



happen overnight. It takes many years, and sometimes the change takes place so slowly that it's not even noticed. Persistence is key."

Summary: Making Your Case

- Figure out what motivates people and what connects them to trees. Often, that connection comes from little, subtle things, sometimes from the least expected places.
- Talk with people, not to them. Use less jargon, listen more, provide opportunities to connect and be informed. People don't know what they don't know.
- Keep in mind your key message, the target audience and the right tools.
- State outright how much trees are worth—their value in saved energy costs, housing prices, stormwater interception and health benefits. Many places are putting "price tags" on public trees as a community education effort.
- Enlist the skills and ideas of others. Partner with others, take part in other organizations' events, don't silo. It's all about the impact.
- Simply put: communicate with people, connect people to trees, and engage people with urban forestry. People must always be part of the equation.
- Be patient, yet persistent. This is for the long game.

THE TALE OF A Successf

Gwinnett Place Mall near Duluth, just off Interstate 85, was "the center of the universe when it first opened," remembers Joe Allen, executive director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District (CID).

When the mall opened in early 1984, it became the leading mall in the region. For many years it served as the focal point of the fastest-growing county in the US, spurring new restaurants, office buildings and hotels around it and creating "Gwinnett's central business district" centered along Pleasant Hill Road at I-85.

After decades of success, and facing stiff competition from other malls along with changing shopping patterns and customer preferences, its retail operations began to struggle. Simon Property Group, who owned Gwinnett Place, let go of the mall several years ago, and it was sold.

"Since the beginning, the CID's board of directors has had an overarching goal to lead the transformation of the area from a suburban, auto-centric model of development to one that is sustainable, green and walkable with a mixture of residential office, entertainment and retail uses," says Allen. The CID has championed the efforts to lay the groundwork for a new vision of a thriving network of lively businesses, shopping areas and eateries, interconnected green spaces and parks for walking and bicycling, and enhanced transportation options.

"That area is the heart of Gwinnett County," he says. "If that area struggles, the entire community struggles."

Enter, the Gwinnett Place CID, established in 2005.

"Basically, CIDs are self-taxing districts created by the Georgia constitution and local legislation," Allen says. "There are about 25 CIDs in Georgia today."

The board of directors of the CID raises funds by setting an ad valorem millage rate within the CID, not to exceed 2.5% of the assessed value on the non-residential property within the district. Revenues can be used only to provide governmental services and facilities within the district.

Property owners have to consent to be a part of the CID, and the CID elects its own board of directors and picks its own projects and millage rates. "Why would people agree to an additional, self-imposed tax?" asks Allen. "Because the CID is leading the effort to expedite mobility, quality of

u1 CID

This aging suburban mall is receiving a new facelift, thanks to the creation of a self-taxing district based on public-private buy-in.



Gwinnett Place Mall

life and economic improvement strategies for the benefit of businesses, employees and visitors to the area.”

The idea to improve the district works because people have a vision of how to proceed, he says, and are committed to upgrading streetscapes, cleaning up the area, improving public safety and revitalizing the community.

The average CID takes two to three years to form, and the first steps are to identify the main stakeholders, hold meetings with property owners and get buy-in.

CIDs can be involved with constructing roads, streets, bridges and sidewalks; installing streetlights, water and sewer systems; and creating parks and recreational areas while improving public transportation. Therefore, they can be powerful forces for sustainable green space, ecosystem protection and restoration, urban forestry and walkable green space.

In the past 10 years, the Gwinnett Place CID has added more than seven miles of streetscapes and new sidewalks, approximately five miles of pedestrian and street lighting, and 18 park benches. It has funded more than \$2.5 million for the installation and maintenance of plants and trees, including coverage of the I-85 entrance ramps onto Pleasant Hill Road and Steve Reynolds Boulevard, along major corridors, and at key nodes throughout the district.

Such green spaces and connected communal areas are a win-win for areas that want to attract more visitors, shoppers, jobs and community members. Wide avenues, road “diets,” pedestrian-friendly walkways and more mature trees are an important part of what such districts try to create and sustain. They are re-imagining old retention ponds, trying to “take eyesores and make them look good.”

“The bottom line is that CIDs are a great tool to improve value, stimulate economic development, and bring new and exciting things to a commercial district,” Allen says. “The results are well worth the efforts and investment for a business community.”

CIDs rely on public-private partnerships, with buy-in from local governments and business and commercial property owners. Several other CIDs exist in the area; the region’s newest CID, Sugarloaf CID, was formed this spring.

Traffic management and parking are primary considerations: For every \$1 spent on transportation improvements by the Gwinnett Place CID, there is an estimated \$8 return, Allen says.

“About 40 percent of my CID is a parking space,” he says. “Our goal is to create a green environment, with linear parks, public gathering spaces and a thriving redeveloped and reimagined business district in the center of Gwinnett.”

Quality-of-life initiatives, such as seven-day-a-week community patrols and trash removal along area roadways, are keeping the area neat and inviting. Crime is down 29%. And CID-led efforts to secure economic development incentives have helped bring almost 2,000 new jobs into the greater Gwinnett Place area.

“Gwinnett Place is still in most Gwinnettians’ DNA,” says Allen. “The CID offers a connection, property owners get to know each other, alliances form around a solid plan and an ambitious vision. Partnership is the buzzword of the 21st century.”