

# “Where the Sidewalk Ends”: Sustainable Mobility in Atlanta’s Cascade Community<sup>1</sup>

CASSANDRA JOHNSON GAITHER  
USDA Forest Service

DAVID HIMMELFARB  
Eckerd College

SARAH HITCHNER  
University of Georgia

JOHN SCHELHAS  
USDA Forest Service

J. MARSHALL SHEPHERD  
University of Georgia

BINITA K.C.  
Northeastern University

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## Abstract

*Roughly one third of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions are travel-related, and much of these are from routine, short trips that can be controlled by individual consumers. Because of this, sustainability advocates encourage greater use of alternative transportation modes such as mass transit and non-motorized transport to help limit carbon dioxide emissions. However, the efficacy of such prescriptions is contingent upon the social and physical context of a given place, that is, how these recommendations are received or put into practice by the intended audiences. This case study of Atlanta, Georgia’s mostly African American Cascade community examines the influence of the broader social context of consumption as social practice and the built environment as factors influencing decisions about sustainable mobility (i.e., mass transit use and neighborhood walking), both inside and outside of Cascade. Not surprisingly, lower income residents routinely use mass transit, while middle- and upper-income earners are reluctant users of Atlanta’s mass transit system (MARTA). Lack of use by those with higher incomes is due mainly to the availability of personal automobiles and inefficiencies in system design attributable to a history of racial politics that restricts MARTA to just two of metropolitan Atlanta’s twenty-eight counties. Neighborhood walkability is encumbered by the lack of sidewalk space for higher income individuals and fear of crime for those with lower incomes. The social practice of status signaling via automobile purchasing may also inhibit African Americans’ use of mass transit. [Climate Change; African American Communities; Atlanta, GA]*

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## Introduction

Atlanta, Georgia's southwest side receives a nod in rap artist T.I.'s 2006 hit "Ride Wit Me." The tune pays homage to some of the city's ghettos in this predominantly black part of town, but to anyone familiar with south Atlanta, a parallel version of the song could just as well have touted the social and historic successes of this diverse section of the city. One of the most noted communities in southwest Atlanta is "Cascade," which, like southwest Atlanta in general, contains a seemingly easy mix of wealth and poverty. According to Patillo (2005), the juxtaposition of middle-class status and poverty characterizes urban black communities across the country. In larger metropolitan areas, this mix is the black community. As such, the Cascade community provides an apropos setting for investigating black urban responses to topics that have bearing upon black communities but are rarely spoken of at the local level. One such topic is climate change mitigation, particularly efforts related to sustainable mobility.

There is overwhelming scientific consensus that climate change is evident, is "very likely" propelled by human activities, and presents risks for both human health and natural systems (National Research Council 2011). A report issued by the Congressional Black Caucus in 2004 charged that African Americans' health had already been disproportionately and adversely affected by climate change, as demonstrated by higher death rates among African Americans during heat waves, more rapid spread of infectious diseases, higher than average rates of respiratory illnesses, and declining air quality in predominantly black neighborhoods (Congressional Black Caucus Foundation 2004). A recently developed climate vulnerability index for Georgia counties shows that mostly urban Fulton County, where Atlanta is located, had either high or extremely high decadal climate vulnerabilities in the years 1980 through 2010 (KC et al. 2015). Cities are more vulnerable to heat-related manifestations of climate change because of the urban heat island phenomenon, which concentrates solar energy and "waste heat" from sources such as automobile exhaust to heat up downtown areas in particular (Zhou and Shepherd 2010; Stone 2012, 75–6).

The present investigation is less about the biophysical effects of climate change on an urban minority community than about the public transportation infrastructure of city neighborhoods and the social practices of black automobile consumption, both of which bear on African Americans' willingness, and ability, to mitigate climate change via the choices they make about everyday mobility. A key climate change mitigation strategy promoted by environmental advocacy groups and academics urges citizens of industrialized nations to adopt greater mass transit use and non-motorized transport such as walking (Frank et al. 2010; Maibach et al. 2009). However, we argue that in the case of contemporary Cascade, dual forces—the presentation of the African American self via automobile consumption and a geographically constricted transportation network—constrain alternative mobility options and, ultimately, responses to climate change.

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Our investigation is informed by Barr and Prillwitz's (2014) critique that policy and empirical inquiries examining the choices people make regarding routinized mobility have focused too narrowly on the individual psyche, to the near exclusion of the broader social and physical context in which such decisions are necessarily embedded. A more useful inquiry would examine how everyday mobility is constrained by both social practices and the structure and organization of built environments. We consider social practices as routinized activities and habits, for example how one presents or represents oneself in both private and public spheres, in terms of everyday dress, interactions with other societal actors, or the consumption of material goods (Spaargaren 1997, 144; Veblen [1899] 1994). The performance of such practices is directed by the norms and values that govern specific activities (Verbeek and Mommaas 2008). These practices constitute an overriding social milieu which links apparently individualized environmental behaviors (e.g., selection of transport mode) to the intricacy of both implicit and explicit group expectations about appropriate actions in a given context (Spaargaren 1997). Importantly, the normative practices involving mobility across space, which for subcultural groups are more likely to be informed by subculture than the broader culture, may be inconsistent with official prescriptions from government or environmental groups about appropriate interactions with, or response to, environmental crises such as climate change.

Barr and Prillwitz (2014, 10) also argue that individual decisions about mobility must be considered in light of obdurate, physical circumscriptions of the built environment. While a person or household may intend to behave sustainably with respect to modes of mobility, those choices are framed by features of the built environment (e.g., availability of public transit facilities, the connectivity and placement of bicycle paths and sidewalks) that can promote or hinder alternative mobilities (Lorenzoni et al. 2007). In the case of Atlanta, Baylor (2002) writes that access to public transit in black Atlanta neighborhoods was problematic as far back as 1917. The electric utility company that owned Atlanta's early bus and streetcars, the Georgia Power Company, refused to extend services to black communities in the 1940s and 1950s in an effort to halt black integration of white neighborhoods.

More recently, Bullard et al. (2004) have charged that the city's public transit system, the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), allocated the smallest bus fleet to south Atlanta (where Cascade is located), resulting in overcrowded buses in these communities; and in 2000, they alleged that all of the south Atlanta buses were powered by "dirty" diesel engines, while buses in north Atlanta (largely non-Hispanic white and middle or upper class) burned clean natural gas and that newer MARTA rail stations on Atlanta's north side are better designed and maintained than the older ones that service mostly southside, minority neighborhoods. Wells and Thill's (2012) analysis of transportation equity in four southern states found some evidence to suggest bias in service delivery for predominantly black neighborhoods, but they argue that "transportation disadvantage" (lack of access to dependable

private transport) actually results in greater public transit use for lower income, black city dwellers versus non-Hispanic white suburbanites. Indeed, the 2001 National Household Transportation Survey reports that African Americans are nearly six times as likely as non-Hispanic whites to use any form of public transit and eight times as likely as non-Hispanic whites to use public bus services (Pucher and Renne 2003). This seems to be the case for Atlanta as well. The *Onboard Transit Survey* of public transit in metropolitan Atlanta revealed that about 71 percent of MARTA passengers in 2010 were African American (Atlanta Regional Commission 2010). However, the metropolitan area’s Transportation Authority operates in just two of the region’s twenty-eight counties.

To understand better how limited options for transportation impede alternative mobilities in Cascade, we use focus groups and interviews to locate the nexus of race and public transportation in metropolitan Atlanta. We also use these methods to uncover respondent views on consumption, especially black automobile purchasing, and how such social practices inform the presentation of the contemporary African American self, which in turn, influences choices about mobility. Though seemingly unrelated, these factors are crucial to a more subtle understanding of black responses to climate change.

## Atlanta’s transportation infrastructure and “white flight”

The lack of transportation networks connecting in-town Atlanta to suburban neighborhoods is, arguably, an outcome of white opposition to desegregation and the resulting hyper-segregation (from about 1970 to 2000) of black people in Atlanta from others in the metro area (Kuswa 2002; Bayor 2002; Henderson 2004 and 2006). Observers stress that Atlanta’s contemporary public transit dilemma results from a historical disinterest, especially at the state level, in the provision of public transportation to urban minorities, an indifference rooted in post-World War Two white rejection of the city and its concomitant construction as dirty, diseased, and criminal, in short, *anti-white* (Kruse 2005; Keating 2001). Hatfield (2013, 5) maintains that the state of Georgia’s indifference to metro Atlanta’s public transportation issues is evidenced by the fact that for more than forty years, the Georgia legislature has denied funding to MARTA from state gasoline taxes, “making MARTA the nation’s only big city transportation system to make do without assistance from the state.”

Housing shortages and overcrowding after World War Two made black confinement to black-only sections of Atlanta impossible. Inevitably, African Americans moved into white neighborhoods (Kruse 2005, 19–41). Henderson (2006) stresses that, rather than resist black expansion, white Atlantans retreated to suburban and rural spaces, a “succession” that was grounded in racialized “freedom of association”

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rhetoric that later solidified into an anti-urbanism where suburbia was imagined as a terra nullius of racial homogeneity and clean living.

Kruse (2005) describes the integration of several west-Atlanta neighborhoods such as Mozley Park, which transitioned from overwhelmingly white in the early 1950s to virtually all black by the end of the decade. Cascade experienced a similar transition. The first homes in Cascade were established in the early 1930s with the aid of Federal Housing Administration (FHA) financing, which according to Lands (2009, 166) favored white buyers. In 1962, Dr. Clinton Warner was one of the first African Americans to integrate a Cascade subdivision, Peyton Forest (Kruse 2005, 5; Crater 2011; Bayor 2002). White residents responded by urging the city to erect a barricade across two city streets, the intention of which was to block black access into the neighborhood. After much media attention and criticism, the “Atlanta Wall” was dismantled in March 1963, but by the end of July 1963, Crater (2011) relays that only fifteen white families remained in Peyton Forest. White flight was repeated in other Cascade subdivisions such that, by 1980, most southwest Atlanta neighborhoods were overwhelmingly black.

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Despite white abandonment, some parts of Cascade have retained middle-class, and in some instances approached upper-class, status. The collective “Cascade” is considered by many to be the epicenter of black culture in the city. A 1987 *Ebony* article highlighting black middle-class communities across the country describes Cascade as a “mecca for Atlanta’s Black middle class,” many of whom may be described as belonging to what sociologist Floyd Hunter (in Kruse 2005, 21) describes as Atlanta’s black power structure. In a recent dissertation, Daniel (2009, 108) writes of the social and political capital concentrated in Cascade. Importantly, Cascade contains numerous churches which also serve as seats of power for the community. One senior pastor of a well-established church on Cascade Road described the thoroughfare as the “Cascade Corridor of Churches,” noting the number of influential churches on the street and their various roles in community resilience. The middle-class presence, however, should not obscure the fact that socio-demographics in Cascade are varied. There is certainly what some lower and moderate income participants in this study described as “big Cascade,” the Cascade of multi-millionaire businesspeople, prominent politicians, and gated subdivisions, but there is also the Cascade of “Section 8” housing, homeless individuals, drug trafficking, and boarded-up homes, primarily on the eastern edge closer to downtown.

After the white exodus from Atlanta, Cascade and other in-town neighborhoods were left to contend with long commutes as businesses increasingly located outside of the city, making motorized transport a necessity for metro-area navigation (Henderson 2004; Keating 2001). With the expansion of Atlanta’s suburban sphere, by the end of the 1960s traffic congestion had grown increasingly worse (Keating 2001). In 1971, MARTA was established via referendum by voters in Fulton and DeKalb Counties to help contain the increase. Of the five counties that could have been included in MARTA’s routing in the early 1970s, only

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Fulton and DeKalb county voters approved a one cent sales tax to fund the project. From the outset MARTA was beset with controversy because of its circumscribed service areas and white fears of MARTA buses transporting black criminals to suburbia (Keating 2001; Bullard et al. 2004). The derisive play on the acronym MARTA ("Moving Africans Rapidly through Atlanta"), apparently whispered in white circles outside of the city in the early 1970s, is remembered still (Hatfield 2013).

In 2012, it appeared that the metro area's car-centric culture faced a real challenge by interests that had both the motivation and political clout to effect longer term changes in transportation. However, a Transportation Special-Purpose Local-Option Sales Tax (T-SPLOST) referendum aimed at relieving Atlanta's traffic congestion via road construction and rail service expansion in North Atlanta failed to pass that year, after years of political wrangling and promotion by backers (Hatfield 2013; Henry 2013). An interesting mix of interests spanning the political spectrum coalesced to defeat the measure. Political conservatives assailed the plan from the start, charging that too much emphasis was placed on public transit. The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) rejected it for placing too little emphasis on rail and connectivity in black communities, and the Sierra Club objected to the plan's emphasis on road construction. Not surprisingly, T-SPLOST encountered the stiffest opposition in suburban counties both north and south of Atlanta but also garnered only marginal support (42 to 50 percent) from some southwest Atlanta voting districts, including both lower and higher income areas within Cascade. East Atlanta in-town communities, which have undergone significant gentrification in the past thirty years, were the staunchest supporters of the tax in the City of Atlanta. Public transportation options in both the City of Atlanta and surrounding suburban counties remain limited although increased demands from business and residential sectors across north Georgia are placing increased pressure on both local and state officials to rectify the area's transportation dilemmas (Wheatley 2016).

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## The automobile and the African American self

The preponderant black presence on public transportation in Atlanta and elsewhere in the U.S. would indicate that African Americans are already contributing disproportionately more to climate change mitigation by using mass transit, despite any structural constraints they may encounter. However, abstracted statistics obscure the broader normative context undergirding mobility choices, which is crucial to understanding factors that drive longer-range commitment to sustainability. A more nuanced understanding of black mobility necessitates an examination of broader social practices, particularly those which shape the presentation of self (Goffman 1956; Charles et al. 2009). Important here are ideas about the social acceptability of public transit use. Public transit use in the U.S. is not viewed favorably, even by those who might willingly

choose a more sustainable alternative to the private automobile (van Exel and Rietveld 2010); however, we would argue that the *deliberate* decision to use public transportation is less prevalent among African Americans because of the stigma attached both to public transportation use and the generalized stigma of being black in American society.

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For African Americans, in particular, the presentation of the public self is deeply informed by social practices that convey that one has breached the bounds of working-class, and certainly lower-class, ranks (Lamont and Molnár 2001). Mass transit use and walking (as a means of accomplishing routinized tasks) are not social practices emblematic of such liberation. More broadly, popular black culture celebrates urbanity, almost exclusively. Many of African America's contemporary cultural icons exemplify urban glamour and style, which in turn suggest highly consumptive lifestyles, particularly around transportation. The music video of T. I.'s hit song "Ride Wit Me" referred to earlier illustrates this imaginary well, as the rapper drives through southwest Atlanta in a Rolls Royce Phantom. Such displays are typically antithetical to the smaller "live simply" lifestyle advocated by those calling for alternative transportation modes involving more use of "active transportation" and "eco-driving" (Frank et al. 2010; Maibach et al. 2009). Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest that African Americans willingly use mass transit as a means of reducing carbon emissions or that they engage in what Griskevicius et al. (2010) describe as "conspicuous displays of altruism." This occurs when consumers display "green products . . . [to] demonstrate to others that their owners are voluntarily willing and able to incur the cost of owning a product that benefits the environment (and society) but that may be inferior for personal use" (392).

We do not wish to perpetuate stereotypical images of African Americans or imply that African Americans are unsympathetic to a changing climate or unengaged with climate change mitigation. Quite the contrary, 58 percent of African Americans responding to a national climate change survey indicated that global warming was a major problem; 52 percent said climate change was a major problem; and 63 percent said that people that they knew would be willing to change their driving habits as a means of limiting Green House Gas (GHG) emissions. However, when asked about their use of mass transit, 72 percent said buses or other forms were accessible, but only 17 percent said they made regular use of public transportation (Bositis 2009). Also, according to the 2009 National Transportation survey, only 4 percent of hybrid vehicles in California were owned by blacks (cited in Song 2011). African American blogger "Madame Noire" says such differences are not all due to price differentials between hybrids and standard engines: ". . .there is not a shortage of Caddy trucks, and other gas-guzzlers, in the 'hood. And rarely—if ever—have we seen a basketball player, hip-hop artists, actors or other Black folks of means stepping out of a Chevy Volt" (Ball 2011).

The Black Diaspora scholar Paul Gilroy (2001, 90) also highlights the disproportionate purchase of automobiles by African Americans: "African Americans currently spend some 45 billion dollars on cars and

related products and services. . . ; [T]hey are 30 [percent] of the automotive buying public although they are only 12 [percent] [at the time of writing] of the US population." As well, Charles et al.'s (2009) longitudinal analysis suggests that African American car purchases may be more likely than non-Hispanic white purchases to signify status, given that African Americans spend roughly 12 percent more per car purchase than non-Hispanic white Americans, with all other factors equal. From a critical perspective, Gilroy (2001) argues that black Americans have for the most part abandoned serious attempts to dislodge the hegemony of consumerism. He sees no examples nowadays in American society, for instance, of the kind of protest displayed by Ralph Ellison's black protagonist in "Cadillac Flambé," who sets his Cadillac on fire after realizing that the illusory world of consumer goods did not command respect for blacks but only mocking characterizations of blacks as excessive, exaggerated caricatures in the eyes of white Americans. Related, Packer (2008) suggests that while the Cadillac, in decades past, may have conferred social status, a mark of "freedom" to blacks, at the same time, the black possession of a luxury vehicle subjects black drivers to a hyper scrutiny of their public behavior by authorities and engenders debt—ironically a form of bondage.

Importantly, Gilroy argues that historical privations, with respect to the denial of human and civil rights and real property ownership, whet the black appetite for more ostentatious displays of property ownership. He suggests that the same modalities (white bigotry and the myriad tools used to reinforce the same) that undergirded a white flight apologetics made manifest by the private automobile and its requisite transportation network have contributed to the black American infatuation with the automobile.

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## Data collection

Perceptions of mass transit and walkability were solicited as part of a larger study investigating Cascade residents' understanding of and responses to climate change (Himmelfarb et al. 2014). We employ a mixed-method approach to data collection which includes semi-structured focus groups and interviews, population and mapping data from the Census Bureau's 2010 U.S. Census and 2006 to 2010 American Community Survey, and transportation infrastructure and impervious surface data from the City of Atlanta GIS Department and the Atlanta Regional Commission. For the qualitative component, we conducted six focus groups with a total of twenty-nine participants and interviewed twenty-three individuals. Participants were recruited through solicitations made at area churches, civic organizations, community meetings, and housing developments. We asked about respondents' impressions of and history in the Cascade community. We also queried participants about challenges faced by the community, including residents' perceptions and engagement with mass transit and neighborhood walking and

respondents' awareness and understanding of weather and climate change. Participant ages ranged from twenty to eighty years, and all were African American.

Three focus groups were conducted at the Cascade United Methodist Church (CUMC) in June 2012. We classified all of these participants as either middle- or upper-income professionals or retirees. Individual interviews were also conducted with some focus group members subsequent to the CUMC focus group sessions. Other individual interviews were conducted with persons affiliated with the Hillside International Truth Center also located in Cascade. We also conducted a focus group with laypersons after a meeting of the Concerned Black Clergy (CBC), which meets in the Cascade community. Respondents in this group were mixed income. The CBC is an interfaith organization comprised mostly of clergy from predominantly African American churches in metropolitan Atlanta. A number of participants urged us to contact the CBC because of its centrality to issues affecting Cascade and other black Atlanta communities.

Another focus group was held in conjunction with a National Action Network (NAN) meeting in the West End community adjacent to Cascade in August 2012. Here, income and education levels ranged from moderate to middle income. NAN is a national civil rights organization founded by Reverend Al Sharpton, a spokesperson for some segments of the U.S. black population. The last Cascade focus group was held in October 2012 at an apartment complex on Cascade Road with a group of moderate- to lower-income residents. Socioeconomic status for all research participants was assessed based on the occupations participants reported.

In addition to collecting the focus group data, we also engaged more substantively with the community by situating ourselves, multiple times, in an iconic neighborhood venue, the "Beautiful Restaurant" on Cascade Road, to observe patron interaction and pedestrian behavior. The first author also visited neighborhood parks on Saturday mornings for observation; we attended church services at CUMC, meetings for local Neighborhood Planning Units (NPU), and NAN meetings. The first and second author were also given a tour of the neighborhood by a realtor who works in Cascade, to get a sense of the history and housing stock in this part of Atlanta. We engaged, both formally and informally, with the community from March to November of 2012.

We assessed neighborhood characteristics supporting mass transit use and walkability with Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping to examine features of Cascade's built environment that could support mass transit use and walkability, such as the extent of bus stops and routes, rapid rail stations, and sidewalk acreage. Walkability is defined as the extent to which "walking is readily available as a safe, connected, accessible and pleasant mode of transport" (Abbey 2005, 2). For mass transit, we mapped MARTA bus stops, routes, and rapid rail stations in three sections of Cascade (see below). We also calculated sidewalk acreage for each sub-area of the community. For these analyses, we used ArcMap to

geo-code bus stops, routes, rail stations, and impervious surface (sidewalk) data from the City of Atlanta and the Atlanta Regional Commission (bus stop data) with Tiger/Line census block group data (CBG) (U.S. Census Bureau 2010; City of Atlanta GIS Department 2012; Atlanta Regional Commission 2014).

Cascade encompasses roughly twenty CBGs covering an area of 18.75 m<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1). Due to the large size of Cascade and internal differences in socio-demographics, population density, and residential development across the community, we divided Cascade into three areas: Cascade Avenue/Road, Cascade Heights,<sup>2</sup> and Midwest Cascade to better determine variations in responses across these sub-parts of the community (Figure 2). Cascade Avenue/Road is made up of nine CBGs; Cascade Heights, seven; and Midwest Cascade, four. Cascade Avenue/Road area is on the eastern end of the community, closer to downtown Atlanta. The mean of median household incomes across the nine CBGs that comprise this section of the community is \$38,695, and population density is highest at 2,494.60 persons per square mile (Table 1). The highest mean percentage of vacant housing is in this sub-section; it also contains the lowest average percentage of persons earning at least a four-year college degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2011a).

To contrast, Cascade Heights contains sprawling, picturesque homes and more consistently well-maintained lawns. Gated communities emerge in this section of Cascade along the main east-west corridor, Cascade Road. There are also a greater number of larger, mainstream groceries and other national chains here. Cascade Heights has the greatest percentage of persons with a bachelor's degree or higher education and the highest percentage of owner-occupied housing. The average of median household incomes across the seven CBGs in this section is \$55,516; population density is also lower (1,601.96) than in Cascade Avenue/Road (U.S. Census Bureau 2011a).

Midwest Cascade has the lowest population density of the three sub-sections (1,266.03); the percentage of college completion is closer to that for Cascade Heights, but this area has the lowest homeownership rate. Midwest Cascade contains portions of unincorporated Fulton County and areas that were annexed into Atlanta in the 1990s.

The next sections present open-ended data on social practices influencing mass transit use and both open-ended and mapping data describing Cascade's built transportation infrastructure.

## Everyday practices and mass transit use

Social practices influencing mass transit use were assessed with questions related to the role that cars play in people's lives and with questions about the suitability of Atlanta's mass transit system. A professionally-employed woman who was born and raised in Atlanta said that while in graduate school and before becoming a parent, she routinely used public transportation. She does not do so now because of the

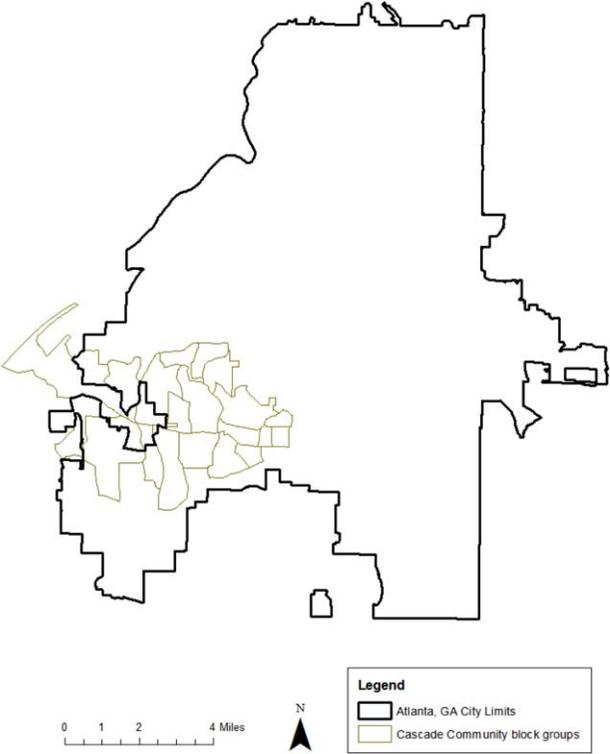


Figure 1. Atlanta city boundaries and cascade community.

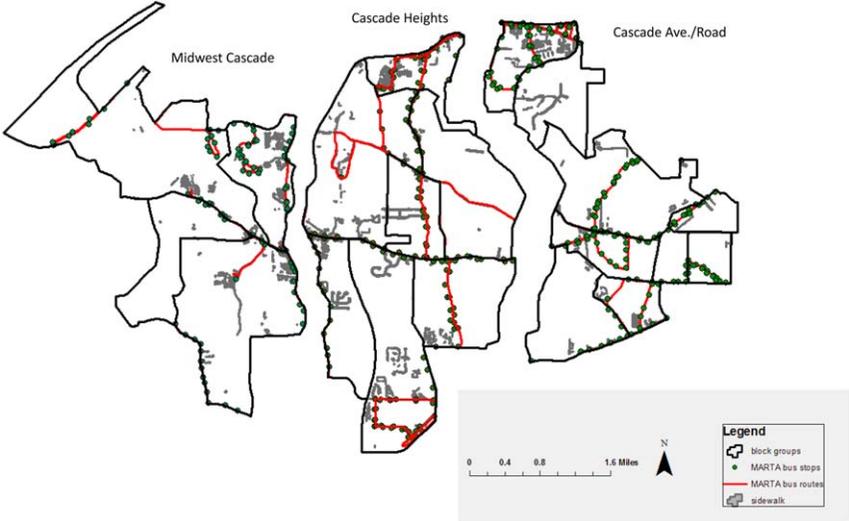


Figure 2. Cascade subdivisions.

**TABLE 1.** TOTAL POPULATION AND MEAN SOCIAL VULNERABILITY INDICATORS FOR CASCADE SUB-SECTIONS. SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2011. SOCIAL EXPLORER TABLES: AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY, 2006-2010.

	Square miles	Total population	Percent black	Percent college	Median HH Income	Percent vacant housing	Percent owner-occupied housing	Population/square mile
Cascade Avenue/Road	4.59	11,444	95.52	19.03	\$38,695	18.94	52.56	2,494.60
Cascade Heights	6.64	10,637	93.76	38.86	\$55,516	14.49	73.13	1601.96
Midwest Cascade CBGs	7.52	9,518	97.58	33.73	\$49,966	11.14	46.86	1,266.03
City of Atlanta	133.93	413,462	54.3	45.10	\$45,171	20.7	37.99	3,154.30

inconvenience of using a slow, inaccessible system to transport her and her family to and from work, school, and the many other places they navigate on a daily basis. She stated: “cars play a very big role in our [her family’s] lives.” On the surface, it appeared that her family’s personal automobile usage related mostly to the inconvenience of using mass transit; however, when we probed further to ask whether taking public transit was simply a matter of inconvenience, she stated: “I think it’s a step beyond convenience; it’s not feasible.” This statement, when considered within the larger context of the lifestyle she described, points to the fixedness of the automobile to the family’s sense of itself. The non-use of public transit transcends individual inconveniences to a point of being implausible as a transportation mode because those things that now contribute to the family’s sense of itself—their preference for suburban living, the child’s enrollment in an independent, non-neighborhood school that does not have school buses, the parents’ jobs outside of the neighborhood—make private automobile use, rather than any form of mass transit, central to how the family envisions itself and functions as unit.

The need for non-motorized transport also arose in response to this topic. A young woman who established a business recently in the city remarked: “It’s [Cascade] so pretty, and it has so much green space with so much potential . . . for more alternative options to transportation . . . Because everyone drives their car from Kroger [supermarket] to home, which is a mile and a half away. . . and you see these big Cadillacs that are caught in the middle of things.” However, the shift to non-motorized transport may be met with some resistance in predominantly black communities. One man we met at the NAN focus group declared that suggestions of alternative transportation modes, for example the use of bicycles or Segways to navigate the city, were indicative of environmental elites not cognizant of the costs of such mechanisms or unaware that these mobility modes were inconsistent with *how* African Americans, compared to whites, navigated the physical space of their neighborhoods:

No...white people bicycle. Black folks ain't got no real bicycles. . . . We got that Walmart brand that you can't ride but two more feet. . . .you can't get nowhere with these bicycles. So when you talk about commuting in that kind of way, look who can commute with a bicycle. The type of bicycle that [you need to commute], the revolutions on that bicycle are able to move as if it was a car. . . .That bicycle, that's \$700. *And I gotta pedal it after I paid \$700 for it!* No, it's not going to happen. . . .

A respondent from the apartment complex group also discussed the affordability of transportation although she argued that lack of money was less relevant to black people's choices for transportation modes. Rather, she stressed the significance that African Americans, in general, place on personal vehicles and the ends to which they will go to ensure that the vehicle remains in their possession:

Speaking as an African American I can say, sort of get the sense sometimes, if I can buy a bigger car . . . I think if I'm going to buy a bigger car, I'm going to buy a bigger car, because that sort of demonstrates to the world that I have arrived. . . . It is a status, because you don't have much to show. People don't have a whole lot. . . .we [African Americans] don't save like in our 401(k)s. . . .So for a lot of people they identify with their car. . . .And everyone I know, [if] they have a choice between a tiny car and a big car—and this goes across socioeconomic—they're going to get the big car because it costs more money.

Although this focus group was comprised of moderate- to low-income wage earners, fellow participants concurred with the view that consumption as a social practice, particularly of higher-priced automobiles, heavily influenced African Americans' transportation choices. The act of buying, and thus demonstrating to others that one can afford, an expensive car overrides practical considerations of cost, fuel efficiency, or excessive emission of environmental pollutants. Ironically, a bicycle purchase is perceived of as being too expensive or incompatible with black culture for consideration, but "big [expensive] cars" appear more appropriate. Echoing Gilroy (2001), the apartment group speaker relates this social practice via consumption to African Americans' historic struggle for respectability in American society. An apartment manager commented:

Yeah, I've had people who will get that big car and not pay their rent. . . .Don't have nowhere to live. You know, but it's that important to them to have that car. . . .status. . . . It is an emotional, psychological, and mental thing. It's not something you can put your hands on. . . .It's their identification. It's who they identify with being. [mimicking car owners] "So you're telling me to take away my identity, of who I am and get rid of that. . . ." And that goes through a whole history of where we've been in the country. . . . I can come in that fancy car, and you won't know I sleep on the couch in my mama's house. . . . You think the last thing people hold on to, they hold on to that car before everything. That's the last thing they'll get rid of, because that's what you identify with.

Another woman commented on black purchasing behavior in general and the legitimization it conveys. She contrasted her fiscal conservatism to that of other African Americans she knew, who she felt had misplaced priorities, in terms of relative amounts spent on purchases that appreciate in value such as a home, versus automobile and furniture purchases designed to impress the casual observer: “I had a girlfriend. . . every single stick of furniture in her house was from Rent-A-Center; [but] she had a ‘bling-bling-blingy’ [expensive] car, though. And it was important to her. . . .”

This same respondent distinguished her routine sustainability practices from those she routinely saw around her. She emphasized that she and her husband had adopted a lifestyle that easily incorporated both public and non-motorized transportation. When we spoke in 2012, she had been using public transit and a bicycle as transportation modes for the past six years. She stated: “I was drowning in my own hypocrisy. . . I could not even stand myself anymore.” This woman stressed the personal responsibility of individuals to mitigate climate change in their daily routines. A lifestyle centered around the individualized automobile, she had come to believe, negated her convictions to demonstrate a more sustainable lifestyle. This appears to be a household decision, as her stepchildren either grew up riding public transit in the city or were transported across the city on her husband’s bicycle.

## The built environment, mass transit use, and neighborhood walkability

To provide a context for the open-ended responses related to features of Cascade’s transportation infrastructure, we first present data on indicators of built features in Cascade supporting mass transit use. Table 2 shows that the highest number of bus stops per square mile was in the more densely populated Cascade Avenue/Road area (33.55). The number of bus stops per square mile decreases as one moves from Cascade Avenue/Road to Midwest Cascade, where the number of bus stops per square mile is roughly one-third of that in the eastern zone (12.23) and about one-half of that in Cascade Heights (23.49). As well, the number of bus routes every square mile decreases across the community from 4.36 in Cascade Avenue/Road to 1.06 in Midwest Cascade. There is only one MARTA rail station in Cascade, which is located on the far northeastern boundary in Cascade Avenue/Road.

As expected, the data show that the more densely populated eastern portion has more facilities supporting alternative transportation, compared to less densely populated sections. U.S. Census data on modes of alternative transportation to work (public transportation, bicycling, and walking) are also mostly consistent with built environment features in each of the Cascade sections. For instance, the most likely mode of alternative transportation used by residents (“public transportation, including

**TABLE 2.** MASS TRANSIT AND SIDEWALK INDICATORS FOR CASCADE SUB-SECTIONS. SOURCE: CITY OF ATLANTA GIS DEPARTMENT, 2012; ATLANTA REGIONAL COUNCIL, 2014; U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2011. AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY, 2006-2010.

	Number of bus stops	Number of bus routes	Number of rail stations	Sidewalk acres	Bus stops per square mile	Bus routes per square mile	Sidewalk acres per square mile	Rail stations per square mile	Percent using alternative transportation
Cascade Avenue/Road	154	20	1	19.61	33.55	4.36	4.27	0.22	19.86
Cascade Heights	156	9	0	23.81	23.49	1.36	3.59	0	12.32
Midwest Cascade CBGs	92	8	0	14.54	12.23	1.06	1.93	0	11.32
City of Atlanta	4,090	92	23	1,457.58	30.54	0.69	10.88	0.17	17.90

taxi cabs”) is highest at a mean of 19.86 percent in Cascade Avenue/Road, followed by Midwest Cascade (12.32 percent) and Cascade Heights (11.21 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau 2011b). Virtually no one cycled or walked to work in any of the sub-neighborhoods.

Population density is important to any discussion of mass transit. The cost effectiveness of a mass transit system depends on the amount of capital outlay, population and job densities, and the type of system involved—bus rapid transit or light or heavy rail (Guerra and Cervero 2011). For roughly \$5 million, buses would be cost effective with a population and job density of less than five persons and jobs, respectively, per acre. Light rail would be worth an investment of \$10 million with similar population and job densities. For heavy rail (MARTA is heavy rail), the minimal investment would be \$25 million with a population and job density of roughly fifteen, respectively. The per acreage populations densities in Cascade Avenue/Road, Cascade Heights, and Midwest Cascade are 3.89, 2.50, and 1.98, respectively. Only buses and light rail transit appear cost effective given the low population densities in Cascade.

Population densities would enhance ridership even more if there were also a substantial number of jobs and housing within walking distance of a rail station (Guerra and Cervero 2011). As discussed, employment growth has been relatively weak in south Atlanta (Henderson 2004). However, a 2006 redevelopment plan for underserved Atlanta communities includes Cascade Avenue/Road and a portion of Cascade Heights. It identifies numerous opportunities for economic growth in this part of the city (City of Atlanta Bureau of Planning 2006). The plan calls for high density, mixed-use development in the Cascade Avenue/Road area, which would include new loft housing, office, and retail uses. This development would be within walking distance of the southwest trail of the Atlanta Beltline, which is a 22-mile greenway around the city’s central core that utilizes abandoned rail lines. The Beltline is expected to produce a major increase in demand for commercial and residential development in areas it traverses.

Focus group discussions reiterated the transportation infrastructure data. CUMC focus group member concerns were mostly with the limited services offered by MARTA. Some participants said they used MARTA sometimes to attend events in the city like ball games but also cited the limited coverage of the service across the metro area and the distance of metro stops from their homes. Here, respondents contrasted rapid rail systems in other major east coast cities that “go somewhere,” with Atlanta’s, which they perceived as not extensive enough to adopt a lifestyle with public transportation as a primary mode of transport. As one father with young children commented: “I don’t think MARTA goes enough places to make it, you know, a thing, that people would do.” Similarly, a young woman in a CUMC focus group stressed that MARTA’s restriction to Fulton and DeKalb counties is the reason she cannot reasonably use mass transit to commute to work. She described herself as environmentally concerned and aware but said: “it just does not make sense for me, logistically, to ride the bus for two or two hours plus, when I can get in my

'pollute the atmosphere car' and drive and be there in an hour or inside an hour."

In discussing the lack of connectivity to other parts of the metro area, one participant raised the issue of past discrimination in mass transit services, citing the fact that at MARTA's inception, there was a concerted effort on the part of the Authority and white people in neighboring counties to keep African Americans out of their counties: "It's my understanding, the lack of convenience for us [black Atlantans] was really by design. And Cobb County [adjacent metro county] is famous for refusing to allow MARTA in because they didn't want that 'other element' [blacks] to come out there." Others readily agreed. Interestingly, this participant pointed out that during MARTA's early years, middle-class African Americans also relished the fact that the lack of bus connectivity to the higher-income, sparsely populated parts of west Cascade prevented lower-income blacks from the city from coming into their part of the community. According to the respondent, the prevailing sentiment among some black people at that time was that their move to the suburbs would enable them to escape crime associated with inner cities: "the whole mentality of 'old Atlanta' was very segregated along socioeconomic lines," with segregation here referring to attempts to draw class distinctions among African Americans.

The lack of bus or rapid rail connectivity with the rest of the metro area was a prevalent theme that ran through the CUMC focus groups. This is an important consideration, given that a disproportionately large number of both professional and service jobs are in the metro area's northern, "favored quarter," which expands from an in-town community just north of downtown Atlanta (Midtown) to the northern suburbs (Henderson 2004). Henderson (2004, 199) describes this part of the metro area as "the region to Atlanta's north which incorporates a high degree of executive housing, a demographics of mostly White, affluent families, and a favored location for corporate headquarters, branch offices, and upscale malls." Nearly 75 percent of the high job growth in Atlanta during the 1990s was in this part of the metro area, an area with limited or no public transportation access (Brookings Institute 2000). These jobs remain either inaccessible if one has no private transportation, or they necessitate private automobile use. So, although bus routes and stops in Cascade may be higher than or commensurate with those in the city, the relative lack of connectivity of Cascade public transit with other parts of the metro area is problematic.

Similar to Barr and Prillwitz's (2014) respondents, we also heard comments in both the focus groups and individual interviews about contemporary work schedules which inhibit carpooling. These conversations suggested that people's ability and/or willingness to adopt alternative transportation modes were not only a function of constraints tied to the built environment of public transportation, bicycle paths, or sidewalk connectivity, but also to the broader cultural and economic shift towards irregular business hours. The standard professional work schedule has been replaced with hectic and less predictable working hours that made

it much more difficult to schedule commuting times with neighbors. This move, in turn, contributed to more individualized commuting and greater reliance on individual transport. For instance, a woman who lived in an eastside suburban area and who worshipped at CUMC elaborated on life-style changes over the past forty years that interfered with people’s ability to develop definitive timetables for sharing commutes with others. One participant remarked that use of a private automobile was more than a matter of convenience but rather an act of conformity to demanding and hectic work schedules:

But it’s not just that [convenience]. . . . When jobs were 9 to 5, and they really were 9 to 5, then you could really do that [car pool], but when you have the craziness. . . .you know the way people have to work now. They have to be there at 8, and they are there ‘til 9. . . .You can’t wait on them.

A contrasting perspective was relayed by participants in the apartment complex focus group, only one of whom owned a car. They all depended on MARTA and/or family and friends for transportation to places outside of walking distance. These respondents said that MARTA provided a valuable service to those without private transportation options and that the services were convenient to their home. One woman in the group who worked a night shift in a hotel said that her choice of where to live depended upon her ability to conveniently access a MARTA route that operated later than 8 pm. Also, two women who attended the International Truth Center in Cascade said that they regularly ride MARTA without qualms but also cited its limited services in Midwest Cascade.

## Neighborhood walkability

The GIS mapping shows that, in absolute terms, the greatest amount of sidewalk acreage was in Cascade Heights, but sidewalk per square mile was highest in Cascade Avenue/Road (4.27) and lowest in Midwest Cascade (1.93) (Table 2). The western portions of the community have the lowest amount of sidewalk per area. When discussing challenges facing Cascade, some CUMC focus group respondents immediately pointed to the amount of traffic and the lack of sidewalks and bicycle trails in the community. In a one-on-one interview, a young single person who grew up in Cascade and currently lives there remarked on livable, sustainable communities, suggesting that ease of access to different places in the community via pedestrian zones helps to build community in mixed-income neighborhoods. This respondent said that issues affecting people’s daily lives like sidewalk availability for school children can be issues around which community members rally and relayed that the lack of sidewalks in Cascade is an issue that constantly comes up at Neighborhood Planning Unit meetings.

Others, when asked the same question about community challenges, exclaimed that the lack of sidewalks was “horrible.” One woman

commented that sidewalks in Cascade Heights and some parts of Cascade Avenue/Road were in good condition but as one moved closer to the city, the sidewalks were either ripped up or in disrepair. Alternatively, sidewalks located in the westernmost part of Cascade (Midwest Cascade) “disappear.”

In contrast to those who lived in Cascade Heights or Midwest Cascade, the apartment complex residents (Cascade Avenue/Road) said they routinely walked to shopping centers and other nearby restaurants and commercial outlets, but they also recounted the unpleasantness oftentimes encountered on the streets, for instance witnessing police raids or being harassed by homeless people. Vagrancy and verbal accosting were included in these respondents’ descriptions of east Cascade streets. One woman lamented (and others agreed): “we have a lot of homeless people walking the street *all* night long and all day long.” Early on in our discussion, these discussants voiced fears of engaging with strangers they saw while walking. A younger woman in this group who had recently moved from another part of the metro area said people kept to themselves. In response, another explained that such standoffishness was due to reservations people have of engaging those whom they do not know. The same participant related the story of a woman who lived in their complex, who was beaten and robbed while walking from the bus stop just in front of the complex to her apartment. Not surprisingly, respondents also emphasized that crime influenced where and how much they walked in the neighborhood.

*The apartment complex participants who had lived in Cascade for decades felt that the quality of people in the community had changed over the years*

The apartment complex participants who had lived in Cascade for decades felt that the quality of people in the community had changed over the years from those focused primarily on earning a living through honest work to those who had little or no ambition. The older women in the group said they would still “speak” to others on the street, that is greet them; however, they would go no further in attempting to acquaint themselves with strangers because they did not feel comfortable doing so. The following exchange occurred between group members: “. . .you walk to the store, and then you got all these people sittin’ around; they just got they lil’ chairs, and they just sittin’ around. . .yeah, like they at home! And they just gather together every day up there. . .; they bring they lil’ folding chairs, and they just sit up there every day. . .around the liquor store.” The women must pass by the liquor store on their way to the Kroger grocery store, about a quarter mile from their apartment complex.

When we visited Cascade, we observed more pedestrian traffic in east Cascade, compared to the outer residential areas. Most of these pedestrians seemed to walk with a purpose, as if they were headed to a particular destination, for instance women walking to and from Connally Elementary School, just off Cascade Avenue, to escort children. We also observed others who appeared more aimless in their traverse; and like the apartment dwellers mentioned, there was a shopping center not far from the complex where people, mostly men, gathered throughout the day. Certainly, the most insightful observation gleaned from our multiple visits to Cascade has to do with some residents’ fears of placing themselves

in public spaces. Similar to the apartment residents, we got the sense that in the Cascade Avenue/Road area, vagrancy and associated fears of deviant behaviors figured prominently in residents' perceptions of their immediate out-of-door space. These were spaces in which people situated themselves only if they were compelled to do so. The private automobile would seem to serve multiple purposes in this part of Cascade, not only as a means of transport but also as a shield against the volatility of the street.

In contrast to the eastside dwellers, participants who live in middle- and upper-income areas in Cascade describe nearby subdivisions where neighbors come together around summertime cookouts, home school organizations, and children's activities. These residents intentionally situate themselves in outdoor spaces around their homes with no seeming concern for crime. As well, when we observed at neighborhood parks farther to the west in Cascade Heights and engaged in conversations with recreationists, we noted a lack of defensive posturing. For instance, a group of tennis players spoke to the first author openly about the group's regularly scheduled tennis matches on Saturday mornings. The parks acted as a vetting source, it seemed. Those who were recreating there assumed that others were there to intentionally recreate, and this conferred a stamp of approval. The centrality of neighborhood parks was also emphasized in an interview with a recent Georgia Tech graduate who commented on the extensive recreational facilities and programming at the Adamsville Recreation Center, not far from Cascade and the John A. White Park, which helped to impart a sense of place when she was growing up. She and her brother attended camp and learned to play tennis and golf there; this woman describes the park as "huge for [her] in creating community."

## Conclusion

The topic of African American communities and climate change has begun to receive coverage in the popular black press as the realities of a changing climate become evident. *Ebony* online magazine featured an article by J. Marshall Shepherd, research meteorologist and past president of the American Meteorological Society, that made explicit connections between urban environments, African Americans, and climate change (Shepherd 2013). The *Ebony* feature suggests that climate change awareness is being brought to black audiences in familiar forums; but while the problem of climate change and African Americans has been identified, less effort has focused on climate-related, place-based studies involving black communities that also examine the potential for climate mitigation within those predominantly black places. Well-intentioned interest groups suggest generalized actions that ordinary citizens can adopt to help mitigate GHGs; two of these are discussed in this article—use of mass transit and walking. However, people's willingness or ability to integrate these prescriptions into their daily lives may be context dependent, as our examination suggests.

Participants suggested that place features influencing public transit use or walking vary according to where one lives in Cascade—whether in the older, denser blocks in east Cascade (Cascade Avenue/Road) where the apartment complex is located, or the sprawled residential areas containing middle- and upper-class subdivisions. The older sections appear more supportive of mass transit usage and walking, thus allowing for a smaller carbon footprint among residents there who make regular use of city buses and sidewalks. However, lower incomes also characterize these blocks, along with the place and social characteristics that often accompany lower-income neighborhoods—vagrancy, street harassment, high unemployment—features that inhibit people’s willingness to place themselves in public places. So, while lower-income residents may be more likely to use sidewalks because of higher population and building densities, their actual experiences on the streets are often marked by insecurities around personal safety.

Our data suggest that for middle-class African Americans living in Cascade and elsewhere in the metro area who have a greater choice in the selection of neighborhoods, sustainable mobility is secondary to other quality of life indicators such as proximity to other middle-income African Americans, schools, and neighborhood aesthetics, when making choices about where to live. The comfort and familiarity of living in a predominantly black community offers an appeal for a number of the middle and upper income respondents with whom we spoke. These respondents mentioned, repeatedly, some variant on the theme of locating in a Cascade neighborhood because of its reputation of being both distinctly African American and middle class.

The complexity of understanding African Americans’ responses to climate mitigation via sustainable mobility is underscored in this case study, given that the social practice of consumption as a determinant of mobility modes was a dominant theme among lower-income respondents but was less explicit (although not missing) in discussions with higher-income people. On the one hand, black people (who are more likely to be lower income) are already contributing to this aim, given the high numbers using mass transit. Again, however, the social practice of consumption can reveal much about African Americans’ underlying motives for behaviors, including sustainability initiatives. Importantly, differences in consumption and mobility by class within the African American population have yet to be theorized. Such a comparison provides a ripe point of departure for exploring factors influencing sustainable mobility in other predominantly African American communities, both in Atlanta and elsewhere in the U.S.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>From Shel Silverstein's 1974 children's book of poetry, *Where the Sidewalk Ends: Poems and Drawings of Shel Silverstein*.

<sup>2</sup>Cascade Heights is also the name of a subdivision in the community.

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