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**Clayton County makes MARTA more regional**  
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Since 1971, MARTA's financial support has come from three governments — the city of Atlanta, Fulton County and DeKalb County.

Until now.

A solid case can be made that Clayton County has become the fourth government and the third county to join the MARTA system.

Just a month ago, the Clayton County Commission, working with Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport and MARTA, passed several pieces of legislation that will strengthen its relationship with the transit agency.

The most significant change is that Clayton County will start collecting a one-cent sales tax collected at the airport, which lies mostly in Clayton even though it is owned and operated by the city of Atlanta.

"We discovered that we could levy a penny at the airport for the purpose of transportation projects — that's projects with an 's,'" says Eldrin Bell, chairman of the Clayton County Commission. "And I'm hoping to take full advantage of that. I think it's miracle sent."

He could even call it a "miracle cent."

"It gives the [Clayton] Board of Commissioners a chance to explore new vistas of transportation in and around the airport," Bell says of the tax that is expected to generate at least \$3 million a year.

Clayton County also approved a move to switch back all of its transit operations to MARTA, a move that MARTA's board approved in June.

When the C-Tran bus system began in October 2001, MARTA had been the original operator. But Clayton commissioners, in a move to save money, decided in 2004 to turn over the operations to First Transit, which was awarded a three-year contract.

In Bell's mind, it just makes more sense for MARTA to operate C-Tran and its five bus routes that serve Jonesboro, Morrow, Forest Park, Lake City, Riverdale and major activity centers.

"MARTA carries 92 percent of the transit passengers in the region," Bell says. "MARTA has a great deal of know-how, and it creates the kind of synergy that we need for seamless transportation flow. MARTA also will take over a segment of our system that we've had a lot of difficulty with, and that's paratransit."

But it's the promise of a closer link to a regional system that's most appealing to Bell as

chairman of the Transit Planning Board, which is working on a 13-county regional plan for mass transit. MARTA's new Breeze card also will make it easier to implement a regional fare structure.

For MARTA, a closer relationship with Clayton is validation.

"It shows that we are a regional agency," says Richard McCrillis, MARTA's general manager. "It's important for us to show that we can go beyond what we are doing. MARTA brings expertise on how to run a system, and there are economies of scale. Why doesn't the region utilize that? Why reinvent the wheel?"

McCrillis welcomes all newcomers to MARTA. "Any discussion on expanded service would give additional benefits to our current riders. The more people we can get on transit, the better off the region will be," McCrillis says. "Transit has to be a major part of the solution going forward."

Back in Clayton, Bell is busy strategizing on how to make the most of the airport sales tax. Remember, he says the tax can be used for transportation projects with an "s."

Sitting in his office in Jonesboro, Bell starts drawing a map of a possible grand plan.

The airport terminal is in the middle. He draws a transit loop surrounding the airport that would connect MARTA to the Georgia International Convention Center, the airport's new car rental facility in College Park, the old Ford plant in Hapeville and the State Farmer's Market. He also believes the transit loop could help connect the current airport terminal with the proposed East Terminal.

But he doesn't stop there. He sees that loop also connecting to the proposed commuter rail line that would serve towns between Atlanta and Griffin. And he would like to see the transit line link Fort McPherson with Fort Gillem — thereby extending the reach of the Peachtree Streetcar and MARTA.

"I've asked the airport and MARTA to consider joining with Clayton County to study a transportation loop around the airport that will tie into other transportation projects," Bell says. "The people of Clayton County have a window to look and evaluate the possibility of future projects with MARTA."

After two years in office, Bell has made transit issues his signature cause. "Transportation impacts the quality of life of people in my county more than anything else," he says. "The feeling now is that mass transit is needed to relieve traffic congestion."

The moves by Clayton County can be a model for the rest of the Atlanta region. Instead of striking out on its own, Clayton is taking advantage of MARTA's strengths. The county is working on a multi-pronged effort to bring mass transit to the Southside. And Clayton is actively pursuing alternative ways to finance transit to create a transportation system that serves the county while linking with the entire region.

If only other metro counties could be as creative and forward-thinking.

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