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## To Woo Millennials, Atlanta Considers Covering Highways With Parks

Proposals draw inspiration from Dallas project



Klyde Warren Park, built atop a highway in downtown Dallas, has become a model for other American cities. PHOTO: ASHLEY LANDIS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By *Cameron McWhirter*

168 COMMENTS

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ATLANTA—Leaders of this southern city want to draw more young workers, and their strategy includes covering congested downtown highways with acres of green park land.

Jennifer Ball, who works with a business group promoting a plan to cover over a section of interstate downtown, said cities such as Atlanta that in the past neglected their urban centers need to make improvements to compete for tech jobs and millennials.

“The urban core just has to be attractive,” she said.

### Stitching the City

Advocates say a ‘deck park’ built atop the I-75/I-85 freeways in downtown Atlanta would create open space and revive the area.



Downtown Atlanta where “The Stitch” would go. PHOTO: GOOGLE



A rendering of the platform. PHOTO: CENTRAL ATLANTA PROGRESS

As living and working in walkable urban centers becomes more popular, interest has risen in such projects, which are often called deck parks. Dallas completed a \$112 million, 5.2-acre park over the Woodall Rodgers Freeway in 2012, sparking commercial and residential development around it. It now draws crowds for food trucks, a reading area, a playground and free concerts.

Since then, dozens of deck parks have been proposed in about 30 cities including Philadelphia, Denver and Los Angeles, said James Burnett, a landscape architect whose firm works on many such plans, including two in Atlanta.

“Open space drives real estate values through the roof,” he said. “It was this big cavern and now it’s a green oasis.”

Backers of deck parks say they could help lure tech companies seeking to expand their presence outside of Silicon Valley. Critics say they often benefit developers and siphon valuable dollars—either through direct government support or tax-financing plans—from more pressing needs such as road repairs, expanded public transit and affordable housing.

As the U.S. boomed in the last century, new highways divided many cities with noisy rivers of traffic. Neighborhood activists in some areas were able to stop highways or force small deck parks to be built over roadways. A portion of Manhattan’s FDR Drive is covered by a park deck, and the Brooklyn Heights Promenade was built over the Brooklyn Queens Expressway. But many poorer neighborhoods, often with large minority populations, lacked the political clout to stop or modify highway projects.

Building deck parks “isn’t really a new idea, it’s just now we are ready to spend the money” in postrecession years, said Francesca Russello Ammon, a University of Pennsylvania assistant professor of city and regional planning and author of “Bulldozer: Demolition and Clearance of the Postwar Landscape.”

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Current interest is high. Delegations from other cities, including Atlanta, have come to Dallas to learn about its park. The \$112 million cost was tough to line up, but eventually the project secured money from the City of Dallas, the Texas Department of Transportation and other sources. A nonprofit runs the park and raises millions needed for the annual cost of park maintenance, Mr. Burnett said.

The city broke ground early in 2018 on another deck park, which will cover over part of an interstate near the Dallas Zoo.

Charlie McCabe, director for the Trust for Public Land’s center for city park excellence, said after the success in Dallas, a southern city known for sprawl, many developers decided “it could happen anywhere.”

“I’m glad to see them re-emerging,” he added.

While a large number of projects are being considered across the country, only a handful are under construction. It can be difficult to get cooperation among city, state and federal authorities, as well as donors, business leaders and developers, Mr. McCabe said.

In Atlanta, three plans are under consideration. Each has backing from powerful business groups or executives.

The “Stitch” plan—which preliminary cost estimates put at more than \$300 million—would create about 14 acres of new park land, attract businesses and apartment complexes and revive an area “that long lost its luster,” said A.J. Robinson, president of Central Atlanta Progress, the group pushing the Stitch.

“We decided we needed to reconnect what the interstate disconnected,” he said.

Early in 2019, the group plans to release a report on the feasibility and cost of creating and maintaining the park. A team of national experts with the Urban Land Institute is scheduled to visit in February to review the plan and offer advice, according to Central Atlanta Progress officials.

Another plan with an estimated \$250 million price tag proposes covering part of busy Georgia State Route 400 near a shopping mall. A third would cover portions of the connected Interstates 75 and 85 near Georgia Tech and Midtown Atlanta.

Trae Payton, a manager at a dog kennel and grooming business near the proposed Stitch, said he would welcome the deck park and any spinoff development in the area, which he described as “sketchy at night.”

“What’s the downside?” he said. “I’m always for more green space.”

But Jennifer Thompson, who has lived in a nearby apartment for three years, said the proposed park “will become a mini-Skid Row,” attracting more homeless to the area, while other infrastructure problems like potholes abound.

“I don’t really need a new park,” she said. “Can we fix our streets?”

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