

Atlanta's Plans For Parks Over Highways Get National Attention

January 2, 2019 | Jarred Schenke, Bisnow Atlanta



Atlanta's efforts to create new swaths of green space over its major interstate has taken the national spotlight.

The Wall Street Journal [reported this week](#) about a push by some city leaders to create decked parks over the Interstate 75/85 interchange through Atlanta, as the region's efforts to woo and retain millennial talent becomes a priority.

That chase for millennial talent became a driving topic in Atlanta and other major metro areas as municipalities chased [Amazon's](#) second headquarters project. The emphasis on a pool of tech talent [became the key factor](#) in what the online retail giant ultimately decided: splitting HQ2 between [Long Island City](#), New York, and [Crystal City](#), Virginia.

The WSJ focused on [three major plans in Atlanta](#): The \$300M-plus Stitch plan in Downtown Atlanta, the [14th Street](#) Midtown park project being pushed by [Chick-fil-A](#) President [Dan Cathy](#) and a third \$250M proposed park covering portions of Georgia 400 in [Buckhead](#).

“We decided we needed to reconnect what the interstate disconnected,” [Central Atlanta Progress](#) President A.J. Robinson told the Journal. CAP is pushing the Stitch plan and is expected to release a feasibility study later this year.

These parks are known to add more green than just from grass and trees, as proven by the greenway over the [Woodall Rodgers Freeway](#) in Dallas. Opened in 2012, the \$112M, 5.2-acre park sparked both commercial and residential development around it, according to the WSJ.

“Open space drives real estate values through the roof,” the president of San Diego-based landscape architecture firm OJB, [James Burnett](#), told the WSJ.

Related Topics: [Chick-fil-A](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [Central Atlanta Progress](#), [Woodall Rodgers Freeway](#), [James Burnett](#), [AJ Robinson](#), [Dan Cathy](#), [OJB Landscape Architecture](#), [Amazon HQ2 Shortlist](#), [Amazon HQ2 bids](#), [The Stitch](#), [Park Over 400](#)

Americans plot garden highways to entice people out of their cars

United States

Will Pavia New York

The 14-lane highway that sweeps through Atlanta is called the Downtown Connector, though it is also referred to, less charitably, as “the car sewer”.

Built in an age when many American cities were bulldozing neighbourhoods to make room for cars, it is no longer regarded locally as a gorgeous testament to social progress. Now Atlanta and dozens of other American cities are pondering a solution to the motorways that divide them. They would like to build parks on top of them.

Proof that such a thing is possible is to be found in Dallas, Texas, where the city authorities have constructed one such “deck park” and are already working on a second.

Jim Burnett, a landscape architect who may be the most prolific highway-park builder in the country, said the park that now lies over part of the Woodall Rodgers Freeway in Dallas has less than a foot of topsoil on the deck that spans the road. But the structural engineers who made the deck strong enough to hold large trees also built “pockets which trees could drop into”, Mr Burnett said. “It feels like you are walking through a park with big trees everywhere.”

Concerts are staged above the roaring freeway, there is a children’s playground and an area for quiet reading, not many feet above the speeding cars. The 5.2 acre park cost \$112 million, which was supplied by the city, the Texas department of transportation and some private sponsors.

Cities like Atlanta have looked to deck parks as they seek to draw a younger workforce: tech professionals and millennials who wish to live in the heart of the city, rather than in a suburb, and who would like to walk or cycle to work. A similar trick was pulled off in Manhattan with the aid of a disused elevated railway line that snaked up



The High Line development has breathed new life into a once run-down part of Manhattan and planners now envisage a motorway deck park for Atlanta, left

through the west side of the city. It was marked for demolition but two local residents, noting that a carpet of wildflowers had grown over the tracks, proposed that it be turned into a park. The High Line, which opened in 2009 and grew by four blocks in 2014, is now one of the most popular parks in New York and has spurred the transformation of a once semi-derelict tract of the city.

Mr Burnett’s company is working on the second highway deck in Dallas. “We also have one in Kansas City in planning, we’re in the preliminary stages for

one in Cleveland and we have a few others that are confidential,” he said.

He has also been working with a group called Central Atlanta Progress, which is seeking to create 14 acres of parkland above the highway that weaves through the city.

Jennifer Ball, vice-president of the non-profit group that is funded by local businesses, said a plan for the project had been finalised. It would cost up to \$450 million “for the infrastructure itself, for the concrete and steel and to create the park”. She hopes the money

will come from public and private sources.

Francesca Ammon, a historian at the University of Philadelphia, said highways were laid through American cities after the 1956 Interstate Highway Act gave federal funding to city councils. “Today cities are more popular in the US and we can see the short-sightedness of these developments,” she said. The displacement of communities was a series of grave injustices, she added. “This is a step towards righting those wrongs.”

Bolsonaro takes aim at indigenous land rights

Brazil

Stephen Gibbs

President Bolsonaro of Brazil has stripped a government body of the power to establish indigenous reserves and awarded it to the agriculture ministry in his first executive order.

The decree, which will expire in about four months unless ratified by congress, has alarmed environmentalists who fear that downgrading the Funai agency is a prelude to the destruction of indigenous lands.

Mr Bolsonaro, a right-wing retired military officer who was sworn in on Tuesday, has expressed extreme scepticism that indigenous people would choose to remain in protected areas of the Amazon rainforest and other unspoiled regions of Brazil, saying they are being kept in “zoos”. He said in 2017 that they wanted “electricity, television, blonde girlfriends and internet”.

He defended his executive order in a tweet that said: “Fewer than one million people live in these isolated places . . . exploited and manipulated by NGOs. We will together integrate these citizens and value all Brazilians.”

Sonia Guajajara, the leader of one of Brazil’s foremost indigenous rights groups, tweeted: “You see? The dismantlement has already started.”

Brazil’s new agriculture minister, Tereza Cristina Dias, supported the decision, saying Brazil was more than capable of preserving its native forests. The president of the country’s main grain growers’ association, Bartolomeu Braz, also backed the move, saying the “Indians want to be productive too”.

Mr Bolsonaro spent much of his first day stressing his intention to form close ties with Mr Trump’s administration, and met Mike Pompeo, the secretary of state. He said the tendency for Brazil to elect enemies of the US as presidents was over and he wanted to make up for the distance that his country had kept between the two. Mr Pompeo responded that Mr Trump was very pleased with the burgeoning relationship.

Sharp-eared dogs a flop at airports

Tom Knowles San Francisco

Passengers travelling through American airports who feel unnerved at the sight of patrolling German shepherds can breathe easy. Soon they are likely to be greeted by a friendly labrador or retriever instead.

Security forces are to start using more floppy-eared dogs at airports instead of breeds with pointy ears in an effort to put travellers at ease.

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) said that it wanted the dogs to stop scaring people, especially children, while sniffing for explosives.

David Pekoske, a TSA administrator, told *The Washington Examiner*: “We’ve made a conscious effort in TSA . . . to use floppy-eared dogs.

“We find the passenger acceptance of floppy-eared dogs is better. It presents a little bit less of a concern . . . doesn’t scare children.”

About 80 per cent of the 1,200 dogs the TSA uses are droopy-eared breeds, while 20 per cent have conical ears.

They screen passengers or sniff cargo and baggage behind the scenes. The TSA said that about a third of the dogs mingled with passengers. The agency

said that it trained seven breeds of dogs. The two with pointy ears are German shepherds and Belgian malinois. The others are labradors, golden retrievers, German shorthaired pointers, wire-haired pointers and vizslas.

Only the Department of Defence uses more dogs than the TSA in America. Over the past 12 months, 80 per cent of those purchased by the TSA were floppy-eared breeds. The dogs undergo 12 weeks of training at Lackland Air Force base in San Antonio, Texas, before being assigned to a handler, with whom they live permanently.

The desire to put passengers at ease around sniffer dogs in America is in contrast to the British approach. The Border Force at Gatwick told the *Sunday Mirror* last September that its officers monitored the reaction of passengers to sniffer dogs. They investigated those who appeared particularly

anxious or uncomfortable around the animals. To help calm nervous travellers, however, the first British therapy dog was recently introduced at Aberdeen airport. Passengers can stroke Harley, an Alaskan malamute, and play with him as he walks around the terminal with his owner.

Fraser Bain, the airport manager, said that Harley was an instant hit after being recruited in March last year.

“People warmed to him straight away,” he said. Studies have shown that petting an animal can reduce stress.

Dogs deployed at British airports have been used to sniff out drugs or wads of money. Since May they have also been used to detect explosives.

The animals are considered the most effective bomb detectors because they can smell the elements of an explosive device, such as the nitroglycerine found in dynamite.



Mexican mayor shot dead hours after taking office

Mexico

Stephen Gibbs

A mayor in Mexico has been murdered moments after leaving his inauguration ceremony.

Alejandro Aparicio was shot by at least two men as he walked to the town hall in Tlaxiaco, in the southern state of Oaxaca, for his first official meeting. He died shortly afterwards in hospital. Four of his assistants were wounded, one of them seriously. The governor of Oaxaca, Alejandro Murat, condemned the attack and said that one suspect had been arrested.

Political killings increased sharply last year in Mexico, with more than 130 candidates killed in the run up to the general election in July.

Mr Aparicio was a member of the left-wing National Regeneration Movement, the party of the new president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Since taking office last month, Mr López Obrador, 65, has vowed to take action against corruption and violent crime, creating a new national guard.

Yeidckol Polevnsky, the party’s president, lamented the murder and said that “hatred and violence” would not stop the transformation promised by the new administration.

In his last tweet, posted on December 27, Mr Aparicio had invited his supporters to attend his inauguration and promised to deliver “work and results” in the mountain town.

He is the second mayor to be murdered since Mr López Obrador took office. On December 16, Olga Kobel, 42, the mayor of Juarez in the northern state of Coahuila, was found dead six days after she disappeared. A local businessman was arrested on suspicion of murder.

Mayors in Mexico are often targeted if they attempt to take tough action against local criminal networks or if they are seen to side with one gang over another. Unlike federal officials, small-town mayors usually have only minimal security.

At least 30,000 people were killed in Mexico last year, a record mainly attributed to drug-related violence.

HIGHWAY HANGOVER

Three deck park proposals pop up over Atlanta's congested urban core

By SYDNEY FRANKLIN • January 4, 2019

Development News Southeast



The Stitch is one of three proposals in Atlanta featuring a deck park design that will cover the city's tangled highway system near downtown. (Courtesy Central Atlanta Progress)

Three groups in [Atlanta](#) are proposing to cover portions of the city's congested downtown [highways](#) with deck [parks](#), or green spaces built over highly-trafficked roadways. Riffing off the recent rails-to-trails developments found in New York such as the [High Line](#) or [Hudson Yards](#), these park-like platforms would attract newcomers and new development to Atlanta's urban core while still allowing cars to continue crossing underneath.

According to the [Wall Street Journal](#), several schemes are underway to reimagine Atlanta's notoriously crowded interstates with deck parks. One proposal, dubbed [The Stitch](#) is being touted by [Central Atlanta Progress](#) (CAP), a nonprofit community development organization that works to improve and preserve the downtown area. If built, the 14-acre park plan would span the I-75 and I-85 Downtown Connector from the Civic Center [MARTA Station](#) to Piedmont Avenue, creating a series of urban plazas and corridors for walkable and recreational space as well as special programming surrounding Emory University and the Georgia Power headquarters. Mixed-use residential projects, restaurants, retail, and medical buildings are also envisioned for The Stitch.



Rendering of The Stitch (Courtesy Central Atlanta Progress)

Though it seems like an ambitious undertaking—creating a new elevated public space with room for future tall construction—projects like this have been done before. In 2012, the 5.2-acre [Klyde Warren Park](#) was completed over the Woodall Rogers Freeway in [Dallas, Texas](#). The city is currently constructing [another one near the Dallas Zoo](#) designed in collaboration with [OJB Landscape Architecture](#). Similar initiatives set over abandoned infrastructure have also been erected over the last decade like Atlanta's own

[Belt Line](#), boosting real estate values and enhancing green spaces in underutilized areas.



Two other proposals in Atlanta aim to bring green space and room for mixed-use development in downtown. Shown here: BCID park at Buckhead (Courtesy BCID/Rogers Partners Architects + Urban Designers)

The [WSJ notes](#) this is a growing trend. Nearly 30 cities around the U.S. have suggested deck park developments in recent years. Given Atlanta's rising population and booming downtown development, it looks like the leading Southern city is on track to level up as an urban hub. Georgia already [boasts the nation's largest tree canopy](#) in a major metropolitan area, so adding serious acreage to downtown seems like a logical next step. And because Atlanta didn't secure Amazon's HQ2 bid, creating one or multiple deck parks in the city center could actually be a viable way to charm tech companies that want dynamic urban environments for their young employees.



The Buckhead project would serve the city's busiest business district. (Courtesy BCID/Rogers Partners Architects + Urban Designers)

Besides The Stitch, another plan under consideration in Atlanta is a \$250 million proposal for a 9-acre deck park covering Georgia State Route 400. [Buckhead Community Improvement District](#) (BCID) and [Rogers Partners Architects + Urban Designers](#) released renderings of the project in 2017 and announced a planned groundbreaking for 2020. Over the last year, the BCID has been [busy raising money](#) for the project.

In another section of the city, [it's rumored](#) that Chick-fil-A CEO Dan Cathy is looking to build a deck park along North Avenue at the I-85 and I-75 interchange in order to better connect Midtown Atlanta with Georgia Tech. Further details on the idea have not yet been released.

Atlanta Freeway deck parks Highways

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U.S.

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

January 1, 2019

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.

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?"

Write to Cameron McWhirter at cameron.mcwhirter@wsj.com

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