

An architectural rendering of a modern urban development. The scene is viewed from an elevated perspective looking northwest. In the foreground, a large, vibrant green lawn is populated with people sitting and walking. A circular plaza with a fountain and a central sculpture is adjacent to the lawn. A winding path leads through landscaped areas with trees and grass. In the background, several modern high-rise buildings with glass and metal facades are visible under a clear blue sky. A prominent building on the left has a distinctive tower with a glass-enclosed top section. The overall atmosphere is bright and contemporary.

Reconnecting a  
Torn Urban Fabric

FY 2022 Reconnecting  
Communities Pilot Program  
Grant Application

Submitted by City of Atlanta  
in partnership with Atlanta Downtown  
Improvement District

# THE STITCH

# CONTENTS

## **Project Overview**

Project Brief .....	1
Site History: Highway and Urban Renewal Impacts.....	2
Lasting Impacts on Social and Economic Well-being for Atlanta .....	2
Project Location and Map .....	3

## **Existing Conditions and Project Need**

Surrounding Area Population and Demographics .....	4
Transportation .....	4
Housing and Jobs .....	7

## **Project Purpose, Features, Benefits**

Mobility, Accessibility, and Transportation Safety Improvements .....	9
Community and Economic Development.....	11
Environment and Health.....	12
Summary of Benefits .....	13

## **Response to Merit Criteria**

#1: Equity, Environmental Justice, and Community Engagement.....	14
#2: Mobility and Community Connectivity.....	16
#3: Community-based Stewardship, Management, and Partnerships.....	17
#4: Equitable Development and Shared Prosperity .....	18

**Appendix A:** Project Readiness – Environmental Risk

**Appendix A Attachment:** NEPA Review Assessment

**Appendix B:** Benefit-Cost Analysis

**Appendix C:** Budget Narrative

**Appendix D:** Letters of Financial Commitment and Support



## CITY OF ATLANTA

55 TRINITY AVE, S.W. ATLANTA, GEORGIA 30303-0300  
TEL (404) 330-6100

ANDRE DICKENS  
MAYOR

October 10, 2022

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg  
Secretary of Transportation  
U.S. Department of Transportation  
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE  
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

I am writing to express my enthusiastic support of the City of Atlanta's Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program Capital Construction Grant Application in support of The Stitch.

The Stitch, a  $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile cap of Interstates 75/85, known locally as the "Downtown Connector," will seamlessly reconnect the torn urban fabric of our Downtown with a 14-acre park, extensive transportation improvements, and sustainable infrastructure. The Stitch perfectly aligns with the objective of the Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program: it mitigates past harm resulting from the construction of the Downtown Connector and subsequent eradication of established low-income Black communities. It does so through new affordable housing, expansion of safe mobility options, creation of new access to economic opportunities & community resources, and investments in climate-change resilient infrastructure. These reconnecting threads are described in more detail below:

### **Affordable Housing Supply & Equitable Development**

A top priority of my administration is building or preserving 20,000 affordable housing units by the end of 2030. The Stitch is projected to generate 3,000 – 3,400 new affordable housing units within a half-mile of the project and is a key component of solving the affordable housing deficit in Atlanta. Furthermore, this new affordable housing will be part of a reimagined north Downtown district that has unrivaled access to affordable transportation options, jobs, recreational opportunities, civic services, and other resources.

### **The Stitch Key Project Information:**

#### **Project Type**

Interstate barrier mitigation, multimodal transportation, sustainable infrastructure, community development

#### **Project Location:**

Downtown Atlanta, Georgia

#### **Project Sponsors:**

The City of Atlanta,  
The Atlanta Downtown Improvement District

#### **FY 2022 Funding Amount Requested:**

\$10.5M for project design, engineering, and permitting

#### **Estimated Project Cost:**

\$713M

#### **Projected Economic Benefit:**

\$3 Billion (private investment)

**Expansion of Safe Mobility Options**

The City of Atlanta is one of the fastest growing major cities in the country, with some experts projecting that its population could more than double by 2040. The Stitch will help us prepare for this denser future by rethinking how we move people and goods around the City. The Stitch transforms north Downtown's transportation network from Interstate-oriented to community, people, and transit-oriented. The Stitch accomplishes this using several strategies including implementing Complete Streets treatments on existing roadways, reconnecting streets that were disconnected during interstate construction, and both operational and user experience upgrades to the Civic Center MARTA station.

**Creating New Access to Economic Opportunities & Community Resources**

A necessary companion of a successful affordable housing project is providing pathways to build individual and family equity through affordable transportation, good-paying jobs, and access to resources such as healthcare, parks, and civic services. The Stitch is located in an area with unparalleled access to such amenities including direct walking, biking, or transit access to multiple major employment centers; major healthcare providers such as Emory Midtown Hospital; two major universities, and an array of community and public resources. Furthermore, the new expected development will unlock opportunities for small businesses to grow. Finally, residents of Downtown will also see health and quality-of-life benefits associated with direct access to a new 14-acre park.

**Meeting the Challenge of Climate Change**

Finally, the Stitch will help the City combat urban heat island effect, tree canopy loss, water pollution, and impaired air quality associated with vehicle use and congestion. The Stitch's 14-acres of park space will function as a giant green-roof – capturing, filtering, and reusing rainwater to supply park irrigation and other greywater demands. This will have the added benefit of alleviating current flooding on the Interstate and Downtown. In addition, multimodal transportation improvements and the introduction of dense infill development near high-quality transit will reduce individual energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. Finally, shoulder upgrades on the Downtown Connector and other potential Interstate operational and safety upgrades such as the removal of interstate exit ramps will reduce vehicular tailpipe emissions.

This immense suite of benefits for the City of Atlanta are not possible without the creation of the Stitch. While the City and its partners are committed to advancing the Stitch, we require Federal support to make this project a reality. As such, we greatly appreciate your consideration of our application of The Stitch for the Reconnecting Communities Pilot Grant Program and your continued support of The Stitch. Please don't hesitate to contact my office with any questions you may have.

Sincerely,



Andre Dickens  
Mayor

# PROJECT OVERVIEW

## THE STITCH

### A Transformational Transportation Investment

#### The project will build a cap over Interstates

**75 and 85**, (I-75/85, known locally as the “Downtown Connector”), reconnecting the disrupted street grid and the neighborhoods surrounding north Downtown Atlanta. The cap will improve the overall transportation network in Downtown Atlanta by transforming existing car-oriented streets into complete streets, developing an off-street bus facility for local and commuter buses, and renovating an existing heavy rail station. The cap structure will spur the development of a new urban neighborhood with affordable housing, direct access to heavy rail, and a 14-acre park where an interstate and vacant and underutilized land sits today.

Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program (RCP) funding is crucial to advancing engineering of the Stitch. RCP funding will support preliminary design and engineering of the structure, transportation systems, and park elements, as well as supporting environmental permitting approvals and detailed cost estimates. This work is anticipated to produce project approvals and design development that will advance the project to a shovel-ready state.

#### Site History: A Once Vibrant Community Destroyed by Highway Building and Urban Renewal

The 7.4-mile Downtown Connector opened in September 1964 after 16 years of construction. Intended to bring predominantly white commuters from the suburbs into the Central Business District (CBD), the interstate intentionally wove around the CBD and through the “depressed” neighborhoods where it was most “feasible to purchase suitable rights-of-way.”

**The construction of the Connector displaced an estimated 24,000 people and separated the historic Black neighborhoods of Buttermilk Bottom and Butler Street from jobs and services in Downtown Atlanta. Urban renewal programs in the neighborhoods surrounding the Connector further displaced an estimated 17,000 individuals, resulting in 41,000 displaced individuals.**<sup>1</sup> As a corollary to the interstate system, city planners converted many of the streets in Downtown from two-way to one-way to better aid traffic flow. In the 1980s, the Connector was expanded throughout, further widening a chasm of vacancy through Downtown.

**By 1967, the Buttermilk Bottom and Butler Street communities no longer existed. A combination of highway construction and urban renewal had obliterated housing, realigned streets, and further separated Black Atlantans from the densest employment center in the region.**

<sup>1</sup>Report on the relocation of individuals, families and businesses [to the] Atlanta Community Improvement Program: sections one and two, City of Atlanta, Georgia

<sup>2</sup>Potteiger and Purinton, 1998



**FIGURE 1.** Housing stock in Buttermilk Bottom before the Interstate Highway System



**Atlanta Slum Tour:** Touring Atlanta’s rundown “Buttermilk Bottoms” area, a group of city ministers inspect one of blight areas that will be redeveloped under a proposed multi-million dollar slum clearance program.

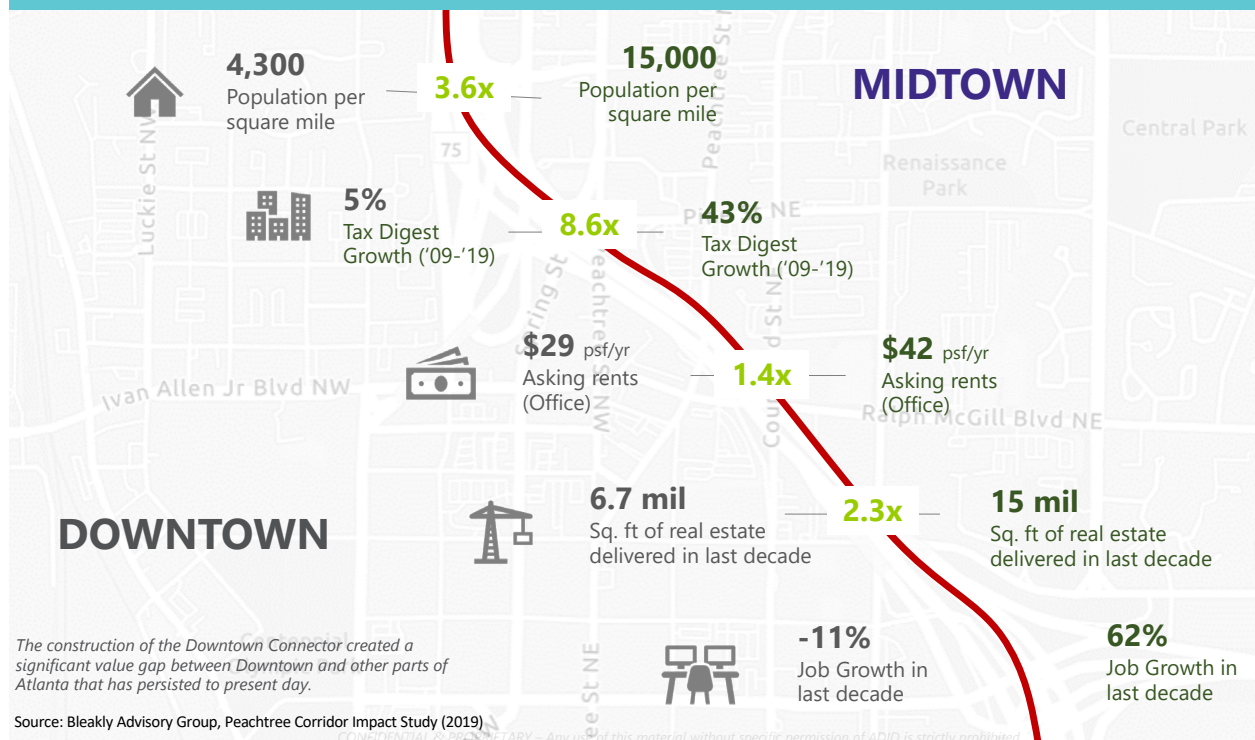
**FIGURE 2.** A tour of Buttermilk Bottom before urban renewal razed the neighborhood (1959)

### Lasting Impacts on Social and Economic Well-being for Atlanta

A persistent and steady decline of Atlanta’s once-vibrant Downtown community was driven by a combination of “White Flight” and the resulting suburbanization of Atlanta, including the disruption caused by the construction of the Connector. Over the decades, the physical barrier created by the

Connector significantly stymied development. Increased vehicular access to Downtown resulted in increased demand for parking, and much of Downtown’s historic fabric succumbed to demolition to make space for parking lots and garages. Compared to nearby areas, Downtown’s land and real property values have lagged for decades, as seen in Figure 3.

**FIGURE 3.** The persistent value gap from the Connector





**BUTTERMILK BOTTOM** was a vibrant community of African American-run schools, churches, and businesses. It was a district of shotgun houses and juke joints, low-lying and poorly drained – a haven, a community—indeed a place—created by segregation. **Former residents were displaced when the city leveled and cleared the district, and streets were realigned or removed.** The transformation was so extensive that most people had even forgotten or never even knew that there had ever been a place called Buttermilk Bottom.”<sup>2</sup>



**FIGURE 4.** The construction of the Downtown Connector and other “urban renewal” projects eliminated the Buttermilk Bottom and Butler Street communities. (Photo: Russell Stough Miller)

### Project Location and Map

The Stitch is in the heart of Downtown Atlanta; it is centered on Atlanta’s historical ‘Main Street’— Peachtree Street. Running along a ridgeline through the heart of the City, Peachtree Street has been a hub of commerce since pre-European settlement, and it continues to be the epicenter of major cultural events and civic gatherings for the region. In the core of Downtown, the Stitch will strengthen both the City of Atlanta and the entire metro economy by bolstering the regional center for jobs, housing, entertainment, recreation, and culture. Figure 5 shows the site of the Stitch in relation to Atlanta proper and the region as a whole.

**FIGURE 5.** Location Map



<sup>2</sup>Potteiger and Purinton, 1998

## EXISTING CONDITIONS & PROJECT NEED

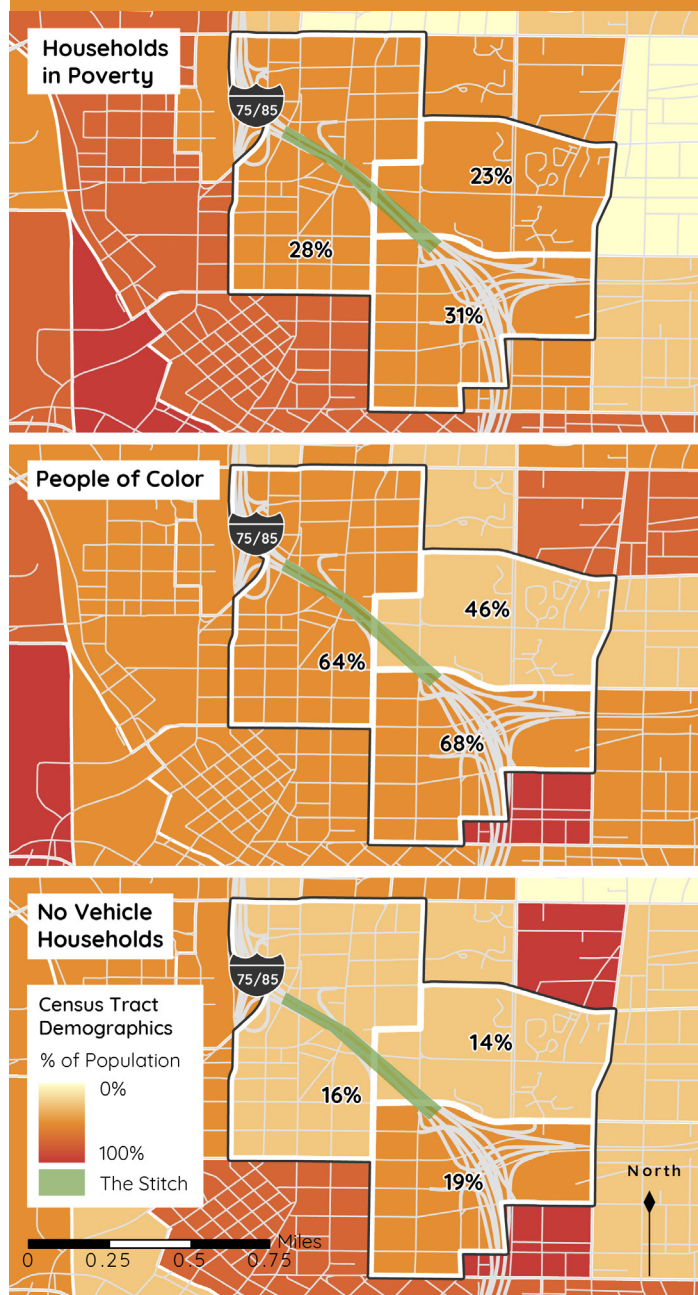
Located in Atlanta’s historic city center, the Stitch is both a local and regionally significant investment needed to overcome the physical barrier that I-75/85 poses to Downtown Atlanta’s revitalization. As the City of Atlanta’s population continues to surge (it is predicted to more than double from 500,000 to 1.2 million people by 2040<sup>2</sup>), density will need to be strategically concentrated in already developed areas with transit connectivity, such as Downtown<sup>3</sup>. This densification should foster the mode shift to biking, walking, and taking transit that is envisioned for Atlanta’s future.<sup>4</sup>

### Surrounding Area Population and Demographics

The Stitch is located in an Area of Persistent Poverty (Fulton County, Georgia census tracts 18, 19, and 28). Within project census tracts, 23-31% of residents are below the poverty line. This is approximately double the rate in Fulton County as a whole. The per capita income is \$28,127, which is approximately three-fifths of the amount in the City of Atlanta (\$47,424)<sup>5</sup>.

While the most direct benefits of the project will be felt in census tracts 18, 19, and 28, the project, which spans between Downtown Atlanta and Midtown Atlanta, will impact the entire City of Atlanta, the metropolitan region, and beyond.

FIGURE 6. Demographics surrounding the Stitch



### Transportation

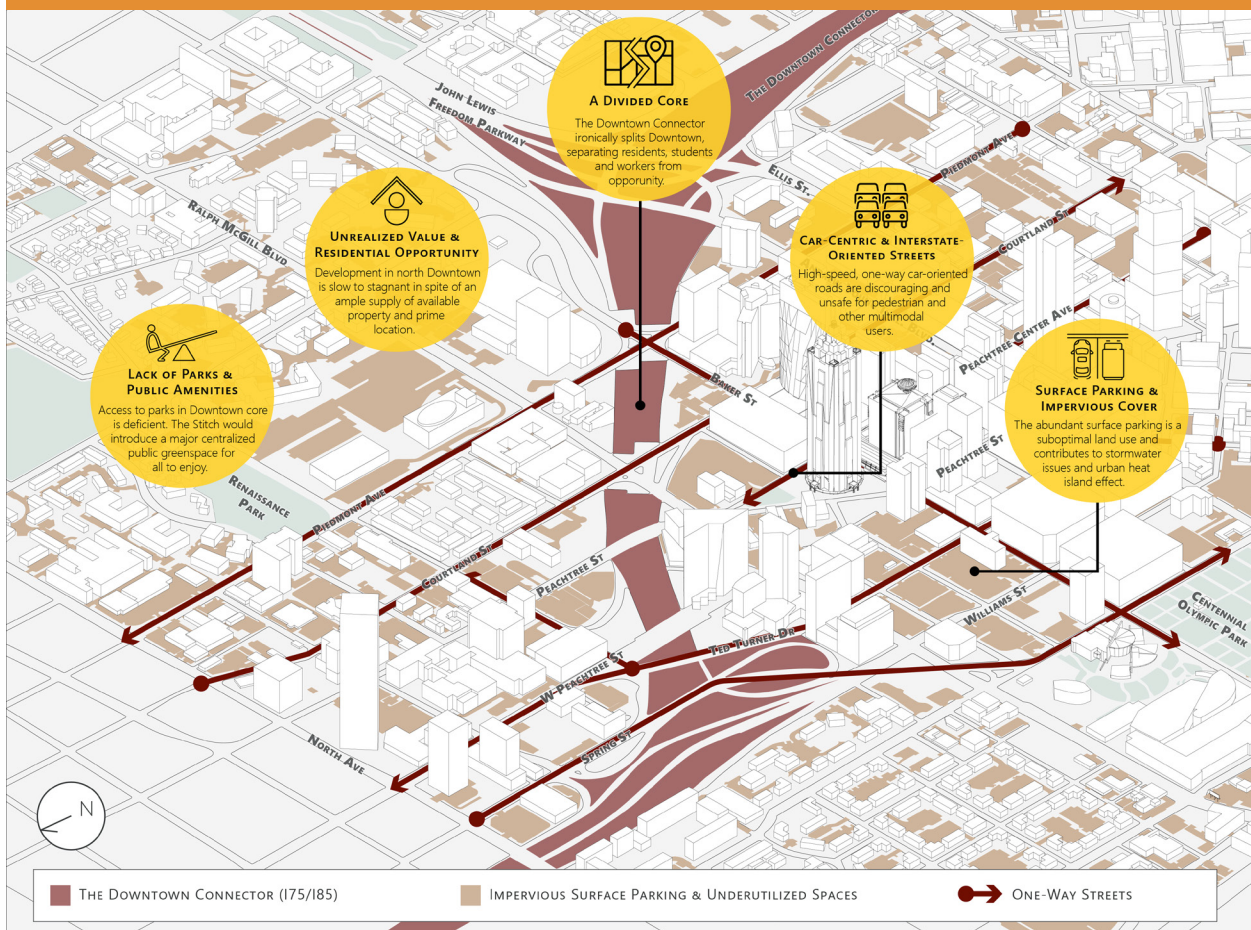
The Stitch site is within a disconnected Downtown street grid and directly on top of a ¾ mile segment of I-75/85 between Ted Turner Drive and Piedmont Avenue. The 14-lane interstate separates Old Fourth Ward,

<sup>3</sup>Atlanta City Design: <https://www.atlcitydesign.com/city-design>  
<sup>4</sup>Atlanta City Design: <https://www.atlcitydesign.com/city-design>

<sup>5</sup>Atlanta Transportation Plan: <https://www.atlantaga.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/48083/637353603332230000>



FIGURE 7. Downtown Barriers Created by Interstate I-75/85



## CURRENT BARRIERS AROUND THE STITCH

### Housing

- ▶ Low housing supply
- ▶ Low housing diversity
- ▶ Declining affordability (both downtown and across Atlanta)

### Transportation

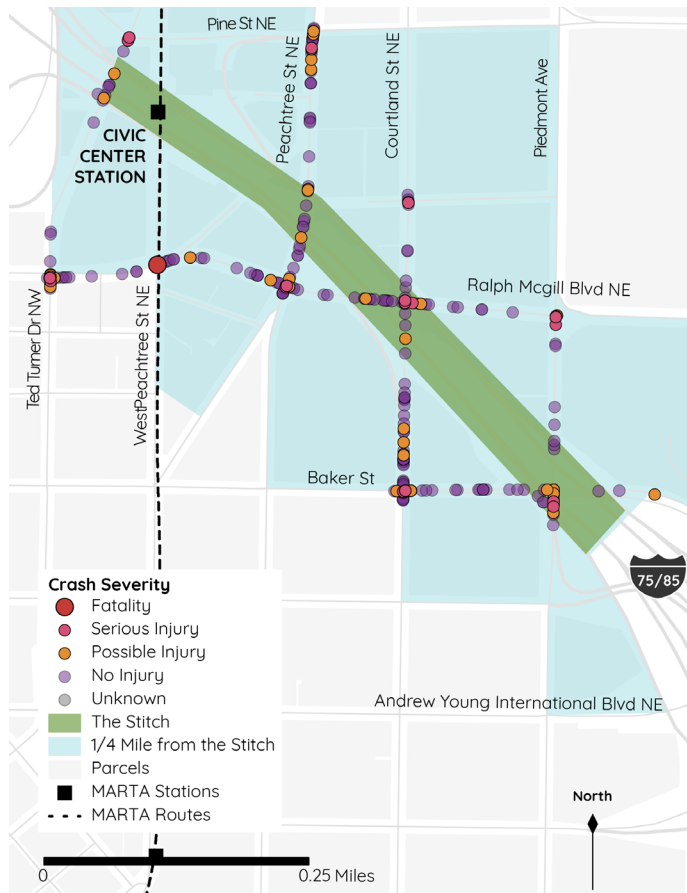
- ▶ Underutilized MARTA Civic Center station
- ▶ Underperforming regional bus connectivity
- ▶ Lack of multimodal transportation options
- ▶ Transportation safety issues

### Economic Opportunity

- ▶ Low housing access to jobs
- ▶ Low housing access to resources and goods
- ▶ Lagging property values
- ▶ Lack of investment
- ▶ Slow post-COVID recovery
- ▶ Stagnant job growth

### Quality of Life

- ▶ Low access to parks
- ▶ Low access to healthcare
- ▶ High levels of noise and air pollution



**FIGURE 8.** Reported crashes on surface streets 2017-2021

Midtown, and Downtown, creating a physical impediment to accessing transit, jobs, healthcare, and education. The roads crossing the Stitch also create a maze of barriers. All seven roadways within the Stitch footprint are currently 4-lanes or wider, and the only bike lane that exists today stretches for one block along Peachtree Street. In the past five years, there were 1,065 crashes on surface streets within ¼ mile of the project, 8 being serious injury crashes, and 1 fatality. On Interstate 75/85, there were 2,285 total crashes, 64 serious injury crashes, and 7 fatality crashes within ¼ mile of the Stich in the last five years.

The MARTA Civic Center Heavy-Rail Transit Station sits above the Downtown Connector and is the primary transfer point for metro Atlanta regional commuter bus service, serving nearly 1,000 commuter-bus-to-MARTA transfers each day. Despite this, it is in the bottom third for station ridership for the entire MARTA system, and it has the second lowest ridership among Downtown transit stations due to its poor connectivity to surrounding destinations. The bus queuing and loading at Civic Center Station occurs on-street along West Peachtree Street as there is currently no off-street bus facility in Downtown Atlanta.



**FIGURE 9.** Buses Staging at Civic Center MARTA Station. 43 busses per hour stage during the peak period without a dedicated bus facility.

The future location of the Stitch is the missing link in Atlanta’s growing network of off-street, protected bicycle trails. To the east, at the Piedmont Avenue terminus of the Stitch, the Baker-Highland Connector Trail and the Freedom Park Trail connect

Downtown Atlanta to the Atlanta Beltline just two miles away. Ultimately this network extends to the Stone Mountain Trail even further east. To the west, a trail beginning at Centennial Olympic Park connects Downtown to the Atlanta Beltline on the Westside and further to the Procter Creek Greenway, with plans all the way to the Silver Comet. These two trails— and the broader regional network with Downtown Atlanta at its hub— bring cyclists to Downtown.

**Parks**

Currently, Downtown Atlanta only has seven acres of parkland per 1,000 daytime residents, with the largest parks located

on the edges and a severe lack of green-space amenities in the center. The current parkland falls short of Project Greenspace’s goal of 10 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents citywide, a goal that matches the National Recreation and Park Association’s open space goal. Approximately 42% of Downtown must walk five minutes or more to access open space.

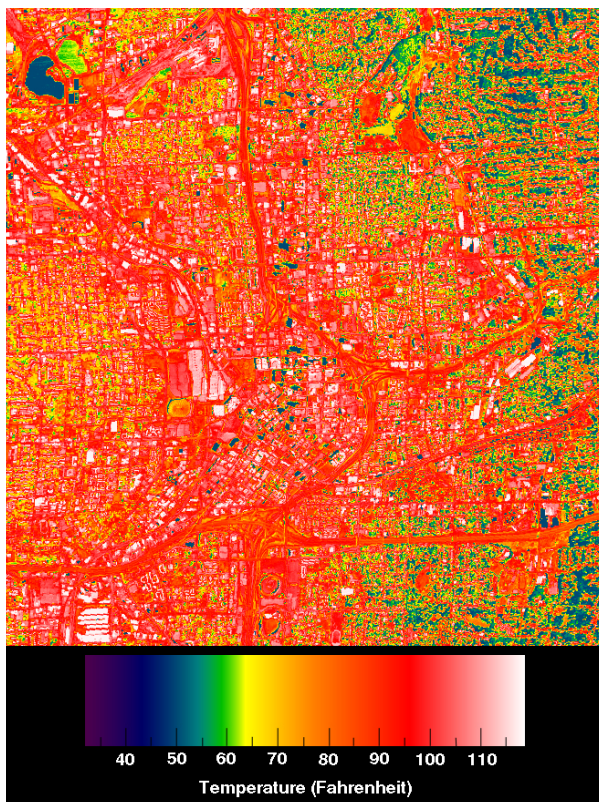
**Surrounding Land Use**

Today, due to the interstate, the area surrounding the future Stitch site is comprised of mostly underperforming sites straddling the 13-lane wide Downtown Connector. Within ½ mile of the Stitch site, 43% of property is surface parking lots, parking garages, and streets (including the Interstate), 27% is buildings, and only 0.65% is tree canopy coverage and open greenspace.

**Housing and Jobs**

As seen in Table 1, only 3% of Atlanta’s population lives in Downtown Atlanta, despite being one of the most density permissive areas in Atlanta. Comparatively, Downtown has 111,512 jobs, approximately 19% of the City’s total jobs. Only 1.5% of Downtown employees live and work Downtown, while the remaining 98% of workers commute from outside the submarket, the majority via single-occupant vehicles. Approximately 83% of employed Downtown residents leave to work outside of Downtown.<sup>6</sup>

The low housing-to-jobs ratio brings adverse transportation patterns in the region and threatens Atlanta’s overall economic competitiveness. Affordable, transit-adjacent housing for employees is essential to attracting and retaining a diverse workforce. Without it, employers add unsustainable cost burdens on their workforce and lessen their quality of life.



**FIGURE 10.** The high number of impervious surfaces and lack of tree canopy is the primary contributor to the urban heat island present in Downtown Atlanta. (Image Source: NASA)

### Affordable Housing

Within half a mile of the Stitch, there are currently around 876 units of affordable housing, including 90 units of permanent supportive housing units for those exiting homelessness, as shown in Figure 11.

Looking ahead, there is opportunity to build 3,000 or more units of affordable housing within that same geography. Most notably, the 19-acre former Civic Center site, just one block from the Stitch, will include over 1,300 units of new residential housing, 50% (525 units) of which will be set aside as affordable for those making less than 80% of the area median income. Faith-based landowners like St. Luke's Episcopal Church and Atlanta First United Methodist are also advancing plans to deliver significant affordable housing developments on their land. In addition to these faith-based and public agency landowners, there is an additional 55 acres of vacant and underutilized land that will be targeted for affordable housing development.

**TABLE 1. Jobs to Housing Ratios for Downtown, Midtown, and the City of Atlanta**

	Downtown	Midtown	City of Atlanta
Percent of City Land	1%	0.8%	100%
Residents (Percent of Atlanta's Population)	14,500 (3%)	18,692 (4%)	479,098
Jobs (Percent of Atlanta's Population)	111,512 (19%)	82,076 (14%)	589,210
Job Growth 2010-2019	-11.8%	62%	27%
Resident to Jobs Ratio	1 to 7.7	1 to 4.4	1 to 1.2
Tax Generated	7.5%	10.3%	100%
Tax Digest Growth from 2010-2019	5%	43%	32%

**FIGURE 11. Affordable Housing Partners in Proximity of the Stitch**



# PROJECT PURPOSE FEATURES & BENEFITS

While there is no bringing back the communities that were lost during the construction of the interstate, the Stitch would close the chasm the interstate created in Downtown Atlanta, while addressing the City's affordable housing crisis, providing access to opportunity, and correcting the perpetual Downtown value gap resulting from highway construction and urban renewal.

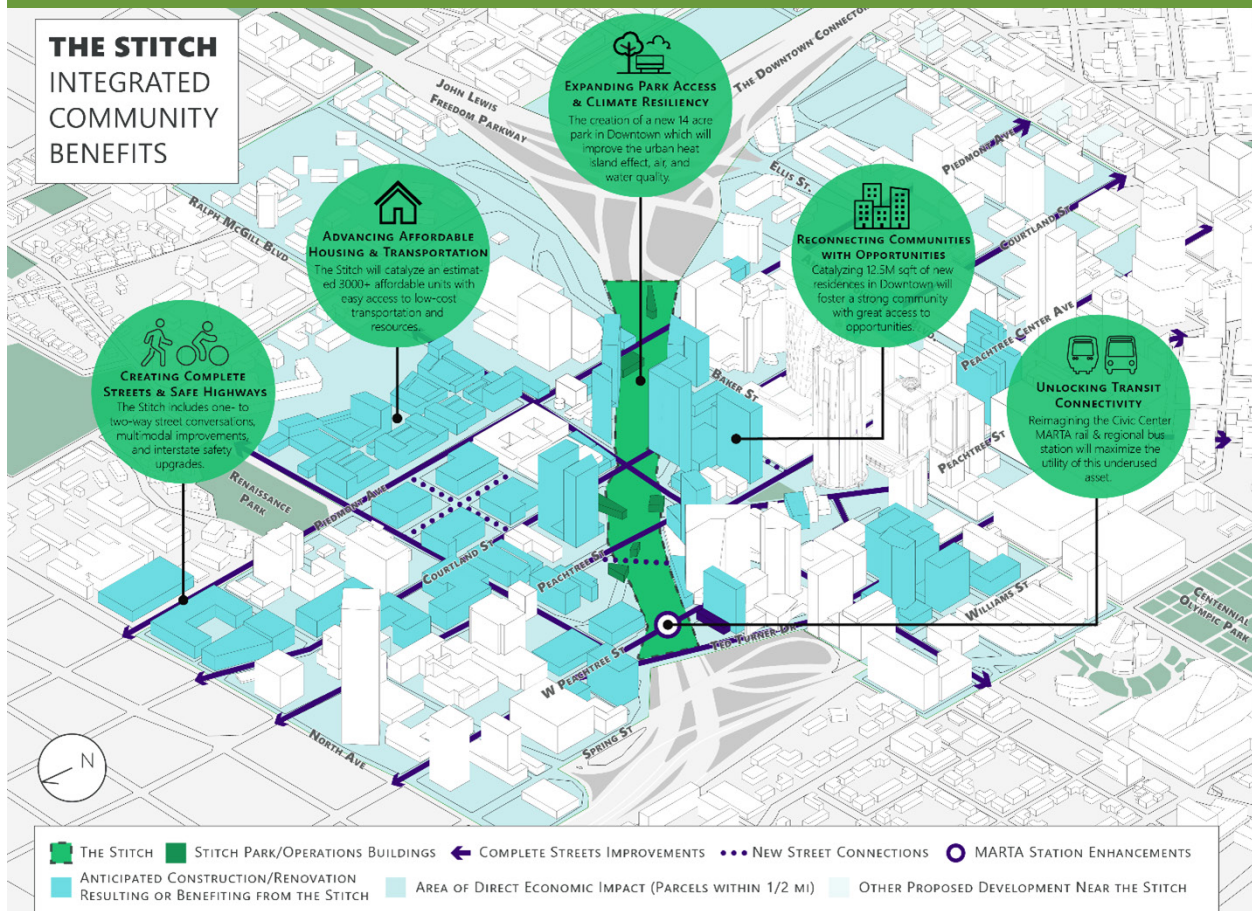
The project will build a 14-acre cap park over the Downtown Connector, reconnect the disrupted street grid, improve the multimodality of the existing streets as they cross the interstate, develop a new off-street bus-rail transfer facility, and renovate an existing heavy rail station. Located in an area of persistent poverty, the Stitch will redress, repurpose, and reconnect the long-standing physical division between the Downtown, Midtown, and Old Fourth Ward communities that has persisted for 50 years.

## Mobility, Accessibility, and Transportation Safety Improvements

### Transit Access and Efficiency

In addition to closing the connectivity gap, the Stitch will support the City of Atlanta's ambitious goal of reducing drive-alone trips from 54% to 35% by 2040<sup>7</sup>. To achieve this goal and deliver residents to

FIGURE 12. Anticipated Benefits of the Stitch



<sup>7</sup>Atlanta's Transportation Plan: <https://www.atlantaga.gov/home/showdocument?id=48083>

job centers, much of the travel will need to be by transit, specifically by bus. However, Downtown’s current infrastructure is not supportive of large local or regional bus volumes and an off-street loading and staging facility is needed. The Stitch will include an intermodal connection with direct interstate high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane access and platform-level heavy rail access with transit-oriented development (TOD) on top of the Civic Center MARTA Station.

**Multimodal Safe Streets**

The Stitch will include the re-design of all existing roads in the project footprint—including two on Atlanta’s high-injury network— as more complete multimodal streets to support the new urban fabric. This will slow speeds and improve safety for those traveling to and through Downtown in cars, on bikes, and on foot. Identified street design elements include converting one-way arterials to two-way streets with dedicated turn lanes, wider sidewalks

buffered with street trees and green infrastructure, as well as dedicated, protected bike lanes. One historic street connection over I-75/85 (Alexander Street) will also be re-established by the Stitch.

**Mainline Interstate Components**

The area of I-75/85 that will be capped by the Stitch suffers from significant flooding and has sub-standard shoulders. The Stitch will mitigate these deficiencies and contribute to the state of good repair of the existing roadway and structures. The Stitch project will widen the shoulders and rehabilitate or replace the aging retaining walls along the I-75/85 Stitch corridor. The Stitch is also studying and considering the potential to modify the current Williams/Spring interchange, as well as close the Peachtree/ Pine and Courtland Street exit ramps. A major benefit of the Stitch infrastructure to the mainline interstate is that it shifts the preference away from using I-75/85 for short local trips. Instead, the reconnected

**FIGURE 13.** Example of a Downtown Atlanta one- to two-way conversion concept. The Stitch will pursue this type of complete streets transformation along major one-way streets that intersect the project.



local-street grid or other, non-motorized modes will become the favored way to move through this area.

### Community and Economic Development

The Stitch will create a connection to education, jobs, and healthcare by bridging the gap between Downtown and Midtown. The project is flanked by two of the region’s largest healthcare facilities and two major institutions of higher learning, Georgia State and Georgia Tech. In addition to improving access to these locations, the Stitch will connect the City of Atlanta’s two largest job centers (totaling approximately 200,000 jobs) and foster broader regional job center connections via the enhanced existing heavy rail and commuter bus connectivity and operations.

### North Downtown Redevelopment

Within a 10-minute walk of the Stitch, there are nearly 80 acres of vacant or underutilized land in addition to the 14 acres of land consumed by the interstate right-of-way. The Stitch is expected to physically mitigate the negative impacts on property value caused by the I-75/85 Connector through both

noise reduction and the introduction of new urban green space. Properties within 300 meters of an urban freeway have experienced a decline of 3.6% in value due to noise pollution<sup>8</sup>. The projected mix of new land uses spurred by the Stitch on adjacent and nearby sites includes approximately 12.5M square feet of residential space and 1.5M square feet of commercial and hotel uses. Cumulatively, this represents between \$2 and \$3 million in investment yielding an estimated \$21 to \$58 million in new annual property tax revenue. All new development will be transit-oriented given its location adjacent to the Civic Center MARTA Station. This influx of residents will create a new neighborhood in north Downtown where one hasn’t existed for decades, helping grow Downtown’s labor market and economic competitiveness. This new community will in turn support the park and local businesses, and it will be a key factor in restoring the historic vibrancy and culture of Downtown Atlanta.

### Affordable Housing Opportunity

One of the primary goals of the Stitch is to dramatically increase the affordable housing supply in Downtown Atlanta, an area

**FIGURE 14.** Rendering of Potential Parkspace Created by the Stitch. The Stitch will help to increase access to Parks for Downtown residents, 42% of which have to walk more than 1/4 mile to access a park.



<sup>8</sup>Lekovich, et al. (2015). “The effects of highway development on housing prices”. Retrieved from: [https:// link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11116-015-9580-7](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11116-015-9580-7)

with inherent qualities that support low-income families by reducing living expenses through low-cost transportation and high access to jobs and resources. The development team of the Stitch is committed to ensuring that at least 20% of all new development resulting from the Stitch provides a spectrum of affordable housing options at 80% AMI level or less, which could result in 3,000 to 3,400 units of new affordable housing in Downtown Atlanta.

### Environment and Health

The construction of the Stitch will significantly increase Downtown's total green space through the introduction of a 14-acre park. The green space is expected to improve mental and physical health outcomes, particularly for marginalized and underserved populations. Similarly, the reconnected grid will improve access to active transportation infrastructure.

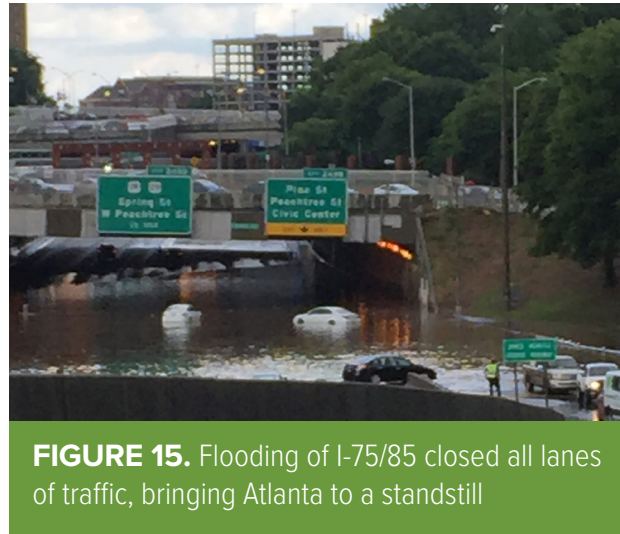
### Emission Reduction

Through the introduction of safer streets for bicycling, walking, and improved access to the heavy rail transit system, the Stitch will reduce emissions through the mode shift away from single occupancy vehicles, as well as help reduce overall local trip generation.

The off-street bus facility introduced as part of the Stitch will play a critical role in the Atlanta-Region Transit Link Authority (ATL)'s electrification of the region's commuter bus fleet. The proposed off-street bus facility would allow significantly more flexibility regional bus operators to charge their fleets near Downtown destinations.

### Stormwater Quality and Runoff Reduction

The topography of the area combined with highly impervious land cover and minimal tree canopy (Downtown has a 3% tree cov-



**FIGURE 15.** Flooding of I-75/85 closed all lanes of traffic, bringing Atlanta to a standstill

erage compared to 48% citywide) has led to an overburdened stormwater system that often floods during rain events, as seen in Figure 15. Furthermore, Atlanta's downtown is served by a combined-sewer overflow system which exacerbates water quality issues during flooding events.

The Stitch will reintroduce permeable surfaces to Downtown, and the 14-acre park will capture and filter stormwater runoff falling on site. The park is estimated to potentially capture, filter, and slow the peak runoff rate for 19M gallons of rainfall a year. A portion of this stormwater will also be stored in cisterns and reused for irrigation and other greywater uses in the park. Preliminary feasibility work suggests that the Stitch can reduce the peak stormwater flow rate between 11% and 33%.

### Urban Heat Island Effect Reduction

Downtown Atlanta is a significant urban heat island. The Stitch will reintroduce green space and needed mid-story and overstory tree canopy in Downtown, reducing the urban heat island effect. This will help reduce cooling-related energy costs and make walking in Downtown more comfortable and accessible in the warmer months.



## Summary of Benefits

In summary, the Stitch meets the grant and policy priorities of the Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program by creating the following benefits:

### Housing Supply for Atlantans from All Walks of Life

- Catalyzes 14M square feet of potential transit-oriented redevelopment
- Introduces 3,000 to 3,400 new affordable housing units
- Attracts 19,500 to 23,400 potential new Downtown residents
- Supports 30 acres of publicly owned and nonprofit-owned land for affordable development

### Safe and Effective Multimodal Transportation Options

- Adds more than a mile of shoulder upgrades on the Downtown Connector
- Applies seven or more crash modification factors resulting in an expected safety benefit of nearly \$30M
- Develops regional bus-transfer center at the Civic Center MARTA station
- Rehabs the Civic Center MARTA station
- Introduces five local street reconnections
- Considers removal of two interstate ramps
- Converts four one-way streets to two-way
- Adds four miles of new protected bike connections

### Economic Strength and Global Competitiveness

- Creates more than 13,000 new construction and permanent jobs
- Creates \$21-\$58 million property tax revenue for the City of Atlanta annually
- Creates \$2-\$3 billion in private investment
- Redresses the barrier and community harm created by the past construction of the Downtown Connector

- Repurposes and revitalizes underutilized assets, including the air space over the Connector, the Civic Center MARTA Station, the streets currently solely dedicated to vehicular throughput, and more than 66 acres of nearby vacant private land
- Focuses investment on an area of Atlanta with a persistent value gap due to the interstate
- Improves low-cost access to jobs and community resources
- Increases downtown access to high-quality, programmed greenspace through the creation of a new 14-acre park

### Climate and Sustainability

- Reduces urban heat island effect by replacing 14 acres of impervious landcover with new greenspace
- Captures, filters, and reuses up to 19 million gallons of stormwater via the 14-acre greenspace
- Replaces up to 45 acres of impervious parking lots with new development
- Reduces 12,000 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> from improved vehicular traffic congestion
- Promotes low-energy and low-emission transportation options

### Transformation

- Uncovers Atlanta communities lost to the interstate through outreach, interpretive elements, and art
- Supports local art and artists through public art and performance spaces integrated into the Stitch
- Uses multi-faceted community outreach and engagement to inform the design and program of the Stitch
- Incorporates new technologies such as electric vehicle and bus charging, smart/connected infrastructure, and publicly accessible internet.

# RESPONSE TO MERIT CRITERIA

## #1: Equity, Environmental Justice, and Community Engagement

The Stitch will improve socioeconomic and racial equity for residents of Atlanta by reducing barriers to opportunities in an area where minority and low-income populations were displaced. Maximizing the effectiveness of this investment requires a thoughtful community engagement strategy that ensures traditionally margin-



**FIGURE 16.** The Downtown Connector and other “Urban Renewal” projects ripped through and destroyed historic downtown neighborhoods. The negative impacts of these projects have left a visible scar on the urban fabric of Downtown Atlanta.

alized communities have a significant voice in shaping the Stitch’s design and program.

The Downtown Connector was intentionally planned through established low-income Black communities. These activities were racially charged methods of ridding Downtown of “blighted” areas in favor of new commercially focused development centered around the automobile. This resulted in the displacement of more than 40,000 individuals, erasing wealth and well-being for the members of those communities.

Due to the presence of the interstate, redevelopment and reinvestment in this area that was once comprised of thriving communities has been stagnant for more than half a century. Table 2 shows that the census tracts that comprise the Stitch project are in high percentiles for environmental justice indices as well as meet several of the index thresholds for historically disadvantaged communities. While there is no bringing back the Buttermilk Bottom, Butler Street, and other lost communities, the Stitch strives to recreate north Downtown Atlanta into a thriving and connected community with an equitable development ethos that yields and retains a diverse population. This will be achieved by providing new residents with access to affordable housing, low-cost transportation, parks, jobs, healthcare, and other resources while at the same time improving local air quality, noise pollution, water quality, and flooding.

Effective community engagement is critical to ensuring that the Stitch meets its equitable development goals. The Stitch’s successful 2021 RAISE Planning Grant is funding the next major step of community engagement, which will include four major components:

1. Broadly publicized virtual public information open houses, meaningful online and in-person input opportunities, and project updates via the forthcoming website and newsletter
2. Targeted and equity-focused outreach that will engage current residents living in the area and potential future residents who would benefit from

**TABLE 2.** Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool (EJScreen) Results for the Stitch

Census Tracts Intersected by the Stitch	13121001900	13121001800	13121002800
EJ Indexes	Percentile in USA	Percentile in USA	Percentile in USA
Particulate Matter 2.5	61	61	95
Ozone	61	61	95
2017 Diesel Particulate Matter	67	67	99
2017 Air Toxics Cancer Risk	62	62	98
2017 Air Toxics Respiratory HI	62	62	98
Traffic Proximity	8	8	99
Lead Paint	68	68	83
Superfund Proximity	59	59	72
RMP Facility Proximity	67	67	94
Hazardous Waste Proximity	64	64	93
Underground Storage Tanks	65	65	98
Wastewater Discharge	N/A	N/A	N/A
Socioeconomic Indicators	Percentile in USA	Percentile in USA	Percentile in USA
People of Color	72	66	77
Unemployment Rate	81	32	66
Less than High School Education	52	57	36
Low Life Expectancy	Insufficient Data	90	Insufficient Data
Low Income	73	61	85

affordable development components of the Stitch. This will include engagement strategies that meet community members where they are and enlisting and compensating current community leaders to help obtain input from their neighbors

3. The creation of a project steering committee comprised of members who have strong ties to the community and who can provide input and oversight on the engagement and design of the Stitch
4. The creation of programs to generate awareness of the Stitch, its features, and its benefits through partnerships, pop-ups at community events and in high-traffic locations, and an engaging social media presence

Furthermore, the multiple City of Atlanta offices and their implementation partners conducting outreach, planning, and design of the Stitch will adhere to the City of Atlanta’s Title VI Plan with all aspects of the project. This will ensure that the Stitch both reverses the effects of historic discrimination and does not subject current stakeholders to discrimination.

Preliminary engineering feasibility work for the Stitch shows that the construction of the Stitch is not expected to permanently harm or displace families or business. Rather, this project will help to mitigate the previous harm that

the construction and subsequent widening of the interstate through Downtown caused. There will be temporary closures of roadways and transit from construction, but these will be planned so that their impact is minimized. No full closures of the Downtown Connector are anticipated during construction. Also, measures will be taken to minimize impacts to potential historic resources within the project area, including eligible historical, cultural, and environmental resources, described in additional detail in Appendix A. Existing vacant land around the Stitch will provide multiple low-impact options for construction staging and crane placement, and current noise and pollution resulting from the interstate will reduce the impact of noise and debris levels from construction activities. Community outreach will inform construction and detour plans for the Stitch that will strive to minimize community impacts.

## **#2: Mobility and Community Connectivity**

Today's largest barrier to opportunity in Downtown Atlanta—the Downtown Connector—is tomorrow's mobility opportunity.

**The Stitch will provide multi-modal connections over the interstate via multi-use paths, an improved surface transportation network, and enhanced transit amenities.**

The Stitch will modify the existing surface street network to include safe, complete street amenities that aid community connectivity. Today, five bridges are the only north-south connections over the 14-lane highway. Each of the bridges was designed to move cars quickly through Downtown rather than to provide safe, multimodal streets. The streets across the interstate are signed for twenty-five miles per hour;

however, the design characteristics of Piedmont Avenue, Courtland Street, West Peachtree Street, and Ted Turner Drive encourage speeds much greater.

The Stitch will retrofit the existing one-way streets into two-way streets, making them slower speed complete streets that are safe for bicyclists and pedestrians. It will also introduce five new local street connections—including re-establishing Alexander Street where it was removed by the interstate. Together, these new local streets will close important gaps in the network. Like the five existing bridges that will be retrofitted through the Stitch, the new street connections will prioritize safe and comfortable multimodal movement within Atlanta's urban core. These new connections will literally Stitch the community's safe and affordable access to jobs, healthcare, education, and housing back together. In addition, the Stitch will greatly improve regional mobility and efficiency. The Civic Center MARTA Station is located on one of the bridges within the Stitch area. However, the station is significantly underutilized and is in need of significant state of good repair work. The Stitch will deliver user improvements to the station and thousands of new users via new housing opportunities. Beyond the heavy rail, Downtown Atlanta does not currently have a single off-street bus facility despite having the largest concentration of buses in the region. The Stitch will introduce an off-street bus facility adjacent to the renovated Civic Center MARTA Station, improving bus service for MARTA and the three regional bus operators servicing the station. Improvements to the bus and heavy rail system deliver affordable and low-carbon transportation options for today's residents and the entire future neighborhood of the Stitch. Creating

significant affordable housing near existing major transit hubs magnifies the access impact of the project by affordability connecting housing to jobs.

Finally, the project is anticipated to improve safety conditions along the interstate through the delivery of widened shoulders, new or rehabilitated retaining walls, potential access management improvements, and flood mitigation along the I-75/85 corridor. As a significant corridor for freight movement, these improvements will also improve goods delivery by reducing delay and ensuring the reliability of the system as climate impacts continue to grow.

Combined, the Stitch will reconnect the community for people to live, work, play, and move freely and safely while spurring development that will bring people to the area.

### **#3: Community-based Stewardship, Management, and Partnerships**

Partnership and community are cornerstones of the Stitch. The reconnection of local streets above the interstate and the development of a new park space provides an opportunity to collaborate with multiple levels of government. Both the City of Atlanta and the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) are committed project partners, bringing a variety of expertise as the project advances. Invest Atlanta, the City of Atlanta's economic development arm, committed \$10 million in funding to advance engineering on the Stitch. The Atlanta Regional Commission has also awarded funding for Stitch engineering development through the regional call for transportation projects. As the project advances, the City of Atlanta is prepared to support the Stitch through value capture funding and future infrastructure bond programs. GDOT is

a committed technical partner in the advancement of the Stitch and is supporting the project through the federal aid process.

Beyond government, the Stitch benefits from neighborhood mission-driven partnerships that demonstrate a commitment to the project and a unified vision for the neighborhood. A sizable portion of affordable housing spurred by the Stitch will be delivered by long-standing community-based organizations and anchor institutions in the area such as Atlanta Housing, Atlanta First United Methodist Church, and St. Luke's Episcopal Church. Ongoing partnership with ingrained institutions ensures the Stitch will center equity and affordability as the project advances.

Similarly, Emory University Hospital Midtown has significant land holdings near the Stitch. As indicated by a letter of support, Emory is committed to the Stitch and will benefit directly from the project. The recently announced closing of Wellstar Medical Center—located just east of the Stitch—places increased importance, visibility, and overall patient volumes on Emory University Hospital Midtown. The proposed transportation improvements delivered by the Stitch will provide improved access to healthcare for patients, and the affordable housing delivery will provide opportunities for Emory's diverse workforce to live adjacent to work.

Lastly, the Atlanta Downtown Improvement District, Inc. (ADID)—Downtown's Community Improvement District, a government-recognized commercial property assessment district—has dedicated approximately \$3 million to the Stitch to date. With a board of private- and public-sector leaders and long-standing relationships with property owners, ADID's commitment to the project and strong ties to the area will

foster private sector partnerships with developers and institutional landowners. ADID will continue to be an important partner in the effort and will ensure ongoing community support.

As the Stitch proceeds, a new dedicated 501(c)(3) organization will be formed to guide the design, development, programming, operation, and management of the park. The governing board of the Stitch will include representatives of relevant stakeholders (City of Atlanta, councilmember(s), adjacent property owners, affordable housing representation) and key civic-minded individuals from the neighborhood. In the development of the board, special attention will be given to ensuring a diverse, inclusive, and equity-focused membership that is representative of the community. This board—alongside extensive community and stakeholder engagement—will drive the Stitch’s commitment to community-development activities.

#### **#4: Equitable Development and Shared Prosperity**

The Stitch seeks to advance equitable development practices and foster shared, community wealth building. The 2021 RAISE Planning Grant is funding a robust, community engagement plan premised on inclusive and equitable principles that respect the historic context of the community. While this specific work will advance in earnest in early 2023 and help refine design elements and supporting programs of the Stitch, the project’s work to-date is grounded in two decades of planning and community input that has established the need, vision, and major design elements such as the Stitch’s structural limits. Similarly, the forthcoming strategy will undoubtedly leverage existing policies, funding,

and the City’s overall vision for the future that centers around economic inclusion and a culture of equity.

#### **Community Planning and Priorities**

The Stitch is in full alignment with the community vision set out in 2017 Downtown Atlanta Master Plan. A year-long collaborative process that engaged more than 2,250 individuals, the Downtown Atlanta Master Plan put forth an ambitious roadmap to deliver a more equitable, thriving, and resilient Downtown for all to enjoy.

#### **Affordable Housing and Community Restoration**

There is approximately 80 acres of underutilized land within a half mile of the Stitch which could conservatively yield 14 million square feet in new redevelopment potential. With the right mix of zoning, public policy, and funding mechanisms, the Stitch could catalyze between 3,000-3,400 units of affordable housing. The 2021 RAISE Planning Grant will support the development of site-specific criteria, guidelines, and housing policy needed to meet such an ambitious, but necessary, goal and that builds on the 2019 City of Atlanta Housing Affordability Action Plan.

Currently, the Stitch sits within a tax increment financing district (TIF) that provides value capture revenue to incent redevelopment. Most recently, the tool has been prioritized for affordable housing development targeted at residents making between 50-80% of the area median income. Invest Atlanta can also issue tax-exempt bonds to make below-market interest rate mortgage loans to developers for rental housing. The Stitch sits within an eligible geography for the tool. Invest Atlanta also administers a host of homebuyer assistance programs and legacy owner-occu-

**The Stitch closely aligns with all six goals of the 2017 Downtown Area Master Plan:**

1. Maintain focus on quality-of-life issues
2. Uncover, celebrate, and preserve Downtown's heritage
3. Grow Downtown neighborhoods
4. Reinforce Downtown's role as the entrepreneurial and economic center
5. Restore the forest in the center of the city
6. Offer real choice in transportation

pied rehabilitation grants to ensure the goal of homeownership remains attainable within the City of Atlanta.

Lastly, the project's adjacency to the Civic Center MARTA station will provide for location-efficient housing to be built, which in turn drives down the costs of transportation and overall household expenses, as residents gain improved accessibility to jobs, services, and other everyday travel requirements. Investment in the Stitch means investment in safe and multimodal streets and access to transit and parks space. In turn, this will catalyze a host of transit-oriented development sites that improve overall affordability.

The forthcoming land use, zoning, and affordable housing plan will advance a policy framework inclusive of targeted regulatory changes, strategic infrastructure investments, and other tools needed to achieve the Stitch's vision for an inclusive urban neighborhood. The plan will be developed in close coordination with the City of Atlanta Department of City Planning, the Atlanta Housing Authority, Invest Atlanta, the Atlanta Land Trust, foundations, community development financial institutions, House-ATL, and nonprofit and/or mission-aligned developers.

### **Creative Placemaking**

Through the 2021 RAISE Planning Grant, the project team is advancing a park and open space plan to define and shape the design and programming of the Stitch's 14 acres of urban green space. The design will consider the inclusion of passive and active spaces, greenspace, hardscape areas, playgrounds, performance areas, and public art. The design will outline potential programmatic approaches to the park with a focus on the history of the area, while recognizing all aspects of operations and maintenance needs and costs.

Furthermore, the project's location within a Community Improvement District will allow for additional private resources to go towards events and programming, curation of public art, and the celebration of the history and legacy of the more than 24,000 individuals—notably in the Buttermilk Bottom and Butler Street neighborhoods—who were displaced in the construction and subsequent widening of the I-75/I-85 Downtown Connector.

### **Inclusive Economic Development**

The redevelopment catalyzed by the Stitch will deliver new storefront and office space, a portion of which will be set-aside as affordable so that entrepreneurs—particularly minority and women-led businesses—can grow their businesses in the neighborhood. Similarly, the newly created park space will allow additional locations for vending for everyday users as well as larger, special events. Lastly, the Stitch's direct access to the Civic Center MARTA Station provides future residents with access to the more than 415,000 primary jobs within a 10-minute walk of a heavy rail transit station.

Invest Atlanta offers a host of grants and loans targeted to all segments of the small

business ecosystem. These resources are an extension of the City’s 2020 Economic Mobility and Resiliency Plan that centers underrepresented entrepreneurs in a comprehensive strategy to combat Atlanta’s income inequality and promote comprehensive, community wealth building.

Atlanta is home to a host of nonprofit technical assistance and funding partners that deliver resources for entrepreneurs and small businesses within the Stitch. These partners ensure that homegrown Atlanta businesses have the capital, community, and technical support needed to grow and remain in Atlanta. These partners include but are not limited to Georgia’s Small Business Development Centers, LISC Atlanta, Access to Capital for Entrepreneurs, Atlanta Emerging Markets Initiative, Center for Civic Innovation, Russell Innovation Center for Entrepreneurs, and the Atlanta Wealth Building Initiative.

**Labor Practices and Workforce Development Partnerships**

The City of Atlanta is committed to following federal requirements for wages and encouraging strong labor standards and practices. The project will adhere to both

federal and state workplace standards, as set forth by the U.S. Department of Labor and the Georgia Department of Labor, ensuring a safe and supportive work environment. Like previous USDOT-funded projects in Atlanta, the Stitch will provide new opportunities for good-paying jobs, particularly in the building and construction industries. The City of Atlanta has integrated their Workforce Development Board, WorkSource Atlanta, within Invest Atlanta, the City’s economic development agency, in order to unify economic and workforce development strategies. Working together the agencies can better serve the workforce needs of the city’s business community and help more Atlantans build wealth through good, middle-income jobs. In addition, collaboration with CareerRise, a public-private workforce intermediary and other workforce development partners like Atlanta Technical College, Urban League of Greater Atlanta, and the Fulton County Office of Workforce Development will be vital to the economic success of this project, from conception to completion.



**FIGURE 17.** The Stitch could have initiatives similar to Downtown Atlanta’s Public Kiosk Program that would provide low-cost retail space for entrepreneurs.



**FIGURE 18.** The integrated benefits of the Stitch touch on all aspects of creating a more equitable community, aligning with the goals of the Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program.