



Not the Stitch: Learning from Two Atlanta Reconnecting Communities Projects Finding New Paths Forward

GPA Conference 2025 | October 8, 2025, at 4:00 PM

Nice to See You!

Panelists



LeJuano Varnell,
Executive Director
Sweet Auburn Works



Amy Goodwin,
Planning Administrator,
Transportation
**Atlanta Regional
Commission**



Josh Phillipson,
Principal Program
Specialist, Transportation
**Atlanta Regional
Commission**



Sarah McColley,
Senior Associate
Perkins&Will

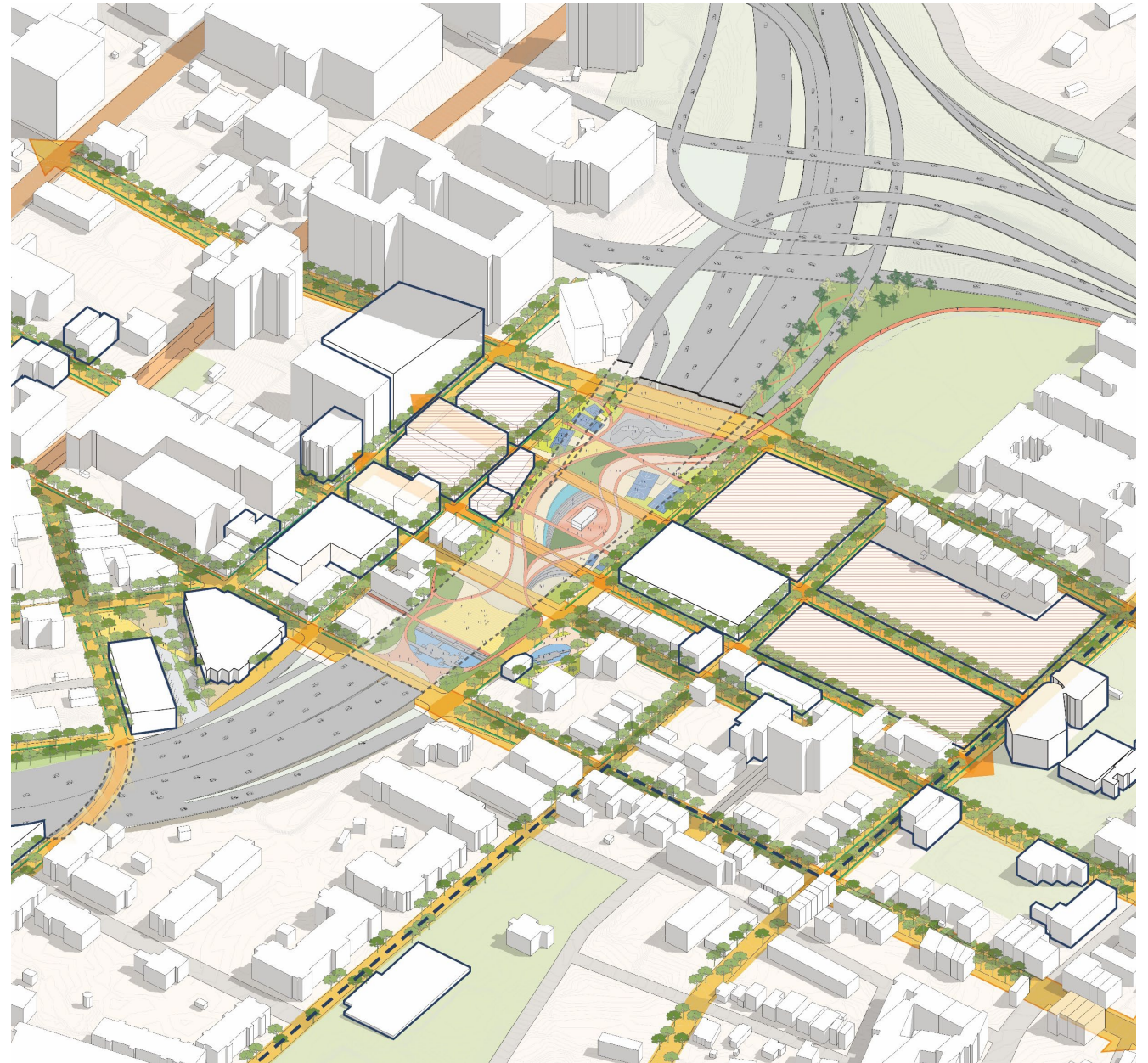


Meghan McMullen,
Senior Associate
Nelson\Nygaard

Agenda

- 01 — Introduction
- 02 — Project Overview – Flint River
- 03 — Project Overview – Sweet Auburn
- 04 — Maintaining Momentum
- 05 — Discussion

→
Reconnecting Sweet Auburn
Atlanta, GA



01 — Introduction

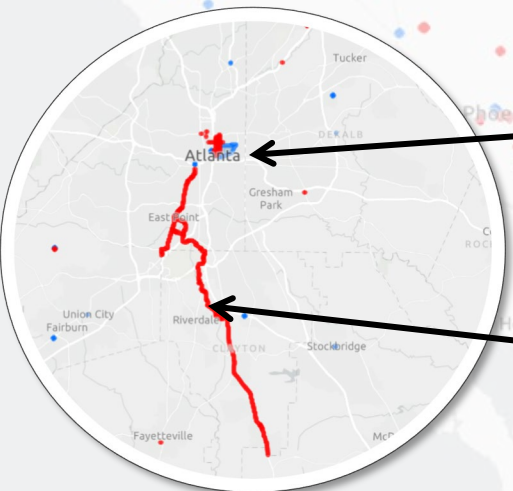
USDOT Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods (RCN) Grant Program

Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (2021):
Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program

Inflation Reduction Act (2022):
Neighborhood Access and Equity Program

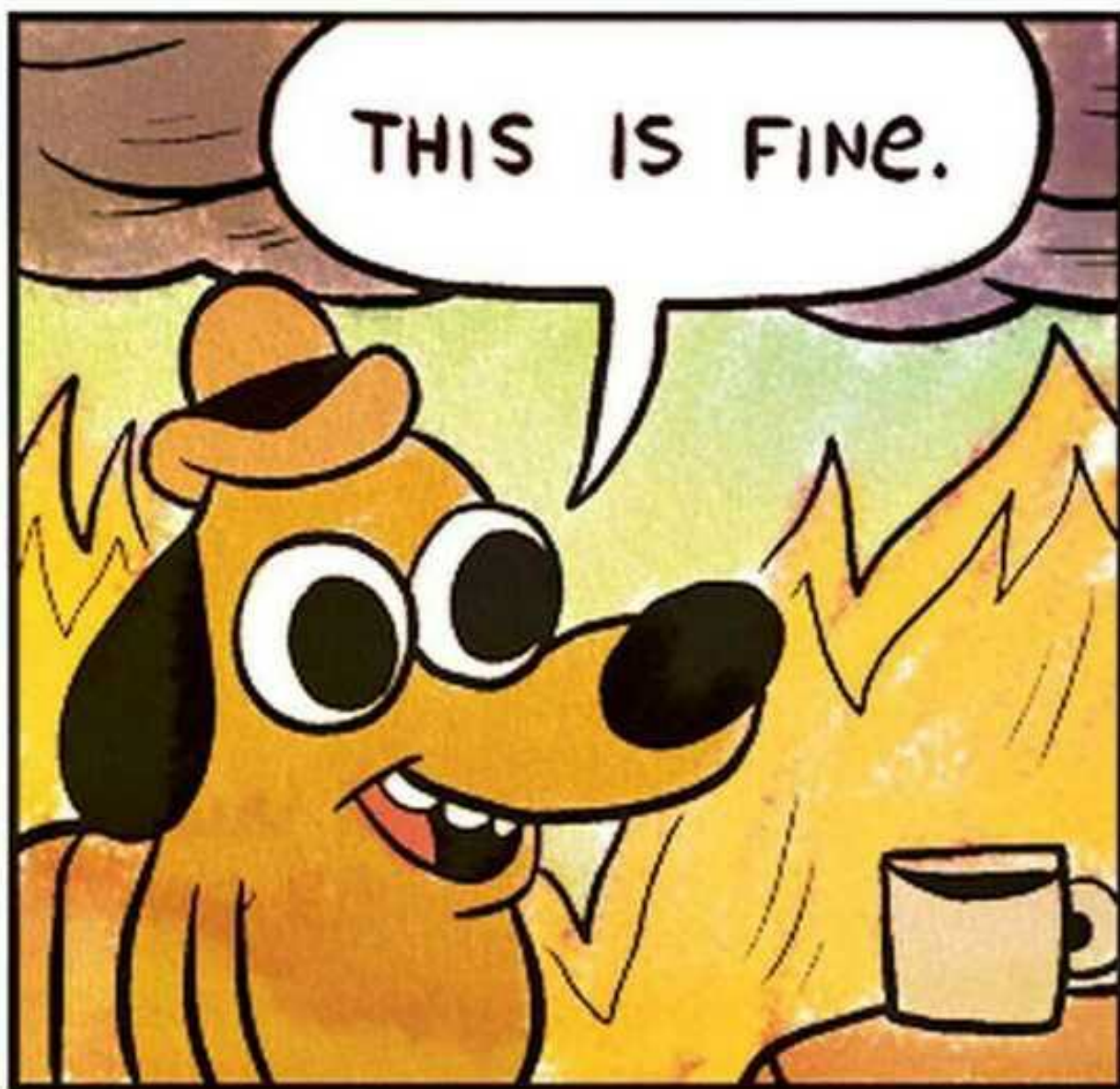
The primary goal of the RCP Program is to **reconnect communities harmed by past transportation infrastructure** decisions, through community-supported planning activities and capital construction projects that are championed by those communities.

USDOT RCP Program Overview



Reconnecting Sweet Auburn
\$800k planning award (RCP)

Flint River Gateway Trails
\$64.9M construction award (NAE)



WABE BLACK HISTORY | CITY OF ATLANTA |

CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT | HISTORY | LOCAL

| MLK

Historic Sweet Auburn is fighting for a future

Kendall Murry

April 11th, 2023



Like many legacy Black urban neighborhoods, the Sweet Auburn community has envisioned a thoughtful resurgence.

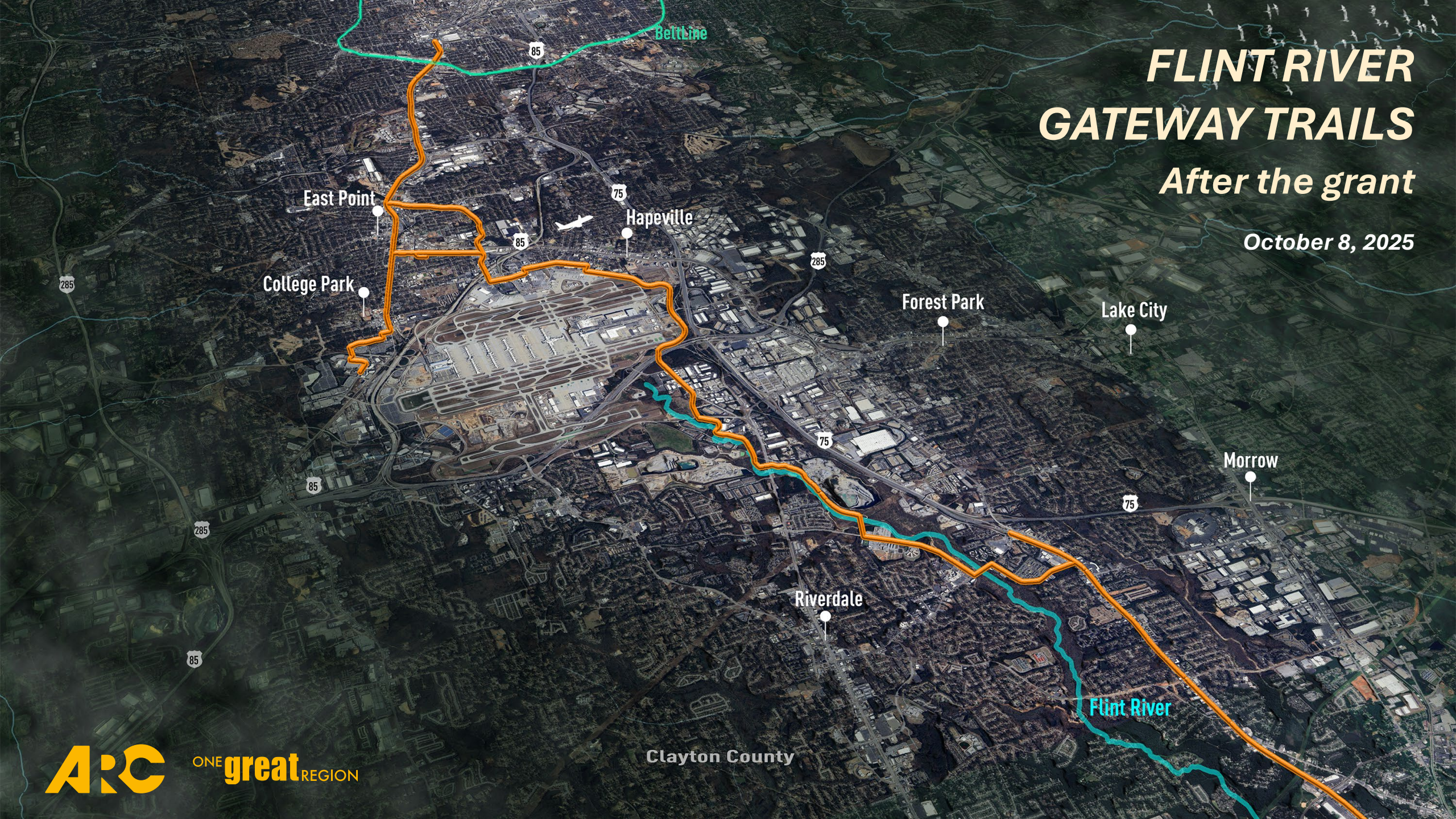
Neighborhood leaders hoped the RCP Program could be one tool to help use infrastructure reinvestment to help guide that resurgence.

02 — Project Overview: Flint River Gateway Trails

FLINT RIVER GATEWAY TRAILS

After the grant

October 8, 2025



Fulton Okays Annexing of Airport Road

By RICHARD ASHWORTH

Fulton County's legislature Monday agreed to pass

College Park Takes Airport Expansion Fears to ARC

By KATHY TILLEY

College Park officials took their questions and instructions about proposed Atlanta airport expansion to the Atlanta Regional Commission Tuesday morning for discussion. That airport growth will not be detrimental to the city.

Although airport planner Max Walker assured them the airport construction as developed in 1945 was still largely the same, the College Park representatives did not seem particu-

larly reassured that their fears were unfounded.

The environmental impact report on the new, wide, 66 airport, states, involving relocation of Interstate 85, College Park officials believe it is one of the recommended best solutions. The report suggests hotels, shops and restaurants might be built on airport property, but during its possible change in size or relocation, it would be caused by the moving of I-85.

Max Walker, airport planner, as-

serted the officials no hotels would be built, in fact the land in question is located at the end of a runway where it is impossible to build commercial establishments other than parking.

College Park officials say the project in the 300,000 sq ft wing 20 years old, since 1940, and the

airport, Walker said, is not always planned with the manner in which College Park developed adjacent land. He expressed understanding of the airport development and the

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Downtown and Airport Connectors To Join the System Early This Fall

Two short but important connecting links of Interstate 85 — both located in Atlanta — are expected to be opened early this fall.

They are the Downtown Connector and the Airport Connector.

The Downtown Connector will bring together the North and South Expressways in Atlanta. It actually carries both I-85 and I-75.

The Airport Connector, which

juts off from the South Expressway to cut across past the Atlanta Airport, carries I-85 down to the Perimeter Route where the interstate then will head southwest toward West Point and the Alabama line.

This stretch of I-85 will cut considerably the time it takes to drive to the airport from downtown Atlanta. At present, the delays and that the work motorists must drive down the

many stop signs and traffic lights before arriving at the airport.

The Downtown Connector has been the subject of a long-running controversy because of the time it is taking to complete it.

State Highway department officials point out that bad weather has been the big factor in downtown Atlanta. At present, the delays and that the work motorists must drive down the

MERGER: A THORNY PROBLEM—NO. 3

Neighbor Cities Suffered

By PAUL BEEMAN

College Park and Hapeville, the second and third largest cities outside Atlanta, that

was published up by an Atlanta County merger, nothing in common, in their association loose confederation the Tri-Cities.

He suffered considering the 1960s. College Park, which has a population of about 18,000, has a mayor — Perry Hudson — who is outspoken, opinionated, a native son, sure of himself and a veteran politician.

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other thing in common. Both have airline captains for mayors.

Hapeville, with a population of about 18,000 has a mayor — Perry Hudson — who is outspoken, opinionated, a native son, sure of himself and a veteran politician.

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must be considered in the consolidation of all the cities of Fulton County. Five of them either own land or have a portion of their city limits in another county.

Atlanta includes portions of DeKalb County and owns a portion of northwest Clayton County for airport purposes; part of College Park lies in Clayton County; East Point owns a 200-acre reservoir in Douglas County; a significant portion of Palmetto is in Coweta County and one lot in Mountain Park lies in Cherokee County.

Neither House Bill 829 nor any proposition put forth by

Atlanta, although he did appear with East Point Mayor R. E. Brown while Brown presented his plans for a South Fulton City.

Nolan, who runs a small grocery store across from city hall, thinks that if the majority of the residents of his town, especially the new ones, wanted to be a part of Atlanta, "they wouldn't have left Atlanta in the first place."

Nolan believes HB 829 will pass the House — and without a referendum clause. He would rather have a South Fulton government than a merger with Atlanta, but he says he does not care for big

Roadway Land Loss Hurts

HAPEVILLE'S SURVIVAL FIGHT LOSES GROUND

By RICHARD ASHWORTH

The City of Hapeville is fighting for its life.

Death of the Atlanta suburb is not eminent.

But the near-fatal afflictions against which the city's leaders are fighting were strongly brought home to its citizens last week by a bill passed by the Georgia Legislature.



people, unless they want to move into an older house, will owe their allegiance somewhere else when they get married."

And Mr. Knight emphasizes this further facet of the land use problem: By its action to save the city financially in converting land to commercial uses, the city is wiping out badly needed residential land.

"WE HAVE NO desire to become a commercial city," Knight commented. "But I don't see how we can avoid it."

There are only two avenues of land expansion left open to the city: Jump the county line and expand into Clayton County or take in the Owens-Ilinois glass plant.

"We have almost given up hopes of acquiring the glass plant," Mr. Knight said, pointing out that East Point is also vying for that.

Move Over for Progress

Hartsfield Airport Expansion Shoving Interstate Aside In Costly Relocation Project That Already Spans Decade

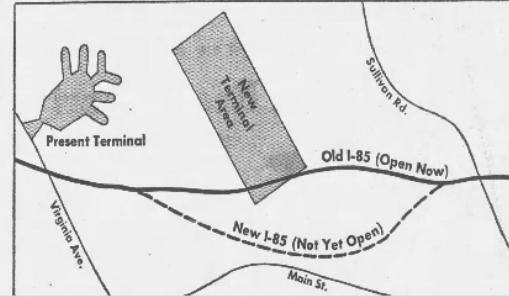
By RALEIGH BRYANS

Interstate highways don't get up and walk away when they stand in the way of progress: they are relocated at great cost and effort.

Witness the work in progress to relocate I-85 South so Hartsfield International Airport can be enlarged enough to accommodate construction of a \$400 million midfield terminal complex.

Not one but four governments or governmental agencies are cooperating in this considerable road-moving. And the cost of construction alone, excluding right-of-way, is \$114 million for a mere 1,000 miles of interstate and 10 bridges.

And the interval between the time the relocation became an obvious need until it finally was funded and put to



In the scheme of things, people who go to the terminals in the future will check in at ticketing lobbies, then hop aboard a peoplemover or minitrap rapid transit system to be transported to concourses along which the plane-loading platforms, or gates, may be reached.

The peoplemover is the "spine" of the big complex, running from west and the terminals to east and crisscrossed by concourses.

The peoplemover will be the occasion for certain construction activity that is expected to begin before this year is out—hence, before the big terminal complex itself is let to contract.

This work is to lower the water table of (or "dewater") the ground through which the subsurface peoplemover must

about to begin is the work already in progress to relocate I-85.

No one can travel existing I-85 without seeing some of this work.

Driving south, one first sees construction activity at the point where Williamson Drive (College Park) passes over I-85. The work is in preparation for the eventual merger of the old and new stretches of I-85, which will be made some distance farther on, beyond the Virginia Avenue exit.

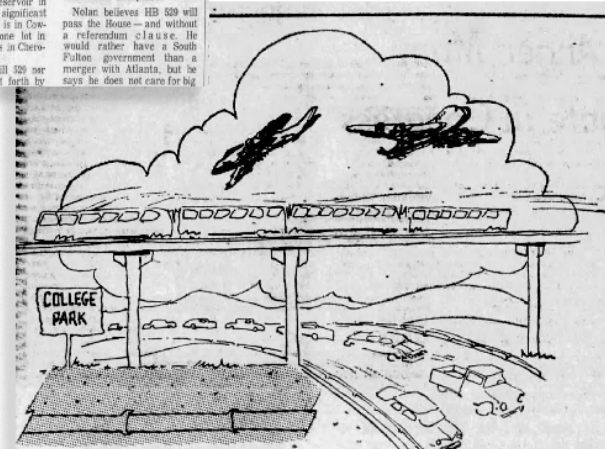
From that point, the new roadway bears substantially to the right, so that when it intersects the Camp Creek Parkway it is almost abreast of Main Street in College Park (U.S. 89).

Farther south, the new route roughly parallels Best Road for a distance, then merges with existing I-85

(DOT). It is DOT that has full management of the project, an indication of state cooperation in what is perhaps inaccurately deemed a purely "local" project.

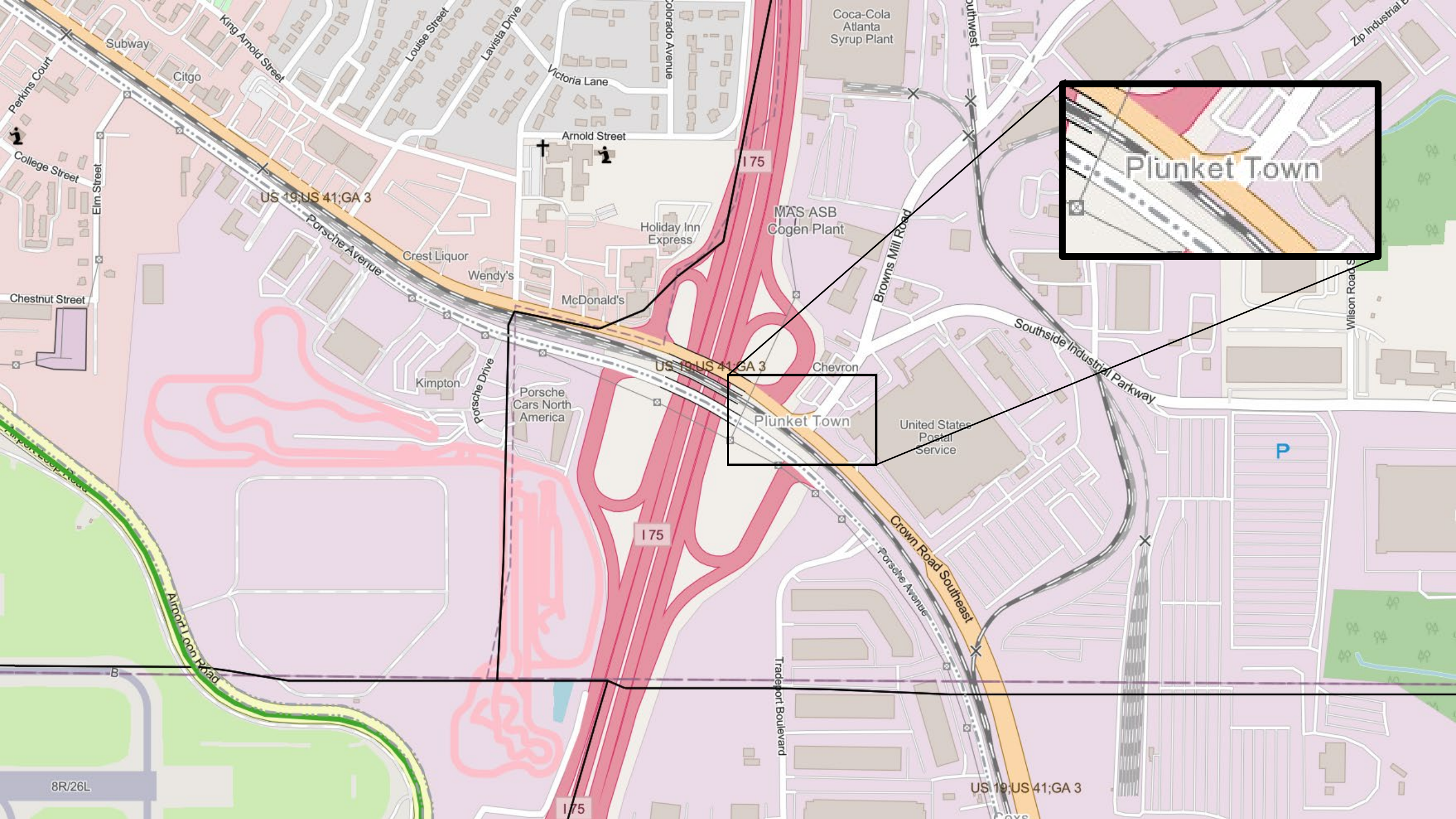
But DOT is financially the lowest contributor to the project, with a \$1.5 million share. Atlanta and hence the airlines who actually end up financing most airport improvements have a \$4.5 million involvement, and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has the tab for the remaining \$1.1 million.

NOTICE! Dick's



Twisting in Wind

Atlanta Breathes—to College Park It's Either Perfume or Halitosis





Foundational Plans & Projects

Existing Plans & Projects within the Atlanta BeltLine to Flint River Trail

There are 12 plans and projects encompassing the project area that provide the planning context and need and purpose for the Atlanta BeltLine to Flint River Trail project. Those plans and projects, listed from regional to local scale, and then from north to south, are as follows:

1. [Atlanta Regional Trail Vision \(2020\)](#)
2. [AeroATL Greenway Plan \(2018\)](#)
3. [Lee Street Trail Project](#)
4. East Point – Main Street Multimodal Corridor Improvements Scoping
5. East Point – Downtown East Point & MARTA Station Multimodal
6. [Hapeville Comp. Plan \(2022\) + Comp. Plan/LCI Study Update \(2017\)](#)
7. [Willingham Corridor Study \(2021\)](#)
8. [Hapeville – Virginia Ave Smart Corridor Plan \(2019\)](#)
9. College Park Global Gateway Project
10. [College Park LCI Plan \(2017\)](#)
11. [AeroTropolis Greenway Model Miles \(2021\)](#)
12. Tara Blvd Pedestrian Safety Improvements + [Tara Gateway LCI Study](#)

Finding the Flint

- Finding the Flint is a big vision for a healthier river and better quality of life in the airport area, comprised of project concepts that meaningfully incorporate the urban headwaters into the plans and identity of the Aerotropolis.
- It was guided by the **Finding the Flint Working Group**, a constituency of private and public stakeholders in the headwaters area working to make the Finding the Flint vision a reality.



AeroATL Greenway Plan

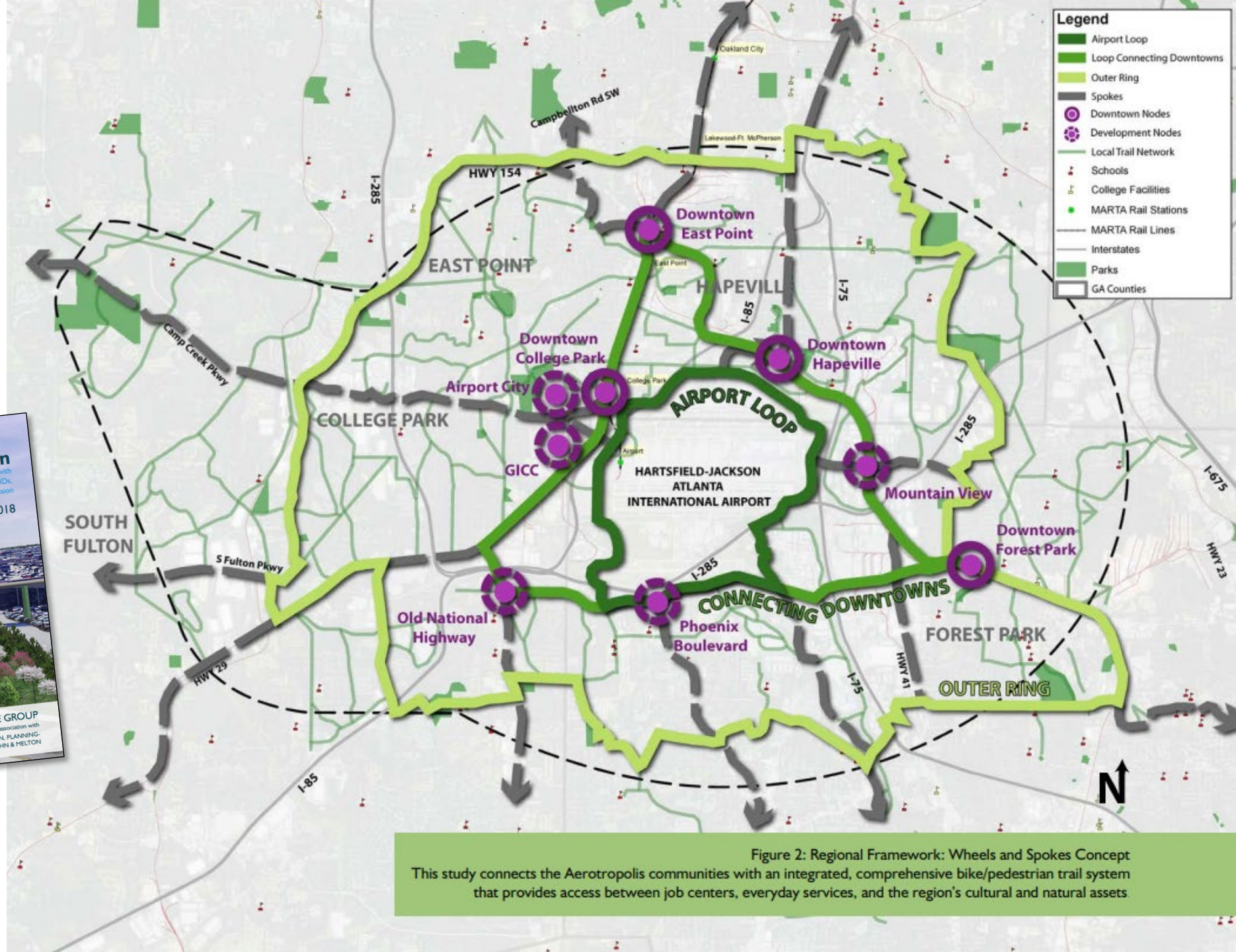
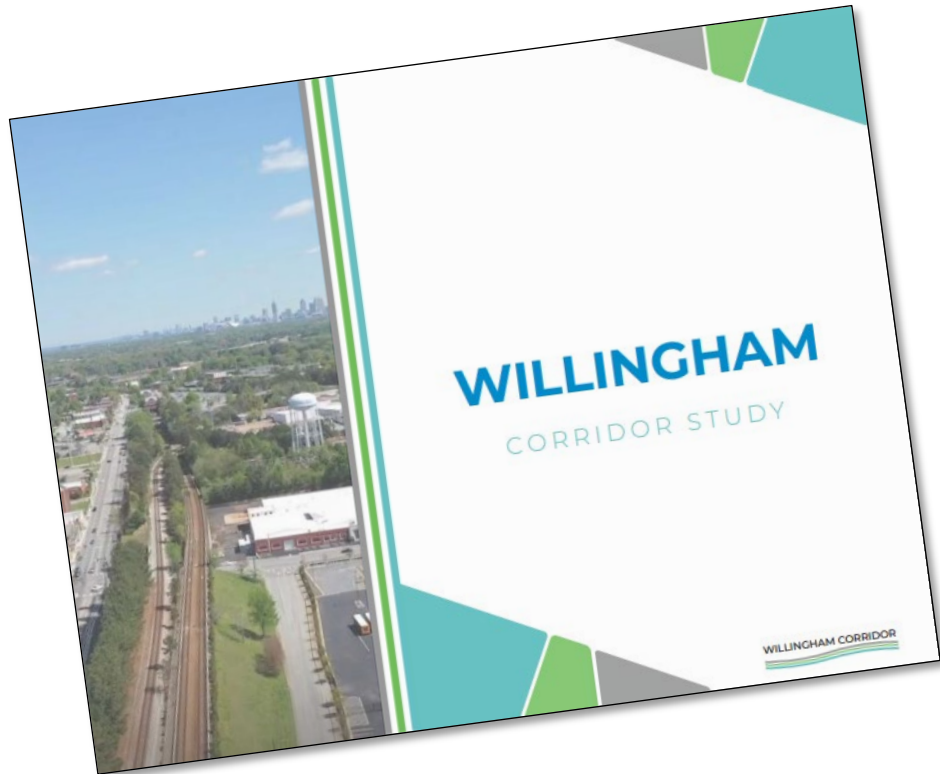


Figure 2: Regional Framework: Wheels and Spokes Concept
This study connects the Aerotropolis communities with an integrated, comprehensive bike/pedestrian trail system that provides access between job centers, everyday services, and the region's cultural and natural assets

Willingham Corridor Study

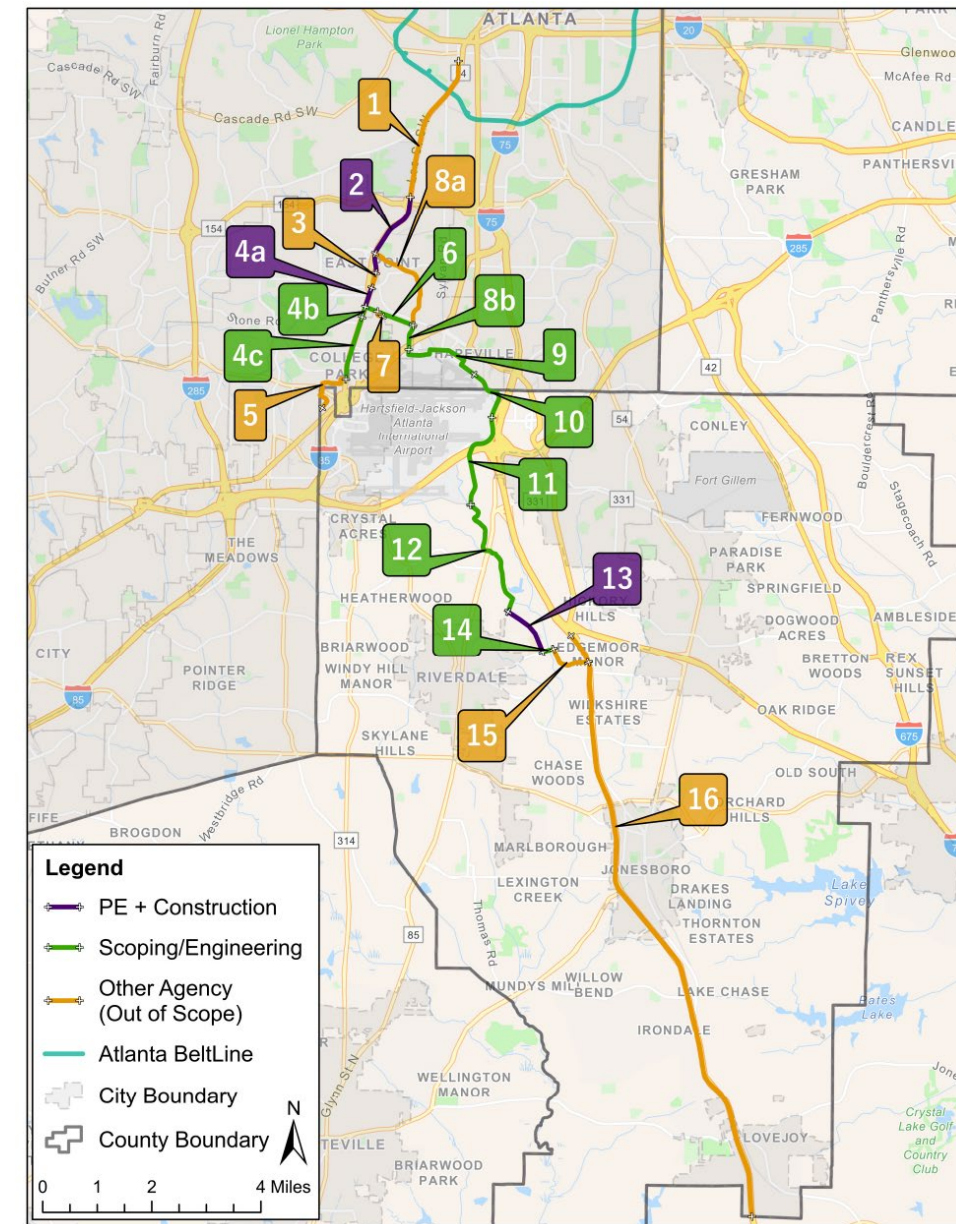


FLINT RIVER PARCELS

The presence of headwaters of the Flint River provides an opportunity for reimagining the physical form and character of the corridor. There are approximately 95 parcels adjacent to the Flint River. Several large parcels of land along Flint River have the potential for redevelopment or the addition of greenspace or stormwater facilities. The Flint River which has mostly been forgotten and overlooked in the area, can become a community asset and new feature around which future development can occur.

RCN Grant (\$64.9 million)

- **100% Funding:** No local match required
- **9 Segments:** Scoping/engineering (10.7 miles)
- **3 Segments:** Construction (3.1 miles)
- **Funding for:**
 - Continuous community engagement throughout project
 - Stormwater/flooding analysis + engineering practices to address flooding
 - Technical assistance to government partners
 - Partner organization support
 - Flint Trails Master Plan
 - South Metro Trails Connection Plan
- **Rescinded:** July 2025 Reconciliation Bill



Proposed Trail Alignment Map

03 — Project Overview: Reconnecting Sweet Auburn

PRE-HIGHWAY (1955)



HOUSTON STREET

(JOHN WESLEY DOBBS AVE)

IRWIN STREET

AUBURN AVENUE

EBENEZER BAPTIST CHURCH

EDGEWOOD AVENUE

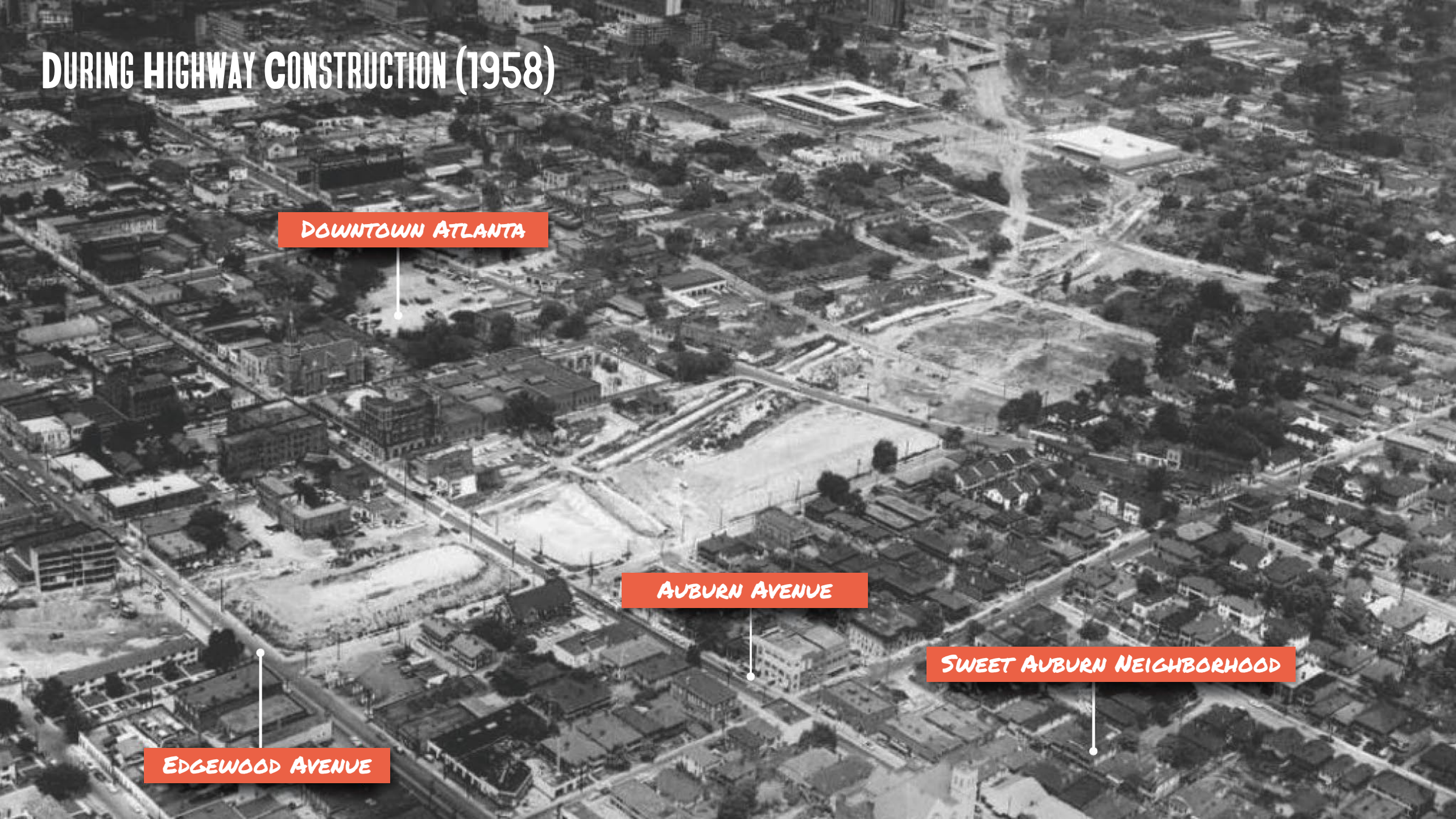
HURT PARK

GRADY HOSPITAL

GRADY HOMES

OAKLAND CEMETERY

DURING HIGHWAY CONSTRUCTION (1958)



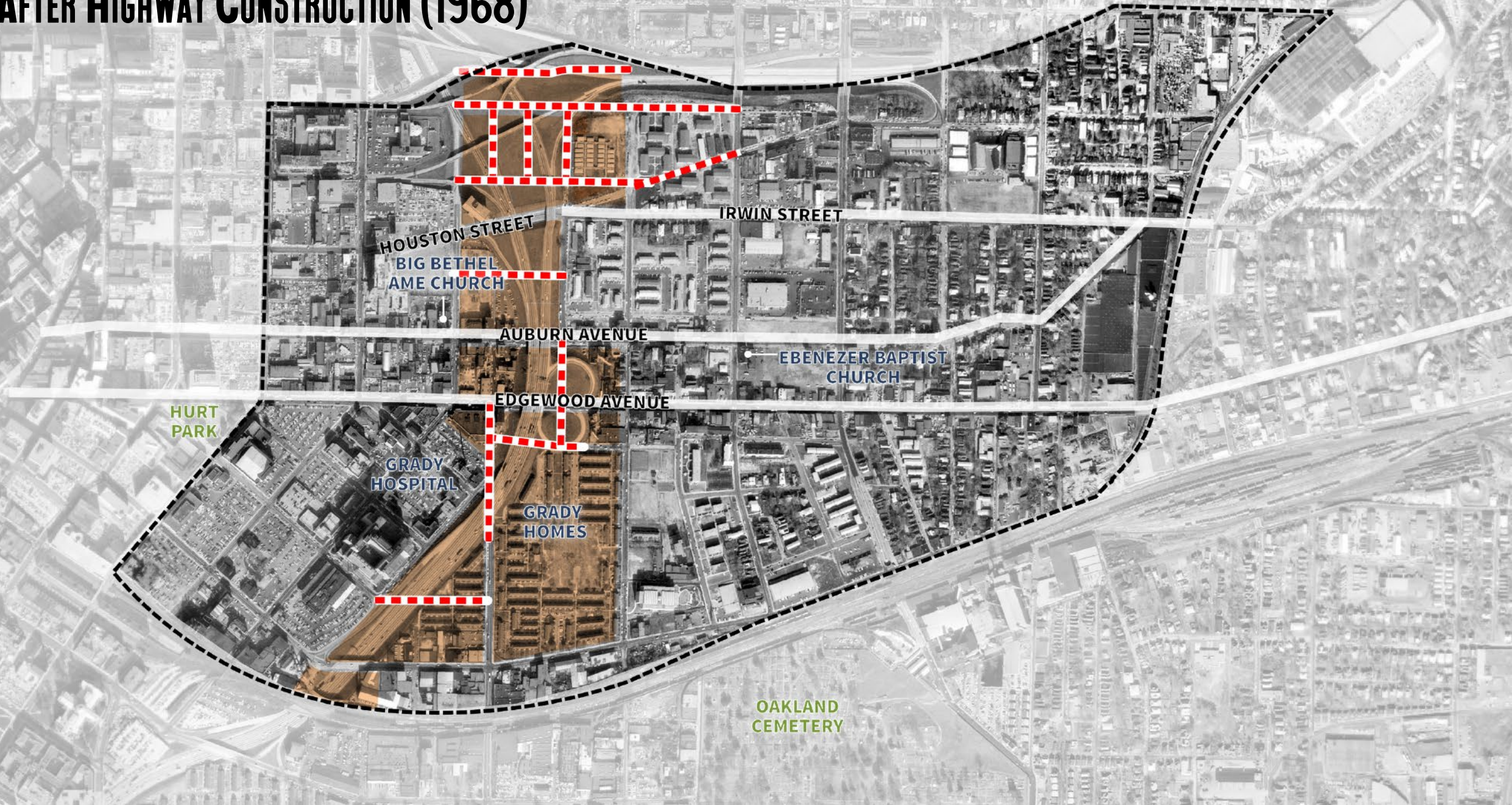
DOWNTOWN ATLANTA

AUBURN AVENUE

EDGEWOOD AVENUE

SWEET AUBURN NEIGHBORHOOD

AFTER HIGHWAY CONSTRUCTION (1968)



TODAY

GA POWER SITE

TALL BARRIER

ELIMINATED STREETS

VACANT LAND

STREETCAR MAINTENANCE FACILITY

ELEVATED HIGHWAY WITH 4 UNDERPASSES

HIGHWAY BILLBOARDS

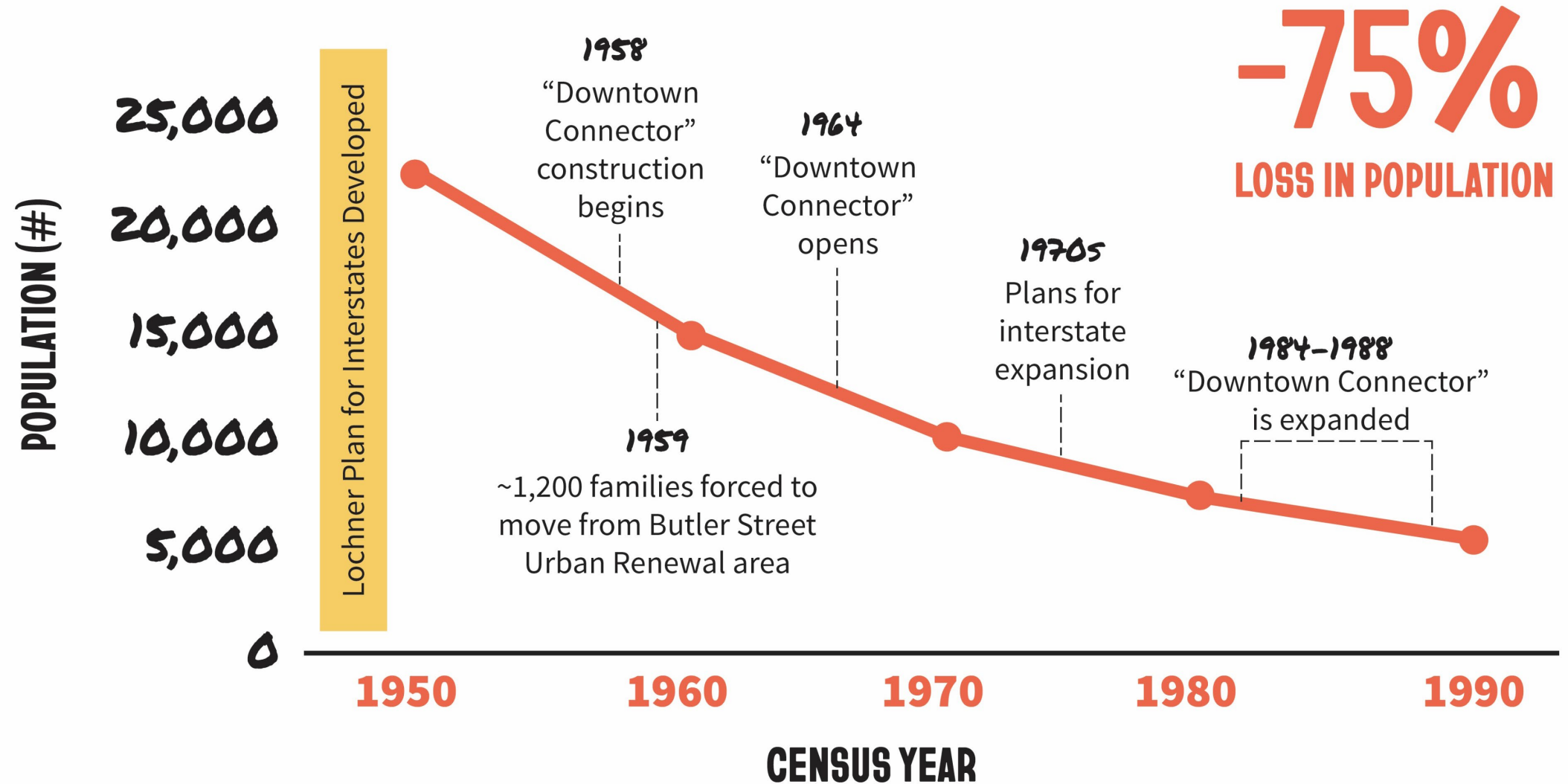
ONE-WAY ACCESS ROADS







KEY ISSUES



KEY ISSUES

LITTLE GREEN SPACE

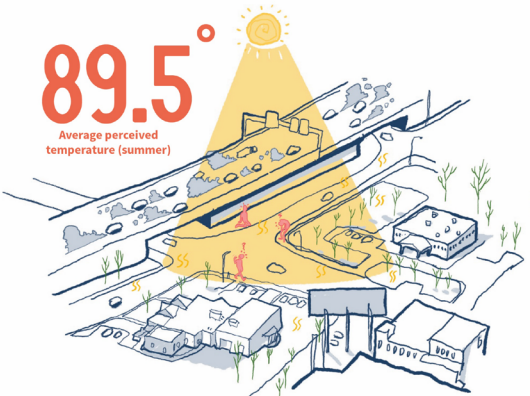


SWEET AUBURN



PONCEY-HIGHLAND +
INMAN PARK

HIGHER TEMPERATURES



SWEET AUBURN



PONCEY-HIGHLAND +
INMAN PARK

15% OF STREETS ON HIN

TREE CANOPY 35% LOWER THAN AVERAGE

PHYSICAL DIVIDE

300 PROPERTIES AFFECTED BY FLOODING

33-48% OF RESIDENTS REPORT ISOLATION

HIGH RATES OF ASTHMA

HIGHER VACANCIES NEAR HIGHWAY

PROPERTY VALUE IMPACTS

ENGAGEMENT

Steering Committee Meetings (4)

Public Open Houses (3)

Canvassing

Community Survey (digital and paper)

ArcGIS StoryMap documenting the harm and the planning process



ENGAGEMENT

THE NEIGHBORHOOD WANTS...

FEEL LIKE A SUCCESSFUL BLACK COMMUNITY, WELCOMING TO ALL

MORE PEOPLE LIVING IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

MORE COMFORTABLE PLACES TO GATHER

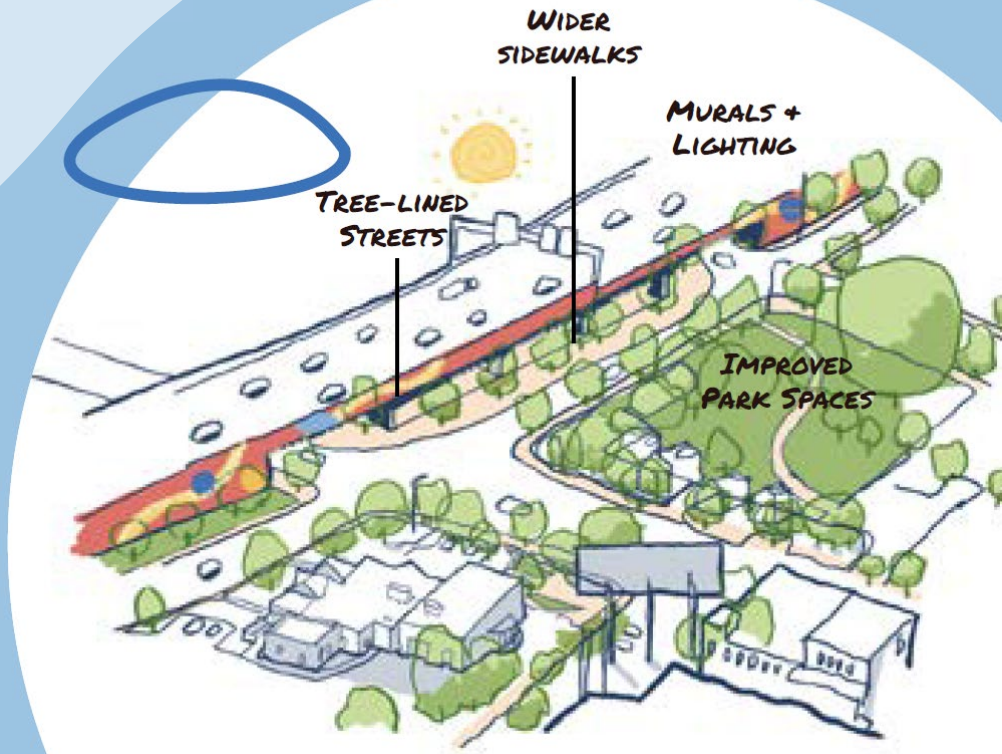
VIBRANT COMMERCIAL + RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS

LANDSCAPING, GREENERY, + STORMWATER MANAGEMENT

ART INSTALLATIONS REFLECTING THE NEIGHBORHOOD

USE UNDERPASSES FOR SHADED RECREATION

BETTER SIDEWALKS, CROSSINGS, + LIGHTING



THE OPPORTUNITY

Focus on **improving the experience of four underpasses** and connecting streets

LEGEND

-  Potential Streetscape Improvements
-  Space and Walls Under the Interstate
-  Opportunities for Public Realm Improvements
-  Opportunities for Temporary Improvements on Private Property
-  Retaining Walls

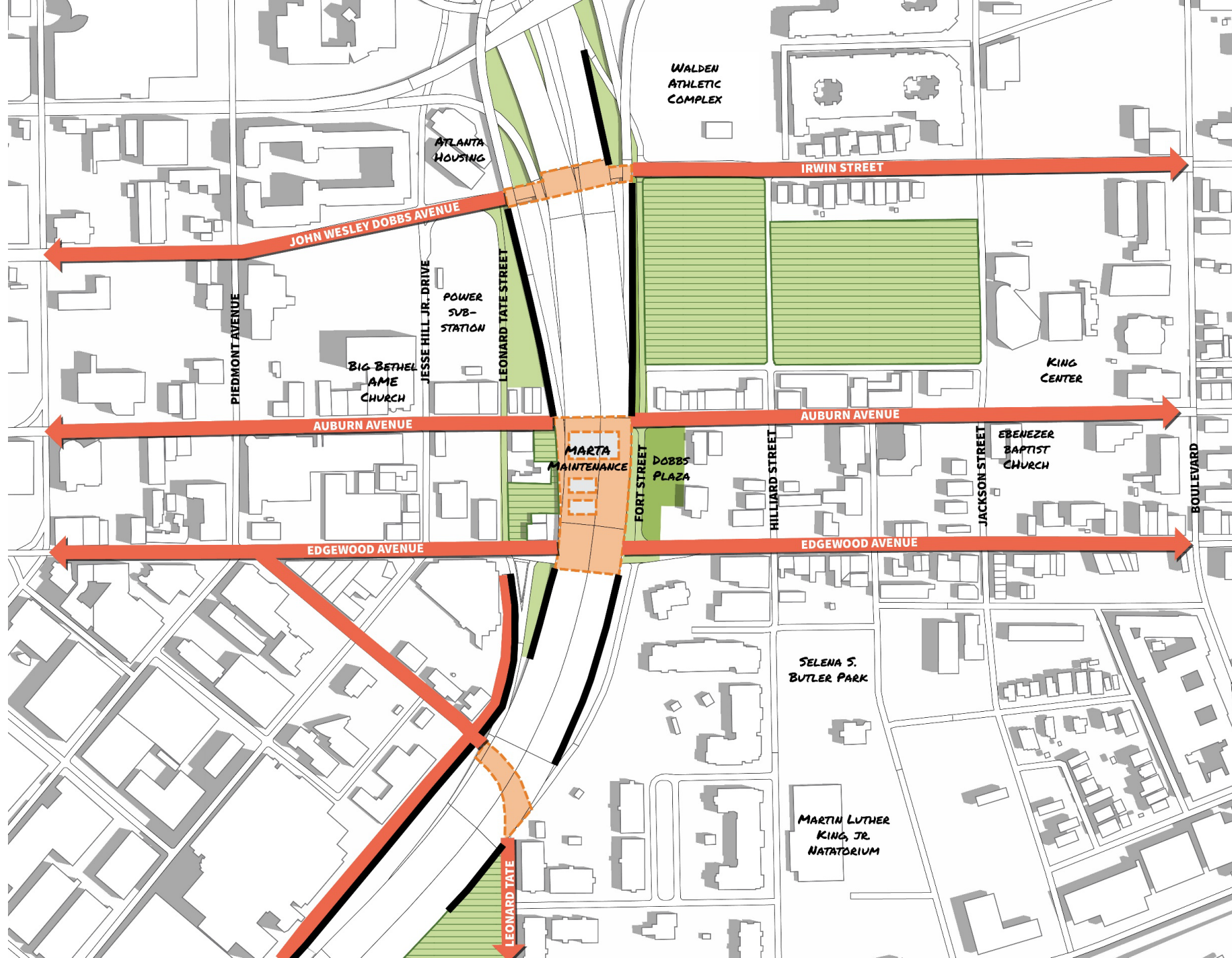


Photo: Adobe Stock, Felix Mizionnikov



Photo courtesy of City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program



Photo courtesy of the Bentway



Photo courtesy of Shane Wynn



Photo courtesy of SWA Group



2 SCENARIOS

Offering options considering...

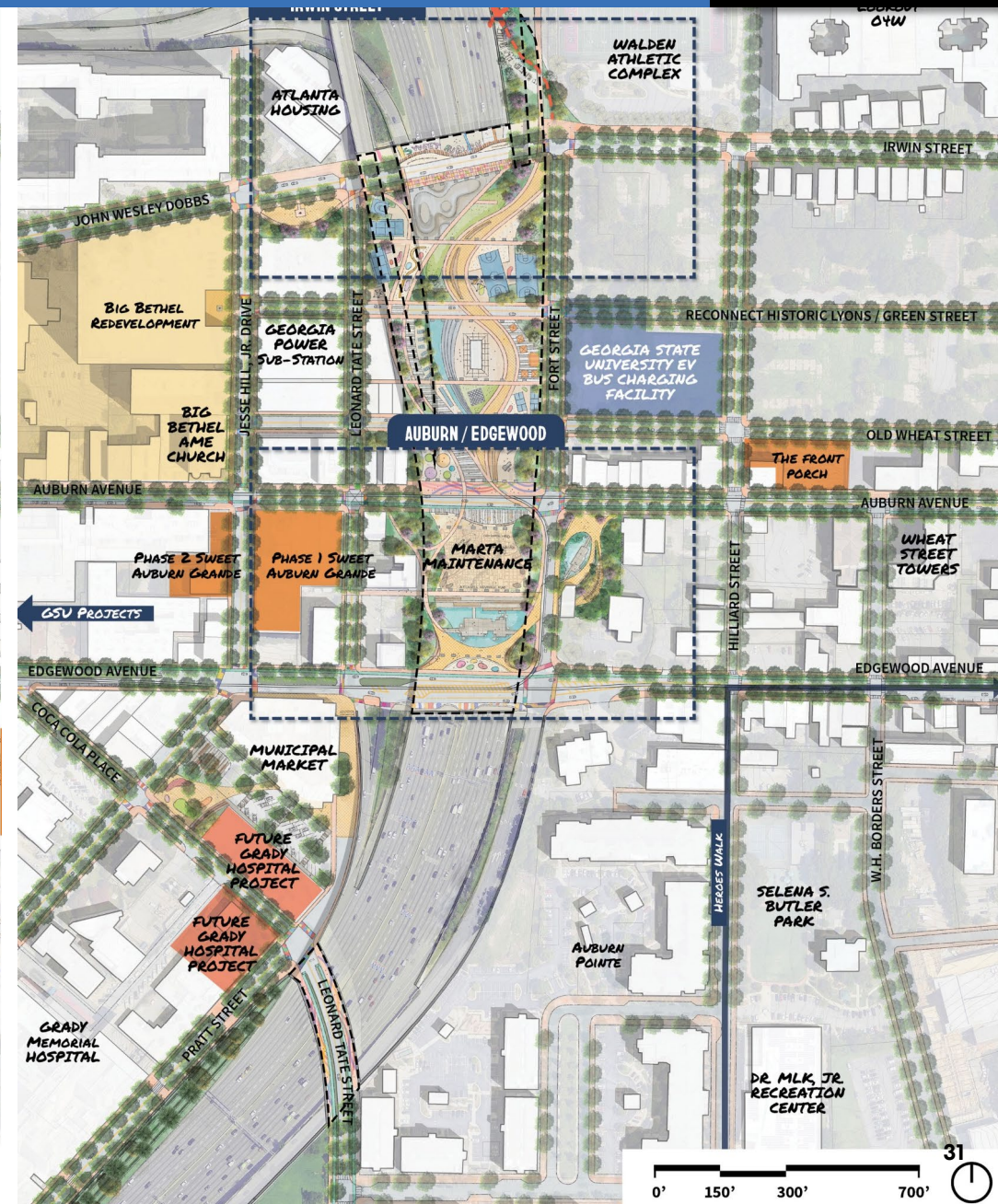
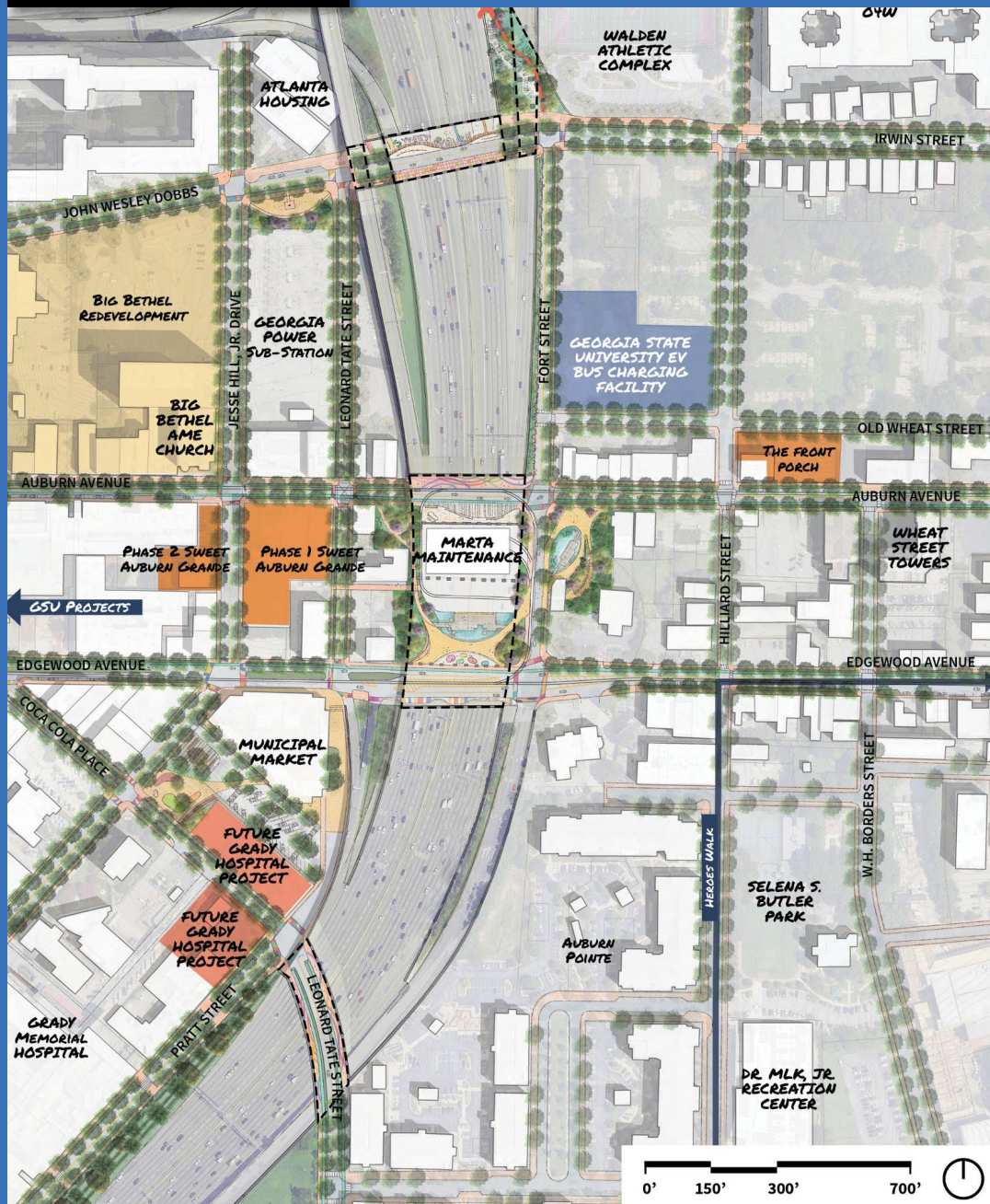
1. Interstate ramp closures
2. Potential to remove retaining walls
3. Streetcar maintenance facility relocation

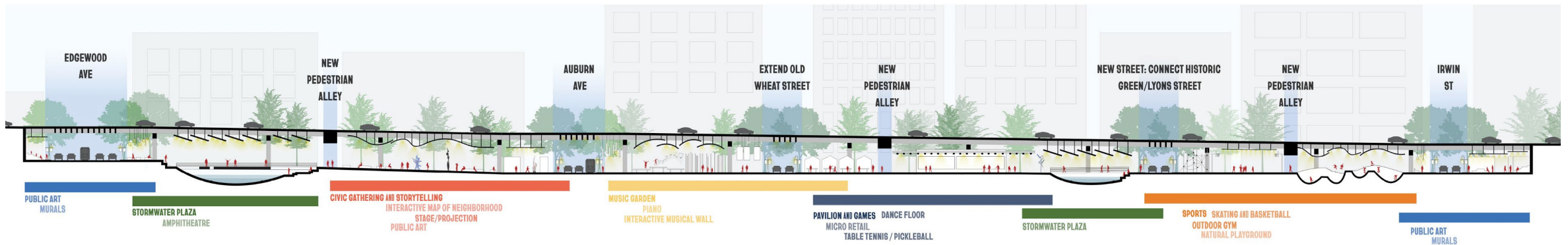
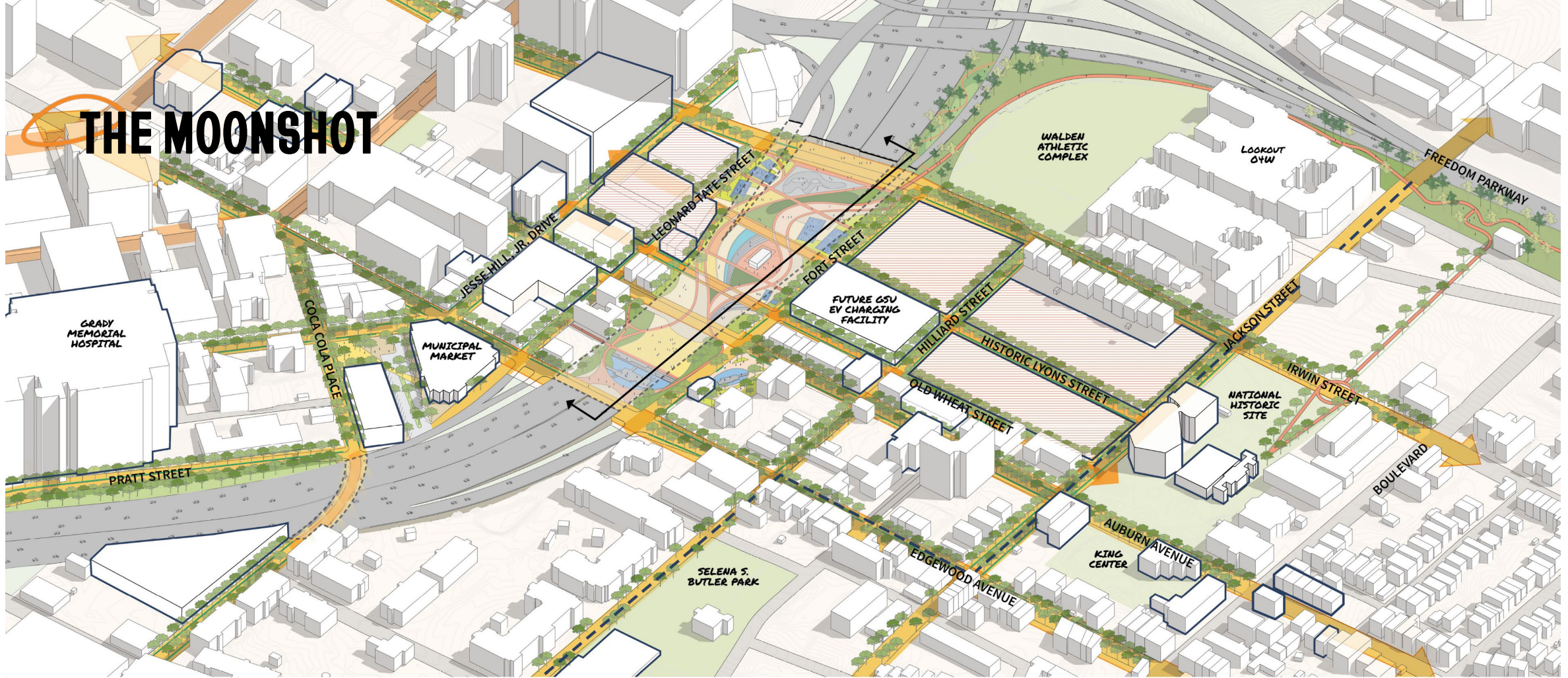
BIG DREAMS

← AMBITIOUS...

...EVEN MORE AMBITIOUS →

MOONSHOT





BIG DREAMS: IRWIN STREET UNDERPASS

LIGHTING ON
FLYOVER RAMPS

MURAL WITH
HEROES WALK
QUILT PATTERN

LINEAR SKATE
PARK

FREEDOM PARKWAY TRAIL >>
<< DOWNTOWN ATLANTA

STORMWATER PARK <<<

IMPROVED
STREETSCAPE



BIG DREAMS: AUBURN AND DOBBS PLAZA

EXISTING
HISTORIC
MARKERS

RE-DESIGNED
DOBBS PLAZA

HEROES WALK
PATTERN
WRAPPED
AROUND
COLUMNS

ART TO SCREEN
MAINTENANCE
FACILITY

IMPROVED
STREETSCAPE

ATLANTA INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

EBENEZER BAPTIST CHURCH



KEY MOBILITY PROJECTS



Restore Fort Street and Leonard Tate Street to **two-way**, neighborhood streets



Extend Freedom Park Trail through Sweet Auburn to the Municipal Market



Widen and repair sidewalks and upgrade pedestrian lighting, street trees, and crossings



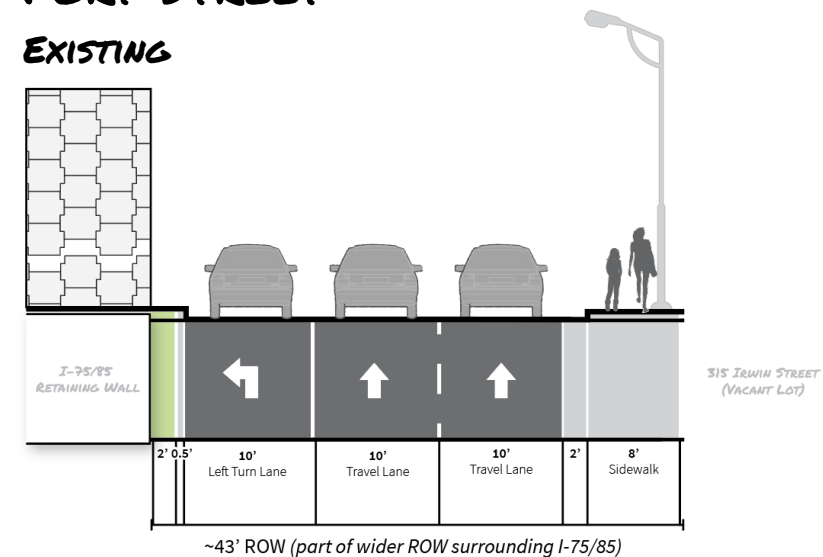
Consider **closing the I-75 NB on ramp** at Irwin Street (additional ramp 0.25-mile away)



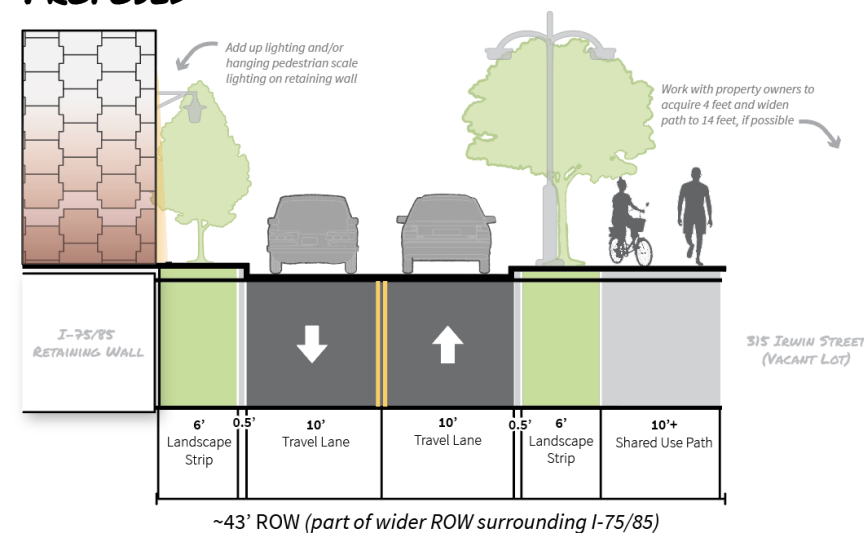
Safety improvements at high-crash **intersections**

FORT STREET

EXISTING



PROPOSED



PROJECT EVALUATION

1 **ESTABLISH SHARED VALUES**

Previous planning efforts provided an understanding of community priorities for how Sweet Auburn should develop with the residents. The ideas were validated with the Steering Committee and the neighborhood.

Previous Studies & Efforts

Steering Committee

Sweet Auburn Works' Mission

Public Meeting #1

6 **SHARED VALUES**

2 **DEVELOP HARM METRICS**

Measured how the neighborhood was harmed by the construction of I-75/85 using a series of statistics and comparing the current conditions to those of Poncey-Highland and Inman Park, which were able to fight the construction of an interstate.



Land Use & Connectivity



Heat Risk



Flood Risk



Park Access



Mental Health / Isolation



Air Quality



Food Access



Traffic Crashes



Population Loss

3 **GATHER COMMUNITY FEEDBACK**

Asked residents what they love about Sweet Auburn, their priority locations for interventions (underpasses, walls, streets, vacant properties) and their experiences getting around, using parks and public spaces, and what it feels like in Sweet Auburn. Gathered feedback on preliminary design ideas (#4 below).



4 **DEVELOP PRELIMINARY DESIGN IDEAS**

Used the feedback received to develop preliminary public space and mobility design ideas. They spanned basic maintenance to visionary changes to the interstate to reclaim acres of land for a park and street connections under the highway.



5 **DETERMINE SCORING CATEGORIES**

Used categories from the community survey (mobility, parks, use and experience) to create sub-metrics and supplemented with cost and feasibility, level of support from the community, and how many harm metrics and Shared Values the projects addressed.

Categories from Survey

Shared Values

Harm Metrics

Cost & Feasibility

Community Support

6 **SCORE EACH PROJECT TO IDENTIFY PRIORITY PROJECTS**

Scored each project on a scale of 0 to 3 for all metrics, except for the Shared Values, which received a score of 0 or 1. The maximum score projects could receive was 66, and those with 40 or more points rose to the top. Priority projects generally aligned with what was heard in public feedback.

SCORE OF:

40+

OUT OF:

66 MAX

ACTION PLAN

21

MOBILITY PROJECTS

(Streets,
trails)

20

PUBLIC SPACE PROJECTS

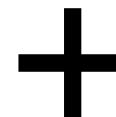
(New parks, public
art, re-designing
parks)

8

POLICY PROJECTS

(Partnerships, financial
assistance, code
changes)

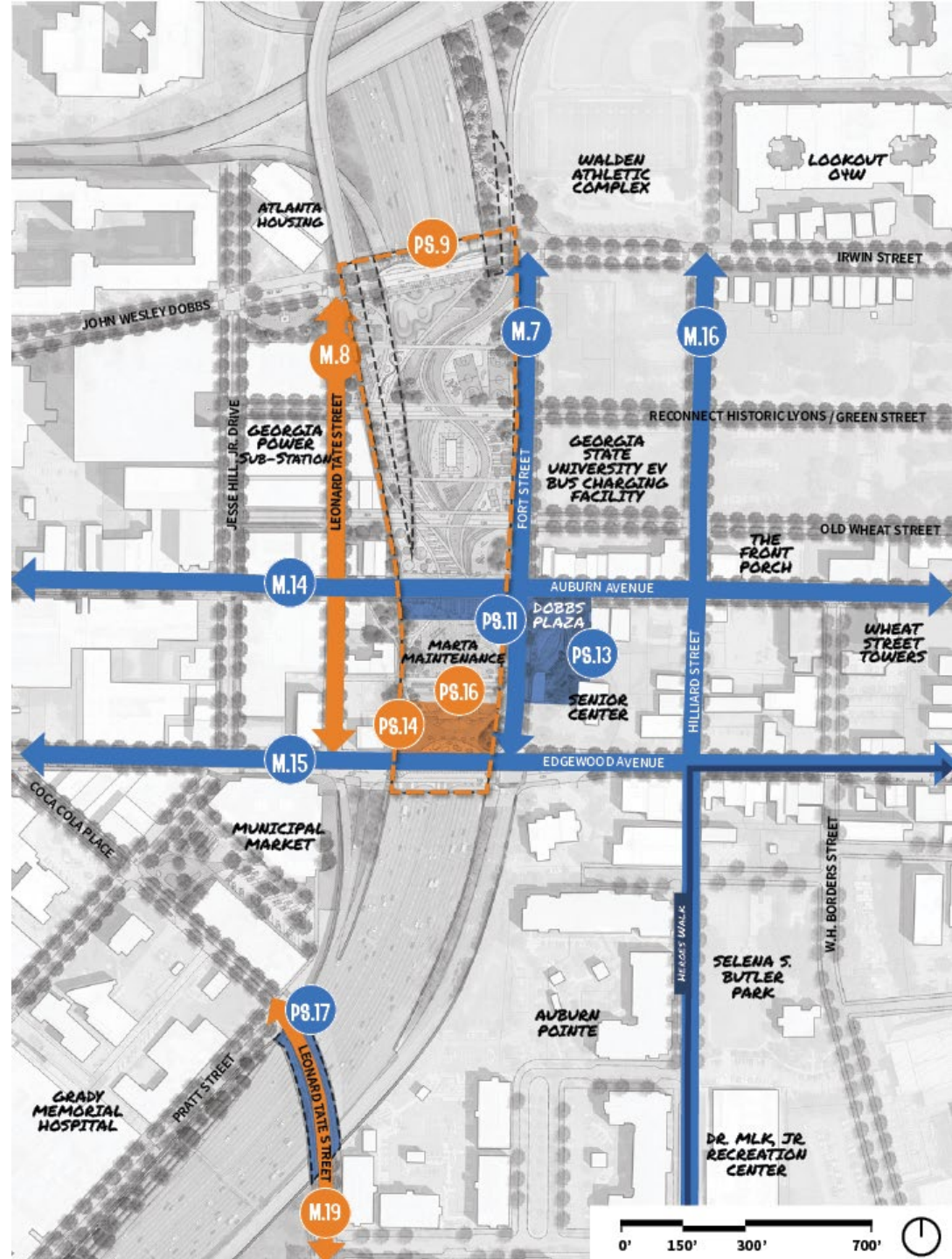
PROJECT START TIMELINE



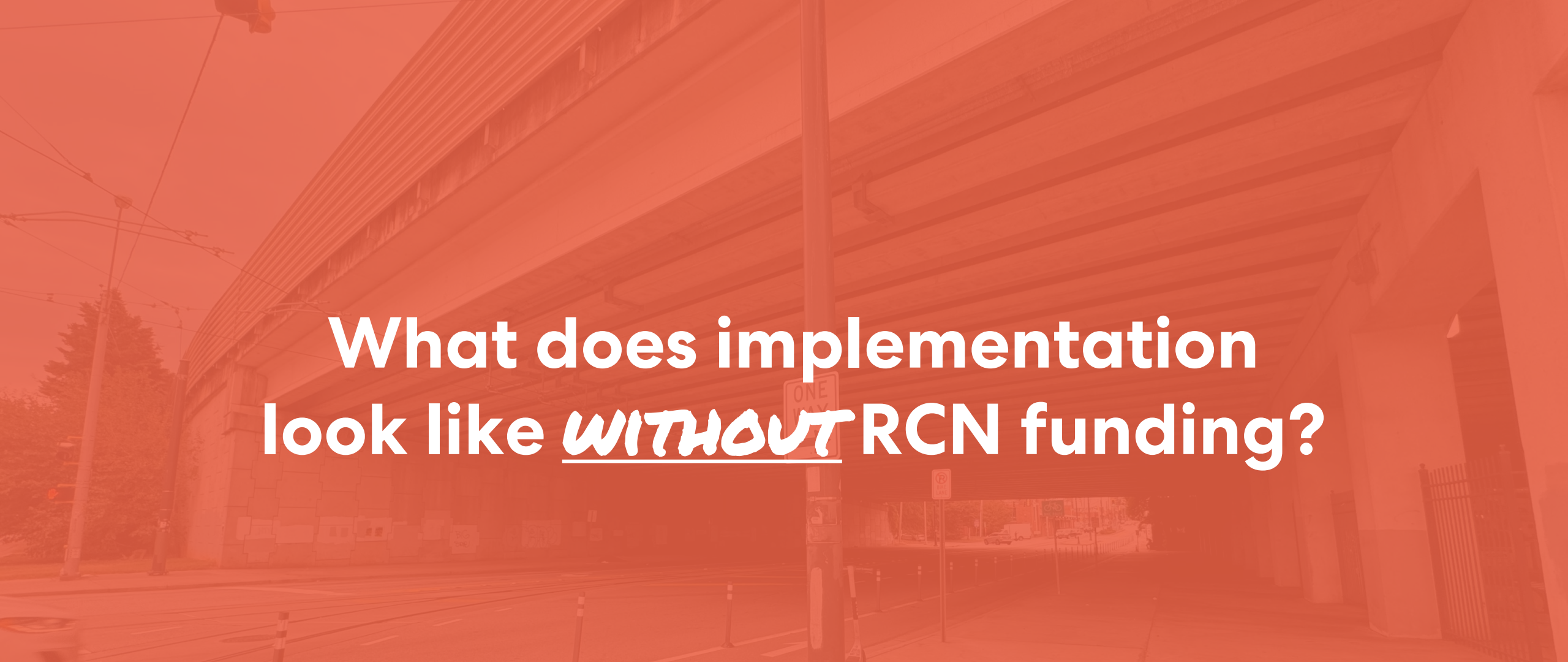
FUNDING MATRIX
(local, state, federal)

PRIORITY PROJECTS

- M.7** Convert Fort Street to two-way
- M.14** Re-design the Auburn Avenue streetscape and intersections
- M.15** Re-design the Edgewood Avenue streetscape and intersections
- M.16** Re-design the Hilliard Street Streetscape and intersections
- PS.11** Add public art and gathering spaces highlighting neighborhood pride under the overpass and at John Wesley Dobbs Plaza
- PS.13** Re-design John Wesley Dobbs Plaza to be more usable and connected to Fort Street and the space under the overpass
- PS.17** Install art and interactive lighting in the Leonard Tate Street tunnel



04 — Maintaining Momentum



What does implementation
look like WITHOUT RCN funding?

Still moving forward, but more SLOWLY.

How Sweet Auburn is moving forward

Ground Work & Partnerships



Political Priority



Alternative Funding



Initial Projects



Ground Work & Partnerships

Reconnecting Sweet Auburn

- Sweet Auburn Works
- Atlanta Downtown Improvement District (ADID)
- RSA Steering Committee
- ATLDOT
- SAGE
- Private Partners: Grady Hospital and The Integral Group
- Property Owners
- Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Site



Steering Committee Site Walk



Political Priority

Reconnecting Sweet Auburn

- Alignment with municipal political goals
- Prime opportunity to grow the center of the city and better connect Downtown to the Beltline
- Advances the City's Vision Zero goal
- Aligns with the City's planned bike network
- Leverages investments in streetcar and King Memorial Station

“Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens hopes his new, \$5 billion **"Neighborhood Reinvestment Plan"** will be that intentional disruption. It seeks to jumpstart development in specific areas by **using existing tax allocation districts** (TADs) to raise money for major investment projects.”

“City of Atlanta announces \$5 billion plan to end the ‘tale of two cities.’” 11 Alive. 30 September 2025.

Reconnecting Sweet Auburn

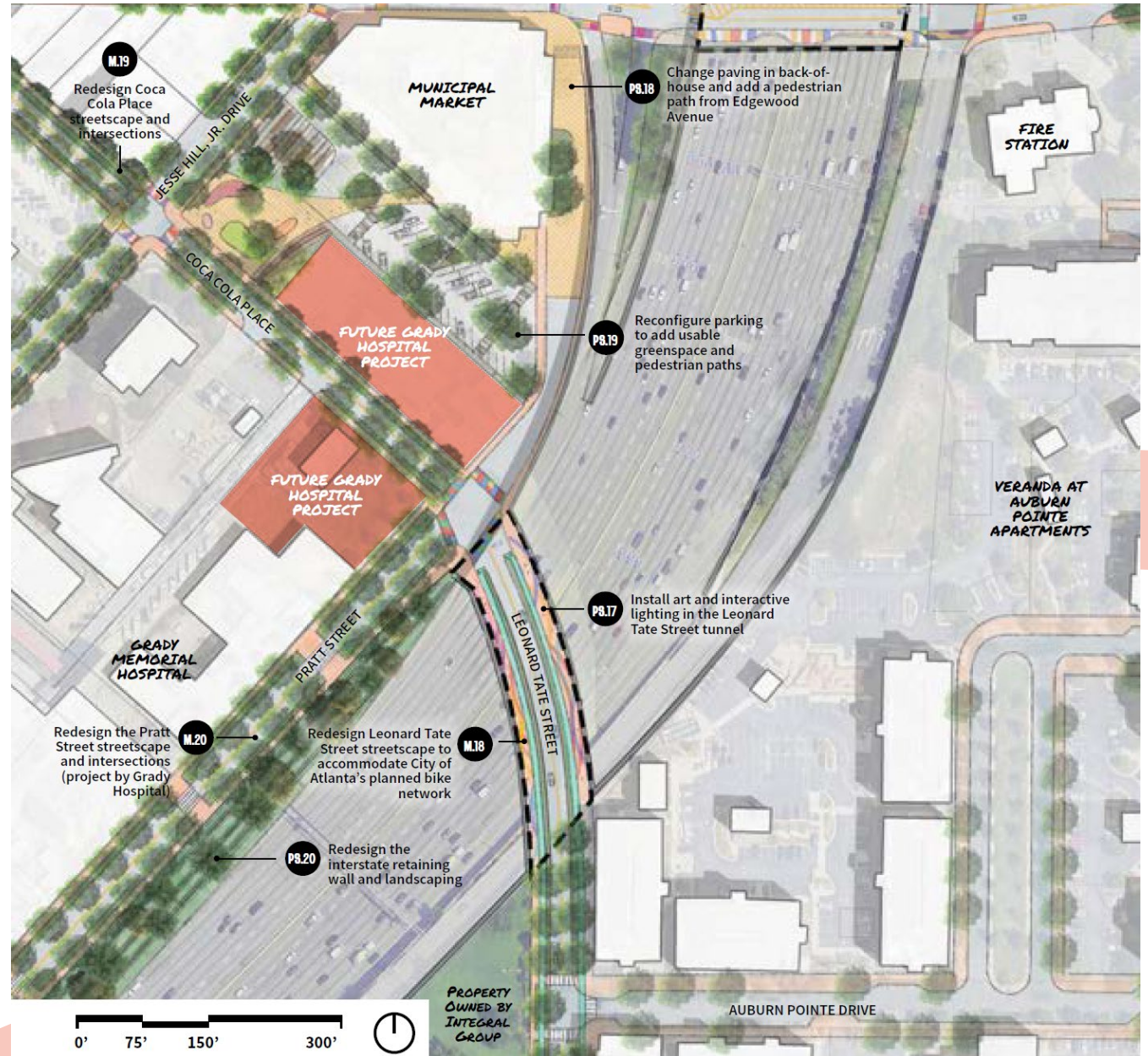
- Congressionally designated funding
- ADID district expansion or new CID
- Eastside Beltline TAD
- Private sector support
- Advocacy for inclusion in City transportation plan and budget

[illegible]

Initial Projects

Reconnecting Sweet Auburn

- Leonard Tate Street underpass
- Auburn Avenue and Edgewood Avenue streetscapes
- Heroes Walk
- Lighting



→ Leonard Tate Street Underpass

BIG DREAMS: LEONARD TATE STREET TUNNEL

ARTISTIC
LIGHTING
OVERHEAD

MURAL AND
ARTISTIC
LIGHTING

INTERACTIVE
MUSICAL
INSTALLATION

BUFFERED BIKE
LANE

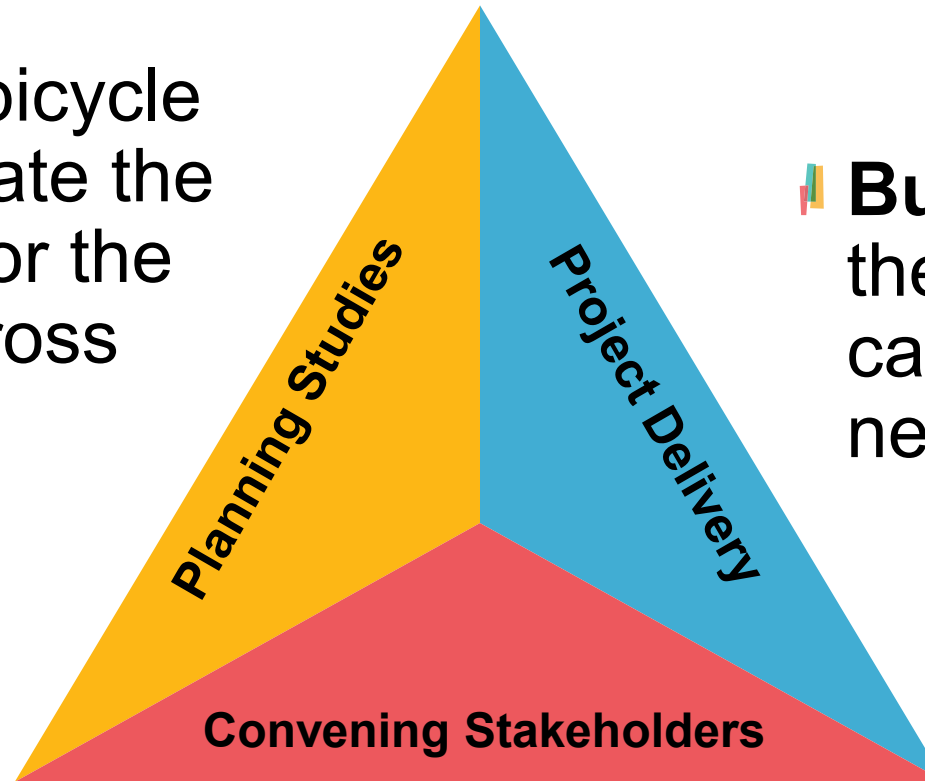
LEONARD TATE
STREET HAS TWO
LANES OF TRAFFIC



Flint River Trail – Connecting the South Metro

 **Plan:** Three trail/bicycle plans that will create the long-term vision for the Flint and trails across South Metro

 **Build:** Trail segments on the Flint River Trail that can be accelerated in the near term



 **Convene:** Bringing together leadership in support of the Flint and trails across the South Metro

Build: Existing Projects

ARC staff identified three projects from Flint River Gateway Trails that were already in the early stages of development, and could be advanced via the TIP, and serve as catalyst for the trail corridor.

— Lee Street Trail – Atlanta

- ARC has invested \$6.5M in this project.
- Concept developed and NEPA (environmental) cleared, but City working on federal certifications required before approval to begin engineering phase

— Main Street – East Point

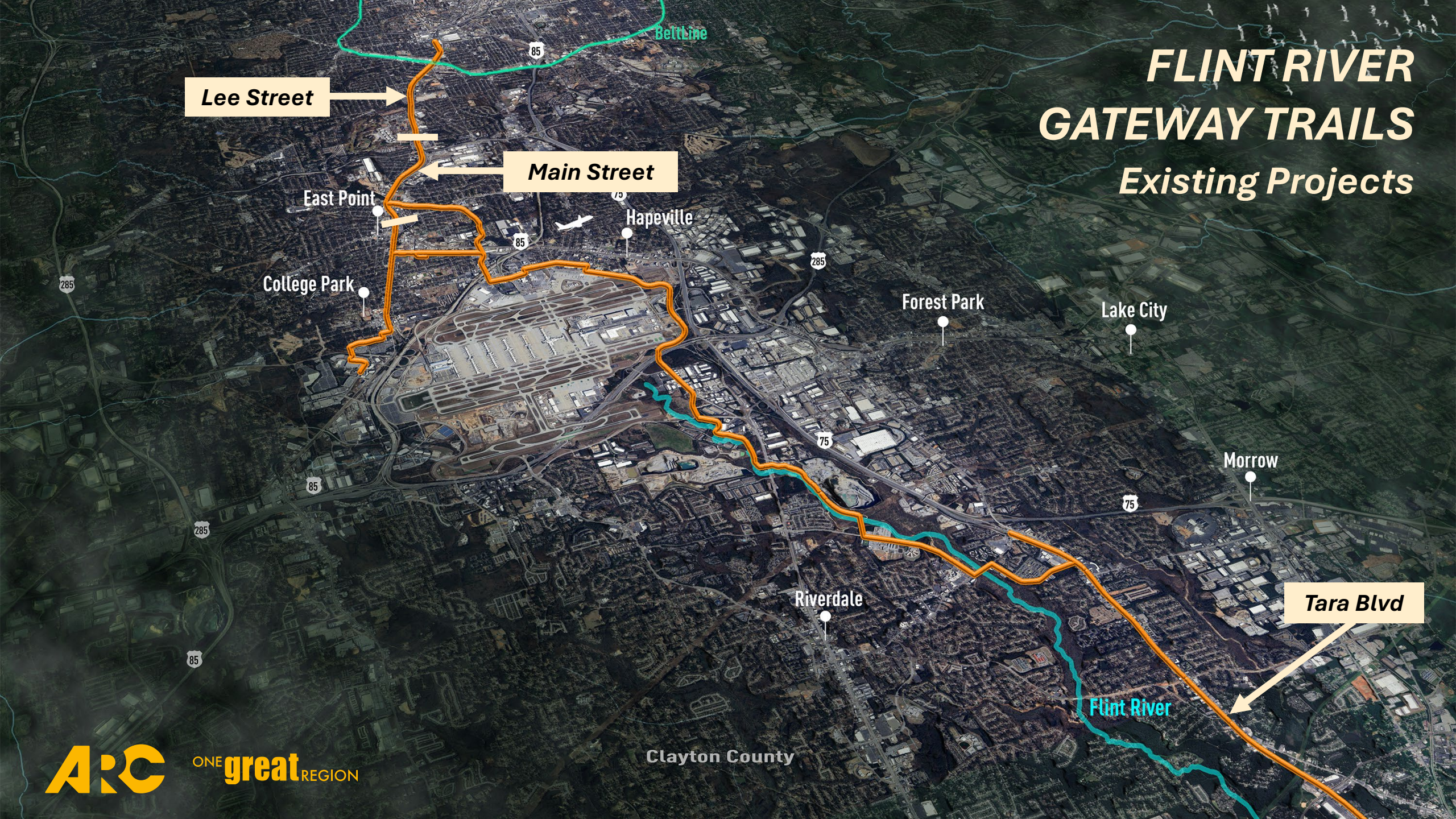
- Scoping phase was previously funded but cancelled when the project was incorporated into the Flint River Gateway Trails \$65M grants
- ARC now working to restore scoping funds to restart the project

— Tara Blvd – Clayton

- Currently designed for “pedestrian improvements” on 11.5 miles of Tara
- ARC and County in discussion about expanding to multi-use trail width (10-12’)
- Additional TIP funds to be added to accommodate scope change

FLINT RIVER GATEWAY TRAILS

Existing Projects



Lee Street

Main Street

East Point

College Park

Hapeville

Forest Park

Lake City

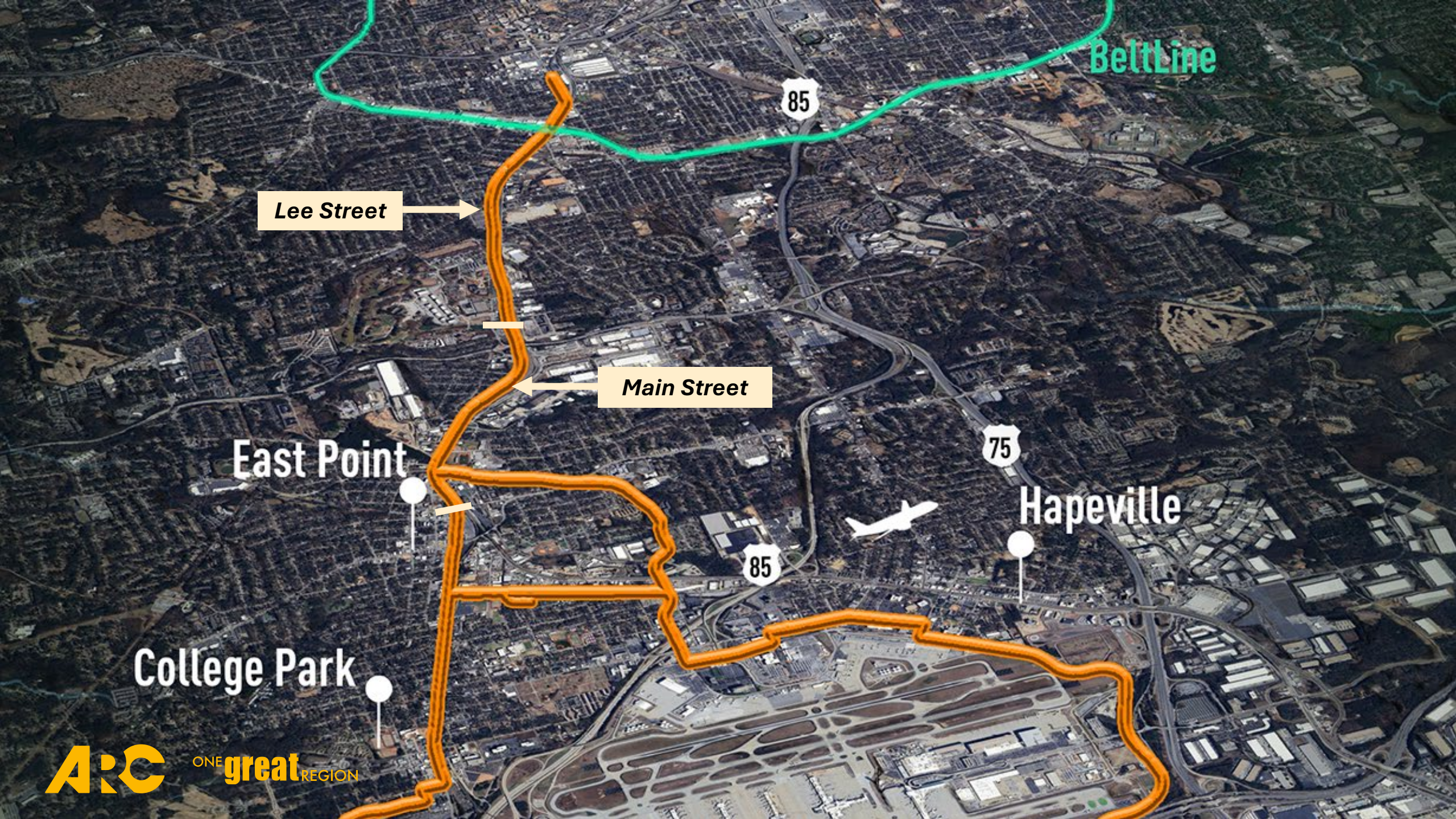
Morrow

Riverdale

Tara Blvd

Flint River

Clayton County



BeltLine

85

Lee Street

Main Street

East Point

75

Hapeville

85

College Park



Morrow

75

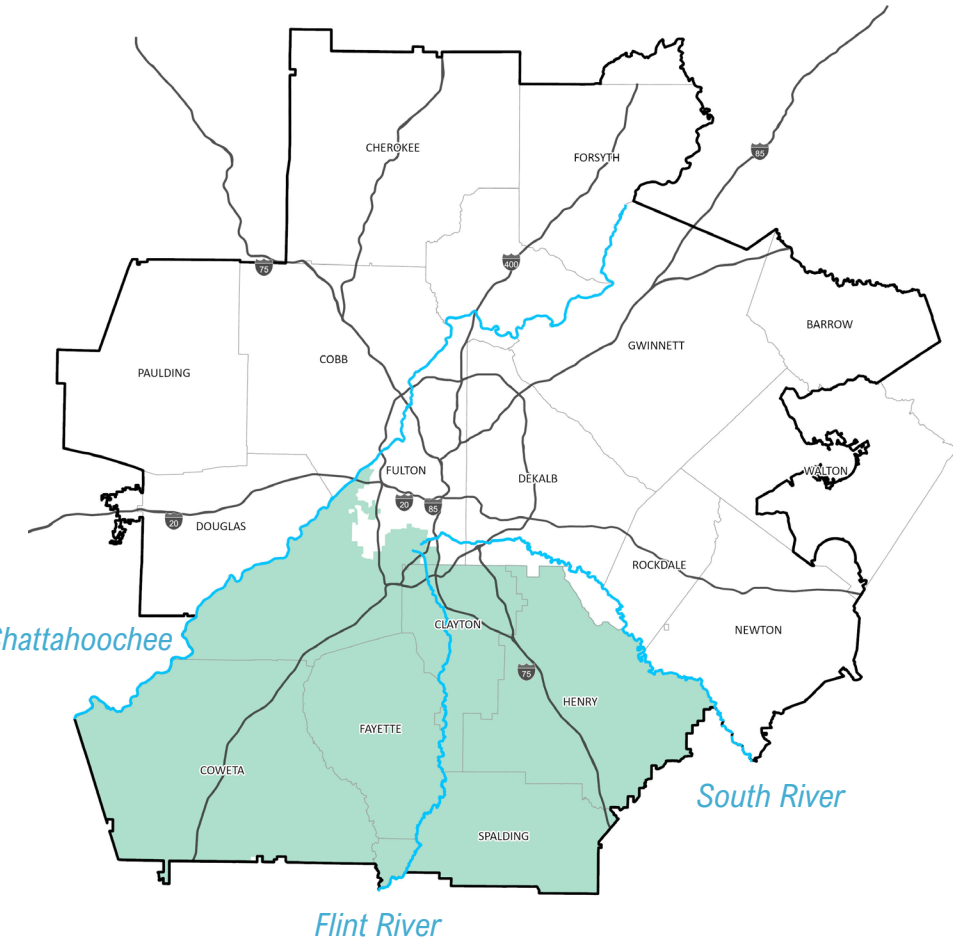
Riverdale

Flint River

Tara Blvd

Three Planning Studies

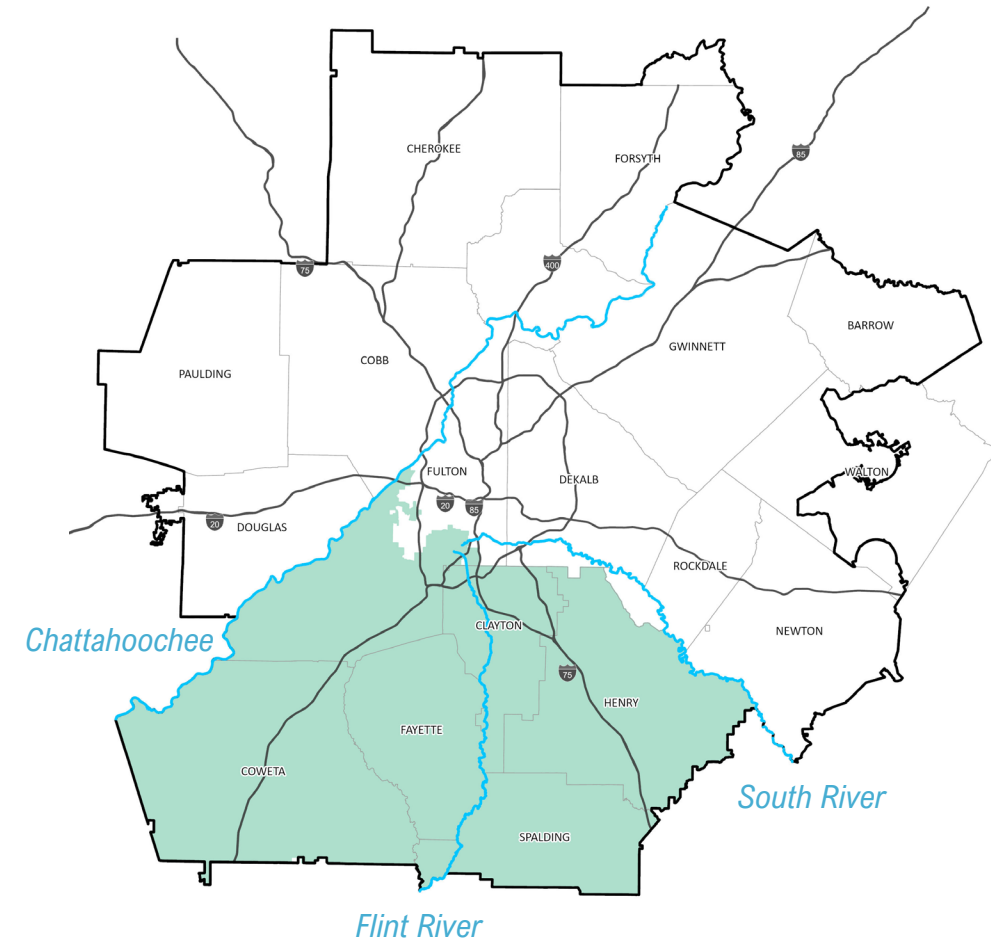
- **Regional Trail + Bicycle Facility Network Plan** Covers the full 19-county MPO
- **South Metro Trail + Bicycle Facility Plan**
Deeper study of sub-regional, 6-county area of Regional Trail Plan; identifies specific alignment options
- **Flint River Trail Plan**
Master plan for trail for quarter-mile-wide corridor centered on Flint River from headwaters in East Point to the southern edge of MPO



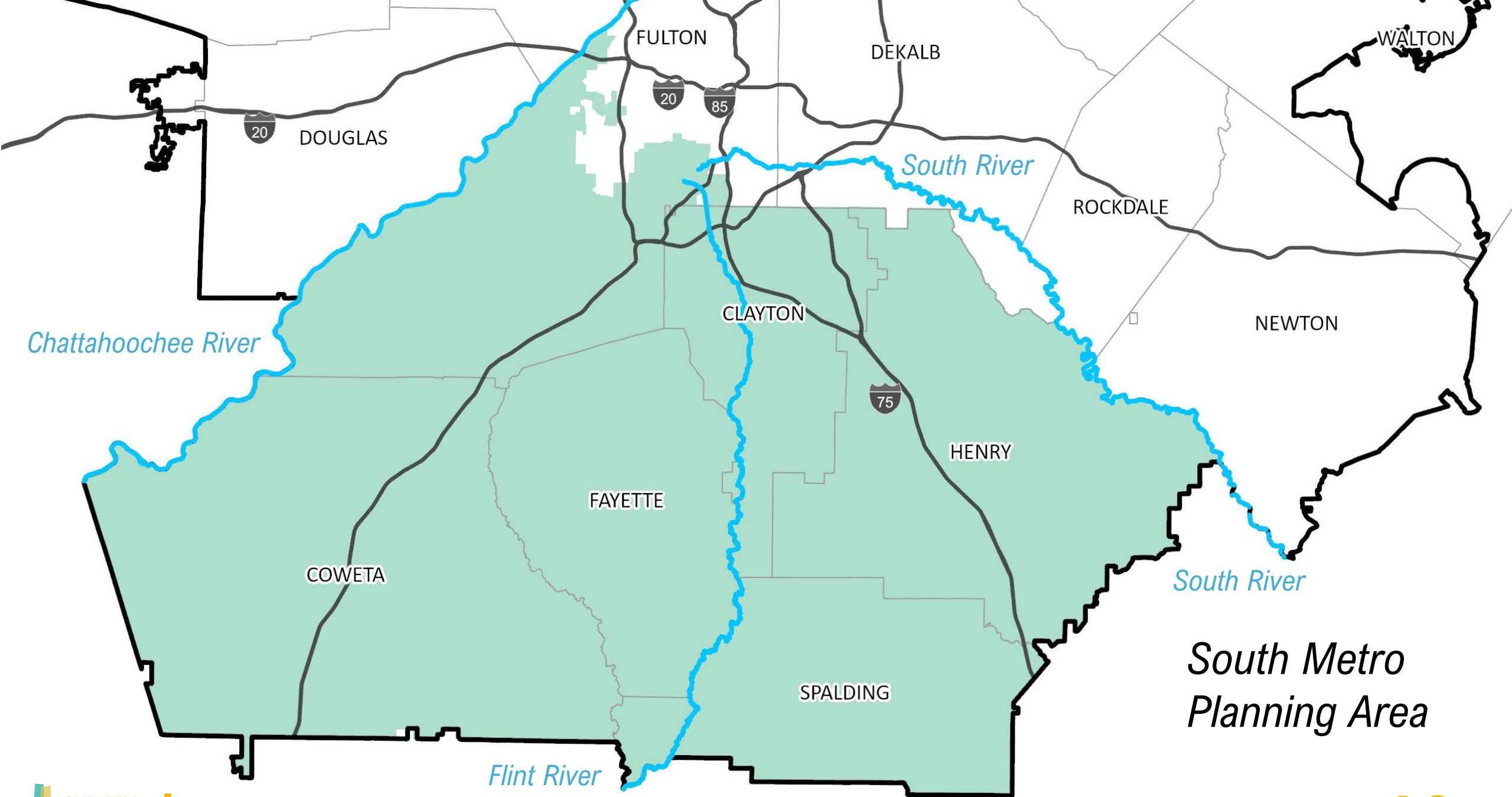
South Metro Planning Area

Next Steps

- **South Metro Trails Leadership Group**
County Commission Chairs + Mayors from South Metro Atlanta
 - Convening with Aerotropolis Alliance
 - Sub-group on the Flint River
- **Local private and philanthropic funding models**



South Metro Planning Area





Discussion

GPA Conference 2025 | October 8, 2025, at 4:00 PM