

RACE AND TRANSIT INVESTMENT IN DEKALB COUNTY, GEORGIA



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Cover image: Addicks, Rich. *A full MARTA train heading eastbound during rush hour.* Georgia State University Library Digital Collections. Accessed February 19, 2021.

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INTRODUCTION

Mass transit in United States cities proliferated during an era of white flight and increasingly different conditions between inner city neighborhoods and the suburbs that exist on the urban periphery. In metropolitan Atlanta, referenda to implement and expand the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), the region's heavy rail and bus system, have been rejected multiple times in suburban counties such as Cobb County and Gwinnett County.

One key narrative that is returned to time and time again in telling the story of Atlanta's transit issues is that MARTA's expansion is hampered by resistance from white suburbanites due to a popular perception that transit expansion will increase crime by allowing inner-city residents better access to suburban neighborhoods, people whom suburb dwellers may believe to be more likely to engage in criminal activities. This perception has its roots in racist and classist fears about people living in the inner city, which are especially important to acknowledge and analyze in a heavily segregated city like Atlanta. Another popular objection to MARTA in suburban areas is a reluctance

to direct tax dollars towards a system that currently operates primarily within the confines of I-285, the area's perimeter highway. However, little attention has been focused on resistance to transit within one of the already participating counties. This paper aims to dissect intra-county neighborhood-level attitudes to transit in DeKalb County, which still fall along racial and class lines, even in a majority black county that has been funding MARTA for five decades. These attitudes and concomitant neighborhood organizing have had a profound effect on where transit dollars have been spent, where they have been wasted, and where they have not gone despite general support for them.

In contrast to Cobb and Gwinnett, DeKalb County has been a part of the MARTA system since the very first vote on the issue in November of 1962. A majority of DeKalb County residents voted to approve MARTA in 1971, and the county is now host to eight rail stations and numerous bus routes. However, despite the historically documented favorability of the majority of the county to MARTA services, multiple efforts to expand MARTA's range of services within DeKalb County have failed, due in part to opposition at the neighborhood level. In this paper, I focus in on the ways in which the voices of white, wealthy, well-connected neighborhood groups have

been prioritized over those of lower-income black DeKalb residents in the southern part of the county, who have been promised expansions like the East Atlanta busway for the last fifty years without seeing any such investment materialize.

In 2012, a regional referendum that would have represented the biggest investment in Atlanta transit since MARTA's founding failed in all ten counties that voted on it, including DeKalb County. The fact that DeKalb did not pass this referendum is significant considering the county's historic support for transit initiatives. Since MARTA's inception, DeKalb County residents have received lower prioritization for transit projects compared to City of Atlanta and Fulton County, and the black voters that have historically come out in force in DeKalb County to ensure the passing of transit-related legislation did not lend their support in this instance. This paper posits that a pattern of broken promises and wild goose chases in transit investment decisions within the county has led to a growing perception among county residents that MARTA will not deliver on its projects and a general loss of faith in the possibility of more transit opportunities in DeKalb.

The analytical framework for this examination comes from the notion of transit equity and scholarly work that has been conducted on this topic. A component of this is a discussion of the imagined crime-transit link and of race- and class-based discrimination in transit investment, as well as literature that focuses on MARTA and the impact that race and racial bias has had on its implementation. I will also consider the biases that influence investment in heavy and light rail versus investment in bus systems.

The historical analysis later in this paper draws on primary sources, using contemporaneous Atlanta Journal-Constitution articles to lay out a timeline of proposed MARTA expansion projects in DeKalb County and to analyze neighborhood responses. I draw upon historical census tract data, visualized through GIS, to present a demographic makeup of the neighborhoods involved in these proposals. An analysis of how neighborhood response, MARTA's actions, and the demographics of the neighborhoods intersect follows, to the level that the historical record permits. The final section of this paper explores the recent DeKalb County Transit Master Plan, investigating areas of proposed future investment and analyzing them using the historical context of neighborhood objections to MARTA activity. This is

complemented by discussion of the DeKalb New Day Partnership with MARTA, which proposes an investment of \$250 million in DeKalb County transit improvements, as announced in February 2020, also grounded in the historical context of objection to and investment in MARTA infrastructure in DeKalb County. Additionally, I will look at the impact of COVID on bus service in DeKalb County. To conclude, I will make some general recommendations regarding moving forward with transit investment in the county in light of this paper's findings.

TRANSPORTATION EQUITY: A FRAMEWORK

It is impossible to discuss the history of transit in Atlanta without acknowledging the white supremacy underlying all power structures in the United States. This white supremacy was long codified as law in the South and persists in numerous manifestations, legal and extralegal, today. There has been generally explicit acknowledgement of the role that race and racism have played in preventing the expansion of MARTA into Cobb and Gwinnett counties, populated as they were in the latter half of the twentieth century by whites that had fled the inner core of Atlanta and rural whites distrustful of the urban lifestyle. In 1986, Chairman of the MARTA Board of Directors Charles Loudermilk asserted that the reason Cobb County would not buy into the system was motivated by racism: “It’s got to be racial. They do not want MARTA to bring ‘undesirables’ from downtown into their county” (Harris 1986). His successor agreed. The following year, new MARTA Chairman J. David Chestnut responded to Cobb County’s

decision to start their own transit system separately from MARTA by explicitly acknowledging the racial divide underlying transit decisions in the Atlanta area, saying: "The underlying problem remains race, and fear that MARTA will bring blacks to the suburbs. All I'm saying is, let's admit it and talk about it" (Schmidt 1987). By the turn of the century, MARTA's leadership were still acknowledging this racial component, with Chairman Bill Mosely stating plainly in 2001 that "people in the suburbs think MARTA is a black, transit-dependent system" (Kirouac-Fram 2012). While these distinctions were relatively easy to draw when they played out between suburbs that were overwhelmingly white and urban counties that were majority black, it becomes more nuanced when discussing the racial politics within one of those majority black urban counties – DeKalb County.

My fundamental assertion in this paper is that transportation investment in DeKalb County has been inequitable. Generally, DeKalb County is a county divided. As Bullard, Johnson, and Torres point out, "I-20 served as the racial demarcation line in the region, with blacks located largely to the south and whites to the north" (2000). This generally holds true in DeKalb County as in Fulton. These authors identify three types of inequity related to transportation investment:

procedural inequity, when decisions do not fairly consider all stakeholders; geographic inequity, which includes environmental justice issues and substandard conditions based on geographic location; and social inequity, which arises when there are disparities between the burdens and benefits of transportation investments among different groups (2000). My assertion is that north DeKalb County, with its whiter and wealthier inhabitants, has been repeatedly offered millions of dollars worth of heavy rail and light rail extension and been the subject of costly studies to identify alternatives when residents rejected these offers. Meanwhile, south DeKalb has been promised a busway, never objected to that busway, and never received that busway. Procedural inequity has occurred when well-funded northern DeKalb neighborhood groups with lawyers on retainer have repeatedly sued MARTA to get their way and when the public input of south DeKalb residents has gone unheard and unaddressed. The geographic divide is palpable. Finally, residents of south DeKalb are expected to contribute the same sales tax funding to MARTA that north DeKalb residents do (despite being more likely to earn less), while seeing very little return on their investment, constituting social inequity.

This analysis will draw upon some of the concepts and relationships laid out in Laurel Paget-Seekins' article "Competing Mobility Needs: The Users, Actors, and Discourses in Atlanta, Georgia." Paget-Seekins sets up an analytical framework consisting of three elements (users, actors, and discourses) in order to break down their interactions, particularly in the case of the failure of the 2012 transportation funding referendum, which will be touched on in detail later in this paper. The framework is premised on the idea that there is competition between aspects of these elements and there are necessarily some which are privileged over others. Paget-Seekins defines discourses as "narrative frames through which problems are seen and solutions are shaped" (2013b). The diagram in Figure 1 shows her conception of some interactions that occur during competition for transportation resources. The key discourses that she sees as playing out across debates about

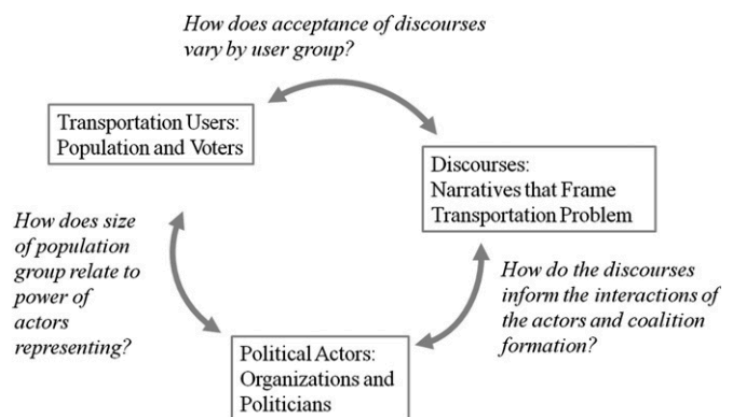


Figure 1. "Interactions between population, political actors, and discourses" (Paget-Seekins 2013b)

transportation in Atlanta are one which sees the issue as congestion, one that sees a lack of choices, and a third that sees inequitable access. This analysis will primarily operate with the equity discourse as its underpinning. The three discourses will be described in more depth in discussing the 2012 referendum, and I will also point to additional themes that I see as discourses shaping the outcomes of transportation decisions.

CRIME AND TRANSIT

One of the most frequent excuses that residents give for resistance to transit is apprehension about increased crime. This constitutes a discourse that is used by anti-transit actors. Of course, this reason is rarely cited when other types of transportation networks are expanded: one rarely hears neighborhood associations express concern about increased rates of burglary with the opening of a new pedestrian trail. The link between transit and crime in the suburban imagination is inextricable from the cultural context in which many



Figure 2. MARTA Central Control Room operations, circa 1979 (RTA, 2008)

mass transit systems in the United States were built, where white flight had gathered momentum and cities had seen a demographic shift to lower white

and higher black shares of the population. The assertion that transit brings crime has two implicit premises: that transit is primarily utilized by black Americans, and that black Americans are more likely to commit crimes. It is a fundamentally racist assertion, and it is an incorrect assertion.

A 1986 article entitled "Does MARTA Transport Crime?" points out that local Atlanta media often play up nonexistent links between MARTA and crime, using as an example a murder which took place at Lenox Square Mall after MARTA had already ceased operating for the night, yet nonetheless linking the crime with the then-new rail line

(Jaben 1986). Ironically, the headline itself reinforces the link in the reader's mind, drawing upon the same stereotype that the article discusses. The author interviewed multiple police sources who stated that while crime as a whole was increasing across the city, there was no particular increase attributable to MARTA.

Indeed, researchers have attempted to test this notion's basis in reality by looking at real world instances of crime rates and transit. In 1993, Stephen L. Plano looked at two stations in Baltimore which had been open at the time for about six years. His research was marred by a lack of geographic specificity within the data, but he still concluded that there was no outsized impact on crime caused by the stations, as crime rates in the area were rising at about the same rate as the rest of the city. He also mentions the notion of distance decay, which is the idea that activities and interactions decline with increasing distance, and applies this concept to the supposed crime-transit connection to posit that the likelihood to commit crimes declines with distance from one's origin and the concomitant declining level of familiarity with one's surroundings, pushing back on the idea that inner-city residents were deliberately targeting suburban neighborhoods and using transit to access them.

In Atlanta, research was done at the time of the opening of two DeKalb County MARTA stations, Kensington and Indian Creek, to assess if the stations had any effect on surrounding crime. In his article "Transit-Related Crime in Suburban Areas," published in the mid-1990s, Theodore H. Poister analyzed crime rates in the areas immediately surrounding these two new stations. He found that there were some increases in some specific types of crime – namely, larceny, robberies, and auto theft – right after the stations opened, but the rates soon decreased to levels consistent with those preceding the new stations.

However, the reality of the situation has little bearing on the outsized impact that relying on the trope of transit bringing crime has had in shaping which areas embrace transit and which roundly reject it. The implications of this particular discourse are evident in this letter from a reader to a suburban weekly newspaper around the time of the 1971 MARTA referendum: "If you want the drug pushers, muggers, rapists, and other degenerates who are now stalking the streets of downtown Atlanta to invade your community, the vote for rapid transit . . . A speedy 15-cent ride will drop them off near your front door and your neighbor's front door" (Williams 2015). The transit-

crime link has no basis in fact, but it has been a repeated theme as a racist dog-whistle across the history of transportation policy in metro Atlanta.

BUS VERSUS RAIL

Mode choice is also an area of focus that has resounding transportation equity implications. As Gerard C. Wellman points out in his article expounding on the concept of transportation apartheid, even within the realm of public transit different modes are divided among racial and socioeconomic lines: “Upper-middle class White transit riders are far more likely to use light rail lines whereas poor and ethnic minorities can be found on public buses” (2014). This divide particularly resonates in Atlanta, where one can often see a distinction among transit advocates with some who push for more expensive heavy and light rail investment but advocate little for increased expansion of the MARTA bus network.

MARTA’s bus system, which is generally composed of feeder buses that run to rail stations to keep the whole system integrated, is

not an insignificant part of its operations. At the turn of the century, MARTA's bus operations included 154 routes covering 275,000 passengers on the average weekday, compared to 100 miles of rail carrying 259,000 passengers (Bullard, Johnson, and Torres 2000). The bus therefore had higher ridership than the train. Yet, as Jaclyn Kirouac-Fram points out, it is more so the bus that is stigmatized and associated with negative stereotypes about poor people and people of color:

It was the bus, in particular, that Atlantans had in mind when they used the repurposed the MARTA acronym to mean 'Moving Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta.' It is the bus, not the rail, that is picked out for derision in the YouTube sensation, "Bitch U Ride The MARTA Bus" ("Not my fault you broke as fuck! / Don't try to hop in with us / Cuz bitch you ride the MARTA bus!") (Kirouac Fram 2012)

While this paper primarily focuses on investments related to the heavy rail system, this interplay between bus and rail will be examined at several key junctures.

EARLY HISTORY OF MARTA IN DEKALB

"Historically the Black Community has given full support to programs and individuals claiming to improve the quality of life in the entire Metropolitan Community, only to find that once the goals of the White community have been realized, no further consideration is given to the needs, desires and interests of the Black community."

- Maynard Jackson and Leroy Johnson, Atlanta Coalition on Current Community Affairs

INITIAL PROPOSALS

The Georgia Legislature first approved the establishment of MARTA in 1965, following the Metropolitan Atlanta Transit Study Commission report of 1962. According to historian Ronald H. Bayor, when MARTA's first plan was unveiled in 1966, "it was clear that black neighborhoods had once again been neglected" (1996). The response

was a decision by the Atlanta Summit Leadership Conference, a black leadership organization, to oppose the plan unless the western line of the rail system was extended to better serve the black neighborhoods in this part of Atlanta, including the Perry Homes public housing project. Representatives from MARTA met with black leaders and made revisions to the plan to reflect their concerns about the western line and about employment practices, but by May of 1968, the Atlanta Summit Leadership Conference once again stated that the plans were not satisfactory and they would continue to oppose them: “Unless certain changes are made in proposed routes and services, along with a clear understanding regarding employment and staff recruitment, we could not recommend MARTA to the Negro community” (Bayor 1996). They recommended a vote against the proposal in the 1968 referendum.

The initial system proposal from the authority was rejected in the 1968 referendum (Regional Transit Authority, 2008). Four counties participated in this initial referendum – Fulton, DeKalb, Clayton, and Gwinnett. At the time, the main funding source was slated to be property taxes. All four counties rejected the proposal, forcing a redesign and different direction for the imagined transit system. A lack

of support from low-income black residents also forced MARTA to reconsider what the system had to offer. In 1969, the executive director of the Atlanta Metropolitan Planning Commission, Glenn Bennett, indicated that this was a factor in planning for the next attempt to pass the proposal, stating that “the determination to meet the basic requirements of these groups is more genuine and more widespread than it has ever been” (Bayor 1996). While it is certainly possible that this constituted mere lip service, MARTA did take some substantive action in terms of representation, appointing Atlanta Summit Leadership Conference co-chair Jesse Hill to the MARTA Board of Directors, where he joined one other black member, banker L. D. Milton (Bayor 1996).

A group called Action Forum was established in 1969, comprising Atlanta’s white business leaders and leaders of the black community (Bayor 1996). MARTA was a key topic of discussion for the group. The Atlanta Coalition on Current Community Affairs (ACCCA), another black leadership organization, issued a list of demands that would need to be met before they would support MARTA, including 35% black employment and contracts to black firms, an increase in black representation on the Board of Directors, a 15-cent fare for the next

decade, and rail service to the Perry Homes public housing project and other black neighborhoods (Bayor 1996). The Atlanta Summit Leadership Conference also requested better service to Thomasville, in addition to several other key locations (Williams 2015). It is possible that this prompted the Thomasville terminus for the East Atlanta Busway, which will be discussed at length in later sections.

MARTA responded with some concessions, including an affirmative action plan, an agreement to the 15-cent fare for seven years and service to Perry Homes via the Proctor Creek spur. This ended up being only partially constructed, and Perry Homes was demolished and replaced with mixed-income housing, but this is outside the scope of this paper.

THE 1971 REFERENDUM

The revised system plan expanded the 40.3-mile rail system that had been proposed in 1968 to 56 miles and introduced the one-cent sales tax as a substitute for the formerly proposed funding through property taxes (RTA 2008). While this referendum was still brought before the same four counties that had voted on MARTA in 1968, this

time only two approved the initiative – Fulton and DeKalb. The measure was defeated in Clayton and Gwinnett counties, with about four votes against to every one vote for (Williams 2015). Notably, at the time of the 1970 census, Clayton and Gwinnett counties were both about 95% white, while Fulton and DeKalb had much higher proportions of black residents (Karner 2019). 43% of registered voters in the City of Atlanta at the time of the referendum were black, and they supported MARTA with 54.8% of the vote (Bayor 1996). In DeKalb County, the resolution passed with 39,565 votes to 36,206 (Harris 1986). These results seem to indicate that MARTA was at least somewhat successful in swaying black voters to support their proposal with the amendments that were made at the behest of black community leaders.

THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The distribution of the power to approve new projects within the MARTA Board of Directors has put DeKalb County at a disadvantage in comparison with City of Atlanta and Fulton County, who share overlapping geographic area and thus have a good deal of mutual vested interests. The Board of Directors has generally consisted of representatives appointed by their respective county or municipal legislative bodies. While DeKalb County has consistently contributed a large percentage of funding towards the MARTA system, its interests have not always been well-represented in this decision-making body.



Figure 3. The MARTA board meets with the Georgia Black Caucus in January of 1973 (Bayor 1996)

The first meeting of the MARTA Board of Directors was held on January 3, 1966 (DeKalb County 2019). Prior to the successful referendum that inaugurated the construction of MARTA heavy rail, the board consisted of ten members: two from DeKalb County, two from Fulton County, one each from Clayton and Gwinnett counties, and four from City of Atlanta, giving the city's interests disproportionate influence, which the city in fact specifically insisted on (Collins 1970). This arrangement remained following the referendum, despite the fact that Clayton and Gwinnett rejected the sales tax that would make them a part of the MARTA system.

By early 1974, this imbalance had become such an issue that at least one legislator sought to address it through changes through the board structure. The board at this point continued to have ten members with the aforementioned distribution of representation among the four counties and City of Atlanta. State Senator Bob Bell authored a bill that would remove Clayton and Gwinnett's representation on the board and give DeKalb County two more board representatives, one from Atlanta in DeKalb and one from unincorporated DeKalb (Morrison 1974). This bill was unsuccessful.

The issue surfaced again the following year, with the DeKalb County Commission requesting two more seats on the board and Bob Bell again sponsoring a bill to make this so via the legislature. The justification for the increased representation was given by Fran Sheats, DeKalb liaison to MARTA: "DeKalb County contributes more than 40 per cent of the sales tax revenue to MARTA from its one-cent sales tax and... the first construction on the rapid transit system will take place in DeKalb, the first patrons of the system will be DeKalb residents" (King 1975). Not only was the bill amended in the legislature to reduce the provision to one additional seat, but the bill was also subsequently vetoed by Governor George Busbee.

Governor Busbee's motivation for vetoing the bill was a desire to introduce state representation to the MARTA Board of Directors, and the following year he acted on this inclination. He expanded the board to fourteen members, adding an additional DeKalb County representative, but also including the Georgia Department of Transportation commissioner, the state revenue commissioner, and a state auditor (Bailey 1976). Thus, while DeKalb marginally gained increased representation, the powers of the local governments actually

funding MARTA's construction and operation were diluted by the new presence of state representation.

Meanwhile, Gwinnett and Clayton counties retained their representation on the board, close to a decade after the first failed referendum and with no revised plans to opt in to the MARTA system. In 1977, there was an effort by State Representatives Billy McKinney and Douglas Dean to remove these county representatives from having a say in decisions involving MARTA, given that they had rejected the one-cent sales tax in 1971, by filing a suit alleging that the counties should not hold seats on the board under state law since they did not contribute tax revenue towards the system (Bailey and Allen 1977). The suit was overturned, with the ruling judge stating that "the reverse of taxation without representation is not unconstitutional" (Hendricks 1977). While the two non-participating counties may not have violated the spirit of MARTA's enabling legislation by continuing to have seats on the board, their presence detracted from the ability of the participating city and counties to have a say commensurate with the funds they were contributing.

A situation arose in 1983 with the nomination of one of DeKalb County's MARTA board representatives that serves as a stellar exemplar of the North DeKalb-South DeKalb divide that will later form the crux of this paper's argument. DeKalb County had recently elected its first black County Commissioner, John Evans, who would remain a strong pro-transit voice in the county over the next several decades. Evans supported appointing Thurman McKenzie, a black resident from Decatur, to the board, who would have been the first black DeKalb representative on the MARTA board (Parker 1983a). The County Commission Chairman, Manuel Maloof, had previously stated that he would support the nomination of a black representative. However, Maloof was hospitalized, and in his absence Commissioner Jean Williams nominated David Chesnut, giving her reason as being that "DeKalb needs to be represented by a north DeKalb resident because that is where construction is headed" (Parker 1983b). Thus, DeKalb's representation on the MARTA Board of Directors remained white, and the interests of white north DeKalb were privileged over those of black DeKalb residents, echoing the prioritization of the Tucker-North DeKalb line over the East Atlanta busway that will be elaborated upon shortly.

DeKalb did finally gain its first black member of the Board of Directors in 1985, a full two decades after the establishment of MARTA. State Representative Dick Lane authored a bill giving south Fulton County an additional seat on the board, as well as two new seats for DeKalb County, which was signed into law in March of that year (Miller 1985). Several months later, the DeKalb Board of Commissioners appointed real estate professional Harold Buckley to the board, marking the county's first official black representation in terms of its transit needs (Pendered 1985).

However, contentions about DeKalb's level of representation in general continued to be raised. By 1986, Hugh Jordan, who served as one of five representatives for DeKalb County on the now 17-member MARTA Board of Directors, voiced concerns that DeKalb County was not seeing an adequate return for the proportion of funding it was contributing. At this point in time, DeKalb was still contributing 40% of local sales tax revenues, while it contained only 19% of the rail system and roughly 33% of bus route miles (White 1986).

Across the course of two decades as a partner in the MARTA endeavor, DeKalb County officials have repeatedly fought an uphill battle for

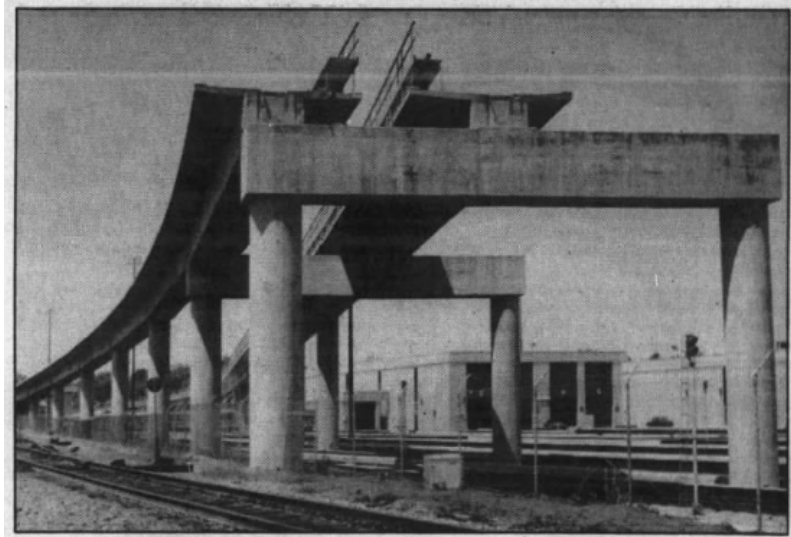


Figure 4. The unfinished eastern line just past Avondale Station in 1986. Bell, Chuck. *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 1, 1986.

proportional representation on the MARTA board. However, while DeKalb was given more seats at the table, the amount of seats at the table also increased, making it difficult to gauge how much of an impact this increased representation had. As we will see, the question of DeKalb's interests in regard to the board are made more complex by the disputing interests within the county itself.

A TALE OF TWO DEKALBS

"In theory, we support public transportation, but if it affects our residents, then we oppose it."

- Kevin Egan, Kirkwood Neighborhood Association President

DeKalb County is a land of contrasts. Figures 5 through 13 show census tracts (standardized to 2010 census tract geography) for each census year beginning in 1970 and ending in 2010. The census tracts are then represented based on percent white population and median family or household income, adjusted for inflation to 2019 dollars for comparison purposes. Median family income is used for 1970 and 1980 and median household income is used for 1990 and 2000. For the sake of comparability, income is excluded from 2010 because it was no longer a part of the decennial census form and thus is no longer able to be associated with census tract geography.

In 1970, right before the enabling referendum, DeKalb County was overwhelmingly white, with non-white populations being concentrated near I-20 and the East Lake Meadows public housing

project, as shown in Figure 6. Figure 8 shows that the northern half of the county remained over 80% white for the most part, with non-white percentages of the population growing in southern DeKalb County. By 1990, a vast swathe of south DeKalb County was now less than 20% white, and one of the only census tracts that remained above 80% white was the stretch of land south of I-85, containing Emory University and Northlake Mall (see Figure 10). Finally, Figures 12 and 13 show that during the first decade of the 21st century, the southern half of DeKalb County is predominantly black, while northern DeKalb County has diversified in pockets.

In terms of income, Figures 5, 7, 9, and 11 show that the highest earning census tracts have fairly consistently remained those in the northern area of the county near Emory and Northlake Mall. The census tracts with lower median incomes tend to be clustered around the I-20 curve and south towards Thomasville, although there have also been some areas emerging around the Buford Highway area with lower median incomes, which is unsurprising considering the area's status as an immigrant enclave.

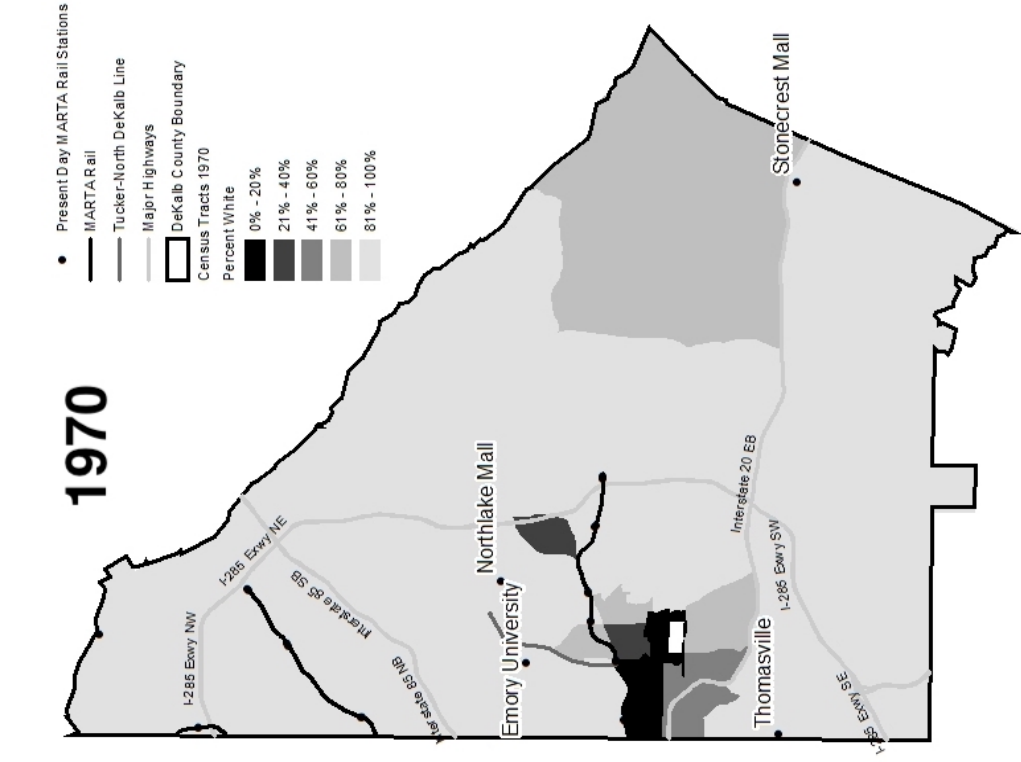


Figure 6. Racial demographics in DeKalb County in 1970. Data sources: ESRI, ARC, US Census Bureau. Map assembled by author.

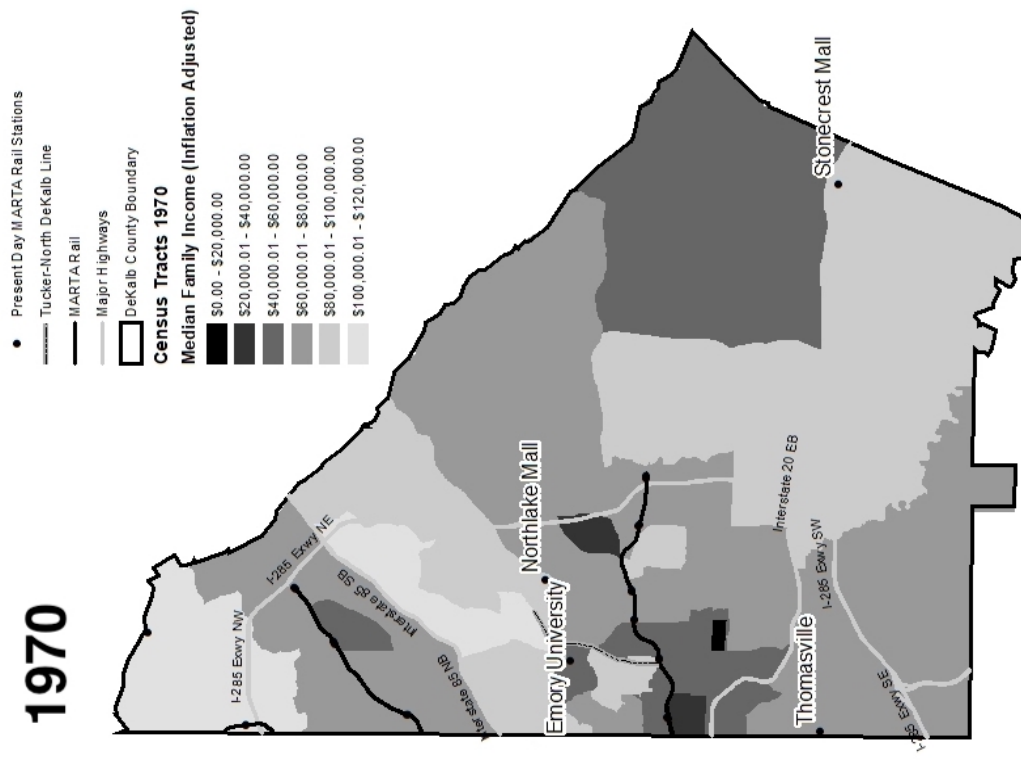


Figure 5. Median income distribution in DeKalb County in 1970. Data sources: ESRI, ARC, US Census Bureau. Map assembled by author.

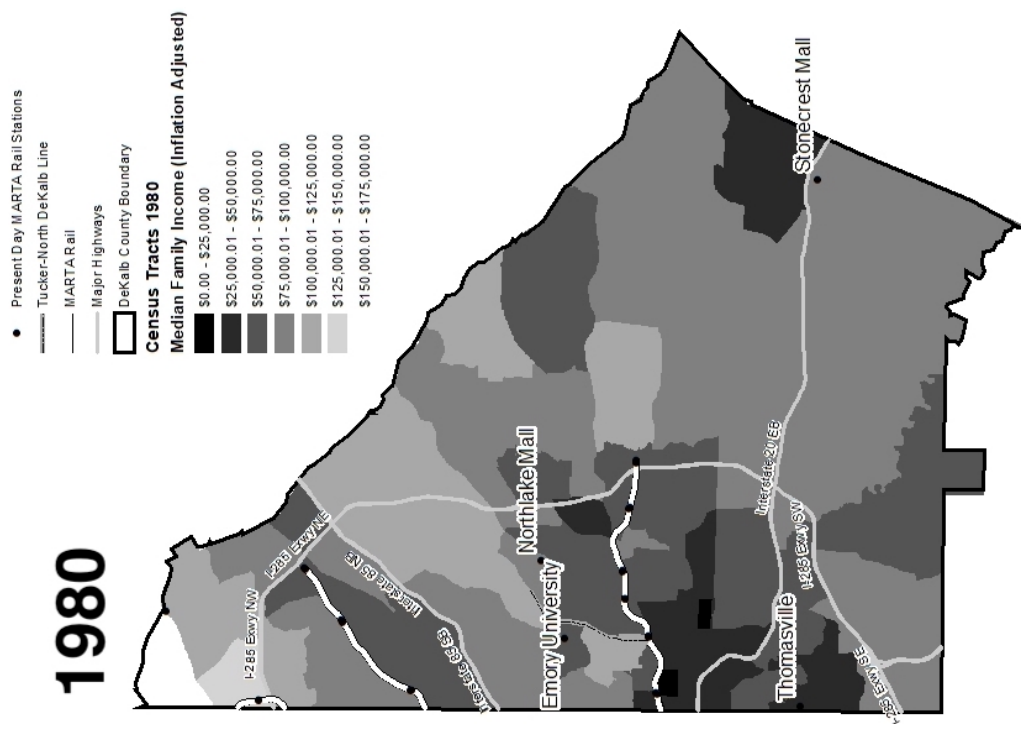


Figure 7. Median income distribution in DeKalb County in 1980. Data sources: ESRI, ARC, US Census Bureau. Map assembled by author.

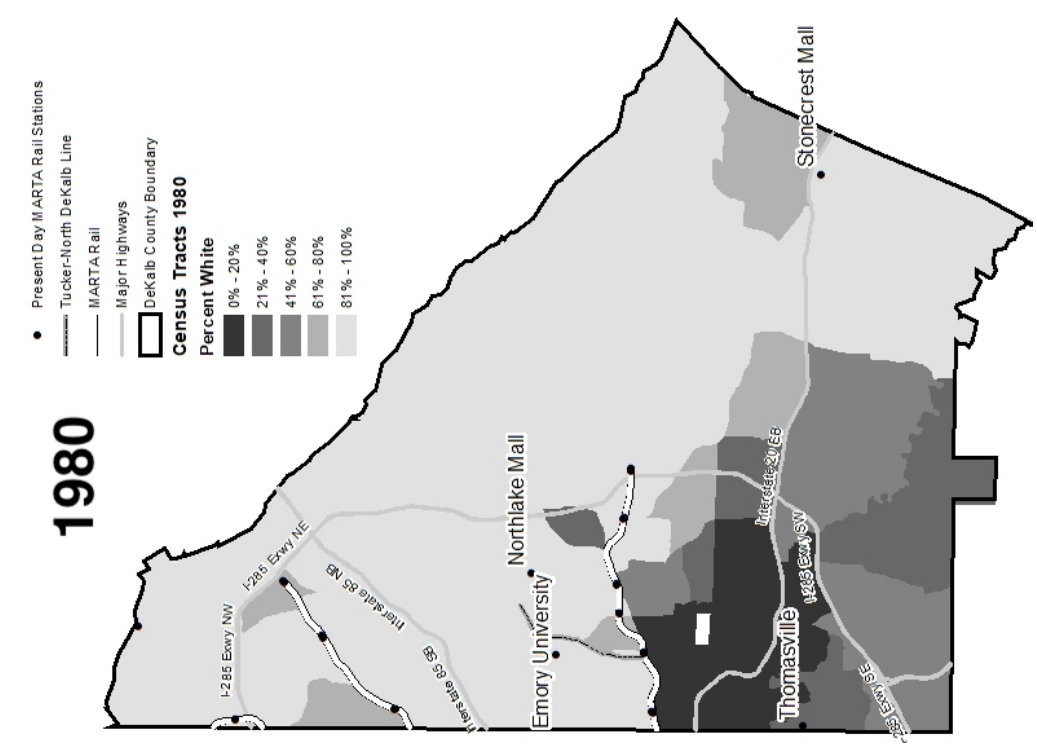


Figure 8. Racial demographics in DeKalb County in 1980. Data sources: ESRI, ARC, US Census Bureau. Map assembled by author.

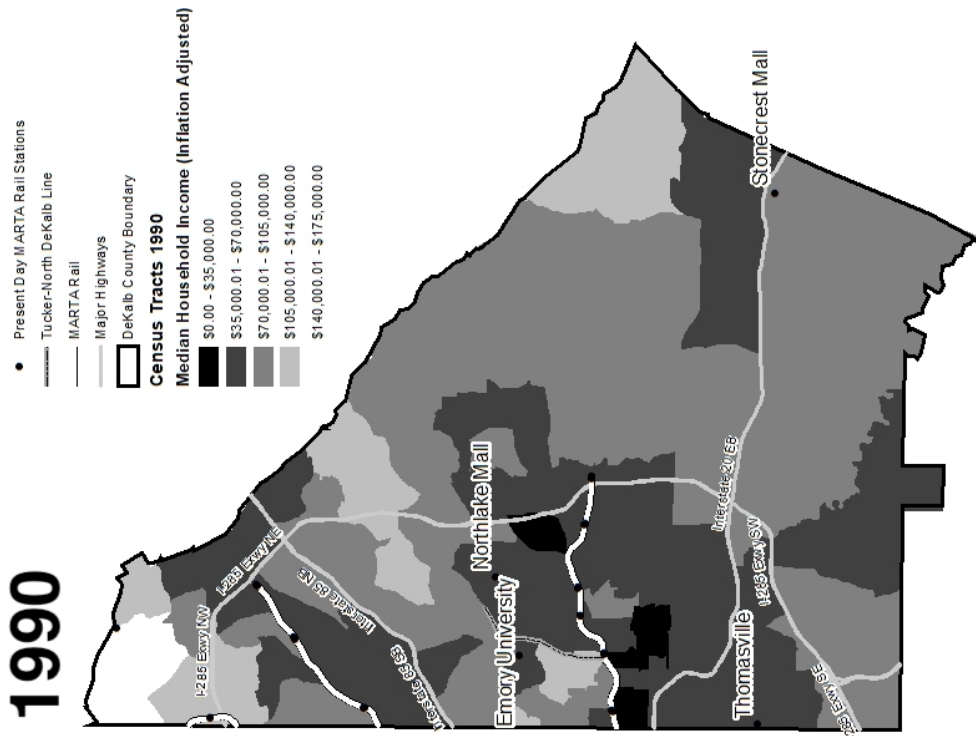


Figure 9. Median income distribution in DeKalb County in 1990. Data sources: ESRI, ARC, US Census Bureau. Map assembled by author.

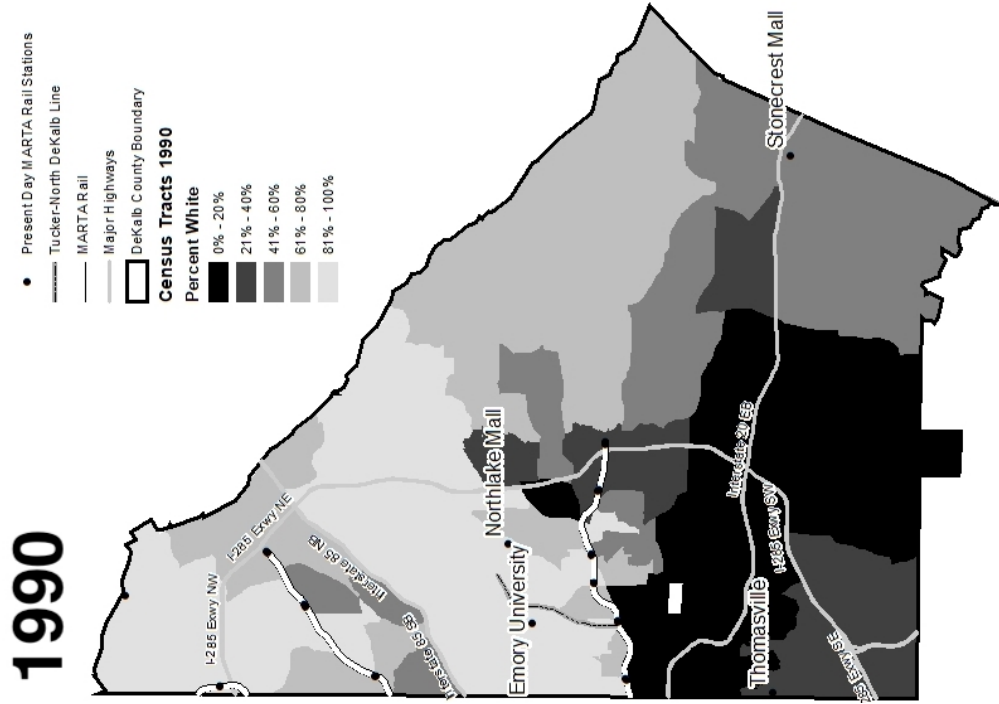


Figure 10. Racial demographics in DeKalb County in 1990. Data sources: ESRI, ARC, US Census Bureau. Map assembled by author.

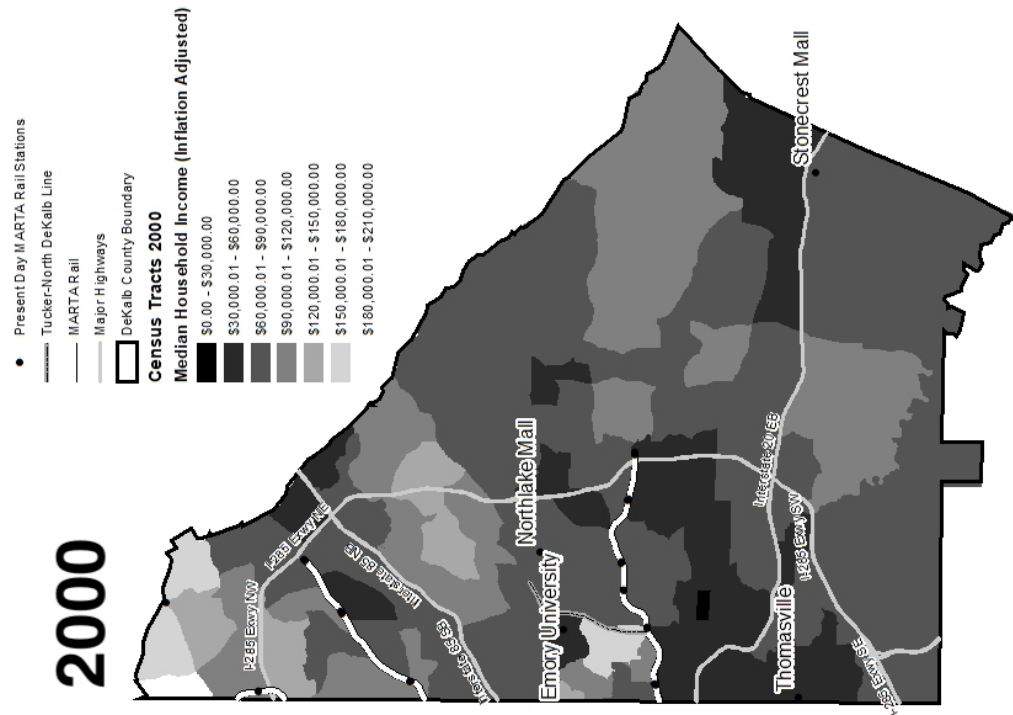


Figure 11. Median income distribution in DeKalb County in 2000. Data sources: ESRI, ARC, US Census Bureau. Map assembled by author.

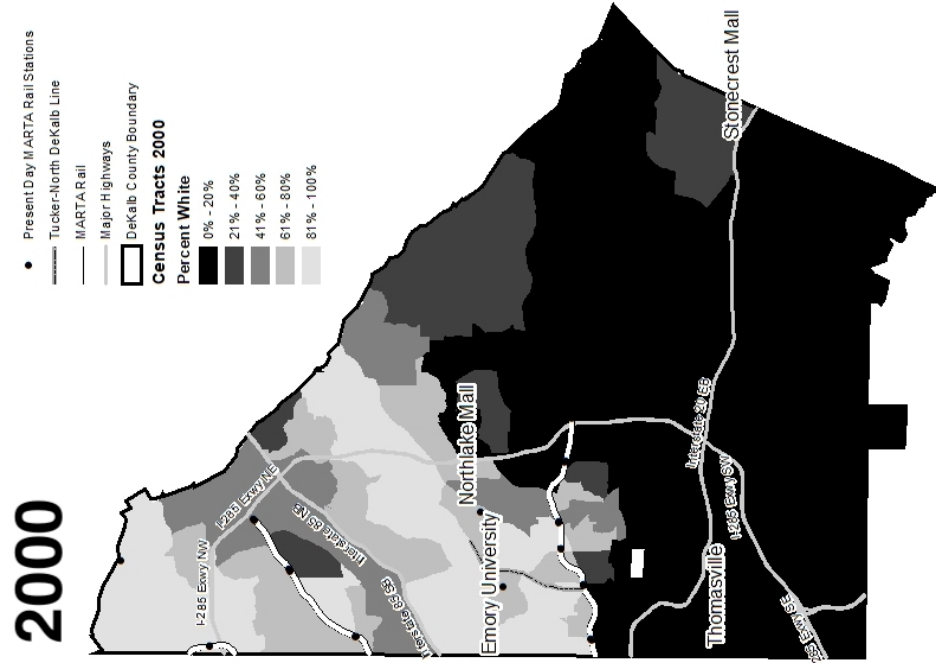
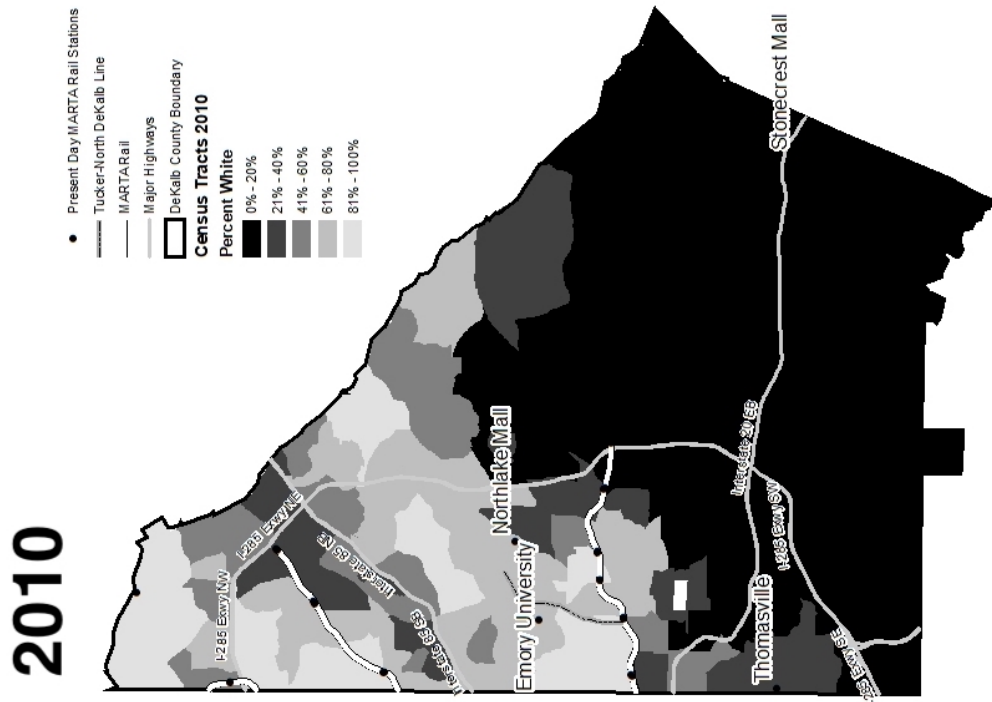


Figure 12. Racial demographics in DeKalb County in 2000. Data sources: ESRI, ARC, US Census Bureau. Map assembled by author.



NORTH DEKALB

The Tucker-North DeKalb Branch Becomes the Clifton Corridor

The year following the establishing referendum, the DeKalb County Commission requested that the MARTA Board of Directors review the proposed Tucker-North DeKalb busway and consider implementing a rail line in the corridor instead, citing a need to respond to a projected increase in population in the area as well as regional air quality concerns (Stewart 1972). At the time, the busway was supposed to run from Montreal Road in Northlake, at the Northlake Mall, along a disused railway line to the proposed East Lake Station. MARTA approved a partial conversion of the Tucker-North DeKalb branch to rail late in late 1973, planning heavy rail from East Lake station to North Druid Hills Road and leaving open the possibility of further rail in the future along the remainder of the line (Bailey 1973b). This change came with a price tag of an estimated \$35 million, but the justification for the conversion was given as better accommodating the rapid growth that was projected for the area (Harris 1986).

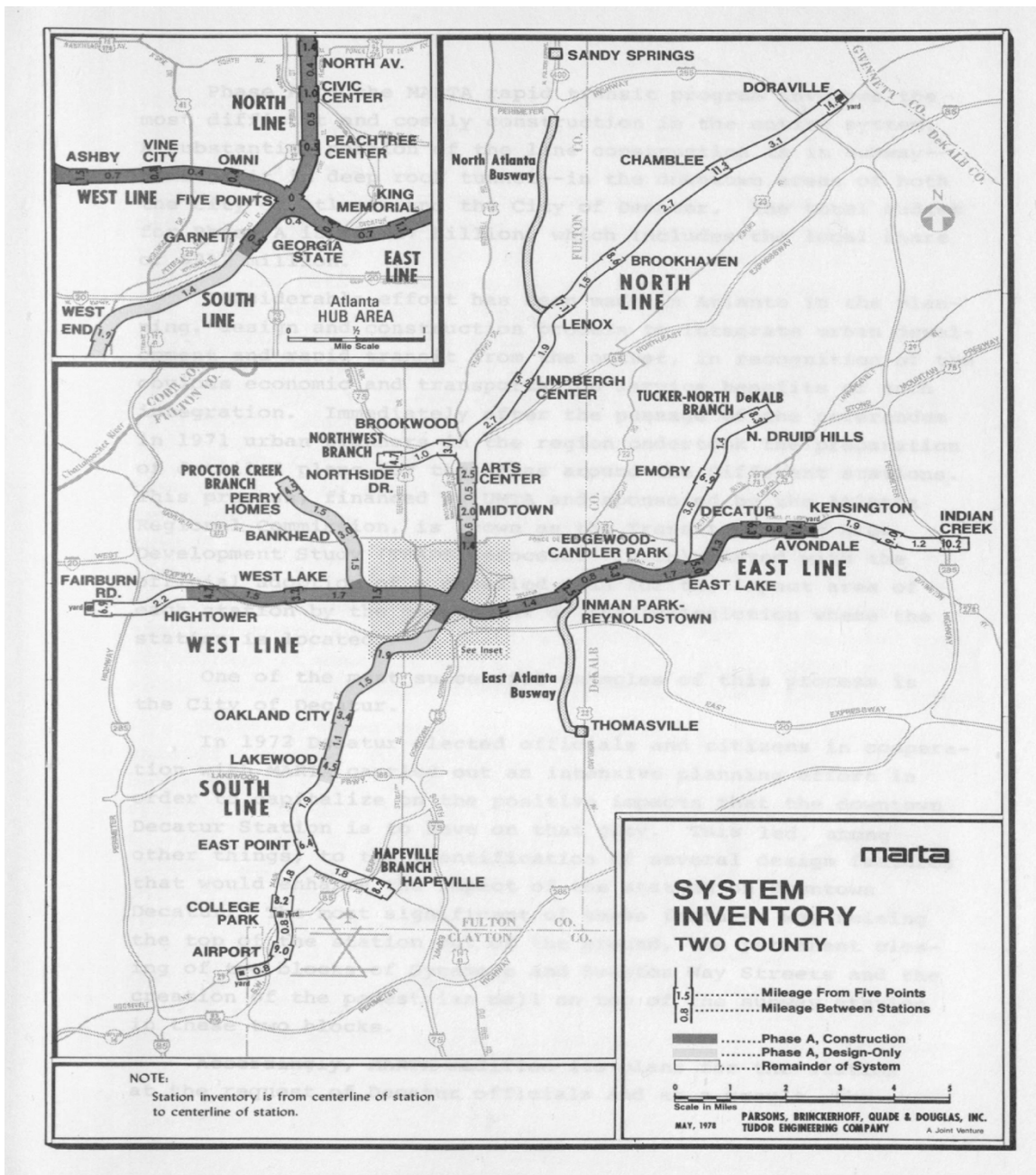


Figure 14. A map of the existing and proposed MARTA rail and busway system as it stood in 1978. Note the location of the Tucker-North DeKalb branch and its origin at East Lake station, as well as the planned East Atlanta Busway along the Fulton-DeKalb county line (MARTA 1978).

The Tucker-North DeKalb MARTA branch would have linked East Lake to Northlake, passing through North Druid Hills, Emory University, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the VA Hospital. Its quick conversion from busway to heavy rail spur speaks to the priority consideration that expansion in this area has received from the very beginning. Figure 14 shows the location of the proposed line in 1978. However, the implementation of this controversial extension has been and continues to be heavily combatted by neighborhood opposition.

In 1975, this proposed Tucker-North DeKalb rail line met with opposition from a community group. The East Lake Association of Neighborhoods (ELAN) disagreed with the proposed location of the line along a Seaboard Coastline Railroad spur. Spokesperson W. H. Hill stated that the group preferred the line be located in a non-residential area, explaining: "We do need a transit system, but we don't need it in our backyard" (Bailey 1975a). This was just the beginning of over four decades of resistance to rail in this area, which has remained higher

income and generally white in comparison to the rest of the county, as Figures 5 through 13 demonstrate.

Community opposition to the line proved to have demoralized even DeKalb County transit advocates by 1976. In a meeting concerning what should be built after the completion of MARTA's "phase A," DeKalb County representative Eleanor L. Richard "said MARTA should give the Tucker-North DeKalb line its 'lowest priority' because it has aroused so much community controversy" (Bailey 1976a). While MARTA may have relegated the extension to a lower priority, it was not in exchange for greater investment in transit-positive south DeKalb County, and the Tucker-North DeKalb line continued to be a focus of discussion for local officials.

Seeking to find an option for the line that would minimize neighborhood disruption in contentious Druid Hills, DeKalb and Decatur officials supported a feasibility study on an alternative location for the Tucker-North DeKalb line. The revised plan would have shortened the spur from 4.2 miles to 2.5 miles, and instead of linking East Lake Station with Northlake Mall, would run between Avondale Station and North DeKalb Mall (Reetz 1977). A map of the two alternatives can be

seen in Figure 15. MARTA did undertake the study – at a cost of \$30,000 (Bailey 1977). Where the original Tucker-North DeKalb line was supposed to run along an

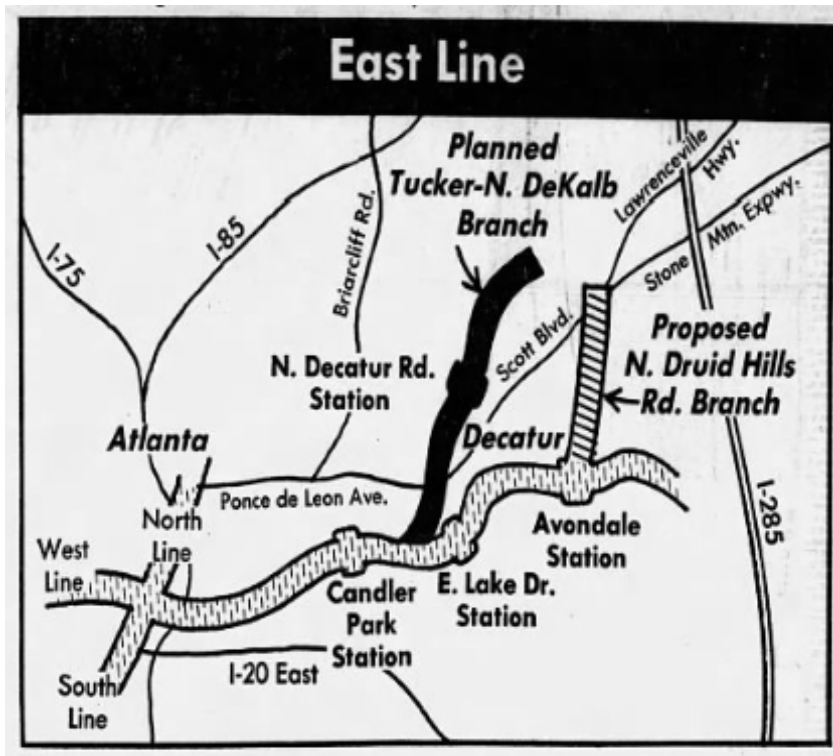


Figure 15. A map showing the planned and alternative routes for the Tucker-North DeKalb branch (Reetz 1977)

existing disused railway right-of-way through primarily residential development, the revised plan would be surrounded by vacant and industrial land. However, additional expense and difficulty would arise from routing through existing in-use railyards surrounding Avondale Station.

In fact, at this point in 1977, construction was already underway of the turnout that would allow for the extension of the line, presumably in the original location near the Seaboard Coastline rail line just west of East Lake station. The work, which cost \$1.5 million, was “too far along to stop” (Bailey 1977). This expenditure, in addition



Figure 16. "Cynthia Casabonne, holding her 2-year-old daughter Jenifer Casabonne, says a new MARTA rail line would bring noise to her neighborhood in the Leafmore area" (Torpy 1998)

to the money spent on the alternative study, represents a staggering investment for what was only a few years prior supposed to be a busway. The expense is even more significant when considering the amount of pushback the community had given

and the subsequent alleged demotion of the entire project to a very low priority for MARTA.

The Tucker-North DeKalb line continued to face community opposition into the 1980s and 1990s. During a public hearing concerning the line, numerous residents of the Rehoboth neighborhood near Northlake spoke in opposition (Easters 1980). Rather than back down and focus their attention elsewhere, perhaps in a more transit-

friendly area, proponents of this line instead began to devise ways that it could be implemented with a minimum of residential disruption.

Approaching the turn of the century, an amended version of the Tucker-North DeKalb branch was still being discussed and still eliciting vocal neighborhood opposition; however, this time advocates attempted to cut out one of the most vocal groups of opponents by

eliminating the section that would run through Druid Hills. In 1998, U.S. Representative Cynthia McKinney brokered a \$1.6 million grant to study the corridor, while Emory University also put \$80,000 towards this study (Torpy 1998). This iteration of the Tucker-North DeKalb line would have also included a link to South DeKalb Mall.

Following “immediate and fierce opposition” from Druid



Figure 17. “Concept C” would have implemented two separate spurs in order to avoid Druid Hills (Torpy 1998)

Hills residents, McKinney switched to advocating for a revised plan – dubbed “Concept C”, as shown in Figure 17 – that would include two separate heavy rail spurs, one connecting South DeKalb Mall to Edgewood-Candler Park station roughly following I-20 and the other connecting Lindbergh Center station to Northlake Mall (Torpy 1996). This, of course, would have eliminated the benefits of linking the CDC, the VA Hospital, and Emory University to the overall MARTA network as would have happened with the original Tucker-North DeKalb line, whether it was a busway or heavy rail. Ironically, “Concept C” simply evoked more outrage from different neighborhoods. As soon as the plan was announced, residents in Northlake, in Kirkwood, and along Cheshire Bridge started rallying and readying their opposition (Torpy 1996).

One of the most vocal opponents to a rail line in this area has been residents of Druid Hills. They have at their disposal a well-funded and well-connected neighborhood group that has the resources to fight any agenda that does not align with their community’s priorities. In 2000, the Druid Hills Civic Association (DHCA) had an annual budget of \$90,000 and cash reserves of up to \$200,000, with up to 700 members contributing dues (Smith 2000a). The DHCA President at the

time denied that DHCA was opposed to MARTA, stating that “the community supported light rail plans that steered clear of the neighborhood” (Smith 2000a). Unsurprisingly, this amounts to a “Not in My Backyard” sentiment. This is just one group that has used its wealth and influence to manipulate the outcome of transit planning. We will look at another example of this, this time in Decatur, below.

Efforts to implement this line have continued, with the area and associated transit proposals being rebranded as the “Clifton Corridor.” We will return to the Clifton Corridor and its ongoing prioritization later in this paper. The key actors here in north DeKalb County are affluent non-transit riders who are nevertheless being offered transit, despite their continued refusal, and who draw upon their means and the legal system to try and get their way.

Save Old Sycamore and the Sycamore Street Condos

In 1974, Don Mahaffey founded a neighborhood association in the Decatur Sycamore Street neighborhood, Save Old Sycamore (SOS), in response to the planned construction of MARTA’s eastern rail

line. The following year, SOS had successfully become eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places, delaying MARTA's progress as they completed a required state and federal review of alternate routes (Bailey 1975b). By 1976, SOS was deep in a legal battle with MARTA, attempting to halt construction of the Decatur rail station. The association filed suit against MARTA, alleging that the construction of the station was a departure from the plan approved in the 1971 referendum and that DeKalb County had disproportionate representation on the MARTA Board of Directors (Martin 1976). Ultimately the group was unsuccessful, the suit was decided in MARTA's favor, and construction of the Decatur station proceeded as planned.

However, the fact that MARTA spent \$1 million fighting this legal battle against SOS is indicative of



Figure 18. "MARTA paid for moving historic house at 719 Sycamore Street" (Henderson 1977)

the lengths that powerful, well-connected, and legally savvy neighborhood associations have gone to in order to combat MARTA expansion in their backyards. In addition to the \$1 million MARTA spent in court, they also paid for the relocation of two houses formerly on Sycamore Street and in the path of rail line construction (Henderson 1977). One of these houses can be seen in Figure 18.

Save Old Sycamore was not the end of MARTA's legal battles with residents of Sycamore Street. In 1980, 11 condo owners who lived on the street filed suit against MARTA, alleging that train vibrations posed an inconvenience to them (Hopkins 1981). The plaintiffs won restitution in the amount of \$35,000 each and a concession that trains would slow to 18 miles per hour when traveling between Decatur and Avondale stations. MARTA did attempt to obtain a noise and vibration easement, which would have allowed them to pay out restitution of a much smaller amount and continue operating trains at up to 55 miles, but this was thrown out by the Georgia Supreme Court (Hopkins 1981).



Figure 19. Atlanta Regional Commission. *East Line Decatur Station Area*. Georgia State University Library Digital Collections. Accessed February 28, 2021. <https://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/digital/collection/atlmaps/id/2785>

This is another example of the outsized impacts that these outspoken neighborhood groups, with resources at their disposal and the legal acumen to make use of them, can make in influencing the very course of thousands of strangers' days, as the

train journey factors in additional time at slower speeds simply to accommodate their choice to live in downtown Decatur. What we will look at next is predominantly black and lower-income south DeKalb, which lacks the kind of neighborhood-level clout that abounds in north DeKalb County. While residents in both areas pay the same penny sales tax, residents in the north are continuously offered rail, while residents in the south still haven't even gotten a busway.

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MAP 22
MARTA RAIL SYSTEM

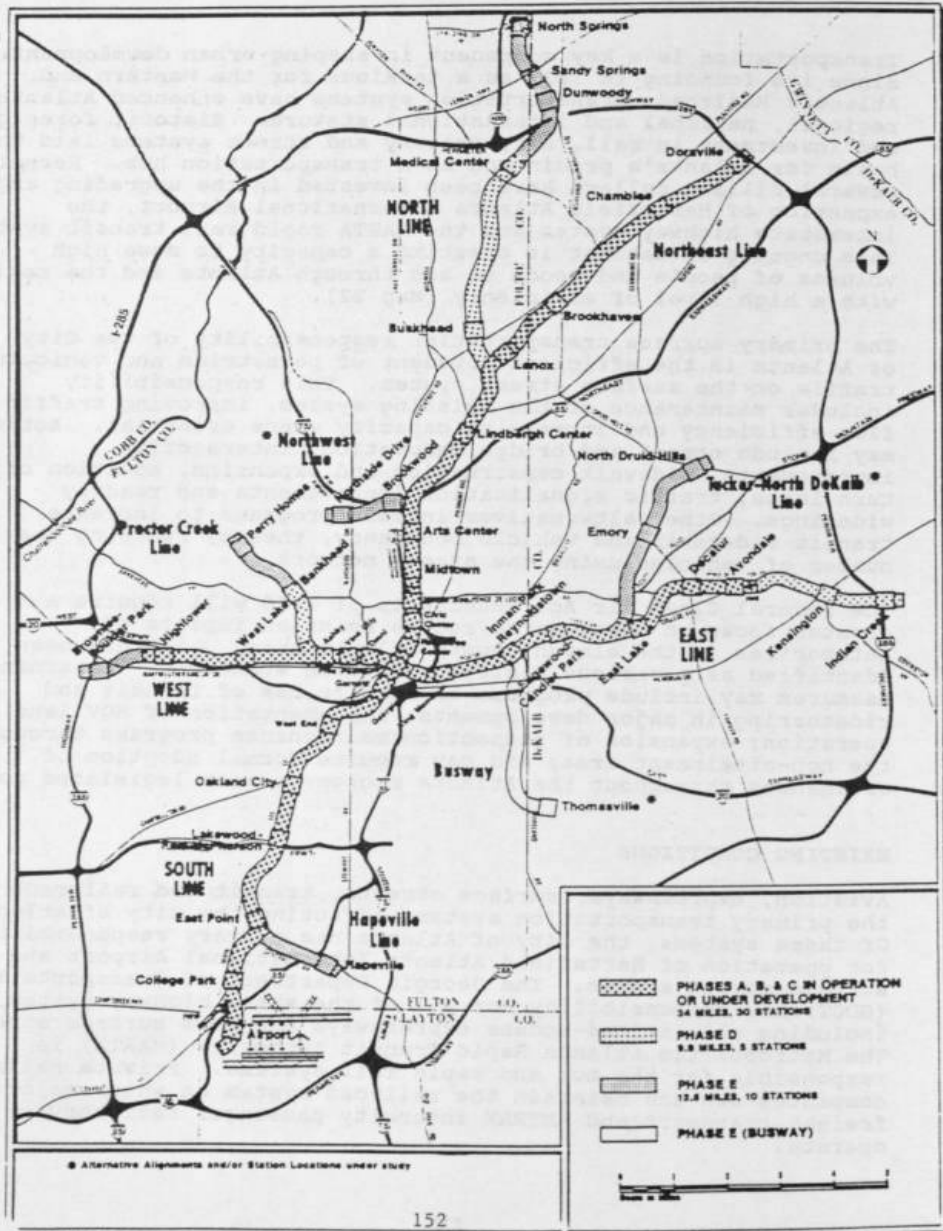


Figure 20. Almost 25 years later, the "North Atlanta Busway" is a fleshed-out rail line and the Tucker-North DeKalb Line remains a planned extension. The East Atlanta Busway remains relegated to "Phase E" (City of Atlanta, 1992)

SOUTH DEKALB

The East Atlanta Busway

The East Atlanta Busway, the only part of the original 1971 MARTA proposal to extend high-capacity service into south DeKalb, was a casualty of the “freeway revolts,” demonstrating another way in which neighborhood opposition has ultimately hamstrung transit in south DeKalb. The original plan for the East Atlanta Busway was a 3.3-mile route from Thomasville to what is now the Inman Park-Reynoldstown station off of Moreland Avenue, as can be seen in Figure 14. The busway was originally slated to run down the median strip of the East Atlanta tollroad, a proposed connection between the planned I-485 and the existing I-285, running near Moreland Avenue. Moreland Avenue, of course, runs along the Fulton-DeKalb County line. MARTA also envisioned a park-and-ride bus station at the southern terminus, to be called Thomasville Station (MARTA 1971).

It’s notable here that there were three busways proposed prior to 1978: the North Atlanta Busway, the Tucker-North DeKalb Busway, and the East Atlanta Busway. As previously discussed, the Tucker-

North DeKalb busway was approved to be converted to rail first, as Figure 14 shows, although it obviously was not built out. The North Atlanta Busway was also converted to rail, and this did get built out: it became the North Springs line, from Lindbergh Center to North Springs station. Yet, by 1992, the East Atlanta Busway remained an unimplemented busway, relegated to the lowest possible priority, as shown in Figure 20.

The defeat of I-485 put an end to the initial East Atlanta Busway plan. Participation in the “freeway revolts” did not always go hand in hand with support for mass transit, but in 1973, Dr. J. Michael Lane, who chaired the Atlanta Coalition on the Transportation Crisis (ACTC), suggested that MARTA ask for the \$80 million in federal funding for I-485 to be transferred to transit instead (Bailey 1973a). This was apparently possible under the 1973 Highway Act if the governor and the city requested the transfer. The Atlanta Board of Alderman did vote affirming their support for transferring the funds in December of 1973, pointing out that the highway was facing mass opposition and the money would no longer be on offer unless spent by July 1974 (Linthicum 1973).

However, then-Governor Jimmy Carter was a vocal proponent of I-485. He refused to transfer the funds, claiming that the Board of Alderman were not “qualified local officials” and demanding that the request come from the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) instead. Governor Carter’s stubbornness meant that this \$80 million in federal funding that could have aided MARTA in expanding ultimately went unused.

MARTA planned to study alternatives for the East Atlanta Busway in 1974, in the event that I-485 and the East Atlanta Tollway were not built as planned (Bailey 1973a). Indeed, as the prospect of I-485 grew more dismal, MARTA seemingly made arrangements for workarounds. At the time, the prospect of some sort of transit that was faster than regular bus routes seemed almost guaranteed: “The MARTA Board of Directors promised in 1971 that—if plans for the tollways were abandoned, thereby making rapid busways in their median strips impossible—the authority would provide some other form of ‘express transit’ in the corridors” (Bailey 1974a). MARTA fulfilled their promise when it came to the North Atlanta busway corridor. It was converted to heavy rail, built out entirely, and is now the North Springs line.

MARTA did not fulfill their promise to provide high-capacity transit in south DeKalb, and they still have not.

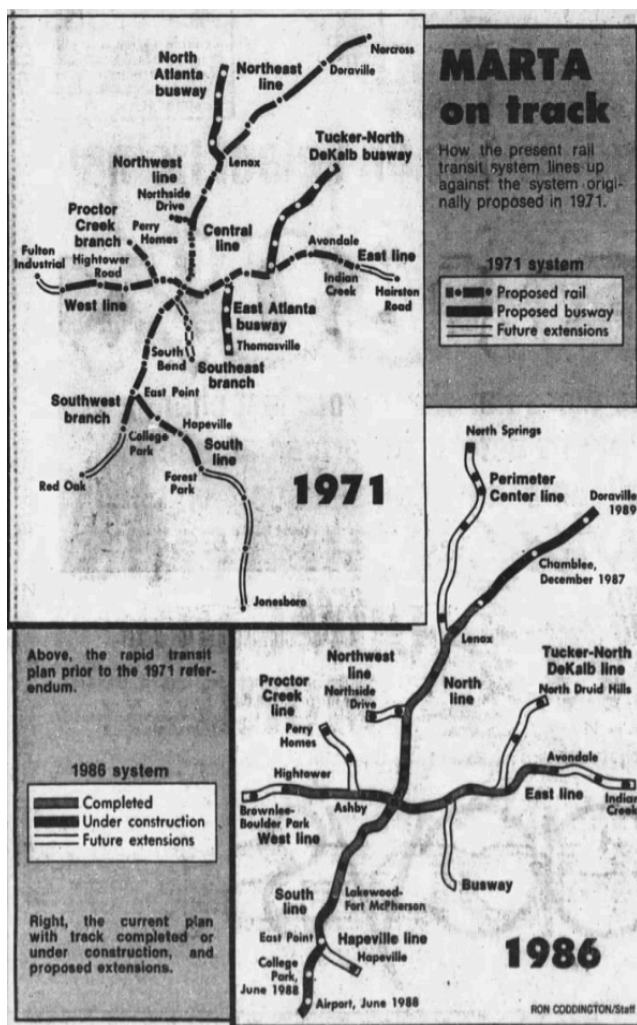


Figure 21. This AJC map from 1986 still includes the East Atlanta Busway (Harris 1986)

While placed on the backburner and no longer feasible as a bus rapid transit system along the tollway median, the East Atlanta Busway was still apparently in the works. A 1986 map of MARTA's plans from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution features the busway, as seen in Figure 21. At this point it seems essential to analyze the racial dynamics of MARTA's priorities. In 1987, three quarters of MARTA patrons were black (Schmidt

1987). It stands to reason that since black residents of metro Atlanta made up the vast majority of ridership, new investment in areas that

were majority black would likely garner consistent ridership on those new routes. As Figure 10 shows, south DeKalb was more than 80% non-white by 1990, including the area around Thomasville that would be served by the busway. Yet no new high-capacity investment materialized.

In 1998, while Druid Hills, Northlake, Kirkwood and Cheshire Bridge residents fought bitterly against the proposed “Concept C” version of the Tucker-North DeKalb rail line, residents of South DeKalb once again declared their open support for a rail line in their neighborhoods. Sarah Wood, director of the South DeKalb Community Development Corporation, pointed out that not only were people open to it, but the demand was also already there judging by bus ridership: “We feel we deserve a rail system in South DeKalb. There are more people riding buses in south DeKalb than anywhere else. Anything less puts us 20 years behind” (Torpy 1996). South DeKalb County was crying out for more transit service, and they continued to be ignored.

With the formation of the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA), there seemed to be a renewed promise of a rapid bus system serving south DeKalb. Gloria Gaines, then-vice president of

planning for MARTA, suggested a rapid bus system demonstration program using dedicated lanes on Candler Road, linking South DeKalb Mall to the Decatur rail station (Saporta 2000). Then-executive director of GRTA, Catherine Ross, voiced her approval for the move to dedicate lanes. MARTA took some preliminary steps in this direction, installing signal pre-emption technology along Candler Road, but the inability to dedicate lanes proved to be an insurmountable obstacle (Smith 2000b). While there have been some other attempts by MARTA to dip their toes in the water of providing more high-capacity transit in DeKalb County, like the failed Q bus rapid transit experiment on Memorial Drive, there has been no substantive and sustained investment in this realm.

I-20 Rail

A proposed transit expansion that has gained some momentum and support over the last two decades is heavy rail extending the existing eastern line along I-20 to Stonecrest Mall. In 2002, MARTA undertook a multi-year study on the feasibility of this line in response

to demands from DeKalb County officials (Gentry 2002). The concession that general manager Nathan P. Ford Sr. offered at the time was more bus rapid transit in the interim – which certainly has not been fulfilled, despite the existing strong bus ridership in the area that would support implementing such infrastructure.

In stark contrast to the vehement opposition surrounding the Tucker-North DeKalb/Clifton Corridor extension, the I-20 rail extension enjoys popular support from consistently transit-friendly south DeKalb. In 2002, MARTA held public hearings to ask residents how they felt transit service along I-20 could be improved. The result was an “overwhelming response from Lithonia residents and many who live in south DeKalb County... to extend the MARTA rail line from the Indian Creek station to the Mall at Stonecrest” (Stirgus 2002). The demand is there, although the funds are not. Funding that exceeds the existing penny sales tax must be secured to enable any new expansions of the MARTA system in DeKalb County. As the next section will explore, voters have been offered the Clifton Corridor in exchange for more funding – and they turned it down. It remains to be seen if a commitment towards I-20 rail might mobilize voters towards more funding, as this has not been offered.

LINGERING DISTRUST

"We're saying you have screwed us for years, and we've paid all this money and you won't even give us this rail line to Stonecrest Mall."

– John Evans, NAACP

The new millennium has seen a growing sense of dissatisfaction with MARTA in DeKalb County and has largely been marked by refusals to invest anything further beyond the penny sales tax. In 2000, commissioners from DeKalb County refused an extension of the half-cent sales tax to fund future MARTA construction past 2032, although the sales tax for operations remained in place. There was speculation at the time that this refusal was motivated by a retaliatory impulse stemming from the fact that the long-discussed rail extension along I-20 had still not moved past the study stage (Spink 2000). This marked the first point in MARTA's history where no expansions were currently underway.

In 2006, MARTA requested an extension of the cent sales tax funding operations past 2032, at which point it would have dropped to

a half-cent without renewal. The MARTA Board of Directors proposed that the three governments approve a contract with the understanding that the funding would be spent on three projects, including an I-20 bus rapid transit line between downtown Atlanta and Candler Road, the “first leg of the BeltLine transit loop,” and a bus rapid transit line in West Fulton (Donsky 2006). The DeKalb County Commission voted to approve this extension, as did City of Atlanta (Saporta 2007). Interestingly, in this case, the decision did not need to be put before voters.

THE TRANSPORTATION INVESTMENT ACT OF 2010

The Georgia State Legislature took a new approach to transit funding in 2010 with the passing of the Transportation Investment Act. The act divided Georgia into twelve “special districts” for transportation planning purposes and enabled project funding through a one-percent sales tax over a ten-year period, to be approved by voters on a district-by-district basis (House Bill 277). The legislation also made some changes to the structure of the MARTA Board of Directors, most notably, for our purposes, imposing that

Four members shall be residents of DeKalb County to be appointed by the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners and at least one of such appointees shall be a resident of that portion of DeKalb County lying south of the southernmost corporate boundaries of the City of Decatur and at least one of such appointees shall be a resident of that portion of DeKalb County lying north of the southernmost corporate boundaries of the City of Decatur (HB277).

The inclusion of this stipulation points to the fact that striking a balance between the needs of north and south DeKalb County had not necessarily been prioritized thus far. As we shall see, this disequilibrium was not put to rest by this requirement.

The Transportation Investment Act allocated responsibility for coming up with a project list to district officials and enabled the option of funding those projects with a T-SPLOST. In metro Atlanta, the decision-making body was dubbed the “regional roundtable,” and it consisted of mayors and county commissioners, who began assembling to decide upon the project list for the ten-county metro area (Hatfield 2013). By late 2011, the \$6.14 billion project list was complete, and a referendum was put on the ballot for July of 2012 in each of the ten counties, which we will examine shortly.

One of the major sources of controversy surrounding the 2010 Transportation Investment Act in DeKalb County was a sense that

legislators were disregarding the fact that Fulton and DeKalb had already been funding transit through the MARTA sales tax, as instituted by the 1971 referendum. In response, DeKalb commissioners proposed a counter-referendum of sorts that would have DeKalb voters rescind the DeKalb tax if the 10-county tax were imposed (Matteucci 2010). With the failure of the 2012 transit referendum, this counter-referendum was not necessarily, but it speaks to the growing sentiment in DeKalb County that the county has been paying more than its fair share for decades and receiving very little in return.

THE 2012 REFERENDUM

In July 2012, a referendum to put \$8.5 billion towards transportation investments was put before voters in the ten-county Atlanta metropolitan area, of which 52% was allocated to transit projects (Paget-Seekins 2013a). This would have constituted the largest investment in transit in the region since the 1971 MARTA referendum. The initiative did not pass in any of the ten counties, including DeKalb, despite a higher than usual voter turnout; however,

it did pass in the City of Atlanta. Laurel Paget-Seekins sees this failure as the result of a three-way split between competing discourses about how to solve Atlanta's transit issues: the congestion discourse, the choice discourse, and the equity discourse. The congestion discourse posits that transportation in Atlanta can be improved by roadway projects and increased capacity. The choice discourse is more of a new urbanist take, suggesting transit-oriented development, more rail, higher density, and bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure. The equity discourse zeroes in on the "history of unequal development and racialized decision making" (Paget-Seekins 2013a).

The equity discourse, of course, serves as the undergirding argument for this paper: transit project funding in DeKalb and Fulton counties has continually prioritized wealthier white patrons and business interests. The 2012 referendum is a particular encapsulation of how this has fostered skepticism that these priorities will ever change. Paget-Seekins points out that the state chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) vocally opposed the referendum. The NAACP stated at the time that the transit proposed in the referendum did not benefit low-income residents or people of color: "The association was upset that the

transit projects were skewed towards the northern half of the region and that the southern side of DeKalb County, which has been paying the MARTA sales tax for 40 years, only got new rapid bus service and not a rail extension” (Paget-Seekins 2013a).

To understand the objection of the NAACP to the referendum, let’s turn to looking at the project list included in the referendum using the historical context previously detailed in this paper. The referendum would have allocated \$600 million for BeltLine-related transit projects, \$695 million for “premium transit service” in northwest Atlanta, and, most notably, \$700 million for the Clifton Corridor (Jaffe 2011).

Despite four decades, at this point, of attempting to implement this transit link through Emory University – formerly known as the Tucker-North DeKalb line, now rebranded as the Clifton Corridor – and facing vocal opposition every step of the way, MARTA and other regional transit voices were still attempting to fund this project and place it as a top priority. Meanwhile, south DeKalb was given approximately a third of this amount, and for buses only, which was the major source of contention for the NAACP: “Most of all, [the NAACP] took exception to the roundtable’s decision to provide only \$225 million for transit to South DeKalb – enough for buses, but not rail” (Hatfield 2013). While

it's debatable that rail would be a preferable investment in comparison to expanded bus service at this point, the pertinent takeaway here is that north DeKalb *was* being offered rail, yet again, while south DeKalb was offered the pittance of more buses, after four decades of zero progress being made on the original bus rapid transit proposal from the 1971 referendum, the East Atlanta Busway.

This disparity so frustrated NAACP branch leader John Evans that he exclaimed, "We're saying you have screwed us for years, and we've paid all this money and you won't even give us this rail line to Stonecrest Mall" (Hatfield 2013). Evans' comment reflects a very justified frustration given that metro Atlanta leadership and MARTA continually prioritize projects like the Tucker-North DeKalb line/Clifton Corridor that have been opposed time and time again by residents and at this point have cost millions of dollars in studies and preliminary work. Meanwhile, south DeKalb has been paying their share of the sales tax for the last half-century and affirming their desire for more transit, and not even the promised rapid bus line on Moreland Avenue, much less heavy rail in the I-20 corridor, has actually been implemented. As Paget-Seekins concludes, "addressing the long-standing tensions about race and the inequity felt by voters in Fulton

and DeKalb counties who have been paying the MARTA sales tax for 40 years is probably necessary before another tax can pass” (Paget-Seekins 2013a). As we shall see in the following sections, recent transit planning has not sought to address those tensions.

As recently as 2019, DeKalb County CEO Michael Thurmond pointed to a general distrust of MARTA’s ability to follow through on its plans as a reason for the failure of the Gwinnett County transit referendum, citing similar distrust among black DeKalb County residents: “Thurmond... said that distrust isn’t limited to conservative white residents in Gwinnett. He said African Americans in south DeKalb and elsewhere also are skeptical” (Wickert and Estep 2019). Given the history of an utter lack of investment in south DeKalb, despite promises made from the very first MARTA plan, and the attention that has been lavished on the Clifton Corridor, this skepticism seems justified. Indeed, DeKalb County is at a virtual standstill in regard to its transit future. As the DeKalb County Transit Master Plan points out, the last two decades of planning for capital investment in high-capacity transit has not led to any major investments in DeKalb County” (DeKalb County 2019). The following section will look at what has been proposed over the last two years to rectify this situation.

A NEW DAY?

THE DEKALB COUNTY TRANSIT MASTER PLAN

In 2019, DeKalb County published a transit master plan after roughly a year of multiple public engagement meetings, charting a 30-year outlook for the county's transit needs and areas of focus. The report was completed in collaboration with the Atlanta Regional Commission. The plan consists of four funding scenarios: continuing with the existing penny sales tax; the existing tax and an additional half-penny tax; the existing tax and an additional full penny tax; and finally, the existing tax and some as yet unidentified funding source which could generate enough revenue for full capital investment (DeKalb County 2019). Projects identified consisted of heavy rail extensions, light rail, bus rapid transit, and arterial rapid transit. Heavy rail extension of the eastern line along I-20 is included in the plan, but only as part of the fantasy fourth scenario.

My analysis here is limited to the first and second scenarios since they are closest to being able to be feasibly implemented and will

demonstrate priorities for what could realistically happen over the next three decades. The first scenario, which is essentially proceeding under current conditions, does not include any expansion projects, although it does suggest the possibility of “mobility centers” at South DeKalb Mall, Stonecrest, Tucker, and Northlake Mall. The second scenario – this would rely on an additional half-penny sales tax being passed in DeKalb County – includes one light rail project, five bus rapid transit projects, and nine arterial rapid transit projects. Unsurprisingly, the light rail project is a small segment of the Clifton Corridor, slated to be

built out between Emory and the intersection of Clairmont and North Decatur Roads at a projected capital outlay of \$108 million (DeKalb County 2019).

The segment in question would



Figure 23. Segment 1b of the Clifton Corridor (DeKalb County 2019)

not connect to any existing MARTA heavy rail stations. The map in Figure 23 suggests that it will possibly connect with an ART route in the same area. The lack of connectivity and conflicting descriptions of what the full light rail line would consist of (the full line in the fantasy fourth scenario is described as connected to Avondale station, but the map in Figure 23 shows it connecting to Lindbergh Center station)

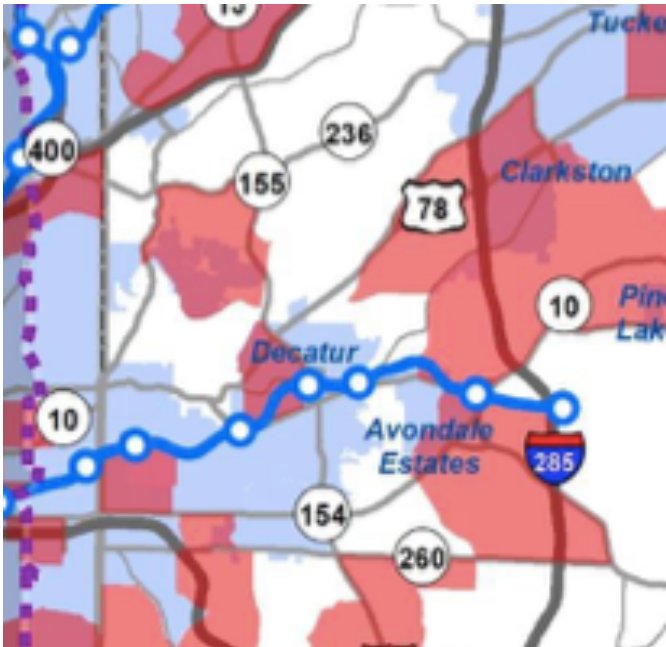


Figure 24. Equitable Target Areas in part of DeKalb County (DeKalb County 2019)

force one to ask: whom exactly is this for? Rail transit in this area has been rejected by local residents for decades. The area that the segment would be built in falls outside the Equitable Target Areas (ETAs) that are supposed to be used as a guideline for where to

focus transit investment, as shown in Figure 24. So why is this a part of a scenario that might be within reach? Why is it the flagship high-capacity investment of the next thirty years? Why, after DeKalb

County voters rejected funding that would have prioritized this corridor in 2012, would it be included in a scenario that hinged on voters approving more funding? It is truly disheartening to see this area once again prioritized with a complete disregard for the history of proposed expansions at the expense of concentrating on residents that really do need – and *want* – transit.

THE DEKALB NEW DAY PARTNERSHIP

The MARTA & DeKalb County New Day Partnership was forged in the flames of MARTA’s attempts to get DeKalb County to sign on to extend the full penny sales tax to run through 2057 instead of dropping to a half-penny in 2047. DeKalb County was the last county to approve the extension, citing MARTA’s history of broken promises and making the approval contingent on “new transit centers at South DeKalb Mall and in Stonecrest; faster bus service in the Buford Highway and Candler Road corridors; and continued support of transit-oriented developments” (Estep 2020). The New Day Partnership proceeds from the priorities identified in the “business as usual” first

scenario of the DeKalb County Transit Master Plan. Mercifully, that means that the Clifton Corridor is not included.

The partnership was unveiled just a month shy of the global shutdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, so it is unclear how much will actually materialize due to the economic fallout from the pandemic. Still, the plan envisions four bus-to-bus transit centers with multimodal first- and last-mile options built in, presumably at South DeKalb Mall, Stonecrest, Tucker, and Northlake Mall, although this is not explicitly spelled out in the plan (DeKalb County and MARTA 2020). The plan also includes bus shelter improvements throughout the county. The future seemed bright for improvements to DeKalb County bus routes, but the pandemic has cast somewhat of a dark shadow over the future of transit throughout the nation.

COVID-19 AND REDUCED BUS SERVICE

Following the 2008 recession, MARTA made cuts to their service because of a lack of revenue, including the shuttle bus to Turner Field, when the Atlanta Braves were still playing games there. The shuttle

bus service was restored after an outcry from the mayor and the business community at large, whereas cuts to regular bus lines serving MARTA's primarily black and low-income bus ridership remained (Paget-Seekins 2013b). Bus operations are less expensive than rail, and buses are more likely to be taken by "transit-dependent" riders rather than "choice" riders, and yet buses are frequently first on the chopping block when austerity knocks, unless they are granted clemency by interventions from the wealthy and powerful, like in the case of the Braves shuttle. This is an equity issue.

In looking at service cuts in the midst of the 2008 recession, Jaclyn Kirouac-Fram puzzles over two seeming paradoxes: why bus service would be cut when bus ridership had skyrocketed and buses were serving the interests of capital in transporting low-wage workers to their jobs. She concludes that these service cuts were "legitimized" by "a persistent association between the urban bus and racial others" (2012). She also looks at cuts in Atlanta specifically. In 2010, MARTA discontinued almost a third of its bus routes along with close to 3000 bus stops (Kirouac-Fram 2012). With 73% of MARTA ridership being black, this disproportionately impacted black Atlantans.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit in March of 2020, MARTA immediately significantly reduced its bus service offerings, removing many lines entirely. 70 of 110 bus routes, equating to 64% of routes, were suspended (Wickert 2020). MARTA attributed the cuts to an attempt to encourage social distancing, which makes very little sense considering ridership would either be consolidated on to remaining routes or simply be stranded entirely. A group of protesters that gathered outside MARTA headquarters in October of last year demanding the reopening of routes pointed out the obvious: that these cuts have “disproportionately affected minorities and the poor” (Wickert 2020). Certainly, MARTA has the right to alter service in response to a global pandemic. However, following on from Kirouac-Fram’s notion that the bus is stigmatized and racialized, one has to wonder if bus service bore the brunt of this austerity because of an assumption that bus ridership has little power or leverage to resist the cuts. MARTA is finally set to restore all routes by mid-April of this year (Nobles 2021). While this is certainly an auspicious development, who can measure how many lives have been impacted by having their one reliable link to access jobs and services suddenly be severed and remaining absent throughout the intervening year?

RECOMMENDATIONS

The events of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as shifting federal priorities following a change in presidential leadership have made it difficult to predict how the transit landscape may change in the next several years. While ridership has been heavily impacted by public response to the pandemic, the Biden administration has proposed legislation that would fund transit investments at a level heretofore unseen in this century. The American Jobs Plan would put \$85 billion directly towards public transit investment over the next eight years (Wanek-Libman 2021), which makes the possibility of MARTA service improvements very real. With these factors in mind, and drawing upon important lessons from the fifty years of history covered in this paper, I propose the following four key recommendations to guide transit investment in DeKalb County over the next few decades.

- **Follow through on existing promises.** There have been numerous statements made concerning better bus service in South DeKalb, especially over the last two decades. Efforts to actually implement better bus service seem to be hamstrung by overly

ambitious proposals for bus rapid transit or arterial rapid transit which are simply not feasible with the current state of metro Atlanta's road infrastructure. However, faster headways on heavily used routes, even if only at peak hours, would impact a lot of residents by shortening their wait time for the bus without presenting an insurmountable cost burden. Similarly, since DeKalb does have the funding and the agreement in place with MARTA to build bus transfer centers that will make the bus-to-bus experience a lot more enjoyable, these hubs and other bus stop improvements should be pursued as soon as possible.

- **Center racial equity.** President Biden's American Jobs Plan includes funding and prioritization of "equitable transit infrastructures" and aims to "make historic investments in addressing racial segregation caused by decades of failed infrastructure projects" (Major 2021). Transit planning at the local level should incorporate these aims. While concentrating future investments in Equitable Target Areas is one good first step towards providing equitable transit, it is also important to look at connecting these areas with employment centers. Another way to center equity

is to prioritize decisions that will benefit “transit-dependent” riders rather than “choice” riders.

- **Prioritize interconnectivity in route planning.** One of the most effective aspects of the MARTA bus and rail system is the way that bus routes act as feeders to rail stations, enabling residents who do not live near the rail lines to access them nonetheless. Future investment decisions should build upon, not detract from, this interconnected structure. Faster headways for buses and strategic schedule planning will facilitate smoother transfers to and from the rail system. Investments that do not connect to the existing rail system, such as the proposed small segment of the Clifton Corridor that is included in the DeKalb Transit Master Plan second scenario, should not be pursued.
- **Formalize representation of South DeKalb residents.** DeKalb County has representatives on the MARTA Board of Directors, but these representatives are appointees of the County Commission and do not necessarily represent the interests of DeKalb’s neighborhoods and communities. There were public engagement

events as part of the planning process for the DeKalb County Transit Master Plan, but these were discrete events and necessitated that attendees had the time and ability to participate in them. DeKalb County could follow Clayton County's lead and create a citizen advisory board that would meet regularly and discuss the necessary improvements and changes to be made to better transportation in the county.

CONCLUSION

In order to redress historic inequities, one must have a thorough understanding of the details of that history. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how transit investment in a single county has been inequitably prioritized, whether those projects came to fruition or not. Discourse around transit expansion in DeKalb County has been centered around investment in north DeKalb for the last several decades, completely ignoring the fact that it is made infeasible by the resistance of the residents in this area. Meanwhile, south DeKalb residents have asked for more transit repeatedly, but the approach from decision-makers has been to fob them off with promises of better buses, while failing to actually follow through on these bare minimum promises. I claim that the way these discourses and decisions have unfolded is inextricable from the fact that north DeKalb tends to be wealthier and whiter and south DeKalb tends to be poorer and more black.

Let's return briefly to the genesis of MARTA. MARTA had to explicitly court the black community and adjust its priorities in order to

win the support that enabled the system in the 1971 referendum. The MARTA system in DeKalb County, as it stands, does not have sufficient funding for any kind of expansion (although this may change based on the fate of the American Jobs Plan). Actual expansion will require more funding, and more funding will require voter support and enthusiasm.

The Clifton Corridor has been offered up as an expansion time and time again and it has only succeeded in stoking the flames of resistance in the areas it would serve and fanning the flames of resentment in underprioritized south DeKalb County. I posit that any proposal involving transit in DeKalb County needs to acknowledge the history of broken promises and wasted money and actually commit to giving residents of south DeKalb the transit that they have been paying for over the last half century. Prioritizing south DeKalb would not only be a step in the right direction in terms of righting the inequity in investment, but it would also ensure that ridership is expanded to serve more of the same people who have made up the majority of MARTA's ridership all along: the black working class.

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