued its Atlanta- Chattanooga-Knoxville-Washington, DC route.

Citizens for Progressive Transit

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