



Exploring a new world

Atlanta's Ponce de Leon Avenue prepares for transformation into complete street

By Jeff Zagoudis
Associate Editor

Change is coming to Atlanta's Ponce de Leon Avenue, and the Spanish explorer would have been proud to see a street named after him leading a movement into the future.

Starting in mid-2016—or so the project team hopes—this major east-west corridor on the city's northeast side will begin its transformation into a complete street suitable for all types of users: drivers, pedestrians, bicyclists and public-transit riders.

Construction block party

Ponce de Leon Avenue is an integral portion of the Atlanta Beltline project, a massive urban redevelopment effort by the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) and the city to revitalize the region. The Beltline follows a 22-mile historical rail corridor and will feature expanded transit-, pedestrian- and bicycle-oriented features, including 33 miles of multiuse trails, 1,300 acres of parks and 5,600 affordable-housing units.

As for Ponce de Leon Avenue, improvements along the entire corridor will be

divided among four separate projects. The complete streets portion, which is being overseen by Atlanta Beltline Inc. (ABI), will focus on the segment from Monroe Drive to Freedom Parkway.

This portion of the project alone carries an initial price tag of approximately \$4.5 million, according to Catherine Owens, P.E., senior civil engineer for ABI—certainly no pittance. While ABI was contemplating how it was going to afford moving into the area, however, the generosity of another set of new neighbors provided the answer.

In 2011, local real estate investment company Jamestown Properties purchased the old Sears, Roebuck & Co. building near the intersection of Ponce de Leon and Monroe Drive. Through a subdevelopment group called Ponce City Market (PCM), Jamestown plans to breathe a little life back into the 2 million-sq-ft landmark structure and reimagine it as a multiuse space with a marketplace, retail and office space.

PCM always intended to spruce up the streetscape on Ponce de Leon Avenue as part of its project, but the city asked PCM to take it a step further and apply for a Livable Centers Initiative (LCI) grant. LCI grants are distributed by the Atlanta Regional Commission, benefiting development projects focused on high-impact corridors. A total of \$350 million in competitive grants has been budgeted between 2000 and 2017 for projects that directly result from LCI studies.

Once the LCI grant was on the table, PCM approached ABI with an opportunity for collaboration.

"They came to us and said, 'This is in your planning area. Can we help fund the project and prepare the application?'" Jenny Odom, ABI communications coordinator, told *ROADS & BRIDGES*. The two sides did indeed work together to fill out the grant, and the Ponce de Leon complete streets project ended up getting \$5 million in LCI money, which accounts for 80% of the project funding.

The remaining 20% of the money will come via local match from PCM.

All for one and one for all

Ponce de Leon is a heavily traveled commercial corridor, which in 2010, according to GDOT data, had an average daily traffic count of 34,710 vehicles per day between Monroe Drive and Freedom Parkway. In addition to cars and trucks, the thoroughfare sees heavy bicycle use.

Like many city streets where cars and bikes are forced to share the road, though, accident rates on Ponce de Leon were among the highest in the city, according to the Atlanta Bicycle Coalition. A 2011 road-safety audit conducted by the organization analyzed bicycle crash data from 2003 to 2007, and found that there were 17 accidents along the corridor during that period, though none resulted in fatalities.

The ABC study also analyzed road-user behaviors as a factor in bicycle crashes, with the following findings:

- Four of the crashes involved cyclists riding on the sidewalk;
- Wrong-way riding contributed to three crashes;
- Three crashes were the result of cyclists passing other people or vehicles; and
- Two crashes resulted from cyclists following too closely.

These bicycle factors, plus a number of pedestrian accidents along the corridor, prompted ABI to pursue a complete streets project plan.

"We needed to improve that interface between the existing infrastructure and the new infrastructure that we're constructing, so we

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wanted to make sure that it's pedestrian- and bike-friendly as well as positioned for vehicles," Odom said.

Reshaping the road

In its current iteration, the ABI complete streets project features a series of pedestrian-oriented improvements to the section in question of Ponce de Leon, including:

- Four new vehicular travel lanes;
- A two-way left-turn lane;
- New Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)-compliant sidewalks;
- A new landscape strip, creating an added layer of separation between pedestrians and vehicles;
- Buffered bike lanes; and
- Updated light poles along the entire corridor.

One of the centerpieces of the LCI project, according to Odom, will be an ADA-accessible ramp running from Ponce de Leon Avenue up to the Atlanta Beltline. "It's about a 20-ft vertical difference because the [Eastside Trail]

runs over Ponce," Odom said about the elevated trail, which carries roughly 8,000 people per day.

Because of that high foot traffic, ABI hopes to add one other feature to the intersection: "We're designing a set of stairs as well, and we'll see if the project budget will allow for it," said Odom.

Before any of that work can begin, however, GDOT has to finish the first milling and paving phase, which began in 2013. As part of that first phase, GDOT crews executed a road diet and converted two of Ponce de Leon's existing lanes into bike lanes. Within the next year, according to Odom, the agency will begin improvements to ADA ramps at all intersections along the corridor, as well as constructing two or three midblock crossing pedestrian relief zones. "There are a lot of midblock crossings on Ponce, and since it's a major corridor we want to give pedestrians a chance to catch their breath while they wait for another light cycle," Odom said.

Sidewalk improvements will go a long way toward enhancing pedestrian safety, added Odom, who described the perilous situation

currently facing those out for a stroll: "Right now the sidewalk goes right up to the edge of the curb, so before we started our project pedestrians would essentially be walking right next to cars going 40 to 60 mph," she said.

At press time, ABI had just completed a preliminary plan set "that was about 60% designed" and was scheduled to submit the plans to GDOT within the following two weeks for the environmental-review process, according to Owens. Once the environmental document has been approved, ABI can begin what she calls one of the most difficult parts of the project—right-of-way acquisition.

"The project was planned to only require one easement, with the assumption that the back of the sidewalk was the right-of-way line, but for all of the corridor the right-of-way line is in the middle of the sidewalk," said Owens, "so essentially we have to acquire an easement from every adjacent property."

The old rail line ABI discovered below street level also has added some difficulty to the early stages of the project, requiring additional environmental review.

"With three other projects going on in



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the area, you can imagine we have a lot of stakeholders and partners," said Owens. "The coordination has been great but it definitely added a layer of complexity to the project."

The next generation

Despite the difficulties and unknowns associated with a project of this nature, Owens and Odom both believe that the Ponce de Leon Avenue project could be the beginning of a larger movement in the city.

"After we received the grant, GDOT ended up adopting their own complete streets policy," Odom said. "So GDOT is starting to see the light in terms of multimodal use."

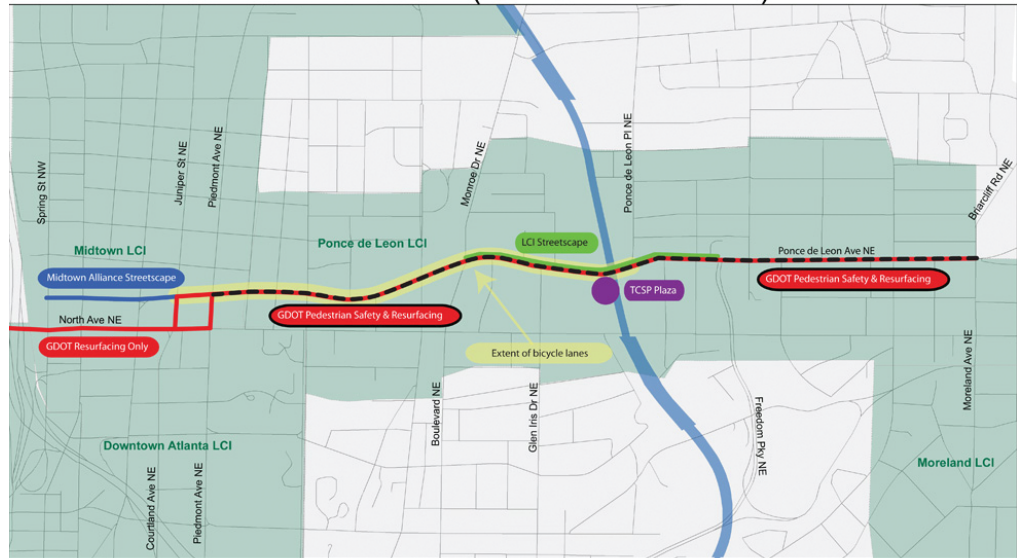
"We're starting to see a lot of the adjacent property owners and retailers turn their front door to our corridor now," she added, "so our goal is to make the sidewalk and pedestrian experience better than it is."

And what do Atlanta's citizens have to say about ABI's handiwork thus far?

"We've heard very few complaints and a lot of thank-yous for providing additional infrastructure for the different types of users of the corridor," Owens concluded. **R&B**



Funded Transportation Projects along Ponce de Leon Avenue NE (US 78/US 278/SR 8)



Office of Planning, Department of Planning & Community Development, February 8, 2013

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