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Research Paper

Residents and urban greenways: Modeling support for the Atlanta BeltLine

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ABSTRACT

Urban greenways have received significant attention due to their many publicized benefits and costs that make them contentious recreational developments. Most prior studies have approached urban greenways from a demand-side perspective solely focused on their users. This study adds to the literature by taking a supply-side approach to assessing resident attitudes towards greenways and using these attitudes to predict support for greenways. Building off of Weber's theory of formal and substantive rationality and social exchange theory, resident support for the Atlanta BeltLine is posited to be a function of different extrinsic and intrinsic factors. Extrinsically, it is hypothesized support for the BeltLine is a function of residents' frequency of use and their perceptions of how the greenway trail generates economic benefits within their neighborhood. Intrinsically, it is hypothesized resident support for the BeltLine is a function of how the BeltLine psychologically, socially, and politically empowers or disempowers residents. To test these hypotheses, surveys were distributed across three neighborhoods adjacent to portions of the Atlanta BeltLine using door-to-door systematic census-guided random sampling. The 568 usable surveys (60% response rate) were entered into SPSS' AMOS and used to assess both the construct validity and predictive validity of the measures. The model explained 62% of the variance in support for the Atlanta BeltLine with four of the five antecedents being significant. Implications suggest that support for greenways is more than just a function of frequency of use, but a complicated mix of use and perceptions of the trail's economic benefits and empowerment.

1. Introduction

Urban greenways and the recreational trails associated with them have received significant attention within the popular press as well as academic literature. This attention is due to their many publicized benefits as well as costs that make them popular recreational developments for some stakeholders and areas of contention for others. Most of these prior studies on urban greenways have approached the subject from a demand-side perspective that solely reports findings from the users of greenways (Akpinar, 2016; Byrne et al., 2009; Chon & Scott Shafer, 2009; Lee, Scott, & Moore, 2002). While this demand-side perspective has helped to provide a better understanding of the attitudes, preferences, and behaviors of urban greenway users, large-scale supply-side studies investigating residents' perceptions of living in close proximity to urban greenways are largely absent from the literature (Baur, Tynon, & Gómez, 2013; Corning, Mowatt, & Chancellor, 2012).

Examining urban greenways through the lens of the resident is important for multiple reasons. First, one cannot assume that residents are users of the trails and parks associated with these urban greenways. Second, the positive and negative impacts of urban greenways are disproportionately felt by residents on a daily basis. Concerns ranging from safety and trespassing to unleashed dogs and owners not cleaning up pet waste are also more commonly voiced by residents rather than users (Corning et al., 2012; Gobster & Westphal, 2004). Additionally, development of urban greenways can cause an increase in property value. This increase may benefit homeowners wishing to sell and leave their neighborhoods, however, as commonly noted within the urban trail literature, it could also lead to increases in property tax and ultimately gentrification if residents' income does not increase commensurately (Wolch, Byrne, & Newell, 2014). Providing credence to these points is Corning et al. (2012, p. 284) who acknowledge that "Although trail research is not new, there is little information on residents and property owners adjacent to trails yet they are an important population as they are potentially more affected by trails than resident property owners living further from the trails." Residents represent an important constituency with the political power to either lobby for increased funding for urban greenways or to lobby legislatures to halt greenway development.

With these factors in mind, this study seeks to add to the urban greenway literature by taking a supply-side approach to assessing

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resident attitudes towards urban greenways and using these attitudes to model support of the Atlanta BeltLine. The Atlanta BeltLine was chosen because, as a large-scale, sustainable recreation and transportation redevelopment initiative currently under construction, it is uniquely suited for the purposes of this study (BeltLine.org, 2016). Of specific interest is understanding why residents support or oppose urban greenways within their neighborhood. Literature has suggested support to be an important factor of urban trail success and sustainability (Gobster, 1995; Gobster & Westphal, 2004), but until now, the antecedents to resident support have yet to be tested. Support for the Atlanta BeltLine is posited to be a function of different extrinsic and intrinsic factors. Extrinsically, it is hypothesized support for the BeltLine will be a function of residents' use and their perceptions of how the greenway trail generates economic benefits within their neighborhood. Intrinsically, it is hypothesized resident support for the BeltLine will be a function of how the BeltLine psychologically, socially, and politically empowers or disempowers residents. These extrinsic and intrinsic factors of urban trail development are investigated through the theoretical lens of social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976) and Weber's theory of formal and substantive rationality (Jagd, 2002). The resulting knowledge provides valuable information regarding how residents perceive and interact with urban trails in their neighborhoods and helps managers and academics better understand the various factors that lead to support or opposition to these controversial recreational developments.

2. Literature review

2.1. Evolution of greenways and urban trails

Greenways and urban trails have evolved over time in response to the physical and psychological pressures of urbanization and have recently appeared to transition from a diffuse state of greenway activities to a well-developed era of greenway planning for the sustainable development of cities (Fabos, 1995; Lindsey, 2003; Searns, 1995; Shafer et al., 2000). This evolution can be encapsulated in three distinct generations of the greenway development. The first generation consisted of axes, boulevards, and parkways that were the ancestral greenways (Schwarz, Flink, & Searns, 1993; Searns, 1995). The second generation consisted of trail-oriented recreational greenways that provide access to rivers, streams, ridgelines, railbeds, and other corridors within the urban fabric, often automobile free (Little, 1990). The third, and current, generation consists of multi-objective greenways that go beyond recreation and beautification to address all aspects of sustainable development including: conservation of urban biodiversity, restoration of ecological services, outdoor education, alternative transportation, economic development, growth management, and other urban infrastructure objectives (Bryant, 2006; Lindsey, 2003; Ryder, 1995). Greenways are now considered an important facet of urban sustainable development and a strategic tool for the planning, design, and management of sustainable landscapes (Lindsey, 2003; Reis & Jellum, 2012).

This evolution of greenways and their many disperse forms across the world make consensus on a precise definition of greenways hard to come by (Ahern, 1995; Searns, 1995). For the purpose of this study we use the definition of greenways provided by Corning et al. (2012), where they describe greenways as *multiuse trails*, which are usually closer to urban population centers, often paved, wider than sidewalks or hiking trails, and more accessible to diverse populations. This definition aligns with the Atlanta BeltLine Trail, first envisioned by Georgia Tech student Gravel (1999). The BeltLine, once completed will create 33 miles of multi-use trail circumnavigating the urban core of Atlanta by repurposing abandoned railroad right-of-ways.

With the important role greenways play in the sustainable development of urban areas, the academic literature has followed with a host of studies on the user experience and user attitudes and preferences for urban greenways (Gobster, 1995; Lindsey et al., 2006; Matsuoka & Kaplan, 2008; Shafer et al., 2000; Wolch et al., 2010). These studies have provided a rich profile of who urban greenway users are based upon demographic factors such as education, socio-economic status, age and family status (Lindsey et al., 2006; Shafer et al., 2000; Wolch et al., 2010) and how the aesthetics, design of greenways, and perceived crime/safety influences greenway use (Gobster & Westphal, 2004; Kaczynski et al., 2008; Reynolds et al., 2007; Wolch et al., 2010). While users are an important greenway stakeholder and provide valuable feedback on satisfaction with urban greenway experiences, their views do not necessarily represent the views of residents living in communities adjacent to urban greenways as evidenced in Corning et al.'s (2012) previous quote. This study seeks to build off the initial exploratory and qualitative work of Lindsey (2003), Wolch et al. (2010), Corning et al. (2012), and Baur et al. (2013) to quantitatively understand resident perceptions of urban greenways and how these perceptions influence support for proximal urban greenway developments.

2.2. Theoretical framework and proposed hypotheses

While there has been limited quantitative research on resident support for urban greenways, other bodies of literature have been modeling resident attitudes towards other types of recreation and tourism developments for years (Boley, McGehee, Perdue, & Long, 2014; Látková & Vogt, 2012; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon,2012). Within this body of literature, resident support for recreational developments has been the ultimate dependent variable of interest because residents are viewed as the primary stakeholder who must be won over in order for the development to be considered successful and sustainable (Belisle & Hoy, 1980, Choi & Sirakaya, 2006).

Resident support has been conceptualized using multiple theoretical lens. Two that are most pertinent to this study on resident support for urban greenway trails are social exchange theory (SET) and Weber's theory of formal and substantive rationality. According to Emerson (1976), SET is a theory stemming from the converging works of sociologists Homans (1958) and Blau (1964) and social psychologists Thibaut and Kelley (1959). SET provides a theoretical framework that suggests actors initiate and maintain favorable social associations because they receive a valued return, called reinforcement or exchange (Ap, 1992). Thus, SET sees an individual exchange as a single point in a series of past and potential future exchanges (Emerson, 1976). A participant's willingness to engage is determined by whether or not the valued return outweighs the cost of participation *over time*, not just during one specific exchange (Ap, 1992; Emerson, 1976). SET is widely used in tourism literature because it can clarify the varying attitudes held by different stakeholders within the host communities toward tourism development based upon their varying perceptions of the costs and rewards (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012). Advantages of using SET to measure resident perceptions towards urban greenways include its ability to scale from the individual to the community level, explain interactions of networks containing many actors, reconcile market imperfections, and accommodate explanations of both positive and negative perceptions of urban greenways.

While SET possesses the aforementioned advantages, its use is not without limitations, and has been critiqued for assuming all participants gain from exchange and overemphasizing the importance of economic benefits (Boley et al., 2014; Látková & Vogt, 2012). Further, SET assumes actors behave rationally and fails to account for non-economic rationales, thus failing to respond when actors exhibit inconsistent behaviors (McGehee, 2007). One solution suggested by Látková and Vogt (2012) and Boley et al. (2014) is to use social exchange theory in conjunction with other theories so that the economic and non-economic impacts of recreational developments can be considered.

With the complicated impacts of urban greenways on residents, a theory is needed that can cover the range of extrinsic and intrinsic

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