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Peachtree Corridor project defines a grand vision

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Peachtree. Plans to transform Atlanta's grand boulevard have been in a quiet phase since March. But despite a lack of visibility and attention, the proposal has not gone away.

Six months ago, the Peachtree Corridor Task Force and Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin unveiled an ambitious \$1 billion plan to transform the city's signature street into a world-class boulevard complete with parks, trees, wide sidewalks and a modern streetcar.

The plan calls for the 16.1-mile corridor project to stretch from Brookhaven to Fort McPherson and include a 2.35 mile east-west downtown loop that would connect major tourist attractions.

During this quiet phase, groundwork has been laid to determine and build the level of support for the project.

In the next couple of months, the mayor is expected to unveil her detailed recommendations to the Atlanta City Council on how the first phase of the project can be funded and implemented.

Ray Christman, retired president and CEO of the Federal Home Loan Bank in Atlanta, was hired in May to help define those recommendations. He has met with more than 50 stakeholders along the corridor to determine how best to proceed.

At a recent meeting of the mayor's Atlanta Committee for Progress (a group of top business leaders who meet in private four times a year), Christman and the mayor shared their views on their current thinking of the project.

"This is a very complex and multi-faceted project," Christman says. "There's no way the community can digest the whole project in one bite, either financially or operationally. We have to step back and say, where can we start."

Expect the proposal in the first phase to be implemented in downtown and

Midtown, including the east-west loop — a total of 6.3 miles estimated to cost about \$342 million.

The proposal also will provide details for a special funding district in Midtown and downtown for a streetcar line and streetscape improvements.

The mayor and City Council must approve a "special assessment district" along the Peachtree Corridor, before the project can move forward. The hope is that those approvals will occur by the end of the year.

"We need a special assessment district to provide local funding to jumpstart this project," Christman says. "Nobody wants to force any part of the corridor into a district that they don't support."

That's why downtown and Midtown are in the first phase.

Tom Bell, CEO of Cousins Properties, which owns property all up and down Peachtree, says support is strongest in the central part of the city and more lukewarm in Buckhead and other parts of the corridor.

Bell co-chaired the Peachtree Corridor Task Force and remains as committed as ever to the concept. "The corridor is very important to Atlanta," he says. "It pulls the city together and provides a linkage allowing people to move around. It would have a big impact."

The corridor already has three community improvement districts (downtown, Midtown and Buckhead) where property owners are taxing themselves for street improvements and public safety. But there are two major sections where CIDs don't exist — south of downtown to Fort McPherson and between the Brookwood Interchange and Buckhead.

In the latter phases of the project (which could take 20 to 25 years), the hope is that the state and federal government will support the corridor and that there would be other sources of funding.

The Peachtree Corridor is only one of a half-dozen major initiatives that Franklin is trying to put in place during her last 800 days in office. In many ways, the Peachtree project is the most compelling. It already has tens of thousands of people living and working along Peachtree, and it provides Atlanta's best hope to create a pedestrian-friendly and transit-friendly corridor.

"Of all our transit options, this is the one we can implement the fastest," Bell says.

And this is so much more than just a transit corridor. As goes Peachtree, so goes Atlanta. Not only is it our postcard skyline image. At street-level, it exemplifies how we view ourselves.

Will we proudly portray a beautiful boulevard with trees, streetcars, clean wide sidewalks, active street life, attractive buildings, public art and a place we want to show off to the world?

Or will it be a spotty corridor speckled with parking lots, unsafe sidewalks, ugly asphalt, cars whizzing by, unsightly utility poles with disconnected developments?

Christman believes the community will opt for the grand vision.

"There is deep and broad-based support among the people I've talked to for the vision the mayor has articulated about how we can turn Peachtree into a grand boulevard," he says. "Peachtree is deeply tied to Atlanta's identity. It gets to the heart of how people think about Atlanta."

Franklin knows that she will be out of office long before that vision is realized. But she also knows that she's "setting in motion a long-

range plan that supports the most significant commercial corridor in the city."

The next few months will be fraught with discussion and controversy over details on the Peachtree Corridor's corridor — particularly over the funding piece.

But among all that static, our City Council members and citizens must not lose sight of the grand vision for Peachtree. We have an opportunity to realize a dream that will pay dividends for decades to come.

We've waited long enough.

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