

2 Atlanta MARTA

OVERVIEW: TRANSIT SYSTEM CHARACTERISTICS

The Georgia State Legislature created the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) in 1965, and in 1972 MARTA initiated transit service with the acquisition of the Atlanta Transit System, a privately owned bus company. MARTA currently operates heavy rail service on more than 45 miles of double track in the City of Atlanta and DeKalb and Fulton Counties. MARTA has invested approximately \$3.7 billion in its bus and rail equipment and property, and it is the nation's eighth largest transit system.

The system serves 36 stations along five different rail lines: the North Line, South Line, East Line, West Line, and Northeast Line. The Five Points station forms the heart of the MARTA rail system, with the North/South and East/West Lines crossing at an underground station in Atlanta's downtown business district. The rail system currently serves 78 million passengers annually, and more than 25,000 passengers use the Five Points station daily. MARTA trains operate at speeds up to 70 miles per hour.

Construction began on the heavy rail system in 1975, and service began on the East and West Lines in 1979. In 1981, the North and South Lines opened, and MARTA extended each line several times between 1982 and 1988. The Northeast Line, a spur from the North Line, opened in 1992, and both the North and East Lines were also extended in the 1990s.

Further extensions on the North Line are scheduled to open in the year 2000. Ultimately, MARTA plans to have 60 miles of double track and 45 stations, including 12 aerial stations, 21 at-grade stations, and 12 tunnel stations.

Station characteristics are shown in Table 2-1.

Table 2-1.
MARTA STATIONS

	Parking Lot?
<u>Downtown Hub</u>	
Five Points	No
<u>East Line</u>	
E1 Georgia St.	No
E2 King Memorial	No
E3 Inman Park/ Reynoldstown	Yes
E4 Edgewood/ Candler Park	Yes
E5 East Lake	Yes
E6 Decatur	No
E7 Avondale	Yes
E8 Kensington	Yes
E9 Indian Creek	Yes
<u>West Line</u>	
W1 Omni/Dome/ GWCC	No
W2 Vine City	Yes
W3 Ashby	Yes
W4 West Lake	Yes
W5 Hamilton E. Holmes	Yes
<u>North Line</u>	
N1 Peachtree Ctr.	No
N2 Civic Center	No
N3 North Ave.	No
N4 Midtown	No
N5 Arts Center	No
N6 Lindbergh Ctr.	Yes
N7 Buckhead	No
N8 Medical Ctr.	Yes
N9 Dunwoody	Yes
N10 Sandy Spgs.	No
N11 North Spgs.	No
<u>South Line</u>	
S1 Garnett	No
S2 West End	Yes

Table 2-1.
MARTA STATIONS

S3 Oakland City	Yes
S4 Lakewood/ Fort McPherson	Yes
S5 East Point	Yes
S6 College Park	Yes
S7 Airport	No
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<u>Northeast Line</u>	
NE7 Lenox	Yes
NE8 Brookhaven/ Oglethorpe Univ.	Yes
NE9 Chamblee	Yes
NE10 Doraville	Yes

STATION AREA PLANNING FRAMEWORK

Following the 1971 passage of a referendum approving funding for MARTA in Fulton and DeKalb Counties, MARTA initiated its rail system planning efforts. The transit authority contracted with the Atlanta Regional Commission, which in turn contracted with the City of Atlanta’s Planning Department, to craft development plans for the transit station areas within the city limits. City staff members developed an Urban Framework Plan, which assigned each station to a different category based on its existing development characteristics; the categories included neighborhood, community center, regional development node, and central business district. Different development tools would then be applied to different station types. The transit station area development studies involved extensive community input and efforts to coordinate diverse interests. The result of the studies was a set of comprehensive plans for the areas surrounding the transit stations; these plans were incorporated into the Land Use Element of the City’s comprehensive plan, a 15-year land use plan. As discussed further in the sections below, MARTA worked closely with the City of Atlanta to revise its zoning ordinances to be more supportive of transit.

In planning for the MARTA system, the transit board examined heavy rail systems around North America and determined that Toronto provided the best model for Atlanta’s system. Toronto has many high-rise, high-density residential structures around its stations, but this model has proved less popular in Atlanta, where sprawling development patterns and long commutes to work prevail. The construction of a perimeter highway, I-285, about 15 miles outside downtown Atlanta also fueled the flight of jobs to less expensive sites in Atlanta’s surrounding suburbs, particularly during the recession of the 1980s. Currently Atlanta’s central business district accounts for about 30 percent of the region’s office space, while about 70 percent is located in the suburbs. Market forces alone have been insufficient to promote dense, transit-supportive development in many station areas, so MARTA and the City of Atlanta have employed additional strategies to promote desirable development near rail stations.

LINDBERGH CENTER, NORTH LINE

The Lindbergh Center station, on the North Line north of the downtown business district, was targeted as a regional node for development in the City of Atlanta's Urban Framework Plan. Planners projected growth in the location, but instead the expected development did not occur. The Lindbergh Center was an old industrial area that was rezoned for high-density, mixed-use development. To promote desirable development in the station area, MARTA obtained a federal Livable Communities grant and published a Request for Proposals seeking a developer to construct a transit-oriented development on 47 acres of surplus land from its Park-and-Ride and from station construction. Only two developers responded to MARTA's request; MARTA selected one, and the TOD project is currently moving forward. This station may offer lessons for planning around the Seattle Center and South Lake Union stations and the Royal Brougham station.

PEACHTREE CORRIDOR

The City of Atlanta created Special Public Interest (SPI) zones in the downtown core and around several rail stations to the north. MARTA and the City initially tried to create a cross-shaped SPI district at the intersection of the North/South and East/West Lines at the Five Points station. This zone would have increased allowable densities along the rail line, but it would have downzoned some areas outside the SPI, including sites near freeway interchanges. However, protests from the business community resulted in the creation of a circular SPI-1 district which essentially maintained the status quo zoning in the heart of the central business district and did not focus density around the rail system.

Around the stations to the north located in midtown, however, the City was successful in creating SPI districts that significantly changed zoning within and outside the SPI zones around the North Avenue, Midtown, and Arts Center stations. The City developed a separate SPI for each station, tailoring the shape and requirements of each SPI to the different station area characteristics and desired development plans. At the North Avenue station, BellSouth, the regional telephone provider, had planned to demolish a historic theater to construct its two million-square-foot corporate headquarters, but instead the company reached an agreement with MARTA to build on top of the station. MARTA integrated the foundation of the headquarters with its station construction, and the 47-story building included a retail mall on its lower levels and a direct connection to the rail station. Similar efforts to integrate new construction with transit stations have taken place in the other two SPI districts to the north. The Peachtree Corridor may offer lessons for planning around the Downtown and First Hill and Broadway/Roy stations.

STATION AREA DEVELOPMENT TRENDS

The Atlanta Regional Commission previously tracked development throughout the region and prepared area impact statements, but they have measured land use changes and development trends in station areas since the 1980s. Neither MARTA nor the City of Atlanta has conducted formal studies of new construction and changes in property values around rail

stations. Most evidence to date regarding development trends in Atlanta is anecdotal. Some rail station areas have experienced significant development, especially along the North Line, but these growth areas may show the effects of regional market trends as well as rail station influences.

FACTORS INFLUENCING STATION AREA DEVELOPMENT

ECONOMIC GROWTH IN THE ATLANTA METROPOLITAN AREA

The Atlanta metropolitan area has been booming in recent years, and this strong regional market has helped spur development around some rail stations as well as throughout the region. The region has been growing at about 3 percent per year, adding 100,000 residents each year and one million each decade. Despite some slower periods, the region has experienced high growth rates in population and employment for more than three decades. The region netted more than 88,000 new jobs in 1996, and the Atlanta Regional Commission expects the employment growth rate to quadruple the national average over the next decade. Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport is the nation's second busiest, and its operations are expected to increase significantly in the next several years. The Atlanta metropolitan area now sprawls into 18 counties, though MARTA only provides service in two. As traffic congestion and air pollution worsen in the region, MARTA may become a more attractive alternative for commuters and for employers trying to bring workers from around the region. The 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta also helped bring resources that enhanced the MARTA system, and base ridership has increased since the Games. The Georgia Department of Transportation is currently seeking to build an Outer Loop highway further out from central Atlanta, which could promote increased sprawl and make it more difficult for MARTA to foster compact development around rail stations.

SUPPORTIVE LOCAL LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

In the 1970s, MARTA convinced the City of Atlanta to revise its zoning ordinances extensively. Historically Atlanta had had one of the most liberal zoning ordinances in the nation, and the ordinance had not been revised in more than two decades. Only cities without zoning like Houston and Dallas had fewer controls over land use. MARTA and the City brought the creator of the ordinances that San Francisco created to support the BART system to help Atlanta consider changes in its zoning ordinance. Initially the planners sought to revise the zoning for the entire City of Atlanta. The original zoning in the central business district automatically allowed floor area ratios of 25 with no requirements for building setbacks or public amenities. Planners wanted to reduce the base FAR to 12 and provide bonuses for amenities (such as plazas, observation levels, retail establishments, residences, and pedestrian pathways through buildings to transit stations) that would allow developers to build back up to an FAR of 25. However, when the business community protested, plans were modified and a compromise was reached on a less sweeping plan. New Special Public Interest (SPI) zones were created in the downtown and midtown areas.

MARTA has also undertaken a Livable Communities/Transit-Oriented Development Initia-

tive designed to promote transit-supportive, pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use development in the immediate vicinity of existing rail stations. Lindbergh Center is the first station area slated for joint development under the initiative, and the project is designed to be compatible with the Federal Transit Administration's Livable Communities Initiative.

JOINT DEVELOPMENT

MARTA has placed a priority on using joint development efforts to create transit-supportive development in station areas. As discussed above, MARTA issued an RFP for developers to undertake a joint development on 47 acres of land at the Lindbergh Center station on the North Line. Only two developers responded to the MARTA's request, but the transit-oriented development project is currently moving forward with the selected developer.

PUBLIC FUNDING

The Atlanta Economic Development Corporation helped fund construction of a major federal office center adjoining the Five Points station in downtown Atlanta. AEDC demolished an old department store on the site and constructed a three-building complex providing more than one million square feet of office space. In a turnkey arrangement, federal agencies signed a 20-year lease on the facility. A pedestrian tunnel links the transit station to the federal complex, though security precautions restrict access to the connector to federal employees with identification. MARTA also tried to work with the Internal Revenue Service to locate a new 600,000-square-foot facility at the Chamblee station on the Northeast Line, but the deal fell through and the IRS located at an auto-oriented site along the loop highway. At the Civic Center station in downtown Atlanta, the State of Georgia constructed two 20-story buildings providing one million square feet of office space on top of the station and created a pedestrian concourse connecting to the station.

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

Station Area Planning

In designing new stations, planners are working to be more sensitive about transit connections than they have been in the past. They are trying to place greater emphasis on expected and existing development in order to merge station plans with development patterns.

Non-rail Infrastructure Investments to Improve Pedestrian Amenities and Access

MARTA believed that connections to transit stations were valuable to developers, and in the early stages of rail system development MARTA tried to earn revenue from this source. If developers approached the transit authority about direct connections to rail stations, MARTA used to seek fees from the developers in return. After a number of developers balked at such arrangements, MARTA reconsidered its position. Currently the transit authority is actively fostering appropriate direct linkages with its transit stations, and stations are often designed with knock-out panels in anticipation of future connections. In some cases, developers cover

the cost of the access, but MARTA is also working to find other ways to fund improved transit access. The City and MARTA lack authority to require developers to build pedestrian pathways to rail stations, but in some cases they have been able to obtain improved pedestrian access and amenities through negotiations with developers.

The City of Atlanta's zoning ordinance contains a pedestrian overlay zone designed to improve pedestrian access to station entrances. The ordinance requires that developers provide an extra ten feet of sidewalk width around station areas, or they can avoid this requirement by providing a station connection through the building instead. MARTA and the City review building plans on a case-by-case basis and grant administrative permits to compliant proposals.

Shared Parking and Parking Management

With many businesses moving to suburban locations along I-285, the loop highway that encircles the city, Atlanta did not feel the market would tolerate significant parking restrictions in its downtown core. Developers threatened to relocate to the suburbs if the City of Atlanta infringed on their ability to build accessory parking in new downtown construction. As a result, parking management efforts have been minimal. In downtown and midtown, the City established a parking limitation district, in which a special permit is required for the construction of independent primary parking structures. Planners concede that this policy probably has not decreased the supply of parking, but it may have influenced the design and location of parking so that it does not impede pedestrian access to transit stations. In some cases, planners have successfully persuaded developers to reduce parking by convincing them that their proximity to a MARTA station will reduce parking demand.

MARTA is currently working to develop a shared parking system at the Lindbergh Center station. Currently, the site has a 2000-space surface parking lot, which MARTA plans to replace with two parking structures. MARTA users and retail shoppers will share these structures, and the transit authority is currently negotiating with stores to determine the appropriate sharing ratios.

Expedited Permits and Reviews

This implementation tool has not been used to promote transit-friendly development in Atlanta. MARTA stressed the importance of retaining its review capacity, citing the example of a building permit for a corporate headquarters that the City granted without MARTA review. The site is located above the rail line's downtown tunnel, and MARTA staff feared that the new building could affect the structural integrity of the subway. The proposed project is now undergoing MARTA review.

Zoning and Rezoning

In its early stages, MARTA worked closely with the City of Atlanta to revise its zoning ordinance significantly. Protests from the business community led to less sweeping changes than originally envisioned, but the City did succeed in making significant zoning changes. In the downtown and midtown areas, the City established Special Public Interest (SPI) zones in

place of the previous commercial zoning. The SPI-1 district in the downtown core did not involve major changes in existing zoning, but the creation of the SPI-2, SPI-3, and SPI-4 districts further up the North Line involved density increases within the zones and reductions outside the SPIs. The SPI zones also included a parking provision, as described above.

Land Assembly

The Atlanta Economic Development Authority, a City agency, has been involved in redevelopment efforts in some station areas, especially involved older Park-and-Rides that rail line extensions have rendered less useful. The AEDA is undertaking efforts to assemble MARTA land and other properties for redevelopment at the Hamilton E. Holmes station on the West Line, the Arts Center on the North Line, and the West End and Lakewood/Fort McPherson stations on the South Line.

Direct Public Investment in Projects

As discussed in the Public Funding section above, the Atlanta Economic Development Corporation helped fund construction of a major federal office center adjoining the Five Points station in downtown Atlanta. At the Civic Center station in downtown Atlanta, the State of Georgia constructed two 20-story buildings providing one million square feet of office space on top of the station and created a pedestrian concourse connecting to the station.

Local Transit Service Design

Most of MARTA's bus service is designed to bring riders to the MARTA rail system. Nearly all of its more than 150 bus routes connect to rail stations.

SUMMARY ASSESSMENT; IMPLICATIONS FOR SEATTLE

Although Atlanta's MARTA is a heavy rail system, its station area planning and development efforts can still offer lessons for Seattle's light rail line. (Examining Atlanta's rail system is also interesting in light of the fact that the federal investments in MARTA could have come to Seattle instead if local voters had approved the referendum in the early 1970s.) Some relevant lessons from the MARTA case include the following points.

- *Regional Transportation Plans.* Rail transit competes with other modes of travel, and transit-oriented development competes with sprawl. Transportation planning decisions, such as the construction of the I-285 perimeter loop highway, affect land use patterns and the demand for public transit. Regional transportation plans should be compatible with efforts to foster transit-friendly development around rail stations. An auto-oriented approach to transportation planning in a rapidly growing region can undermine efforts to promote transit and create transit-supportive development around stations. For example, the Georgia Department of Transportation's plans to construct an Outer Loop highway around Atlanta and double the freeway capacity into downtown could exacerbate sprawl and undermine MARTA's efforts to concentrate growth around rail transit nodes.

- *Parking Restrictions.* Efforts to limit parking supply in downtown Atlanta provoked an outcry from downtown businesses, which threatened to relocate to the suburbs if the proposed restrictions were enacted. The City eventually established an additional review process for stand-alone parking structures, but accessory parking within other building uses remained unrestricted. As noted in our case studies, however, other cities have successfully limited downtown parking without driving out businesses. Communication, education, and positive models from other cities may help persuade the business community to accept some parking limitations.
- *Public Facilities at Rail Stations.* Locating public buildings at rail stations, like the Georgia state offices at Civic Center and the federal center at Five Points, can help spur additional investment and provide models of transit-related development for the private sector. Showing early successes can help promote future projects at rail stations.
- *Planning for Appropriate Development.* Models of development should be appropriate to the local character. It is useful to learn from the experience of other places, but adopting a cookie-cutter approach may not work in a different region. For example, Toronto's model of high-density, high-rise residential development at rail stations, which transit planners originally sought to replicate in Atlanta, has been slow to gain acceptance among local residents. In preparing for the future, planners should also recognize that areas may not receive the development that planners expect. Accordingly, plans should be flexible enough to adapt to unanticipated changes in development patterns, types, and locations.
- *Working with Private Developers.* Municipalities and transit agencies should communicate with developers throughout the planning process and work to create opportunities for transit-supportive developments that benefit communities, developers, and transit systems. Communication can help foster realistic expectations on both sides of the table and may lead to mutually beneficial outcomes. For example, when MARTA first attempted to charge fees for direct connections into rail stations, developers balked. In subsequent cases, however, MARTA and developers found ways to build and fund system connections that benefit private developments as well as foster transit ridership.

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