

'There is a great sense of optimism ...'

George Chidi - Staff
Saturday, June 17, 2006

If the Kroger grocery store in Gwinnett Station in Duluth weren't closed, developer Wayne Mason might have drawn a crowd Friday while a photographer took pictures of him in front of the building.

But the grocery near Gwinnett Place mall locked its doors last year. The nearby Target store closed, too. So no one was around to notice the big-name Gwinnett developer as he stood — empty black glass windows behind him, empty black parking lot before him, empty storefronts around him — and surveyed his new domain.

"Everything you see here, I've got all of that," he said, gesturing toward the empty buildings.

And he plans to remake it as a vision in high-rise development. Mason proposes building up to 10 high-rise condominiums, high-end shopping and office space on the site.

The 66-year-old developer and former chairman of the Gwinnett County Commission, said he had been planning his exit from the Gwinnett real estate market. He had been selling off the last of his commercial property in Snellville and was getting ready to concentrate on his newest project, redevelopment of land in the city of Atlanta along the rail loop known as the Beltline.

Then the prospect of developing high-rises along Pleasant Hill Road came up, and he couldn't say no.

Mason bought Gwinnett Prado and Gwinnett Station — two mostly empty shopping centers near Gwinnett Place mall — for \$24.7 million. Working with financial backers from Asia, Mason plans to build a \$600 million mixed-use development on the 42-acre site.

On Friday, he rattled off reasons for continuing to develop in Gwinnett: a growing population, affluent nearby residents, too little residential development near the mall. "Two-thirds of the economy in Gwinnett is retail," he said.

Mason may bear some responsibility for emptying the buildings in the first place. He bought and sold the land for Discover Mills mall in Lawrenceville, paving the way for some big retailers around Gwinnett Place mall to pick up stakes and head north on I-85.

On Friday, neighboring business owners applauded his latest move.

"I think it's awesome," said Casey Coffee, owner of Gwinnett Place Nissan up the street. "The entire Gwinnett Place community needs revitalization. Any time that you have an empty property, it doesn't bode well for the business community."

Anchor retailers for the two centers — Kroger, Target and Sports Authority — vacated the property for other developments nearby. The empty storefronts in Gwinnett Prado helped spur nearby property owners to form

the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District, said Joe Allen, the group's director.

"It was part of the perception that the area was in decline because they would see these vacant parcels," he said. "We specifically used that location to drive home the point that we need a CID in that area."

Community improvement districts raise tax money from businesses in the area to fund revitalization efforts. The Gwinnett Place mall district has been funding landscaping projects and roadway improvements to make the area more attractive.

"The stars appear to be aligning over the Gwinnett Place area," Allen said. "There is a sense of great optimism in this area, that we've turned the corner."

Mason's plans coincide with other developments around Gwinnett Place mall.

A Michigan-based developer has proposed a mixed-use high-rise condominium development about a mile away. Gwinnett developer George Thorndyke said he expects to unveil a plan in August for a new condominium and retail development at the mall.

Though the big stores at Gwinnett Prado and Gwinnett Station stand empty, the former tenants kept making rent payments, in part to keep competitors from having easy access to nearby retail space, said Tom Wheeler, a principal owner of Wheeler/Kolb Management Co. Wheeler's management firm represents Gwinnett Prado. The sale depended on an agreement to end the retailer's leases on the property, he added.

The sale will help revitalize the area, Wheeler said. "I think it makes the area — as far as residing and conducting business there — more attractive," he said.

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