Transit Planning 201 for Atlanta: Please don’t let us blow it

By Mike Dobbins

The pace quickens for putting out some information for citizens to consider as they decide how to vote on the transit referendum. Yet major issues remain about how people will be able to make an informed decision on this most important opportunity. I shared in the Saporta Report recently the process by which rational and effective transit planning should go forward. Regrettably, Atlanta lacks a comprehensive transit plan and has not considered most of the technical and commonsense steps to create one, instead pinning its faith on a 52 mile streetcar plan. My concern here was well captured by John Kay of the Financial Times (4/27) under the headline, “Grand projects are worthless if they don’t work,” states: “While the recent focus on infrastructure is welcome, the plans seem to have already succumbed to the political imperative for soundbites and predilection for the grandiose. The usual outcome is projects that run over time and over budget,” and, in the case of Atlanta, don’t meet existing needs and opportunities.

To have our best chance to capitalize on the referendum opportunity, the language approved by the state provides the Atlanta City Council the option to call for the vote either this November or November 2017, which could give the city the time to fully develop the comprehensive transit plan that the city now lacks. In addition, the state legislation allows the grouping transit types, like buses, bus rapid transit, light rail, heavy rail, and new technologies, so as to avoid getting mired into the “my project” versus “your project” kind of bickering that damaged the TSPLOST process back in 2012.

So I offer here more depth on what transit planning can and should investigate and a rationale for why paying attention to these issues and details is vital, both for the vote and for responsible stewardship going forward. Others, too, are seeking to better understand and communicate more details on the proposals before us. David Emory’s Citizens for Progressive Transit (CfPT) initiative shares rule-of-thumb project cost information so that people can begin to get a sense of compare how much the costs of different options. Rule-of-thumb capital and operating cost data for project types should be joined by reasonable implementation timeline projections. Beyond giving useful information about when which project type might be realistically deliverable, the timeline can soften conflicts that seem to emerge as advocates for different technologies realize that transit types cannot occur all at once, thus attenuating competition issues. In addition, all these modes should incorporate frequency assumptions to estimate ridership, vital for a viable transit system. And, in the context of Atlanta’s persistent wealth divide, fundamental consideration should focus near term transit expenditures where access needs are greatest, taking into account housing affordability and routes serving low wealth neighborhoods. A key factor in unemployment, which widens the income gap, is lack of access to jobs. Beyond jobs, people in low wealth communities lack access to health care, healthy food, and other service needs, further diminishing their quality of life.

Such an analysis could reveal that improvements to the bus network can begin right away: Restoring routes that were cut by insufficient budgets, beefing up east-west connectivity to the Peachtree spine, increasing frequency of service – the biggest boon to ridership regardless of mode - installing bus shelters with a full digital and information and safety package, to mention a few. Streetcars, on the other hand, are longer term projects due to their far greater costs and the lengths of time it takes to get them going. Increasingly, too, this mode is becoming uncertain in a time of rapid change in travel behavior and accelerating technology, thus over their reasonable timeline for implementation more exposed to risk.

An overriding factor, certainly for near term transit emphasis, has to be access for people needing to get to existing concentrations of destinations, the downtown to Buckhead core along with CDC/Emory and the emerging concentrations around Old Fourth Ward Park. Here, during the daytime, demographics are comparable to those of the region as a whole, that is, diverse in income, ethnicity, gender, and age, where people come every day to work and to meet their full range of needs. An issue to overcome in Atlanta’s politics-as-usual, however, is the occasional perception that resources boosting these areas just serves those who already have much. This perception should fade when people across the board stop to think about their daily destinations: Jobs, health and other services, shopping, colleges, and sports and cultural amenities are all focused in these high concentrations. The further relevance of this issue is the vote. If I live in Grove Park, Pittsburgh, Peoplestown, Lakewood, or Joyland, say, why would I vote for a program that does nothing to get me to where these destinations are concentrated, where I can meet my needs?

So a logical timeline grouping of project types might suggest meeting real people’s real needs now with a great bus system as the first group. Connecting Lindbergh to Emory/CDC as well as the extension of the Atlanta Streetcar to Ponce could be a second group that could begin detailed planning now but obviously takes longer to achieve, probably five years or so out. A third group could assess the effectiveness and ridership of a by then beefed up east-west bus service as a basis for a deeper investigation of other mode choices available for east-west connectivity, not assuming that the streetcar in traffic is the only answer. And then the other mode choices further out in time, when the plan could consider and incorporate the changes in travel behavior and technology-driven mode choices that are surely coming.

Oh, and MARTA, now emerging from its decades of justifiable defensiveness, has to be the principal agency for planning and implementing the program. They are the only entity that has a comprehensive mission, 40 years of generally successful performance (against a drumbeat of racially-driven opposition), thus the experience, the knowledge, and the tradition of designing, building, and operating a comprehensive system. Surely the City and the Atlanta BeltLine have come to understand that they don’t begin to have what it takes to perform any of these transit functions. Approaching 11 years and a half-billion dollars spent, the City, the BeltLine, and the Atlanta Streetcar have yielded a forlorn route that covers a distance of a mile and a half, millions of dollars in consultant and public relations expenditures, yet with no systematic, comprehensive – that is, all modes, citywide – plan for transit for everyone.

Despite the obvious logic of not having two agencies trying to do the same thing in the same place – actually three counting the public works department - I fear what would happen if the City and/or the Beltline somehow decide that they can do this, yet they might try. The trail, the parks, the art, the hype have been arguably transformative for the east side and could continue apace. Performance on improvements in low wealth neighborhoods, housing affordability, and job creation for those who most need work, though part of the BeltLine’s mission, has been negligible at best. It would help if efforts aimed at narrowing the wealth gap were to become the primary focus of the BeltLine’s considerable resources.