

**The Dawn of a New Era:
The Atlanta Streetcar and What It Means for the City of Atlanta**
By Obinna Morton

No, its name is not Desire, but the Atlanta Streetcar is filled with grand ambition. A project that has been over a decade in the making and that began construction in 2012 is slated to debut this holiday season.

This is not the first time Atlanta has introduced the electric streetcar. It first appeared in 1871 and ran until 1949. To accommodate the evolving needs of the city spurred by the increase in suburban living, busses, trolleys, and, later, cars would replace the electric streetcar. By the mid-20th century, the electric streetcar had slowly become obsolete in dealing with the city's growing transportation needs.

For the coming years Atlanta would experience steady growth, but it wasn't until the 1996 Olympics that Atlanta experienced an unprecedented growth and migration back into the city.

In the 1970s, Atlanta had reached the 2 million mark, and by 1996, Atlanta had nearly three million people. Over the next decade, Atlanta would add over one million people to its population, more than doubling the previous rate for the city's population growth.

By the early 2000s, Atlanta had reached a critical mass that would inspire the reintroduction of the electric streetcar, with the goal of connecting metro Atlanta to the greater Atlanta region and facilitating travel in the Downtown corridor.

Top business, government, and community leaders of the City formed the Atlanta Streetcar, Inc. in 2003 in order to reintroduce the streetcar to Atlanta, and in 2010, Atlanta applied for and was awarded the prestigious Tiger Grant II from the Department of Transportation, securing \$47.6 million—more than half of the funding required—to build the ambitious project.

Additional funding would come from the City of Atlanta Recovery Zone Bond funds, the Department of Watershed Management Clean Water Program, the Atlanta Downtown Improvement District, and the Atlanta Regional Commission Livable Centers Initiative Program to cover the total cost of \$92 million.

The City of Atlanta began construction on the Atlanta Streetcar in early 2012 and at present has an opening day set during this year's holiday season.

With the advent of the Atlanta Streetcar, the City stands at the dawn of a new era, one that draws from its illustrious past to create something sleek, modern, and new.

A collaborative project between the City of Atlanta, Atlanta Downtown Improvement District, and the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), the Atlanta Streetcar will connect the Auburn Avenue district, east and west. It will run 2.7 miles of light rail looping the King Memorial Center and Centennial Olympic Park along 12 stops.

The question that arises is, “Why now?” Why has the City decided to bring back the electric streetcar, a mode of transportation that has long been a memory of the past? What will the benefit be to the Atlanta of the 21st century?

The benefits are four-fold. The Atlanta Streetcar will bring improvements in connectivity, the environment, infrastructure and economic development.

The Atlanta Streetcar will unify the eastern and western districts in the Downtown corridor that have been separated by the I-75/I-85 interstate highway connector for more than fifty years. It will provide last-mile connectivity and help ease Atlanta’s current traffic congestion. The Streetcar will also assist in circulating the Downtown population once people get off of MARTA, Atlanta’s regional transit system.

William Jones, Transit Service Development Manager for the Atlanta Streetcar, monitors ridership numbers and maintains the passenger schedule. He attests to the benefits of connectivity the Streetcar will provide. “In the concept of the integrated transit network, the Streetcar supports MARTA,” Jones says.

The Atlanta Streetcar will also link to four areas along the Atlanta Beltline: the King Historic District, along the Eastern and Western lines, and at Centennial Olympic Park.

In addition to the first installment of the Streetcar, aptly called Phase 1, the City of Atlanta also has plans to add additional routes and services.

The Atlanta Streetcar is environmentally-friendly. Each car holds up to 200 people, and with an expected ridership of 2,600 per day, the Streetcar has the potential to significantly reduce the City’s ecological footprint.

The City of Atlanta also aims to transform the neighborhoods surrounding the Streetcar into an EcoDistrict. With an emphasis on sustainable development, the EcoDistrict will focus on areas such as climate, arts and education, and equity and empowerment, and will boast environmental benefits that include both green living and improvement in quality of life.

The Atlanta Streetcar will improve the infrastructure of the Downtown corridor. Sidewalks will be redesigned, street ramps and streetlights upgraded, and bicycle lanes added. Luckie Street will also be converted into a two-way street connecting Centennial Olympic Park and Peachtree Street to ease traffic congestion. These additions will improve mobility for pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists.

The Atlanta Streetcar will spur the Downtown economy. Between 2014 and 2015 alone, over \$662 million in public and private investment will be invested in Downtown Atlanta. By 2015, a total of \$2.2 billion in redevelopment will be completed in institutional, residential and commercial space.

A number of investment opportunities exist in the area surrounding the Atlanta Streetcar. Keith Hillsman, Community Relations Liaison for the Atlanta Streetcar, actively monitors conditions along the Streetcar's alignment and continues to create public awareness for the numerous opportunities available to Atlanta businesses. "New business can invest in commercial property, which will redevelop areas," states Hillsman.

Atlanta, for example, introduced the Pop-Up Shops Program in January 2014. The City of Atlanta activated the properties of businesses with vacant space, and businesses received four months free in exchange for a long-term lease.

Central Atlanta Progress, the Atlanta non-profit organization tasked with strengthening economic development Downtown, oversaw the Pop-Up Retail Event, and a number of retailers now line the Atlanta Streetcar route including Modern Tribe, Just Add Honey, The Byrd's Box, and Fallen Arrows.

The Atlanta Streetcar is modeled after the Portland Streetcar, which is the first system in the United States to utilize the modern streetcar. Taking inspiration from the 16th Street Simulator in Denver, CO, the Atlanta Streetcar is also a form of light rail transit.

Additional cities going the route of the electric streetcar include Charlotte, Tucson, Ft. Lauderdale and Washington, DC.

Tim Borchers, Deputy Commissioner of Transportation, oversees the execution and operations of the Atlanta Streetcar. "27 other cities are in the building and planning stages of having streetcars, but Atlanta is the furthest along in the building, planning and operation," he states.

So now the countdown begins.

Testing and operator training is well underway, and night testing was completed in mid-November. The Streetcar is currently undergoing demonstration testing where operators receive 40-50 miles of live experience. "We're currently doing pre-revenue service training. We're emulating schedules and running them without passengers to verify times and locations," states Hillsman.

As a matter of final preparation, Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed is currently tasked with resolving safety issues with the Streetcar before receiving the go-ahead from the Federal Transit Association. At present, the city's latest documents are being reviewed by the FTA.

It will be the final step in this years-long journey.

Hillsman notes that the Streetcar will have a residual effect on Atlanta. "It will bring people Downtown and bring Atlanta back to the Glory Days when Downtown was the vibrant center of the City."

The Atlanta Streetcar aims build on its past to deftly steer Atlanta through the 21st century. With its debut set for this holiday season, the revitalization of the Downtown corridor has only just begun.