



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BELTLINING: GENTRIFICATION, BROKEN PROMISES, AND HOPE ON ATLANTA'S SOUTHSIDE

HOUSING JUSTICE LEAGUE AND
RESEARCH|ACTION COOPERATIVE

OCTOBER 2017

The Atlanta BeltLine, which will ultimately be a 22-mile loop of green parks, trails, and streetcars circling inside city neighborhoods along discontinued rail beds, is a force for gentrification and displacement of long-time, low-income residents, many of them Black. But it does not have to be. Built upon a survey and participatory action research project largely in three historic Black neighborhoods on the Southside near the BeltLine, research by the Atlanta community group Housing Justice League and Research|Action Cooperative tracks the hopes of the residents for the development, how they are actually affected by it, and the forces of gentrification that are already displacing longtime residents whose supportive ties with one another are a strength of the area.

Photo by James Diedrick
A mural by Australian artist
Fintan Magee oversees a
parking lot in Atlanta's gentrified
Fourth Ward near the BeltLine.

THE PROJECT FOUND THAT

- Residents overwhelmingly want to stay in their neighborhoods,
- Gentrification has already raised property values and displaced people even in neighborhoods not yet touched by BeltLine development, and Atlanta failed to enact protections against displacement used in other cities. But it still has time to do so as the BeltLine turns its development eye to the historically Black Southside.

The report's major recommendations are for the BeltLine and city as a whole to embrace more democratic planning processes that incorporate the interests of current residents, finally accept legal protections for tenants, and enact a range of policies found in other cities that protect and expand affordable housing. As Alison Johnson, a Peoplestown resident and Housing Justice League member who helped author the report, says,

Communities on the Southside deserve to be a part of the process to shape and determine the neighborhoods where we live. We want the kind of responsible, democratic city building that gives us the best quality of life, not that which is done by and for the wealthy.

BACKGROUND

Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. is a public-private partnership launched in 2005, when the Atlanta City Council, Atlanta Public Schools, and Fulton County all empowered a new Atlanta BeltLine Tax Allocation District to fund both parks and housing—only 5,600 units of it affordable—in neighboring areas. The project initially promised to spur equitable development and to include a robust affordable housing strategy to prevent displacement. But as Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. acknowledges, they are falling short of the original affordable housing goal.

Almost midway through the 25-year-long development period, fewer than 1,000 of the promised affordable units have been built in the area. Meanwhile housing prices near the greenways are rising faster than in the city as a whole. This means the area is losing far more existing affordable housing than it is gaining.

Our investigation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey confirmed most neighborhoods along the BeltLine south of I-20 and east of Hill Street are gentrifying, putting pressure on still-affordable neighborhoods like Peoplestown, Pittsburgh, and Mechanicsville. We tracked three major signs of gentrification: increasing median income, rising shares of white residents, and rising shares of the college educated.

*"I'm proud knowing that amidst the struggles Pittsburgh's had, it has produced people who have contributed back to the community."
– Annette Samuels*

Earlier research showed that the BeltLine itself is causing a significant rise in home values—across the city, but most importantly in low-income Black communities on the Southside. The southwest segment of the BeltLine, including Adair Park, Pittsburgh, Mechanicsville, and Westview, saw median sale prices jump 68 percent from 2011 to 2015. The BeltLine, researchers charged, is a form of "environmental gentrification," using green goals to make the displacement of low income people palatable.

In addition, the administration of the BeltLine has been beset by problems. The project's creator resigned from the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership board in September 2016 as the promises of affordable housing fell drastically short of stated goals and displacement pressures on longtime residents grew.

Southside residents, lacking protection such as rent regulations or alternative property tax policies, are fighting for their say in a project that will radically reshape their neighborhoods. Their neighborhoods—including Adair Park, Peoplestown, and Pittsburgh—have seen broken promises and divestment for decades.

OUR FINDINGS

Our investigation of U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey data from 2010 to 2015 found clear signs of displacement and gentrification on the Southside as measured by our three indicators: increasing median income, rising shares of white residents, and rising shares of the college educated. We found:

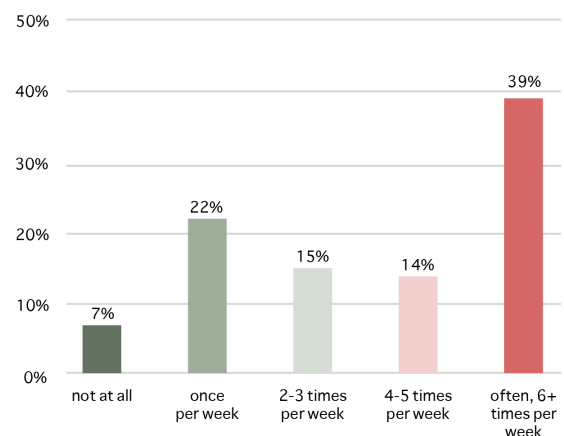
- When a Southside neighborhood loses homeowners, they are likely to be Black homeowners. All neighborhoods between I-20 and the BeltLine corridor saw a drop in the non-white share of homeowners. That includes Adair Park, Peoplestown, Pittsburgh, Mechanicsville, and Grant Park;
- The median income increased at a higher rate in most southern neighborhoods than in the city as a whole. Median income actually decreased in Atlanta during that time;
- The college-educated share of householders increased more in many census tracts along the BeltLine than in the rest of Atlanta;
- There were fewer very low-income people earning below \$25,000 in every neighborhood along the BeltLine from Memorial Drive to Hill Street as well as Westview and Adair Park;
- Adair Park is quickly gentrifying;
- Mechanicsville, Pittsburgh, and Peoplestown remain enclaves of affordable housing for low-income people of color, but they face increasing pressure from gentrification.

"I value my community because my neighbors look out for me because I'm a senior homeowner and I'm by myself. We help each other out."
– Cynthia Scott

Our own survey of residents found:

- People value the green space and other amenities the BeltLine can bring, but also want family-owned businesses, affordable shops and restaurants, affordable groceries nearby, more affordable housing, and jobs and public transportation to work;
- Residents don't feel part of the development process and found Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. meetings overly focused on park issues and not on the other needs of existing residents;
- Residents have already seen displacement from gentrification generated by the project;
- Seniors have seen a drop-off in services, including bus transportation, and need access ramps to buildings;
- People have a strong sense of history, both the good and the bad. They look back to the solidarity and self-help created during Jim Crow while also remembering the waves of displacement and disenfranchisement that continued even after Jim Crow ended;
- Even higher income residents value the racial and economic diversity of their neighborhoods and don't want to lose it;
- Residents have hope and vision for a BeltLine for all;
- Residents in Southside areas value their relationships with their neighbors more than any other aspect of their community and overwhelmingly want to stay put.

How Often Do you Talk to Your Neighbors?



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SOLUTIONS

For decades the city has been guided by “The Atlanta Way.” This was the name given to an alliance of first all-white, and then of Black and white, elites supporting growth at all costs while shutting down community-led concerns.

*“Do renters have rights?
What are our rights to stay
in our houses for four to
five years, 10 years, longer
even, to buy a house? Will
I be able to have my kids
grow up in the same home?”
– Nicole Rivers*

The Housing Justice League believes Atlanta can do better. We developed these alternatives during the summer of 2017 through a series of workshops involving Housing Justice League members, allies, and residents of Southside communities. We continue to believe in collective action that joins policymakers, organizations, and everyday residents in alliance with those most threatened by displacement to ensure that Atlanta is a city for all.

Residents emphasized the need for development without displacement, as well as the need to respect their neighborhoods’ history and culture. Renters and low-income homeowners require legal protection and inclusion in the planning process. It is also vital to acknowledge the long history of racism and displacement our communities have endured in order to enact public policies that work for residents.

With that in mind, we recommend the following policies.

THE CITY MUST

- Mandate inclusionary zoning within the BeltLine areas. That means requiring developers to include a certain proportion of affordable units within the new buildings. This is the most effective way we will meet the BeltLine’s goal of 5,600 new units. The City should mandate such zoning throughout Atlanta;
- Allocate a portion of the \$40 million in the Affordable Housing Bond Program to develop rental housing in the BeltLine planning area, focusing on households earning below 60 percent of Area Median Income;
- Reclaim vacant housing and secure property to create new affordable housing;
- Embrace more democratic forms of controlling property to protect against gentrification, including nonprofit land trusts, limited equity housing cooperatives, and expanded access to the Housing Trust Fund by community development corporations to build low-income housing;
- Use tax abatements to entice developers to build and preserve affordable housing;
- Expand the power of Neighborhood Planning Units, citizen advisory boards

*“Peopletown has nice,
low-income housing that is
affordable for a lot of our
residents, which we are very
proud of. We want to make
sure that remains.”
– Rakia Reeves*

*“I would really be heart-
broken if I was displaced
because I don’t know if I’m
gonna find that in another
community, I don’t know
if I’m gonna find the close
knit family.”
– Jo Ann Augourh*

*“I want to see the BeltLine
bring affordable housing
and something for the se-
nior citizens and single
people and grocery stores,
drug stores and shops.”
– Cynthia Scott*

Housing Justice League
volunteer researchers

Photo by James Diedrick



- launched in 1974 to advise the city council and mayor on planning in their areas;
- Put the protection and creation of affordable housing into the center of planning and new development projects;
 - Require that developers conduct their own Displacement Impact Studies before starting so that any plan includes measures to mitigate and avoid displacement;
 - Consider a moratorium on evictions and foreclosures during times of crisis. This legal tactic was used in some areas of the country to combat the human toll of the recession of 2008. Establish clear criteria as to what constitutes a "crisis."

THE COUNTY AND STATE MUST

- Implement laws that protect low-income homeowners and renters, not just in the BeltLine but throughout the city. This has been a long-time goal of the Housing Justice League and includes rent stabilization laws, eviction protection laws, and legal aid for tenants;
- Georgia should join other states in enacting property tax "circuit breakers" that cap how much property tax homeowners pay depending on their income. Many homeowners leave gentrifying areas because they cannot afford rising property taxes. This cap would protect them.

"I feel that if the BeltLine is going to connect the communities it should connect the communities in an equal manner. Not have this community feel above that community and that community feel below this community. Instead, they should all be together as one."
– Nikiria Sky

"It's dismaying to see a lot more massive housing developments go up along the BeltLine and most of them seem to be luxury apartments priced for middle and upper middle class."
– James Collins

ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT MUST

- Redirect funding from programs that put pressure on affordable housing to fund affordable housing itself.

Gentrification is underway but we can move forward together and build more just and livable communities.

METHODS

The data collection and research completed for this report were conducted over a year-long Participatory Action Research Project by the Housing Justice League, Research|Action Cooperative, and a large team of volunteers. We conducted 143 individual surveys in 16 BeltLine communities and 31 interviews with residents of the communities of Peopletown, Pittsburgh, and Adair Park. We reviewed current discussions in academic and policy literature. We drew on demographic and economic indicators compiled from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2006-2010 and 2011-2015 five-year estimates. In addition, we indexed census tracts using three indicators of gentrification and examined two indicators of displacement.

"You're building plenty of apartments, high-rises, but the nearest grocery store is miles away."

– Vivian Williams

"Will new developers honor the history, or just destroy it and rebuild on top of it?"

– James Collins

"I'm not sure if the BeltLine is here to help us or tear us apart and push us out."

– Austen Johnson



Youth center in Peopletown

Photo by James Diedrick