

A Better Way of Living

Two RSPH studies—and the involvement of multiple partners—help shape Atlanta’s built environment and its parks

By Kathy Morse

Capitol Hill
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If you could walk to your neighborhood grocery store, and bike paths led from your home to your office, would you keep your car in the garage, become less sedentary, and lead a healthier lifestyle? If nearby parks were cleaner, better maintained, and easier to access, would you use them more?

Two studies conducted by the Rollins School of Public Health (RSPH) are adding to our knowledge of what motivates behavior that could reduce the prevalence of cancer, heart disease, and obesity in our society. These studies—

one completed and one just beginning—also demonstrate the power of partnerships for the school with Atlanta-area corporations, private foundations, local governments, and the Emory community.

For two years, the RSPH carried out a study of the City of Atlanta parks system. Funded by the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, the study paired RSPH researchers with the Goizueta Business School whose MBA students interviewed park users and conducted park inventories. These findings are helping the city allocate resources of money and manpower to maintain and improve its parks while it prepares to add another 1,200 acres of green space through the Atlanta BeltLine project.

Now the RSPH is launching a three-year study of the health effects of living in Atlantic Station, a new planned community in midtown Atlanta where you can “live, work, and play.”

Researchers will collect data before people move into their new homes and again once they have lived for a year in a community where opportunities for physical activity have been engineered back into their daily lives. Funded by the CDC through the Emory Prevention Research Center (EPRC) at the RSPH, the study would not be possible without the involvement of Atlantic Station developers.

The CDC, through its “Healthy People in Healthy Places” initiative, awarded \$420,000 to the EPRC for the three-year project, “Studying Walkability and Travel (SWAT): Assessing Residents in the Atlantic Station Neighborhood.”

“The design of this study will help us learn if there is an effect on the health of residents who move into a community that is more walkable,” says Andrew Dannenberg, medical officer with the CDC’s National Center for Environmental Health.

Emory is one of two CDC-funded Prevention Research Centers in the United States that received such a grant. The second is in St. Louis, where residents in the New Town community will be studied. “The researchers involved in both studies will talk to each other,” says

Dannenberg. “They will share the same protocols and instruments so the results can be compared.”

“We want to follow the exact same procedures in Atlanta and St. Louis so we can combine the data and learn from the results of a larger population,” adds Karen Glanz, EPRC director. “This experiment will allow us to test the thinking of a lot of public health researchers about communities designed for more active living where people use their cars less. We are looking at physical activity associated with several kinds of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and obesity—all of which have a very direct tie to the EPRC’s main mission.”

Before and after

The SWAT study is being launched concurrent with a separate event highlighting Atlantic Station as a model of smart growth. “We will learn whether and how a mixed-use environment with good sidewalks and nearby destinations encourages people to walk and reduce their use of automobiles,” says Karen Mumford, principal investigator for the study in the RSPH’s Department of Environmental and Occupational Health.

According to CDC data, only 25% of adult Americans are physically active 30 minutes a day, most days of the week, as recommended by health experts. Nearly one in three has no leisure-time physical activity. More and more, researchers, developers, and the public are focusing their attention on the “built environment” and strategies for engineering physical activity back into people’s daily routines. Settings that encourage biking and walking may reduce automobile use, traffic congestion, and pollution.

Mumford believes the residents of Atlantic Station will provide important answers. Participants “are motivated by the thought of helping to contribute to public health knowledge—and some are intrigued by the gadgets involved,” she says. “There also is a small financial incentive: a \$25 gift card to Atlantic Station stores the first year and a \$50 card at the end.”

Participants, eventually 200 in all, will perform several tasks a few months before they move to Atlantic Station and again a year later. They will:

- Fill out a short survey about their age, health, and habits (everything from dog ownership to recreational activities and personal barriers to physical activity).



Above: Jim Jacoby is among those whose vision led to the development of Atlantic Station. Opposite page: Developers Brian Leary, John Whitaker, and Peter Curnyn hope the results from the RSPH study will quantify that living in Atlantic Station is healthier for residents.

- Wear activity and travel monitoring devices (an accelerometer and GPS data logger) for five days. Atlanta-based GeoStats, a study partner, developed the monitoring tools.

- Complete a five-day travel and activity log to record where they go and how they got there, what time they arrived and left, and what they did there.

“Atlantic Station is the perfect laboratory for us,” says Mumford. “We can study whether changes in the physical and social characteristics of neighborhoods have an impact on health by encouraging more walking, for example.”

Marketing results

The developers of Atlantic Station are just as interested in the data that the study will reveal, which may quantify the quality-of-life benefits they envisioned in the community’s design. They are providing access to new residents as study participants and supporting the study with a grant of their own.

Atlantic Station is the nation’s largest urban brownfield redevelopment project on the 138-acre site of a former steel mill that opened in 1901. At the turn of that century, the property was on the outskirts of the town. With time, Atlanta became a railway and airline transportation hub intersected by three interstate highways. Growth spread as far as automobiles could

take commuters to and from work each day.

Atlantic Station LLC (a joint venture between AIG Global Real Estate and Jacoby Development) bought the land in 1999 with a shared vision of how to rescue this environmentally impaired site for redevelopment into a valuable mixed-use property. When completed, Atlantic Station will provide houses, town homes, condos, and apartments for 10,000 residents and a workplace for 40,000 people. The community offers retail stores, restaurants, theaters, and 11 acres of parks and green spaces. Bike trails, wide sidewalks, “share” cars, and trolleys linked to MARTA’s bus and rapid transit system provide transportation options.

“Atlantic Station is part of the Renaissance of the west side of Atlanta with Georgia Tech, Coca-Cola headquarters, and the World Congress Center,” notes Jim Jacoby, president and chairman of Jacoby Development.

Realizing a dream

The vision for turning the steel mill site into a community where people would “live, work, play” began as a master’s thesis on city planning by Georgia Tech student Brian Leary. He now serves as vice president, design and development, of Atlantic Station, LLC, with a high-rise office overlooking a dream that became reality. All that was possible once New York-based AIG insured the environmentally challenged



property and became its developer.

“We looked at great urban neighborhoods across the world and figured out why they worked,” says Leary. “Cities like Savannah grew at a walking pace; Atlanta grew at 55 mph. Now people in Atlanta are tired of the gridlock. We’ve built a community the way it was defined 100 years ago. People can get out of their cars and live close to where they work, shop, and enjoy restaurants and movie theaters and reach it all on foot. They can *walk* to where they like to walk rather

than *drive* to where they like to walk. Convenience is important, but it’s also a healthier way of living—physically, mentally and emotionally.”

“Atlantic Station is always evolving and learning ways to make it even more green and healthy,” says Peter Curnyn, vice president–development for AIG Global Real Estate. “There is a perception that building green is exponentially more expensive, but that’s not really the case if you are creative and careful in terms of your architectural design and selection of materials.

You can even see the stars in Atlantic Station. The Sierra Club gave us the idea of using streetlamps with topside shades so the lights shine down and not up.”

Atlantic Station’s developers naturally were attracted to Mumford’s study. “You can’t get two more respected organizations than Emory and the CDC,” says Leary. “If they ask us to work with them, it is almost a ‘yes’ before you know what it is. We’re providing \$150,000 for whatever the study needs and access to study participants. We see this as clear value added. There is real market value for us if we can quantify that living in Atlantic Station is healthier.”

The Novare Group is among three residential developers that are providing access to their residents for the Emory researchers. Mike Everly is president of the company, which will add a 46-floor condo building next to its existing 26-floor investment.

“We believe those who move into town are excited about the urban experience and will be receptive to participating in this type of study,” Everly says. “I’m interested in learning how many of our buyers are moving into town to be closer to work compared with those attracted by the great amenities available in Atlantic Station and midtown.”

Creating great parks

The successful collaboration under way at Atlantic Station was preceded last year by a compelling study on park use. The City of Atlanta Park Research Initiative (CAPRI) was an outgrowth of a goal shared by the city

and the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation to improve green space in the city.

“This was a wonderful combination of private and public support to do good work,” recalls Mumford. “The Blank Foundation is an icon in the community. It supports important initiatives that benefit local communities, such as contributing to the expansion and improvement of parks and green space in the metro Atlanta region. It provided a grant for our study. The RSPH contributed their experience in developing and conducting intercept surveys of park users and inventories of parks. The MBA students at Goizueta gained valuable experience in gathering and analyzing the data and making recommendations. Now the City of Atlanta has data that can aid in decision-making. This study produced multiple benefits for students and researchers as well as the City of Atlanta.”

The city operates 355 parks with 3,403 acres of green space, including larger entities such as Piedmont Park and Freedom Park. But the city didn’t have a current inventory of parks and park features or information on park users and accessibility. Soon the city would be acquiring another 1,200 acres of land as part of the BeltLine project in which old railroad right-of-ways would connect 40 existing parks.

The Blank Foundation, created in 1995, is committed to helping develop a system of great parks in Atlanta and spurring greater public-private investment in the city’s environmental well-being.

“If we can help create this system of parks,

“Atlanta currently loses 54 acres of trees a day. I’m proud to say that our foundation has helped turn that around. To date we’ve saved more than 800 acres from development in our city.”

—Arthur Blank, Home Depot co-founder and philanthropist

“We hope the study will provide a resource for the city as it moves forward to deal with the condition of parks and how people want to use them.”

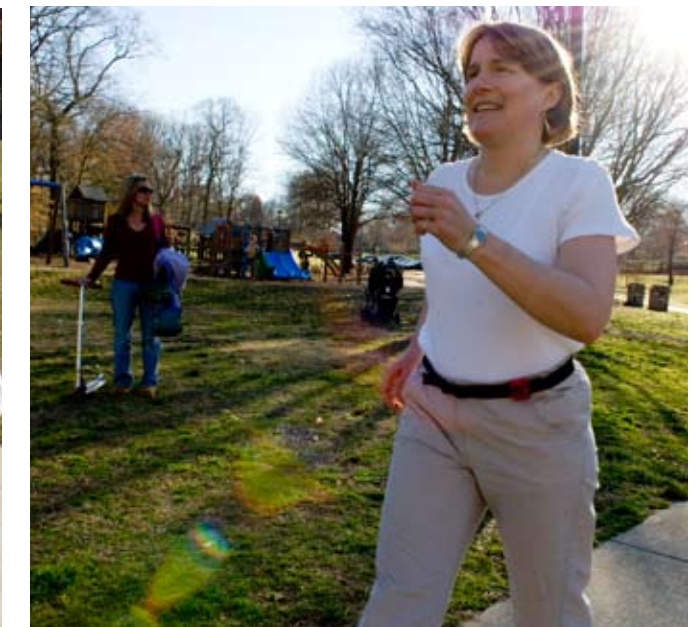
—Margaret Connelly
Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation



Arthur Blank and Margaret Connelly are using results from the CAPRI study to help drive the Blank Foundation’s efforts to enhance green space throughout Atlanta. The city operates 355 parks and 3,403 acres of green space.



Left: Graduate students from Goizueta Business School conducted user surveys throughout Atlanta to assess how residents use city parks.



Right: RSPH researcher Karen Mumford exercises regularly in Candler Park, one of 87 city parks assessed in the CAPRI study.

then we can have a real impact on quality of life for Atlantans, particularly in urban neighborhoods,” says foundation chairman Arthur Blank. “Great parks can improve health through increased physical activity, and they provide places where children and families can safely play and connect with one another and reduce social isolation. For Atlanta to remain a great city, we need great parks.”

To that end, the foundation has formed productive relationships with numerous partners, including the City of Atlanta and Emory. “The city has been our partner from the very beginning and on many levels,” says Margaret Connelly, program director for the Blank Foundation. “Mayor Shirley Franklin and parks commissioner Dianne Harnell Cohen have been incredible champions of green spaces and provided real leadership in helping create a world-class parks system.

“Our foundation feels that the more information we have about parks and how people use them—why they go there, how they get there, what they do when they are there—the better investment we can make. The BeltLine project is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the city to address issues around parks, transit, affordable housing, and how communities interact with one another. As a foundation, we love the idea of a connected system of green spaces, parks, and trails.”

Perfect symmetry

The foundation started a conversation with Emory around how to create an inventory of park features and conditions, to understand how residents view the parks and their policies (such as hours of operation) and determine how accessible the parks are and how that relates to their usage.

“We saw a nice symmetry between Goizueta Business School and the RSPH,” Connelly says. “We had worked with Karen Mumford at the RSPH on the parks study in DeKalb County. She helped guide what the instruments look like, how to create the data in a usable format, and where to house it, and she gave it the public health perspective. Through Michael Sacks at Goizueta, we provided real-life experience for the students, working collectively on one issue.”

The project was assigned to 150 first-year MBA students as part of their Introductory Leadership course, explains Sacks, associate professor in the practice of organization and management. “They learned survey design and analysis, project and team management,

presentation design—and adapting to situations when things don’t go according to the project plan.” He adds, “This is what our school should be doing—connecting what happens in the classroom to real work.”

The students laced up their sneakers and took their Palm Pilots and inventory sheets to 87 parks where they listed facilities and conditions such as usability, structural integrity, and cleanliness. They marked pedestrian and automobile access on a map. For the second phase, they returned to the parks to conduct user surveys one day on the weekend. More than 1,000 people filled out a brief questionnaire on their age and residence, their travel and park use patterns, and their views on policies such as hours of operation and future park development goals.

In spring 2006, 13 students volunteered to analyze the data with the help of an advisory committee, using techniques of statistical analysis, marketing strategy, and decision modeling. They defined park-user segments (such as “leisure lovers” and “sports enthusiasts”) for marketing efforts, identified key parks to target for improvement, as well as features such as cleaning up litter and graffiti that need attention across the entire park system, and developed a prototype park funding decision model.

“What I found most interesting about the study were the numbers on usage and demographics,” says Ken Gillett, acting director of parks for the City of Atlanta. “We learned that Freedom Park is truly a regional park and draws people from distant zip codes. Many also come from the immediate community and like the direct and easy access to the park. They don’t have to walk around the block to get into it.

“This study showed us the value of keeping parks open and accessible, ways of designing them to be easy to get into, and how people value that space.”

True to form, the study provided the Blank Foundation with new information to drive its efforts to enhance green space while engaging the community. “As a result of the study, we have more people out there interested in the issue of parks,” says Connelly. “We hope the study will provide a resource for the city as it moves forward to deal with the condition of the parks and how people want to use them. For our foundation, the more we know, the better we can align our investments with community needs and interests.”

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