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Building Our Way to Better Health

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At Kaiser Permanente, our mission is to improve the health of our members and the communities we serve. We recognize that the built environment plays a big role in determining the health of communities. That is why our Community Benefit program has invested a total of \$5 million since 2010 in Atlanta's largest, most dynamic urban redevelopment project – the Atlanta BeltLine.

WHAT IS THE ATLANTA BELTLINE AND HOW IS IT TRANSFORMING ATLANTA?

The Atlanta BeltLine is one of the most transformative projects in Atlanta's history. When completed, the project will provide a network of public parks, multiuse trails, and transit along an historic 22-mile railroad corridor circling downtown, creating new connections between 45 neighborhoods. The Atlanta BeltLine is led by two partner organizations – Atlanta BeltLine Inc. and the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership – that facilitate community input and implementation, as well as the engagement and awareness aspect of the Atlanta BeltLine through programs that help ensure that the positive social impacts of the development are brought to fruition in support of the overarching Atlanta BeltLine vision.

There are two major trails that comprise the Atlanta BeltLine: the Eastside Trail and the Westside Trail. Our original \$2.5 million grant supported the construction of the 2.5 mile Eastside Trail, which is already showing positive benefits. Annually, more than one million walkers, runners, cyclists, and others use the trail. The Eastside Trail provides an opportunity for local residents to increase their physical activity and change their lifestyles.

- People are walking and riding bikes instead of driving to work and school.
- More than 20,000 individuals walked four miles down the trail during the 5th annual Lantern Parade in 2014.
- More than 5,000 people have participated in running events.
- More than 1,000 others are participating in free fitness classes offered by the Atlanta BeltLine on the Eastside Trail.

We have also made a \$2 million investment in the development of the Westside Trail along with an additional grant for \$500,000 for health measurement and programming to

support positive social outcomes. This trail will pass through Atlanta's historic Southside neighborhoods and affect some of the city's most underserved communities, which have high rates of poverty and chronic disease, and experience significant health disparities. This investment in the future of communities around the Westside Trail supports increased opportunities for active living and health improvement through environmental redesign and clean-up, as well as economic development, job creation, affordable housing, public art, streetscapes, and historic preservation. By supporting the development of infrastructures of the Eastside Trail and Westside Trail, we are laying the foundation for long-term transformation into healthier lifestyles.

While we have already seen impressive short term gains, we are focused on the long-term return on investment. We expect this project will lead to improved mental, physical, and emotional health outcomes that will ultimately drive savings on medical costs and create a healthier, happier, and more stable workforce. Building this infrastructure will spur a culture shift through education, behavior, and environmental space/connectivity that the Atlanta BeltLine is facilitating through physical construction, fulfilling community need, and public-private partnerships. With our investment in the Atlanta BeltLine community, our eye is on long-term results: sustained, measurable improvement in the overall health of Atlantans; a change in mindset and behavior that gets residents outside and moving and out of their cars; and access to safe, and healthy food options in areas currently considered "food deserts." In short, "if you build it, they will come." And, we all benefit from that.

COMMUNITY NEED

Our investment in the Westside Trail is directly aligned with issues identified in our 2013 Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA). The CHNA identified high rates of obesity, chronic disease (diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension), and educational nonattainment as the top issues affecting the health of these communities. Obesity and overweight were found to be the top health needs.

According to the American Community Survey, residents in the Westside Trail area are 93 percent African American. Thirty percent have a high school or General Education Development (GED) diploma; almost 25 percent live in poverty; and almost 15 percent are unemployed. The Georgia

Department of Public Health notes that communities located near the Westside Trail rank in the highest category for the number of hospital discharges related to cancer, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. Furthermore, those living in neighborhoods along the Westside Trail are likely to suffer most from years of potential life lost due to chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease and cancer (Riggs 2013).

The Public Health Institute has found that, “there is a 47 percent increased likelihood that people who live in neighborhoods with sidewalks get at least 30 minutes of exercise per day and a 50 percent increased likelihood that people who live near trails will meet physical activity guidelines” (Urban Land Institute 2013). The Trust for Public Land ranked Atlanta 42nd among 60 American cities in its 2014 rating of how well cities meet the need for local parks and greenspace (Urban Land Institute 2013).

The Atlanta BeltLine is essential to helping planners prioritize the acquisition and development of greenspace and parks. By investing more in infrastructures in disadvantaged areas such as this now, we will begin to help shape a culture of healthier living, providing the means necessary to adapt lifestyles, access healthier food options, and incorporate more physical activity as a part of the day-to-day lives of Atlantans on and near the Atlanta BeltLine.

Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

— World Health Organization

DELIVERING ON THE HEALTH PROMISE THROUGH PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

The Atlanta BeltLine Partnership’s success in convening public and private organizations that normally would not have the need or opportunity to work together to combat social challenges has helped it become one of the strongest public-private partnerships in the country. Through such collaboration, the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership is developing programs that will lead the way to healthier lives for Atlantans through a number of initiatives, including:

- **Workforce Partnership in Health Care** – Cited by the Obama Administration as an organization on the “map” of programs leading the path on workforce modernization and training, this program helps families along the Atlanta BeltLine gain meaningful employment close to home, and financial stability—valuable steps in the long-term vision of building and maintaining healthier lives. A Workforce Partnership in construction is also being developed to help residents near the Westside Trail gain training and employment in the development of the trail.
- **Local Fitness Provider Partnerships** – Through this partnership, local fitness providers offer free fitness classes in parks and trails around the Atlanta BeltLine. This is a fun, accessible opportunity for residents of all ages and fitness levels in these communities to engage in physical activity. Through yoga, aerobics, bike instruction for children and adults, Walk with a Doc, Nutrition Walks,

and more, the Atlanta BeltLine is offering something for everyone.

- **Public School Partnerships** – There are eight public schools located within walking distance of the Westside Trail, which provides promising opportunities for making physical activity available to schools as part of Kaiser Permanente Thriving Schools Initiative. Roughly 90 percent of students attending these schools receive free or reduced price lunch. The trail will facilitate active transportation and safe routes to increase biking and walking to schools.
- **Urban Agriculture** – The development of urban agriculture on a site at the southern end of the Westside Trail will involve neighborhood residents and school students. It will become a local source for fresh produce in “food desert” areas along the trail.

Investments in the Atlanta BeltLine have helped stimulate a shift in the population. More people are moving back to the urban core, where they can access the more than \$2.5 billion in private real estate development completed since 2005 or underway within a half-mile of the Atlanta BeltLine. Atlantans are beginning to take advantage of the infrastructures and programs in which we are investing. By building smart and investing in infrastructures that supports sustainable, healthier lifestyles, the projected returns are beyond measure.

SOURCES

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