

Commissioners interested in possibilities of \$85 million Gwinnett Place CID plan

Funding for full project remains an issue though

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Some Gwinnett County commissioners expressed interest in plans for a major overhaul of the Gwinnett Place Mall area during a presentation on Tuesday, but funding the estimated \$85 million price tag left officials scratching their heads.

Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District Joe Allen talked to the commissioners about the details of the district's ACTivate Gwinnett Place master plan. His presentation was a follow up to another speech he made to county leaders last week during a tour of Commission District 1.

The plan includes streetscape improvements, a bellline-esque grand promenade, waterfront recreation areas, an amphitheater, walking trails which connect the mall to McDaniel Farm Park and a massive roundabout-like traffic circle — with a park in the middle — at the intersection of Pleasant Hill Road and Satellite Boulevard.

"I find the plan very appealing in terms of what has been presented," Commission Chairman Charlotte Nash said. "It certainly makes totally good sense to create an easy connection to McDaniel Farm Park ... So much of what is being proposed is totally logical. As always, it's a matter of finding the dollars to make it happen, but it's progressive and not out of reach for most of these things to be done."

Funding for the full project will be the largest obstacle facing implementation of the ACTivate Gwinnett Place plan, and it's not clear who will pay what to make it a reality.

Many parts of the plan require partnership between the county and the CID, particularly on transportation-related projects. Although they have partnered in the past to fund projects in the district, such as the Pleasant Hill Road diverging diamond interchange, it remains to be seen how much each side would be looking at putting up.

Allen said it will take as long as 10 years to see the full ACTivate Gwinnett Place plan become a reality. The goal is to create a "game-changer" that will attract developers to the mall area with plans of introducing mixed-use redevelopment projects along Pleasant Hill Road and Satellite Boulevard.

Data compiled by the CID shows an estimated 248,000 people live within a five-mile radius of the mall. An estimated 59 percent of those residents are young people from the Generation X and Millennial generations which development planners tend to pursue more heavily than older generations.

Allen said he has met with about 24 developers in the region who he said have told him they want to see something happen to push the area forward. Their knowledge of the mall area has been shaped by activities at mall, including changes of ownership and store closings, he said.

"One thing they did say is, 'Gwinnett Place needs a game-changer to continue to move the area forward,'" Allen told commissioners. "We asked them, 'What does that mean?' (They said) 'Well, we need to see something, either at the mall or something else in the area. What's the game plan for the area?'"

"The good news is, because of working with you, we have that game plan, that game-changer that can move the area forward," he added.

There are five targeted sites the CID is pushing for redevelopment, including the mall, the Mall Corners shopping center, the Prado, Santa Fe Mall and Pleasant Hill Square. All of them are located around the area where improvements would be made under the ACTivate Gwinnett Place plan.

Some parts of the CID's plan, such as streetscaping work and improvements along Gwinnett Place Drive and Mall Boulevard, are already in the early stages of coming to fruition. Allen said requests for proposals have gone out on the planned streetscaping and road improvement work and are due next Monday.

Other requests for proposals, which will look at the scope and feasibility of the roundabout-like traffic circle at Pleasant Hill Road and Satellite Boulevard, as well as a bridge that will connect the mall and McDaniel Farm Park, are due Oct. 1.

Although the overall price tag is big, those projects come with smaller price tags that are easier to work with. Allen expected the streetscaping work to cost about \$3 million and other work on Gwinnett Place Drive and Mall Boulevard is expected to cost about half of that.

"There's a lot that can be done quickly, that doesn't cost a lot of money," Allen said. "That's why we're issuing some of these RFPs, just to start the process ... We actually know what we want to see on the streetscaping and what we want to see with the improvements on those two roadways.

"Let's just go ahead and get the construction plans set and ready to go, and pass that along to the folks here at the county to help us implement," Allen added.

Other components — namely the traffic circle and the bridge to McDaniel Farm Park — are long-term plans which Allen admitted need further studying before they can become a reality, which means it may be years before residents see them built.

Commissioner Lynette Howard told improvement district officials that she "loved" the work they have already done to improve the mall area, and that she agreed with plans to tie the area together with walking trails and connections to McDaniel Farm Park.

"The sidewalks and everything are just beautiful and I think that tying everything together with the green space — looking at all the redevelopments we've seen across the country, that's what they have," Howard said.

Money is needed to make it all happen though. Gwinnett Place CID board member Mark Williams admitted funding will be an issue, but he added the district's leaders are determined to seek out whatever path they need to bring it to fruition.

"We've got the will," Williams said. "We've just got to find a way to get there."

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