



Supporting Quality Public Transit in Atlanta

November 2018 Newsletter

www.cfpt.org

LEFT AT THE STATION: THE AMAZON TRAIN PULLS AWAY



The DC Metro system was one factor in Amazon's decision to establish a corporate campus in northern Virginia.

A headline in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution summed it up: “Amazon HQ2 shows taste for urban transit.” Atlanta’s transit deficit in general and its lack of commuter rail service in particular appear to have been major factors in Amazon’s recent decision to take its “HQ2” projects elsewhere. The giant online retailer chose New York City and suburban Washington, DC for huge new corporate campuses, and its press release emphasized the fact that both sites are adjacent to commuter rail service, as well as other transit options including multiple subway lines in New York and three heavy-rail stations in suburban Washington. Amazon made no mention of highway access as a significant factor in either of the decisions. Even the so-called “consolation prize” in the HQ2 sweepstakes, an operations center awarded to Nashville, TN, is located near the downtown terminal for Nashville’s Music City Star commuter rail line

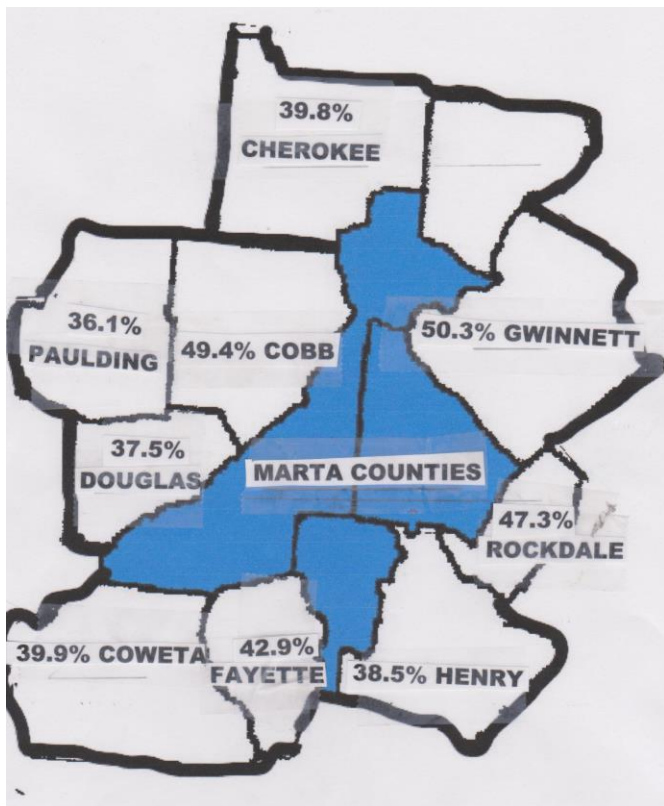
TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

When the HQ2 competition was first announced, Georgia tried to compete by offering plans for future transit expansion, but those last-minute promises were no match for the existing infrastructure in the winning cities. “We got the transit game,” Georgia House Speaker David Ralston told the Journal-Constitution, “But we couldn’t go back and catch up.” Is the lesson learned? Georgia needs to redouble its efforts so that its transit infrastructure is in place when the next big employer comes calling. Ben Brantley of the Georgia Department of Economic Development told the AJC: “A lot of the things Amazon was looking for are things other companies are looking for.”

VOTE PRESERVES COMMUTER RAIL OPTION

Metro Atlanta has been talking about commuter rail for decades. There’s nothing to show for it so far except a drawer

full of consultants’ studies and unfunded plans. But a recent decision by the Atlanta City Council will at least leave the door open. It involved subsidies for the construction of a mini-city above the downtown “gulch” where Atlanta’s major railroad lines connect. Preliminary plans called for parking spaces where a commuter rail station and boarding platforms would have to be located, but CfPT’s David Emory and other observers raised the alarm, and thankfully, council members listened. They approved the subsidies, but included an amendment requiring the developer to leave room for a train station. That’s still no guarantee, of course, that any station will be built, but at least the possibility has been preserved. Atlanta Journalist and commentator Maria Saporta, who has been following the story, says a downtown station would give the mini-city a soul, and she’s calling on MARTA to extend a its planned Clayton County commuter rail line to the gulch. If Georgia is sincere about turning its transit promises into reality, it may finally be time to dust off Atlanta’s commuter rail plans and turn them into reality.



Based on ARC figures, this map shows the percentages of transit tax supporters in “ATL” counties outside the MARTA service area (Forsyth County, on the upper right, was not included in the survey).

“THE ATL” TAKES SHAPE; PROSPECTS UNCERTAIN

All 16 board members have now been selected for the ATL regional transit authority, created earlier this year by the Georgia General Assembly. They include such well-known figures as Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, DeKalb County CEO Michael Thurmond and Gwinnett County Chair Charlotte Nash as well as other political leaders, business executives and transportation experts. The board will face a complicated task. It’s charged with creating a coordinated transit system across up to 13 counties, but it’s not clear yet how many non-MARTA counties can pass the sales taxes required for participation. The Atlanta Regional Council’s 2018 Metro Speaks survey indicates that 49.9% of all metro residents are willing to pay more taxes to fund transit, but the exact percentages vary from county to county. The only non-MARTA county where a majority favored or strongly favored a transit tax was Gwinnett, which is already scheduled to hold a MARTA referendum in March. Beyond Gwinnett, percentages dropped. Approval was just below the 50% mark in Cobb County, at 49.4%. And percentages continue to drop as you get farther from the urban core: 47.3% in Rockdale County, 42.9% in Fayette, 39.9% in Coweta, 39.8% in Cherokee, 38.5% in Henry, 37.5% in Douglas and only 36.1% in Paulding County. It’s likely that support for a transit tax will grow as outer-collar counties become more urban. And counties that turn down ATL participation at first will be able

to revisit that decision in future years. But if the ARC survey is accurate, the initial ATL service area may not be that much bigger than the current MARTA service area.

BIG PLANS FOR SMALL TOWNS

The study panel that laid the groundwork for the ATL legislation earlier this year is now turning its attention to rural areas outside the Atlanta region. The House Commission on Transit Governance and Funding is expected to release some recommendations before the new General Assembly convenes in January. The Journal-Constitution reports that the possibilities include public-private partnerships and direct transportation subsidies for the unemployed, possibly funded by the state hotel-motel tax. In some places, help can’t come quickly enough. A budget crisis almost forced Macon Transit to shut down earlier this year. In Gainesville, planners are worried that population growth will soon make Hall County intelligible for federal rural transportation funding, and they’re looking at the possibility of replacing some or all of Hall Area Transit’s operations with ride-sharing services.

“MORE MARTA” PLANNING CONTINUES

Even though MARTA’s Board of Directors recently finalized a project list for the City of Atlanta’s More MARTA initiative, many of the details remain unresolved. As reported in last month’s CfPT newsletter, the plan includes new light-rail lines, bus rapid transit routes and other projects, but many finer points still have to be worked out, including which projects will have priority during the 40-year span of the initiative. MARTA has scheduled a series of community discussions across Atlanta, starting off with a Nov. 27 session from 6:30 pm to 8 pm at the John C. Burdine Neighborhood Center on Lakewood Way. Other sessions will take place from 6:30 pm to 8 pm on Nov. 29 at St. Mark AME Church on Campbellton Road, and from 6 pm to 7:30 pm Dec. 3 at the Northwest Library at Scott’s Crossing on Perry Boulevard. There also will be an 8:30 am to 10 am session on Dec. 15 at Morningside Presbyterian Church on Morningside Drive.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Atlanta Journal-Constitution columnist Bill Torpy reports that some residents of Atlanta’s West End neighborhood are unhappy about MARTA’s decision to change the name of its West End rail station to the Juanita Jones and Ralph David Abernathy at West End station. The name change would honor the late local civil rights leader and his wife, and the West End station is adjacent to Ralph David Abernathy Boulevard, so there is indeed a geographical connection. But critics think the deemphasis of the West End name diminishes the neighborhood, and they want MARTA to reconsider. Despite recently setting up a committee to draft a uniform policy for renaming stations, no policy has been released yet. Some

current station names are outdated: there is no longer a fort at the Lakewood/Fort McPherson stop, the Atlanta Civic Center property is being redeveloped, the Georgia Dome has been imploded and the Philips Arena is now the State Farm Arena. But renaming a station should be a rare and cautious practice. A station name's main purpose is to help riders – especially new riders – find their destinations, and any deviation from a geographical name should be considered carefully. Hopefully, MARTA will wait to develop a formal policy before any other stations get new names.

MARTA'S NEXT STOP: THE SUPER BOWL



MARTA'S Dome/GWCC/Philips Arena/CNN Center station will be a major focus during the upcoming Super Bowl.

With Atlanta scheduled to host the Super Bowl Feb. 3, MARTA is working to prevent a recurrence of the service problems after last year's College Football Championship Game. MARTA has admitted underestimating demand, leading to overcrowded trains and platforms and service delays. MARTA recently held a pre-Super Bowl pep rally for employees, and it participated in an emergency preparedness exercise at the Dome/GWCC/Philips Arena/CNN Center station outside Mercedes Benz Stadium. While there are continuing concerns about MARTA workforce vacancies, the transit agency is bringing in extra officers from other transit agencies, and it plans to have an employee standing outside each train door after the big game. MARTA trains will be operating 24 hours a day from Friday morning to early Tuesday morning on Super Bowl weekend.

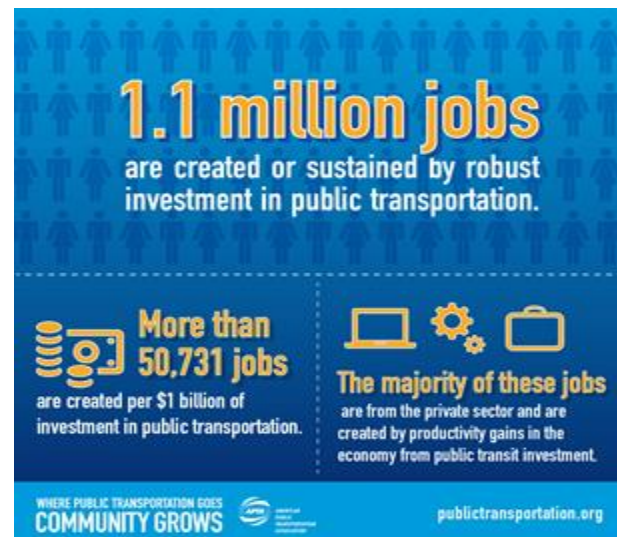
ALL STOPS

Amtrak is reporting the lowest operating loss in its history, \$168 million in fiscal 2018... Brightline, the privately-owned passenger rail company that launched service between Miami and Fort Lauderdale earlier this year, is forming a strategic alliance with



Florida's Brightline will become Virgin Trains USA (Brightline photo).

British tycoon Richard Branson's Virgin Group, changing its name to Virgin Trains USA.... The Florida Dept. of Transportation is recommending a two -mile extension of Miami's Metrorail heavy-rail system to Miami Dade College... Milwaukee has opened a new two-mile downtown streetcar line, and El Paso, TX has launched a 4.8-mile streetcar line... Atlanta's economic development agency will provide \$15 million to help develop affordable housing near MARTA stations... An initiative to turn the area around the Chamblee MARTA station into a vibrant walking neighborhood has been recognized with an exceptional merit award from the Atlanta Regional Commission... MARTA has launched a seven-year, \$133 million track upgrade project... The family of the MARTA contractor hit by a train at the Medical Center station last June is suing the transit agency for negligence... A would-be rider who chased after a MARTA bus on Buford Highway was killed when he slipped beneath the wheels... 14 riders reported injuries after a car hit a MARTA bus at the Flat Shoals Road exit from I-20... A woman who was injured getting out of a MARTA Mobility van has won an \$18.8 million court award... Accusing the private company that operates MARTA Mobility paratransit services of failing to hire enough minority and female subcontractors, MARTA has launched a search for a replacement... The U.S. Transportation Security Administration has given MARTA its Gold Standard Award for security enhancement.



Citizens for Progressive Transit

Box 56306, Atlanta GA 30343

info@cfpt.org

Follow us on Twitter and Facebook!