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FEATURED

## Gwinnett Prado site may be added to Venture Drive overlay district

By Curt Yeomans

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Gwinnett County's officials are optimistic that an expansion of the Venture Drive Redevelopment Overlay District will bring the spark they've been looking for to revitalize the area around Gwinnett Place Mall .

The proposed expansion would add a triangle bordered by Satellite Boulevard, Pleasant Hill Road and Old Norcross Road to the district, which was created in late October. The expansion means the overlay district will now be made of two catty-cornered blocks that share a common corner at the intersection of Pleasant Hill and Satellite.

The move is cause for excitement among local officials. That's because they believe one particular project on the drawing board may benefit from the expansion: the 32-acre Gwinnett Prado redevelopment.

"The folks who are looking to redevelop the Prado had shown interest in the Venture Drive Overlay from the very beginning," Gwinnett Planning and Development Director Kathy Holland said. "But because of timing and variations in their plan, they had been looked at going through the rezoning process for a mixed-use development."

The county's Planning Commission recommended approval of the expansion Wednesday night, but final approval will have to come from the Board of Commissioners, which will take it up later this month.

The overlay district's guidelines were designed to encourage denser and taller urban redevelopment projects, with property owners given carte blanche to build structures as tall as they want to make them.

County officials have always viewed the overlay district as a game changer for the area around the mall to bring back some of the luster it lost when newer activity centers, such as the Mall of Georgia and Sugarloaf Mills, opened.

The block being added to the overlay district includes the Gwinnett Prado shopping center, as well as the GW Marketplace shopping center and several other, smaller properties.

The chance to add the Prado shopping center property, which was bought by new owners earlier this fall with the intention of being redeveloped, has built enthusiasm for what the district can accomplish, however.

"We're still looking for the first catalyst project in the overlay district to show that it is feasible, to show what can be done in this area, and we're hoping through the expansion of the overlay district, we can more quickly get to that first project," Gwinnett County Planning Manager Jerry Oberholtzer said.

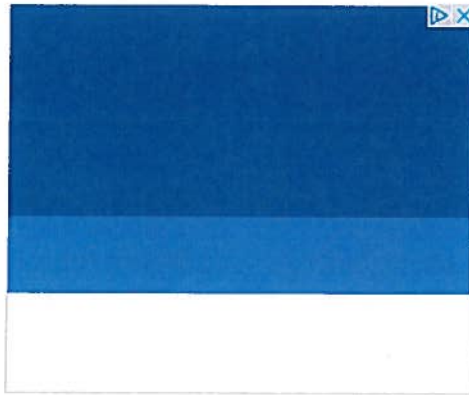
Although the district was approved more than a month ago — and word that it was being planned had gotten out several months before that — Holland said there hasn't been a rush of developers breaking down the county's doors with proposals for the site.

That could mean adding the block that includes the Prado site to the district might be an important move for the area.

"I haven't had anyone come to me or my department with a plan," Holland said. "With that being said, most of those property owners in that area are excited about it so that's why I'm hoping that if we get something happening in that area soon, then they'll jump on the bandwagon."

Holland said the Prado site's new owners have not yet submitted formal plans for review by county

staff, but she said some conceptual designs have been shared with county staff.



Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District Executive Director Joe Allen said the owners plan to tear down the vacant buildings on the property — occupied spaces, such as the Great Wall Supermarket, would stay — and replace them with new denser and urban uses, such as residential buildings and green space.

The Prado property's new owner, Chaz Lazarian, told local business leaders in early October that they see the redevelopment including some new commercial and hotel components as well to make it more attractive to millennials.

Being added to the Venture Drive Redevelopment Overlay District would provide another tool to use to reinvent the site, according to Allen.

"This gives them greater flexibility in what they can do," he said.

Planning Commission Chairman Chuck Warbington said expanding the district is also a good move, due to the fact that he has long felt the district's footprint should be bigger. He echoed Oberholtzer's sentiments that bringing in that block may help spur redevelopment throughout the rest of the district.

"I'm excited to see that we're venturing out a little bit with this overlay to incorporate a potential project ... and I hope that we'll be able to expand it over to the next block as well for the catalyst," Warbington said. "I think this is a very positive step toward the positive changes that we're going to be seeing in that Gwinnett Place Mall area."

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