



Survey results give Gwinnett Place CID hope

By Cosby Woodruff | October 13th, 2017

A summer survey conducted by the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District shows the area around the fading mall has potential to grow if redeveloped. For CID executive director Joe Allen that means even if the mall itself sinks, the rest of the CID can thrive.

Most importantly, Allen said, the survey shows the area's cultural diversity could become its greatest strength. Shifting demographics, along with competition from other malls in the market and the emergence of online retail, has long been blamed for the mall's demise.

Allen knows the CID can't do anything about any of those factors, but it can help developers take advantage of the demographics to build a thriving business district. This time, that district won't be so dependent on retail. He said the survey shows that workers in the area, and especially younger workers, value the diversity of residents and businesses. Restaurants serving cuisines from around the world have sprung up along Pleasant Hill Boulevard. Those are valued by people who work in the area.

The survey found that 61 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that they enjoy the area's diversity. The survey also found areas the CID must work on. Crime is declining in the area, still only 40 percent of respondents said they feel safe when shopping. Only 31 percent found traffic manageable, and just 23 percent said the area has the right mix of shopping, dining and entertainment.

The CID has no real regulatory authority, meaning it can't force developers to move in a certain direction, but Allen said Gwinnett County officials are on-board with the project. And developers are interested. Allen's sees the CID's role in this process as identifying what he calls "catalyst sites." Those sites, when redeveloped, could lead to additional redevelopment at other sites.

His vision is for a walkable live-work-play area that attracts young, vibrant residents who value the area's diversity. If enough of those residents move in, the other parts of the puzzle will follow, Allen said. "Our location is great," he said. "We have all the building blocks."

While the CID has building blocks and hope, it still has the mall itself to deal with. The survey found that fully half the respondents said if they could change one thing about the area, it would be the mall. Allen said the mall's owners told him they are onboard with redevelopment, but words and actions from the owners have often not been the same. "The hardest part of this job is the perception," he said.

He acknowledged that, at some point in the future, a name change for the area could be in the works. But that isn't a priority today. A new name on the same problems won't help. Plus, some of the most successful businesses in the area are auto dealerships, and some of them have "Gwinnett Place" in their names. A name change, Allen said, would likely be more effective once redevelopment has begun and the area has a new identity.