

Assessment of the Planning and Decisionmaking Process

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Atlanta has taken important steps toward creating an effective institutional structure for regional transportation planning. 19 The tradition of control by a business elite has given way to a more responsive approach to government. A regional planning agency has been given the means to coordinate all modes of transportation planning with regional comprehensive planning. Local jurisdictions are plugged into transportation/land use planning through studies of the development impact of future transit stations. A special institution in the legislature allows Atlanta State transit planning to be monitored from a statewide perspective. The most important shortcoming in Atlanta's institutional arrangement is that the modal agencies (MARTA and GDOT) negotiate decisions primarily within the forum of the transportation subcommittee of the regional planning agency, out of the public view.

Forum for Decisionmaking

The adequacy of the decisionmaking forum has improved significantly over the 15-year period of transit planning in Atlanta. In the beginning, transit decisionmaking took place outside official channels because there were none. Since then a comparatively well-integrated regional forum has been created. Rivalry between modal agencies has diminished considerably in recent years. Perhaps most importantly, transit planning in Atlanta is still distinguished by the relatively close relationship between regional comprehensive planning and transportation planning.

In the early 1960's Georgia State law forbade any local or regional public agency to finance transit studies without an enabling amendment to the State constitution. (The transit plan produced by the Atlanta Region Metropolitan Planning Com-

mission was authorized because it was an element of the regional comprehensive plan. 20) The stage was thus set in the beginning for private sector organizations to dominate the planning process.

After local officials, their supporters from downtown Atlanta civic "groups, and the Atlanta Regional Metropolitan Planning Commission decided to pursue transit seriously, the decision-making forum for several years was fragmented between the State legislature, ARMPC, and the civic leaders. The Metropolitan Atlanta Transit Study Commission reported to the legislature but turned over technical responsibilities to ARMPC. A number of special organizations were created to bring together the public and private leaders who were taking an active interest in transit.

The establishment of MARTA was an important step toward informed regional decisionmaking. Technical planning functions were still handled by ARMPC, but MARTA's board of representatives from jurisdictions in the region had final say on policy. The agency could receive and dispense funds, although it was not empowered with taxing authority or the right of eminent domain.

MARTA provided a transit decisionmaking forum, but an effective comprehensive transportation planning institution still was lacking. The Atlanta Area Transportation Study (AATS) was created in 1965 to take responsibility for coordinating the transportation planning in the region, but it concentrated on highway work. Its funds came from the State Highway Department (SHD). After MARTA came on the scene, the AATS Policy Committee was reconstituted to include MARTA as well as representatives from regional jurisdictions, SHD, and ARMPC. The Policy Committee's mission to improve cooperation and coordination among the organizations responsible for transportation planning, however, was only partially successful.

19 Frank C. Colcord, Jr, and Steven M. Polan have published a careful analysis of Atlanta's institutional arrangements for transportation planning in *Urban Transportation Decisionmaking: Atlanta Case Study*, U.S. Department of Transportation, September 1974.

20 *Atlanta Region Comprehensive Plan: Rapid Transit, Atlanta Region Metropolitan Planning Commission, June 1961.*

21 Joint Steering Committee, 1961; Committee of 100, 1962.

SHD and MARTA continued to make decisions outside the new forum. For example, in 1968 MARTA decided to test the transit proposal at the polls before the Policy Committee's review (the Voorhees study) of regional transportation planning was complete. ARMPC lacked the stature to assume its logical role as arbiter in such matters. ARMPC was run by appointed businessmen, had no regional budget, and never attained credibility as a power to be reckoned with,

The new regional organization created by the General Assembly in 1971 was designed to provide a truly multimodal forum for transportation policymaking. The Atlanta Regional Commission is designated the 3-C organization and the A-95 review agency in the region.²² To date ARC has functioned fairly well as a comprehensive regional planning body with responsibility for transportation.

Nevertheless, critics have noted ARC's shortcomings. First, there is considerable competition within ARC for the power to make transportation decisions. The procedure for shaping transportation policy was established in a tripartite (MARTA, GDOT, ARC) agreement at the time the AATS was terminated and ARC established. The process, called the Atlanta Region Transportation Planning Program (ARTPP), was recently amended to include Atlanta's mayor and the commission chairmen of the seven ARC counties. Its embodiment is the Transportation Policy Subcommittee (TPS) of ARC. In theory all policy decisions are made in this subcommittee and subjected to review by the Community Development Planning Liaison Committee, one of the three subject area committees to which ARC board members are assigned.²³ Members of the transportation subgroup of the Community Development Planning Citizen Advisory Council also review TPS recommendations. The ARC Board of Commissioners gives a final review and is designated to arbitrate when the recommendations of the subgroups disagree.

In practice the TPS, not ARC, has provided the forum for most policymaking. Disagreements are usually worked out in TPS rather than at the ARC board level. The Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) Action Plan lends legitimacy to this practice by stating that TPS has ultimate decision-making authority.

²² See footnotes 3, 4 p. 8.

²³ The others are Health and Social Services planning Liaison Committee and Governmental Services Liaison Committee.

ARC's board reviews the annual transportation work program and sets priorities among its elements. To date MARTA and GDOT have not strictly followed the priorities ARC had set. One reason ARC does not dominate may be that it still has not published its updated regional development guide. (The plan was due in summer 1975.) The guide is expected to provide a rationale for priority ordering and, once priorities are drawn up, a logic for enforcing them.

Another more important explanation for ARC's back-seat role is the tradition of mutual backscratching that is well established in Atlanta transportation politics. MARTA usually has supported GDOT'S (and predecessor SDH'S) highway initiatives, just as the highway organizations have stood behind transit. No dispute between the two modal agencies has surfaced as a major public issue, in spite of internal policy and technical disputes over the years. ARC usually goes along with both MARTA and GDOT, and neither of the latter agencies tends to welcome ARC suggestions for change when they do come.

In practice, the ARC-ARTPP process has operated smoothly. The ARC agency is legislatively mandated, financed by regional levy, and is generally a more credible institution than its predecessor. Although modal biases have shown up in decisionmaking from time to time, the structure offers the distinct advantage of bringing transportation decisionmaking under the same roof as land use planning. ARC has taken the lead in development planning around future rail transit stations. Theoretically, the ARC board will begin measuring transportation proposals against land use goals as soon as the regional development guide is completed. The most significant—and potentially debilitating—limit to ARC's power to control land use development is its lack of authority to review local zoning regulations.

Accountability of Decisionmakers

Over the years the individuals responsible for transit decisionmaking in Atlanta have become more directly accountable for their actions. Few of the early transit decisionmakers in Atlanta officially represented the region's citizens. The situation began to change in the 1960's, and since 1971 the institutional structure has involved decision makers whose authority to make decisions on behalf of a particular group of citizens is comparatively clearly designated,

Nevertheless, two major issues involving accountability are inherent in Atlanta's institutional framework for transit decisionmaking. First, although decision making bodies are structured to encourage a regional point of view, individuals tend to represent the narrower political interests of the constituent jurisdictions. Second, because many decisions are negotiated in the Transportation Policy Subcommittee of the ARC, the process tends to be removed from the public view.

The business and civic leaders who led the drive for transit during the early 1960's were not directly accountable for their decisions. They were acting as private citizens. The Rapid Transit Steering Committee, whose members were officials of the area's political subdivisions, was the first organization to operate with clearly delegated authority and a degree of accountability. Members of the Metropolitan Atlanta Transit Study Commission also bore a clearly described responsibility to the public by virtue of their appointment by local officials. Members of the ARMPC board were appointed businessmen; the ARMPC staff provided most of that agency's transit leadership.

Fair representation has been an issue in Atlanta transit planning since the beginning. Debate most often has focused on the appropriate composition of the regional transit authority. MARTA's ten board members are appointed by local officials. Office holders were ruled ineligible in order to minimize the influence of local politics on decision-making. Nevertheless, each member comes from and is associated with a particular county or the city of Atlanta. The State legislature, through the MARTA Overview Committee (MARTOC), is currently giving consideration to the advantages and disadvantages of a directly elected board, but no action is expected to be taken in the near term. MARTOC is behind a movement to increase the representation from De Kalb County on MARTA's board. At present six board members represent the city of Atlanta's interest—the four members appointed by the Mayor plus the two from Fulton County. De Kalb County accounts for 40 percent of MARTA's sales tax revenues but is represented by only two board members. Options that have been suggested for changing the balance include adding new De Kalb representatives to the board and replacing the existing delegates from Clayton and Gwinnett Counties with De Kalb representatives. Clayton and Gwinnett citizens voted against financing the MARTA rail system in the 1971 referendum and therefore do not participate in the

transit improvement program; yet they retain voting representation on the MARTA board. The State legislature approved a compromise measure during the 1975 session to add one more De Kalb representative to the board. The bill was vetoed by the Governor on a technicality, but MARTOC expects the issue to arise again in 1976.

MARTOC itself adds a degree of accountability to the transit planning process in Atlanta. It is a joint committee of State senators and representatives with a staff. In theory, MARTOC functions more as a watchdog for the public interest than as a body of officials directly accountable to Atlanta citizens. The enabling legislation requires only 4 of the 14 voting legislators that sit on MARTOC to be from the area of MARTA jurisdiction. However, all 11 of the appointed committee members were chosen from among Atlanta area legislators due to political considerations.

MARTOC has exercised its ombudsman function in several ways. As noted, MARTOC is concerned with the accountability of the MARTA board. MARTOC also is monitoring the degree to which MARTA follows the advice of its consultants rather than its staff. MARTOC wants to keep the reins tight on PB-T-B to prevent further cost overruns and other difficulties. MARTOC'S concern has increased since the turnover in the MARTA board in November 1974. The old board tended to follow staff recommendations. The new board hopes to take a more active role in order to increase its responsiveness to the public. In early 1975 the board voted to side with PB-T-B against the MARTA staff on the critical issue of the automated train control system. The staff recommended semiautomation that could be upgraded to full automation when a large enough portion of the system was on line to justify the considerable extra cost. PB-T-B, developers of the control system, argued for full automation from the beginning. Although the board went on record in favor of the PB-T-B system, the recent decision to build a 13.7-mile trunk system instead of 26 miles inspired a change of heart. In June 1975 the board reversed itself and approved a semiautomated system for the initial rail segment.

²⁴ The Governor appoints six members, the president of the senate appoints three, and the speaker of the house appoints two members; the remaining three members are chairmen of three committees. The lieutenant governor and the speaker of the house are ex officio members of MARTOC.

The structure of the ARC also gives rise to important accountability issues. The fact that most disagreements are worked out in the Transportation Policy Subcommittee of the ARC means that many important policy decisions take place behind the scenes. In addition, the fact that all members of the ARC's board of commissioners are either county and city officials or private citizens appointed by the elected officials jeopardizes the ARC's goal of offering a regional perspective. For in practice many of the board members bear allegiance to the jurisdictions that appoint them rather than to the regions as a whole. Therefore, to the extent that the transit policy is shaped in the ARC Transportation Policy Subcommittee, it is the product of decisionmakers with local and mode-oriented interests.

Public Involvement

The effectiveness of citizen participation has figured as a prominent issue in Atlanta transit planning since the preparations for the 1968 referendum. MARTA's failure to bring the public into the decisionmaking process except in a perfunctory way was cited as a major reason for the defeat of the transit issue in 1968. Conversely, much of the credit for the 1971 success was attributed to MARTA's vigorous community relations campaign. Since 1971, however, a number of citizen groups have been expressing dissatisfaction with aspects of the MARTA program for public participation.

The dominating role of civic leaders in pre-1970 Atlanta transit planning does not imply involvement of the general public. To the contrary, most of the protransit interests were businessmen with a concern for upgrading Atlanta's business district. They were not transit consumers. ²⁵

Planners waited until 1968 to initiate a formal process of citizen involvement. Even then there was no vehicle for citizen input provided by the ARMPC. MARTA had begun an informal public information and education program shortly after the agency was created in 1966. The approach used a monthly newsletter, slide shows, and speeches,

²⁵ They were in fact highway consumers. Transit was the key to strengthening downtown, but transit ranked second place below highways in the Chamber of Commerce's list of priority civic projects in 1960. Antihighway citizen activists have commented scathingly that the business community seemed to want transit service for their maids and uncontested new freeways for their own travel.

but it reached an audience composed mostly of businessmen, civic leaders, and public figures—not the general public. MARTA scheduled the formal public hearings required by its enabling legislation to occur at the end of the planning process, after preliminary engineering had been done and the plans had been presented to local jurisdictions.

Twelve hearings were held in April and May of 1968. Citizen testimony at one of the hearings led to reconsideration of a route alternative and to an additional hearing on the segment in question. The opinions expressed resulted in a number of minor changes in the proposed system. However, no major changes, such as were recommended in the transit impact study, came about as a result of the hearings. Many blacks in particular were angered by being solicited for their views at such a late date.

The black community had been expressing growing dissatisfaction with the transit proposal as the 1968 election approached. Their complaints centered on their lack of involvement throughout the planning process and on the inadequate service to poor black neighborhoods. Blacks voiced disapproval as early as 1966, when the Summit Leadership Conference threatened to oppose MARTA unless service to black communities was improved. In spring 1968, after the transit impact study had been published, the Summit Leadership Conference reiterated its threat of nonsupport. Other criticisms were aimed at MARTA's minority hiring practices and the lack of representation on MARTA's board. (There was one black on the board at the time, a banker.) In October 1968 a number of black civic organizations, including the Summit Leadership Conference and the NAACP, joined in public opposition to the transit proposal, arguing that their requests for changes had been ignored. Their constituencies agreed, and the MARTA issue was defeated in every precinct that had a black majority.

By 1971 MARTA had made significant improvements in its approach to public participation. A total of three blacks sat on the board. A minority hiring program had added blacks to the MARTA staff. The 60-person Citizens' Transportation Advisory Council mandated by law included 24 blacks, and MARTA staff periodically met with the council. As the year progressed MARTA began a wide-reaching community information campaign that included a great number of public forums and neighborhood meetings. A black public relations firm was hired to run the campaign. Overall,

MARTA's more sensitive attitude toward blacks and the urban poor community in general—reflected in route and station changes, the short-term bus program, and the 15-cent fare as well as in progress within the citizen participation process—was an important ingredient in MARTA's success at the polls in 1971. The need to get support from this segment of the public is widely cited as the reason MARTA elected to keep rail service on the east-west corridor and to extend a link to the Perry Homes development.

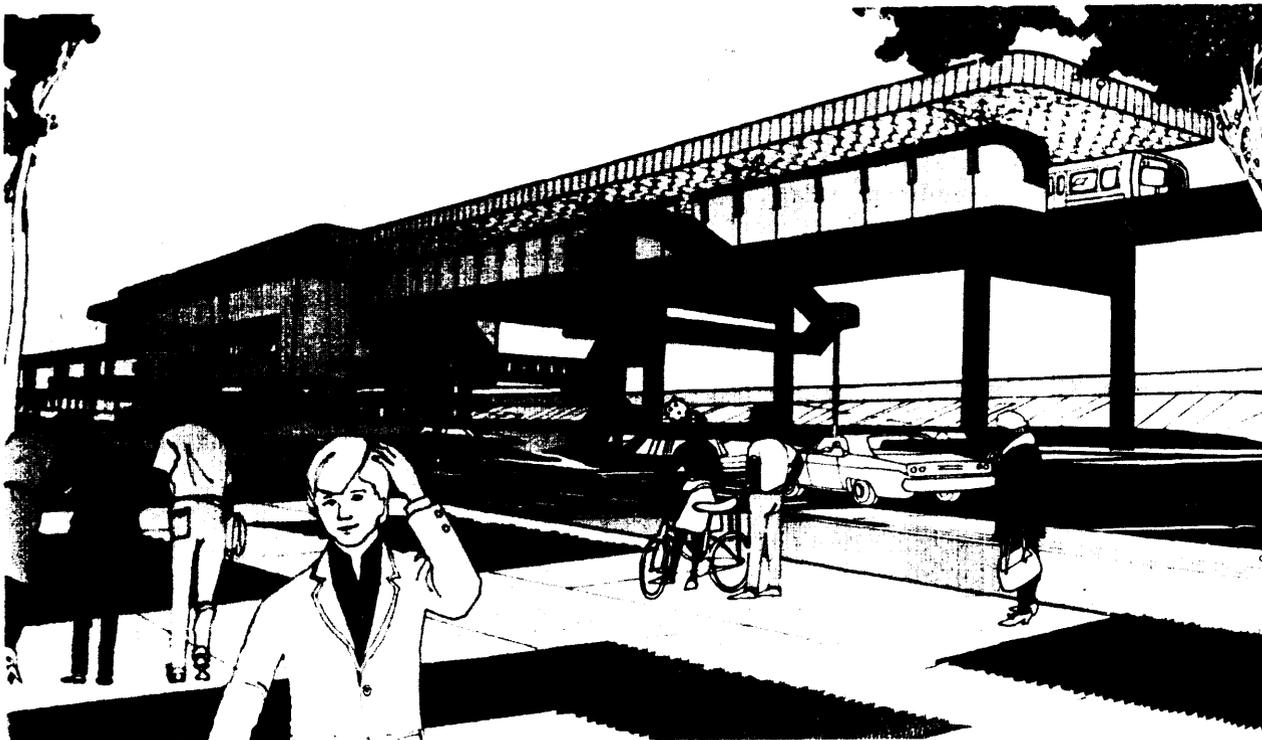
Since 1971 MARTA's standing with neighborhood groups has lowered. Citizens who once gave hearty support to transit raise complaints as detailed plans are made to build in their neighborhoods. The situation is ironic, since MARTA appears to have grown increasingly responsive to local groups as the implementation process advances.

The Impact Council is one of the organized citizen groups bringing such charges. The Council, based at Atlanta University, acts as a citizens' advocate and referral service on questions of relocation. The Impact Council has been accused of

being more concerned with confrontation with MARTA than with resolution of conflicts, but it acts as a forum for the low-income black community to voice its concerns.

Most of the controversy involves station area development. ARC has delegated responsibility for station area planning to local jurisdictions. In some areas the process has been well received to date, but it is being challenged in other areas. The Ashby Street Station on the west line is an example of a successful planning effort. A local politician with a grass roots constituency was the catalyst for a genuinely participatory process there. The drama that has unfolded around the Decatur Street Station illustrates a less happy situation. The Decatur "charrette"²⁶ of approximately 2 years ago was heralded as a successful application of a pioneering technique for melding consensus from the diverse group of individuals concerned with the fate of the Decatur Station and its neighborhood. Now the Decatur plan is tied up in three lawsuits

²⁶ The charrette technique brings people with a wide range of interests together in a marathon session to iron out differences.



Artist's sketch of MARTA's Grant Street station

centering around the allegations that the city arranged for the charrette to be held in closed session and that it did not include residents and merchants whose homes and businesses will be taken.

This and other experiences have sullied MARTA's reputation for encouraging effective citizen involvement. In addition, Atlanta citizens have become concerned with the adequacy of the public liaison at ARC and other forums. ARC established a Citizen Transportation Advisory Task Force to channel public comments on transportation issues. The mechanism proved inadequate. The Task Force had been comprised of 30 citizens chosen by local officials. Some were establishment businessmen, others were neighborhood activists appointed for their interest in transportation issues; the two factions could not work well together. They were constrained by ARC from addressing some matters. The Task Force has been replaced by three advisory councils covering different "transportation-related subjects. Participants are appointed on the basis of a demonstrated interest in the issues to be addressed by each council.

TECHNICAL PLANNING WORK

The quality of the technical planning work in Atlanta is generally regarded as having been excellent for its time. Yet more often than not it came too early or too late to be optimally useful in guiding decisionmaking. The 1961 ARMPC planz—an exception to this generalization—did help persuade policy makers decide to plan seriously for transit. The technical study that resulted, 28 however, came 6 years before the decision was made to implement a transit plan. The referendum vote in 1968 was held before the Voorhees alternatives study had reported conclusively whether rail was best. Ironically, when the technical and political processes finally coordinated in 1971, the technical information showed too little difference between the principal alternatives to be a persuasive factor in decisionmaking. In part this ambiguity was created out of political necessity.

²⁷ *Atlanta Region Comprehension Plan: Rapid Transit, Atlanta Region Metropolitan Planning Commission, June 1961.*

²⁸ *A Plan and Program of Rapid Transit for the Atlanta Metropolitan Region, Metropolitan Atlanta Transit Study Commission (Parsons, Brinkerhoff, Quade & Douglas), December 1962.*

Goals and Objectives

Atlanta began planning its transit system before formal goal-setting had become a conventional step in planning. Nevertheless, a number of goals were articulated from the beginning and were drawn upon to justify decisions if not to make them.

The fundamental goal in Atlanta transit planning has been the desire to reduce traffic overload on highways in the region. In addition, Atlanta's transit planners have embraced the objectives of channeling regional growth and enhancing the center city. The 1961 ARMPC study and its predecessors in the 1950's touched on all these points. By 1971 the summary version of the officially approved plan cites the same objectives—and adds explicit mention of the objective of improving mobility for transit dependents.

Since 1968 both MARTA and AATS have been able to direct their transportation planning efforts in light of a set of regional development goals. ARMPC adopted a list of goals in April 1968. Both MARTA and AATS have acknowledged their allegiance to several of these goals:²⁹

- Encouragement of new growth that fits local and regional plans;
- Conservation of established areas;
- Clustering of new growth to avoid incompatible uses; and
- Encouragement of a balanced transportation system, allowing appropriate levels of accessibility.

The AATS/Voorhees study process between 1968 and 1971 was performed in light of a series of "implicit" objectives, according to the final report. ³⁰ The AATS work was partially supported by MARTA and undertook the most rigorous evaluation of transit proposals in the region. The AATS objectives were listed as:

- Serving the transit dependent;
- Providing a good highway system to all parts of the region within constraints of cost and community cohesion;

²⁹ See AATS, *Development and Evaluation of a Recommended Transportation System for the Atlanta Region, 1971; MARTA Draft Response—Guidelines for Capital Grant Selection, 1972.*

³⁰ AATS, *Development and Evaluation, op. cit.*

- Providing an alternative to the private automobile in order to reduce congestion and give access to the CBD; and
- Focusing highway and transit access to encourage development centers at transportation “nodes.”

Neither AATS nor MARTA developed a formal procedure for using goals to assist in decision-making. The choices among alternatives were made on the basis of which alternative produced greatest patronage at least total cost rather than on whether it would achieve particular goals. Indirectly, however, the goals were incorporated in the decisionmaking process. Highest patronage would come from areas designated as growth centers, and both routes and stations were planned to serve as many of these centers as feasible.

The twin goals of reducing congestion and controlling growth also have come into play in the station area planning process. The City of Atlanta adopted a node growth/neighborhood preservation development policy in 1972. The city’s policies included the following:

- Make maximum use of rapid transit to promote mobility and reduce congestion;
- Encourage multipurpose activity centers used day and night and discourage strip commercial development;
- Improve the urban environment through urban design; and
- Prohibit new industrial or commercial development near stations serving low- and medium-density residential neighborhoods.

These policies have guided the city planning department as it creates station area development plans.

Development and Evaluation of Alternatives

Until 1968 alternatives analysis in Atlanta transit planning was grounded more in public debate than in technical process. A conventional alternatives analysis was not published until 1971. That evaluation was sufficiently competent technically to compensate for the shortcomings of the past, although its findings were too ambiguous to guide decisionmaking clearly.

No formal testing of alternative transit systems was incorporated in ATS *Rapid Atlanta* or ARMPC

Rapid Transit plans in 1961. The MATSC plan in 1962 briefly investigated improved bus service concepts and the use of commuter rail but rejected these options in favor of rapid rail. The first serious look at an alternative concept occurred when ATS commissioned its own transit study in 1967.

That study, *Rapid Busways*, called for exclusive busways along existing rail rights-of-way as an interim solution to Atlanta’s transit needs. The report stated that about half of the guideways it proposed would later be converted to rail as part of the MARTA system. Yet the study also showed that express buses on exclusive rights-of-way could serve more people equally fast or faster than the proposed rail system. With this and similar statements *Rapid Busways* made a good enough case for building only busways—instead of rail—to interest several public groups in the idea. Thus the debate on alternatives began.

Support for the busways concept came from fiscal conservatives such as Alderman Millikin and a number of people in the Chamber of Commerce. An incipient rail versus highway controversy became an underlying issue, however. Robert Somerville, architect of *Rapid Busways* and head of the Atlanta Transit System bus company, had criticized MARTA for opposing a balanced transportation approach. MARTA allegedly had not given thoughtful attention to feeder buses; a map in the MARTA public relations document *Rapid Transit Now* showed feeder bus routes where no streets existed. MARTA also demonstrated an apparent protransit bias by dismissing the *Rapid Busways* idea after a hasty 3-week review.

The *Busways* report was a contributing factor in the decision to commission the AATS comprehensive transportation study in 1967. consultant Alan M. Voorhees & Associates undertook a thorough evaluation of alternative system concepts that was not completed by the time of the 1968 referendum vote. This fact created the impression that MARTA was asking for public commitment to a plan that was not finished, and it thus helped bring the MARTA proposal to defeat.

The Voorhees/AATS 1971 final report called *Development and Evaluation of a Recommended Transportation System for the Atlanta Region* described the results of comparative evaluation of five basic transportation systems: (1) an expanded bus system using existing highways; (2) the 66-mile MARTA system presented in spring 1968; (3) a 31-mile system of

exclusive busways like the one proposed in *Rapid Busways*; (4) a 66-mile system using rail only in the north-south corridor and express bus elsewhere; (5) a 65-mile busway system. These comprise a relatively broad range of alternatives for that time. None of the light rail or priority bus lane approaches that are popular today, however, were treated by the Voorhees study. Their absence is understandable. The streetcar era had passed too recently for light rail to be taken seriously. And at that time no precedent existed for giving buses priority over cars on the same right-of-way; the idea simply was not considered practical. 31

Political considerations did not enter the Voorhees process of selecting and evaluating alternatives, but they did influence the way MARTA used the Voorhees findings. The results of the Voorhees evaluation were first published in 1969. 32 That report recommended 54 miles of busway and 10 miles of rapid rail. The AATS Policy Committee designated the Voorhees report as the guide for all agencies to use in developing priorities and implementation plans. Meanwhile MARTA asked for further work from Voorhees before publishing the final report. Although MARTA hoped rail would look better this time, Voorhees continued to recommend busways for the east-west corridor in the draft of its final report. The draft was not widely circulated, and UMTA refers to it as the “suppressed report.”

Although the draft was not in fact suppressed, its recommendations were changed allegedly under pressure from MARTA. The final text was more ambiguous on the bus-rail issue. MARTA argued busways need a third “breakdown” lane for safety reasons. The cost of the extra lane inflated the Voorhees’ busway figures to more nearly approximate rail costs. The language of the Voorhees report was amended to say that both bus and rail could provide needed service on the east-west line; that buses would attract the same ridership as rail at a somewhat lower cost; but that the cost would be the same if greater construction and safety

³¹ Several members of the UMTA staff who were reviewing the technical process in Atlanta grew curious about the priority bus alternative. Using the Voorhees numbers, they adjusted the assumptions and got a rough estimate that total operating costs on the east-west corridor would have been 50 percent less if priority bus lanes had been substituted for the exclusive busway proposal.

³² Summary of Highlights: Recommended Transportation Program, Alan M. Voorhees & Associates, Inc., April 1969.

standards were adhered to for buses as shown in the MARTA/PB-T-B preliminary engineering report. Most observers agree the changes were motivated by political necessity. The black communities along the east-west line would not have supported a plan that offered them “second-class” bus service while giving whites “first-class” rail service.

MARTA drew heavily on the Voorhees alternatives evaluation when it applied for its first capital grant from UMTA. In its application MARTA offered two reasons for its decision to drop its east-west busway concept. First, it pointed out that the Technical Coordinating Committee of ARC-ARTPPJQ had voted against busways and for rail in April 1970 because of restrictions to long-range service expansion and the technical problems incumbent in locating a large underground busway transfer in downtown Atlanta’s narrow “gulch.” Second, MARTA explained that an all-rail trunk system (with busway feeders) was judged to be better than a mixed rail-bus concept because it (1) would require fewer transfers and hence would be “more functional and desirable” 35; (2) would attract more patronage largely because of the transfer issue; and (3) was slightly less expensive per passenger. MARTA also presented as rejected alternatives a 1969 commuter rail study 36 and a 1971 analysis of the “no-build” alternative. 37 The alternatives package thus was relatively comprehensive and the comparative evaluation relatively convincing.

Following a November 1971 MARTA board resolution, MARTA (with ARC and representatives from local governments) undertook an environmental assessment of the already adopted system. The procedure followed requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 and therefore presented and evaluated alternatives to the proposed system at points where it was found

³³ See Draft Response-Guidelines for Capital Grant Selection, Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, September 1972.

³⁴ The Technical Coordinating Committee is comprised of technical staff representatives from ARC, MARTA, and DOT and should not be confused with its policymaking counterpart, the Transportation Policy Subcommittee.

³⁵ MARTA Draft Response, op. cit., p. 96.

³⁶ Preliminary Study Of Commuter Railroad Feasibility for Atlanta Metropolitan Region, MARTA, 1969.

³⁷ Benefits to the Atlanta Metropolitan Area from the Proposed Regional Transportation Program, prepared for MARTA by Development Research Associates, December 1971.

to threaten significant environmental disruption. In fact, most alternatives discussed were recapitulations of the Voorhees alternatives analysis. The study identified few major environmental problems serious enough to call for devising new alternatives. Severe problems were found at only seven points of intrusion in areas of ecological value, and MARTA agreed to route changes at four of these points and to put lines underground in two other parks. With almost two-thirds of the system following existing railroad rights-of-way, the proposal was judged to threaten little damage to neighborhoods and community services or to historic sites. The environmental assessment did not challenge the overall plan and did not evaluate alternative route configurations or modes of transportation.

Financing and Implementation

Financing issues have influenced Atlanta's transit planning at several critical points since 1960. Chief among these issues have been (1) the difficulty of obtaining Federal capital assistance in recent years, (2) setbacks in guaranteeing the local share, and (3) escalating construction cost estimates. The net effect of these obstacles has been to scale down the first phase transit system to a skeletal 13.7 miles.

The Atlanta system will be the first major new rapid rail transit project to come on line with the aid of UMTA funds. Since the beginning of transit planning in Atlanta, the expectation of Federal money, and the difficulty in getting it, have influenced decision making.

As early as 1961 the ARMP plan mentioned the Federal transit funding policies that were under consideration at that time. It compared the existing situation to the period shortly before enactment of the 1956 interstate highway legislation and stated that an "early policy breakthrough toward a similar Federal transit financing program is a distinct possibility." These statements were coupled with the assertion that the proposed system would require Federal and possibly State aid.

The hope of obtaining Federal aid continued to affect Atlanta's transit policy planning. One of the reasons for seeking the transit-enabling constitutional amendment in 1962 was to prepare the way for qualifying for the new Federal-aid program that was debated by Congress that year. The Urban Mass Transportation Assistance bill was defeated,

and so was the State amendment. The need to qualify for Federal aid was offered again as a reason for backing the transit amendment when it came up for consideration in 1964. This time the Federal program was a reality, enacted into law with a lobbying boost from Atlanta that converted the entire Georgia delegation on Capitol Hill to the side of transit. Voters in Atlanta were urged to support the enabling proposition so Atlanta could get in on the ground level when the limited new Federal money was parceled out.

Even without UMTA aid, Atlanta made good use of the Federal funds that could be obtained. The Metropolitan Atlanta Transit Study Commission in 1962 was supported by a HUD 701 grant—the only planning grant money at the time that was being used for transit purposes. Later, Atlanta lobbied to have a technical studies program appended to UMTA in 1965. Congress obliged, and the next year MARTA received UMTA's first technical studies grant.

The most direct effect of Federal financing policy on the MARTA system has been and will continue to be exerted through the UMTA capital grants program. During the tenure of former DOT Secretary John Volpe, MARTA alleges it received assurances that UMTA would pay its full share of the system's cost. In early 1974 DOT began publicly backing away from its earlier position by suggesting it would not provide all the money MARTA wanted when MARTA asked for it.

The MARTA Overview Committee (MARTOC) of the Georgia State assembly launched an investigation to clarify the situation. MARTOC collected evidence of "solemn and repeated assurances from high officials in the Federal Government" 38 that MARTA could expect Federal capital assistance. Such "firm Federal commitments" guided MARTA's prerferendum promises and helped encourage local support. 39

In April 1975 UMTA put the issue to rest for the present, by committing \$600 million out of its capital grant discretionary fund to the Atlanta system in the form of contract authority, pending Congressional approval of annual appropriations.

³⁸Report of the MARTA Overview Committee, December 1974, p. 17.

³⁹In 1968, the lack of a firm Federal commitment to the MARTA system was one of the main issues raised by MARTA critics in the successful campaign to defeat the transit measure in referendum.

The \$600 million plus \$200 million in capital grants already given to MARTA totaled more than 10 percent of UMTA'S discretionary capital grants program over the duration of the present legislation. ⁴⁰ However, the offer falls \$200 million short of the amount MARTA feels—and UMTA agrees—is necessary to build a well-functioning core system. With the 20 percent local share added, the UMTA funds will build only 13.7 miles of rapid transit. ⁴¹

In late June 1975 UMTA rejected MARTA'S formal request for the additional \$200 million. The agency offered "no prejudice" status to local money used for construction beyond the 13.7-mile trunk segment. If Congress were to **provide new** authorization, MARTA could ask for a new capital grant and, if UMTA approved the application, could credit the already-spent local funds toward the local share of the new grant. In turning down MARTA'S request for a larger commitment, UMTA stressed its intention to put no more money into the 13.7-mile segment under any circumstances. MARTA will be forced to pay for any cost escalations (beyond the 8 percent inflation factor built into its estimates) with local resources.

Mustering these local resources has been MARTA'S second major financing issue. Proposed money-raising mechanisms had an important impact on popular support in 1968 and 1971. Problems did not disappear after the 1971 referendum established a revenue source, however, and local financing questions are as critical today as ever.

Atlanta transit planners in the beginning aimed at a financing procedure that would assess the local contribution on a regional basis rather than depend only on contributions from jurisdictions. Early versions of MARTA legislation would have given the transit authority taxing power. Conservative politics prevailed, and MARTA got bonding authority. The local jurisdictions would participate by making a rapid transit contract to produce a given amount over a period of a year or longer. If the local contributions required a tax, they would have to hold a public referendum.

⁴⁰Urban Mass Transportation Assistance Act of 1974.

⁴¹At 13.7 miles th,north-south route can extend ordy as far north as the North Station; MARTA claims that extending the north route 4.7 miles to Lenox Station would improve patronage.

The 1968 referendum was technically a vote to approve a 35-year contract between each participating jurisdiction and MARTA. The contracts committed each jurisdiction to raise the property tax in order to pay off bonds that would be issued to finance transit construction. Several of the key factors in the failure of the referendum measure were related to financial considerations. First, the property tax increase was unpopular. Second, the nature of the referendum (authorization of a contract rather than a direct approval of a bond issue) required the total price over the 35-year period, including interest plus principal, to appear on the ballot. Usually voters are shown only the face value of the bonds, and the true cost of the system is thought to have dissuaded some of the voters. In addition, the insecurity about the Federal contribution played a role, as mentioned.

The relatively good showing of the transit issue in the 1971 referendum was aided by an important change in the financial plan. The sales tax was substituted for the property tax. Also, additional benefits—the bus improvement program and the 15-cent fare—were added to the rapid transit system to make the price more palatable.

Today MARTA is having difficulty meeting its 1971 promises with the revenue generated by the 1 percent sales tax increase approved in 1971. There are several causes for this problem. A large portion—over 40 percent—of the sales tax fund is being used to defer operating deficits. MARTA'S ledgers reflect the nationwide picture of greatly increasing gaps between operating revenue and costs. As farebox returns dropped, a greater proportion of the sales tax than expected had to be diverted to pay the operating bills.

To protect the sales tax fund, the MARTA Overview Committee (MARTOC) sponsored legislation placing a ceiling of 50 percent on the amount of sales tax revenue that can be spent for operations. The measure was enacted in 1974. With operating deficits rising at an alarming rate in Atlanta as elsewhere, the 50 percent lid has created a ticklish problem. The operating expenditures are not yet bumping the ceiling; but at 40-44 percent monthly, they are claiming a growing portion of the sales tax revenues. The only alternative source of funding, if the ceiling is reached, is to increase fares. It is considered unlikely that the 50 percent limit itself would be lifted, because the legislature wants to guarantee a means for raising the local share of future project costs. The option of hiking fares,

however, would go against MARTA's referendum promise to keep fares at 15 cents. MARTOC has reminded MARTA of its simultaneous commitment to implement both short-term and long-range transit improvements. Due to shortage of funds, portions of the short-range plan still have not been put into effect. Resolving this conflict is one of MARTA's most pressing responsibilities.

The recession also has played a role in the financial situation in Atlanta. Sales tax revenues grew only 1 percent last year, during which time MARTA had planned for a 10 percent rise. The situation is attributed to a decline in consumer purchasing, although the matter is being investigated by MARTOC.

The most important reason for MARTA's financial difficulties involves the unexpected increases in the cost of completing the long-range rapid transit system. The cost of the 60-mile system was pegged at \$1.3 billion in 1971; it is now estimated to exceed \$2 billion. MARTA says delays in the implementation schedule have caused the cost escalation. Federal requirements for an environmental impact assessment allegedly delayed MARTA's timetable over a year. Expensive

additions to the system also contributed to the hike in cost.

Regardless of the accuracy of MARTA's allegations, delay and the consequent cost escalations comprise the third major financial issue that has affected the transit decision making. In this case, the impact has not yet fully been felt. The extra cost itself is a factor in trimming the initial system to 13.7 miles; UMTA'S \$800 million would build many more miles if costs had stayed at the 1971 level.

More importantly, the combination of delay and additional cost may force reconsideration of the remainder of the adopted system. The 1971 vote approved the 1 percent sales tax financing for a 10-year period. In order to guarantee a local share over the 6-year period of UMTA participation that will begin now, MARTA will have to either return to the polls for an extension of the sales tax, persuade the State to increase its contribution, or raise the 1.5-cent fare. UMTA says it will not come to the rescue. If UMTA policy holds, and if funds are not forthcoming on the State or local level, the Atlanta transit system will look far different from the way it was originally envisioned.