

REVEAL THE RIVER

A PLAN BY SCAPE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE
AIMS TO RECONNECT METRO ATLANTA RESIDENTS
TO THE RIVER WITHOUT PUSHING THEM OUT.

BY JONATHAN LERNER / IMAGES AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCAPE

ABOVE
Scores of municipalities
and organizations are
working to open a
100-mile river corridor
to public use.

As it snakes for 100 miles through sprawling metro Atlanta, the Chattahoochee River borders 19 municipalities in seven counties. It descends through landscapes that transition from wooded Appalachian foothills and manicured subdivisions into underserved urban neighborhoods, across a low-rise industrial zone, and back out into agricultural countryside.

That's almost a complete rural-to-urban transect, except it lacks an urban-core segment. But Atlanta originated at a rail terminus, not on a waterway. The Chattahoochee is nowhere near downtown. Distance from the city center is one reason why much of the river shore is still undeveloped. More important in keeping it that way has been Georgia's 1973 Metropolitan River Protection Act (MRPA), which reserved a 2,000-foot buffer along both banks through most of the metro area. Since then, suburbanization has been rampant: The

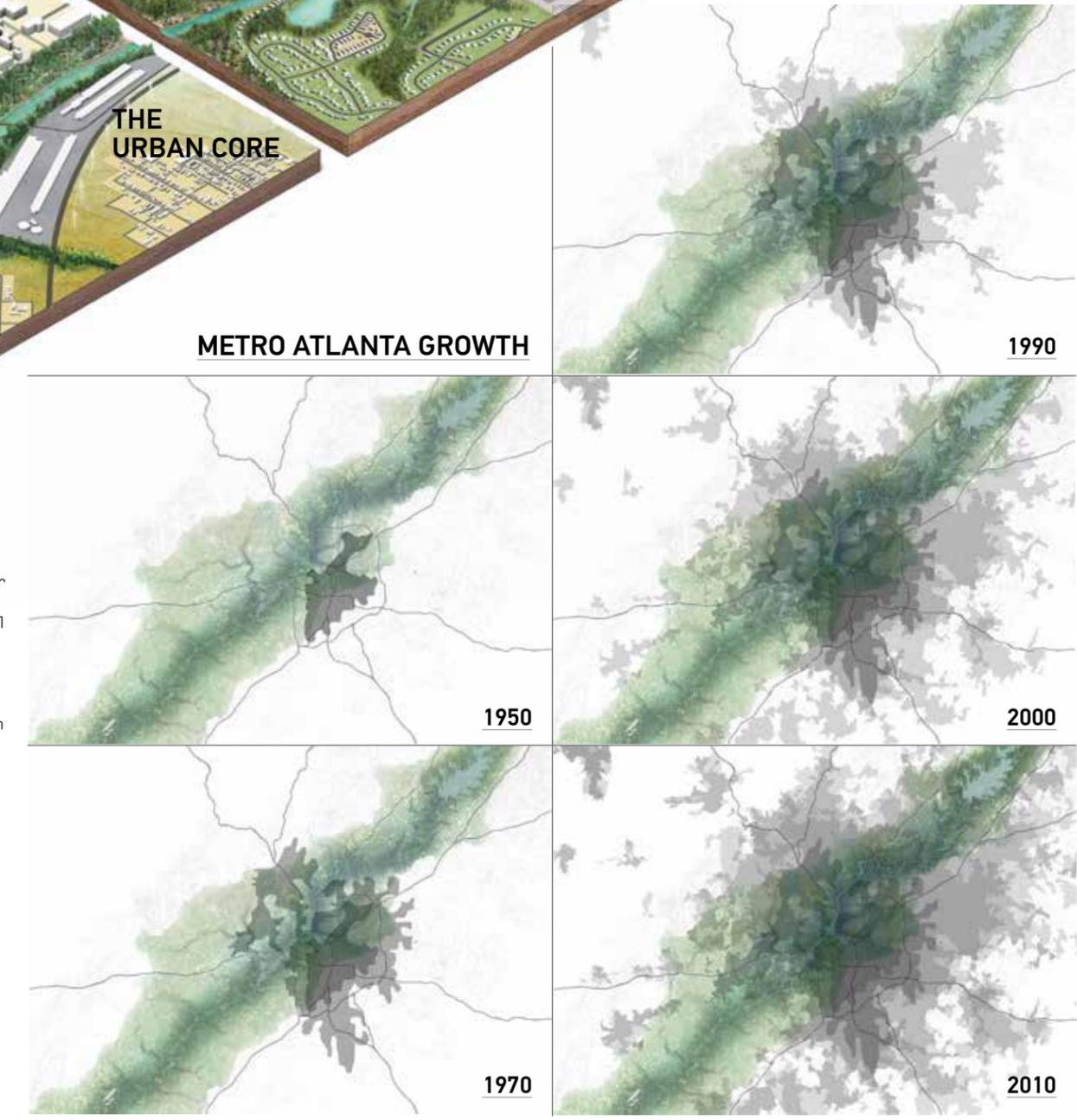
population of riverfront counties in those 100 miles has tripled to nearly 3.5 million, while the metro area now has almost twice that number. One shudders at how the river might look without the MRPA's protection.

The law either prevented construction on riverside properties or forced it toward their upland boundaries. Most of the Chattahoochee's margins remain thickly wooded. In some places there are bluffs, and in others, floodplain. The river is



SUGAR HILL TRAILHEAD
This demonstration-site concept illustrates types of access and amenities that could be used throughout the project.

CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVERLANDS



shallow, with exposed granite outcrops creating shoals and rapids. North of the city, surrounded by affluent suburbs, the multiple units of the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area, established in 1978, protect 48 miles of shoreline and nearly 7,000 acres of land. The river is beloved by fishing, kayaking, and birding enthusiasts and a passion of environmentalists. “Shootin’ the Hooch” in inner tubes is a popular summertime activity. Still, the Chattahoochee remains a special destination, not an enmeshed feature of metropolitan life. There are few access points. It’s hard to even glimpse it.

The MRPA was a “magical thing,” says Gena Wirth, ASLA, the design principal at SCAPE Landscape Architecture. “It envisioned environ-

mental protection and recreation. What it didn’t do was set up a similar template for how to introduce public access.” SCAPE recently conducted a study and issued a report, *The Chattahoochee RiverLands* (available at chattahoocheeriverlands.com), describing an ambitious vision of the same name to address that challenge. It would establish a continuous greenway and blueway along the river. It was initiated by the Trust for Public Land and the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), an intergovernmental planning agency. The two organizations were joined, and the undertaking partially funded, by the City of Atlanta and suburban Cobb County, between which the river furnishes a relatively short but politically significant—sometimes charged—border.

TOP LEFT
The Chattahoochee RiverLands study corridor spans sprawling metro Atlanta from north to south.

ABOVE
Three sub-areas were defined, reflecting their respective suburban, urban, and agricultural demographics and development patterns.

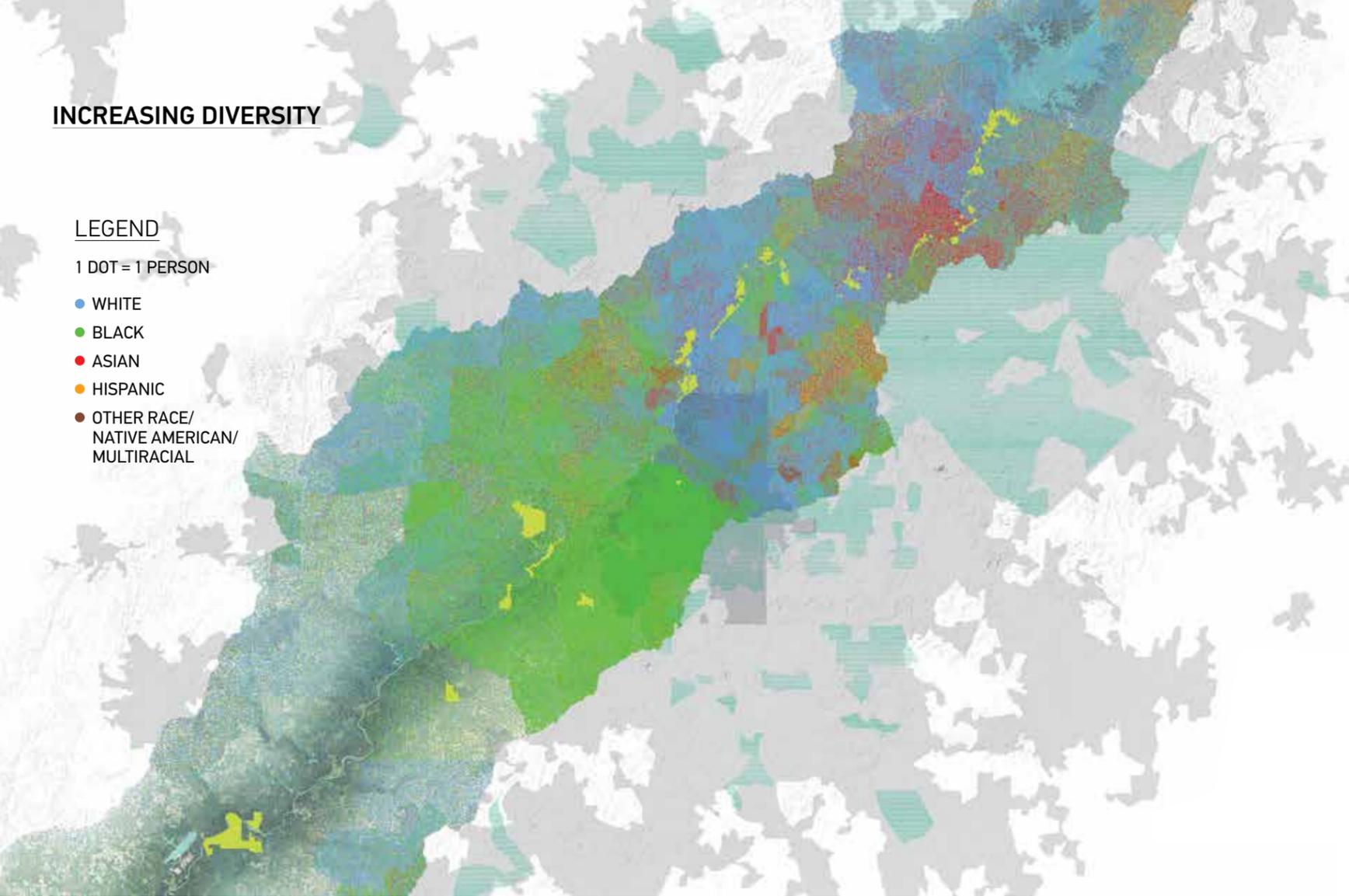
RIGHT
The region’s population and suburbanization have exploded over recent decades.

INCREASING DIVERSITY

LEGEND

1 DOT = 1 PERSON

- WHITE
- BLACK
- ASIAN
- HISPANIC
- OTHER RACE/
NATIVE AMERICAN/
MULTIRACIAL

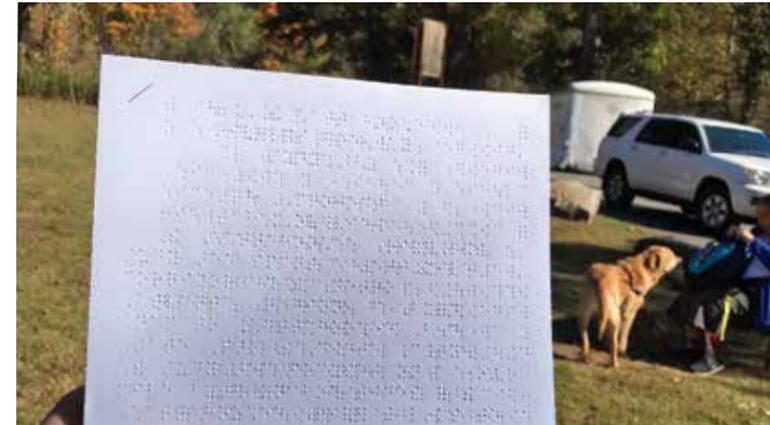


The RiverLands would establish about 125 miles of continuous, accessible walking and biking trail. (Unavoidable detours will make it longer than the 100 actual stream miles.) This would incorporate 25 new or improved river crossings and increase trailheads from 11 to 25. Forty-four other existing or proposed nearby trails might tie in as tributaries. Water access points would increase from 16 to 42, and eight campsites would be established. Beyond numbers, the RiverLands is in the words of the report an “aspirational vision” for parlaying a largely hidden natural resource into a salutary recreational amenity and corridor of physical communication between separated communities—in the project’s slogan, “a common ground for all.”

It is also a “generational project” and for now a concept, not a plan. It will likely take decades to be fully realized. The study itself was conducted over 20 months and concluded last summer. All told, the process engaged hundreds of individuals and more than 140 governmental, business, and community organizations. Not many projects have its scale or multiplicity of interested parties; Wirth compares it to the 500-mile San Francisco Bay Trail project and even the 2,200-mile Appalachian Trail.

Even the route of the RiverLands trail is unclear because of the inherent tension between promoting use and preventing damage. “We did an ecological suitability analysis for the trail,” says Aiman Duckworth, a senior landscape architect

ABOVE
A de facto color line crosses the corridor between the predominantly white north (in blue) and the predominantly Black center (in green).



ABOVE
“River Rambles” introduced groups of students and the differently abled to the largely hidden Chattahoochee.

LEFT
Braille guidance was provided for the River Rambles.

and urban ecologist at Biohabitats who was on the design team. It was “fairly riparian forest-centric.” He emphasizes the Chattahoochee’s potential as a regional corridor for the movement and climate-driven migration of species, which makes safeguarding the large forest cores on the river’s margins a priority. But he also points out that “engagement with and understanding of these ecosystems is incredibly important to the long-term preservation of the river itself.”

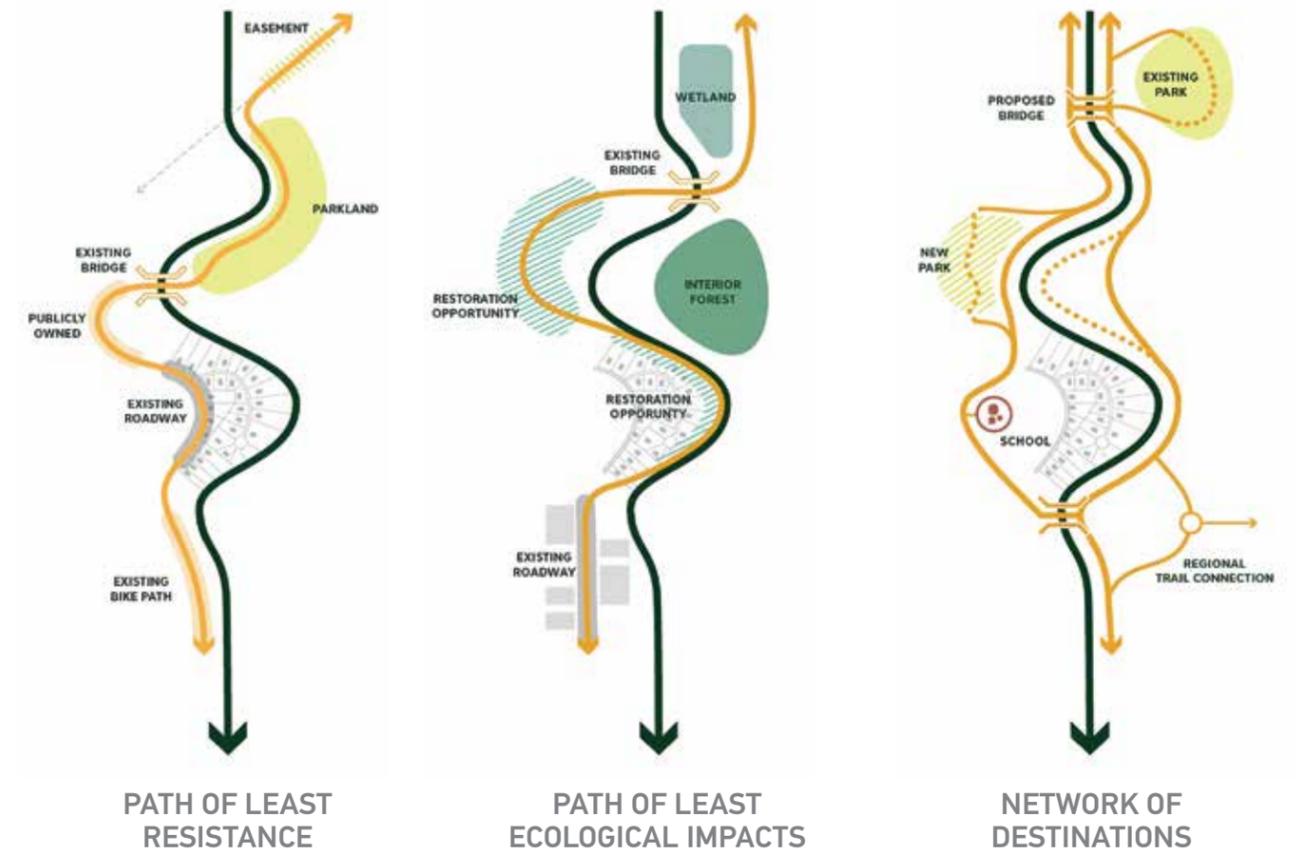
The designers proposed three alignments. A “path of least resistance” would rely on public land and

existing trails and roadways. A path of “least ecological impact” would avoid landscape fragmentation and skirt ecologically sensitive and flood-prone areas. A “network of destinations,” more urban and conforming less closely to the river, would prioritize cultural sites and facilities, trail and transit connections, and population nodes. Then, following public workshops, a “preferred alignment” was arrived at, blending elements of all three regardless of their feasibility. The designers further articulated a “practical alternative” to that, plus “other alternatives.” This abundance of options underscores the inherent complexity of the RiverLands.

So does the number of jurisdictions and interests involved. Many “are already advancing trail plan-

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—GENA WIRTH, ASLA



PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE

PATH OF LEAST ECOLOGICAL IMPACTS

NETWORK OF DESTINATIONS

ning studies, looking at enhancing the pedestrian and bike network,” Wirth says. “A lot of the project was taking all these disparate plans that were already on the map and connecting them back together—to work with one another and also connect—at some points directly, at some points indirectly—to the river.” Funding and initiative to proceed on segments of the RiverLands will not be forthcoming all at once. Finding coherence and continuity will be a challenge. “It’s a great big question, being able to translate it to something that could be implemented in an opportunistic fashion—we know that’s how it’s going to happen,” says the architect and urban designer Nans Voron, a senior associate at SCAPE.

“The next steps are trying to define the design guidelines,” Voron says. “What will it take to have all of those people in agreement on a series of materials, the options for ecological treatment, bridges, to be able to maintain the identity of that 125-mile greenway?” To inform this conversation, SCAPE offered a concept design for a planned pilot project encompassing many of the issues and opportuni-

ties that will recur elsewhere. It will be built on Cobb County-owned land on the river’s west bank, opposite an industrial district of Atlanta, at roughly the midpoint of the project area. The site has wetlands and stormwater outfalls that need mitigation to support healthy riparian ecology; steep slopes, but also a former roadbed and utility easements that could provide the trail route; a Civil War archaeological site; and adjacency to another planned trail. The design includes 2.4 miles of paths in several configurations including paved, unpaved, and boardwalk, plus recreation and education areas. “But groundbreaking is probably several years away,” says the ARC bicycling and walking program manager, Byron Rushing. Three other sites have been identified as potential demonstration projects: a new trailhead, a link between an existing trail and the river, and a future riverfront park. But these are “simply renderings,” Rushing says.

Another challenge, if the RiverLands is “for all,” as the report promises, will be the region’s auto-driven development pattern and sketchy transit network.

ABOVE
Three possible trail alignments were proposed.

OPPOSITE
Workshop discussions yielded a “preferred alignment” merging elements of the three proposals.



TOP LEFT

In a demonstration-site concept, an existing upstream greenway along Proctor Creek would be extended to the river through this area.

ABOVE LEFT

Underserved communities in the Proctor Creek area are blocked from the river by moribund industrial sites and the degraded condition of the creek and its surroundings.

How many will be able to enjoy the greenway if they can't drive to it? Conversely, can the RiverLands really help mitigate the region's auto dependence? Three stations of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) heavy rail network are within sight of the river, Rushing points out. But MARTA's system, including its bus network, is chronically underused. Using 2013 data, ARC calculated that only 3.1 percent of commuters used transit. Ridership has been decreasing since then. In a region where trips are unavoidably long—and summers hot and sticky—there are discouraging distances between the transit stops and the places people need to actually go. In much of the city, not just the suburbs, transit is so sparse as to be virtually useless.

That is partly a function of the system's racialized history. MARTA's rail map was distorted when



most close-in counties opted out, at its inception in the 1960s and repeatedly since, for fear of Atlanta's Black population. The result, since as built it mainly served the city, is that ridership became predominantly African American. The "joke" among some whites has been that MARTA means "Moving Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta." Meanwhile, to many Atlantans, Cobb County in particular has been a poster child for racism and reluctance to collaborate. But ARC's Rushing says, "A selling point for the RiverLands is that both the City of Atlanta and Cobb County agreed to sign on as local sponsors. That spoke to a lot of decision makers in the region, that they are willing to work closely together on their shared border." Besides, he points out, the suburbs are no longer overwhelmingly white. "The more diversity, the more that traditional resistance to transit expan-



sion, low-income and multifamily housing, and some of the other hot-button suburban NIMBY issues starts to fall away."

Still, de facto racial—and class—segregation persists. The project area's wealthiest census tract is 89 percent white with a median household income of \$210,000; the poorest is 97 percent Black with a median household income of \$28,000. Similar inequality is reflected in the availability of the river. A map of population by race shows a literal color line between the predominantly white northern part of Atlanta and the northern suburbs, and the mainly Black western and southern part of the city and suburbs. Overlaid with locations of existing river access points, the northern section, which also includes the 48 shoreline miles of the National Recreation Area, shows seven. In the

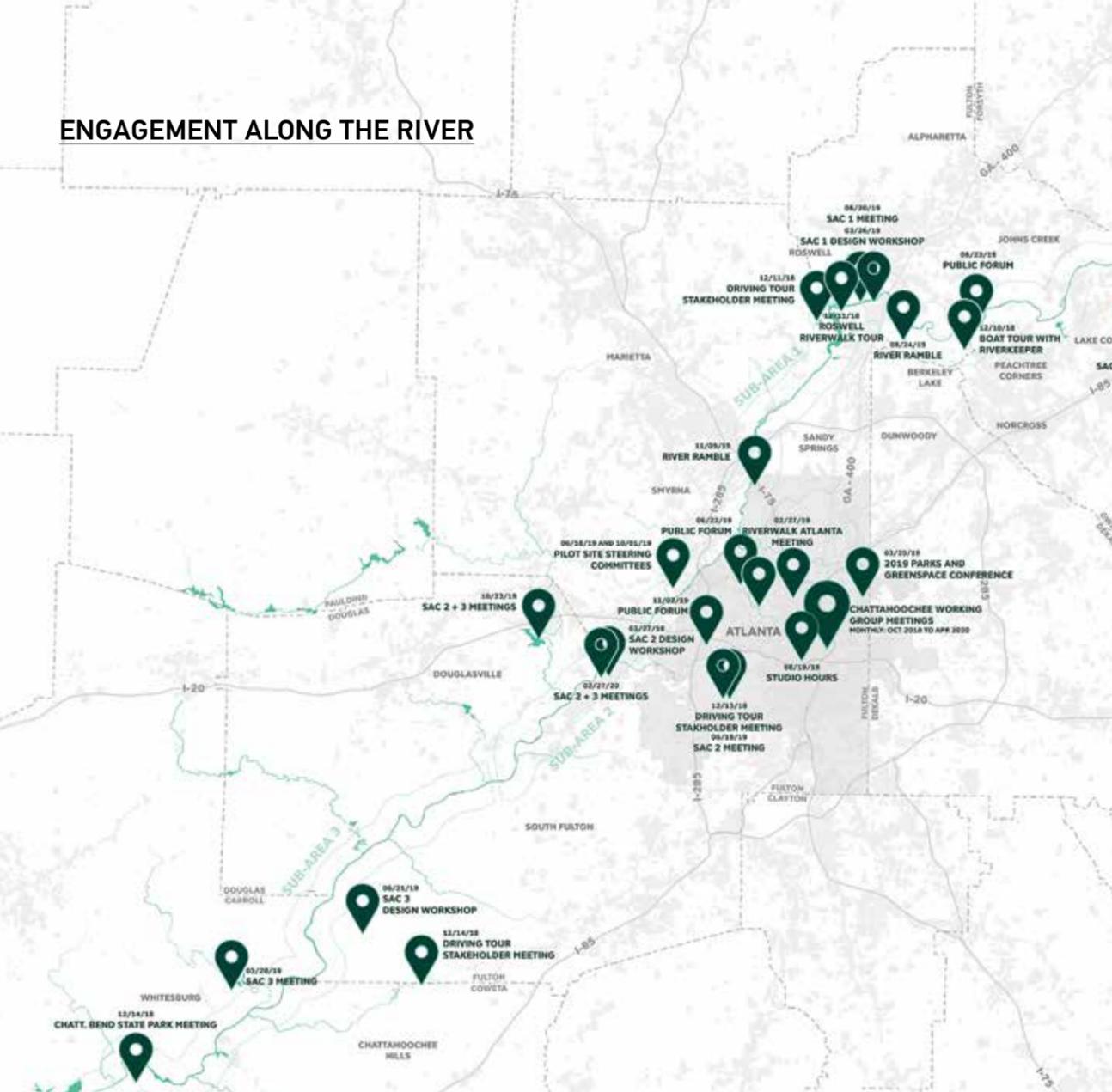
more Black and urban part south of that—where the protection of the MRPA didn't extend and roughly 11 uninterrupted miles of riverfront on the city's side have industrial uses—there is a single one. The next access, going south, is some 15 miles distant.

Recognizing these disparities, SCAPE brought in what Wirth calls a "little think tank of academics." That was Na'Taki Osborne Jelks, an assistant professor of environmental and health sciences at Spelman College and an expert in engaging urban communities of color in environmental stewardship, and Richard Milligan, an assistant professor of geosciences at Georgia State University, who studies the intersections of race and environment, with regard to watersheds in particular. Both are also well-connected community activists.

ABOVE

The vision for the Proctor Creek Trail Extension includes an interpretive pavilion and amenities geared toward environmental education.

ENGAGEMENT ALONG THE RIVER



“HOW DO YOU PUT MEASURES IN PLACE TO ENSURE THAT THIS REALLY IS A CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVERLANDS FOR ALL?”

—NA'TAKI OSBORNE JELKS

ABOVE
Tours, forums, working groups, and individual stakeholder meetings were held in communities throughout the project corridor.

OPPOSITE
A conceptual rendering of the greenway design and amenities.

Jelks says, “In our minds, the consequences are not unintended anymore. We’ve seen it happen.” The RiverLands vision includes principles of equitable development: Promoting job opportunities, affordable housing, and transit access, for example, should be incorporated from the start of implementation planning—when it occurs. “You’ve got to recheck what’s happening at whatever point the resources are brought to the table and the political will is there” to build the project, Jelks says. “We know that change is going to happen. How do you anticipate that change, and put measures in place to ensure that this really is a Chattahoochee RiverLands for all?” ●

JONATHAN LERNER LIVED IN ATLANTA FOR 21 YEARS, DURING WHICH HE RARELY GLIMPSED THE CHATTAHOOCHEE AND HIKE IT EVEN LESS.

Project Credits
DESIGN LEAD SCAPE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE, NEW YORK. **TRANSPORTATION AND MULTIMODAL TRAIL DESIGN** GRESHAM SMITH, ATLANTA. **ANTHROPOLOGY AND HISTORY** NEW SOUTH ASSOCIATES, STONE MOUNTAIN, GEORGIA. **ECOLOGICAL DESIGN AND PLANNING** BIOHABITATS, MOUNT PLEASANT, SOUTH CAROLINA. **ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE** NA'TAKI OSBORNE JELKS, ATLANTA. **GEOGRAPHY** RICHARD MILLIGAN, ATLANTA. **ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEERING** EDWARDS-PITMAN, ATLANTA.

