INTRODUCTION:

New York City has the Hudson River; Miami has South Beach; Los Angeles—Venice Beach. For land-locked Atlanta, the Chattahoochee is the city’s water play place. From the days of the Ramblin’ Raft Race in the early 1970s to the development of the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area into the 1980s, Atlantans have long had a love affair with the river...at least part of it. Downstream from the national park, sewage treatment plants discharge millions of gallons of treated waste to the river, and for decades metro Atlanta’s inadequate sewage infrastructure fouled the river. Until recently, Atlantans typically turned their backs to that section of river. Now, however, after years of progress in fixing sewer problems, the river is in recovery, and the Chattahoochee RiverLands vision now hopes to link those previously forgotten sections of the river with the long-beloved national park using a 125-mile multi-modal trail. The trail will stitch together communities from Gwinnett to Coweta counties, featuring parks, river access points and connecting trails that bring residents to the river’s edge.

THE WATER BODY:

Coursing 434 miles from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Florida state line, the Chattahoochee is Georgia’s longest and most important river. It supplies drinking water for about 40 percent of the state’s population and carries away the treated waste of those same citizens. Its water generates electricity at multiple hydro-power dams as well as at gas and nuclear-powered facilities located along its banks. Paper mills and chicken processing plants, among other industries, also depend on its flow. Meanwhile it is home to an incredible array of wildlife: 104 fish species, 24 aquatic turtles and, historically, as many as 45 species of freshwater mussels. Especially for those in the metro area, it is an outdoor recreation mecca. The Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area hosts more than three million visitors annually that float the river’s gentle rapids, cast for trout in its cold water and jog, walk and bike on riverside trails.

THE CLEAN:

With the revival of the river downstream of Atlanta, the Chattahoochee RiverLands vision has taken hold. A recently published $1.5 million study, funded by the Trust for Public Land, the Atlanta Regional Commission,
The City of Atlanta and Cobb County, lays out a road map for making some 100-miles of the Chattahoochee into “metro Atlanta’s defining public space.”

The plan calls for construction of a 125-mile multi-modal trail along the river, connecting to multiple public parks and to “tributary” trails—like the popular Silver Comet—that will link to nearby neighborhoods, cities and public transportation. Meanwhile, new river access points will be developed to extend the already existing 48-mile Chattahoochee River National Water Trail. These boat launches will make accessible some 56 miles of the river for boating, floating, fishing and swimming. When completed the greenway will be the largest of its kind in the state—the equivalent of four Atlanta BeltLines stitched together.

The first phases of the long-term vision are already taking shape as various stakeholders develop individual projects. Cobb County will soon construct nearly two miles of path between Mableton Parkway and Veterans Memorial Highway and a new boat launch near the confluence of Nickajack Creek and the Chattahoochee. Ultimately, 19 cities and seven counties will play roles in completing the RiverLands project which is estimated to cost about $1 billion—about the same cost as the new interchange that the state is currently building at Ga. 400 and I-285.

For the river, it’s a miraculous change of course. “Thirty years ago, you wouldn’t have wanted to be along the river downstream of Atlanta,” said Walt Ray, the Trust for Public Land’s Michael J. Egan Chattahoochee Conservation Fellow. “For that reason, the river has been well hidden. This project will allow metro Atlanta to discover its waterfront.”

For the Trust for Public Land (TPL), the project is a continuation of efforts that it began more than 25 years ago. Since the 1990s, TPL has protected some 18,000 acres along the river, including some 80 miles of riverfront for public use.

Aside from connecting communities and providing transportation and recreation alternatives, the RiverLands project ultimately aims to connect residents with the river—a goal summed up in the RiverLands report that borrows the words from famed natural historian, David Attenborough: “No one will protect what they don’t care about and no one will care about what they have never experienced.”

Said the TPL’s Ray: “That’s the genius of the RiverLands. It will introduce the river to a whole new generation of stewards.”

For More Information Contact:
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Georgia Water Coalition

Top: In addition to the primary 120-mile trail, the Chattahoochee RiverLands project includes plans for “tributary trails” that will connect with neighborhoods and communities along the river.
Left: The Chattahoochee is Georgia’s longest and most important river, supplying drinking water for about 40 percent of the state’s population. The Chattahoochee RiverLands project aims to enable more Georgians to experience the river in person.
Above: Artist’s renderings of the Chattahoochee RiverLands project show the 120-mile trail running from Buford Dam in Gwinnett County to Chattahoochee Bend State Park in Coweta County.