

PRE-PUBLICATION DRAFT

NORTHSIDE DRIVE, THE GRAND TRANSIT BOULEVARD OF THE FUTURE

Mike Dobbins, FAIA, FAICP, Professor of Practice, School of City and Regional Planning, Georgia Tech

You would think that a street that connects Cobb County to Atlantic Station, Georgia Tech, the Georgia World Congress Center, the Georgia Dome, the Atlanta University Center, West End and points south, would get a little respect. But Northside Drive, the west frame of Atlanta's downtown/midtown core, is a ragtag, shabby, and confusing street that fulfills neither its development potential nor adequately meets its transportation purpose. Despite the fact that it provides access to tens of thousands of people on a daily basis, you can't even take a bus from one end to the other.

And a lot is happening in the corridor. Cobb County's locally preferred alternative transit link to the core would utilize bus rapid transit (BRT) technology coming down Northside. The State Road and Tollway Authority's (SRTA) strategically located site at 17th Street is up for sale without conditions that would serve transit connectivity. Georgia Tech is seeking to establish better program and physical linkages with its westside neighborhoods. A new stadium is in play. The Multimodal Passenger Terminal (MMPT) is finally in a serious planning and development mode. The Atlanta University Center (AUC) is actively re-visioning its future. West End businesses are forming a community improvement district. Wouldn't now be a good time to plan comprehensively?

We think so.

Our Georgia Tech city planning and civil engineering students are preparing a working draft of such a plan for the corridor as a whole and for the sites where decisions are pending right now. The questions we address include:

- How to redesign the travel way to incorporate transit to serve both through traffic and local access to increase capacity and provide a grand streetscape
- How to connect Cobb County's BRT to MARTA, from Cumberland to Atlantic Station to the east and to the MMPT to the south, utilizing the SRTA site as a transfer location
- How to install local transit service up and down Northside and at its east-west crossings to enhance the optimum use of street frontages
- How to reimagine the street as a grand boulevard – trees, lights, parking, and traffic patterns that attract people, not repel them
- How to establish a positive, functional pedestrian environment along Northside Drive and across its forbidding divide, with a comparable plan for bicycles
- how to shape the corridor's considerable development potential, including hundreds of housing units built before the downturn, so that when the economy comes back its planning, design and development realize their highest values for the community as a whole, not just for real estate speculators

- Finally, how to erase the divide that separates the business and institutional vitality on the east from the neighborhood isolation on the west – a divide that marks historic scars unworthy of a city looking forward

Our studio is pursuing two tracks of exploration. First, students have organized a comprehensive strategy for considering the technical, organizational, financial, cultural, and political factors that come into play. Second, we are reaching out to the full spectrum of people, organizations, and interests that have a stake in Northside's future. The goal is to merge technical with process factors to seek overall visions for the corridor and its subparts, building on the strengths already in place. Through both focused and general meetings with all concerned we aim to develop and widely share information and ideas that come forth. Out of this we hope to identify actions that can move the vision forward. Already we have received and are incorporating most valuable feedback and ideas about how to focus our next steps.

Fortunately, the City is moving to designate Northside Drive as a "transit corridor" in its upcoming update of the Connect Atlanta Plan, which will provide the legitimacy to seek transit funding support from local and federal sources. Next priorities include:

- Pushing for the SRTA property purchase process to provide for a transit hub in any development plans that includes Cobb County BRT both across to Arts Center MARTA station and down Northside Drive, the Amtrak station, a commuter rail station, as well as local transit connectivity
- Connected MMPT and stadium planning that includes downtown's "Greenline" plan, Centennial Olympic Park, the College Football Hall of Fame, that extends to and through a Northside gateway along MLK to the AUC campuses and supports preservation and revitalization goals of the westside neighborhoods

The ongoing planning work will soon be accessible through an interactive web site for comment and critique. Come on board!