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■ **COMMENTARY** ECONOMICS

# Atlanta's MARTA Expansion: An 8 Billion Dollar Step in the Right Direction

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Jim Galloway of the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* reports that Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) officials plan to ask state and local leaders to support an \$8 billion expansion of the city's rail line, which would include new lines from the Atlanta suburb Alpharetta to downtown Atlanta and to Hartsfield-Jackson Airport. Officials also plan to expand rail access along Interstate 20 to Emory University and the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Currently, MARTA has four rail lines that run in roughly two directions. The red and gold lines run north and south (with gold running northeast), while the blue and green lines run east and west. All together MARTA covers roughly fifty miles of rail and serves the entire city of Atlanta as well as Fulton and Dekalb counties. Including its bus service, MARTA serves 550,000 passengers each day, making it the ninth largest public transportation system in the United States.

The city of Atlanta is the poster child for urban sprawl, as nearly thirty surrounding counties are considered to be a part of its metropolitan area. While Atlanta's city center continues to experience urban revitalization and an influx of white residents, more low-income residents are escaping higher property taxes and expensive living within the city's perimeter and moving out to the suburbs. As a result, while the city center grows and improves, its neediest residents, many of whom have been displaced, are not benefiting from inner-city development projects and now lack access to transportation, which hinders their income mobility.

This evolving problem only begins to hint at why MARTA expansion could greatly improve Atlanta's infrastructure. Developing the rail line would address the city's severe traffic problem, cutting commute times and making the city more environmentally friendly—and perhaps more prepared to deal with weather emergencies. Overall, an expanded MARTA system would improve Atlanta by making it easier for residents and tourists to move around in the city and making them more willing to take full advantage of all Atlanta has to offer.

## Increased Economic Opportunity

MARTA's scrawny layout excludes major swaths of Atlanta's metro area—namely the northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest portions of the city. In these areas, commuters must rely on MARTA's unpredictable bus transport, which is often delayed by heavy traffic. With this reputation, ridership can hardly be expected to increase without significant overhaul and investment.

A more expansive, reliable rail system could draw major corporations to the city. Galloway points out that many corporations arriving in the metro region have chosen to build their offices near MARTA stations. In fact, a larger number of companies nationwide are choosing to build near public transit—a decision that is attractive to young professionals, since increased rail access minimizes their commute times and takes their cars off the road.

MARTA expansion could also increase employment opportunities for Atlanta's working class, which would improve the quality of life for many Atlanta residents and reduce Atlanta's searing socioeconomic divide. The poorest Atlanta residents earn twenty times less than the wealthiest—a difference greater than any city in the United States—and much greater than the average nationwide gap, where the poorest citizens earn 9.3 times less than the wealthiest. Poor suburban neighborhoods that are cut off from Atlanta's urban center need increased access to the jobs and public resources located across the city—and an expanded rail system could facilitate this.

Specifically, the proposed rail lines to Emory University and the CDC would provide improved commutes and travel times for these institutions' combined 44,000 employees. Emory University alone is the second largest private employer in the city of Atlanta, yet no rail line directly serves the university, its students, or its employees, thereby physically separating Emory from the city of Atlanta and its residents.

MARTA also plans to add five new rail stations through north Fulton County and Alpharetta, improving access to the city for those who live further north of Atlanta's perimeter (Emory and the CDC are both south of it). Galloway suggests that rail access in this area would give residents and developers a real economic advantage over the neighboring Cobb and Gwinnett counties, which have both continually refused MARTA rail service, although it's been proposed there several times.

## Southern Conservatism, Urban Revitalization, and Public Transit Needs

Changes to MARTA service are never without controversy. In 2012, a proposal for MARTA expansion failed with the defeat of the T-SPLOST funds package, which was voted down by various Atlanta constituencies from the Tea Party to the NAACP. The contentious bill would have raised the sales tax by 1 percent over ten years to fund the expansion. Concerns over this, and over who would truly benefit from the expansion, both contributed to the defeat.

Historically, northern Atlanta suburbs, which are predominantly white, (such as Cobb and Gwinnett) have held an anti-MARTA stance due to their small government preferences and the fear that MARTA would bring criminals to their neighborhoods. But the link between MARTA and crime has been robustly debunked, leaving only racial animus and

southern conservatism as the true reasons for the lack of investment in MARTA. The service even has a pernicious nickname—**Moving Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta**.

Even Atlanta progressives have been suspicious of MARTA expansion propositions, especially when they have failed to serve Atlanta's poor black communities. Such concerns are justified, particularly in light of the fate of new urban development activities along the Atlanta Beltline. This popular urban renewal project cuts biking and walking trails through historically working class African American neighborhoods, such as the Old Fourth Ward and Inman Park; therefore encouraging gentrification along the Beltline, increasing property taxes, and ultimately excluding older African American residents. The Beltline is being developed in anticipation of the installation of a light rail system there, which would primarily benefit those who can afford to live inside of the perimeter—meaning it would do little to help alleviate Atlanta's bigger problem of suburban poverty.

While the politics around the MARTA expansion are muddled on all sides, MARTA's current lack of investment and expansion simply maintains the rail line's limited scope and prevents Atlanta from becoming a world-class city. Visitors and residents may recall the disastrous 1996 Olympics, where buses frequently were delayed or lost and MARTA trains were unprepared to handle the thousands of people needing transport.

The expansion of the rail line should aim to meet more of the public's needs by continually pushing to provide more access across the city and its numerous suburbs. Rail development is crucial, but an increase in bus service should be considered as well, especially in the areas MARTA currently fails to reach. MARTA officials and all interested parties must package and sell an expansion for what it should be: an equitable, sustainable, reliable public transportation option that could benefit all of Atlanta. If Atlanta can succeed, then perhaps it can serve as a progressive model for other cities struggling to provide transportation in the midst of ever-growing urban sprawl.

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