


**Win Free** **Movie Passes** **Sports Tickets** **& more**

**ajc.com**  
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

 **PRINT THIS**

 [Click to Print](#)

[EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

[ajc.com](#) > [Metro](#)

## Koreans find a home in Gwinnett

**Asian prosperity is taking root along I-85. A major retailer picks the county over New York or L.A. for its U.S. debut.**

By [Michael Pearson](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Sunday, May 03, 2009

The swirling circles and sharp lines on the signs outside The Shops at Pleasant Hill and Steve Reynolds shopping center would seem to make it plain as day that this isn't just another of Gwinnett County's newer strip malls.

But in many ways, it is.

There's the insurance agent, the law office, the CPA, the community bank branch. In other words, the kinds of businesses you'd find all over Gwinnett or metro Atlanta.

It's just that these businesses are owned by Koreans who, in most cases, are doing business with other Koreans who've made the Pleasant Hill Road corridor in Duluth the epicenter of the region's Asian economy.

While the recession has slowed the trend, a growing number of financial institutions and other businesses that have come to the area in the last year or so suggests to many locals that it's no more than a temporary slowdown.

So much so that the Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce continues to heavily court Asian businesses, especially Korean businesses, to expand here.

The chamber's vice president for economic development, Nick Masino, departed recently for what will be the first of two trips scheduled to South Korea in two months.

"We are still very positive on Korea, and we are very positive on China," he said.

And Koreans, especially, are very positive on the Gwinnett Place Mall area.

A recently built shopping and entertainment district on Satellite Boulevard is owned by Korean developers. Entrepreneurs backed by money from South Korea have taken over an entire vacant Wal-Mart shopping center for redevelopment. The major Korean retailer MegaMart chose Gwinnett Place Mall over more traditional Korean

communities in Los Angeles and New York for its entry into the U.S. market.

The county is also home to a Korean-language television station, radio station and some 10 Korean-language newspapers, including a daily.

And at least three Korean banks have opened in the area in the past year, said Joe Allen, executive director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District, a self-taxing business group created to help renovate what was once Gwinnett's pre-eminent retail and entertainment destination.

#### Magnet for investment

Unlike with the region's well-known multicultural hub along Buford Highway, it's not just minorities who are predominant investors in the Duluth area, noted Korean-American Chamber of Commerce of Georgia board member James Song.

An Alpharetta developer recently concluded construction on a project near Duluth heavily marketed to Asian retailers. Developer George Thorndyke owns the former Macy's into which MegaMart is moving and struck the deal to bring that retailer to Atlanta. He also is planning twin high-rise condos at Gwinnett Place said to be targeting urban Koreans comfortable and familiar with high-rise living.

There are no numbers on how much Korean companies, investors and entrepreneurs have invested in the area, and little good data on how many Koreans live here. Estimates range as high as 100,000, with as many as half living in Gwinnett.

But it's no mystery why Koreans have flocked to the area.

"The same thing that brought my parents here in the 1970s is the same reason the Korean, the Chinese, the Vietnamese communities are coming to Gwinnett County," Allen said.

'We want to contribute'

Joseph An, owner of the Chung Dam restaurant on Pleasant Hill Road, is a good case in point.

When his contract job as a project manager overseeing research and development at a California audiovisual firm ran out three years ago, he started looking for a place to relocate. He researched Korean communities in the U.S., and passed them over for Gwinnett for its well-regarded schools, a climate similar to Korea's and its access to I-85 — a more desirable interstate, An says, than I-75 because it runs toward coastal communities with Korean populations.

Businessman Soon Young Kim said there's something else about Georgia, which he's found friendly and welcoming, that makes him feel at home: the dirt.

It's red, just like at home, he said through an interpreter.

Koreans living in the area say they do feel some pressures and unwelcoming attitudes. Stephanie Ok Lee, a real estate agent who foresees Korean communities stretching up I-85 to Suwanee one day, said longtime white residents aren't always welcoming and harbor fears that Koreans are here to "take over."

She pulls a visitor out of lunch to look at a shopping center dominated by Korean businesses sporting signs rarely translated into English. But out front, she proudly points to an American flag.

"If they wanted to take over, don't you think that would be a Korean flag? We want to blend in," she said.

Kim went further.

He said he and many of his countrymates adore the U.S. for its aid to their country, its principles and its freedoms.

"We want to contribute," he said.

While crime has threatened the area's progress — several fatal shootings in recent months rattled residents and businesses alike — Song, the Korean chamber leader, said he expects Korean investment in the area to pick up next year. That should help the business community to be ready to capitalize on economic recovery he predicts will come in three years.

When it does, Song and others predict growing Korean influence in the area, with new major developments reshaping the landscape.

But it likely won't become anything like Koreatown in Los Angeles, a sprawling conglomeration of Korean businesses that visitors say can be intimidating for outsiders.


MegaMart, the Korean retailer expected to open later this year, is planning to have English-speaking staff and product information. Already Koreans, whites and others mingle at Super H Mart, one of several Asian-themed grocery stores in the area.

And traditional mainstream businesses such as Sears, J.C. Penney and McDonald's still outnumber ethnic businesses by a huge margin, Allen said.

"It may be a Korea town, but a multicultural one," Kim said.

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.ajc.com/services/content/metro/stories/2009/05/03/asian0503.html>

 [Click to Print](#)

[EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

**Win Free Movie Passes Sports Tickets & more**