

**Federal Highway Administration** 



# Case Study: ATLANTA BELTLINE AND SPECIAL SERVICE DISTRICT

The Atlanta BeltLine is a multimodal urban redevelopment project around downtown Atlanta, connecting 45 neighborhoods through 22 miles of transit and 33 miles of urban trails for pedestrians and cyclists. The Atlanta BeltLine has faced significant funding shortfalls due largely to the Great Recession in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemicinduced recession in 2020. Yet the BeltLine has remained resilient, continuing with the tax allocation district and also implementing a special service district. Despite the setbacks, the BeltLine is projected for completion in a timely fashion.

# **Summary Overview**

Project name	Atlanta BeltLine	
Location	Atlanta, Georgia	
Built environment	Urban, Suburban	
Type of infrastructure	Street improvements, light rail transit, parks, and trails	
Value capture instrument	Tax allocation district (a kind of tax increment financing defined in Georgia statute)	
Summary of value capture and infrastructure cost	Total estimated project cost at completion: \$4.8 billion Estimated tax allocation district tax collection (2007-2016): \$165.7 million Estimated tax allocation district tax collection (2016-2020): \$328.5 million	
Duration of value capture	2005–2030	
Value capture innovation	An innovation on traditional tax increment financing that can be used for a broad range of transportation improvements.	
Notable outcomes	Transportation improvements along one of the largest ongoing urban development projects in the United States	
Statutory or regulatory changes	State of Georgia Redevelopment Powers Law	

### **Key Takeaways**

- Value capture techniques can be implemented in a range of transportation improvements. The Atlanta BeltLine is one of the largest ongoing urban development projects in the United States, simultaneously receiving funding from tax increment financing.
- When implementing value capture techniques, stakeholders must acknowledge and account for financial challenges along the way. Funding for the Atlanta BeltLine was deeply impacted by the Great Recession, which demanded changes to revenue projections and consideration of new funding sources.
- Stakeholders must remain resilient and communicative when faced with financial challenges. Despite challenges, the Atlanta BeltLine remains confident in receiving support and funding from the community to bring the project to the finish line.
- Value capture can support broader planning goals. Affordable housing is a key component of the Atlanta BeltLine project. The BeltLine's strategy for meeting affordable housing development goals while incorporating transportation access, density, and greenspace can serve as a model for the nation.
- Comprehensive planning is critical to providing an array of benefits. The project demonstrates how cities can align adaptation efforts and programs to revitalize underused spaces by looking for opportunities to reforest parks and paths, use reflective materials, provide shade, increase connectivity between low-income and high-income neighborhoods, and provide alternative transportation options.
- The BeltLine is a model for revitalizing cities. It demonstrates how cities can attract private financing for resilience projects that increase property values.

### Introduction

The Atlanta BeltLine is the largest urban redevelopment project in the Atlanta's history and is among the nation's largest ongoing urban redevelopment projects. The BeltLine connects over 45 neighborhoods in the Atlanta Metropolitan Area that remained disconnected due to freight corridors (formerly called "belt lines"). The BeltLine project pieces the historic and partially abandoned freight corridors back together into a loop, creating trails, parks, and light rail transit routes that connect diverse neighborhoods across socioeconomic and racial lines. 1 The BeltLine will establish approximately 1,300 acres of greenspace, which the City of Atlanta was previously lacking, in the form of public parks, urban farms, and an arboretum.

In addition to the notable improvements to mobility, connectivity, accessibility, and greenspace, the BeltLine project will develop needed affordable housing, with a goal to create or preserve 5,600 affordable units for the communities it runs through.<sup>2</sup> Alongside the development of affordable housing is the goal to promote business and development in areas that traditionally haven't seen such activity. It is expected that the Atlanta BeltLine will bring about economic development to surrounding communities resulting in 48,000 construction jobs, up to 50,000 permanent jobs, and improvements to workforce development partnerships.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>FHWA, Center for Innovative Finance Support, "Project Profile: Atlanta BeltLine." www.fhwa.dot.gov/ipd/project\_profiles/ga\_atlanta\_beltline.aspx.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>Atlanta BeltLine, "2020 Annual Report." www.beltline.org/flipbook/2020-annual-report.

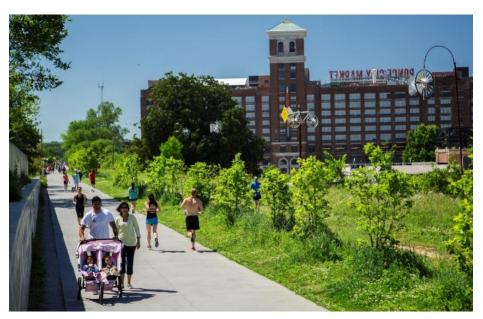
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>Georgia Tech, SLS Case Study: The Atlanta BeltLine, https://serve-learn-sustain.gatech.edu/sls-case-study-atlanta-beltline

The Atlanta BeltLine redevelopment project seeks to achieve the following goals:

- Increase multimodal mobility within Atlanta,
- Increase the accessibility and connectivity of Atlanta communities
- Increase the amount of greenspace within Atlanta
- Clean up sites with environmental issues, including brownfield remediation<sup>4</sup>
- Provide an interactive space for the community
- Support socioeconomic connections and racial inclusion
- Restore, maintain, and preserve historic landmarks
- Spur development of underdeveloped areas
- Support sustainable growth and construct new housing, with an emphasis on affordable housing.5

Given the expansive nature of this project, the Atlanta BeltLine requires numerous funding sources to achieve these goals. The Atlanta BeltLine is expected to receive funding from seven public and private funding sources, the largest a tax increment financing district, called in Georgia a tax allocation district (TAD), which collects tax revenues from the commercial properties surrounding the Atlanta BeltLine.6

The BeltLine's ambitious nature, along with the unwavering commitment of its project leadership and proponents to further the project and secure funding through two recessions, make it a model urban redevelopment project not only for the region and the state, but also for the nation.



Source: Photo by Christopher T. Martin. Atlanta BeltLine, "Eastside Trail." https://beltline.org/places-to-go/eastside-trail/

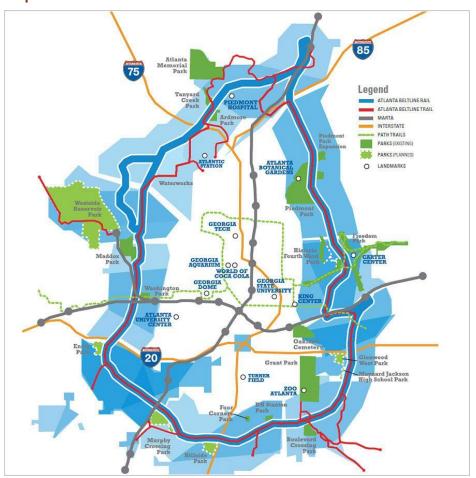
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>City of Atlanta, Tax Allocation Bonds (BeltLine Project), 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>FHWA, Center for Innovative Finance Support, "Atlanta BeltLine: Tax Allocation District." www.fhwa.dot.gov/ipd/pdfs/value\_capture/case\_studies/atlanta\_beltline\_tax\_allocation\_district.pdf.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>lbid.

# **Project Context**

The Atlanta BeltLine urban redevelopment project includes 22 miles of modern streetcar/ light rail transit that loops around the City of Atlanta, 28 miles of transit that crisscrosses through town, and 33 miles of multiuse urban trails. Map 1 depicts the vision of the Atlanta BeltLine, including the transportation and infrastructure improvements that serve to link communities to Downtown Atlanta and beyond.



Map 1. Atlanta BeltLine Vision

Source: Curbed, "How the Atlanta BeltLine's Westside Trail Looks Right Now." www.atlanta.curbed.com/2017/7/3/15915032/atlanta-beltlinewestside-trail-photos-looks-right-now.

This vision is expected to be completed by 2030 and has achieved important milestones since the simultaneous development of the Atlanta BeltLine Redevelopment Plan and the Tax Allocation District in 2005. Since the start of the project, Atlanta BeltLine Inc., the organization overseeing this vision, has delivered 16 miles of pedestrian and cyclist urban trails, 350 acres of parkland, and 14 miles of streetscape improvements. Notably, 1,100 acres of brownfields have been remediated to date and artifacts of the old railway have been recycled into pieces of public

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>Atlanta BeltLine, "2020 Annual Report." www.beltline.org/flipbook/2020-annual-report.

art placed along the BeltLine. The project has developed over 1,100 units of affordable housing thus far. Development of affordable housing units slowed slightly during the COVID-19 pandemic but remains on target to fill the commitment of 5,600 units by 2030. The BeltLine remains on schedule for job creation, and with the adoption of the special service district (SSD) funding strategy in 2021, the BeltLine is expected to create up to 20,000 more permanent jobs than originally anticipated.

## Management

In 1999, the Atlanta BeltLine concept was introduced by researchers at the Georgia Institute of Technology, which was then executed as a grassroots planning initiative. 8 In 2005, ABI brought the Atlanta BeltLine Redevelopment Plan and Tax Allocation District to the City of Atlanta, Fulton County, and Atlanta Public Schools, which then initiated the necessary community engagement and project management for the Atlanta BeltLine.<sup>9</sup>

The Atlanta BeltLine is administered by Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. (ABI) and the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership. Although both nonprofit organizations work together to achieve the vision behind the Atlanta BeltLine, ABI oversees management, development, and execution, while the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership oversees funding and engagement. 10,11 Furthermore, the City of Atlanta owns the respective transportation and future infrastructure, which are being made possible by investments from the Atlanta BeltLine. Thus, Invest Atlanta<sup>12</sup> is responsible with administering the tax allocation district associated with the Atlanta BeltLine, and appointing board members to ABI and the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership.

## Legislation

The TAD was developed to provide a majority of the funding necessary for the development and execution of the Atlanta BeltLine until 2030. In 2005, the TAD received significant support from the City of Atlanta, Fulton County, and Atlanta Public Schools to create the TAD on parcels surrounding and benefiting from the Atlanta BeltLine. 13 In short, these agencies pledged to dedicate property tax revenues collected from these parcels to the development of the BeltLine.

The inclusion of Atlanta Public Schools in this coalition was contentious, however, as local attorney John Woodham argued that the TAD infringed on the Educational Purpose clause in the state Constitution, because the TAD diverted educational funding to noneducational purposes.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup>FHWA, Center for Innovative Finance Support, "Atlanta BeltLine: Tax Allocation District." www.fhwa.dot.gov/ipd/pdfs/value capture/case studies/atlanta beltline tax allocation district.pdf.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>Atlanta BeltLine, "Atlanta BeltLine Timeline." www.beltline.org/the-project/timeline.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>Atlanta BeltLine, "Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. Team." www.beltline.org/atlanta-beltline-inc-team.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup>Atlanta BeltLine, "Atlanta BeltLine Partnership Team." www.beltline.org/the-project/atlanta-beltline-partnership-team.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup>Atlanta Development Authority is the City of Atlanta's designee as the redevelopment agent for the Belt Line Tax Allocation District, doing business as Invest Atlanta.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup>Atlanta BeltLine, "Project Funding and Financials." <a href="www.beltline.org/the-project/project-funding">www.beltline.org/the-project/project-funding</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup>Williams Mullen, "Update on Tax Allocation Districts (TADs) and the BeltLine Project." www.williamsmullen.com/news/update-taxallocation-districts-tads-and-beltline-project

This argument placed pressure on the BeltLine's primary funding sources, because removing Atlanta Public Schools from this coalition would reduce property tax revenues by 45%. 15

In response to this argument, the State of Georgia issued an amendment to existing TADs in the Redevelopment Powers Law, which allowed TADs to use educational funding for noneducational purposes.<sup>16</sup> Since this amendment, Invest Atlanta, the local redevelopment authority, has completed and established nine other TADs across Atlanta. 17

## Commitment to Affordable Housing Goals

Affordable housing is a key component of the Atlanta BeltLine project, prioritized by ABI even through the COVID-19 pandemic. The BeltLine plans to build 5,600 affordable housing units by 2030. ABI funds affordable housing in the Atlanta BeltLine through multiple strategies. First, revenues from the TAD go to support for affordable housing development. ABI dedicates up to 20% of annual TAD increment to affordable housing. In addition to the share of annual increment, ABI may commit a further 75% of any unanticipated midyear tax increment. 18 In 2017, the Atlanta BeltLine Affordable Housing Trust Fund (BAHTF) was established to promote affordable housing in the BeltLine. Through the BAHTF, ABI can commit up to \$2 million to developer incentives to build affordable housing. Coupled with these funding strategies is ABI's strategy to acquire land along the corridor. ABI believes that by owning the land, they can be more selective in choosing developers for the construction of affordable housing.

ABI has a strong commitment to helping existing residents to affordably stay in their neighborhoods throughout the development of the BeltLine project and associated market pressures. To mitigate potential gentrification, ABI established the Legacy Resident Retention Fund. This fund will pay for property tax increases through 2030 for residents whose annual income is less than 100% of the Area Median Income. 19 During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Atlanta COVID-19 Emergency Assistance program provided rental and housing-cost relief to low-income residents, including some of those living in BeltLine neighborhoods. In 2020, 151 families living in BeltLine neighborhoods received support from this program to remain in their homes and communities.

# Project Funding

Although the majority of funding for the Atlanta BeltLine comes from the TAD, the Atlanta BeltLine has also sought out other funding sources to supplement the property tax revenues collected from the TAD, given the aforementioned legislative challenges and the consequences associated with the Great Recession and COVID-19 pandemic-induced recession.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup>Dan McRae, "Quick Takes: TADs: What To Do After the BeltLine Case." https://www.danmcrae.com/quicktakes/qt 08-feb21.pdf.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup>FHWA, Center for Innovative Finance Support, "Atlanta BeltLine: Tax Allocation District." www.fhwa.dot.gov/ipd/pdfs/value capture/case studies/atlanta beltline tax allocation district.pdf.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup>City of Atlanta, "Tax Allocation Districts." www.atlantaga.gov/government/departments/city-planning/office-of-zoningdevelopment/plans-and-studies/tax-allocation-district-tad.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup>Atlanta BeltLine, "2020 Annual Report." <a href="www.beltline.org/flipbook/2020-annual-report">www.beltline.org/flipbook/2020-annual-report</a>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

## **Funding Sources**

The Atlanta BeltLine receives funding from seven sources, with one of the largest funding sources being the property tax revenues collected by the TAD. Table 1 reveals the funding distribution for the Atlanta BeltLine as of 2014.

**Table 1. Existing Funding Source Distribution** 

Funding Source	Funding (millions of dollars)	Share of Total Funding
Government Bonds	\$144	36%
City of Atlanta (TAD and Other Grants)	\$112	28%
Private Philanthropic Grants	\$39	10%
Other Governmental Grants	\$38	10%
Atlanta Public Schools (TAD, Net)	\$36	9%
Fulton County (TAD, Net)	\$25	6%
Other Income	\$3	1%
Total TAD-Related Funding	\$173	43%
Total Funding	\$397	100%

Source: Atlanta BeltLine, "How the Atlanta BeltLine has been Funded to Date: Atlanta BeltLine Funding Chart." https://beltline.org/theproject/project-funding/

The TAD was established to use the property tax revenues that would result from the increasing development surrounding the Atlanta BeltLine. The TAD boundary, depicted as the blue area beneath the BeltLine Rail and BeltLine Trail in Map 1, was drawn to prioritize development opportunities that would benefit directly from the Atlanta BeltLine while avoiding single family neighborhoods.<sup>20</sup>

The TAD collects incremental property tax revenues from commercial properties within its boundaries. In doing so, the TAD captures the increased value associated with these properties, which then leads to steadily increased tax revenue over time. Thus, the more the transportation and infrastructure improvements are built, the more the surrounding commercial properties and ultimately, tax revenue for the Atlanta BeltLine, increase in value.<sup>21</sup>

#### **Projections and Realities**

The TAD was developed following a series of financial feasibility studies that estimated the expected tax revenue that would be collected to fund the Atlanta BeltLine.<sup>22</sup> In 2005, the TAD was expected to generate over \$3 billion in tax revenue until 2030, which would have provided over two-thirds of the funding necessary to complete the Atlanta BeltLine.<sup>23</sup> These financial feasibility studies did not account for the legislative challenges and the financial consequences

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup>City of Atlanta, "The BeltLine." <u>www.atlantaga.gov/home/showdocument?id=1628</u>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup>Atlanta BeltLine, "Project Funding and Financials." <a href="www.beltline.org/the-project/project-funding.">www.beltline.org/the-project/project-funding.</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup>FHWA, Center for Innovative Finance Support, "Atlanta BeltLine: Tax Allocation District." www.fhwa.dot.gov/ipd/pdfs/value\_capture/case\_studies/atlanta\_beltline\_tax\_allocation\_district.pdf.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup>Atlanta BeltLine, "Project Funding and Financials." <a href="www.beltline.org/the-project/project-funding">www.beltline.org/the-project/project-funding</a>.

of the Great Recession that would halve the expected tax revenues in subsequent years, as seen in Table 2.

**Table 2. Tax Increment Projection Changes** 

Year	2005 Projections	2012 Revised Projections	Percent Change
2006	\$2,359,501		
2007	5,006,477		
2008	7,980,356		
2009	11,689,870		
2010	15,858,716		
2011	22,348,862		
2012	29,621,733	\$17,818,558	-40%
2013	37,831,123	22,730,096	-40%
2014	47,165,969	27,834,978	-41%
2015	57,434,300	33,137,309	-42%
2016	68,987,693	38,645,403	-44%
2017	81,380,079	43,889,215	-46%
2018	94,605,925	49,403,432	-48%
2019	108,650,158	55,134,865	-49%
2020	123,487,654	61,146,400	-50%
2021	140,730,731	67,441,896	-52%
2022	158,792,684	75,311,169	-53%
2023	177,615,297	83,439,284	-53%
2024	197,129,098	91,919,513	-53%
2025	217,253,888	100,707,670	-54%
2026	237,295,064	109,755,135	-54%
2027	257,733,890	117,250,186	-55%
2028	278,465,899	125,036,671	-55%
2029	299,380,806	133,091,374	-56%
2030	320,364,155	141,357,545	-56%
Total	\$2,999,169,927	\$1,395,050,697	

Source: Atlanta BeltLine, "Projected Revenue Generated from TAD: Atlanta BeltLine Projection Comparison Chart." https://beltline.org/theproject/project-funding/.

Although the TAD remains an active, viable funding source for the Atlanta BeltLine, tax revenues collected from the TAD now fund only a third of the expected project costs. This unexpected funding shortfall, in large part due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in a need for supplemental funding sources, as seen in Table 3.

**Table 3. Expected Funding Source Distribution** 

Funding Source	Funding (in millions of dollars)	Share of Total Funding
City of Atlanta (TAD and Other Grants)	\$1,455	33%
Government Bonds	\$1,272	29%
Other Governmental Grants	\$343	8%
Local Funds	\$157	4%
Private Philanthropic Grants	\$275	6%
Unidentified Funds	\$891	20%
Total Funding	\$4,393	100%

Source: Atlanta BeltLine, "2030 Strategic Implementation Plan." https://beltline.org/resources/strategic-implementation-plan/

Although the unidentified amount of funding is a significant share of the expected funding sources, the unidentified amount aligns with the amount noted in the BeltLine Redevelopment Plan, which was estimated to fall between \$511 million and \$1,036 billion.<sup>24</sup> Stakeholders remain confident that the Atlanta BeltLine will be able to identify and secure the funding necessary to push the Atlanta BeltLine to the finish line over the next decade.

#### **Special Service District**

Given this remaining funding gap, the City of Atlanta passed legislation authorizing the development of an SSD along the Atlanta BeltLine in 2021. This SSD is a targeted tax district in the existing TAD in which commercial and multifamily property owners have agreed to increase property taxes by two mills to continue funding the Atlanta BeltLine.<sup>25</sup>

The property tax revenues to be collected through the SSD are expected to fill a \$100 million gap in expected funding, which would then be matched by the philanthropic community in Atlanta and private sector contributions. In doing so, the Atlanta BeltLine can then confidently seek federal and state funding to complete other funding gaps in the project.<sup>26</sup>

Though not ideal, the SSD has been determined as a necessary funding source for the completion of the Atlanta BeltLine. In doing so, tax revenues collected from the SSD would not only complete remaining transportation and infrastructure improvements, but also create value for communities benefiting from the Atlanta BeltLine.

# **Implications**

The Atlanta BeltLine provides insight into how long-term economic conditions can impact value capture implementation, especially for large urban developments. In theory, the TAD would have provided most of the funding necessary to complete the Atlanta BeltLine in a timely manner, eliminating the dependence on competitive and philanthropic grants. Given the compounded obstacles during the Great Recession, however, the TAD fell behind expectations,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Atlanta BeltLine, "2030 Strategic Implementation Plan." https://beltline.org/resources/strategic-implementation-plan/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Atlanta BeltLine, "City of Atlanta Approves Funding to Complete Atlanta BeltLine Multi-Use Trail Special Service District." www.beltline.org/2021/03/16/city-of-atlanta-approves-to-funding-to-complete-atlanta-beltline-multi-use-trail-special-service-district/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Atlanta BeltLine, "Special Service District." www.beltline.org/the-project/special-service-district.

leaving the Atlanta BeltLine to seek more creative, local techniques to complete funding gaps, such as the recent development of the SSD.

Value capture techniques, including those implemented for the Atlanta BeltLine, can provide more flexibility for supplemental funding sources than more traditional funding sources but municipalities should also acknowledge and account for financial insecurities and legislative challenges that may arise with large developments. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the project the Atlanta BeltLine prioritized transportation and infrastructure improvements. In doing so, the Atlanta BeltLine earned a reputation with stakeholders in the community, so much so that the SSD was welcomed by property owners to push the Atlanta BeltLine to the finish line.<sup>27</sup>

#### Conclusion

The Atlanta BeltLine is a model for other cities seeking to redevelop underutilized spaces through investments in transportation, green space, and affordable housing. The BeltLine remains a monumental multimodal development in the United States, demonstrating that value capture techniques can also be implemented to support large projects in metropolitan areas. Additionally, planned multimodal projects like the BeltLine can be used to deliver large-scale community benefits while addressing resiliency, livability, and environmental goals. This project demonstrates how cities can align adaptation efforts and programs to revitalize underutilized spaces to deliver parks, multiuse paths, and green space, increase connectivity between lowincome and high-income neighborhoods, and provide alternative transportation options. This project also demonstrates how cities can attract private financing for resilience projects that increase property values.

Despite obstacles, the Atlanta BeltLine continues to receive a significant share of funding from revenues collected by the TAD and has received support from federal, state, and local funding sources. Furthermore, the Atlanta BeltLine remains resilient and communicative in seeking other funding sources to complement existing funding sources, including the SSD. Thanks to the perseverance of the project leadership, stakeholders, and the public, who stuck with the project through two recessions, the Atlanta BeltLine is confidently slated to be completed in a timely manner. Without additional funding from the SSD or another innovative funding source, the trail loop will likely not be delivered by 2030 and would not spur the expected affordable housing, economic development, job creation, and connectivity outlined in the BeltLine vision. The Atlanta BeltLine has proven to be an economic driver and can play a significant role in the city's growth and economic recovery from the pandemic.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> FHWA, Center for Innovative Finance Support, "Atlanta BeltLine: Tax Allocation District." www.fhwa.dot.gov/ipd/pdfs/value capture/case studies/atlanta beltline tax allocation district.pdf.