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Commission approves high-rises

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LAWRENCEVILLE - Commissioner Shirley Lasseter said Gwinnett Place Mall needs a shot in the arm.

With the unanimous approval made by the Board of Commissioners on Tuesday, the scheduled injection is now going to be coming courtesy of a \$150 million high-rise development project called "The Grand at Gwinnett."

"Let's hope this will bring a new start to that mall, the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District and to the county," Lasseter said in making her motion to approve. "Let's make it better than when the mall first opened."

According to Michael Sullivan, the attorney who represents The Grand, getting the two 25-story towers built could lead to a transformation in how the county's revitalization efforts are perceived by the development community with regards to high-rises.

"Not one of the two high-rise projects approved by this board have been built," Sullivan said. "Gwinnett County needs this kind of development, and this should be encouraged. Change is hard, but the status quo with regards to this property is not trending in the right direction."

The project, which was previously turned down by the BOC in 2006, will put the twin residential towers complete with 312 condominium units in the parking lot in front of the old Macy's building. Sullivan said the condo units would start at a price of around \$350,000 and could go as high as \$1 million. He also said the project and its "high-end residential development" is just the "prescription" the Gwinnett Place CID has been calling for as it attempts to revitalize the area around the mall.

"The crowds that used to flock to that mall have changed," Sullivan said.

The Grand at Gwinnett project only recently returned to the board's agenda after a court issued consent order directed the county to consider the case again.

Two of the mall's larger retail occupants - Sears and JCPenney - are opposed to the high-rise project.

According to Victor Moldovan, the attorney who represents Sears, because of the board's approved rezoning, all interested parties could be headed down the legal highway again soon.

"We're not opposed to development inside the ring, but this is in our parking lot," Moldovan said. "The project is not consistent with the use of the property."

Moldovan further stated that any development inside the mall's "Ring Road" might break existing covenants that have been in place since Sears bought the property back in the early 1980s. He also said his client was caught off guard by the speed at which the project moved through the county's planning and development cycle.

"It's not going to stop here if you approve it," he told the Board.