

BeltLine, PATH meet on trail; ignore public input on route

by [John F. Schaffner](#)

[write the author](#)

December 28, 2007

An email sent Dec. 18 to the leadership of the Brookwood Hills, Peachtree Hills and Piedmont Heights neighborhoods makes it clear that BeltLine planners and leadership met with the PATH Foundation sometime between Oct. 30 and Nov. 27 and decided to virtually ignore public sentiment against early proposed PATH routes through the Armour Drive area and again route the trail along and through a conservation easement owned by the Brookwood Hills neighborhood.

It became evident at a Nov. 27 BeltLine Studyarea 7 Steering Committee meeting that BeltLine and PATH officials had decided to revert back to an earlier trail alignment that three surrounding neighborhoods previously had been assured would not be part of the final Master Plan for Studyarea 7.

In the email, Jonathan Lewis, senior project manager for the BeltLine within the city's Bureau of Planning, wrote: "Between the 10/30 Study Group meeting and our Steering Committee meeting on 11/27, we met with the PATH Foundation to discuss trail options throughout the Study Area, which affected our thinking in the area."

Lewis' email was in response to one sent to him by Rod Cook, head of long range planning for the Brookwood Hills neighborhoods.

Cook wrote to Lewis: "I was very disappointed when I reviewed the map representing the most up-to-date plan for the Beltline's Sub Area 7. It was surprising to see the proposed route of the PATH located along Armour Drive and Clayton Road, at least partly on property owned by Brookwood Hills and covered by a Conservation Easement. As you well know, this is a key issue for Brookwood Hills. It was the primary issue we focused on in our meeting with you and Tina Arbes (COO for the BeltLine). Putting the PATH in this location is totally inconsistent with our conversations and contradicts what our neighborhood believed to be a mutual understanding and agreement with the BeltLine planning team," he wrote.

Cook further pointed out, "It is also inconsistent with the planning maps presented at the last two BeltLine Study Group meetings, and it ignores the public input provided by representatives of the adjacent neighborhoods to be connected by the PATH. To our knowledge, there was no public support for the route shown on the map presented at the Nov. 27th Steering Committee meeting. Also, to our knowledge, no one from PATH has attended any of the recent public planning meetings to explain why the route proposed by PATH is superior to the route supported by the neighborhoods.

In his reply email, Lewis said: "As you know, there is no silver bullet to get from Peachtree Creek to the BeltLine ROW (right of way) on the other side of I-85. The combination of Buford Highway, I-85, MARTA rail, and Norfolk Southern rail amount to a huge challenge for the trail.

"The simplest way to get through this huge barrier is to cross under MARTA and Norfolk Southern along Armour Drive, which allows us to follow Mayson Street to the tunnel under I-85. As we discussed in our meeting, this has many advantages over other options. Primarily it is more direct and minimizes extensive bridges to get over the MARTA and Norfolk Southern lines. But it also includes the following major barriers that we are not going to resolve in this Master Planning process:

The Armour tunnel under MARTA will likely need to be widened.

BeltLine transit may use the tunnel, which would make it difficult to also fit the trail.

There is a large grade change between Armour Dr and Mayson Street.

"Because of these issues we have to continue to show a feasible option through the Armour Ottley Area."

Lewis explained that "previous studies (2004, 2005) showed the BeltLine trail running along Clear Creek through the Brookwood conservation easement, but per your neighborhood's request, this option has been taken off the table," he said in the Dec. 18 email. "At the first two Study Group Meetings in August and September, we showed a trail option running along the street edge of Armour Drive and Clayton Road. After we met, we shortened the length of the trail along Armour and showed it cutting through the industrial park; an option that requires the acquisition of existing parking areas or buildings, a difficult and expensive, but not impossible, proposition," he stated.

"The reason we restored the trail all the way to Clayton as you saw on 11/27, was based on findings from the PATH Foundation about getting across Norfolk Southern and MARTA," Lewis said. "If the trail goes all the way to Clayton Road, it can use ramps to get up and over the tracks and ramps to get back down. But as we discussed in our meeting, this option has several disadvantages: it is indirect, you all oppose it, and the ramps would be expensive.

"If we cross through the middle of the industrial area, ramps are not an option. The only way to get over the pair of tracks is with elevators," Lewis said. "This option is less attractive from a maintenance perspective (elevators break down and people defecate in them) and it would also be disruptive to the experience of travelling around the BeltLine Trail to have to ride up one elevator, cross a short bridge, and take another elevator back down."

He told the email recipients that something to keep in mind about the option along Armour Drive is that most of the trail would be in public right-of-way. There is 50' of ROW and only about 30' is needed curb-to-curb, he said.

"All that said," Lewis wrote, "at this stage, we need to keep both Armour Drive options on the table. So what is next? I think it would be helpful for us to meet in the field with

the PATH Foundation and visit the various options." He said he is available Jan. 2, or Jan. 3.

In his email Cook had pointed out that Brookwood Hills has been supportive of the BeltLine concept and has participated "in good faith with the planning process. We believe the other neighborhoods are doing the same, and there has been a high degree of coordination and cooperation between the various neighborhoods located in the Beltline's Sub Area 7." Speaking for Brookwood Hills, Cook added, "We now find it very difficult to understand why the BeltLine planning team would risk weakening this relationship by arbitrarily eliminating or changing key understandings important to one or more of the neighborhoods involved, when it is clear that the unexplained change would ignite a negative reaction.

"If one of the key goals of the BeltLine is to provide greater connectivity between one or more neighborhoods by way of a path or a trail," Cook added, "why would the route preferred and supported by the neighborhoods involved be changed without prior discussion or explanation? Furthermore, how could the planning team view the route proposed by PATH favorably when it is certain to create intense opposition?"