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FEATURED

Big plans in place for Gwinnett Place redevelopment

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A shopper walks out of Gwinnett Place Mall near Duluth on Monday. County and Gwinnett Place Community Improver on redevelopment and traffic improvements in the area around the mall in an effort to revitalize the area. (Staff Photo: Curt Yeomans)

Like many aging shopping areas around metro Atlanta, the Gwinnett Place area is fighting to survive in a world where stores have to not only fight competition from nearby commercial districts but also from the online realm.

The mall that gives the area its name, as well as many of the shopping centers that surround it on streets such as Pleasant Hill Road, Satellite Boulevard, Venture Drive and Steve Reynolds Boulevard, date back to the 1980s. Despite the area's age, however, Commissioner Jace Brooks said it remains vitally important in the eyes of county leaders.

During the commission's recent planning retreat, Brooks told his colleagues and county staff that his main goal is to get an action plan put together and approved for redeveloping the area within the next year.

"The board is unified in the Gwinnett Place area and the redevelopment of that area is a top priority," Brooks told the Daily Post on Tuesday. "It hasn't changed for us over the last few years. It's still the same. It's still a top priority. It's just that redevelopment is tough, and because it's difficult, it's slow. It takes a while to do some of these plans."

The county and the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement district, as well as some individual business owners in the area, are working on several projects to revitalize the area around the mall. Among those efforts is the CID's ACTivate Gwinnett Place master plan and the county's work on establishing the Venture Drive Redevelopment Overlay District.

"To me, (the vision of the future) is it's walkable, it's sustainable, it's green, it has density," Gwinnett Place CID Executive Director Joe Allen said. "It is truly a central business district."

Studies and plans for the area

The overlay district in particular is intended to dramatically revamp the area south of Pleasant Hill Road, across from the mall, by encouraging development of high-rise buildings. The area is currently filled with one-story shopping centers, such as Mall Corners and the Santa Fe Mall.

"We're looking to get some height, some presence, looking to get some density, some repurposing of some of the retail," Brooks said. "We may wind up with a similar amount of retail, but maybe you then have some office and residential on top of it that will fuel some of that retail."

A vote by commissioners to create the overlay district has been postponed twice since April while outside consultants look it over. County Administrator Glenn Stephens said he hopes the consultants' final report on the district will be ready soon.

Meanwhile, the CID and the county have commissioned several studies to look at various components of the ACTivate Gwinnett Place. Reports from those studies are expected to roll in over the next few months.

Those components include the feasibility of a possible traffic circle at the intersection of Pleasant Hill and Satellite, trails and a pedestrian bridge connecting McDaniel Farm Park and Gwinnett Place Mall. Construction plans are also being drawn up for streetscape improvements on Mall Boulevard and Gwinnett Place Drive.

"I'm expecting (the study on) the connectivity to McDaniel Farm Park — I'll just say late July for now," Allen said. "Probably August or September for the streetscaping to be finished, and probably about the same for Mall Boulevard and Gwinnett Place Drive, and probably the same for whatever comes out of (intersection improvement study)."

Limited ability to influence redevelopment

Although the county and the CID have several plans in the pipeline to encourage redevelopment of the Gwinnett Place area, officials also admit it is somewhat out of their hands in the end.

"We don't really own much property over there if any at all," Brooks said. "I mean, we have a park over there, but we don't own a lot of these properties that can be redeveloped, so we're dependent on the private market to do its thing. We've put as many tools in place as possible to help remove as many obstacles as possible."

The 303,702-square-foot Mall Corners shopping center, which is nearly fully occupied by tenants, may undergo some redevelopment of its own. That could include multi-story buildings with retail on the first floor and residential space above it, according to co-owner Leo Wiener, who is also the CID's board chairman.

"We've gone through some ideas, trying to figure out what a redevelopment of the center would look like," Wiener said. "We're still in the early stages, but we've looked at different densities and different uses."

Wiener said the overlay district would help, though, if it is approved by commissioners.

"That wasn't the reason why we decided to do this, but it's certainly jumpstarted things," he said. "That would allow us to fast track some things that would otherwise take a long time to do."

Brooks said the county has been in talks with Gwinnett Place Mall owners, Moonbeam Properties, about its plans for the mall, adding that some retail spaces may have to be repurposed for other uses.

A Beauty Master recently took over the space previously occupied by JC Penny, which Moonbeam did not own, but the commissioner expects to see mall owners moving on some plans next year.

Gwinnett Place Mall manager Shawl Pryor could not be reached for comment.

What the county and the CID are doing

Brooks said the goal coming out of the studies on ACTivate Gwinnett Place components is to possibly put some of those projects on the 2017 SPLOST list. He pointed to improving the connection between McDaniel Farm Park and the greater Gwinnett Place area as a priority for the county commission.

The CID is also interested in the possibility of connecting McDaniel Farm Park with nearby Shorty Howell Park through a trail system.



“Some of those are transportation-oriented, some are parks-oriented, and so those are certainly going to fit within the realm of SPLOST categories,” he said. “They’ll have to go through the same processes (as other SPLOST projects). The Parks and Recreation authority has to look at them for parks. For transportation, it has to go through the citizens selection committee.”

Allen added that is part of the reason why the studies are important.

“That’s why we’re doing a lot of these studies, so we have that additional information to present to these various decision-making bodies,” he said.

Allen and Brooks said the county’s Department of Water Resources are already working on some concept plans as well to renovate detention ponds near the mall to bring them up to modern standards. Brooks said that will not be considered for inclusion in the SPLOST, though.

The idea is to make the ponds more of an amenity similar to projects done in Atlanta’s Old Fourth Ward with increased walkability for guests staying in nearby hotels. It will not likely be the permanent waterfronts that officials initially looked at, but they do hope to take some of the burden of addressing stormwater detention off developers.

“A major obstacle typically in redevelopment, particularly in more heavily commercialized or urbanized areas, is ‘What do you do with stormwater?’” Brooks said. “I mean it’s an obstacle just on a typical development, but it’s a major one with redevelopment, so we’re beginning to look at ways to see if we can remove that obstacle or minimize it some.”

Optimism about the future

Officials said they believe the plans and ideas that are being bandied about for the area could be beneficial and transform the area — if they come to fruition.

The goal is to attract a mix of not only businesses to the area but new residents including both empty nesters, millennials and internationals. Wiener said residential is a component that is sorely missing from the area and something that he feels would be well-received.

“I look at it as a retail center,” he said. “It’s still got a lot of people doing business there during the daytime hours, but there’s not a lot of residential uses there right now, so we may be looking at more of a mixed-use area in the future.”

Allen and Brooks said both the county and the CID are looking for similar things to address the area’s future, such as housing near their workplaces or shopping and retail areas.

Allen said the area already has a basis to build off of.

“If you think about what’s already here, you’ve got these large towers over here at Satellite Place and you’ve got office that surrounds it,” he said. “Wouldn’t it be neat if you could put some residential development in here? You could literally have a true live, work, play, learn type of environment there.

“You could have some folks that are working here and live in a condo or apartment across the street. That’s not an option for them anymore.”