



# A SNOWY DAY IN GEORGIA

Wanted: Transportation Choices







## INTRODUCTION

On January 28, 2014, an entire region suddenly became paralyzed.

Businesses and schools dismissed at the same time, turning three major highways into massive parking lots. Hundreds of kids were stranded at schools while some drivers reported commutes more than 15 or 20 hours long.

More than 1,200 traffic accidents occurred. About 100 school buses filled with kids were stuck on the road at midnight.

Abandoned cars were everywhere. Thousands of people spent the night in stores and restaurants.

Was it an earthquake? A massive hurricane?

Nope -- just a few inches of snow.

Surely this must have taken place in some third world country.

Actually, it was in Atlanta, GA, one of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States.

Blame was quickly placed on public officials who said that the real problem was that cars hit the road at the same time, not letting plows and salt trucks do their job. The head of the Georgia Emergency Management Agency said he made a mistake by activating the state's emergency response center six hours too late, long after the National Weather Service upgraded its winter storm alert for Atlanta.

Unfortunately, both of these assumptions are wrong. The truth is that blame for Atlanta's embarrassing and dangerous massive traffic jam can be found in the decisions our region made more than four decades before the first snowflakes fell this winter.

Atlanta has no transportation choices. Public transportation is simply not an option for the majority of the area's six million residents. Simply stated, there is no "my way or the highway." here. In Georgia, it's just the highway, and as thousands of us found out recently, the road can be a very cold and dangerous place at 3:00 a.m. on a snowy night.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Metro Atlanta residents face unique mobility issues. Those of us fortunate to own a car spend way too much of our time sitting in traffic instead of spending quality time at home with our families.

If you take MARTA to get around the city, you have become all too familiar with the concept of paying more and getting less, as service cuts have become far too common and fare hikes much too steep.



And if you want to go somewhere outside Fulton or DeKalb County and don't have a car? Hopefully you have a good pair of shoes (or boots).

MARTA is the child of the Georgia General Assembly, created in the 1970s. And like any parent, the legislature has provided structure and discipline along the way. When appropriate, any good parent allows their child to grow so that they can meet their true potential. At some point, Mom and Dad might even put a few dollars in their child's pocket and tell them to go out and spend it wisely.

Unfortunately, while other States, including our competitors in the Southeast, have opened up their wallets and wisely supported public transit, Georgia has instead decided to purposely starve MARTA, along with its 127 brothers and sisters (the smaller transit systems throughout Georgia). This is a case of child neglect, and it has been going on for too long. The question is: Why?

Why does MARTA, which services the economic engine of Georgia, receive no State operating support? In fact it is the largest system in the country without

operations funding – and it only receives 1% of its capital budget from Georgia. Furthermore, why is even local funding for MARTA restricted to just 50% of operations?

Georgia's proud history in the production of pecans, peaches, peanuts, and other products is well known. In addition, some of the largest Fortune 500 companies in the world – Home Depot, Coca Cola, and Delta Air Lines – have long called Georgia home, and the State has nurtured them so that they may continue to grow. We therefore know that when it wants to, the Georgia General Assembly can be a wonderful and caring parent. People throughout Georgia who rely on safe, affordable and reliable public transportation have been waiting for years for the State to show them the same level of affection. For the sake of all of us, now is the time to let MARTA and the rest of the State's transit systems grow.

## ENDLESS TRAFFIC CONGESTION

With no large bodies of water, mountains, or major federal land holdings to limit the city's outward growth, the Atlanta region sprawled out uncontrollably during the 1990s, when two-thirds of our summer days were unsafe for outdoor activities due to unhealthy air quality. We were choking on exhaust fumes after buying homes miles from the city and commuting by single passenger automobiles. Our grandparents and children were told to stay inside all day to avoid poisoning their lungs.





Today, Atlanta is the seventh most-congested city in the U.S., tied for third place in time spent commuting nationwide.<sup>1</sup> While some say our air quality is slightly better today, the likely reason is that the unemployment rate is still sky high and fewer people are polluting the air on the way to work each day. Hopefully the job market will rebound soon, and when it does, “Code Red” days will certainly be back in our daily vocabulary.

Metro Atlanta commuters now lose 51 hours a year to traffic jams. When we are on our death beds years from now, we will definitely want that time back to spend with our families. But those precious moments are gone forever.

With more than four million people (up from 1.8 million in 1970), and a growth rate of 38.9%, Atlanta also has the fastest growth rate of any southeastern city with a population of more than a million people. Atlanta’s urban land area expanded 47% between 1990 and 1996, following a 25% expansion between 1980 and 1990. These trends are likely to continue. Some experts believe that the region’s population could double by 2050.<sup>2</sup>

The only option (short of keeping our employment rate down) for getting out of this congestion cycle is to provide our region’s residents with an alternative to driving to work. But for those of us outside Fulton and DeKalb Counties, MARTA is simply not an option, and sadly, the General Assembly set it up that way. Ironically, as the metro area grew over the past three decades, those suburban counties have become more diverse, more crowded and more congested. But even if those new residents wanted to use MARTA, it wouldn’t be easy for them to do so. There are few connections between MARTA and systems such as Cobb County Community Transit (CCT), which mostly operates bus routes between major commercial centers in Cobb and the heart of downtown Atlanta.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Texas Transportation Institute’s 2012 Urban Mobility Report.

2 The New Georgia Encyclopedia. <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org>

3 The Day We Lost Atlanta; How 2 lousy inches of snow paralyzed a metro area of 6 million. Rebecca Burns, Politico Magazine, January 29, 2014.

## OUR COMPETITORS GET IT

Atlanta trails far behind other Southeastern cities of similar size in terms of transit service provided to the community. Miami and Dallas both run more vehicles than Atlanta during peak service hours. Houston runs nearly three times as many vehicles.<sup>4</sup> Nationwide, even far smaller cities like Baltimore and Salt Lake City provide much more bus and rail service. In fact, Georgia is “looking up” at virtually all of our so-called competitors in the southeast. Florida, for example funds transit at \$185 million annually. And this is not a “Red versus Blue” issue, as even the traditionally Conservative states of North Carolina (\$75 million), Tennessee (\$36 million), and Texas (\$29 million) see the value of investing in safe, quality, affordable public transportation. Even in tiny Arkansas, the State legislature created a dedicated revenue source for transit which has greatly enhanced mobility in the Little Rock region.



## HANDCUFFS

As for Georgia? In 2010 we invested a measly \$2.2 million in transit statewide, and only for capital expenses. In fact, MARTA is by far the largest system in the country without any State aid to provide transit service (operating assistance).

The General Assembly has handcuffed MARTA from its inception. It allows for just a 1% sales tax in Fulton and DeKalb counties, and only 50% of that funding may be used for operating assistance. This statute, another self-inflicted wound, is unique in U.S. transit policy. No other State in the nation places such onerous restrictions on local transit funding.

Put these limitations together with our State’s misguided, archaic constitutional provision which

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4 National Transit Database. Houston runs 2,207, Atlanta 830.

restricts gas tax revenues to highways only, and we have our very own, self-imposed mobility crisis. The State of Georgia invests 22 cents per person on public transportation each year. Twenty-two cents. Americans spend nearly \$1,100 a year; over \$5 a day, on coffee, almost as much as we spend on commuting, which accounts for about \$1,500 a year.<sup>5</sup> If you are a Georgia resident looking to save up enough money for just one cup of joe, you would need to set aside your allotment of transit money for the next 25 years. Hopefully your caffeine fix can wait.

## STARVATION

No State funding. Huge restrictions on local funding. This is a formula contrived to ensure that MARTA service is contained to a designated area with no hope for growth, and the result has been exactly as designed. Transit-dependent people who rely on MARTA service have had to deal with service cuts and fare increases several times since the system was created, and as seen on January 28<sup>th</sup>, when we all really need to get home quickly, MARTA just doesn't get you there.

Most recently, in 2011, MARTA raised one-way fares from \$2 to \$2.50. In 2010, it cut bus hours by 10% and rail hours by 14% to address a \$69 million budget deficit for the 2011-2012 financial year. Forty two bus lines were eliminated, while about 85 were modified. Once again, people who could little afford to pay more were forced to dig deep into their own pockets, and they are getting far less service.

## CLAYTON COUNTY: A NATIONAL DISGRACE

The transit system in Clayton County shut down in 2010, stranding 8,500 people, 81% of whom earn less than \$35,000 a year and 65% of whom have no car. While transit systems nationwide have buckled under the pressure of severe budget cuts since the beginning of 2009, few have actually shut down. Once again, Georgia has distinguished itself.

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<sup>5</sup> Accounting Principals' Workonomix survey, 2012.

A survey found that 3 out of 4 people could lose their jobs when the buses stopped rolling. The State of Georgia, through its transit starvation policy, created a mobility crisis in a majority African-American community in the cradle of the civil rights movement, and it did nothing to address the situation.

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***"I may stay with friends in Midtown. I have to move because I have to keep my job. I work in Buckhead in a law office and I take the bus from Clayton to the MARTA train to get there. It's not like I have a choice."***

— A desperate Clayton County resident reacts to being stranded<sup>6</sup>

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## TRANSPORTATION CRISIS

In fact, as Clayton County residents struggled to make ends meet, the legislature in 2010 began providing direct funding (\$8.1 million proposed by Governor Deal in last year's budget) to the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA) to run the Xpress bus service on 33 routes in 12 metro Atlanta counties. This is fantastic news for the "choice riders" in the 12 counties serviced by Xpress, which provides more than two million passenger trips annually, giving "reliable, stress-free commutes to/from major employment centers in Downtown, Midtown, Buckhead and Perimeter Center."<sup>7</sup>

But why has the State chosen to turn its back on Clayton County residents? Why has it left Cobb and Gwinnett Counties with limited routes and hours? We have an exploding population of suburban poor – up 249% in the last two decades, expanding 60% faster than the rest of the suburban population – often without the money to purchase or keep a car.<sup>8</sup> Yet the only people

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<sup>6</sup> Wheels in motion to drop C-Tran; Clayton County could save \$8 million without buses, but strand 8,500. Atlanta Journal-Constitution, March 13, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> [www.grta.org](http://www.grta.org)

<sup>8</sup> Changing Suburbs Outpace Mass Transit. Atlanta Journal-Constitution, December 27, 2012.

worthy of State funding for transit are the GRTA Xpress passengers, with an average household income of just under \$75,000 a year? Their wages are more than double Cobb and MARTA passengers.<sup>9</sup>

What is going on here? Where are our priorities as a society? The General Assembly should pass legislation to provide dedicated funding for public transportation systems statewide.

## JOBS, JOBS, JOBS

Nationally, 69% of working age residents in American cities live near a transit stop. In Atlanta, that percentage is only 38%. In fact, only 22% of all jobs in the Atlanta region are reachable by transit within 90 minutes. It is no surprise that we rank 91st out of the top 100 metros in the nation with respect to job access.<sup>10</sup>

Yet despite the handcuffs and the starvation, a recent University of Georgia study indicates that MARTA is still incredibly important to our region's fiscal health. The number of workers who depend on MARTA to get to their jobs — nearly 100,000 people — has tripled in the past five years. In fact, MARTA supports between 20,000 and 37,000 jobs in Georgia. Nearly 150,000 workers in the Atlanta area, including car owners, use MARTA for their daily commute. And of the 18 fastest growing industry sectors, 14 employ workers who rely heavily on MARTA. The economic activity of the nearly 100,000 MARTA-dependent workers support another 80,000 additional jobs.<sup>11</sup>

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***According to a national study, “The fact that most public transportation riders are African-American has limited MARTA’s growth in predominantly white and well-off suburban areas.”<sup>12</sup>***

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9 YOUR COMMUTE; State Budget Might Pay For Bus System. Atlanta Journal-Constitution, February 25, 2013.

10 Missed Opportunity: Transit & Jobs in Metropolitan America. Brookings Institution 2011.

11 MARTA Economic Engine for Region, Study Says. Atlanta Journal Constitution, November 27, 2012.

12 Moving Beyond Urban Sprawl: The Challenge for Metropolitan Atlanta. The Brookings Institution, 2000.

## CONCLUSION

The January snow “storm” has renewed the debate in the General Assembly of whether to give Georgian’s more transportation options. If the Legislature is serious about making Atlanta into a world class city where people (rich or poor) want to live and companies (big or small) want to locate, we have to begin to fund public transportation.

The General Assembly now has a clear choice which will impact our region for decades to come: fund and expand MARTA and let it reach its potential, or continue the policies that have made our transportation network the butt of jokes all across the United States.

The dedicated men and women who proudly go to work each day for the nation’s eighth largest transit system and the thousands of riders who rely on the service they provide hope that legislators act to bring Georgia residents out of the cold and into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

On behalf of the people who rely on MARTA and the other transit systems throughout Georgia, ATU calls on the General Assembly to address our State’s mobility crisis by:

- Creating a dedicated revenue source for public transportation to maintain critical service that keeps people connected to their community;
- Providing adequate funding for transit so that people have an alternative to driving to work;
- Abolishing laws restricting the use of local transit dollars to avoid service cuts and fare increases.

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