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Series of meetings starting Jan. 8 gives opportunity for input before City Council considers \$190 million proposal — and tax levy — for downtown and Midtown.

By **PAUL DONSKY**
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Streetcars could be rolling down Peachtree Street within six years as part of a \$190 million proposal that supporters say will transform Atlanta's signature thoroughfare.

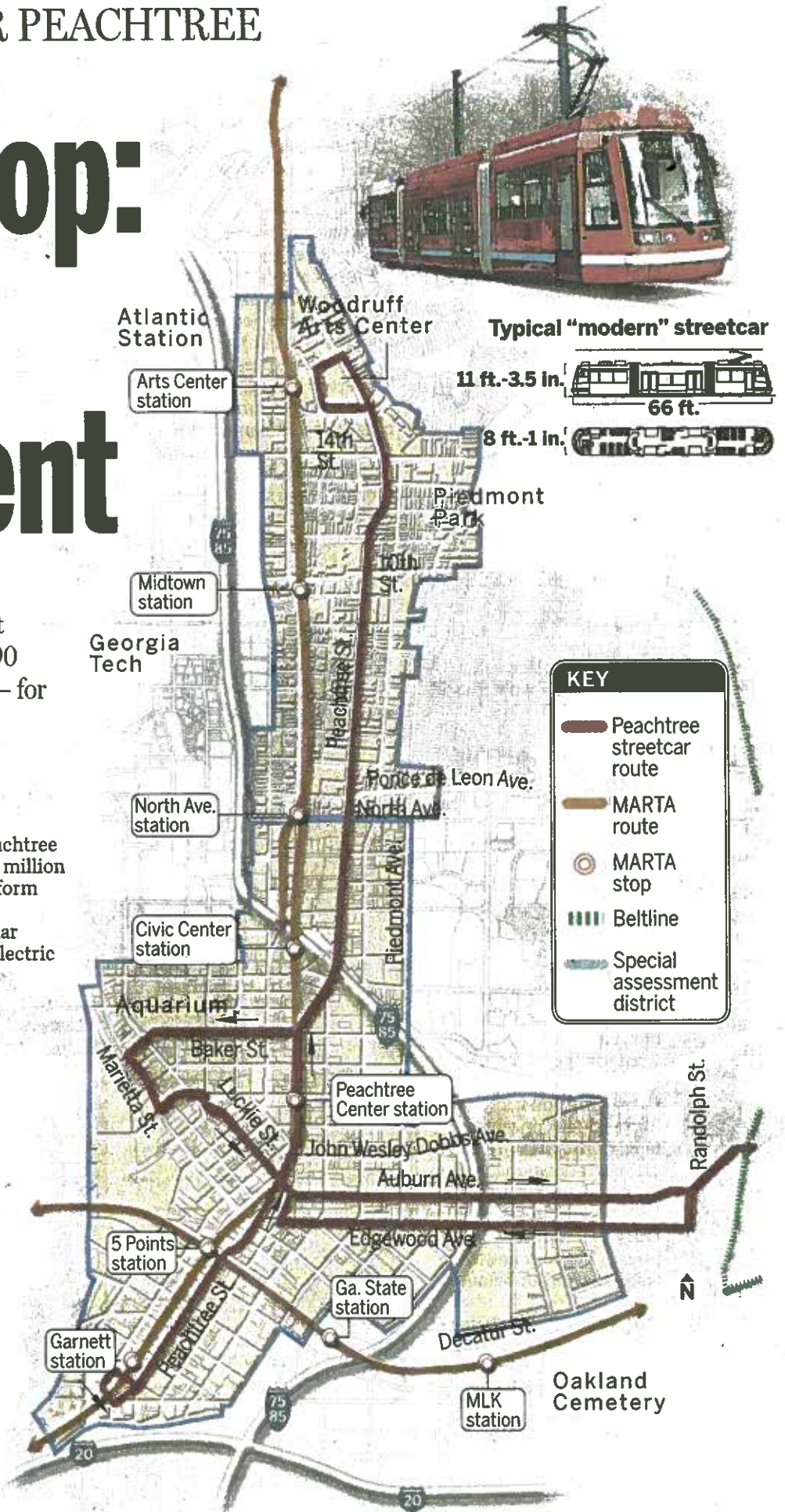
The streetcars would mix with regular traffic, drawing power from overhead electric cables, in downtown and Midtown.

The proposal has drawn support from many of Atlanta's business and civic leaders, who see an opportunity to create a postcard-perfect symbol the landlocked city has sorely lacked.

"We want to create a world-class street, a world-class boulevard, in Atlanta," said Ray Christman, former president and chief executive of Federal Home Loan Bank of Atlanta, who chaired the Peachtree Corridor Partnership formed by Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin to study the issue.

Several roadblocks remain before streetcar tracks return to Atlanta after a more-than-50-year absence.

The plan must be approved by the Atlanta City Council, which may balk at raising taxes in the area served by the streetcar, part of the proposal to cover the bulk of construction costs. The state Legislature would need to approve a law allowing Atlanta to levy a parking tax to cover operating



Streetcar: Proposal faces several roadblocks

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costs, projected to be up to \$6 million a year.

Four public meetings are planned, starting Jan. 8, with a final proposal handed to the City Council by March.

The plan includes about 10 miles of track along two main routes: on Peachtree between Memorial Drive in downtown Atlanta and the Woodruff Arts Center in Midtown; and an east-west loop linking downtown tourist sites.

The construction cost would be shouldered largely by businesses and owners of multi-family housing within a quarter-mile of the trolley line. A special tax district would be created in that area, raising the property tax rate by two to three

mills — up to \$360 for the owner of a \$300,000 condo. Single-family homes would be exempt. The city would kick in as much as \$47.5 million for construction.

Greg Guhl, who lives in a Peachtree Street condo, represents the quardary facing project organizers. Guhl would love to see a streetcar, but he thinks organizers should seek other funding options. "I think we pay a lot of taxes to our government in the first place," said Guhl. Organizers "should be able to find money from other sources."

Guhl said he'd make more trips to places like Centennial Olympic Park if he could ride a streetcar.

"To me, being able to look at the buildings, the architecture, it personalizes everything," he said.

The proposal comes two years

after Franklin formed a task force to explore the feasibility of bringing streetcars back. Last March, the group reported, calling for a \$1 billion makeover for Peachtree, with a 19-mile streetcar route from Buckhead to Fort McPherson, and extensive road and sidewalk improvements.

The mayor asked Christman to turn the vision into a workable plan. Over the last six months, Christman met with community and political leaders and emerged with a significantly scaled-back proposal, with half the streetcar miles and at one-fifth the cost.

Starting in Midtown and downtown makes the most sense, Christman said, because costly and time-consuming road improvements are not needed in those areas

to accommodate the streetcar, and with the density of housing and offices already in place it has the best chance of attracting riders.

Christman said the plan should be seen as Phase 1 of a potentially much larger streetcar system. Expansions could be partially funded by federal transit grants, as has been done in Portland, Ore.

Atlanta City Councilman Kwanza Hall said he's excited about the plans but wants streetcars along other thoroughfares, such as Boulevard and Ponce de Leon Avenue.

"I think it's worth being a little more aggressive without breaking the bank or hurting our taxpayers," said Hall, whose represents most of the proposed streetcar route.

Staff writer Eric Stirgus contributed to this article.

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