



Friday, February 8, 2008

## A focal point for Midtown?

Woodruff Arts Center looks to play a key role as Midtown grows

Atlanta Business Chronicle - by [John Manasso and Douglas Sams](#) Staff writers

The number of Midtown residents will grow from 32,000 to 52,000 over the next eight years and the number of annual visitors will jump from 6 million to 10 million during the same period, the Midtown Alliance projects.

As president and CEO of the **Woodruff Arts Center**, Joe Bankoff holds some of the important cards as to how the neighborhood could shape itself to deal with the issues that it faces -- what he calls a "re-urbanizing." He hopes his vision is transformational.

Bankoff signed a letter of intent last September with MARTA to purchase the air rights for a 6.2-acre parcel that contains the Arts Center transit station.

If he can complete the acquisition -- MARTA's appraisal had a \$40 million price tag -- so that it can possibly contain a new home for the **Atlanta Symphony Orchestra** along with an educational center, Bankoff believes "we may both literally and virtually re-invent how this town thinks about MARTA."

Bankoff foresees an arts center where patrons park at North Springs or Lindbergh stations and take the train directly onto the organization's campus.

"The street system is not equipped to handle that level of traffic," he said.

Of course, his ambitions will require funding for the symphony center, but those efforts have stalled at about \$114 million. The final price tag is estimated at \$300 million.

The current climate -- the mood for public officials to commit large amounts of funds to the arts, the economy possibly sliding into recession and the city government facing a \$70 million deficit -- hardly creates optimism.

Recently, Arthur Blank, who, at \$35 million has pledged the largest amount of money to the symphony center, was quoted as saying, "There's a reasonable chance we'll get a Super Bowl before the symphony center is built. I think it's been disappointing it hasn't gotten the complete support" of the community.



Joe Bankoff: The president and CEO of the Woodruff Arts Center hopes to help transform Midtown by reinventing the area around the Arts Center MARTA station.

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Blank doesn't think Atlanta will receive another Super Bowl until it replaces the Georgia Dome and the timetable for that is between 2016 and 2020.

Bankoff would not comment specifically on Blank's statement.

However, in a previous interview he said that public funds are essential to the project. He called that funding a "long-term" issue.

"This is not an easy thing," he said, calling the need for public money "a reality check."

The payoff for the public, as he sees it, is in helping to improve education and transportation. One model he points to is the Los Angeles Music Center, which was built in conjunction with a \$100 million publicly financed parking garage. In Georgia, he points to Columbus' Riverfront redevelopment, for which one-third of the funding came from public sources.

Of course, with the negotiations over the possible site of a new symphony center in flux, the funding would appear to be secondary. Late last year, MARTA changed general managers, with Beverly Scott taking over.

She needed time to get her feet wet in her new job, but Bankoff said her presence has given talks "a shot in the arm" and called her "a strong supporter of the vision." Bankoff said he envisions being able to put funds on MARTA breeze cards that could be spent at the arts center.

At present, the arts center touches 1 million children annually in 65 different Georgia counties. He sees the arts center's mission -- with a new education center -- as helping the state's dropout rate, the idea being that an interest in the arts can help high school-age children keep an interest in school.

"If we could make the arts center a destination for a learning center and make it clean, comfortable and easy and you don't have to fight for a place to park ... it could materially affect the image of transit," Bankoff said. "It's a wonderful idea."

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