As the world turned its eyes to Atlanta, the host city of the 1996 Centennial Olympics, the city’s leaders were expecting the largest and most logistically complex Games in history. Atlanta sought to capitalize on the moment to show that “southern hospitality” could compete on the global playing field.

**Passing the Torch**
To support this world-class undertaking, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) appointed Urban Engineers to provide Project Management Oversight (PMO) of Atlanta’s public transportation system, which would have to accommodate two million visitors to the City during the 17 days of the Olympics. With throngs of people descending on the City, transportation agencies needed to ensure that they could provide “safe, timely, and cost-effective” transportation services. Bill Thomsen, PE, and Urban’s PMO Program Director, remembers the many challenges the 1996 Olympics posed to a decentralized city like Atlanta, “Integrating the Olympic transportation fleet into the existing transit system and managing increased traffic demands created significant hurdles for the Atlanta project.”

**World Class Initiative**
From its conception in the 1970s, the vision of bringing public transit to Atlanta involved coordination of funding from multiple agencies. Area voters authorized an agreement to form the Metro Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) and create 60 miles of new rail lines, 45 new rail stations, and 33,000 new parking spaces in Greater Atlanta. In 1991, Urban began providing PMO services to MARTA’s new, emerging, modern transit system. In the five years leading up to the Atlanta Games, the FTA again awarded Urban a contract to provide PMO services on the MARTA North Line projects. These projects provided critical spectator access to the primary Olympic venues and Atlanta’s central business district. Thomsen recalled, “The logistics of hosting the Olympics are akin to what one would expect for a city hosting roughly 60 Super Bowls.”

**North Line Expansion**
Urban’s detailed review of the schedule, cost, and quality elements of the $3 billion program provided the FTA with confidence that MARTA was spending the significant Federal funding match properly. Urban was involved in the demonstration projects for the $19 million Intelligent Transportation System (ITS), which included Vehicle Monitoring Systems, Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL), Intelligent Vehicle Highway System (IVHS), Variable Message Signs, and other emerging systems for coordinating traffic. The North Line, approximately 13 miles of the system, was the newest segment of the MARTA expansion program. The segment to Dunwoody Station was finished by June 1996, just in time for the visitors and athletes attending the Summer Olympics. Urban’s John Brach, PE, former Chief Engineer for MARTA, recalls the effort to ready the transportation system for the Olympic Games as, “a Herculean effort.” MARTA served as the backbone for transportation during the Olympic Games as Atlanta shut down much of its vehicular traffic.

**Gold Medal Finish**
Atlanta’s tremendous pride, excitement, and energy enabled the transit system to open a month ahead of schedule. The transit system carried approximately 17 million riders during the Games, and successfully transported the world’s athletes to their respective venues to compete for gold. Urban was honored to play its part.

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“Glycol-Eating Bugs”