

To: Anna Roach, Executive Director and CEO of the Atlanta Regional Commission

From: Colin Cook

Re: Green Space Expansion in the Atlanta Metro Area

Date: April 27th, 2025

Problem Statement

With the effects of climate change amplifying itself every year, the environment has rapidly become a critical focus of public health. Despite being referred to as “The City in a Forest”, Atlanta struggles with inequitable distribution of green space and an overall lack of park acreage, that falls short of meeting the needs of an ever growing population (Parkscore Index). As a whole, Georgia is above the national obesity rate average and is considered nationally middle of the pack for cardiovascular health (America’s Health Rankings). Atlanta has the potential to be a beacon for green space infrastructure, yet these disparities deepen environmental injustice and limit its resident’s opportunities for physical activity and mental restoration. Mrs. Roach, we are at a critical crossroads where every step we take towards fighting climate change can have a major impact on our collective future. You have the opportunity to influence the planning for environmental-centric infrastructure for the Atlanta Metro area. How can we balance time, effectiveness, and cost to boost our current systems? How can you shape Atlanta’s fight to help our citizens in a time of need?

Background

The environment can have a role in the health of an area and its residents. If an area's built environment is environmental-centric, communities tend to have better health outcomes (National Governors Association). Adding greenspace to an area has shown to improve an area’s overall cardiovascular health, lower obesity rates, and improve mental health as well as reducing the urban heat island effect. This is where urban areas have a notably higher temperature relative to its surrounding, less developed areas because urban environments are often built with materials that absorb more of the sun’s heat, raising the area’s temperatures (US EPA) This is significant as climate change has resulted in rising global temperatures that are projected to continue to increase in the coming years. Atlanta already faces hot summers, and the prospect of even hotter summers challenges vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly, and workers whose jobs require them to be outdoors for extended periods of time. Minority populations are also at risk of climate change. Minority populations often reside in neighborhoods with reduced access to green spaces and typically face higher pollution levels. Atlanta residents living in neighborhoods of color have 48% less access to park space than white neighborhoods, and lower income neighborhoods have 33% less access than high income neighborhoods (Groundworks USA). Considering Atlanta’s extensive minority population, it’s crucial, Executive Director Roach, that you help do what you can to help those in need. We are on track to facing a climate catastrophe in the coming years, therefore any measure - no matter how big or small - must be

taken to steer us away from harm. Steps taken now can help reduce the impact of climate change on our current and future generations, benefitting us all.

Policy Options

In order to improve the green space of Atlanta, I have evaluated three potential policy options. These three policies will be evaluated off the following criteria: time, effectiveness, and cost. Time will look into how long it would take to successfully implement these policies. Effectiveness will evaluate how impactful and useful the policy could work. Cost will delve into the price of the policy, monetary or otherwise.

Option #1: Grants for Greenway Construction: As executive director and CEO of the Atlanta Regional Commission, I strongly urge you to consider implementing a program that would provide grants for the purpose of greenway construction. Greenways are large areas of connected land that are used for recreational, conservational, and transportation purposes. These spaces often include lots of trails for movement and are staples of communities that have them. They foster a sense of community and have a major impact on health by promoting an active lifestyle. The timeliness of this policy is far from ideal. Grant programs can take months to implement as the administrative procedures must be clearly written and established by the issuing organization. However, seeing these greenway projects submitted for grant approval can take months, and in the event a program is in fact awarded funds, it may take years to see the greenway actually built. However, the effectiveness is the major strength of this policy option. Greenways can do a significant amount of work for promoting significant health and environmental benefits. The cost of establishing a grant fund is not insignificant. A program of this magnitude would likely have a funding pool of hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars for projects to be awarded, which would likely require the ARC to expand above their current \$105 million annual budget (ARC). Additionally, the actual construction of the public greenway projects would likely cost millions with additional money spent on maintenance fees upon the project's completion, however this is outside of the ARC's jurisdiction.

Option #2: Nature Prescription Programs: Nature prescription programs are programs where medical providers "prescribe" time outdoors to their patients. This is due to the numerous documented health benefits associated with time spent outdoors. As executive director of the ARC, you could encourage medical providers within your region to participate in these programs such as Park RX. Partnering with programs like Park Rx will dramatically simplify the necessary resources needed for this policy as these organizations already have the necessary infrastructure set up (. In terms of time, extra training would be needed for medical providers to better understand how to make the proper recommendations for a natural prescription, yet these programs have the necessary information on hand, reducing the time necessary to get a program up and running. The effectiveness of these programs are questionable as they rely on the patients to follow through with their PCP's recommendation. This creates a potential barrier as a patient's

unwillingness to follow through on their prescription nullifies any benefit gained (Human Kinetics Journal). Potential costs would not be significant, but additional training for providers would elevate this as they would need to be compensated for time lost from their practice.

Option #3: Canopy Coverage Expansion: The last policy I will evaluate is a canopy coverage expansion program. This policy would call for the ARC to provide funding for region-wide tree planting that can reduce Atlanta’s heat island effect. 51% of Atlanta residents live in area with an >8°F heat island effect (11 Alive). Additionally, trees help to absorb pollutants and particulate matters, boosting the environmental health of the region. This program is likely to take a long time to see any benefit. Trees can take a considerable amount of time to grow which could mean years before maximum canopy coverage is reached. The effectiveness of this policy would be about average, but its cost-effectiveness would make it a bang-for-your buck deal. The cost of this program could add up, as a significant amount of saplings would need to be harvested and planted in public areas, and maintenance fees will add up over the years, yet these fees are likely to be miniscule.

Recommendation

Out of the 3 policy options, I believe that *Option #1: Grants for Greenway Construction* would be the best policy to implement for the Atlanta Metro Area. If properly implemented, option #1, can provide a significant boost to the green space infrastructure and park acreage, much more so than options 2 and 3. The establishment of a grant program to assist the development of greenway projects serves to benefit the long-term outlook of our local communities by incentivizing developers to create these spaces. Option #3 would serve as a good backup option as expanding the tree canopy can help absorb pollutants, hence improving the health of our populace, yet would not be as effective in the long-run as dedicated greenspace areas. Option #2 could be a quick-fix policy to implement down the line but suffers from a lack of available existing space and heavily relies on patient adherence to see the benefits. This option would benefit from being paired with Option #1 and/or Option #2. Director Roach, when evaluating these 3 options, it’s clear that Option #1 helps the long-term public health outlook of Atlanta, and I urge you to implement this grant program as soon as possible.

Criteria:	Option #1	Option #2	Option #3
Cost	Medium	Medium	Medium
Effectiveness	Very Good	Poor	Medium
Time	Poor	Good	Poor

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