

From the Atlanta Business Chronicle:

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CHOA new campus will transform I 85 corridor

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Transportation has long been a topic of conversation in the metro area. In the city of Brookhaven, discussions on the subject are about to get more intense as it prepares for the new, 70-plus-acre campus of Children's Health Care of Atlanta (CHOA) to open over several years within its city limits. As CHOA's buildings are being constructed, enhancements already are underway for infrastructure and development around the area.

"When you drop a billion-and-a-half-dollar hospital somewhere," said Brookhaven Mayor John Ernst, "things are going to shift around some."

That's putting it mildly. CHOA's planned facility, expected to welcome its first patients in about seven years, will be a game-changer for the I-85 and North Druid Hills Rd., corridor, as well as the surrounding neighborhoods. In fact, some have already seen a shift, particularly zones close to Brookhaven's proposed Peachtree Creek Greenway. The scenic path, ideal for walkers, joggers and bikers, will meander along the creek, and is on the drawing boards to eventually link with the Atlanta BeltLine and PATH 400 trails.

"We're calling it the confluence," said Ernst. "We'll be part of that system, and that means the whole area around the greenway will see changes."

Construction of the 14-foot-wide greenway is expected to begin this fall, with the first of three phases taking about a year. Funding for the initial segment comes from hotel/motel taxes, which were increased last year when the legislature voted to bring Brookhaven's tax rate in line with that of DeKalb County.



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Renderings of CHOA's Brookhaven campus, 70-plus acres.

Patricia Hansen, the city's fund development director and project manager for the greenway, says the seven-year capital improvement project is on schedule to be more than just a recreational amenity.

"There will always be a recreational aspect to a path that goes along a creek, but it's also designed to get people from here to there without having to get in their cars," she said. "This path will run from North Druid Hills Rd., and to Briarwood Rd., which is a fantastic business environment. And CHOA will be right there, in a densely populated area close to centers of employment."

Hansen said she expects the greenway to eventually become a commuter route. "Ultimately, the CHOA campus will employ thousands of people, from those who support the cafeteria staff to some of the leading medical minds in the country," she added. "Brookhaven not only has the greenway, but also a robust bicycle path plan with links and sidewalks that we'll build over time."

Other significant changes fueled by the CHOA project are: a rebuild of the North Druid Hills interchange on I-85; underpass renovations; improvements along North Druid Hills Rd., itself; and a massive upgrade of the city's sewers.

"There will be a lot more capacity in that area that will add to economic development," said Ernst. "We're being very proactive in doing the basics so we're ready to go, to show that Brookhaven is open for business."

CHOA has pledged \$40 million to the city and county to pay for some of those infrastructure projects.

"Infrastructure is a complicated piece of the puzzle, and we're still developing details," said Chris Chelette, CHOA's vice president for planning, design and construction, who is overseeing the day-to-day aspects of the project. "But connectivity and pedestrian movement are a big part of our vision, and being able to connect with the greenway is an incredible opportunity."

CHOA's plans also call for a path going under I-85 to link to the trail, and a bike and pedestrian zone around the campus.

"We've never had a campus as connected as this one," said Chelette. "And I think what we'll see here is a community amenity created through our site. This is another way to encourage people to be active."

Hansen said she has the same vision. "People started talking about the greenway years ago as a great project for the community," she said. "Then, when CHOA started putting their plans together, they worked with the cycling and pedestrian communities, so having them

on board did jump-start things. Now we have long-term plans that will include trailheads in places that are also community gathering places.”

The timing also meshes well with the cultural shift in how many people throughout the metro area – and country – want to commute, Hansen added.

“If you look at the Atlanta Regional Commission’s report from about six years ago, it showed that the idea of being in the car is not working for a new generation,” she said. “With this project, the potential is there for a significant impact on transportation, especially since we’re in that moment when people are looking for less expensive, healthier and less complicated ways of getting to a job, to dinner or to the grocery store.”

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