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Midtown officials bracing for population boom

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The Midtown Alliance projects an estimated 62,000 people will call Midtown home in another 25 years, marking a 15-fold increase in the population for this neighborhood since 1996.

Through goals outlined in the Alliance's continuing plan for the neighborhood, the Midtown Blueprint II, officials are hoping to be able to handle this population surge through a mix of environmentally sound land-use planning and increased transportation options.

"It's sort of Life Rule 101, where you write down all your goals," said J. Michael Robison, CEO of Lanier Parking Holdings Inc. and a Midtown Alliance board member. "It was an extremely collaborative effort, involving a lot of people in the community over a long period of time and they wrote down what they wanted to do so clearly that the blueprint was mostly passed into ordinance."

Midtown is bound by the Downtown Connector on the west, Piedmont Avenue on the east, the Brookwood Amtrak station on the north and Ralph McGill Boulevard on the south.

When the opening ceremony of the 1996 Olympic Games took place, the area had about 2,500 housing units and about 4,000 residents, not including those housed in college dormitories, according to Midtown Alliance data.

Since that day, another 8,000 residential units have been either completed or are under construction and Midtown will soon be home to 17,000.

But that's only the beginning.

The blueprint identified 249 acres -- 35 percent of Midtown's total land area -- that is ripe for development.

By 2030, the number of housing units is expected to swell to nearly 32,000 and Midtown's population to approach 62,000, 15 times more than the pre-Olympic figure.

"We worry most about 'getting it right,' making sure we don't miss an opportunity," said Shannon Powell, vice president of planning and development at Midtown Alliance. "Urban areas are delicate creatures and every decision, every detail really matters."

Getting around

Just moving all those people in, around and through the area is perhaps the greatest challenge. Some of the tools already are in place.

Midtown's long-term future is based on a complementary mixture of high-density, mixed-use projects that encourage people to walk, bike or use a variety of trains, buses and shuttles.

"Some of those things are starting to happen today and they've proven to be very popular," said Dan Hourigan, director of transportation solutions for the Midtown Alliance.

Two distinct yet intertwined complementary shuttle services ferry riders to and from Midtown, Georgia Tech and the new Atlantic Station development.

A third system, using the Tech trolleys on evenings and weekends, connects residential areas with stores, restaurants and theaters.

As Hourigan plots the future of transportation, another group wants to turn back the clock.

Atlanta Streetcar Inc., a private nonprofit group, backs a return of the rail-based streetcars like those that ran on the streets of Atlanta until 1949.

"In five or 10 years, I think you're going to see some sort of people mover, maybe a return of the Peachtree streetcar," Hourigan said.

Life on the street

Wider sidewalks and tree-lined streets will encourage people to use their feet rather than their cars and Blueprint Midtown II calls for building design changes that will make it easier to dine and shop along the way.

The plan projects about 2 million square feet of new street-level retail establishments with glass-rich façades and entrances that open directly to the sidewalk instead of a parking lot.

New construction will take on an environmental focus. Several existing Midtown structures are LEED-certified (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), adhering to a national

standard for energy efficiency developed by the U.S. Green Building Council. Others are in the works.

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New pocket parks built into streetscapes will provide a buffer between urban and green space. Construction is under way along Peachtree and West Peachtree streets to widen sidewalks, erect new street lights and bury utility wiring.

"This plan takes land use to new levels and ties it all together. Looking at transportation or zoning or parks or whatever in isolation just doesn't work," Powell said.

Midtown's future also may be shaped by development along the proposed Atlanta Beltline, a 22-mile ring of abandoned rail bed that developers plan to transform into a series of bike trails, mixed-use projects, green space and transit lines at a projected cost of up to \$3 billion.

A portion of the Beltline skirts Midtown's eastern edge.

The commitment of the Midtown Alliance, the city of Atlanta, the business community and its residents to make Midtown's tomorrows better helps assure the plan will work, Robison said.

"Investors will feel more comfortable about making long-term commitments when they know the development going up next to them is a mixed-use residential and retail project. You don't want to put up a class A office building and have somebody put a liquor store next door," he said.

Above all, the effort devoted to planning will make Midtown one of the most approachable, convenient and desirable areas in the South, Powell said.

"It's going to be the epicenter of Atlanta, a place where you can find anything and everything," she said. "It is going to be fabulous."

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