

PUBLIC, PRIVATE INITIATIVES HAVE GWINNETT COUNTY 'POISED TO TAKE OFF'

ATLANTA — Gwinnett County in metro Atlanta is flush with opportunity for commercial real estate investors and developers. The county boasts the most diverse demographic makeup in the entire Southeast and is one of the 20 most populous counties in the country, with 890,000 residents. The county has grown by 250,000 in the past 10 years.

Within the county is Gwinnett Place, a district situated off Pleasant Hill and I-85 that supports 2.5 million square feet of Class A office space, 15.7 million square feet of industrial space and 7.7 million square feet of retail space. Anchored by the once-bustling Gwinnett Place Mall, the district's retail market has a 93 percent occupancy rate. The mall was recently taken out of receivership, and the new owner — Moonbeam Capital — is positioning the mall for a major turnaround.

The office market's occupancy rate currently hovers at 81 percent, but the county is home to two companies in the Fortune 500 — AGCO Corp. and Asbury Automotive — as well as regional mainstays like Waffle House. NCR Corp. is still headquartered in Duluth, but the tech firm, also in the Fortune 500, announced its plans in January to move its headquarters to Midtown Atlanta's Tech Square. Despite NCR's departure, the Gwinnett Place district remains an attractive draw for top office, retail and industrial tenants.

"Gwinnett Place is the central business district of the most dynamic community in the Southeast," says Robert Long, economic development director of Gwinnett County Planning & Development. "We are moving the needle to keep that area moving forward in the coming years."

PointOne Holdings, a South Florida-based commercial real estate investor, owns Gwinnett Commerce Center, the largest Class A office building in Gwinnett County. David Garfinkle, principal of PointOne Holdings, says the amount of interest from Asian-American companies in the office building has been substantial because Gwinnett County has the largest concentration of Korean-Americans in the United States. The international interest also stems from a diversified economy, which is what attracted PointOne to Gwinnett County in the first place.

"We're based in South Florida, so why are we deciding to buy properties in Gwinnett and Atlanta? Because Atlanta has a real economy," says Garfinkle. "In Atlanta, there are 18 Fortune 500 companies based here and more than 750 of the Fortune 1000 are here. That shows real economic growth. Those are the companies that are going to be around when times get bad."

Infrastructure Improvement

Garfinkle's comments came during "The Future of Gwinnett County Commercial Real Estate" discussion held on Tuesday, Aug. 25 at the Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough LLP office in Atlantic Station. Joining Long and Garfinkle on the panel was Joe Allen, executive director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District (CID). Andy Litvak, a partner at Nelson Mullins, moderated the discussion, which touched on what economic developers are doing to drive growth in Gwinnett County.

Gwinnett County Planning & Development and the Gwinnett Place CID have been hard at work beautifying the district, which hasn't escaped the attention of the commercial real estate community.

"If you see a combination of a pro-economic quasi government advocacy and diversity, usually that leads to dynamism," says Garfinkle. "It's reflected in the tenant mix of Gwinnett Commerce Center. It's an area that's poised to take off again."

The county boasts the Gwinnett Place CID, three Opportunity Zones, 10 Tax Allocation Districts and 18 Less Developed Census Tracts, which help to facilitate new construction in the area and keep the county competitive from an incentive standpoint.

"The goal of incentives is to make a good deal better, and position Gwinnett to be competitive with other entities in metro Atlanta or in neighboring states," says Allen.

In addition to incentives, one of the highlights of the work done to improve the overall experience in Gwinnett Place was the development of the county's first diverging diamond interchange at Pleasant Hill and I-85. There are also five intersection improvement projects underway in the district.

"We now have a complete game plan, we've identified where the needs are in terms of transportation, whether it be sidewalks, transit, bridges or intersections," says Long. "Because of the partnership between the CID and the county the past two years, millions of dollars in new investment has come back into the area."

The Millennial Effect

Gwinnett County is an 890,000-person market and is expected to eclipse 1 million residents by 2030. There are roughly 31,200 Millennials who live in Gwinnett County, and about 18,500 Millennials work in the county every day. Within the broader 10-mile market area, there are roughly 294,000 Millennial residents.

Gwinnett County and the Gwinnett Place CID are hoping to leverage the work they've done to beautify the area the past few years with new mixed-use projects that can attract the Millennial demographic.



The panel included, from left, Robert Long of Gwinnett County Planning & Development, Joe Allen of Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District, David Garfinkle of PointOne Holdings and Andy Litvak of Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough LLP.



Long speaks about Gwinnett's infrastructure during "The Future of Gwinnett County Commercial Real Estate" discussion on Tuesday, Aug. 25 in Atlanta.

"One of the things that Gwinnett has done great with since the 1980s is that we do cul-de-sacs and subdivisions really well," says Long. "We have great school systems and we're not trying to take away from that. However, when you talk to the young work force, they want that live-work-play model where they can walk to work and walk to dinner with friends. Right now, those options are fairly limited in Gwinnett."

One such development is Sugarloaf Market, a 31-acre mixed-use project located at the intersection of Sugarloaf Parkway and Peachtree Industrial Boulevard in Duluth. Atlanta-based Fuqua Development and The Worthling Cos. have begun construction on the project, and upon completion, Sugarloaf Market will feature 75,000 square feet of retail space and 330 upscale apartment residences. Anchored by Sprouts Farmers Market, the re-

tail portion of the development will be leased to Chipotle Mexican Grill, Orangetheory Fitness, Zoe's Kitchen, RaceTrac, Waffle House and AT&T. The retailers are expected to open for business in spring 2016.

In addition to new mixed-use developments, cities within Gwinnett County are being proactive in establishing a more walkable, community friendly landscape in their downtowns. In Suwanee, the Town Center mixed-use development provides a workable model that other cities are looking to. Town Center encompasses more than 100,000 square feet of retail space, 87,000 square feet of office space, 147 townhome and condominium units, 85 single-family homes and the 10-acre Town Center Park. The project is also home to Suwanee City Hall.

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