Not Just a Walk in the Park

By Johari Harris

Everybody seems to be excited about the Atlanta BeltLine development. An innovative idea, people have already begun flocking to the multi-use trail and surrounding areas are beginning to experience revitalization as individuals take use of the parks, art work, and bike trails. The BeltLine creates a convenient loop around Metro Atlanta which has the potential to alleviate the transportation issues residents know all too well about and encourage environmentally conscious modes of travel. Considering all the benefits one can only think to ask - how is this pioneering idea going to be paid for?

The BeltLine project is a non-profit endeavor that is partially paid for by property tax revenue that would have otherwise gone to Atlanta Public Schools. In exchange for this tax revenue, the BeltLine promised to pay APS a fixed amount every year until completion of the project and APS would benefit from redeveloped areas and a higher tax base. Unfortunately, APS has not received a substantial amount of promised payments totaling around $19 million, creating a tenuous relationship between the City Council that oversees BeltLine finances, and APS schools. So what is to be done? Schools need money; schools without money leads to students without the necessary resources. But, the BeltLine doesn’t have the money. Can the City Council really be blamed for this oversight regarding BeltLine revenue especially considering its still got a long way to go in terms of development? Simply put, yes.

It is unfortunate that the BeltLine hasn’t reached the anticipated revenue but that does not absolve them of the financial responsibility to APS. It is simply unacceptable they are in default by millions of dollars to an already embattled school system that could surely use the money. While it is clear the BeltLine cannot provide what it does not have to schools, it is time for the City Council to consider APS suggested alternatives to funding. It has been suggested that the Atlanta Civic Center be given to APS to use along with water services or developing a fiber network for schools. Personal issues between city officials and school board members must be placed aside to focus on the important objective of providing funds for APS students. If that means funds must be pulled from another part of the project that is what needs to be done. If it means APS must sue the city over missing funds that is what needs to be done. It is absurd that the default amount to APS schools has reached close to $20 million with little pushback from city officials. The extraordinary Nelson Mandela once stated, “there can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its’ children.” The city council and BeltLine’s treatment of funding for APS schools begs the question what does the city of Atlanta value? Is a nice walk in the park worth what is being sacrificed?

Johari Harris, a native of the Bay Area, California graduated summa cum laude from City College of New York where she was a Weston Fellow inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. Upon graduation she lived and taught in New Orleans for two years through Teach for America and holds elementary K-5 certification. In 2012 she received a Fulbright grant and moved to South Africa where she taught and coordinated various literacy programs. She is currently a College of Education Dean’s Fellow in Educational Psychology entering her second year. Her main interests surround urban education and she is interested in understanding the ways urban policies influence schools and the students who attend them. Her experiences have illustrated how interconnected seemingly different disciplines are and Urban Fellows affords her the opportunity to learn and connect with other fields to tackle the complex issues the impact these areas.