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Lilburn betting CID will boost way of life

By Shane Blatt and Patrick Fox
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For restaurateur John Souter, Lilburn has a lot going for it. Prime location. Quality schools. Attractive homes.

But as a business destination, the Gwinnett County city of 11,500 has floundered amid outdated liquor and sign laws, said Souter, owner of Oyster Barn Grill & Bar off U.S. 29.

Those laws, which for a time even banned karaoke, led to a widespread impression that Lilburn's commercial core wasn't the place to start a business — or even frequent one, he said. And despite city-led efforts to relax ordinances and change perceptions, a cloud still lingers.

"Lilburn residents don't shop or eat out in Lilburn," he said. "They go to the Mall of Georgia [in Buford] and the Avenue [near Snellville]."

Commercial property owners such as Souter hope to turn things around with the formation of a community improvement district (CID) along U.S. 29, the city's main commercial artery.

Metro Atlanta already has 12 community improvement districts — areas where commercial property owners agree to voluntarily tax themselves to pay for improvements. Taxes collected primarily fund road upgrades, but over the years, CIDs have paid for beautification, public safety and other projects.

On Tuesday, the Lilburn district is expected to win Gwinnett County commissioners' approval to become the fourth CID in the county. The entire city sits within the proposed district's boundaries.

At least two other CIDs are in the works in the metro area: one in Sandy Springs, the other in southwest Atlanta. But neither is as far along as Lilburn's.

Although their sizes vary, each aims to relieve traffic congestion and spruce up their surroundings. The Sandy Springs group wants to transform

the hodgepodge of retail shops along Roswell Road into a more uniform-looking corridor. Southwest Atlanta business leaders want to focus on public safety in the Greenbrier Mall area.

Lilburn hopes to stimulate economic development from Jimmy Carter Boulevard to Ronald Reagan Parkway. It's a 6-mile swath of U.S. 29 that includes auto repair stores, clinics and aging shopping centers, where traffic snarls through a bevy of orange barrels and road construction.

To lure businesses and patrons, the Lilburn district hopes to begin its own work to widen the road and synchronize traffic signals; identify and promote an arts or sports venue; and link bus and light-rail transit with possible mixed-use development, where residents can live, work and shop.

"We're doing the legwork to upgrade the infrastructure so it will become an attractive location for future projects and businesses," said Gerald McDowell, executive director of the Lilburn CID, expected to be up and running by June 1.

Economic development is a relatively new theme among CIDs, said attorney Lynn Rainey, who represents 11 of them, including Lilburn.

Historically, they have focused on traffic and intersection upgrades, more recently expanding into streetscaping, public safety and even rail service, he said.

"CIDs are able to use their influence and their advocacy, along with some seed money that a city or county might not have, ... to get a project built that might not otherwise be built," he said. "I think CIDs at their base are economic engines."

The Cumberland CID, near Marietta, is the region's oldest with one of the biggest budgets.

Last year, it collected \$6.2 million in taxes from member property owners to support \$232 million in ongoing projects, including \$186 million in roads and \$24 million in streetscapes. Established in 1988, the Cumberland district was formed to relieve traffic choke points in the Cobb Galleria area at I-75 and I-285. It has since branched into land-use planning, said executive director Malaika Rivers.

The Evermore CID, spanning U.S. 78 from Stone Mountain to Snellville, devotes 20 percent of its \$1.7 million budget to economic development, said executive director Jim Brooks. One of its recent initiatives: trying to salvage the time-worn Olympic tennis stadium in Stone Mountain.

"The bottom line is ... to add value to those who own property or do business along the corridor," Brooks said.

On the other side of the county, the Gwinnett Village CID is studying light rail service along I-85, from Norcross to Gwinnett Arena in Duluth. Initial plans call for a 14-mile route with nine stops, including Gwinnett Place mall, the epicenter for the county's bus transit.

In Sandy Springs, Realtor Wanda Buckley Morganstern is heading a drive to explore a new CID along the Roswell Road corridor between I-285 and Abernathy Road.

Unlike districts in Buckhead and Midtown, peppered with high-rises and a considerable income stream, the Sandy Springs district would be dominated by small retail strip centers. While plans are still being drawn, Morganstern said the district would look into aesthetic upgrades and explore ways to "calm" traffic.

"We're in the process of envisioning what we want," she said. "What do we want the main street, the city center of Sandy Springs to look like? And do we want to form a CID to make that happen?"

An effort is also under way among southwest Atlanta business owners to create a district. Early last year, Atlanta City Councilman H. Lamar Willis introduced legislation to establish the authority, which would include the Camp Creek Marketplace, Greenbrier Mall and Tyler Perry Studios.

"The economic capacity is here to sustain good, strong retail development," he said.

Willis is talking with other property owners and Atlanta leaders to move the plan forward. He said he would like to implement a program similar to Downtown's Ambassador Force, which though not a police force, offers some measure of security. Most importantly, he said, a CID would offer a full-time watchdog, an agency targeting high-crime areas and code violations such as trash.

For Lilburn, the district's formation marks the culmination of a four-year effort to shed a less-than-savory business image, city and community leaders said.

"It was sort of like a light bulb went on that we've got to do something," said Thor Johnson, president of the Lilburn Business Association. "I lament it didn't happen sooner, but it is happening."

Three years ago, Lilburn formed a downtown development authority to promote commercial growth. Last year, the city amended its sign laws to allow for larger signs and electronic message boards. And since an alcohol review board was created in September 2008, the city has changed its liquor laws. Now folks can sing in the pubs and drink in the park (during special events).

"We've turned a corner," Mayor Diana Preston said. "I've heard people say they were thinking about moving away from Lilburn, and they've changed their mind."

Gwinnett Community Improvement Districts

Evermore (Snellville area)

Established: 2003

Commercial property owners: 469

2009 tax revenue: \$910,000

Major projects:

- Study to determine long-term viability of Olympic tennis stadium in Stone Mountain
- Addition of almost 15 miles of sidewalks along both sides of U.S. 78 corridor
- Installation in October or November of pedestrian bridge at Yellow River

Gwinnett Place (Duluth area)

Established: 2005

Commercial property owners: 187

2009 tax revenue: \$1.3 million

Major projects:

- Traffic Signal Timing and Optimization Program, which regularly monitors and synchronizes traffic signals at 45 intersections. Last year, the program accounted for a 45 percent decrease in stops along Pleasant Hill Road
- Gwinnett Place TAD, passed last year, which is expected to triple the taxable property value within its borders to \$607 million over the next 15 years

Gwinnett Village (Norcross area)

Established: 2006

Property owners: 550

2009 tax revenue: \$2.1 million



Major projects:

- Landscaping at Jimmy Carter Boulevard, Indian Trail and Beaver Ruin Road — \$825,000

- Double-digit crime reduction from 2007 to 2009 — \$1 million

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