

## **Session 4: What Would it Take to Connect All of Greater Seattle’s Neighborhoods with Walking and Biking Trails?**

*Summary of Proceeding by Samuel E. Cayton*

**Abstract:** Major U.S. cities have endeavored, independently of each other, over the past several decades to create greenway systems connecting residents and visitors with neighborhoods and attractions, increasing opportunities for walking and biking and reducing their reliance on vehicular traffic. Atlanta’s BeltLine—a twenty-two-mile loop of historic railroad right-of-ways encircling the city’s downtown and midtown areas, seeks to reinvent the city if transformed into a green corridor—is perhaps one of the best examples of how a Seattle Greenway might be accomplished (although Atlanta’s concerted efforts through BeltLine.org are still considered a “work in progress” after fifteen years). The mostly abandoned rail corridor connects 45 diverse neighborhoods, including many of the city’s most underserved by parks. A December 15, 2004, Trust for Public Land (TPL) report showed that revitalizing the BeltLine would provide an extraordinary opportunity for economic development—including affordable housing—and to connect communities through green space. The Highline, in Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood, and Chicago’s 606, are more-recent examples of such endeavors to integrate greenspaces into densely populated urban areas. What are the political and legal steps the greater Seattle area would need to take to develop a greenway in the Emerald City that connects well-established, densely populated neighborhoods to employment centers and recreational amenities, such as parks and shorelines?

### **I. The Atlanta Beltline**

*Featured Speaker: Art Lansing<sup>1</sup>*

#### **About the Atlanta Beltline**

The Atlanta Beltline—an in-progress, transitory “greenway”<sup>2</sup> intended to link neighborhoods surrounding the Greater Atlanta metropolitan area with walking and biking trails—was initially conjured in a master’s thesis by Ryan Gravel<sup>3</sup> in 1999. The Atlanta Beltline, once finished, will be a multiuse greenway that incorporates walking trails, biking trails, and a

<sup>1</sup> Art Lansing received a juris doctor degree from Seattle University School of Law in 2020 and is an entering master’s student at the University of Washington’s College of Built Environments, in the Class of 2022.

<sup>2</sup> The term “greenway” combines the words “green” from “green belt” and “way.” A green belt is a land use designation to retain areas that are typically underdeveloped, and a way is a parkway thoroughfare usually developed to make a more scenic roadway.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan Gravel earned his master’s degree in Urban Planning from Georgia Institute of Technology and later served on the board of the Atlanta Beltline Partnership. Gravel eventually resigned from the board after enduring criticism regarding the project’s failure to deliver on affordable housing projections and his lack of efforts in promoting equity and inclusivity.

comprehensive light rail system throughout the region. The land that will be used for the Atlanta Beltline comprises public land, which will be developed from abandoned railways, rights-of-way, and parklands, as well as privately-owned land adjacent to this public land.

The Atlanta, Georgia, metropolitan region is enormous, expanding 8,376 square miles, an area larger than the state of New Jersey. One-tenth of the population lives within the Atlanta city limits and the rest lives in the remaining area around Interstate-25. With an existing population of 6,020,364 as of 2019 according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of the greater Atlanta area is expected to grow by at least 2.5 million people by the year 2040.

In his thesis, Gravel initially posited that Atlanta should develop a twenty-two-mile light rail system surrounding the Atlanta metropolitan area, using abandoned railways and other lands suitable for developing a greenway. Through his thesis, Gravel sought to promote connectivity among the city's many diverse neighborhoods. Since the publication of his thesis more than two decades ago, construction of the Atlanta Beltline has progressed substantially, developing to include a more expansive plan with many forms of transit. The Atlanta Beltline project was started by the Atlanta Beltline Partnership, a non-profit created in 2005 with the mission of implementing the Atlanta Beltline as inspired by Gravel's thesis. To jumpstart implementation, the Atlanta Beltline Partnership expanded transportation by developing light rail and transit on abandoned railways outside the city limits, which serve as the spine of the greenway. By 2017, the eastern and western portions of the Beltline were finished, and some hiking trails connect what is already completed.

Funding for the Atlanta Beltline primarily came from bonds (\$143 million) and the City of Atlanta (\$85 million); however, the project also pooled resources from private sector grants, other municipal government grants, tax allocated districts (TADs), public schools, Fulton County, and other sources. Initially, the Atlanta Beltline did not have access to public funds for acquisitions of real property but was eventually granted approximately \$32 million by the Georgia Office of the Trust for Public Land. While the Beltline's funding sources have been robust and eclectic, the greenway initiative has also faced various funding barriers. For example, although the Metropolitan Atlanta Rail Transit Authority (MARTA) allocated \$570 million to develop rail alongside the Beltline, it failed to secure additional state and federal funding and therefore will need to rely on more TAD funding over the next two decades. Additionally, because Georgia's Constitution prohibits gasoline taxes, the Atlanta Beltline is further restricted as to how it can earn the funds necessary to complete the project. So far, \$4.4 billion has been spent on Atlanta's Beltline and most of these expenditures have been for transit (\$2.2 billion), parks (\$553 million), and affordable housing (\$242 million).

## **Benefits and Challenges**

As Mr. Gravel's thesis projected and the current developments have shown, the Atlanta Beltline has provided many benefits to the Atlanta metropolitan area, including:

- increased mobility;
- increased accessibility and connectivity;
- improved and expanded greenspaces;
- expanded interactive spaces;

- development of underdeveloped areas; and
- development of new properties with a strong emphasis on affordable housing.

However, the Beltline has also faced various challenges over the years. Apart from the various funding challenges mentioned above, the Atlanta Beltline initiative has also faced legal challenges such as breach of contract and state constitutional issues. The project also sheds light on issues of land use, gentrification, and economic inequality. Moreover, physical landmarks and barriers, including Armor, CXS Hulseley Yard, and Bill Kennedy Way, stand to jeopardize the greenway's ability to effectively and efficiently connect the Atlanta metro area.

Today, the Beltline is managed by Atlanta Beltline, Inc. (ABI) – a separate entity from its non-profit counterpart formed in 2006 by Atlanta's Development Authority to further coordinate the development process with private and public organizations, including departments within the city of Atlanta. While unfinished, the southern portion of the greenway is making substantial progress and private developers are starting to develop private properties on the eastern portion, including condos, townhouses, and multifamily residences. Light rail has still not been implemented but is in the process of developing. However, reliable sources of funding and other barriers continue to stall the Beltline's advancement completion.

## **II. Looking to a Seattle Greenway**

Seattle certainly has the potential to prosper by fostering greater connectivity within and across the city, particularly if that connectivity supports pedestrian and bike transit. If Seattle wants to develop a greenway of its own, it needs to consider the various benefits and challenges demonstrated by the Atlanta Beltline's progress. Such considerations would include the benefits of community buy-in, the effects of gentrification, and the implications around land use and public safety. If the benefits of a Seattle greenway are effectively conveyed to the people, then public opinion will strive for the city to push for its implementation. To develop a workable plan for a greenway, advocates in Seattle should be patient but simultaneously determined in their efforts.

## **III. The Proposed Seattle Greenway: A Panel Discussion**

*Moderated by Rob Turner; featuring Jim Langford, Kristen Lohse, Claire Martini, & Art Lansing*

At the top of the panel, Moderator Rob Turner<sup>4</sup> reiterated that the Atlanta Beltline provides many lessons for Seattle. In particular, Seattle should look to how the Beltline promotes connectivity, determine what neighborhoods to connect, and decide on what modes of transit to utilize. In his opening remarks, Turner also stated that Seattle must also remain conscious of its history of built-in racism as it plans to develop a greenway. In 2019, Seattle developed a bicycle master plan, set to roll out in approximately five-year increments. This bicycle master plan could be supplemented by a Seattle Greenway project by promoting grassroots neighborhood initiatives in collaboration with the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) to interconnect the city.

<sup>4</sup> Rob Turner is the Founder Member of [InTown Legal](#), a law firm in Atlanta, Georgia that specializes in commercial real estate.

Turner asked Jim Langford<sup>5</sup> about his work with MillionMile Greenway in Atlanta. Langford mentioned that zoning regulations greatly influenced the final steps of the project because they have erected barriers to the development of such greenways. He recommended that the main goal of a greenway project should be to find the best opportunity and then assess the zoning considerations after the fact, to determine whether the opportunity is feasible. Additionally, Langford touched on the process of using \$32 million in Trust for Public Land funds to assist in the acquisition of property for the Beltline. In order to push through the bureaucratic and expensive hurdles required to implement a comprehensive transit system, he stressed the importance of building strong political momentum.

Kristen Lohse<sup>6</sup> discussed the land use and other property issues around Seattle's Burke Gillman Trail. Lohse commented that the trail presents a unique land use challenge due to its navigation through industrial land in the Ballard area. While Ballard's industrial uses are in decline, its continuity is very important to many locals. Ballard exposes a missing link in the trail because the presence of small businesses and other geographic barriers make the development of a direct bike line difficult. Lohse further commented on the controversy of using eminent domain to acquire land for a trail. Forceful private property acquisitions can often be contentious, delaying transit projects with litigation. However, the Burke Gillman Trail's developments in Ballard have successfully looked to creating bike lanes on Market Street and have already started construction. Ultimately, Lohse believes that trails are very important for greenways because they promote mobility.

Claire Martini<sup>7</sup> provided additional insight into Seattle's bike transit development by explaining her work with the Leafline Trails Coalition, an alliance between several bicycle clubs in the Greater Seattle area who have all come together to advocate for trails as tools for promoting health, mobility, and community. Through its efforts, Leafline uses its voice to demonstrate the demand for new trails in the area. Martini articulated that the biggest missing piece in Seattle's transit system is an effective mode of connectivity between Seattle's most populous neighborhoods. She stressed that small streets alone are not enough to get people from one place to another across Seattle. Martini further opined that trails are a great way to remedy these connectivity issues, but a uniform vision about why trails matter is needed to promote trail development.

Art Lansing provided insight into areas in Seattle that could benefit from a greenway expansion. Lansing mentioned that the Expedia headquarters in the Interbay neighborhood would benefit from connector trails, and Lake Washington Boulevard would benefit from a "pedestrian-focused greenway." In closing, Lansing declared that finding local community heroes to advocate for transportation needs is a huge piece to the movement.

<sup>5</sup> Jim Langford is the President of the [MillionMile Greenway](#), a non-profit that guides local communities in Atlanta and across the state of Georgia on how to develop greenways. He managed the Georgia Office of the Trust for Public Land, which played a seminal role in providing funding for the earliest land acquisitions supporting the Atlanta Beltline project.

<sup>6</sup> Kristen Lohse is a senior urban designer at [Toole Design Group, LLC](#) and primarily focuses on transit issues in the West Seattle neighborhood of Seattle, Washington.

<sup>7</sup> Claire Martini is the manager and one of the founding members of the [Leafline Trails Coalition](#).

## IV. Discussion and Critique

*Written by Samuel Cayton*

This section of the SITIE Symposium offered a unique perspective on the legal and geographic issues concerning intracity transportation. Lansing's overview of Atlanta's greenway expansions was very informative and compelling. The Atlanta Beltline is a particularly innovative transit project due to its many different implementation schemes, as well as its combined state action with private participation. Where many municipalities may only dream of large-scale intracity transportation expansions, the Atlanta Beltline has shown the way. The panel was right to point out that Seattle's unique geography and culture can provide a model template upon which an urban greenway can prosper. Collectively, the panel had a strong, cohesive message about the benefit of a Seattle greenway expansion, all while being candid in considering the challenges and roadblocks that would come with such an expansion. Each member's contribution was meaningful.

This session would have been made more complete by a deeper discussion about the downsides of greenway expansions, particularly regarding displacement and gentrification. Even though enhanced connectivity through expanding greenways should be the collective goal within municipalities, such connectivity must be reconciled with the impacts of such expansions.<sup>8</sup>

If issues such as zoning, displacement, and eminent domain are only generally referenced in the political discussion, then the consequences will be hidden from public view. What will happen to the families who are forced to move to make room for a new greenway?<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, could the Atlanta Beltline serve any benefits to the community that may balance out the negative effects of gentrification? The panel could have filled this hole in the discussion by including a panel member (or two) with a housing justice advocacy background. These panelists could have helped to specifically elaborate on how the greenway has impacted low-income communities in Atlanta or could impact low income communities in Seattle.

Furthermore, the lack of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) on the panel meant that very important perspectives were missing from this important dialogue. Relying solely on white academia to decide how marginalized groups will be affected by new ideas does not provide a complete or comprehensive picture of how communities will be impacted. Although the panelists had good intentions throughout the segments and pointed to gentrification as an issue, the entire session's message was skewed to favor the interests of urban planning and development, which has primarily benefited white people and harmed the BIPOC community.

Moreover, the panelists spoke at length about expanding bike trails and bike lanes in Seattle, yet failed to give attention to other forms of transit that Seattle residents could utilize. Over the past decade, Seattle has become a much more bike-friendly city to live in as evidenced by the great expansions of bike lanes in the region. For example, Seattle has made great use of bike lane expansions in many neighborhoods, including Roosevelt, Westlake, South Lake Union, the Denny Triangle, and others, that have promoted connectivity within the region. Given these major

<sup>8</sup> See Amber Cratsenberg's Final Report: *Building a Greenway in Seattle: Environmental Gentrification Impacts*, submitted on July 14, 2020, *infra* Appendix A at 97. In her Final Report, Cratsenberg defines "Environmental Gentrification" as: "A process in which cleaning up pollution or providing green amenities increases local property values and attracts wealthier residents to a previously polluted or disenfranchised neighborhood."

<sup>9</sup> See *Id.*

expansions, the notion that Seattle is in desperate need of further expansion of bike lanes, apart from finishing the Burke Gillman Trail, appears misguided.

As a suggestion, the panelists could have highlighted the Sound Transit Light Rail system as an existing means to promote connectivity here in Seattle. Like in Atlanta, biking and light rail advocates in Seattle have mutual goals and could benefit from collaborating in a uniform connectivity system. In 2016, voters approved the Sound Transit 3 (ST3) initiative, which would expand the light rail system to all corners of Seattle and beyond King County. However, ST3's future development is at risk of losing its allotted funds from the recently passed Initiative 976 (I-976) in 2019, which would cap car tab renewals at \$30. Was ST3's passage a victory for bike advocates in Washington or did it have no effect on their demands? If it was a victory, what advocacy efforts, if any, are underway to ensure that carless connectivity is not jeopardized by I976's impact on light rail expansions?<sup>10</sup>

Much like Atlanta, Seattle has abandoned tracks in neighborhoods such as Ballard and SoDo that could be converted to another light rail line or streetcar system (or Greenway component). Alternatively, Seattle could expand on its existing underground light rail lines to further capitalize on development while more easily avoiding zoning, land use, or eminent domain issues. Would Leafline or other advocacy groups be in favor of developing streetcars in these areas to supplement the efforts to expand bicycle trails?

<sup>10</sup> See Dana Carlisle's Final Report, *Equitable TOD: A Sound Transit Case Study*, *infra* Appendix A at 51, which addresses this issue.