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## Airport area leaders want funding to demo Southside mobility projects

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A combination of personal rapid transit, autonomous shuttles and microtransit could be the transit solution for the south side of metro Atlanta. To prove it, area leaders need money for demonstration projects.

That's one reason the ATL Airport Community Improvement Districts (AACIDs) and the Andrew Young Foundation are helping sponsor the [2021 Podcar City Conference](#) Dec. 9-10 at the Kimpton Overland Hotel adjacent to the Porsche Cars North America headquarters in Hapeville.

A podcar, or personal rapid transit (PRT) system, is one of a combination of mobility solutions the AACIDs are proposing to solve the need for transit in the growing area around Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. The other components are microtransit and autonomous shuttles.

"In order for south metro to grow it is going to have to have transit solutions in the communities. We need alternatives to high-capacity rail," said [Gerald McDowell](#), executive director of ATL Airport Community Improvement Districts.

Feasibility studies have shown adding high-capacity rail is prohibitively costly; the high price tag recently [led MARTA to abandon efforts to build commuter rail connecting south Clayton County to downtown Atlanta](#).

A PRT system is much less expensive and could work in combination with autonomous shuttles and microtransit to solve transit issues in the Southside, McDowell said. After studying the lower-cost options, the AACIDs believe they could also be appropriate for other communities throughout Georgia, he said.

[PRT uses small modes called podcars to transport passengers between designated locations](#). PRT systems have been built for \$30 million a mile, compared to \$300 million a mile for high-speed rapid transit, equivalent to MARTA trains; \$150 million a mile for light speed rapid transit, similar to the Atlanta Streetcar; and \$50 million a mile for bus rapid transit (BRT), according to the AACIDs' 2021 "Our Vision for Transit and Infrastructure in South Metro" report.

The two-day 2021 Podcar City Conference in Hapeville will feature panel discussions and demonstrations on topics ranging from new and emerging projects to financing and research. About 150-200 people are expected to attend. It's only the second time the 15-year conference has been held in the United States and the first time on the East Coast; the 2019 conference was in San Jose, Calif., and the event skipped 2020.

The event comes as the AACIDs are working with MARTA on a financial feasibility study for a PRT system. In addition, the Andrew Young Foundation is attempting to identify \$600,000 in private funding for the project, McDowell said.

After the study is completed, MARTA would issue a request for qualifications (RFQ) and then ask qualified vendors



ATL AIRPORT CIDS

A conceptual vision for PRT transit around the Atlanta airport from the ATL Airport Community Improvement Districts.

for proposals (RFP) in 2022, McDowell said. The AACIDs have named an advisory committee to help evaluate and select proposals, with a goal of starting construction in 2024-2025, he said.

The ATL Airport CIDs has been working "under the radar" with transit leaders and agencies, including MARTA and the Georgia Department of Transportation, since 2018 to explore the feasibility of PRT, autonomous shuttles and microtransit, McDowell said.

"What we envision is a combination of PRT, microtransit and autonomous shuttles. That's what we believe is the solution. That combination of solutions will solve the same problems as a high-capacity network," he said.

Autonomous shuttles could be used to provide scheduled and on-demand transportation service for first-mile, last-mile mobility needs. First and last mile refers to the walking trip from a formal bus or transit stop to the passenger's final destination. It's important for lower-income people and in industrial employment centers.

The AACIDs completed a transit feasibility study in January 2019 that showed employees in the business park along the Phoenix Boulevard corridor needed first- and last-mile service to supplement existing fixed-route service, according to the AACIDs report. The area would require three shuttles at an annual cost of about \$900,000, plus a one-time \$50,000 cost to build charging infrastructure. If funding for a pilot project in the business park can be identified in the first half of 2022, the AACIDs plan to launch the demonstration in the second half of 2022, McDowell said.

Microtransit, also known as on-demand transit or flexible transit, uses vehicles smaller than buses, such as shuttle buses or passenger vans, equipped with computers that can identify multiple riders traveling in the same direction and create a customized route for them.

Microtransit could significantly benefit workers at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, the largest employer in southside Atlanta, because many overnight airport workers can't use MARTA due to its limited service hours, according to the AACIDs.

The AACIDs plan to launch a microtransit pilot project after, in early 2020, completing service modeling for its use within the AACIDs pilot zone. Costs range from \$900,000 to \$2.47 million depending on the number of vehicles, 6-12, and length of daily service, 12 or 24 hours.

Since deciding against commuter rail in Clayton County, MARTA is now considering a bus rapid transit route along the corridor from the southern part of the county to downtown. PRT is another option for Clayton County, McDowell said.

The microtransit pilot project in the Hartsfield-Jackson area and the Clayton County BRT route are among 17 transportation projects planning agency the Atlanta-Region Transit Link Authority (ATL) approved to submit to the governor's office and the General Assembly for possible funding in 2022.

McDowell and Clayton County Board of Commissioners Chairman [Jeff Turner](#); Fulton County Board of Commissioners Chairman [Robb Pitts](#); ATL Executive Director [Chris Tomlinson](#); MARTA General Manager and CEO [Jeff Parker](#); Georgia House Transportation Committee Chairman [Rick Jasperse](#); and state Senate Transportation Committee Chairman Sen. [Frank Ginn](#) visited mobility technology companies in Orlando in July, he said. The group tried PRT and autonomous shuttles at sites operated by Oceaneering International Inc. and Beep Inc., the latter of which is working on Peachtree City's autonomous vehicle program.

After the visit, leaders asked a PRT consultant to put together prospective networks for South Fulton and Clayton counties to be presented to their boards of commissioners, McDowell said.

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