

# piedmont area transportation study

final report



## Executive Summary

Piedmont Road, Georgia State Route 237, is one of Atlanta's most important north-south corridors, connecting the State Capitol with significant residential, business and visitor destinations. This study focuses on the portion of Piedmont Road located in Buckhead, where it carries up to 45,000 vehicles on a typical weekday, often operating under very congested conditions. With more than 13,000 new residents and 34,000 new jobs projected to move to Buckhead in the next 25 years, the already congested corridor will be clogged with traffic well beyond normal commute hours unless action is taken.

Approximately 450 Buckhead residents, commuters, employers, business leaders, and community leaders came together to tackle Piedmont's issues head on, creating a shared vision for the Piedmont Road of the future. The result is a \$200 million plan encompassing 47 projects that, in combination, achieve "mobility balance" by improving the corridor to function more smoothly for motorists as well as transit riders, pedestrians, and cyclists. This report, the Piedmont Area Transportation Study, captures the shared vision for a new Piedmont Road and shows how a combination of public and private investments can be used to realize it.

"... Buckhead has grown to the point that a balance between roadway operations, transit, pedestrian and cycling improvements are all important parts of the solution for getting people from Point A to Point B."

### Purpose of the Plan

The Piedmont Area Transportation Study was conducted to create a 20-year plan that converts the Piedmont Corridor from an obsolete traffic artery to a comprehensive transportation connection and asset for the community. No longer secondary to Peachtree Road, the Piedmont Road envisioned in this plan will meet the standard for excellence that typifies Buckhead while preserving the unique character of the varying segments of the corridor. This study builds on the work done in 2001 through the Atlanta Regional Commission's Livable Centers Initiative that identified Piedmont Road and Peachtree Road as Buckhead's major corridors. This study also addresses measures to improve the corridor as developed by the Governor's Congestion Mitigation Task Force.



### Current Conditions

Traveling along Piedmont Road in Buckhead during either the morning or afternoon rush hours can be a frustrating, gridlocked experience. A number of factors contribute to Piedmont’s current state including:

- Frequent congestion on Georgia 400 causes drivers to use Piedmont as an alternate southbound route during the afternoon rush hour.
- With no southbound to northbound connection between Georgia 400 and I-85, motorists must use Piedmont and other local surface streets to complete the transition.
- Alternatives to the car to access Buckhead are not attractive - in terms of costs, frequency, and convenience.
- Alternatives to the car to circulate within Buckhead are not attractive and are very limited, with the exception of the “buc,” which is popular, but expensive to operate.
- The existing street grid does a poor job of distributing traffic that is circulating within Buckhead along the Piedmont Corridor.
- Several intersections throughout the corridor are bottlenecks in the system, causing severe delay throughout the corridor.
- The roadway was not designed to handle the uneven flow of traffic, which is significantly heavier in the southbound direction, especially during the afternoon rush hour.
- Limited local funding sources exist to fund improvements in a large part of the area.
- Planned development could outpace the capacity of supporting infrastructure.

### Future Conditions

Left unimproved, Piedmont Road will soon experience significant traffic delays throughout the day.

- The area has experienced three percent growth in traffic over the last six years. The Atlanta Regional Commission forecasts that the Buckhead area may experience an increase in population of 40 percent over the next 25 years. This would accelerate the traffic growth trend as experienced in recent years.
- Four of the 22 study intersections along the Piedmont Corridor will operate under failing conditions during most of the day (not just rush hours) by 2012. By 2027, one third of the study intersections will operate under failing conditions, causing congestion to spread further throughout the corridor.
- Average travel times will increase from 18 minutes to 27 minutes in the afternoon rush hour between 2007 and 2027.
- Average speeds during the afternoon rush hour will decrease from 11 to 7 mph, significantly lower than the current posted speed limits of 35 and 45 mph.

### Recommendations for Improving Piedmont

The Piedmont Area Transportation Study recommends 47 projects that work together to produce meaningful transportation improvements along the corridor. The recommendations represent more than \$200 million in construction projects, producing “mobility balance” by weaving together transit, pedestrian, bike, and roadway improvements. Highlights of the recommended projects are as follows:

- Construct major roadway connections that keep commuter traffic on the highways and interstates.
  - Complete the I-85/Georgia 400 interchange by constructing ramps from I-85 southbound to GA 400 northbound and from GA 400 southbound to I-85 northbound
- Minimize traffic “choke points” by improving traffic flow through intersections and accommodate heavier southbound traffic.
  - Create dedicated left-turn lanes at all major intersections to increase capacity and improve safety
  - Widen portions of Piedmont Road to create three lanes in each direction with exclusive left-turn lanes
  - Re-time signals every two to five years to reflect new development and changing traffic patterns
  - Where widening is not an option, convert lane uses to gain additional southbound capacity with dedicated left-turn lanes
- Enhance transportation alternatives to encourage additional use for access to Buckhead.
  - Establish express bus service directly to several employment centers in Buckhead from Cobb, Gwinnett, and DeKalb counties
  - Increase frequency of MARTA rail and bus service
  - Complete the I-85 HOV interchange to create ramps to/from I-85 South, facilitating faster trips for express bus service and other multi-passenger vehicles
- Enhance transportation options for circulating within the Buckhead community.
  - Extend the “buc” shuttle service to a larger area of Buckhead
  - Improve pedestrian safety by widening buffers and sidewalks, and by improving pedestrian crossings
  - Design roadway sections to accommodate the future inclusion of bike lanes as bridge infrastructure is replaced, right-of-way is acquired, and development is approved
  - Construct queue jumper lanes that allow buses a head-start when traffic signals turn green

### The Planning Process

To ensure that the Piedmont Area Transportation Study created a vision representative of the entire business and residential community, the Buckhead Community Improvement District (Buckhead CID) and the Buckhead Area Transportation Management Association (BATMA) followed a

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rigorous process for public involvement. The study team also gathered extensive data and tested its recommendations using industry accepted procedures to ensure that the final product is a cohesive, effective plan for improving the Piedmont Road Corridor.

- Through 39 public meetings, approximately 450 residents, business owners, and commuters shaped the effort, developed the guiding principles for the study, shared their perceptions of existing problems and provided their ideas on how to correct them. Regular updates were provided via email to more than 11,000 members of the business and residential community.
- The study team analyzed a variety of data including traffic volumes, congestion, delay, intersection levels-of-service, and crash records to determine the deficiencies in the corridor.
- The study team met with property owners to understand their future development plans.
- Future conditions for the corridor were projected based upon historical and projected demographic, development, and traffic data provided by the Georgia Department of Transportation and the Atlanta Regional Commission that was adjusted based upon local knowledge of planned development.
- The study team developed an initial set of recommendations by analyzing future traffic volumes and patterns using traffic modeling software.
- After testing the impact of initial recommendations, the study team met with stakeholders and the general public to seek feedback. Several recommendations were altered based on community input.

## From Plan to Reality

The Piedmont Area Transportation study is not only a 20-year vision for Piedmont Road – it is also a plan for immediate action. Portions of the plan can begin implementation within the year while others will be presented to state and regional transportation agencies for longer term funding consideration. The first step toward implementation will happen in early 2008 as the board of the Buckhead CID reviews the plan and develops its priorities based on feasibility and cost effectiveness.

One key component in moving the study from plan to reality is the study team's close coordination with the City of Atlanta throughout the planning process. The plan was developed to fit directly into the Connect Atlanta Plan currently under development by the City, giving them a head start on work in Buckhead.

Ultimately, the vision for Piedmont Road is to transform it from Buckhead's "workhorse" street into a more attractive and efficient roadway that meets the community's standard of excellence and faces the challenges of the growing Buckhead area in a unique way.

The challenge is to maintain the momentum generated by the study's public engagement effort and to aim for rapid implementation of several of the early action items while taking the necessary steps to begin design work on a wide range of projects. In this way, the Buckhead community sits at the gateway to securing outside funding and moving this vision from a plan to reality.