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## County budget cuts leave rights of way without landscaping

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Staff Photo: Jonathan Phillips

Vehicles travel on both sides of Old Norcross Road in Lawrenceville on Tuesday. The county and the state have cut funding for landscaping medians, shoulders and sidewalks, causing the frequency to reduce by half.

LAWRENCEVILLE - Cutting or reducing services has been a major topic of discussion in light of the state and county's budget woes.

At both levels of government, one reduction that's already in place has been cutting the number of mowing cycles on rights of way, which could be defined as the shoulders of grass alongside roads, the grass near and around sidewalks, and center medians in major roads that are often full of either grass or concrete.

With the rain Georgia's received this year, it's very noticeable driving through the county that a lot of grass in these rights of way hasn't been cut in awhile.

As part of the county's Service-Value-Responsibility project, which was conducted to determine where budget cuts could be made, it reduced its annual mowing to twice along road shoulders and three times along sidewalks and in center medians.

Prior to the reductions, the county mowed along the roads three to four times per year and six to 12 times per year on the sidewalks, Kim Conroy of the Gwinnett Department of Transportation said.

Conroy said the reductions amount to about half the mowing, depending on the number of cycles that were used.

In June, the state DOT said it would reduce its mowing cycle of the same from twice a year to just once per year, beginning July 1, assuming the grass was not so long that it made the road unsafe. In this type of instance, the DOT said it would "do safety mowing on an as needed basis to ensure critical roadway signage remains visible."

In that same news release, the DOT said it was "encouraging local governments and civic or community organizations to participate in efforts that support local beautification such as the Adopt-A-Highway and Keep America Beautiful programs that encourage organizations to assist in regularly scheduled litter pickup."

One of those community organizations that Gwinnett has three of are its community improvement districts, and they're all doing their part, as they always have, to keep their respective areas neat. One is even trying to take on more.

In the Gwinnett Village CID, Director Chuck Warbington said the organization currently maintains 12 miles of state rights of way and 14 miles of county rights of way with an annual landscaping budget of \$332,000. He said they also mow much more frequently than either the state or county would.

"From April to August, the CID performs weekly mowing, edging and litter pickup," Warbington said. "From September to March, the CID provides litter pickup every other week."

Warbington said keeping the business corridor looking tidy is important because "an area well kept begins to change the perception."

"The curb appeal of the area is the first impression of folks who live and work in the area as well as visitors," Warbington said.

He said his group is also trying to take over more mowing from the county by handling Brook Hollow Parkway and Oakbrook Parkway. He said this comes at the request of others in the area who've complained about the length of the grass on the medians.

"I have been getting phone calls from multiple businesses in the area," he said.

It's a similar story in the Evermore CID.

Interim Director Jim Brooks said on a \$123,000 yearly budget, the CID maintains the entire seven-mile stretch of U.S. Highway 78, from Ga. Highway 124 to the Stone Mountain entrance and that the corridor is checked frequently throughout the week, especially during the growing season.

He also said residents who travel the route beginning Oct. 15 will see the nearly \$2 million worth of landscaping and plantings going in as a result of the \$31 million U.S. Highway 78 road project that's been ongoing.

In the county's centrally located Gwinnett Place CID, Director Joe Allen takes pride in the fact that the organization has always maintained 10 miles of county rights of way and an additional two miles on Pleasant Hill Road and at Steve Reynolds Boulevard at Interstate 85, all on an annual budget of about \$196,000.

He said crews are out each Thursday and Friday and also provide litter pickup in the non-growing season.

He said from January through May this year, crews have filled nearly 1000 bags of litter.

"Since the beginning of the CID, our board has been focused on keeping the area clean and well maintained," Allen said. "If an area is free from trash, graffiti and illegal signs it shows visitors that the area has stakeholders committed to its continued success."