



The Belt Line and Rail Traffic in Atlanta's Urban Core

Friends of the Belt Line, Inc.

www.beltline.org

*Position Paper 1
30 March 2005*



Figure 1
The Atlanta Belt Line

The purpose of this paper is to address concerns that the Belt Line and efforts toward an efficient and effective regional freight and passenger (or commuter) rail network are mutually exclusive. They are not. In fact, if Atlanta is to remain a great city, it must, and can, have both. The concerns are based on a few key decisions that must be made about how the two systems can coexist. Friends of the Belt Line is producing this report in order to help clarify these key issues so that both concepts can move forward.

There are 4 main issues:

1. Use of CSX's active Seaboard Air Line Railroad as the northwest quadrant of the Belt Line
2. The route of Amtrak's Southern Crescent
3. The Southeast High Speed Rail (SEHSR) Corridor and the configuration of the downtown Multi-Modal Passenger Terminal (MMPT)
4. The ability of CSX to route freight around downtown Atlanta

Each of these issues are addressed in detail in the following report. In summary, Friends of the Belt Line makes the following recommendations:

1. With an appropriate agreement with CSX, the northwest corridor can be shared with Belt Line transit. The trail component is more challenging from a liability standpoint, but there are several options for accommodating it.
2. If rerouting Amtrak's Southern Crescent line into the downtown MMPT requires use of the Decatur Street Belt, then the Amtrak line should remain on its current route. There are several options for a North Station that would complement the downtown MMPT.
3. If phasing of the downtown MMPT begins with East/West oriented platforms as currently proposed, it should be recognized that this does not accommodate the Southeast High Speed Rail (SEHSR) Corridor without use of the Decatur Street Belt. Since use of this belt is not advisable for heavy passenger rail, it should also be understood that in order to accommodate the SEHSR Corridor, North/South oriented platforms will also be needed at the downtown MMPT.
4. Reinstating through-freight service on either of the two southern belts is virtually impossible due to both physical and political constraints. Their use for the Belt Line is much less challenging, and much more appropriate.

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Figure 21
CSX's old Seaboard Belt



Figure 4 View from Howell Mill Rd.
Figure 5 Howell Junction
Figure 6 View from Peachtree St.

CSX's Seaboard Belt

There is no reason to expect that CSX's Seaboard Belt, which creates the northwest segment of the Belt Line, will ever reduce or terminate freight service. In fact, as freight service increases nationally, freight traffic in this corridor is likely to increase. The Belt Line proposes an arrangement with CSX to share the right-of-way through outright purchase, long-term lease or easement. CSX has similar shared-corridor arrangements across the country and locally with the MARTA system.

The portion of the Seaboard Belt required for the Belt Line is approximately 3.6 miles long and connects the Hemphill Waterworks to Piedmont Hospital to the Armour industrial district. Beyond the Belt Line to the east, the Seaboard connects to Emory University. The width of the right-of-way varies, but is roughly 100 feet wide throughout the corridor. It narrows briefly as it crosses under Huff Road. The segment is double-tracked west of I-75 and single-tracked to the east.

The southern end of the Seaboard Belt is Howell Junction, probably the busiest freight junction in Atlanta. This intersection connects Inman and Tilford Yards with CSX's Seaboard Belt, Norfolk-Southern's main line (the Amtrak route) and the joint CSX/NS trunk line that heads south along Marietta Street into downtown. The junction sits north of Marietta Street just north of the King Plow Arts Center.

In order to avoid disruption of freight service through Howell Junction, the Belt Line transit and trail must bridge above it. For the rest of the trip, the transit line will likely use one side or the other of CSX's right-of-way (see sections, figures 7 and 8) on separate tracks with sufficient separation. The segment of single-track line north and east of I-75 must retain sufficient width for future double-tracking. While some new structures will be required, like the overpass at Peachtree Street, in every case, there is sufficient room to meet required minimum distances between freight traffic and transit.

In order to share the corridor, CSX's interests must take priority. CSX has expressed a willingness to work with communities on projects, but four principles must be met: 1) **Safety**—for CSX employees and the public, 2) **Capacity**—to serve CSX's current and future customers, 3) **No Subsidy**—CSX shareholders will not bear any subsidy of passenger rail and 4) **Liability**—reasonable liability protection against new risks.

The linear park and trail along the Seaboard Belt poses the greatest liability for CSX by introducing pedestrian access and

proximity to the freight tracks. This may be addressed in several ways. The Trust for Public Land's report "The Belt Line Emerald Necklace" illustrates one scenario with the trail skipping along adjacent properties and along other rights-of-way before hooking back up to the rail corridor at each end of the active freight line.

The benefit of using the Seaboard Belt to complete the Belt Line loop is that it connects the Peachtree Street corridor, traffic-choked Piedmont Hospital, and redevelopment-ripe sites along Howell Mill Road, Marietta Street and Hollowell Boulevard to the larger MARTA rail system. It offers the neighborhoods of southern Buckhead and the northwest industrial areas access to trails and transit, and all the other benefits of the Belt Line. It also connects the Belt Line with other proposed transit lines entering the city from the north and northwest, including the proposed Peachtree Streetcar and Northwest Connectivity project to Cumberland/Galleria and beyond, and potentially, to an expanded shuttle through Atlantic Station from the Arts Center MARTA Station.

Figure 7 Typical existing section cut through CSX's Seaboard Belt east of Peachtree Street. Existing single freight track is generally centered within 100' wide right-of-way

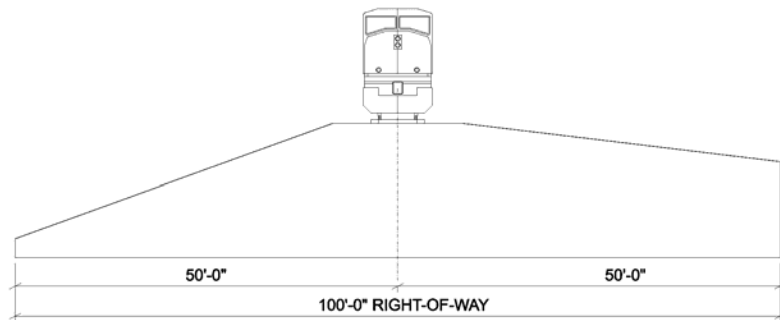
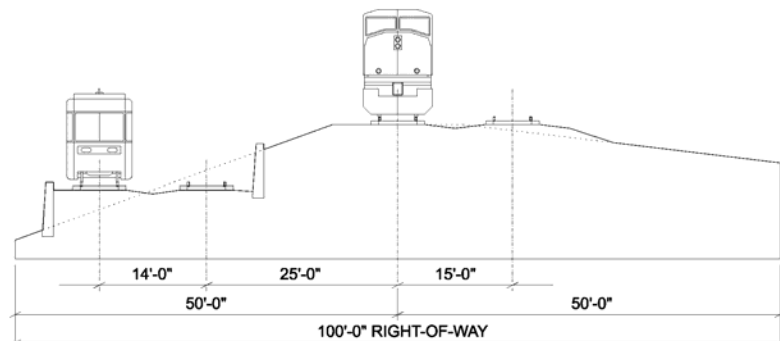


Figure 8 The same section cut showing the Belt Line transit set to one side and a future second freight track on the other.



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Figure 9
Existing Amtrak route



Figure 10
Downtown Amtrak alignment



Figure 11
Other possible North Station locations

Amtrak's Southern Crescent Line

New Orleans to New York City

Figure 9 shows the current route of Amtrak's Southern Crescent with the existing Brookwood Station on Peachtree Street. Figure 10 shows an alternate route for Amtrak's Southern Crescent that enters the proposed downtown Multi-Modal Passenger Terminal (MMPT). Because Amtrak does not want to pull into a downtown station and then have to back out, this arrangement requires use of the Decatur Street Belt (northeast Belt Line) in order to get back on route. In addition to added travel time and expense to Amtrak, use of this line for the commuter rail network is problematic for the following reasons:

- The original alignment of the Decatur Street Belt with the main line into downtown Atlanta was broken by the reconfiguration of Hulsey Yard and the construction of the elevated East MARTA line and King Memorial Station.
- Use of the Decatur Street Belt puts Amtrak trains through residential areas and Piedmont Park, crossing surface streets at Monroe Drive, Irwin Street and DeKalb Avenue.
- The Decatur Street Belt is too narrow south of Freedom Parkway for the Belt Line and Amtrak to share right-of-way with separate tracks.
- Shared use of the tracks themselves in this corridor would be difficult due to topographic and physical constraints.
- Any shared arrangement would make the Belt Line much less desirable by eliminating greenspace and permeability and by increasing safety concerns, particularly for pedestrians and cyclists.

If, for these reasons, it is decided that Amtrak's Southern Crescent will not come through a downtown MMPT, then the Decatur Street Belt is not required for Atlanta's commuter rail system. Amtrak can be accommodated by a North Station that complements the downtown MMPT. Figure 11 shows possible North Station locations, including:

1. Existing Brookwood Station at Peachtree Street with no MARTA rail service.
2. Marietta Street/King Plow Station would intersect with other lines coming from the west and north and the Belt Line, but not with MARTA rail.
3. Atlantic Station would serve huge new development, but would connect to neither the Belt Line nor MARTA.
4. Armour Station could be a potential new MARTA station that would realign Belt Line.
5. Lindbergh Station would serve new development, Belt Line and existing MARTA station, but not routes from the east like Athens or Emory.

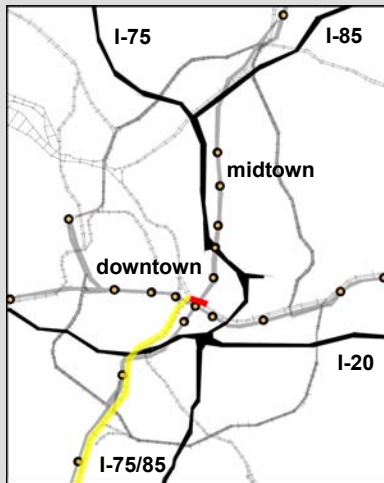


Figure 12
Proposed Lovejoy (Macon) line



Figure 13
SEHSR with East/West platforms



Figure 14
SEHSR with North/South platforms

SEHSR & the Configuration of the MMPT

The Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) currently plans to build East/West oriented platforms at the proposed downtown Multi-Modal Passenger Terminal (MMPT) first. They would be located immediately west of Forsyth Street at the City's Constitution (Georgia Power) property. In addition to accommodating Amtrak's Southern Crescent, (if it were to come downtown), this orientation would:

- allow direct access from the train station to the Five Points MARTA Station (via the City's Constitution property).
- accommodate the proposed first line to Lovejoy without removal of the CNN parking garage which currently covers much of the gulch area (figure 12).

The problem with this East/West platform orientation, however, is that in order to accommodate the proposed Southeast High Speed Rail (SEHSR) Corridor from Macon to Charlotte, the Decatur Street Belt must be used for high-speed trains (figure 13). Use of the Decatur Street Belt for the SEHSR would be inappropriate for the same reasons as discussed previously for Amtrak.

If the Decatur Street Belt is not available for the SEHSR Corridor, and SEHSR trains are to stop at a downtown train station, North/South oriented platforms must be constructed at the downtown MMPT. This orientation requires removal of the CNN garage and would likely be adjacent to the Omni MARTA Station, not Five Points as desired. In fact, in order for any train from the north to access a downtown station, the CNN garage must be removed. While more challenging in that regard, North/South oriented platforms could accommodate most other lines through the city, including the route to Lovejoy and Macon. This SEHSR route would also intersect most of the possible North Station sites.

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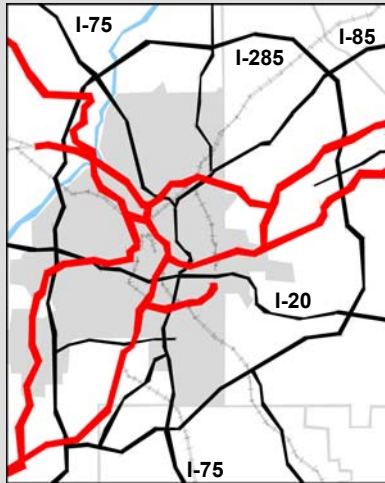


Figure 15
All CSX railroads

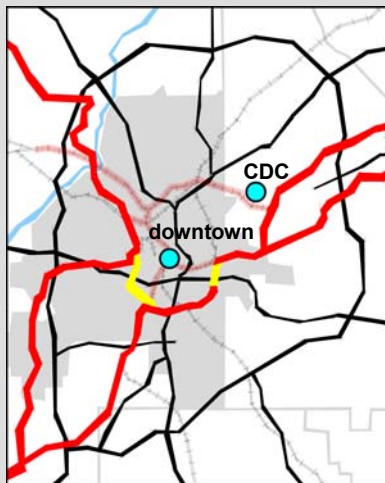


Figure 16
CSX route around downtown and CDC

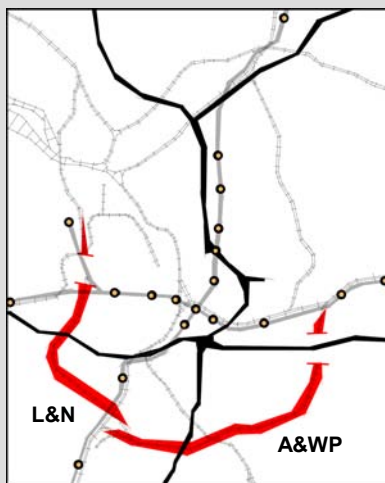


Figure 17

Proposed Freight Reroute

With increased passenger rail service proposed for the downtown area and concerns about homeland security, some have suggested the idea of rerouting freight traffic so that it does not have to pass through the downtown gulch or past the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at Emory University. Figure 15 shows all of CSX's lines in the metro area and Figure 16 shows how CSX could avoid downtown and the CDC with the use of two other pieces of the Belt Line (yellow).

With the transfer of the Decatur Street Belt in the northeast to developer Wayne Mason, and the already-active Seaboard Belt in the northwest, the focus of any proposed freight re-route along the Belt Line would be on the two southern belts (figure 17). Re-activation of these two lines, however, for through-freight service is virtually impossible due to both physical and political constraints.

The L&N Belt

The old Louisville & Nashville Belt, which is currently owned by the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) and forms the southwest segment of the Belt Line, faces serious challenges to reactivation as a freight railroad. Tracks in the L&N corridor were removed many years ago and extensive overgrowth and illegal dumping have also contributed to blighted conditions in some neighborhoods. Upgrades required to return the L&N to freight service would be substantial, and would likely have negative impacts on the largely residential properties along its course through west Atlanta (figure 18).

Not only would new track have to be laid along its 3.8 miles, but the L&N was broken north of Washington Park to accommodate the Proctor Creek MARTA spur to Bankhead which occupies its former right-of-way for almost half a mile as it crosses under Simpson Road (figure 19). A massive reworking of that area would be required to get the freight line below Simpson Road and across the MARTA tracks. The Belt Line transit would be less challenged, and much less expensive because it can cross Simpson Road at grade, can engage steeper slopes, and is generally much more flexible and neighborhood-friendly.

The A&WP Belt

The old Atlanta & West Point Belt, most of which is now owned by CSX, forms the southeast segment of the Belt Line, connecting Hulsey Yard in Reynoldstown to the main line south of downtown at Oakland Junction. In the 1990's, GDOT pur-



Figure 18 Rooftops below GDOT's overgrown L&N line.

Figure 19 GDOT's old L&N line is broken by the Bankhead MARTA spur

Figure 20 CSX's old A&WP line is broken at I-20 East

chased the northern end of the line at Hulsey Yard and severed the railroad between Memorial Drive and Glenwood Avenue for the construction of a new interchange with I-20, the Glenwood-Memorial Connector (figure 20). The original intent was to extend this new roadway north of Memorial Drive into Hulsey Yard to accommodate truck traffic to and from CSX's intermodal facility there so that trucks could directly access I-20. Opposition to the road extension was successful, however, keeping truck traffic out of the Reynoldstown neighborhood and virtually defeating the purpose of the interchange. With significant redevelopment in the area and a desire to improve the roadway as a city street, ownership of the Glenwood-Memorial Connector was transferred from GDOT to the City of Atlanta in 2002.

In order to reconnect the old A&WP belt for through-service, freight tracks would have to be replaced along the Glenwood-Memorial Connector, in front of the Glenwood Park development, across a new freight railroad bridge over I-20 and slice through the Reynoldstown neighborhood. In addition to overcoming formidable protests by neighborhood groups and developers, it is our understanding that reinstating freight service along this city street would require, among other things, approval by the Atlanta City Council.

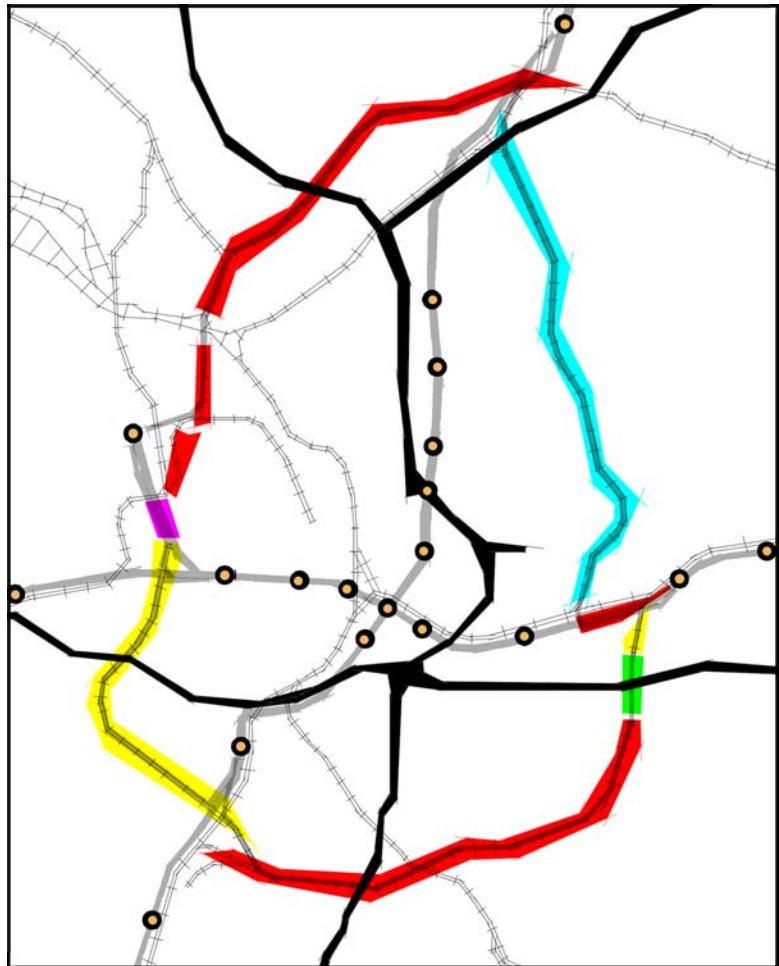
Gaining access to the Southern Belts

The Belt Line corridors are far too valuable of a resource to not be used. But reinstating through-freight service on either the L&N or A&WP belts is virtually impossible due to both physical and political constraints as described. Because light rail technology is much more flexible than freight trains, the challenges facing the Belt Line in these corridors are significantly reduced.

The L&N belt is owned by GDOT, and with no other reasonable use for this line, an arrangement should be made for its use as the southwest segment of the Belt Line.

The A&WP belt currently serves only one user—a sand plant operated by Lafarge located near the line's eastern terminus at Glenwood Avenue. Trains loaded with sand arrive several times each week from the west, and the sand is distributed by truck to various customers including the adjacent Lafarge ready-mix concrete plant. Preliminary discussions with Lafarge indicate a willingness to relocate the sand facility. At that time, because there are no other local users and because through-service is impossible, it is conceivable that CSX may be willing to sell or share the A&WP belt.

Belt Line Ownership



- CSX
- GDOT
- Mason (formerly owned by Norfolk Southern)
- City of Atlanta (Glenwood Memorial Connector)
- MARTA (Bankhead Spur)