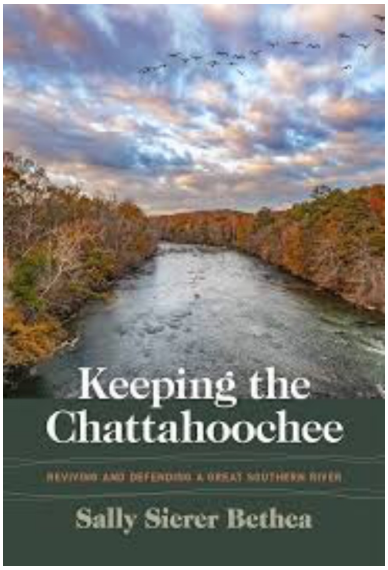
Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Keeping the Chattahoochee: Reviving and Defending a Great Southern River

By Sally Sierer Bethea

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on March 5, 2025 to discuss *Keeping the Chattahoochee: Reviving and Defending a Great Southern River*. Sally Bethea was the founding director of Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, an environmental organization, where she served from 1994 until her retirement in 2014.



This is an environmentalist's memoir that also serves as a guide for civic advocacy. In it, Bethea recounts her many efforts to protect the Chattahoochee River, which flows from North Georgia through the Atlanta region to the Florida state line. There it joins the Flint River to become the Apalachicola, which empties into the Gulf of Mexico.

The cause urbanists should focus on was Bethea's successful campaign to end the "disgusting, hazardous and shameful" fouling of the river by the city of Atlanta, mostly a result of sewer overflows during rainstorms. Bethea and her allies got city government to do something its leaders absolutely did not want to do: rebuild huge parts of its sewer and stormwater systems so untreated wastes no longer poured into the river.

How unwilling was the city to undertake this massive effort? Mayors were willing to pay millions in federal clean water fines rather than take on the task. In the end, Bethea and others left the city no choice but to undertake a $2 billion infrastructure rebuilding program that continues today.

In our discussion, we focused on the lessons that urbanists should take from Chattahoochee Riverkeeper's 20-year effort to change attitudes at city hall and move city government from evasion to acceptance of responsibility—and then to action.

Four Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are four big ideas drawn from *Keeping the Chattahoochee* that we think Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

1. The book makes clear why good advocacy is important and how it works. Good advocacy builds credibility through observation and research. It is persistent, finds creative ways of pointing out problems to citizens and leaders, creates alliances and makes friends easily, and is willing to work toward solutions.
2. The book also shows why good advocacy needs strong organizations. Chattahoochee Riverkeeper was effective because it was good at things like communications, volunteer management, fund raising, events, lobbying and media relations.
3. Riverkeeper's work was in service to a vision of a healthier river and a set of policies and improvements that could advance the vision. This is another hallmark of effective civic advocacy: It has clear goals and can explain why, if the goals are reached, life will improve for many people..
4. The book should leave readers wondering if the Riverkeeper approach to advocacy—through good practices, strong organization, clear vision and goals—could be used to advance other urbanist objectives.

Why Do These Things?

We think Urban Atlanta could benefit from more and better civic advocacy, using many of the practices that Chattahoochee Riverkeeper used. Here's why we think good advocacy is important:

- If we had more civic advocacy, it would improve quality of life for all citizens.
- It would have a particular benefit for low-income neighborhoods, which often suffer from problems that citizens elsewhere are not aware of. This was the case with stormwater overflows in the 1990s.
- When we have good advocacy, we bring new people into civic work. And having new people with new ways of thinking may help us see solutions and opportunities.
- In general, cities are better when more citizens are involved. Good advocacy organizations can be a gateway for citizen involvement.
- We need to know what causes change in cities, apart from businesses and the profit motive. We think having a strong advocacy culture is one way cities can change in positive ways.

What Are the Obstacles? What Are Our Strengths?

Even the most worthwhile efforts create opposition. So our members discussed some of the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- Urban Atlanta does not have a strong civic advocacy culture today. So there are not many models of good advocacy organizations.
- If a group feels strongly about a civic need, there are few places its organizers can turn to today for training and advice.
- The national mood of despair and cynicism makes it harder to rally citizens in support of good local causes. So does the endless cascade of distraction and division from Washington.
- We have a long-term decline in "social capital," as the book *Bowling Alone* documented in 2000. So the work of civic advocacy is doubly difficult today: First, convincing citizens to work together for any cause, then convincing them to do so for a particular cause.

Does Urban Atlanta have strengths that could help us with some of the obstacles? We discussed Urban Atlanta's strengths as well. Here are some:

- There is at least one good model of good advocacy: Chattahoochee Riverkeeper. And if we looked around, we might find others.

- When she was mayor, Shirley Franklin showed local government leaders how to work with good advocates (in this case, with Sally Bethea and Chattahoochee Riverkeeper). So while there aren't many examples of local governments working well with advocacy groups, there is at least one. If we looked around, we might find others.
- This book, which is set in Atlanta, is a useful guide for advocacy groups.
- We have assets that can help with good advocacy. First, our universities, which are good at credibility-establishing research. We also have Neighborhood Nexus, a research organization specifically established to track the region's wellbeing. And the city of Atlanta has its Neighborhood Planning Unit system. NPUs could become allies for good advocacy in years to come.
- There are new, mostly nonprofit media sources in Atlanta that could help with good advocacy in the future. They include Atlanta Civic Circle, Canopy Atlanta, Urbanize Atlanta and others. There are new organizations that could help as well, including the Center for Civic Innovation.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles and some impressive strengths. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming the barriers, using our strengths:

- We could get much better at defining good civic advocacy, understanding what helps some advocacy groups succeed, and documenting these successes. The aim should be to create a model for good advocacy.
- We need to help people build effective advocacy organizations. For 35 years, the Georgia Center for Nonprofits has helped people learn how to start and manage effective nonprofit organizations. Something similar that's focused just on advocacy organizations could help.
- We also need better ways of seeing problems that could use good advocacy. Perhaps one of the new nonprofit media could sponsor an annual event to identify civic issues that need advocates who follow the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper approach.
- In the end, we need talented leaders. Over time Sally Bethea became a good storyteller with a knack for creating allies. Our guess is that there are many such people in Urban Atlanta who just haven't met the right challenge yet.

A Synopsis of *Keeping the Chattahoochee*

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 Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, where she served from 1994 until her retirement in 2014. She lives in Atlanta.

As mentioned above, this is an environmentalist's memoir that walks us through her many efforts to protect the Chattahoochee River. Why would urbanists be interested in such a book? First, because rivers are important to cities. Second, because this river 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 did not want to deal with, its fouling of the Chattahoochee. When she started, the city was content to pay millions of dollars in federal fines rather than to fix its stormwater and sewer 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 protection 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.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define "urbanism" broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn't to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.