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A new Peachtree for \$1 billion

Details emerge on proposed overhaul to add streetcars, parks

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More than 50 years after streetcars vanished from Atlanta, a group of business and civic leaders have a \$1 billion, 20-year plan to bring them back along a dramatically revitalized Peachtree Street corridor.

Unveiled Tuesday, the recommendation envisions an overhaul of the city's signature thoroughfare to include new sidewalks and bicycle lanes, improved lighting and landscaping, buried utility lines and a string of small parks and plazas, about one every quarter-mile. The plan, which is being fine-tuned, would be financed in part with new taxes on property owners along the street.

The plan faces considerable political hurdles, but its supporters believe the proposal is far from fanciful.

Tom Bell, who co-chaired the Peachtree Corridor Task Force, said he began the process thinking it would produce a vision. "Now I believe that a large portion of this can get done," said Bell, chief executive officer of Cousins Properties, one of the city's largest and most influential developers.

The group was brought together by Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin to transform Peachtree into a world-class corridor along the lines of Michigan Avenue in Chicago.

Bell said final recommendations will be given to the mayor by March 26.

After a year of work, the group on Tuesday released details of their plan, including answers to some of the thorniest questions they faced — how to pay for the project and how to squeeze streetcars onto the traffic-clogged corridor.

About half of the \$1 billion price tag would come from a special taxing district that would encompass the entire Peachtree corridor, a change that would require City Council approval, Bell said.

Every property owner, both residential and commercial, would pay an additional tax each year based on the value of their home or business. The amount has yet to be determined, but Bell said the owner of a \$300,000 condo might be expected to pay an additional \$250 a year.

The remaining money would come from a variety of sources, including city, state and federal governments, a dedicated parking tax, and from private donors.

Name change planned

The plan includes two streetcar lines that would cost up to \$450 million. The longest, a 15-mile stretch from Brookhaven in the north to the Fort McPherson area in the south, would cut through Buckhead, Midtown, downtown and the emerging Castleberry Hill district.

A separate four-mile line would circulate in the downtown area among hotels and tourist attractions, from the Georgia Aquarium to the Martin Luther King Jr. Historic District.

It's unclear whether MARTA or some other entity would build and operate the streetcar system.

The proposal calls for streetcars to roll with other traffic along the 19-mile route. To keep traffic moving, Peachtree may need to be widened at certain points to accommodate medians, turn lanes and wider sidewalks, officials said.

Stations would be spaced about a quarter-mile apart, and several connections are planned with the proposed Beltline rail line.

In addition, the Peachtree name, which now changes to Whitehall Street in downtown Atlanta, would extend south all the way to Fort McPherson — bringing the city's most coveted address — along with the streetcar line and other improvements — to an area of town long in the shadows of the northside.

Assuming the city approves the plan and other funding is secured, Bell said work could start building the streetcar's first leg in downtown and Midtown in two years.

'What are we waiting on?'

Steve Cover, commissioner of planning and development for the city of Atlanta, said the task force has come up with a solid plan.

"Eventually, when this report is presented to us, I think it will be something the city can definitely run with," said Cover, who serves on the task force.

Atlanta City Council President Lisa Borders, said Tuesday that she had not heard about the special tax district aspect of the proposal, but she said the council would be "open to looking at all ideas that would benefit the city, and any financing vehicle that would help with transportation options would be of interest."

City Council member Kwanza Hall, who represents downtown and several close-in neighborhoods, said he's inclined to support the plan, envisioning the Peachtree streetcar as the initial piece of a comprehensive streetcar network.

"What are we waiting on?" said Hall. "We need innovative transportation solutions immediately."

Franklin could not be reached for comment.

The idea of resurrecting streetcars in Atlanta can be traced to a 2002 speech noted urban planner Andres Duany gave to the Midtown Alliance. The concept was picked up by several business leaders led by Michael Robison, owner of Lanier Parking.

After two years of study, the group handed the project off to the mayor.

Tax could be tough sell

One of the more controversial aspects of the proposal could be the addition of a special tax district. Three communities — downtown, Midtown and Buckhead — already have established community

improvement districts (CIDs) where commercial property owners tax themselves to enhance the area.

"There would be some serious questions about double taxation," said Scotty Greene, president of the Buckhead CID who also serves on the task force. "This is going to be a challenge for Atlanta leaders for the next two elected terms to articulate the opportunities in the future."

Susan Mendheim, president of the Midtown Alliance who also serves on the task force, said her organization would have to look over the proposal. But she stressed that "we are enthusiastic about the goal."

The draft recommendation envisions the project's being built in three phases, starting in the downtown and Midtown areas.

The second phase would be in Buckhead, and the latter phase would be in the area south of downtown.

That phasing is fine with Atlanta developer Egbert Perry, co-chair of the task force, who sees the extension of Peachtree Street to the south side as a way to reshape the underdeveloped part of town.

"This is an opportunity to knit the city back along the spine," said Perry, who is CEO of the Integral Group.

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