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BeltLine head speaks to Buckhead Business Association

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Brian Leary



The Atlanta BeltLine is not expected to be complete for 10 more years, but Brian Leary has full confidence in the \$2.8 billion project, despite the current economy.

"By the way, it's not an 'if' but a 'when and where,'" Leary, president and CEO of Atlanta BeltLine Inc., the organization behind the development, told the Buckhead Business Association at its breakfast meeting Thursday at City Club of Buckhead.

The BeltLine is a 22-mile ring of old and abandoned railroads around the city, about halfway between downtown Atlanta and Interstate 285. Linking 45 neighborhoods, it's a mix of mass transit (either streetcars or light rail) and pedestrian/bicycle trails, with only its northern tip coming into south Buckhead.

The project is funded by a tax allocation district, in which a portion of property taxes collected in the BeltLine area's 6,500 acres will provide \$1.7 billion over the TAD's 25 years, ending in 2031. An additional \$60 million will come from the public-private BeltLine Partnership's capital campaign, and half of those funds have already been raised, Leary said. The city of Atlanta has invested \$165 million in the project, and the remaining funds are expected to come from the federal government.

According to its website, the BeltLine is expected to generate \$20 billion in new economic development (housing, retail and office space, restaurants and parks) during the TAD's existence. It will connect with up to five current MARTA stations and could interact with future mass transit systems, such as the proposed Peachtree Streetcar project.

"It's really about raising the quality of life here in Atlanta," said Leary, the former vice president of Atlantic Station who took the BeltLine job in September. "As the Southeast's capital, [Atlanta's] quality of life continues to be a big issue, especially with competition from other cities like Nashville and Charlotte. We've grown so fast we've leapt over our infrastructure."

Leary, a Buckhead resident, pointed to the progress that has been made in a short time, including the completion of some pedestrian trails. The Northside Trail in Buckhead opened in April and connects Tanyard Creek, Louise G. Howard and Atlanta Memorial parks. Atlanta Memorial Park includes Bobby Jones Golf Course.

According to BeltLine data, the project will create 1,300 new acres of parkland (a 40 percent increase), 33 new miles of trails, 20 areas and 30,000 jobs and 5,000 housing units and will have public art (which is now on display) and an environmental cleanup of 1,100 acres. The BeltLine has a jobs training program that graduated 30 people in March, Leary said, adding all of them got job offers.

During a question-and-answer session after Leary's speech, association member Mark Shaver asked him if the BeltLine has qualified for federal stimulus funds.

"Yes," Leary said, adding the project is applying for the money but has not yet received any. "What we're doing for our transportation and mobility standpoint, nothing like this has been done in the country."

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