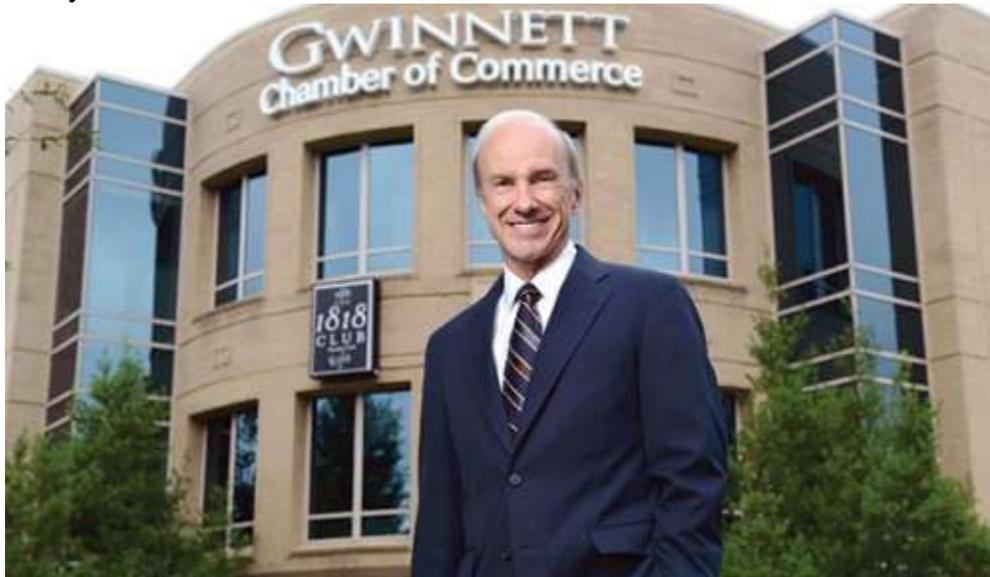


Gwinnett County: The Future Is Now

Celebrating diversity, opportunity

Randy Southerland



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In Gwinnett County, they have looked into the future and found that it's already here.

"Gwinnett is the prototype of America 2040," says new Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Dr. Daniel Kaufman. "We already look like America 2040, and we have the opportunity to show them how to do it right."

By that year the United States is projected to become a "majority minority" country. Whites will no longer hold an absolute majority. Instead most citizens will belong to one or another ethnic or minority group. That day arrived in Gwinnett with the last U.S. Census. About one of every five residents was born outside of the U.S., and some say more than 100 different languages and dialects are spoken here.

Kaufman traded the presidency of Georgia Gwinnett College for the chamber's top post after his predecessor Jim Maran retired. In the job since July 1, he has been pushing a vision of a vibrant diverse community in which all elements of society, regardless of ethnicity or background, have the opportunity to succeed educationally and economically.

"Diversity is a fact, not a theory or a policy," he explains. "So we have to think strategically as a community and ensure that all parts of the county – be they white, African American, Hispanic, Asian or whatever – are included in the development of that common vision."

Making that vision a reality will mean providing access to both employment and education. Fortunately for local residents, the county has been uncommonly successful in both areas. It has one of the best public school systems in the nation and a selection of colleges ranging from the practical, such as Gwinnett Technical College, to the highly specialized – the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine.

With a strong business environment and diverse workforce, the county is finding it easier to attract the increasing number of jobs that will be needed. The chamber's role will be working to bring more companies to the area, while providing re-sources entrepreneurs and small business owners can use to build their own enterprises.

So far those efforts are bearing fruit.

“In the last year we've just been humming along,” says Nick Masino, the chamber's senior vice president of economic development.

In fact, the county's economic development effort can best be compared to the proverbial well-oiled machine. Since the 2006 launch of Partnership Gwinnett, which Masino also heads, the county has led the state in job growth and achieved one of the lowest unemployment rates in the Metro Atlanta area.

In its first five years, the organization helped foster 282 corporate relocations and expansions, more than \$808 million in total reported capital and more than 12,000 new jobs.

Good Decisions

Although the news has not been good for everyone, activity has clearly picked up recently at all levels of the economy.

“We are seeing some new permitting activity, and we've had some good decisions by businesses related to either location or expansion in the county,” says Gwinnett County Commission Chair Charlotte Nash. “For example, the decision by Primerica to build a new campus in the county rather than going somewhere else – that was a big win that we celebrated.”

Back in 2011, locals cheered when Primerica, the largest independent financial services marketing company in North America, announced that it was not only staying in Gwinnett, but would also build a new international headquarters in the county.

In May of this year, company officials joined state and local leaders to formally open the 365,000-square-foot facility that now houses 1,600 of the company's 1,700 Gwinnett-based employees and has the capacity for an additional 200 people. The newly constructed facility, located in the Duluth area, consolidates Primerica's operations into one three-story building that company officials say will streamline business operations and enhance logistical efficiencies.

With a good quality of life and a strong base of companies both domestic and international, Gwinnett has been attracting a steady stream of corporate headquarters. In addition to the

Primerica facility, RockTenn and FedEx Ground have expanded in recent years. Cavanna Packaging USA, Inc. and Ricoh Electronics added both jobs and space to their operations. Mitsubishi Electric Cooling & Heating built a 550,000-square-foot expansion of its HVAC America's headquarters, R&D, training center and distribution center in Suwanee. Then there's Hyundai Construction Equipment Americas, which moved its North American headquarters and warehouse facility to Norcross from Chicago.

Site-Seeing

Locals are also hoping the magic will finally take hold at one of the county's most underutilized pieces of land – the OFS site along I-85 and Jimmy Carter Boulevard. Over the years a series of large-scale projects – including most recently a \$1-billion gambling complex – have been floated, often to great fanfare, with disappointing results.

Now all eyes are on a proposal by Atlantic Station developer Jim Jacoby for a movie studio that would anchor an extensive mixed-use development of office, residential, retail and even a film school.

“It's coming along very fast,” says Chuck Warbington, executive director of the Gwinnett Village Community Improvement District and a veteran of talks on several failed projects for the site. “What we're seeing there is a coalescing of folks who have said that this is ground zero when you begin to look at the location in Metro Atlanta that can outreach all of the major parts of Georgia.”

The Jacoby plan includes a 400,000-square-foot state-of-the-art studio with a dozen sound stages designed to serve Georgia's growing film industry. The studio's location, within easy drives of lakes, mountains, quaint small towns and other on-location sites, should be a strong attractor for film crews, according to Warbington.

(The CID is already working on a bridge replacement and a congestion-relieving Diverging Diamond Interchange near the proposed development at the I-85/Jimmy Carter Interchange – similar to improvements in place in the Gwinnett Place CID, just up the road.)

“Coupled with the fact that the existing site has a building that is 500,000 square feet with large ceiling heights, large bays with regards to column width that makes it perfect for a sound stage,” he explains. “Without a lot of work, the shell and the structure is already there.”

In the mix is an arts and media education school to produce trained personnel for the industry and reduce the need for transporting technical personnel into the city for movie shoots.

“They have to import all the workers from all over the U.S.,” says Warbington. “There was a new movie being made here that was scouting hotels to bring 200 employees that would be here for six months. The idea of having a school where you would be training folks over a period of time to work in that industry is another big win for the producers and companies that are looking at the site.”

Media is already big business. According to reports, there are more than 150 motion picture, video and sound recording businesses already based in Gwinnett.

Revitalization of existing business sites is a major emphasis throughout the county. In the heavily traveled area around Gwinnett Place Mall, the goal is to make getting around easier, according to Joe Allen, executive director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District.

Here, the centerpiece of traffic improvement is another Diverging Diamond Interchange, the county's first, which opened on Pleasant Hill Road and I-85. It actually shifts vehicles to the opposite side of the road to improve flow for the more than 50,000 vehicles that travel it every day.

"I think these traffic im-provements will help to spur the redevelopment of the area," says Allen.

The new interchange has already improved drive times, according to Allen – good news for the mall, which has been looking for a new owner since Simon Properties gave up on it.

"We're hoping for a redevelopment," says Allen. "We see things beginning to point in that direction – once a new owner is found. We view this as Gwinnett's central business district, and it's still a very strong, economically viable location."

The CID is laying the groundwork for what Allen believes will be a different kind of development in the future. While about 40 percent of the CID is now paved for parking, the goal is to create denser, more pedestrian-friendly mixed-use development. In the years to come, there will likely be more housing, including condos and apartments.

The Gwinnett Place CID, along with other areas of the county, has more tools to use in attracting businesses. Along with roads, local governments are experimenting with creating opportunity zones that will provide tax incentives for new businesses to add jobs.

In the first few months of operation, the Gwinnett Place Opportunity Zone helped attract Bellingham, Mass.-based National DCP LLC, the exclusive sourcing, purchasing and distribution partner for Dunkin' Donuts restaurants. The firm moved its corporate office here, along with 125 jobs.

"We'll pursue other [opportunity zones] when the time is right," says Allen. "We need a couple more wins under our belt, and then we can go back to the state and say 'Yes, it's working.'"

(The county's other opportunity zone is in the Gwinnett Village CID.)

Enhancements

Nearby Lilburn has the newest CID in the county and is also helping get transportation projects off the ground. Its focus has been on improving traffic along the Highway 29 corridor. A Living Cities Initiative study identified a series of projects that would improve the area, including the

building of a 16-mile, multi-purpose trail system at a cost of approximately \$15 million. The city had already begun building its own network of greenway trails that could be connected with the CID's efforts.

Throughout the county you hear stories of how local cities and communities are making the best of the resources they have rather than wishing they had more.

“We're trying to build an environment that supports small business owners and those that want to start a business,” says Eric Van Otteren, economic development manager in Snellville.

Outside of a few small manufacturing outfits, the city doesn't have an industrial base. Most of the economy, in fact, can be found in the dense retail presence along Highway 124. This stretch of roadway generates about \$1 billion in sales annually – almost as much as the Mall of Georgia, according to Van Otteren.

The goal here is to foster small business and make it easier for entrepreneurs to make ideas into reality. And when he says entrepreneurs, he means business folks of any age. Along with a support organization for adults, quite a few moneymaking enterprises have come out of the Young Entrepreneurs Academy at South Gwinnett High School. (See sidebar, page 46.)

The chamber has also sought to foster small businesses throughout the county. Partnership Gwinnett and the Gwinnett Chamber Economic Development effort sponsor an annual small business plan competition – The Amazing Entrepreneur. The winners snare recognition, cash and a variety of services including legal consulting from a business attorney.

This year's winner, Palmetto Grant Consulting, found success through unique value adds to its core grant writing services.

“We realized that we would meet with clients and say you have to have all these pieces, documents before you're grant-ready, and a lot of these folks were not grant-ready,” says Susan Bacon, founder and president of Palmetto Grant Consulting. “So we still kept our core services of grant writing, but we added support services to help our clients.”

She expanded her company's services to include strategic planning, board development, program evaluation and helping clients prep for site visits from funders. After the grant proposal is written, the company follows up with grant management services as well.

Municipalities

Gwinnett leads the state in the number of municipalities – 16, counting the newly incorporated city of Peachtree Corners. The relationship between these entities has not always been an easy one. A few years ago, the county was locked in a legal battle with cities over the costs of providing services such as police and fire. The suit was settled by allowing property owners to opt out of certain service districts and not pay county property taxes for services provided by the county.

When Peachtree Corners became Gwinnett's 16th city this year, it meant another drop in revenues for the county.

"It had a large impact on us," says Nash. "Larger than many people thought it would have related to revenues. There are a number of revenues that we were receiving previously that now will be going to the new city, while at the same time that city is only providing three services."

Along with its new status, the city also greeted a new employer – 4P Therapeutics, a transdermal research and development company, opened its new headquarters in an 8,000-square foot space, with plans to expand an additional 5,000 square feet later.

Community Snapshot

Local Leaders

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Population (2012)
842,046

Per Capita Income (2011)
County, \$27,988
Georgia, \$35,217

Unemployment (May 2013)
County, 7.4 percent
Georgia, 8.5 percent

Top Employers

Gwinnett Medical Center, Cisco Systems, Fiserv, Primerica Financial Services, NCR Corp.

Source

U.S. Census Bureau, Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce, Georgia Department of Labor