

Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Keeping the Chattahoochee: Reviving and Defending a Great Southern River

By Sally Sierer Bethea

Keeping the Chattahoochee: Reviving and Defending a Great Southern River is 196 pages, with a preface, afterword and 32 chapters. There are also acknowledgments, a chronology, resources and references.

Sally Bethea was the founding director of the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, where she served from 1994 until her retirement in 2014. She lives in Atlanta.

This is the memoir of an advocate for a river, the Chattahoochee, which runs from the North Georgia mountains through Atlanta, then angles west to the Alabama state line. From there, it flows south where it connects with another river, the Flint, at the Florida line. It then becomes the Apalachicola River, which empties into the Gulf of Mexico.

Why would urbanists be interested in such a book? First, because rivers are important to cities. Second, because this river, the Chattahoochee, was so endangered when Bethea began her work. Third, because in telling her story Bethea has written a manual of effective advocacy.

Over a 20-year period Bethea figured out how to get Atlanta city government to take on a problem it absolutely did not want to deal with, its “disgusting, hazardous and shameful” fouling of the Chattahoochee. When she started, the city was content to pay millions of dollars in federal fines rather than to fix its pollution problems.

Over time Bethea outmaneuvered city hall, to the benefit not only of the river and communities downstream, but also the citizens of Atlanta. How did an outside advocate, with no government power, do this? Through publicity, public awareness, organizational skills, lobbying, political alliances—and a few well-chosen lawsuits. Also a bit of luck: A mayor, Shirley Franklin, came to office in 2002 with the vision and skills to organize and finance the cleanup that city hall had long resisted.



Bethea tells other stories in *Keeping the Chattahoochee*, about the decades-long “water war” between Georgia and two neighboring states, droughts that threaten the river and the city’s water supply, the tending of the Chattahoochee’s trout streams, and Bethea’s fraught tenure on the Georgia Board of Natural Resources, which oversees the state’s environmental protection efforts. She was “booted” from the board in 2007 because, she says, she asked too many questions.

Urbanists will find two parts especially interesting: How she built an effective advocacy organization, and how she used that organization to whipsaw the city into repairing its sewer and stormwater systems. And it’s important to note that Bethea’s organization, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, became more than a critic. During the Franklin administration, it partnered with the city in finding solutions. Mayor Franklin even wrote a blurb for the book, saying of Bethea: “She taught me, and many others who were skeptical, the importance of civic advocacy in solving what seem like intractable problems.”

And what were those lessons? First, it helps if you know what you’re talking about and can prove it. One of the first things the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper did was start taking samples of the river, so it could document pollution problems. Over time, this grew into an expansive monitoring effort. Today, the organization has more than 100 volunteers in its “neighborhood water watch” program, sampling more than 200 sites. It knows more about water quality in the Chattahoochee than the city, state or the federal governments, knows it sooner and has the test results to prove it.

Second, you must use your expertise to build credibility and public support. Reporters who wanted to know about the river’s problems turned to Bethea over the years because she could not only explain what was going on, she could show them. The Chattahoochee Riverkeeper bought a series of “patrol boats” that helped with sampling the river and, importantly, allowed her to show reporters the problems.

Third, she grew the organization, not only financially but in expertise and impact. One sign of growth: The first “patrol boat” of the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper was an Old Town canoe. Today, it’s a jet-drive motor boat that is perfect for navigating shallow waters.

Another sign: the number of volunteers who turn out for Riverkeeper events. In addition to the hundred-plus who sample the river regularly, the organization mounts massive clean-up efforts that attract a thousand or more volunteers. By Bethea’s reckoning, in its first 25 years, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper removed at least two million pounds of trash and tires from the river, its streams and lakes.

Fourth, you need allies. Her experience with the state Natural Resources Board notwithstanding, Bethea was good at turning adversaries into allies. One of her admirers was a construction company owner the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper had threatened to sue because his asphalt processing facility was polluting the river. Not only did he end the pollution, he offered use of his construction equipment to cleaning up a nearby trash dump that was also causing problems. (Chattahoochee Riverkeeper ended up giving the construction company a “community partnership award.”)

Fifth, it’s not enough to point out problems. You have to be part of the solutions. Once Atlanta had a mayor willing to fix its sewer and stormwater problems, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper worked with the city to find effective answers, even hiring its own engineering consultants to check the city’s plans and suggest improvements.

This became important because, once the problems with the sewers began moving toward solution, “neighborhood activists” emerged, demanding actions that might (or might not) have benefited their own areas but wouldn’t have helped the river or the rest of the city and were prohibitively expensive. Some demands were not even allowed under federal laws. It sometimes fell to Bethea to explain these things to citizens.

And what were the problems? Two massive ones. First, as in many cities, parts of the city had combined sewers and stormwater lines. This meant, in a storm, water rushing through the streets flowed into pipes connected to the sanitary sewer system. In a torrential rain, the volume would be so great that the combined lines would overflow directly into streams (and sometimes, incredibly, into parks). Result: Raw sewage would devastate streams, foul city parks and create health hazards.

Then there was the state of the city's entire sewer system, which had suffered from decades of underinvestment. In one year, early in the 1990s, the city suffered more than a hundred street and parking lot cave-ins, the result of sewer or stormwater pipes collapsing. Some were minor incidents; others were catastrophic. One sinkhole swallowed a hook and ladder fire truck; others took lives.

Bethea's contribution was pointing out that all these things were connected—the sewer cave-ins, the fouling of city parks, the abuse of the river, the threats to public health and the illegal polluting of the river. These were not isolated, freakish occurrences but came from the same source: the city's refusal to finance and rebuild its sewer system. Thanks to Bethea's longtime advocacy, when Mayor Franklin came to office, citizens were convinced and Franklin could find the political support to deal with the sewer problems.

After \$2 billion in infrastructure repairs financed by a special sales tax and higher water and sewer rates, has Atlanta solved its pollution problems? In the main, it has. As Bethea writes, "Monitoring data revealed that 99 percent of the volume of untreated sewage flowing into the river in the 1990s had been stopped."

There are occasional spills from the sewage treatment plant in northwest Atlanta that foul the river. (There were some in 2024 that caused the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper to threaten a lawsuit.) And with 2,000 miles of sewers in the city, there are leaks in some areas. But the volume of pollution is greatly reduced, and the city now takes its duty to protect the river—and public health—far more seriously.

The greatest problem today may be the city's water system. In recent decades, as the city spent billions to fix its sewer and stormwater problems, it has not invested enough in repairing water mains. One result: Atlanta suffers from about 500 leaks each year. One water main failure in 2024 was serious enough to collapse a street and cause a portion of the city to go without clean water for nearly a week.

If this doesn't sound like progress, Bethea's book may persuade you otherwise. She tells how bad things were 30 years ago, how difficult it was to get city officials to accept responsibility, and how great the change ultimately was. This, in a nutshell, is how reform works. Not quickly, not easily, not perfectly, but with results so great that it's impossible to imagine people ever tolerating the way things were.

When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group meets, we'll discuss Sally Bethea's book about saving the Chattahoochee River. And we'll look for ideas in this book that could make Urban Atlanta better.

Our meeting will be **March 5, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.** at **1788 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta GA 30307.**

There's more information about this discussion at the [Atlanta Urbanist Book Group website](#).

Preparing for the discussion

Here are some questions we'll consider in our discussion:

1. What are “big ideas” in this book that you think could work in Urban Atlanta (that is, Atlanta and its suburban cities)?
2. If these big ideas were adopted, how could they make Urban Atlanta better?
3. What are some obstacles that might prevent these big ideas being adopted in Urban Atlanta?
4. Are there things government officials, civic leaders, neighborhood leaders or citizens could do—collectively or individually—to overcome these obstacles?

How to get your copy of *Keeping the Chattahoochee*:

- You can download an e-book edition from the Amazon, Barnes & Noble or Apple websites.
- You can buy a hardback edition at [Virginia-Highland Books](#).
- You can borrow a copy from the [DeKalb County Public Library](#).