



Magazine

Transit of Tomorrow

Where the city and transit advocates stand on Beltline Rail

4

Drag Culture in Atlanta

The Queens, Kings, and activists of the LGBTQ+ community

20

The State of the Arts

How cutbacks to the NEA reached Atlanta's artistic scene

32



Progress + Pitfalls

Examining Atlanta's path forward

3484

Magazine

FALL 2025



@3484mag

2 Fall 2025

What is 3484?

3484 Magazine is a news magazine focusing primarily on politics and social issues in the Atlanta area. We dive deeply into policies in Atlanta and Georgia to investigate how they impact Georgia Tech students.

34° N, 84° W are the geographic coordinates of the City of Atlanta, rounded. We picked this name because of our focus on the Atlanta area.

When we're not working on publishing a magazine we cover events, like presidential debates and protests, on our social media accounts, @3484mag.

In the future, we will continue to cover issues that impact Atlanta and Tech students. You can expect to see a lot more on elections, healthcare, climate policy, and city planning, as we continue to explore ways policy shapes Georgia Tech students' lives.

Staff

RAELYN BAILEY, editor-in-chief
HANNAH MARSH, creative director
MAEVE MOBLEY, assistant creative director
COSETTE BEELER, assistant editor
INGRID NOHARA, assistant editor
ANOUSHKA GANDOTRA, contributing editor
DANI NICHOLAS, writer
ASHA DESAI, designer
ZAINA SYEDA, writer
BLAINE BRANCH, writer
NINA OTEBELE, writer
SANDHYA RAJESH, writer and designer
DANIEL PAK, writer
SAHIL HANDA, writer
REAGAN MARVEL, writer and designer

Special Thanks

Dr. Joycelyn Wilson
Mac Pitts
Student Media Board

Join Our Staff!

If you are interested in design, writing, or photography, join our staff! Sign up at 3484mag.com/signup

Editorial policy:

The content presented in opinion articles reflects the opinion of the author and not that of the 3484 Magazine. While the editors respect the rights of the authors to express their opinions, the editors will apply to the opinion articles the same editorial standards applied to other parts of the newspaper. 3484 Magazine accepts submissions for opinion pieces, but we reserve the right to edit submissions for clarity. If you have feedback for 3484 Magazine or would like to submit an opinion, please contact 3484mag@gmail.com

Cover Designed by Hannah Marsh

Table of Contents

Articles

4



Transit of Tomorrow

7



Campus Mental Health

10



Reduce, Reuse, Re-Plastic

14



Grieving a Mission

17



Behind the Buzz

20



Drag Culture in Atlanta

25



OPINION: Crafting a Community

29



City Cycling

32



The State of the Arts

Transit of Tomorrow?



Transit of Tomorrow



Where the city and transit advocates stand on Beltline rail

DANI NICHOLAS, writer

ASHA DESAI, designer

In August 2025, the Atlanta Beltline Inc. (ABI) presented its final draft recommendations for the Beltline Transit Study, a \$3.5 billion plan to extend the Atlanta Streetcar for 22 miles of light rail along the Beltline. The study came more than 25 years after the early pursuits of rail on the Beltline. In 1999, Ryan Gravel's Georgia Tech master's thesis – credited by ABI as the Beltline's origin – envisioned a transit corridor alongside the trail that exists today. In 2016, Atlanta voters approved a half-penny sales tax to fund More MARTA transit expansion projects, including the option of light rail. Yet, construction of rail on the Beltline has not begun, and it's unclear whether it will happen anytime soon or at all.

Despite the completion of this two-year study, which included cost estimates and infrastructure alternatives, city leaders have taken a step back from extending the streetcar in the short term. Mayor Andre Dickens announced in March that the city will focus streetcar efforts on the Southside of Atlanta, rather than extending it to the Eastside trail and Ponce City Market.

“The projects they’re advocating will take a decade... We have got to build what we can build.”

Advocates with Beltline Rail Now want to see the extension to the Eastside trail built as soon as possible. With design and engineering plans complete, they say the Eastside trail would benefit from being shovel-ready, high-density, and in high demand. Matthew Rao, co-chair of the advocacy group, says that Mayor Dickens proposed the alternate Southside plan “under the guise of equity.” Instead, Rao argues, “it [would be] equity to deliver quality mass transit to the people who need it as fast as you can from where they are to where they want to go ... So many people want to be able to get to that Eastside corridor.”

If the project extending the streetcar to the Eastside were resumed, MARTA estimates it could be completed in 2028. The mayor's Southside proposal requires more steps to completion, such as design, engineering, and securing a funding source. Rao says, “the projects they’re advocating will take a decade ... We have got to build what we can build.”

Another advocacy group, Better Atlanta Transit, takes a different perspective. Hans Klein, Georgia Tech professor and president of the organization, contends that light rail on the Beltline would not fit an ideal route for transit, as it circles the city rather than crossing through the center. He also argues that rail would compromise the Beltline's function as a linear park. In his view, the developer community has lobbied against transit to keep their customers happy, adding that “what [their] customers really like is this linear park.” Further, Klein calls the light rail proposal “fabulously expensive.” Instead, Better Atlanta Transit highlights less costly alternatives like Bus Rapid Transit, micromobility solutions, and MARTA infill stations that connect MARTA's heavy rail system to the Beltline.

These transit options align with the mayor's recent proposals. Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) is a form of public transportation that features dedicated lanes and right-of-way for high-frequency bus traffic. MARTA is planning three BRT routes in the Summerhill, Campbelltown Road, and Clifton corridors, with Summerhill on track to be completed by next year's FIFA World Cup. Infill stations, which are new, smaller stations built between existing stops on the MARTA heavy rail line, are planned for Murphy Crossing, Krog Street, Armour Yards, and Joseph E. Boone Boulevard. Additionally, in June, the city announced its Trails ATL plan, a comprehensive network of 535 miles of trails designed for all ages and abilities, with the first phase of 35 new miles of trails planned to be completed by 2037.

Meanwhile, Atlanta Beltline Inc. (ABI) is continuing design and construction on the unfinished parts of the Beltline loop. Segments 4 and 5 of the Southside loop near Grant Park,

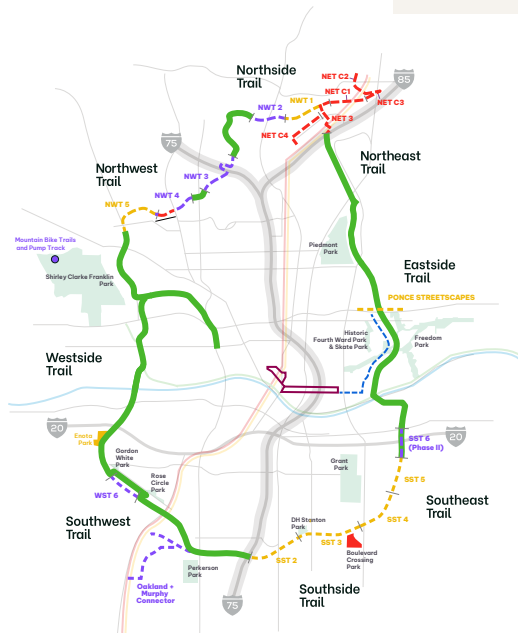
including a pedestrian ramp at United Ave., are on track for completion before the June 2026 World Cup. ABI also hopes for Southside segments 2 and 3 to be completed by that time, but there may be additional delays due to brownfield cleanup and underground storm work.

Design on the Northeast side has been more challenging than other sections due to a long portion of the trail that is not built on a former rail line. ABI is awaiting the finalization of a federal grant and plans to put out a bid for the 3.5-year construction in early 2026. On the Northwest side, many segments are currently, or soon-to-be, under construction, and segment 5 opened to the public on October 30.

One alternative vision for the future of the Beltline is modal separation, or “wheels and heels.” This approach would create a second trail on the Beltline for bikes, e-bikes, and scooters, while maintaining the original sidewalk for the slower-moving pedestrians. According to Klein, it's dangerous to have high-speed cyclists weaving between people who are casually walking around the linear park. The idea has received support from representatives of major nonprofit groups, including the Nature Conservancy, Park Pride, Trees Atlanta, and the Atlanta Botanical Garden. Clyde Higgs, CEO of Atlanta Beltline Inc., recently stated that the proposal has some merit and that ABI is studying it. Klein points to various emerging micromobility technologies (low-speed, short-distance transportation devices), such as autonomous robotaxis, arguing that “we're in the middle of a transportation revolution, and it's hitting critical mass.”

Rao counters that a parallel high-speed cycle track would be more dangerous, attracting e-bikes at up to 30 miles per hour to pedestrian crossings that would not require the signaling and cross-arms of light rail. According to Rao, “squandering the opportunity of the rest of the right-of-way on more pavement for more speed for a few cycles versus thousands of people on light rail is a waste.”

Regarding the cost of light rail, Matthew Rao argues that while the light rail would be



Atlanta Beltline Construction/Ideas Process // Public Domain Image

expensive (an estimated \$3.5 to 5 billion), its cost needs to be understood in the context of other major transportation expenditures. “You have to compare relative costs and benefits ... It is costing more than \$1 billion just to widen Concourse D at the Atlanta airport. It is costing more than \$1 billion just to rebuild an interchange at Georgia 400 to increase its capacity for traffic – a project that will become obsolete in less than 10 years.” BRN advocates reason that the benefits of Beltline rail – addressing economic mobility, affordability, traffic, pollution, and health – far outweigh other projects of similar cost.

Rao asserts that progress on Beltline rail is not about the money, but in his own words, city leadership “having the balls to do it.” To make it happen, Rao says, it is critical that city leadership and MARTA learn to work together. Their relationship has often been strained by MARTA’s slow progress on delivering on the More MARTA Atlanta Program, a 40-year transit expansion funded by a 0.5% sales tax that was passed via city referendum in 2016. MARTA has pared down the list of capital projects that it says it can fund from the 17 that were promised in 2018. This includes drawing back on commitments to light rail, despite it being the public’s most favored project in MARTA’s 2017 outreach campaign.

MARTA has also faced criticism for spending about 50% of its More MARTA funds on bus operations rather than capital projects. Last year, the city published the results of an audit of the program, finding that MARTA had overcharged the program by about \$70 million. Even so, Rao says there are positive signs of the relationship improving, such as the fact that a former City Council member, Jennifer Ide, now chairs the MARTA Board of Directors.

“The city and Atlanta Beltline Inc. have been seemingly and marginally supportive of [Beltline rail] over time, but have not made it happen.”

Other advocates have expressed disappointment in the progress towards Beltline transit over time. Ryan Gravel, the Georgia Tech alumnus credited with the original idea for the Beltline,

says “the city and Atlanta Beltline Inc. have been seemingly and marginally supportive of [Beltline rail] over time, but have not made it happen.” He thinks “the best mayor on the project is probably ahead of us.”

Cathy Woolard, former Atlanta City Council president who championed the Beltline, laments, “we promised people, re-zoned the city, passed the TAD [Tax Allocation District, which finances development on the Beltline], passed extension to MARTA funding ...” She thinks there’s some “accountability due” on why it’s taken 25 years to build this much.

This fall’s City of Atlanta election results could slightly alter the political forces affecting transit. Mayor Andre Dickens’ second-term win was called by the Associated Press just 90 minutes after polls closed, and former Councilmember Marci Collier Overstreet won the Council President spot over nonprofit leader Rohit Malhotra. Mayor Dickens actively campaigned for Overstreet and positioned her as a partner in his policy agenda. In the city council races, all the running incumbent candidates won.

In the open race in District 2, Democratic Socialist Kelsea Bond won, and the top two candidates in Districts 7 and 11 will go to runoff elections on December 2. Both Beltline Rail Now and Better Atlanta Transit vetted the candidates and published responses to essay questions that evaluate their positions on transit. Notably, Kelsea Bond tops Beltline Rail Now’s score card, and her platform explicitly calls for “the full implementation of Beltline Rail and the Streetcar East Extension.” Meanwhile, at MARTA, the Board of Directors said it hopes to select a new CEO to replace the Interim CEO, Jonathan Hunt, by next summer’s World Cup.

As it stands now, the leading voices on both sides agree that the vision of streetcar extension to the Beltline in the short term is unlikely to be fulfilled. Hans Klein believes that the Transit Study released in August was the “final action [on that vision] ... and it’s basically stillborn.” Cathy Woolard says she “doesn’t see meaningful transit happening in the next five years,” but believes the project “can be saved at any time.”

As Atlanta continues to grow in the coming years, transit and mobility are expected to remain active and evolving conversations. Readers can learn more and explore opportunities to get engaged at beltlinerailnow.com and betteratlantatransit.org

CAMPUS

MENTAL

HEALTH

Campus Mental Health



Understanding socio-environmental factors shaping student well-being

ZAINA SYEDA, writer

HANNAH MARSH, designer

Across the nation, college students are experiencing a growing mental health crisis. Rates of anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and substance use have increased over the past decade, affecting students' ability to function academically and socially. According to the Healthy Minds Study, a national research initiative led by the University of Michigan that surveys mental health among college students across the United States, more than 44% of students report experiencing depression severe enough to interfere with their daily lives.

At Georgia Tech, some students say that academic rigor and a competitive environment can contribute to elevated stress levels. The transition from high school to college, a time generally assumed to be for exploration and growth, can become a source of stress.

From demanding coursework, social pressures, and the pursuit of excellence, some students find themselves caught in a cycle of burnout and emotional exhaustion. This combination of high expectations and limited recovery time may be linked to rising mental health concerns on campus.

Aziz Elbasheir, a fourth-year Ph.D. candidate in the Neuroscience Graduate Program at Emory University, studies trauma, PTSD, cognition, and the neural mechanisms behind racial discrimination. Elbasheir said one major challenge college students face today is the constant pressure of comparison. "Social media has dramatically expanded students' social worlds in which they are no longer just comparing themselves to classmates but to thousands of peers and influencers who seem to be thriving," he explained.

Elbasheir added that many college students are navigating a changing cultural landscape, as traditional educational paths are no longer viewed as the only route to success. Together, he believes these factors create deep uncertainty about the future and make students question their academic or career choices.

Elbasheir said that environments such as Georgia Tech and Emory can push students to reach

remarkable academic levels but may also create a level of constant pressure that affects mental and physical well-being. "Students often feel a constant pressure to perform perfectly and compare themselves to high-achieving peers," he shared, describing how this culture can contribute to fatigue, anxiety, sleep problems, and burnout. He said these were challenges he personally faced during his own undergraduate years, and added that when the pressure becomes overwhelming, "learning stops being fun and turns into a 'means to an end,' where college starts to feel like survival."



The Center for Mental Health Care & Resources // Photo via Georgia Tech mentalhealth.gatech.edu

WHY MENTAL HEALTH IS A MEDICAL ISSUE

Mental health is also a medical issue that affects both the body and the mind. Disorders such as depression and anxiety arise from biological, neurological, and physiological processes that can alter how the brain functions and how the body responds to stress.

Dr. Elliot, a psychiatrist and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Emory University, explained that "mental health disorders involve the same level of biological complexity as any other medical condition. The brain is an organ just like the heart or lungs, and when it is not functioning properly, it manifests in symptoms that are every bit as real and measurable."

Aziz Elbasheir also emphasized that "mental and physical health are almost inseparable. When we feel very stressed, this activates neuroendocrine pathways in the brain that can trigger the

production of proinflammatory proteins and, over time, lead to a state of chronic low-grade inflammation." This biological response increases the risk for physical health problems such as cardiovascular disease while simultaneously worsening anxiety or depression. He added that prolonged stress or trauma can physically reshape the brain through mechanisms described by Bruce McEwen's allostasis model, which shows how repeated stress gradually weakens the body's main regulatory systems and contributes to both mental and physical illness.

Depression and anxiety are linked to changes in neurotransmitter levels, disruptions in the brain's reward and stress-regulation pathways, and genetic factors that increase vulnerability. Chronic stress can further intensify these biological imbalances by affecting hormone regulation, immune responses, and sleep patterns.

Dr. Elliot said that "when a student is under constant stress, it is not just their mood that suffers. Their body responds as if it is under physical threat, leading to inflammation, fatigue, and long-term health risks."

Recognizing mental health as a medical issue can lead to collaboration among psychiatrists, psychologists, and primary care physicians that can help provide treatment that addresses both psychological and physiological aspects of well-being.

Dr. Elliot emphasized, "Integrating mental health into medical care allows us to treat

the whole person, not just their symptoms. That is especially important in high-pressure environments like college campuses, where stress and burnout can easily go unnoticed until they become severe.”

When mental illness is understood as a biological and physiological health condition rather than a personal shortcoming, early help-seeking behaviors tend to increase among students. As Elbasheir noted, “stress, anxiety, and depression are associated with measurable changes in brain function, hormone regulation, and immune signaling.”

INNOVATIONS IN MENTAL HEALTH CARE

In recent years, digital technology has changed how mental health care is delivered and accessed. Apps such as Headspace and Calm provide mindfulness and meditation tools to anyone with a smartphone, allowing users to practice emotional regulation and manage stress through guided breathing and relaxation exercises.

Online therapy platforms, including BetterHelp and Talkspace, have expanded access to licensed counselors, offering flexible sessions that reduce barriers such as long wait times or the stigma often associated with visiting a counseling center. Even in moments of crisis, students can access immediate support through services such as the Crisis Text Line or the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

Wearable technology has emerged as a tool in mental health innovation. Smartwatches can track heart rate variability and stress levels, providing biofeedback that alerts users when physiological stress responses are elevated.

This real-time data allows students to monitor their emotional states and apply stress management techniques before symptoms escalate. Telehealth has also expanded access to therapy and psychiatric care for students who may have limited time, transportation, or emotional comfort to attend in-person sessions. Virtual counseling has normalized seeking help and allows students to connect with therapists from the privacy of their dorms, apartments, or study spaces between classes.

Aziz Elbasheir acknowledged the promise of digital resources but emphasized the importance of using them thoughtfully. “Machine learning algorithms behind AI chatbots are only as good as the data they’re trained on, and that data can carry human biases,” he explained. He added that while these tools make mental health care more accessible, they do not replace the empathy and understanding that come from human connection.

“Technology can help bridge understanding for people new to mental health concepts, but it should always complement, not replace, genuine human interaction.”

“Mental health is deeply personal and context-dependent,” Elbasheir said. “Technology can help bridge understanding for people new to mental health concepts, but it should always complement, not replace, genuine human interaction.”

GEORGIA TECH’S INITIATIVES

Georgia Tech has developed programs to provide accessible and comprehensive mental health support on campus. The Center for Mental Health Care & Resources (CMHCR) serves as the main hub for counseling, crisis intervention, and outreach programs, offering both individual and group therapy.

Initiatives like “Let’s Talk,” which provides informal drop-in conversations with clinicians, and “Tech Ends Suicide Together,” which promotes education and prevention, aim to reduce stigma and encourage early help-seeking. The CMHCR also collaborates with Stamps Health Services to connect students with psychiatric care when needed and has expanded

telehealth options to increase accessibility.

Additionally, there are many non-Georgia Tech initiatives, like peer programs such as Peers Reaching Out and the Well-Being Activators network provide students with opportunities to support one another. These programs work alongside Georgia Tech’s initiatives to integrate mental health services into the larger framework of campus life.

THE FUTURE INTERSECTION OF MEDICINE AND CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH

As technology continues to evolve, the future of mental health care on college campuses will likely involve integrating medicine, technology, and behavioral science to improve access and coordination of care. Tools such as mental health chatbots and personalized data analytics are being developed to track emotional patterns and identify individuals who may be at risk for decline.

When combined with traditional clinical care, these innovations may help detect early warning signs before students reach a point of crisis. Integrated care models, where physicians, therapists, and psychiatrists work together, address both the biological and psychological aspects of health.

When reflecting on this future, Elbasheir emphasized that progress should not come at the cost of empathy. He explained that “technology can support care by identifying patterns and providing resources,” but “it can never replace the sensitivity and understanding that come from real human connection.”

For premedical students, this intersection between mental and physical health holds particular importance. Future physicians will be responsible not only for treating symptoms but also for considering how emotional and social stressors affect physical well-being. The pressures, anxiety, and burnout that college students face today are similar to the challenges many patients experience in the broader healthcare system.

Experts suggest that by approaching medicine with an awareness of mental health, future doctors can help reduce stigma, encourage more holistic care, and contribute to a healthcare system that values both mind and body. While technology continues to shape the future of care, many emphasize that empathy remains essential in medical practice.

988 24/7 Call + Text
Suicide Crisis Hotline



**Reduce,
Reuse,
Re-Plastic**

Reduce, Reuse, Re-Plastic

The state of recycling

INGRID NOHARA, writer

HANNAH MARSH, designer

Consumers interact with products in a unique way, simultaneously fulfilling the product's purpose in existence and being left with its most purposeless state. The object changes from product to waste. However, as waste, a product has only become purposeless, not useless. There is a substantial amount of resources invested in this idea of giving waste purpose, also known as recycling. In Georgia alone, there are over 120 businesses dedicated to recycling and remanufacturing, which, according to a report by Ball Corporation, an aluminum manufacturing company, accounts for 4,713 jobs in the state. This is based on the 29% of all material that is collected to be recycled, meaning millions of dollars are being left on the table from the other 71%, in both jobs and gross added value to the economy.

Despite the number of remanufacturing jobs and companies located in Georgia, it ranks 31st in the nation in terms of recycling.

Georgia is extremely important for the remanufacturing economy, as it recycles 8% of the country's paper and 33% of the country's polyethylene terephthalate plastic, which is turned into carpet. According to Emma Dufresne, program manager of Live Thrive's Center for Hard to Recycle Materials (CHaRM), Georgia is second in the nation for remanufacturing. However, despite the number of remanufacturing jobs and companies located in Georgia, it ranks 31st in the nation in terms of recycling.

When broken down by material, the Ball report estimates that only 11% of recyclable plastic is captured, the lowest collection rate of all recyclable materials. Part of the reason is that there are multiple types of plastic that have

different processes for recycling. As Dufresne explained, "[o]n your plastics, you'll see a one through a seven and those numbers are your resin codes. It's basically the recyclability of the plastic. The lower the number, the easier it is to recycle, and the more value it has."

In Georgia, only one and two-type plastics are meant to be collected in the standard collection process to be taken to a materials recovery facility. "Our state relies heavily on a single stream system — those haulers picking up [glass, aluminum, paper, and plastics one and two] then going to the [materials recovery facility ... Then they're selling those materials that have a lot of value," Dufresne added. However, even the valuable plastics are being undercollected in single-stream recycling, which is the system where all types of recyclable materials are mixed together and then sorted at the plant. The less valuable plastics (three through seven) and film and flexible packaging are considered hard to recycle. This is where groups like CHaRM come in, serving as a place for people to bring materials that don't have value in single-stream recycling. From there, they can be given to vendors who have the proper machines to recycle them.

Additionally, if something is incorrectly sorted on the consumer end, the whole recycling bin can become contaminated with non-recyclable material and have to be thrown

away. Camylle McDonald, president of ECO, a club centered around increasing recycling within the College of Design, emphasized that understanding contamination is extremely important to recycled materials being properly recycled. "A common misconception is that recyclable materials can still be processed if other trash ends up in the same bin. In reality, once recyclables are mixed with non-recyclable waste, they become contaminated and can no longer be recovered," McDonald explained. Contamination is a huge factor for more than just plastic waste, though. Unlike landfills, which serve as a dumping ground for most materials without discrimination, recycled materials need to be in a certain condition to be properly reprocessed. "Your single-stream materials should be clean, loose, and dry," Dufresne stated simply. The senior facility manager at The Kendeda Building for Innovative Sustainable Design, Brooke Johnson, even changed the signage of compost bins to read 'food scraps only' due to contamination.

Contamination is largely a sorting issue. At the CHaRM facilities, Dufresne pointed out they "really avoid [contamination] because of how the site is set up. All materials are source-separated, so everything has its own station. Visitors to the facilities do their own sorting with the help of trained staff." However, this is different from the system at Georgia Tech, which is decentralized and doesn't have staff assigned to sorting the



Georgia Tech's Kendeda Building // Photo by Maeve Mobley

recycling. At Kendeda, Johnson mentioned “[y]ou will frequently see our building managers sorting through the trash, which not every building manager will do.” Johnson also mentioned that their custodian sorts improperly placed materials if she sees them in the recycling before sending them away. In the loading docks where more specialized items are meant to be recycled, Johnson pointed to the bin where electronics were supposed to go, mentioning that they’re not allowed to take microwaves. Inside that bin were two microwaves. Johnson emphasized that having staff dedicated to sustainability is incredibly important towards the goal of net zero waste, which is quantified by 90% of all waste being recycled. According to Johnson, Georgia Tech is currently at 23% diversion of waste.

Kendeda serves as one of the more visible places to take hard-to-recycle materials on the Georgia Tech campus. As mentioned, the loading docks provide space for wood, styrofoam, electronics, compost, and other large items to be recycled. Inside, there are places for plastic film, which are then delivered to CHaRM on a bi-weekly basis. However, other locations on campus have set up specific recycling systems for their needs. ECO at Georgia Tech operates within the College of Design, which is important because, according to McDonald, “[w]hile many recycling bins across campus are designed for common items such as water bottles, plastics, and cans, they often overlook the unique types of waste generated within classrooms and studios ... ECO also collects second-hand materials from students and resells them at reduced costs.”

In addition, the Hive, a student makerspace connected to the Blake R. Van Leer Electrical and Computer Engineering Building, has collection boxes for common electrical components students may be working with. There are collection boxes for batteries, resistors, and wires. Graduate student Stevie Limon, the head of the Hive’s sustainability committee, mentioned that many students will throw away resistors, a common electrical component primarily consisting of recyclable wire, even if they still work.

Electronics waste is particularly difficult to recycle because, if not properly disposed of, it can cause problems within landfills. At Georgia Tech, the Environmental Health and Safety department will take some electronic waste, such as batteries. This allows building managers, such as Hive’s, to independently set up battery collection bins and take them to the department on their own time. To try to reduce some of this electronic waste,

Limon and the Hive organize projects, such as using old LEDs to build mini figurines or resistor jewelry workshops.

The Hive and other makerspaces produce a significant amount of 3D printer waste, which

is currently looking to reimagine what materials makerspace uses because, as Johnson pointed out, as a living building, there’s a different set of standards Kendeda has to meet. While other green buildings are about mitigating harm, living buildings create a “net positive” effect,

City of Atlanta Public Works Recycling Program // Images via atlantaga.gov

is problematic since the filaments used in 3D printing are not recyclable plastics. Over the semester, the Hive, which is one of the five makerspaces on campus, produces around two to three 13-gallon trash bags of plastic waste. “Waste comes from two places: people not picking up their prints and cleaning swatches,” Limon explained. While individuals can choose to pick up a print, cleaning swatches and supports (the scaffolding required for some 3D prints with overhangs) come from the machine itself. This means there is nothing to be done about that major source of waste.

Currently, the Hive is considering investing in a machine that could recycle 3D printed material and turn it into more filament, but the machine would require all of the prints to be the exact same type of plastic to make filament. Kendeda

which Johnson described as “making the world better than how you found it.” Because of this, the proposed makerspace would seek to turn recyclable plastic into filament for their prints.

Capturing recyclable materials, however, requires knowledge, time, and thought from the consumer. As Dufresne pointed out, “[w]aste diversion, recycling, and throwing things away touches everyone ... every day you’re going to have something you’re holding in your hand and ask yourself: should I be putting this in my regular recycling bin or where can I bring it?” Because of this, CHaRM has an educational program to help a variety of people gain basic knowledge about recycling, which helps reduce confusion around the different kinds of plastics and contamination. “Starting where you are: you’re at home, you have a trash can, you have

a recycling bin, what should you be putting where?” Dufresne explained. “It’s those plastics one and two, your metal, aluminum, your cardboard, and your paper, your mixed paper,” she continued.

However, Dufresne explained that “consistency in messaging” between the materials recovery facilities, the municipality, and outside organizations like CHaRM or Georgia Tech is important. In addition, she mentioned, “Not all MRFs [material recovery facilities] are taking the exact same material all the time, because markets can change.” This can create mixed messages in collecting. For instance, bottle caps are a different type of plastic from the bottles they are on, leading to confusion about how they should be processed in recycling. The website for the City of Atlanta says in some messaging to leave the cap on, and in others that plastic bottles must have their caps removed. Signs at Georgia Tech show images of plastic bottles with their cap on. CHaRM takes plastic bottles and their caps, sending them to facilities where they can separate the different kinds of plastic found in the caps and the bottles, even when being ground up together.

Johnson also commented on a lack of uniform or confusing recycling signs at Georgia Tech. She pointed out that some signs for plastic recycling mentioned taking plastic that isn’t type one or two, which isn’t something the city of Atlanta processes. “We can make a big difference with recycling if we streamline and standardize our bins and signage,” Johnson said, “it’s so confusing. You come to Kendeda and see ‘composting’ and ‘hard to recycle’, and then you go to the student center, and the bins are completely different and the order is different.” Even talking to Limon, he mentioned that it felt “beyond difficult to figure out where things were meant to go.” Johnson added that the

Zero Waste Task Force is currently working on standardizing the bins and signage around Georgia Tech, and that this process will happen over the span of the next five years.

“Try to avoid using things you don’t need to, but also it’s not all on you”

Despite efforts to clear up confusion through education and signage, there remains the issue that plastics are a widely used material in products. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that plastics, which they describe as “a rapidly growing segment of municipal solid waste,” comprise 18.5% of all waste going to landfills. As Dufresne stated, “[p]lastic is cheap. If you’re thinking about it from an accessibility perspective, I might buy that piece of food that’s in plastic versus a glass jar ... You really can only do what you can do because you only have the options you have at the store. We’re an outlet for those things.” Part of the educational programming CHaRM uses mentions reducing consumption. “Try to avoid using things you don’t need to, but also it’s not all on you,” Dufresne explained.

Johnson continued, pointing out that “all the marketing is like ‘you need to put it in the right bin’ and ‘you didn’t do the right thing’.” However, as pointed out by both Johnson and Limon, Coca-Cola used to sell its sodas in reusable glass bottles until it was cheaper to use plastic packaging, removing the costs associated with collection. Coca-Cola then began marketing plastic recycling as a viable alternative to their glass collection and cleaning. The sustainability of this idea hinged on plastic

reclamation, but, as mentioned, very little plastic is currently captured to be recycled. According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation’s Global Commitment 2025 Progress Report, Coca-Cola reported using 7.95 billion pounds of plastic in 2024, making it the company that produced the largest amount of plastic for the sixth year in a row. The Coca-Cola Foundation notably funds recycling programs, which Atlanta has partnered with in the past.

Johnson acknowledges the scale of the issue of plastic production, noting “the volume of plastic that we’re trying to recycle in this country or even on campus is absolutely astronomical. We either need to ban the manufacturing of plastic or figure out what we’re going to do with all this plastic we’re trying to recycle.” Dufresne also mentioned the need to shift from recyclable plastic “being made into more plastic” to being used for building material. Johnson pointed out that the Advanced Research Institute is working on a project that uses recycled plastic to make plastic planks as a substitute for wood. Other novel uses for recycled materials include ECO’s dog bed making, which takes old shirts and turns them into animal beds they donate to animal shelters, and the bottle cap artworks displayed at Kendeda. In the latter case, the artist who received the bottle caps became “overwhelmed” by the amount they were receiving, according to Johnson. The collection bins for caps are now covered up.

Consumer-end plastic recycling and recycling as a whole have numerous issues, but as Johnson reasoned, “the standard way we recycle gets a lot of criticism for very correct reasons, but every effort you make to recycle to the best of your abilities is still better than going to the landfill.”



Mural in the Kendeda Building // Photo by Maeve Mobley

GRIEVING A MISSION



Grieving a Mission



Accounts from former CDC employees

COSETTE BEELER, writer

HANNAH MARSH, designer

When 9-year Weather Channel television journalist Ryan Sloane got news that he was hired at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), he believed he'd found his dream job. For Sloane, CDC represented a second chance. "I [had] the opportunity to drive coverage, engage with reporters, find news, connect reporters with experts, and be home in time to cook dinner," he said. It also meant job satisfaction and constant learning, along with paying for IVF treatment.

However, when he was notified that he was getting RIFed (losing his job due to a reduction in force, or an RIF) seven weeks after his start date, he found out that his dream job was over. This news left him confused. "Why would they go through the effort of hiring me, and putting me in the system, and giving me a badge and a laptop, and training me, then having me do the job, just to fire me?"

"Why would they go through the effort of hiring me, and putting me in the system, and giving me a badge and a laptop, and training me, then having me do the job, just to fire me?"

The Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) is the federal department responsible for the RIFs of federal workers, such as Sloane. DOGE is an initiative of the second Trump administration, with a stated goal of "bring accountability and transparency to federal spending," according to the White House's official website. The organization required federal agencies, such as CDC, to undertake RIFs.

According to the top human resources official of the Trump administration, over 300,000 fewer

federal workers will be working in December than in January. The administration is pursuing this reduction through three measures: two involve involuntary separations, like the one Sloane faced, and the "Fork in the Road" buyout, which was a deferred resignation program. According to the federal Office of Personnel Management (OPM), as of Oct. 29th, 2025, roughly 154,000 workers participated in the administration's "Fork in the Road." According to tracker site layoffs.fyi on Dec. 1st, 2025, roughly 72,000 federal workers had been rified by DOGE. This figure includes around 4,200 employees who received RIF notifications during the October-November government shutdown.

The third method DOGE is employing in an attempt to reduce the federal workforce is Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA). One CDC employee is familiar with the program, though she did not personally choose VERA. For legal reasons, she is referred to by the pseudonym Kate.

Kate worked at CDC for 16 years. Before that, she worked in the private sector doing public health policy research. When she first applied to CDC to work in policy, she was ambivalent towards it, but after going to her first meeting, she knew that it was, in her words, "the professional love of my life." She described that first meeting as an incredibly meaningful debate: "[the debate] was taking something we'd talked about in this abstract, academic way, and actually applying it to people." According to Kate, the experience cemented a crucial aspect of CDC – that the organization focuses on the main principle that "[CDC has] to help people; we have got to make people safer, healthier. How do we do that in the best way?"

One function of CDC is to respond to public health emergencies with the activation of its Emergency Operations Center, which in turn establishes emergency response teams. Kate served on two of these teams – the Ebola response team and the COVID-19 response team.

During the 2014 Ebola epidemic, Dr. Tom Frieden served as CDC director, appointed by

the Obama administration. According to Kate, CDC led the national response throughout the epidemic. Her job was to prepare Dr. Frieden to brief the country on CDC's developments – what the organization knew, did not know, and measures that it was taking to know more. Kate explained that six years later, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic under Dr. Robert Redfield, a first-Trump-administration-appointed CDC director, CDC's role felt different. According to Kate, Trump-appointed officials not directly associated with CDC were addressing the press, which was a change from the previous standard of CDC officials being the ones to administer press. Kate expressed that, "CDC was not in the lead. Dr. Fauci was talking."

"CDC was not in the lead. Dr. Fauci was talking."

Outside of the emergency response teams, Kate worked in tobacco control. Her role was to communicate with partners such as the American Lung Association and American Cancer Society. She also "would talk to [state health departments] to make sure they were doing evidence-based work" with the CDC funds allotted to them. However, at the start of the second Trump administration, she noticed an immediate communication pause. According to Kate, her department "could not talk to anybody. We couldn't talk to people getting our money, we couldn't talk to partners, we certainly couldn't talk to the public."

Despite the lapse of communication with external forces, Kate and her team prepared fact sheets, talking points, and other documents to brief the new administration. Rather than federal communication, they were met with "the Valentine's Day Cut, where [DOGE] cut [CDC] contractors."

The "Valentine's Day Cut" or "Valentine's Day Massacre" refers to the RIFs issued on Feb. 14th, 2025, and the week that followed. During that week, according to Wolfe Research, DOGE and the Trump administration RIFed an estimated



CDC Roybal Campus // Photo by James Gathany via New Georgia Encyclopedia

20,000 probationary workers – those who had worked with the federal government for less than one to two years, such as Sloane – and cut federal contracts.

For Kate, working in public service, such as CDC, means that her job “is all about the collective.” She cited this as particularly relevant when her “work big sister” - someone she worked closely with and developed a relationship with during her sixteen years at CDC - was offered VERA. Although Kate said that VERA was not a choice her “work big sister” would have taken from a financial or career standpoint, her and many other older CDC employees retired early. “They said ‘Well, if I can take some spots so [Kate] can finish out her career, I’m going to do it,’” Kate said.

According to Kate, many employees in her department believed that there would be a 30% cut, and that by taking VERA, older employees with more established careers would be able to preserve the future of younger, mid-career employees.

“And it did not matter,” stated Kate.

Kate received her RIF notification at 5:00 in the morning via an email stating “Your department has been eliminated.”

For CDC retiree Scott Damon, the grief employees are feeling goes far beyond losing a career. “There’s a sense of — set aside losing your job or not losing your job — losing your

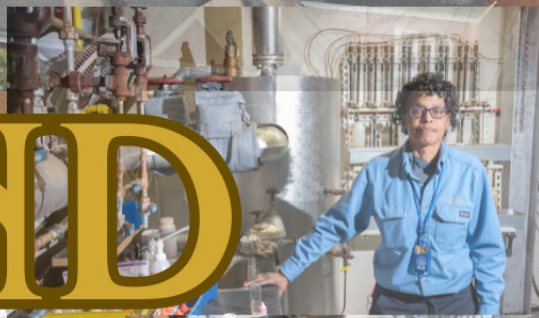
mission,” he said. Damon was notified on April 1 that he would be RIFed June 2nd. This was two days after Damon’s scheduled retirement, and thus had no impact on his career. When the administration reinstated some employees on June 11, Damon was sent a letter notifying him of his reinstatement— but the letter was addressed to a different employee.

In Damon’s perspective after 30 years at CDC, “This [anti-public health rhetoric] is stronger.” Despite this, Damon, Kate, and Sloane all agree that CDC’s focus is and has always been improving the lives of Americans. According to Sloane, “[CDC] is where the best and brightest go to do the best work possible.”

Over the past year, CDC employees have been RIFed and reinstated, top officials have resigned, and the on-campus daycare has been adjacent to a shooting whose gunman — according to authorities — was anti-vaccine. Throughout this time, former and current CDC employees have stayed connected through Signal group chats, coalitions, and legal efforts. In Kate’s perspective, “This network of people that care about [public health infrastructure] will be different — it will be scattered, it will be in different organizations.”

Sloane stated “I do not think I’m going to get closure on this ... and the dogs are going to need to get fed tomorrow. And we’re out of milk in the fridge.” As Sloane’s dogs continue to be fed, CDC’s campus continues to stand on Clifton Road in Atlanta, Georgia. As the agency adjusts to the new administration, former employees

state that the work of public health is ongoing and both current and former CDC employees continue to shape it, even as its future silhouette remains unclear.



BEHIND THE BUZZ



The Sam Nur...
Tech of Internation...

Behind the Buzz



A highlight of Georgia Tech staff's daily routines and perspectives

BLAINE BRANCH, writer
MAEVE MOBLEY, designer

The Georgia Institute of Technology has received numerous distinctions, placing in the top five, top ten, and top twenty in several national rankings. What a day looks like for a student at a top public university often comes into question. Questions like “What does a Georgia Tech lecture look like?” and “How much time do you spend doing homework each day?” are common. Social media frequently attempts to answer these questions through “day in the life” videos to show the college student lifestyle.

Behind the busy commotion of a top-rated public university, the day-to-day routines of Georgia staff keep the Institute up and running. Advisors, IT specialists, bus drivers, landscapers, and custodians are among the positions of staff members who maintain the campus. According to Univ Stats, a website providing statistical data on United States colleges, Georgia Tech reported over 8,270 staff members in 2023.

STAFF IMPORTANCE

Ronny Anderson, an academic program manager in his fourth year with Georgia Tech, highlights the importance of the university's large staff and campus. “Staff members see everything on the front lines. Staff see the problems, issues, and even places for improvement before higher-

“I think the big staff size is a plus because students of all different needs and backgrounds are getting service. There is a department that can serve you.

ups,” Anderson said. He emphasized his point by expressing that he “always sees a new staff face when I go to the student center, a staff appreciation event, or just around campus.”

He added that Georgia Tech's staff size benefits students, saying, “I think the big staff size is a plus because students of all different needs and backgrounds are getting service. There is a department that can serve you. It [Georgia Tech] is not a place where you can say there is no place [department or service] for that issue or problem.”

A staff member of the IT department, Chris Kennedy, expressed a similar feeling about the staff size. With his eight years of experience, Kennedy said, “Georgia Tech [is] a big campus and you find yourself meeting and seeing new people every day.”

From managing academic programs, maintaining campus technology, keeping facilities clean, driving buses, and offering student services, staff contribute to the ease, flow, and order of Georgia Tech's everyday life and operations.

DAYS IN A LIFE

For custodians, the workday can be hectic, as some are assigned to multiple buildings. Antanell Jones, Custodian II, confirmed the busy and hectic nature of the job. The custodian titles I, II, and III reflect differences in experience, salary, and whether they are a lead of a group/building.

Jones shared a story where their cleaning list was inaccurate because they were not informed about an event that was taking place that day. Her team received a call to go to the Exhibition Hall, where they were met with people filling every room upstairs, and the building was a mess. The coffee seminar event left coffee in the trash, on the floor, and in unattended cups. Jones stated, “By the time I got up here (Exhibition Hall) every room in here was packed... to come and work with all the rooms being crowded was kind of challenging.”

The spilled coffee created more challenges for the cleaning team, as it soaked through trash bags and was difficult to contain, Jones said. She mentioned that this was a challenging and frustrating day trying to clean and manage the area while full of people. While some spaces, like the student center, may contain people while custodians clean, Jones noted that the number of

people and the level of cleaning and care needed on this day were unusual.

Jones said her team has three buildings that they are responsible for cleaning every day. A list outlines certain spaces that an individual will have to clean for the day. She added that she has become accustomed to the system, referencing her four years in the role.

Moving from building to building is a regular part of some staff members' routines. Kennedy says he handles IT requests for the School of Public Policy, the Dean's Office of Ivan Allen College, and the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) department in the O'Keefe Building.

Kennedy begins his work day by examining the ticketing system and all platforms of communication for any new assistance requests from staff, faculty, or graduate students. The IT requests can be from graduate students (who have desks and workshops) or faculty who need help with computers and technology set-up and service. His job is not limited to desktop computers, as he often services classrooms and conference rooms as well. He then goes out to complete IT requests solo, such as installing networks, monitors, or servicing. In between requests or in downtime, Kennedy said he “works on project work like maintaining services and staying in security and asset compliance.” The compliance work is referencing Georgia Tech's standards for maintaining technology functionality and protecting systems from internal or external damage.

Anderson's day focuses more on students, but says his duties depend on the time of year. He reported that, “currently we are ramping up the admission cycles. Now, a lot of my day is checking applications and contacting prospective students.” The rest of the year, Anderson handles regular academic advising and guidance, assisting students with registration, planning program events, and keeping school spirit high by attending conferences.

Anderson mentioned, however, “I think one of the things you realize is your title does not really define what you do. I think sometimes this can



Staff Appreciation Event 2025 // Photo by Joya Chapman

cause issues of confusion with staff about the duties that they are expected to do. My title as an academic program does so much.” Anderson said further, “The bandwidth of your job does not match your title,” which threw him off at first. Anderson realized that his duties as academic manager were more than what was expected at his old institution, but he appreciates how his job cultivates relationships with students.

The cultivation of relationships with students might also drive staff members to go beyond their job description role, as Anderson mentioned, once having to help a student from the East Coast find temporary housing and essentially not be homeless from July up until the student’s August lease move-in date. The student came to campus early, but they were able to provide assistance to the student.

Jones’ job, however, unexpectedly changed titles completely from floor technician to custodian when she began the hiring process. After finding out that floor technicians only work night shifts, she decided to become a custodian, but reported she was not disappointed, as cleaning was in the floor technician’s duties, too. Neither Jones nor Anderson complained about their jobs or duties, stating only that they had to adjust to the original expectations of their jobs.

STAFF’S PERSPECTIVES

Overall, interviewees expressed positive views about Georgia Tech as an employer and of its students. All specifically highlighted that the students and familial bond of the staff make their jobs enjoyable. However, all suggested that the institution could do better in staff appreciation, even if not monetary, while emphasizing that they did not feel unappreciated.

Interviewees expressed a neutral or slightly dissatisfied stance on their appreciation of Georgia Tech. Kennedy highlighted, “They have events and things for staff. I go when I can.” However, Kennedy reports that he appreciates the silence too, because that means there is nothing to complete or wrong. Anderson added on by suggesting that Georgia Tech could value staff more by “taking into consideration staff’s insight...” Specifically, Anderson stated, “I think staff need to have more of a seat at the table. Give us more of a say in the day-to-day operations.” Anderson’s rationale is that staff are on the front lines, and oftentimes can notice problems or room for improvement before higher-ups can.

“I think staff need to have more of a seat at the table. Give us more of a say in the day-to-day operations.”

Jones also felt as if staff value was not being completely recognized, as she stated, “We should be getting paid more.” In reference to the custodian staff, Jones’s opinion is that the groups need more training campus-wide and are understaffed.

All of the interviewees said they enjoy and appreciate the students, and noted that students show appreciation for them. It also seems like many of the staff keep in mind Anderson’s sentiment of “We have to remember as staff, GT is a high-pressure environment. Things

do happen, but a lot of the time it [student action and behaviors] really is a pressure of the academic climate that they’re in,” to be true.

Jones said, “Students say thank you all the time and try to help take the trash. If they spill something, they won’t say anything and clean it up themselves.” Jones said she has to remind students that sometimes her job and purpose is to clean. Anderson mentioned, “I have received small tokens from students that really make me feel good.” He added, “I definitely feel appreciated by students.”

On a scale from one to five (with five being the highest) regarding how much they loved their jobs, all interviewees rated their job a four or higher. Jones said, “I love it, and I am not going anywhere. I learn stuff every day and meet new people, I like it.”



DRAG CULTURE IN ATL

Drag Culture in Atlanta

The Queens, Kings, and activists of the LGBTQ+ community

NINA OTEBELE, writer

MAEVE MOBLEY, designer

A BRIEF HISTORY OF DRAG AND INFLUENCE ON ATLANTA

RuPaul did not invent drag. The origins of drag can be traced back to ancient civilizations, where cross-dressing and gender-bending were prevalent forms of entertainment. In the modern era, drag has remained a form of art and expression, as well as holding an influential role in LGBTQ+ culture.

The “Atlanta LGBTQ+ Historic Context Statement,” a report that covers Atlanta’s LGBTQ+ history, dates back to 1895, when the first “female impersonators” were listed as performing in the city. One performer appeared at the Cotton States and International Exposition, a world fair held at Piedmont Park to promote trade between southern states and South American nations.

The first recorded professional drag queen, Anthony Auriemma, sprang into the scene in 1913. He protested Atlanta’s ban on men wearing women’s clothing by walking around Peachtree Street in drag.

He protested Atlanta’s ban on men wearing women’s clothing by walking around Peachtree Street in drag.

By the 1950s, because there were few explicitly public gay spaces, drag shows were often held in heterosexual bars and clubs. There were some exceptions, as by the mid-1950s, more LGBTQ+ spaces began to pop up. For example, a female impersonator known as Guy Dobbs managed a female impersonation supper club called the Queen of Clubs.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, female impersonators transitioned from Atlanta’s heterosexual supper clubs to the newly formed

LGBTQ+ bars and clubs. By the 1970s to 1980s, Atlanta became a central hub for the LGBTQ+ movement in the Southeast.

Drag artists didn’t just perform in this era; they also participated in various forms of LGBTQ+ activism. Back in the late 1970s, the Armory, a cocktail lounge, began airing football games at the bar during football season. In 1979, the Armory’s bartenders dressed up in drag as cheerleaders to support the Atlanta Falcons, known as the Amorettes. By the early 1980s, the Amorettes became a formal drag troupe that performed shows and inducted new members each year.

Around this time, the AIDS epidemic began. The Amorettes began raising money for HIV/AIDS research and to cover the cost of medical, living, and funeral expenses for individuals affected by the epidemic. Although the Armory closed in 2003, the Amorettes continued to recruit and hold performances.

Drag performances were also central to the LGBTQ+ Civil Rights Movement. The Georgia Gay Liberation Front (GGLF) was one of the several gay liberation groups that formed after the Stonewall riots, a series of LGBTQ+ protests that occurred after a gay bar in New York’s Greenwich Village was raided by police. In the 1970s, they began advocating for fair treatment of the city’s homosexual residents. The group formed at a cafe in Emory Village and organized Atlanta’s first Pride March on June 27, 1971.

MODERN ERA OF DRAG ARTISTS

In Atlanta, drag entertainment extends beyond club performances. For example, many queens and kings host drag brunches, storytimes, or bingo. At Georgia Tech, drag culture is showcased at the yearly Spring Drag Showcase hosted by the Student Center Programs Council (SCPC) in collaboration with Georgia Tech’s Pride Alliance. In the past, queens such as Brigitte Bidet, Queen Essence Hall, and Cora Nova have attended. The Pride Alliance has also provided other smaller-scale drag opportunities, such as modeling for their “Slay the Runaway” event.

DRAG QUEENS AND KINGS OF ATLANTA

Drag artists come from a variety of backgrounds and lifestyles. Some modern queens work full-time at venues and compete in drag-based competitions, such as CoCo Iman Starr. CoCo’s drag journey started in middle school, where she first started doing musicals, dancing, and vocal performances. When she graduated from high school, she struggled to find a path that reflected her musical theater background. Things changed when she entered her first turnout competition (people’s first time doing drag). CoCo felt she had found her niche and kick-started her drag career.

CoCo describes her drag persona as an affirmation for herself. “Growing up, it was really kind of difficult being dark skinned. There were always those jokes made at dark-skinned kids. So when I got a name for myself, I really wanted to make sure that, no matter how far I went in this whole drag thing, I really made an emphasis to appreciate and love my dark skin. So, the perfect name would be CoCo.”

CoCo hopes that through her drag performances, she can help eliminate harmful stereotypes about drag and the transgender community. “There’s this stigma that’s been around probably since the beginning of drag that all drag performers are confused about who they are as a person, or they secretly want to transition and become women. I think people really lose sight of the fact that, in its truest and most simple form, drag is really just another form of theater. It’s a role that you play. Are there drag queens who have transitioned? Absolutely, but I truly feel that those people were already on that track to transition at some point in their lives. Drag was, for them, the role that they stepped into to make themselves, and others around them, comfortable before they took that step. For others, like myself, or ‘boy queens’, as I call us, this is literally just a role.”

On the other end of the spectrum are drag kings, performers who pick up a parodic masculine persona—the male version of a drag queen. Drag Kings often receive less attention in the drag artistry field, but there is a large community in Atlanta. Boy Howdy! is a transmasculine drag artist and performer in Georgia. Boy Howdy!

describes his drag as a “reclamation of the southern aesthetic,” performing flamboyant, sparkly cowboy drag. “I like to use drag to heal my inner child. As someone who is transmasculine [a person who was assigned female at birth and now expresses themselves in a masculine way], when I was a kid, there were a bunch of things that were barred from me in society. You know, ‘you can’t play with the swords because that’s for the boys’ or ‘that’s a boy’s costume.’ A lot of my drag is allowing me to play around with things that I couldn’t when I was younger.”

Boy Howdy! says anyone can do drag, in any style. “It doesn’t really matter your gender, because there’s also cis-women doing drag. Drag

“In its truest and most simple form, drag is really just another form of theater. It’s a role that you play.”

is more about the [gender] expression ... rather than your [actual] gender. I would say there are often people who are trans who do drag. I knew I was trans long before I even considered drag, but there are people who start to do drag and realize,

“Wow, this is way more comfortable than I thought it would be,” and discover themselves through drag.”



Boy Howdy! // Image from Boy Howdy!

Outside of drag, Boy Howdy! and a friend cook and deliver food to people in the queer community who might not have access to it every month. “In my first seven years in transition, I didn’t have anyone. It was just me. The only trans people [I saw] were on television or online, on Tumblr. So, for a while I felt disconnected.” This feeling of isolation was intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. While in quarantine, Boy Howdy! began writing letters to the queer people that he liked and cherished. “That snowballed into me making connections and really finding a solid queer community in Atlanta. As a trans person, whose identity was constantly disputed, I just want to give back to the community that made me feel like I can continue going.” Boy Howdy! hopes his drag career will allow him to continue fostering community and being a positive representation of trans joy.

Another drag artist who dedicates their time to giving back to the community is Taylor Alxndr. Their career began in 2011 when they moved to Atlanta to attend Georgia State University. While on campus, they joined the LGBTQ+ student organization, which hosted drag shows each semester. That was where they first performed and began their career. “In the beginning, I realized that through drag, I could do so many things – all of my passions could be used in this form of entertainment. Almost 14 years later, I have created a career based on community and radical expression,” Alxndr shared.

For Alxndr, drag has helped shape their identity. “I have been changed as a person through ways of expressing my gender that I wasn’t able to do before. And I do think that my personal journey with gender has affected my drag, in that it feels more lived in and like an identity, rather than a performance or costume.”

Currently, they are the Mother of the House of ALXNDR, an Atlanta-based drag family and events hub that creates inclusive, drag-centered spaces for marginalized communities. Some of these events include SWEET TEA, Atlanta’s longest-running queer variety show; MUG CHECK, a monthly open-stage drag show which gives a platform for drag performers to entertain; and Pride Art Market & Drag Party, a twice-yearly event that hosts an LGBTQ+ artist market and drag shows for all ages.

Alxndr is also the co-founder of Southern Fried Queer Pride, an Atlanta-based organization that

empowers Black and QTPOC (Queer and Trans People of Color) communities in Atlanta & the South. The organization hosts many immersive events to give Black and brown queer people a safe space. Its most recent event hosted over 25 different artists and vendors. Additionally, Southern Fried Queer Pride runs various fundraising events. They recently raised funds for Sol Underground and the Trans Women of Color Healing Project, hosting over 15 different drag, music, burlesque, and comedy-based performers.

Alxndr’s impact on the queer community is reflected in the feedback and love they have received over the years. “I think at the core of everything that I do is a sense of community and creating spaces, and I think no matter what I do in my career,



Taylor Alxndr // Image from Alxndr

that will always be the center of it,” Alxndr stated.

Alxndr’s work focuses on creating more spaces for Black and QTPOC communities. Dotte Com has a similar mission. The pivotal moment that sparked her drag career was watching RuPaul’s Drag Race in her college years. “When I was a camp counselor, the other campers would bring up RuPaul’s Drag Race ... That was around the time that Violet Chachki had won, [an] Atlanta local. Season 8 was when Dax ExclamationPoint came on there. She was a drag queen who was black and also did cosplay.”

Dotte Com had also done cosplay in the past, but felt she couldn’t accurately portray the characters she wanted to. She shared, “I wanted to dress up as ‘Raven’ from Teen Titans at the time, but I just felt like ‘I can’t be Raven because I’m not going to be accurate.’ Seeing that niche personified made me seek out more. If there’s room for her, there could be room for me here to do this as well.”

Dotte Com is the show director of Neon Black, an all-Black drag show. “In Atlanta, there is a very big, beautiful, Black drag scene here. When I first started out, I found myself in

predominantly white spaces. That’s just the type of environment I found myself in when

“There are different types of Black drag, we have the weirdos, the cosplayers, the punk kids...there’s not one way to be Black.”

I was getting gigs and bookings. I just wasn’t aware of places where I can at least see Black drag performers. But I was like, this needs to be a thing because I know there [are] other Black drag babies [new drag performers] who are trying to figure things out.”

For Dotte Com, it’s about showing the diversity of Black drag performances and expressions. “There are different types of Black drag, we have the weirdos, the cosplayers, the punk kids ... there’s not one way to be Black.”

Dotte shared that growing up, she felt out of place. “Both my parents are from Trinidad, so I didn’t grow up with a lot of Black American culture. So I sometimes was like, ‘Am I black enough?’ At the end of the day, it’s just nice to just be able to represent everybody and to celebrate that,” she explained. Dotte shared that these spaces are what she felt made drag special. “We’re in places where we are celebrated. That’s the beauty of it.”

Many drag queens focus their activism on LGBTQ+ youth. For Mary Lou Pearls, getting

to this point in her career was an unexpected but important journey in understanding her sexuality and gender expression. “I never really sought out doing drag intentionally ... For me, it was more of an exploration of my identity and gender expression than it was necessarily about wanting to be a drag performer. I came out as gay when I was 15, and the messages that I got were ‘it’s okay to be gay, but don’t be one of those gays [who do] too much, marches in the parades, or wears women’s clothes. So in my 20s, I was very adverse to wearing makeup, painting my nails, or doing anything gender non-conforming.”

When Pearls moved to San Francisco, she described being very immersed in the queer culture and realized that there were elements of their gender expression that felt too restrictive. “My partner at the time was really interested in drag. We asked a queen who we’d met to help us figure out putting on makeup. That drag queen, who became my drag mother later, was like, ‘I have a slot in my show every week for baby queens’ if you ever want to try performing.” At first, she remembered being resistant, but eventually gave it a try. “Before I knew it, I was performing every week or several times a month, and then I got into doing drag pageants, the big nightclubs in San Francisco,” Pearls reminisced.

Through their drag persona, Pearls has come to realize their gender identity as non-binary. “Mary Lou Pearls is not a separate character for me. She’s just an extension of myself that is one particular gender expression. In my day-to-day life, I like to play between a lot of different areas depending on how I’m feeling. I like dressing up formally for events in a more [feminine] presentation than many others. Very often I am wearing heels, some makeup,



Dotte Com// Image from Dotte Com



Mary Lou Pearls//Image from Pearls

nails painted, and jewelry. All those things that are not traditionally guys' things. There's this sort of spectrum that I exist on that's pretty fluid. Drag has helped me realize that."

Mary Lou Pearls is also the part-time Southeast director of Brave Trails, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing leadership opportunities and community to young LGBTQ+ children. The organization offers summer camps, backpacking trips, family camps, mental health services, meet-up groups, and year-round leadership programming. Pearls became involved in 2021 as a volunteer at the California location. "When I moved back to Georgia in 2022 to work for Stacey Abrams, I was like, 'Hey, I love Brave Trails. I think it's so interesting, but it'd be amazing if we could be in the South!'"

She collaborated with the California team to establish a Brave Trails location in Georgia. In 2024, they hosted their first family weekend for both queer youth, their parents, and LGBTQ+ parents with kids. They launched their first summer camp last year. Pearl shares that the goal of the organization is "to create a space for [queer teens] to find their people and feel safe and accepted in a moment when the outside world is really scary and not always supportive."

"I think my drag persona is an empowering tool of resistance and a way to pull attention into the work I'm doing with Brave Trails to raise money."

Over the years, Pearls said she has seen the impact that this initiative has had on youth participants of these programs. "There are so many of the youth that come to camp who just say they're the only person in their community that they know who's trans, or they've never interacted with LGBTQ adults. Having access to that just really makes them feel so much more hopeful about the future."

As Pearls reflects on her drag career and how she has changed and evolved, she sees her drag persona as a tool of empowerment and encouragement to herself to keep advocating for the community. "Just existing as a drag

queen these days is unfortunately political as a statement and for resistance. Because it's been so demonized, especially as a drag queen who runs an LGBT summer camp and is around youth. Just the way I exist is very counter to a lot of the narrative these days and plays into a lot of what people, I think, are scared of. I think my drag persona is an empowering tool of resistance and a way to pull attention into the work I'm doing with Brave Trails to raise money. It has fueled my activism, my self-realization, and actualization."

While many of the queens and kings mentioned are full-time or part-time performers, some, like Parton Waters, consider drag to be a hobby they've invested in. "Since I started, I have been careful not to cross work with this. I've worked at Georgia Tech for 12 years now. I would say this has become just one of those other hobbies that I've invested deeply in outside of work," Waters stated.

Waters has created her own show in Atlanta and invited other drag queens to participate. She built a community for herself in the city and found ways to advocate for causes that were important to her. "Over the past month and a half, I've been in drag almost every weekend, which is not typical for me. Getting to be a part of community events, advocating, and performing has felt really important at the moment," Waters expressed.

She said she has also created and hosted many family-friendly drag brunch events. "I try to have between 3-5 [drag performers] at any of the brunches that I do. This past Pride, we did our show over in LIA in Midtown. About 150 people were in attendance, and we had five people performing. I try to create a vibe that is friendly, so queens and kings know that if they're in my show, we try to keep it PG-13."

Waters hopes to dispel a lot of the negative feelings people have toward drag through her persona. "I love when people say that my show is their first drag show. I want them to leave thinking, when do I get to do it again? ... As an academic, someone who has a PhD working in consulting at Georgia Tech, all the assumptions that people who don't know me make about who I am and what I do is fun. Then I get to be in that space where I can push people's brains a little bit further and their hearts a little bit further than they were before they met Parton Waters".

Waters shared that, "to the people who oppose or find issue [with drag queens], most of these queens here in Atlanta, and kings too, are

working multiple jobs, are educated ... I would equate it to any other kind of hobby. I spend as much time on this as someone might spend

"I get to be in that space where I can push people's brains a bit further and their hearts a little bit further than they were before they met Parton Waters."

[on] golf. On a Saturday, I'm brushing wigs, fixing costumes, and rehearsing words. We're just people doing our thing, and this is what brings us joy, and I hope it brings other people joy too."



Crafting a Community

Understanding how artistic small businesses in Atlanta build connections in our tech-heavy world

Crafting a Community



How artistic small businesses in Atlanta build connections

SANDHYA RAJESH, writer
SANDHYA RAJESH, designer

How creative do you think you are? A lot of students might consider themselves highly artistic, highly inventive, or perhaps neither. Regardless of one's perception of their individualized creative abilities, creativity is a skill that is strengthened through intentional effort. The American Psychological Association points out, "You won't get anywhere you want to go if you don't try." If conscious decision-making is not part of the process, the human brain may struggle to expand its creative abilities to the level it is capable of.

In Atlanta, there is a growing, thriving, and bright group of individuals fostering this trait of creativity in the community. These are art-based small businesses. One might find them smiling widely at Georgia Tech's Community Market every Wednesday, bustling with customers at Ponce City Market's brick-and-mortar locations, or featured in the "Recommendations" section on an Etsy search. According to the Georgia Council for the Arts, these "creative industries" contribute to \$28 billion of revenue—a significant figure, to say the least. Beyond their economic impact, they teach consumers the value of building community connections and practicing resilience.

published in *Advanced Intelligent Systems*, for example, found that using tactile media in a child's learning process is crucial for teaching children how to "manipulate spatial information mentally." The study also found that tactile media incentivized collaborative and inclusive learning and even supported their "intrinsic motivation" skills that carry into adulthood and enhance their understanding of, and interaction with, the world.

As Gen-Z children have grown into today's young adults, the idea of creating, using, seeing, and reading tactile media has become "nostalgic." Tactile media feels reminiscent of another time altogether — a time when we were less busy, less stressed, or less concerned with living life as digitally as possible. For those who value the arts and want to stay in touch with them, this can be concerning.

Thankfully, craft fairs and craft markets bring an unexpected solution to this concern. Katherine Trantham, recently-appointed owner of Indie Craft Experience, shared this sentiment about the current digital landscape. The Indie Craft Experience is a bi-annual craft market fair that specializes in its indoor, accessible market



Indoor Small Business Fair // Photo by Indie Craft Experience

whose products might be harmed from the "wind blowing through [their] artwork." For some entrepreneurs, outdoor markets can be "intimidating," due to needing "to have a tent," which can sometimes make attendance and participation in a market less "accessible".

Trantham mentioned that handcrafted artwork simply has "a nostalgia to it." Throughout her career — and especially in her new position — she has "seen an increase in people interested in purchasing at vendors that feed into [a significant increase in people's appreciation for handmade products] and really highlight nostalgia." People are yearning to get back in touch with times when tactile media was simply more appreciated than it is today.

Amidst the fears that society is losing appreciation for physical media's inherent charms, Trantham is a spokesperson for a more optimistic point of view. She mentions that "technology has a time and place, and [she does not] see it replacing the handmade and the tactile." Chad David Shearer, owner of Caren West PR, also shared this optimistic perspective. Caren West PR is a Public Relations company that hosts multiple art markets and art fairs across Georgia. For Georgia Tech Students, some particularly accessible options include the Atlanta Art Fair, Piedmont Park festivals, Buckhead Arts Festival, and Old Fourth Ward Arts Festival.



Amy Durant Art Booth at Small Business Fair // Photo by Caren West PR

GOODBYE PRINTS, HELLO PIXELS? TACTILE MEDIA'S FALL

From reading magazines in the mail to folding paper airplanes or building cardboard box houses, childhood development revolves around tactile media. A 2024 research paper

venues. Trantham recently became the owner of the organization this past summer after participating as a vendor at the same fairs. Accessibility and being indoors is especially important to Trantham, because "its not weather contingent on its success," especially for artists



Jade Orlando's Booth at Small Business Fair // Photo by Indie Craft Experience

Shearer has worked with Caren West PR for over 20 years and has seen various trends come and go. What stands out to him, though, is that today's youth are still innately creative. According to Shearer, "... the bottom line is: regardless of where you live, what your generation is, we are still all tactile people. We want to look at things, we want to feel them and smell them. We want to know what they're about."

IMPLICATIONS ON YOUTH COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Crucially, small business fairs help one maintain interpersonal connections. Craft fairs are spaces created with the purpose of people coming together to chat with vendors, converse with each other, learn about creative skills, and find ways they relate to tactile art. By design, these fairs invite smiles, joy, and connection.

Going to an art fair does not mean art has to be bought. While prices can vary widely, visitors can still make beautiful good memories without spending any money. From Shearer's experience of seeing people visit fairs over the years, "[there is] something for everybody ... all economic [backgrounds], social [backgrounds] ... spend the day and have a good time."

Because Shearer has organized hundreds of art fairs as the owner of Caren West PR, his take on the scene is unique. According to him, there has been an intriguing trend of consumers flocking to art fairs outside of their local areas. Shearer mentions that people "were following [a] particular artist, looking for them again." Community networks expand exponentially when humans get to know artists and intentionally listen to their stories, passions, and creative processes. Attending these art fairs can also be an accessible way for youth to develop further connections.

Trantham believes that for students who feel they do not belong in creative spaces, "there's some element to your life where creativity would benefit you in whatever field you're working in. And I think that just being able to immerse yourself in something creative, even if it's just a creative space [when doing work or homework]," makes a difference and "ties all human beings together." The comfort zone of old habits does not need to be demolished — it just has to be expanded bit by bit. Intentionality is key. Taking the time to intentionally step outside of your comfort zone and engage with the creative world is key to both personal and community growth.

"Technology has a time and place, and [she does not] see it replacing the handmade and the tactile."

Ultimately, both Trantham and Shearer agreed that going to craft fairs and art markets is a reflection of who people truly are. Shearer pointedly mentions that these spaces are "in your back door ... you're going to miss out" if you don't get involved.



Showcasing Paintings at Small Business Fair // Photo by Caren West PR

ASAP: Upgrade Your Creativity — A Checklist

Through interviews with Trantham and Shearer — as well as personal experiences — the following is a curated checklist towards expanding your creativity comfort zone. Add some whimsy to your daily routine!

Make it a point to scour the internet for craft fairs that you're intrigued by. Visit them. Walk around. Bring a friend.

Once there, talk to the vendors. Conversations are the most impactful way to build connections.

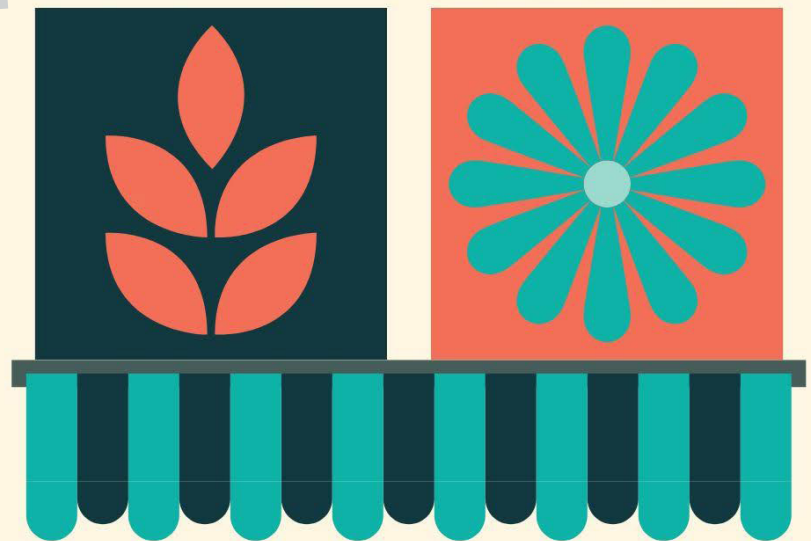
Do the daily tasks of life a bit differently. Do schoolwork at the High Museum of Art instead of a chain coffee shop. Write to-do lists in glitter pens. Film your cooking as if it were a cooking show.

Purchase holiday gifts, birthday presents, and trinkets from small businesses.

Try to not have your first instinct be shopping from major online retailers.

Start a creative side hustle or hobby — even if it does not bring monetary value or social attention. Do it for yourself and your personal growth.

INDIE CRAFT SPRING EXPERIENCE



MAY 2-3, 2026 | 10:00AM - 5:00PM | GOAT FARM



INDIECRAFTEXPERIENCE.COM
[@INDIECRAFTEXPERIENCE](https://INDIECRAFTEXPERIENCE)



City Cycling



City Cycling



Cycling history and culture in and around Georgia Tech

DANIEL PAK + SAHIL HANDA, writers

HANNAH MARSH, designer

FROM CARS TO CYCLISTS

DANIEL PAK

On Aug. 13, Georgia Tech celebrated the completion of a new campus cycle track, providing students and staff an alternative route to travel across campus. Students and faculty attended the inauguration of the newly-built path, a crowd which included University President Ángel Cabrera.

President Cabrera led the inaugural ride through the cycle track wearing his signature gold helmet, showcasing the almost 2.5 miles of new bike infrastructure. The event highlighted the latest expansion of Georgia Tech's cycling infrastructure, which has contributed to the university receiving the title of "Gold Bicycle Friendly University" by the League of American Bicyclists for the third time in a row.

The efforts to expand cycling infrastructure in Atlanta throughout the 1990s can be seen in the establishment of the Atlanta Bicycling Coalition in 1991 and the adoption of a plan to convert rails surrounding the city into a series of trails and parks in 1993, a project which would eventually evolve into the Beltline.

Prior to the cycling infrastructure implemented in the 1990s, journalist King Williams writes in his piece on car-dependency that Atlanta's urban design choices were "choices that emphasize car ownership and decrease quality of life." Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, numerous highways and freeways were constructed around Atlanta, both of which increased automobile transportation. In addition, Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) nearly doubled between 1982 and 1992. Even as cycling organizations and projects began to spring up, Atlanta remained a city metrically focused on automobile travel.

The founding of the ABC and the plan to build the Beltline coincided with the rise of "Critical Mass" cycling events. Originating in San Francisco in 1992, Critical Mass rides involved cyclists riding through city lanes and routes typically occupied by motorists. Critical Mass gained popularity, spreading to over 300 cities worldwide, including Atlanta, by the early 2000s.

In 2011, the ABC organized an event called the Mobile Social, a monthly ride through Atlanta in city lanes that continues to this day.

The ABC also organized "Atlanta Streets Alive," a *ciclovía* started in 2008 that allows Atlanta residents to move through certain routes closed off to motorists. *Ciclovías* originated in Bogota, Colombia, and refer to the closing of city streets to automobiles in favor of cyclists and walkers. Though many participants in Atlanta Streets Alive bike, other residents also walk, jog, and roller-skate through the streets. Initially garnering just a few thousand, Atlanta Streets Alive has grown to become one of the largest *ciclovías* in the US, attracting over 100,000 participants each year.

In 2021, the ABC merged with Pedestrians Educating Drivers on Safety (PEDS) and was renamed Propel ATL the following year. Rebecca Serna, the executive director of Propel ATL, explained the organization's main objective in Atlanta: "We have a philosophy of starting with transit riders [...] because the theory is that if you make [Atlanta transit infrastructure] work better for today's transit riders, it will naturally attract more people."

CYCLING POLICY AT TECH

Similar to the surrounding city of Atlanta, Georgia Tech saw efforts to improve sustainable transportation over the last few decades. In 2010, the Bicycle Infrastructure Improvement Committee, or BIIC, was established with the objective of improving the cycling experience

"We're turning Georgia Tech into a lab of what a great city should look like."

at Georgia Tech through new infrastructure, training, and events. Georgia Tech's cycling infrastructure efforts continued with the publication of the Campus Bicycle Master Plan in 2015, which outlined the goals and actions



Tech Square // Photo by Sahil Handa to improve cycling infrastructure on campus through 2035.

Over the next decade, Georgia Tech rebuilt its on-campus transportation infrastructure, culminating in the Ferst Drive Realignment and Cycle Track that was completed on Aug. 13. Celebrating the project, GT President Ángel Cabrera lauded the efforts Georgia Tech has made to promote cycling, telling the Saporta Report, "We're turning Georgia Tech into a lab of what a great city should look like."

Propel ATL's executive director, Rebecca Serna, also noted Georgia Tech's achievements, stating, "I think that [Georgia Tech's impact] has been huge, just having a university that's really leading the way when it comes to infrastructure [...] and I feel like that has had a positive influence on Midtown and its progression over the years." The Ferst Drive Track was completed alongside Atlanta's Complete Street project, a makeover of 5th Street in Midtown Atlanta that constructed, among other additions, new cycling lanes that led straight to Georgia Tech and Ferst Drive.

Ms. Serna pointed out, however, that Atlanta still has a significant way to go. She explained that, though the city has numerous great plans for sustainable improvements to transportation infrastructure, it struggles with implementing these grand projects. In addition, she expressed disappointment with the transportation policies of the state of Georgia at large, describing it as "woefully inadequate."

THE ATLANTA CYCLIST

SAHIL HANDA

RESILIENCY IS KEY

“Resilience.” That’s the answer Elanor Finalyson, a student on the Georgia Tech Cycling Team, gave when asked what first came to mind when she thought about cycling in Atlanta. According to the U.S. Census American Community Survey, “77% of us [Atlanta residents] drive alone to work... a figure that’s basically been flat since 2008.” In a city known for its car-centric structure, getting around on a bike can often feel like an uphill battle.

New bike lane projects have been cropping up in several parts of the city, such as the recently constructed two-way cycle track on MLK Jr. Drive. The biking infrastructure in Atlanta, although very tangible, suffers from fragmentation, “leaving large sections accessible only by sharing lanes with motor vehicles,” as stated in a bicycle safety overview written by People Powered Movement.

When asked to describe his ride to work, Georgia Tech alum Christian DiCenso said, “I can take the first six miles via the Beltline, but once that path ends, I’m on Marietta Rd ... a six-lane highway.” DiCenso, having raced competitively since 2011, said that the many hours he has spent in the saddle have prepared him for this “less than optimal” commute environment.

Recognizing that your average commuter may not have the same level of confidence to travel in such risky conditions, DiCenso believes that his commute shows just how inaccessible bike commuting in Atlanta is for the average resident. A study conducted by Borecki et. al. in the D.C. metro area found that “almost 60% of casual riders ... did not identify themselves as cyclists that rode frequently on city streets.” The study claims that these “casual riders” are the very population that would specifically welcome the

provision of new cycling infrastructure in the city.

A traffic study conducted by Aurora Innovative Solutions found that Atlanta averaged 124 bike crashes annually over the past decade, but in 2024, that number jumped to 219. Finalyson

The city’s end goal should be to help people feel comfortable to get out on their bike whether that be through an increase in education, physical infrastructure, or even policy reform.

and DiCenso said the city’s end goal should be to help people feel comfortable to get out on their bike whether that be through an increase in education, physical infrastructure, or even policy reform. But with cycling incident rates on the rise and a city limited by bike projects that, according to Streetsblog USA, “could take six to seven years and cost millions of dollars,” the pace of Atlanta’s infrastructure development efforts has left DiCenso feeling as though “infrastructure projects are never executed.”

ATLANTA’S OFFERINGS

When it comes to cycling in metro Atlanta, options range from smooth pavement to technical mountain terrain. Mountain Bike Atlanta, an organization focused on building trails and connecting mountain biking communities, maintains over 200 miles of

trails and, per its website, works to expand the presence of the sport through advocacy, education, and recreational opportunities. Clubs such as Get Rad ATL, based out of the Specialized Atlanta shop, hold weekly group rides and community-oriented events, with a goal to provide exposure to the sport and cycling community. Areas such as Buckhead, Stone Mountain, and the “Airport” route offer road cyclists with miles of rideable tarmac.

Clay Parks, a former elite amateur cyclist based in Atlanta in the 1990s, cited temperate year-round weather and affordable housing as big factors that brought high-level road cyclists into the Atlanta metro area from more traditional road cycling locations. Parks, having spent several years training at a high level in several large cities, claims that “Atlanta riding is as good as you’re going to get in a big city.”

For casual riders, events such as Critical Mass and The Mobile Social seek to provide a safe and casual environment for anyone hoping to hop on a bike, moving at a “party pace” through the city. Projects such as the Beltline and the trails built by the PATH foundation, including the Stone Mountain Trail and PATH400, create a network of separated bike paths throughout the city.

DiCenso, a father of one, sees the Beltline as an amazing place for young children to experience the joys of cycling and exercise some freedom. “If the path was not in our neighborhood, he probably wouldn’t be riding at all,” he said. DiCenso also claimed that living adjacent to the Beltline has provided him with a social experience akin to that of a small-town community: “I love living [in Adair Park]. You can walk to the breweries with your kids on a Friday. You can just run into friends. Kind of like a European town square.”

A study by Garber et. al. found that Atlanta’s newly constructed bike path projects as a whole have enabled 1.1 times more bicycle miles. In more concentrated areas of interest surrounding the Westside BeltLine and the Proctor Creek Greenway, the factor was observed to be as high as 1.45. The Metropolitan Transportation Plan outlined by the Atlanta Regional Commission quotes a projected spending amount of \$168 billion, with 2.3% of this budget classified as Bike/Ped Expansion and roughly 58% devoted towards maintaining and expanding auto-only lanes and corridors. These findings highlight a divergence between the growing demand for bicycle infrastructure and the region’s continued financial emphasis on automotive infrastructure.



5th Street NW Bridge Bike Lane // Photo by Sahil Handa

The State of
the Arts.



Authored and Designed by Reagan Marvel

Cover design adapted from the photograph *Atlanta Ballet Dancers* by Shocara Marcus, featuring dancers Brooke Gilliam and Marius Morawski.

The State of the Arts



How cutbacks to the NEA reached Atlanta’s artistic scene

REAGAN MARVEL, writer

REAGAN MARVEL, designer

In May of 2025, the White House released President Trump’s budget proposal for the 2026 fiscal year (FY 2026). The proposal included a \$163 million, or 22.6 percent, reduction of non-defense discretionary funding. The reduction includes eliminating the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) from the federal budget. Shortly after the publication of the proposal, the NEA rescinded grants across the nation, not excluding arts organizations in Fulton County.

The FY 2026 budget proposal lists 17 agencies, among them the NEA, that the administration suggests to eliminate in order to “enhance accountability, reduce waste, and reduce unnecessary governmental entities.” Following the release of the FY 2026 proposal, the NEA sent an email to arts organizations across the country rescinding promised grants, stating that it was “terminat[ing] awards that fall outside of [the] new priorities.”

LOCAL RESPONSE

According to the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, the NEA not only supports community arts in all 435 congressional districts through

distributing approximately 2,400 direct grants and 8,171 state awards, but it also allocates 40% of its funds to state arts agencies that grant an additional 30,000+ awards.

Arts organizations across metro-Atlanta reported changes to their NEA funding following the budget proposal. Chris Escobar, the Executive Director of the Atlanta Film Society (AFS), noted they did not receive the \$20,000 they expected from the NEA this year. “The [Atlanta] Film Society would very likely have to close right now if it wasn’t for [our] relationship [with the Plaza Theatre],” commented Escobar when asked about how the loss of the grant affected AFS.

Among these arts organizations affected by NEA defunding, Atlanta Ballet lost \$15,000 of its annual funding due to NEA cutbacks. Although only a small percent of its budget was lost, Tom West, the Executive Director of Atlanta Ballet, still recognizes the pressures that federal defunding places on the broader arts community: “It puts more pressure on private donors. It’s like the need [for funding] becomes greater because there are fewer resources here, then all



Sing-Sing Marquee // Photo Courtesy of Atlanta Film Society

the foundations start getting more requests, more desperate requests, and it waterfalls down throughout the entire funding community, so that every arts organization faces increased stress beyond what they lose in terms of the federal support.”

West further highlighted the difficulties of cutting budgets for live performances amid federal defunding: “The stress across the funding ecosystem is putting a lot of pressure on us to trim costs ... ours is a human business ... It takes the same number of musicians to perform Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker this year as they did last year, and we’re not going to replace it with a recording, because that’s a part of the experience ... so where we end up having to cut is the humans who do the work behind the scenes.”

Other organizations reported their funding applications as disqualified despite attempting to align with the new priorities of artistic funding outlined by the Trump Administration. Nicole Johnson, Co-Creative Director of Fly on a Wall, described her organization’s NEA grant experience: “[Fly on a Wall was] recommended for, I think it was \$10,000, for our open bounce program, and this program works with children that are in different stages of unhoused circumstances.”

TRUMP'S PRIORITIES

ACCORDING TO THE NEA EMAIL

FUNDING PROJECTS THAT...

- elevate the nation's HBCU and Hispanic Serving Institutions
- celebrate the 250th anniversary of American independence
- support the economic development of Asian-American communities
- make the District of Columbia safe and beautiful
- make America healthy again
- empower houses of worship to serve communities
- foster AI competency
- support the military and veterans
- support Tribal communities
- assist with disaster recovery
- foster skilled trade jobs

President Trump’s Stated Priorities // Graphic by Reagan Marvel

Despite applying under one of the new priorities stated by the current Administration, Johnson stated their grant recommendation was still denied. “We applied for the youth dance program under Make America Healthy Again, because dance is movement. It keeps us healthy, but we were denied programs like that.”

Rather than cutting the Bounce Program, employees at Fly on a Wall took on the financial setbacks. “We’ve all had to take pay cuts in order to keep our programs going, because we don’t want to cut our programs,” Johnson noted.

In addition to the grants directly provided and later rescinded by the NEA to several of Atlanta’s arts organizations, the NEA also funds the Georgia Council for the Arts (GCA), which further distributes grant money throughout the state. According to Georgians for the Arts, the NEA provided \$1,024,700 to the GCA in its fiscal year 2023.

“The state is affected by the federal government because most of what the state gives out is federal dollars. It’s not actually state of Georgia taxpayers,” commented Escobar on the funding allocation model of Georgia’s state government. “Nonprofits have basically been modeled by funders, both public and private funders, to be living essentially hand to mouth ... If [nonprofits] have too much of a surplus, it’s like, ‘oh, we don’t need to give you money, you made a little bit more money than you spent.’ That would be seen as a failure for a for-profit business.”



Young Ballerina // Photo courtesy of Atlanta Ballet



2024 Atlanta Film Festival Awards Brunch // Photo Courtesy of Atlanta Film Society

IMPACT OF GEORGIA'S NONPROFIT ARTS SECTOR

Escobar referenced a 2024 study conducted by the Georgia Department of Economic Development that found the nonprofit arts sector in Georgia supports 200,000 jobs, brings approximately \$1.27 billion in economic impact, and contributes \$49.4 million in state and local taxes.

West compared the \$49.4 million in tax revenue to the \$1.6 million directly reinvested into the sector from the GCA. “We’re the only sector of the economy in the nonprofit arts that generates 32 times what is invested in us,” he highlighted. “It’s not only the humans that we employ and the tax revenue that we create there, but then it is the tax revenue on the tickets, the people who park, the people who go out to dinner, the babysitters they hire, all of that is economic impact that doesn’t get tracked by the state. So we are probably the best investment that a government could make in terms of generating incremental revenue.”

In addition to stimulating direct impact on the economy in the form of tax revenue and jobs, the nonprofit arts sector generates indirect economic effects. According to The Arts and Economic Prosperity 6 (AEP6) study by the Americans for the Arts organization, nonprofit arts and culture audiences in Georgia spend an average of \$42.24 per person in the city.

Furthermore, local companies cited that audiences and artists engage with the nonprofit arts sector. Escobar stated the attendance for the

Atlanta Film Festival, an established 50-year-old showcase of new films selected from over 8,000 submissions, doubled from 2014 to 2024. Johnson highlighted how Fly on a Wall’s new year-long fellowship, in which selected artists gain free rehearsal hours and mentorship, generated numerous applications. “Applications just closed, and had a huge outpouring from

“We are probably the best investment that a government could make in terms of generating incremental revenue.”

the community of people applying. It just again shows the massive need for artists to have the space,” said Johnson on the upcoming fellowship.

Despite the economic contributions of Georgian nonprofit arts organizations and the engagement of local artists and audiences, the state ranks 50th in investment in the arts, providing just 14 cents per capita, according to the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA).

“People are going out. Organizations, particularly nonprofit ones, [are] doing their job and delivering a good service. The problem is that they have been conditioned and formulated

to expect all of these other [funding sources] to also hold up their end of the bargain,” Escobar commented regarding the sources of strain on the nonprofit arts sector.

“Applications just closed and had a huge outpouring from the community of people applying.”

Escobar went on to attribute the limited reinvestment in the nonprofit arts sector to a combination of different factors. “Corporate funding, public funding, and philanthropic funding, those have ebbed and flowed over the last 10, 20, 30, 40 years, but they have never been at historic lows and all at the same time. And that is the real danger that no one is realizing.”

West also highlighted the cumulative nature of the decrease in state and county funding: “When the NEA drops its funding, then organizations, who are already on the edge financially, it throws them into a, you know, distress center in responding places like the city and Fulton county try to spread their grants further, but that means with the same giving pot, all of those grants go down.”

While Fulton County recently restored its budget for the nonprofit arts sector to \$3 million after planning to reduce it to one-third of last year’s amount, funding for the arts remains at historic lows. “On the fifth time it’s come up, [Fulton County] approved to restore [funding] back to \$3 million. So we are now back to where we were last year, which, point of reference, is lower than where we were in 1985, not adjusted for inflation,” highlighted Escobar.

Escobar also addressed flaws in the allocation of state and Fulton County funding to Atlanta’s organizations. “We don’t fund [the arts] the way that everyone else does. Everyone else says, ‘okay, depending on how much money comes in from [the nonprofit arts sector], that will be the amount of money we will then have available for [it].’ Instead, we are looked at as a pure expense, a pure charity, and going ‘we are just going to pick a number and hope that that number is enough to make a difference and also not so much that it’s unjustified in terms of what we get back for it.’”

LOOKING FORWARD

The final decision on eliminating the NEA from next year’s budget remains contentious in Congress. As of September 30, the federal government is in a partial shutdown while lawmakers work to determine the FY 2026 funding bill.

Several local arts groups independently asserted that addressing persistent underfunding requires shifting public perception of the arts. Escobar commented, “We have to stop talking about the arts as a luxury and as a charity. Even if it is a nonprofit charitable organization, it puts dollars in our economy, it puts people to work, creates jobs, and is generally far more accessible for people to enter that industry than in the for-profit sector.” West concurred, “The arts are not optional in our society, and when the arts thrive, employment is stronger.”

Other nonprofit organizations are stepping in with funding initiatives to aid organizations affected by NEA grant rescissions. The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and Helen Frankenthaler Foundation jointly dedicated \$800,000 to fund visual arts programs. The funding supports two Atlanta-based arts groups: the Callanwolde Fine Arts Center, which provides arts education to students from Title 1 schools, and the Southeast Community Cultural Center, an artist residency.

When asked about the future of the arts scene in Atlanta, local groups express optimism. “I have great hope for the arts ecosystem in Atlanta,

because the arts organizations have realized that no one is coming to save us, so we have to save ourselves,” stated West. Johnson added, “I feel optimistic because of humanity. I see people every day that are inspired by art, that want to make art, that are drawn to needing to be in these spaces, and so I know it will continue.”



Atlanta Ballet Ballerinas // Photo by Kim Kenney

