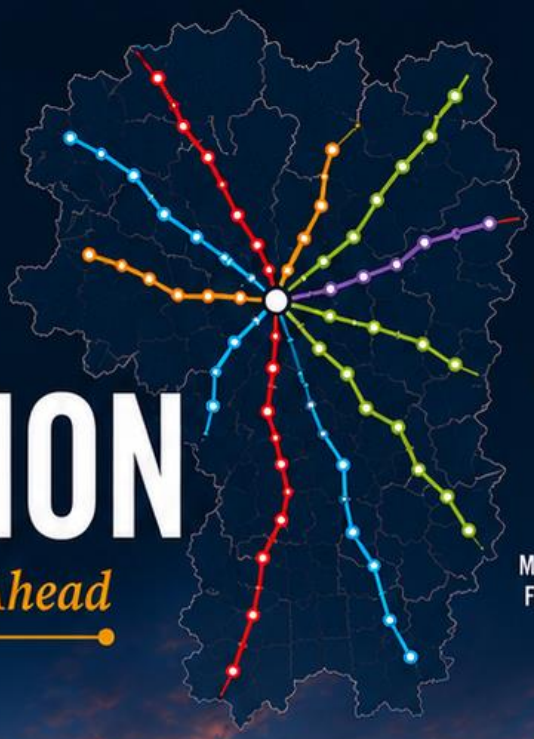
A CENTER FOR URBAN RESEARCH
SYMPOSIUM BRIEF

# TRANSIT IN THE ATLANTA REGION

*Infrastructure, Utilization & the Road Ahead*



RAIL EXPANSION

NEXTGEN BUS NETWORK

MICROMOBILITY & FIRST/LAST MILE

TOD & MIXED-USE

EQUITY & ACCESS

Atlanta BeltLine

Prepared for the

**Atlanta Regional Transit Symposium**

Convened by the Atlanta Regional Commission and the Center for Urban Research

**JULY 2026**


**48** MILES HEAVY RAIL

**81** FIXED BUS ROUTES

**12** ON-DEMAND REACH ZONES

**65.7M** TOTAL RIDES IN 2025 (~179,500 PER WEEKDAY)

**700K+** MARTA MOBILITY RIDES ANNUALLY

### CHANGING WORKFORCE

Hybrid work and flexible schedules are reshaping demand patterns.

### EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

AVs, digital platforms, and micro-transit are expanding mobility choices.

### LAND USE & TRIP REDUCTION

Transit-oriented development and walkable places reduce per-capita trip generation.

### EQUITY & ACCESS

Ensuring every resident benefits from a connected, reliable, and affordable system.

### FUNDING & GOVERNANCE

Sustainable investment and regional coordination are essential for long-term success.


Georgia Tech • Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts

Center for Urban Research

# 1. Introduction: The Atlanta Region is at a Transit Crossroads

Metro Atlanta stands at an inflection point. A region that built its identity around the automobile is increasingly confronting the limits of highway-only mobility: persistent congestion, inequitable access, climate challenges, and the competitive disadvantage of a workforce spending ever more time in traffic rather than being productive. At the same time, the pandemic permanently altered commuting behavior, new technologies are reshaping the menu of mobility options, and the ongoing build-out of mixed-use, transit-oriented communities is slowly but measurably reducing per-capita trip generation.

The Atlanta Regional Commission's Metropolitan Transportation Plan directs $172.6 billion in investment through 2050 across roads, highways, transit, and active transportation.[1] The region is projected to add 1.8 million additional residents by 2050, bringing the metro-area population to approximately 7.9 million people.[2] How transit planning responds to these forces—and how the region avoids locking in infrastructure that will be obsolete within its own lifespan—is the central challenge facing transportation planners today.

The purpose of this brief is to provide a fact-based foundation for those attending the Atlanta Transportation Symposium on Transit co-hosted by the Atlanta Regional Commission and the Center for Urban Research. This brief focuses on five main topics: (1) the existing transit system and its current performance; (2) the impact of changing workforce and travel patterns; (3) the role of emerging technologies; (4) the trip-reduction potential of evolving land-use patterns; and (5) cross-cutting issues of equity, funding, and governance. It closes with strategic planning considerations for symposium discussion.

# 2. The Existing Transit System: Scope and Performance

## 2.1 MARTA: The Regional Backbone

The Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) is the dominant public transit provider in the region, serving Fulton, DeKalb, and Clayton counties as well as the City of Atlanta. The system operates 48 miles of heavy rail on four lines (Red, Gold, Blue, and Green), with 38 stations converging at Five Points in downtown Atlanta. Following the April 2026 launch of MARTA's NextGen Bus Network, bus service now operates across 81 redesigned fixed routes and 12 on-demand MARTA Reach zones. MARTA Mobility provides more than 700,000 paratransit rides annually,[3] and the overall system carried approximately 65.7 million trips in 2025—roughly 179,500 trips per weekday.[4]

MARTA rail carried approximately 30.4 million trips in 2025, or about 80,000 per weekday.[5] This represents a partial, uneven recovery from pandemic lows. Rail ridership had been climbing from early 2020 through late 2023, when it reached 50–60% of pre-pandemic levels, before a reported 6% decline in 2024 that MARTA attributes largely to fare-gate malfunctions that failed to record Breeze card taps.[6] Only Cleveland and Los

[1] Atlanta Regional Commission. Metropolitan Transportation Plan 2050. Available at atlantaregional.org. The RTP invests $172.6 billion through 2050 across roads, highways, transit, and active transportation facilities in the 20-county region.

[2] Atlanta Regional Commission. Metropolitan Transportation Plan 2050. ARC's latest population forecast projects the region will reach approximately 7.9 million residents by 2050, an increase of 1.8 million from current levels.

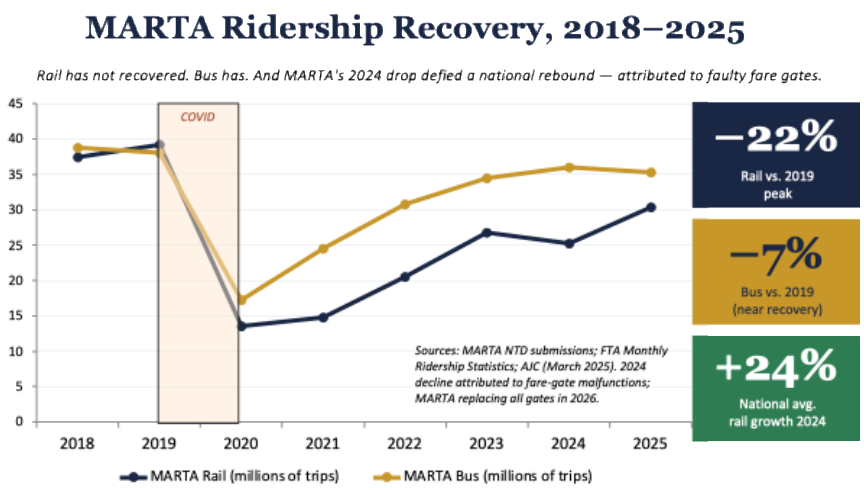
[3] MARTA. Service Standards Report FY2024. itsmarta.com..

[4] MARTA system entry (updated May 2026). In 2025, the entire MARTA system (bus and subway) had approximately 65,752,400 rides, or about 179,500 per weekday in Q4 2025.

[5] MARTA rail entry (updated May 2026). MARTA rail carried approximately 30,373,600 trips in 2025, or about 80,000 per weekday in Q4 2025.

[6] Federal Transit Administration, Monthly National Transit Database Ridership Reports, 2024. Atlanta Journal-Constitution analysis (March 2025) found MARTA's rail ridership fell 6% in 2024 while the national average rose 24%. Only Cleveland and Los Angeles posted larger drops.

Angeles reported steeper rail ridership drops in 2024, a notable divergence from the national average of 24% ridership growth that year. MARTA disputes the federal figures and is replacing all fare gates and migrating to the "Better Breeze" open-payment system as part of its 2026 capital program.[7]




Bus ridership, by contrast, tracked near or above forecast throughout the same period, and MARTA's Mobility and Streetcar services both returned to pre-pandemic levels. The NextGen Bus Network redesigns service delivery to triple the share of metro Atlanta residents within 15-minute frequency coverage—expanding from five to 18 high-frequency corridors—and introduces 12 on-demand micro-transit zones through the new MARTA Reach program.[8]

| Mode | Annual Trips (2025 est.) | Status vs. Pre-COVID | Key 2026 Development |
|---|---|---|---|
| Heavy Rail | ~30+ million | ~50–60% of 2019 baseline | New CQ400 railcars; CBTC upgrade |
| Bus (fixed route) | ~30+ million | Near/above forecast | NextGen network; 18 frequent corridors |
| MARTA Reach (micro-transit) | Pilot / new | New service (March 2026) | 12 on-demand zones |
| Streetcar | ≈220k–285k (~600–775/day) | Below | 2025 estimate ≈218,500 |
| Paratransit | 700,000+ | At pre-COVID level | Ongoing improvements |

*Table 1. Summary of MARTA service modes and approximate utilization, 2025–2026.*

## 2.2 The Broader Regional Transit Network

MARTA remains the region's transit backbone, but it is not the regional transit system in its entirety. The Atlanta-area transit ecosystem includes fixed-route, commuter, microtransit, and demand-response services operated by CobbLinc, Ride Gwinnett, Xpress/ATL, Cherokee Area Transportation System (CATS), Connect Douglas, Henry Connect, Coweta Connect, Paulding Transit, Access Forsyth, and Hall Area Transit. The practical planning issue is therefore not simply MARTA ridership, but how a fragmented regional network supplies mobility across a fast-growing, multi-county region.

[7] MARTA Communications Manager Payson Schwin, quoted in FOX 5 Atlanta (March 5, 2025) and AJC (March 11, 2025): "We are confident that the observed decrease in rail ridership is not real, but instead due to a steady increase in faregates not reporting Breeze card taps." MARTA Wikipedia entry (updated May 2026) notes the Better Breeze system with updated faregates launched in 2026 to support contactless payment methods.

[8] MARTA press release (January 2026) and The Atlanta Voice (January 2, 2026). The NextGen Bus Network launched April 18, 2026, expanding 15-minute frequency service to three times as many metro Atlanta residents across 18 corridors; MARTA Reach on-demand micro-transit launched March 7, 2026 in 12 defined zones.

The latest official National Transit Database profiles show that ridership is highly concentrated. MARTA reported 65.6 million unlinked passenger trips in 2024. The other major regional and suburban operators together accounted for roughly 3.8 million additional annual trips, meaning MARTA carried approximately 95 percent of quantified public-transit boardings among the operators listed below. The non-MARTA systems nevertheless provide important geographic coverage, especially in Cobb, Gwinnett, Cherokee, Douglas, Henry, Coweta, Forsyth, Paulding, and Hall counties.

Major Regional Transit Operations

| Operator | Primary service | Service area | Annual trips |
|---|---|---|---|
| MARTA | Rail, bus, paratransit, streetcar | Fulton, DeKalb, Clayton, City of Atlanta | 65,587,365 |
| Ride Gwinnett | Bus, commuter, paratransit/microtransit | Gwinnett County | 1,391,662 |
| CobbLinc | Bus, commuter, paratransit | Cobb County | 1,096,025 |
| Xpress / ATL | Commuter bus | Regional commuter corridors | 922,219 |
| Hall Area Transit | Bus and demand response | Gainesville / Hall County | 115,587 |
| Connect Douglas | Bus and demand response | Douglas County | 90,224 |
| Henry Connect | Demand response | Henry County | 59,428 |
| CATS | Local bus and demand response | Cherokee County | 47,073 |
| Access Forsyth | Demand response | Forsyth County | 42,138 |
| Coweta Connect | Demand response | Coweta County | 36,974 |
| Paulding Transit | Demand response | Paulding County | 10,484 |

## 2.3 Active Transportation and Micromobility

Shared micromobility has grown rapidly in Atlanta. The number of shared micromobility trips in the city—primarily dockless e-bikes and e-scooters operated by Lime and Bird—has increased four-fold since 2020, reaching nearly 4 million annual trips.[9] The Atlanta Beltline, nearing completion of its 22-mile loop, is emerging as a significant active-transportation artery and a natural integration point for micromobility services. Atlanta Housing's "Ride-to-Work" program, the first in the nation to link shared micromobility directly to public housing, provides residents a 50% discount on Bird rides and reflects a growing recognition that micromobility must be an equitable service, not only a premium amenity.[10]

The Atlanta Beltline, in partnership with BEEP, received $1.75 million from the state Transit Trust Fund in June 2025 to launch an autonomous shuttle pilot connecting the West End MARTA Station to the Lee + White development hub and the Atlanta University Center. Fabrication and testing occurred through the fall of 2025, with the service positioned to support 2026 FIFA World Cup visitors. This pilot represents Atlanta's first foray into autonomous transit operations.[11]

[9] Metro Atlanta CEO (March 1, 2026). "Micromobility Symposium Sparks Ideas & Discussion." The number of shared micromobility trips in Atlanta has increased four-fold since 2020, from 1 million to nearly 4 million, per John Saxton, Mobility Planning Director, City of Atlanta Department of Transportation.

[10] Cities Today (September 25, 2025). "Atlanta pilots first housing-linked micromobility scheme." Atlanta Housing's 'Ride-to-Work' program gives all Atlanta Housing residents a 50% discount on Bird rides — the first program of its kind linked directly to public housing in the United States.

[11] Atlanta Beltline, Inc. (2025). Autonomous Transit Pilot Program documentation. beltline.org/learn/current-projects/autonomous-transit-pilot..

## 3. Changing Workforce Habits and Their Impact on Transit Demand

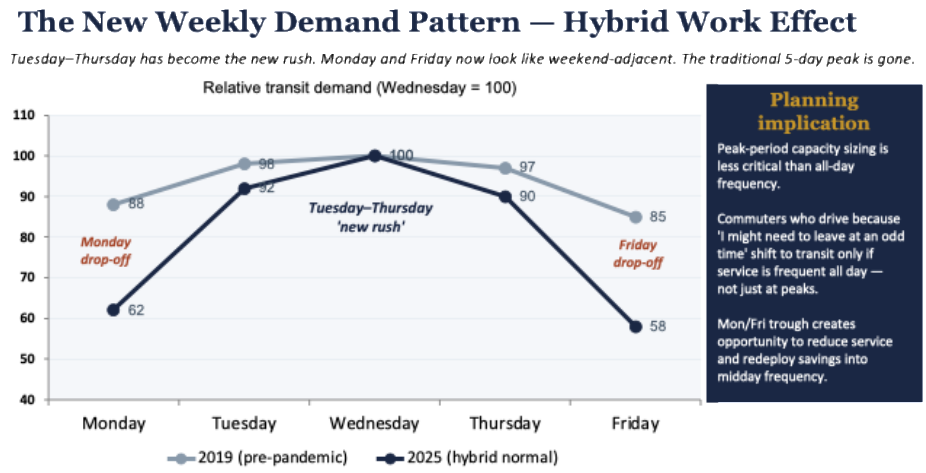
The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a structural shift in how and when Atlantans commute, and the data increasingly suggest that shift is permanent rather than temporary. The ARC's 2025 Regional Commuter Survey, drawing on nearly 6,000 responses from employed residents across the 20-county region, documents what the commission calls a "new normal."[12]

**Key Finding — ARC 2025 Regional Commuter Survey**

Telework as a primary commute mode doubled from 6% in 2019 to 12% in 2025. Average commute times are five minutes shorter than in 2019. Solo driving rose from 80% to 82% of primary commute mode share. Carpooling and bus use both declined. The most common barriers to alternative-mode use: longer trip times (47%) and lack of transit access (44%).

### 3.1 The Hybrid Work Equilibrium

Most knowledge workers in metro Atlanta have settled into hybrid schedules that concentrate in-office presence mid-week, flattening the traditional Monday-Friday commute peaks and making Tuesday through Thursday the new rush—while Monday and Friday see materially lower travel demand.[13] This temporal redistribution has a complex effect on transit. On one hand, it compresses peak demand into fewer days, potentially allowing MARTA to reduce service on lighter days. On the other hand, irregular schedules make it harder to build the habit of transit use and increases the attractiveness of the automobile's on-demand flexibility.




Return-to-office mandates for federal employees—a significant employer cohort in metro Atlanta given the presence of the CDC, the VA, and multiple federal facilities—produced a measurable 5% increase in MARTA weekday rail trips in late February 2025. The CDC's Clifton Road campus, notably, has no direct rail access, projecting worsening congestion on the already strained Clifton Corridor and reinforcing the urgency of a Clifton Corridor solution.[14]

[12] Atlanta Regional Commission (February 11, 2026). "ARC's 2025 Regional Commuter Survey Reveals 'New Normal' for Metro Atlanta Commutes, with Telework Driving Lasting Changes." Based on nearly 6,000 responses from employed residents across the 20-county region.

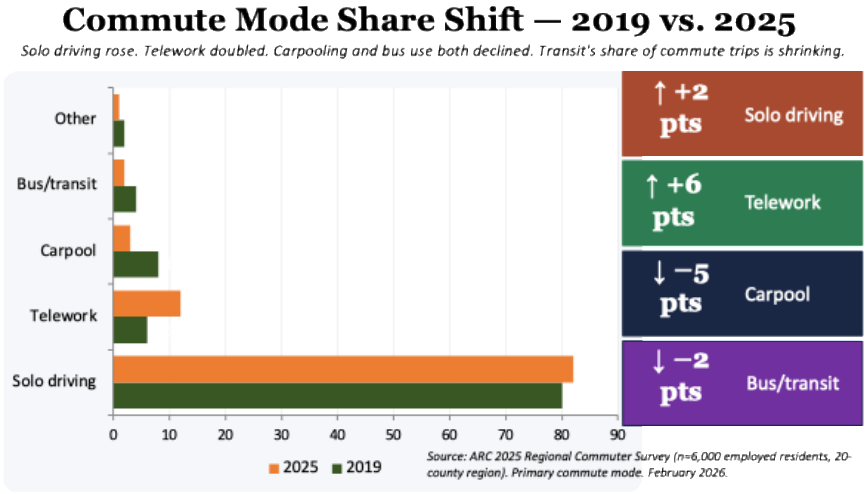
[13] ARC 2025 Regional Commuter Survey. Telework as a primary commute mode doubled from 6% in 2019 to 12% in 2025. Solo driving rose from 80% to 82% of primary commute mode share. Average commute times are approximately five minutes shorter than in 2019. Most common barriers to alternative-mode use: longer trip time (47%) and lack of transit access (44%).

[14] AJC (March 5, 2025). "With federal workers back in downtown Atlanta, MARTA sees a bump in ridership." A total of 406,649 rail trips were recorded the week of Feb. 24–28, 2025, up approximately 5% from the same week in 2024. The CDC's Clifton Road campus has no direct rail access, and the Clifton Corridor LRT (Phase 1 linking Lindbergh Center to Emory/CDC/VA) remains a priority More MARTA project.

### 3.2 Implications for Transit Planning

A workforce that commutes two to three days per week, with high variability in which days, changes the calculus for transit investment in several ways:

- **Peak-period infrastructure sizing becomes less critical than all-day frequency.** Commuters who drive because "I might need to leave at an odd time" will shift to transit only if service is frequent, reliable, and bidirectional throughout the day, not just during AM/PM peaks.
- **Non-work trip generation becomes more important.** Systems optimized exclusively around 9-to-5 CBD commutes will underserve the emerging trip profile.
- **Occupational and income stratification creates equity pressure.** Telework access is heavily skewed toward higher-income, professional occupations. Service-sector, healthcare, logistics, and manufacturing workers—who cannot work remotely—are disproportionately transit-dependent and face a system whose peak-hour design was never fully aligned with shift-work schedules. Equity requires investing in frequency and span of service, not only in capacity.
- **Suburban employment growth reshapes origin-destination pairs.** The continued decentralization of employment toward Perimeter Center, Avalon/Alpharetta, Hartsfield-Jackson's aerotropolis, and suburban office parks creates demand for reverse-commute and suburb-to-suburb transit that the current hub-and-spoke MARTA network is poorly positioned to serve.




## 4. Technology Disruption: Opportunities and Risks for Transit

### 4.1 Autonomous Vehicles

Autonomous vehicle (AV) technology presents both an opportunity and an existential risk for traditional fixed-route transit. The optimistic scenario—robo-taxi fleets that are cheap, ubiquitous, and shared—could function as a last-mile solution that dramatically expands the effective catchment area of rail stations and high-frequency bus corridors. The pessimistic scenario is that low-cost, autonomous single-occupancy vehicles eliminate the time penalty of car travel, further reducing transit's competitiveness and accelerating sprawl.

Atlanta's Beltline autonomous shuttle pilot with BEEP represents an early exploration of the opportunity scenario: using AV technology to solve a specific last-mile gap—connecting a MARTA station to an employment and entertainment hub—rather than to introduce fixed infrastructure.[15]

[15] Atlanta Beltline, Inc. Autonomous Transit Pilot documentation (see footnote 16). BEEP launched a similar programme at The Battery (Cumberland) in July 2023. The BeltLine pilot vehicles hold approximately 10 riders and are software-driven with remote human monitoring.

## 4.2 Micromobility Integration

E-bikes and e-scooters are most effective as first- and last-mile connectors when they are physically co-located with transit stations and digitally integrated into multimodal trip-planning applications. Atlanta's 2025 micromobility symposium, co-hosted by ARC and the Georgia Tech Center for Urban Research, identified critical gaps: insufficient docking infrastructure at MARTA stations, inadequate protected cycling infrastructure between micromobility corridors and transit stops, and uneven equity of access.[16] The planned expansion of docked bikeshare and the MARTA/Beltline partnership with Lime offer a path forward, but require sustained capital investment in supportive infrastructure—not only in the devices themselves.

### Factors That Will Impact Transit Demand

| Demand Factor | Effect | Est. Magnitude on MARTA Boardings | Certainty | Horizon |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hybrid/remote work continuation | ↓ | −8 to −12% peak AM boardings | Med | Near |
| Population growth (+1.8M by 2050) | ↑ | +20 to +35% total boardings | Low | Long |
| TOD & LCI build-out | ↑ | +10 to +18% along corridors | Med | Med |
| Shared AV adoption | ↑ | +5 to +15% (last-mile capture) | High | Med |
| Private/single-occ. AV adoption | ↓ | −10 to −20% discretionary trips | High | Med |
| Micromobility integration | ↑ | +3 to +8% station-area access | Med | Near |
| Aging demographics | ↑ | +5 to +12% paratransit/ADA | Low | Med |
| Return-to-office mandates | ↑ | +3 to +6% peak weekday rail | Med | Near |
| Work-live-play densification | ↑ | −5 to −10% auto VMT/capita | Med | Long |

Certainty: Low = well-established Med = plausible but contested High = highly uncertain

*Sources: ARC MTP 2050; ARC 2025 Regional Commuter Survey; MARTA strategic plans; peer literature. Magnitude estimates are approximate ranges for planning scenario analysis.*

## 4.3 Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS) and On-Demand Transit

MARTA Reach, launched in March 2026, provides on-demand transit service via app in 12 defined zones across the system's footprint, representing Atlanta's most significant investment to date in demand-responsive transit.[17] Internationally, MaaS platforms that bundle fixed-route transit, on-demand shuttles, bikeshare, and ride hailing under a single subscription model have shown early promise in increasing transit mode share—particularly for discretionary, non-commute trips.

[16] Metro Atlanta CEO, Micromobility Symposium (March 2026, see footnote 14). The ARC/Georgia Tech forum was the first of a five-part regional transportation symposium tackling micromobility, the future of transit, autonomous vehicle technology, and next-generation street design.

[17] MARTA press release (January 2026) / The Atlanta Voice (January 2, 2026). MARTA Reach on-demand microtransit service launched March 7, 2026 in 12 defined zones within MARTA's service footprint, bookable via mobile app.

### 4.4 Electrification and Operational Transformation

MARTA's new Rapid A-Line BRT fleet uses articulated electric buses with wireless charging capability—part of a broader transition toward zero-emission operations. The new Stadler CQ400 heavy-rail cars, being phased into service in 2026, incorporate open-gangway design, communications-based train control (CBTC), digital displays, and onboard charging.[18] These upgrades are not merely cosmetic: CBTC will allow MARTA to increase service frequency and capacity on the existing rail network without additional track infrastructure, providing a meaningful capacity dividend as ridership recovers.[19]

### 4.5 Data, AI, and Adaptive Operations

Real-time data systems, AI-driven demand prediction, and dynamic scheduling tools offer transit agencies the ability to shift from static timetables to adaptive service delivery—adjusting frequency and vehicle deployment in near-real time based on actual demand. MARTA's NextGen bus network redesign was itself informed by data analysis of actual origin-destination patterns rather than legacy routing assumptions.[20] Building continuous data feedback loops—integrating fare-tap data, GPS vehicle tracking, mobile app trip planning, and third-party mobility data—will increasingly be treated as core infrastructure investment, rather than an optional add-on.

## 5. Land Use, Density, and the Trip-Reduction Dividend

One of the most durable findings in transportation planning is that land-use patterns drive travel behavior as powerfully as infrastructure investments. The ARC's Livable Centers Initiative (LCI) program has, over more than two decades, funded planning in activity centers and corridors explicitly designed to balance jobs and housing, diversify land uses, and improve multimodal networks—with measurable reductions in per-capita vehicle miles traveled even as populations within study areas grow.[21]

### 5.1 Transit-Oriented Development

MARTA's Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) program is one of the most active in the country among mid-sized transit systems. By leveraging the agency's real estate holdings adjacent to its rail stations, MARTA is catalyzing mixed-income, mixed-use development that generates captive transit riders, produces developer fees that can support operations, and increases the density and vibrancy of station areas. Projects such as Marchon at King Memorial and multiple West End adjacent developments are early examples.[22]

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[18] Urbanize Atlanta (January 6, 2026). The new Stadler CQ400 railcars incorporate open-gangway design, communications-based train control (CBTC), digital displays, and onboard charging. Multiple train sets targeted in-service debut ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

[19] MARTA Wikipedia entry (updated May 2026). The CBTC system, installed by Stadler to work seamlessly with the CQ400 fleet, will allow MARTA to increase capacity, improve on-time performance, and optimize efficiency while maintaining skilled operator oversight.

[20] MARTA / Railway Pro (February 5, 2025). MARTA's NextGen Bus Network redesign expands 15-minute service coverage by 245%, growing from five to 18 high-frequency corridors, and introduces consistent seven-day service and 12 on-demand transit zones via MARTA Reach.

[21] ARC Plan 2040 RTP, Volume I. Analysis of LCI studies supports the conclusion that land-use patterns can reduce per-capita vehicle miles of travel even while expanding population and employment within study areas. The LCI program provides the framework for transit-supportive communities.

[22] MARTA Service Standards Report FY2024. MARTA's TOD Department is undertaking a significant economic development program reimagining metro Atlanta neighborhoods with strategically placed housing and commercial opportunities at or near rail stations, using transit as the catalyst for neighborhood investment.

The Lindbergh Transit Oriented Development, announced in 1999 as the largest multi-use development of its kind in the U.S., established the template. Two decades of experience suggests several lessons: TOD is most effective when it includes a significant share of affordable housing (so that transit-dependent households are not priced out of transit-accessible locations), when ground-floor activation is mandated (not merely encouraged), and when pedestrian and cycling connectivity to the station entrance is prioritized in the site plan.

### 5.2 Work-Live-Play Environments and Net Trip Generation

The proliferation of mixed-use, work-live-play districts—from Atlantic Station and Ponce City Market in the urban core to Avalon in Alpharetta and Halcyon in Forsyth County—represents a structural shift in how the region generates and satisfies travel demand. By co-locating housing, employment, retail, healthcare, and recreation, these environments enable residents to complete multiple trips on foot or by micromobility that would otherwise require an automobile. The net effect is a reduction in vehicle trip generation per capita that, aggregated across the region, can meaningfully reduce pressure on both roadway and transit infrastructure.

### 5.3 The Beltline as a Multimodal Spine

The Atlanta Beltline is the region's most consequential land-use and mobility investment of the past two decades. The 22-mile loop of repurposed rail right-of-way is already functioning as a major active-transportation corridor and has catalyzed billions of dollars in adjacent development. The completion of the Beltline trail corridor, the implementation of the TrailsATL plan that would add 140 additional miles of greenways within the city, and the integration of this network with trails that serve suburban Atlanta create medium and long distance mobility options that may compete with transit and other mobility solutions.[23]

## 6. Demographic and Equity Dimensions of Future Transit Demand

Metro Atlanta's projected population growth of 1.8 million by 2050 is not demographically uniform. The region is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, older on average, and more economically stratified. Each of these trends has direct implications for transit demand and system design.[24]

### 6.1 An Aging Population

As the baby-boom generation moves fully into its 70s and 80s over the next decade, demand for mobility that does not require driving will increase substantially. MARTA Mobility (paratransit) is the current primary mechanism for serving this population, but it is expensive per trip and capacity-constrained. Fixed-route transit with accessible stations, on-demand micro-transit, and autonomous last-mile connectors can collectively extend the independent mobility of older adults at lower cost, but only if the pedestrian environment between transit stops and trip origins/destinations is safe and accessible.

### 6.2 Income Inequality and Transit Dependency

Atlanta ranks among the highest-inequality large metros in the United States, and access to opportunity—jobs, healthcare, education—is deeply conditioned by mobility. Lower-income residents are

[23] TrailsATL Plan, City of Atlanta.

[24] ARC Metropolitan Transportation Plan 2050. The region's population is projected to increase by 1.8 million by 2050. The MTP framework identifies aging demographics, income inequality, and geographic coverage gaps as key equity planning considerations.

disproportionately transit-dependent and disproportionately affected by service gaps, safety concerns, and the "fare burden" (the share of income spent on transit). The ARC's 2025 commuter survey notes that telework access is unevenly distributed by income and occupation, meaning that the workers most dependent on transit are also the least likely to benefit from the behavioral shifts that are reducing overall demand.[25]

### 6.3 Geographic Coverage Gaps

MARTA operates almost exclusively within Fulton, DeKalb, and Clayton counties. Cobb and Gwinnett counties—together home to roughly 2 million residents—have limited transit service and represent some of the region's most acute mobility gaps. Gwinnett County voters rejected MARTA expansion in 2019, reflecting persistent public resistance to regional transit solutions.

## 7. Funding, Governance, and Federal Considerations

Transit in metro Atlanta is funded through a patchwork of local sales taxes, federal formula and competitive grants, fare revenue, and state contributions. The More MARTA half-penny tax has generated $493 million from FY2017 through FY2023, with significant additional revenue accruing since.[26]

Federal transit funding, channeled through the FTA's formula programs and Capital Investment Grants, remains essential to MARTA's expansion program. The region's ability to attract competitive federal funds is partly a function of the completeness and credibility of its long-range plans, the strength of its project pipelines, and demonstrated progress on equity and climate metrics. The hosting of the 2026 FIFA World Cup has accelerated several capital investments and created a forcing function for fare-system modernization, station rehabilitation, and service frequency improvements that benefit everyday riders well beyond the tournament.[27]

## 8. Projecting Future Demand: A Framework

Traditional travel demand modeling, which extrapolates from historical trip-generation rates and assumes stable land-use patterns, is an inadequate tool for the planning environment described in this paper. A more robust approach incorporates scenario analysis across multiple futures, each reflecting different assumptions about the pace of AV adoption, the durability of remote work, the rate of transit-oriented development, and population growth trajectories. The following factors should be treated as key variables in any demand projection exercise:

[25]ARC 2025 Regional Commuter Survey. Telework access is heavily skewed toward higher-income, professional occupations. Service-sector, healthcare, logistics, and manufacturing workers — who cannot work remotely — are disproportionately transit-dependent.
[26]MARTA Wikipedia entry (updated May 2026). The More MARTA half-penny sales tax raised $493 million in capital funds from FY2017 to FY2023. A 2024 city audit found $70 million had been redirected to operational expenses; MARTA disputed the finding, citing a separate audit that found the agency owed only $865,000 to the capital fund.
[27]Urbanize Atlanta (January 6, 2026); MARTA press materials. The 2026 FIFA World Cup, with matches in Atlanta beginning mid-June, accelerated MARTA's capital program including the Better Breeze open-payment system rollout, new CQ400 railcar deployment, and station rehabilitation.

| Demand Factor | Direction of Effect | Uncertainty Level | Planning Horizon |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hybrid/remote work continuation | Reduces peak commute trips | Medium | Near-term |
| Population growth (+1.8M by 2050) | Increases total trips | Low–medium | Long-term |
| TOD and LCI build-out | Reduces per-capita VMT | Medium | Medium–long |
| AV adoption (shared/pooled) | Extends transit catchment | High | Medium–long |
| AV adoption (single-occupancy) | Reduces transit competitiveness | High | Long-term |
| Micromobility integration | Increases transit access | Medium | Near–medium |
| Aging demographics | Increases paratransit/ADA demand | Low | Medium-term |
| Return-to-office mandates | Increases commute peak demand | Medium | Near-term |
| Fuel/parking pricing changes | Affects mode choice | Medium–high | Variable |
| Work-live-play densification | Reduces total trip generation | Medium | Long-term |

Importantly, several of these factors operate in opposing directions. A conservative demand projection that assumes continued commute-trip reduction due to remote work may underestimate future need if hybrid schedules normalize at two or three office days per week—a pattern that may generate more peak-period transit demand than either fully remote or fully in-office work, because those who do commute tend to concentrate on the same days. Similarly, transit-oriented development reduces per-capita VMT but, if successful, increases the population living in transit corridors, potentially increasing total boardings even as mode share per resident improves.

## 9. Conclusion

Metro Atlanta's transit landscape is in the midst of perhaps its most significant transformation in its history. The More MARTA expansion program, the NextGen Bus Network, the Beltline's approaching completion, the autonomous shuttle pilot, the arrival of AVs, and the rapid growth of micromobility collectively represent a genuine shift in the region's transportation environment. At the same time, the region faces structural headwinds: hybrid work reducing the commute trips that justify peak-hour transit investment; suburban growth patterns generating origin-destination pairs that the hub-and-spoke network cannot efficiently serve; persistent governance and funding fragmentation; and the ever-present risk that AV adoption could undercut the case for expansion of traditional transit solutions.

The planning imperative is not to predict a single future and optimize for it, but to build a transit strategy that is resilient across a range of plausible futures. That is a high bar. The symposium is an opportunity to identify where current plans clear it, where they fall short, and what changes in investment, governance, and design practice would close the gap.