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Architect of change sketches out a new skyline near Gwinnett mall

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Wayne Mason, the real estate tycoon who helped turn Gwinnett County from a rural cow pasture into the land of milk and suburban money, wants to build the county's next big thing — Gwinnett's answer to Atlantic Station.

Mason, working with a group of Korean investors, has bought two partially emptied shopping centers near Gwinnett Place mall with plans to convert them into a \$600 million retail, condo and commercial village with as many as 10 towers to rise over the next several years.



(ENLARGE)

His project, tentatively called "Global Station," could raise Gwinnett's skyline, bring mixed-use living to the county on a grand scale and breathe new life to the area around Gwinnett Place mall, a suffering district that was once the county's focal point.

Mason paid \$24.7 million for the 42-acre site between Pleasant Hill Road and Satellite Boulevard — the Gwinnett Prado and Gwinnett Station shopping centers.

There are hurdles. He'll submit detailed plans for the project to officials this fall, and may seek a zoning change and some special incentives from the county. But Mason carries clout and a proven track record for large scale projects. Construction could start next year.

Mason's early concept calls for a Main Street-style village recalling Midtown's 138-acre Atlantic Station, complete with condo towers, more than 500,000 square feet of retail, restaurants and possibly an entertainment area such as an amphitheater.

Atlantic Station, the Atlanta mini-city on I-85, has become a touchstone for developers building clusters of homes, shops and offices. Sites from Roswell to Doraville have been declared potential clones.

Mason himself believes Gwinnettians, traditionally partial to big lawns and two-SUV garages, are ready for such a project, and will increasingly demand high-rise condos and walkable, mixed-use communities.

"I laughed at [Atlantic Station developer] Jim Jacoby, I thought he'd be the biggest failure in the world at Atlantic Station, but he had a thing that worked," Mason said.

The trend is worldwide, Mason said: "People are moving back into an urban lifestyle not married to the automobile."

Seeing a similar trend closer in, Mason in 2004 bought 4.6 miles of prime real estate along Atlanta's proposed Beltline transit route, with plans to build condo towers and other projects.

Mason says he's simply tracking consumers' tastes. As he puts it, "everybody

NICK ARROYO / Staff
(ENLARGE)

The tired and declining Gwinnett Station has been bought by developer Wayne Mason, along with Gwinnett Prado shopping

center, for redevelopment into an Atlantic Station-type village. follows the gold."



NICK ARROYO / Staff
(ENLARGE)

Real estate tycoon Wayne Mason, 66, has a long and enviable record of getting things done in Gwinnett.

Mason also sees the Gwinnett project, to be built on existing shopping centers, as a badly needed catalyst for redevelopment in the county.

Gwinnett officials have recently encouraged developers to build on blighted properties rather than plow untouched land for new shopping and housing — particularly around Gwinnett Place mall, Hwy. 78 and Jimmy Carter Boulevard, areas dotted with aging retail strips.

Twenty years ago, Gwinnett Place was the county's Friday night dinner spot and holiday shopping destination, said Joe Allen, executive director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District, which local businesses formed last year to revive the area and help manage traffic congestion.

But the district has lost consumers and tenants, including the mall's anchor Macy's, as new, shinier centers like Discover Mills and the Mall of Georgia opened, Allen said.

Mason's project can begin a turnaround at Gwinnett Place mall, said Emory Morsberger, a Gwinnett developer restoring City Hall East and downtown Lawrenceville. "Wayne Mason getting involved is good for the area," he said.

Mason agrees, but he wants the county to help him do it.

He's urging Gwinnett officials to declare the area a tax allocation district.

Tax allocation districts pool tax revenue to pay for roads and other improvements to help projects like Mason's get started.

Similar zones were set up to spark development in downtown Atlanta and Atlantic Station.

Gwinnett officials will decide in August whether to let county voters approve such tax allocation districts on the Nov. 7 ballot. If voters approve the program, it could go into effect early next year.

The Global Station complex would also take advantage of a new Gwinnett County ordinance that allows residential high-rises of up to 25 stories in certain areas.

Until last December, zoning ordinances forbade buildings taller than three stories without a special-use permit. Gwinnett commissioners then passed rules to allow mixed-use developments with high-rise residential condominiums.

The change has sparked additional projects. Two other mixed-use developments with high-rise residential towers are being developed for the area around Gwinnett Place.

Michigan-based Yamasaki Associates has proposed a \$150 million development about a mile away, near Steve Reynolds Boulevard.

Gwinnett developer George Thorndyke said Friday that he expects to submit redevelopment plans in August for a mixed-use project on about 16 acres at Gwinnett Place mall's empty Macy's building.

Thorndyke likened the burst of redevelopment interest in Gwinnett Place to the pace of change in other areas around Atlanta, such as Perimeter Mall in Dunwoody.

"It sat there and sat there and then, wham!" he said.

Mason, 66, acknowledged that getting the project built, and soliciting government help, won't be easy. He's wrangling with the city of Atlanta to get approval for condo towers on Piedmont Park, part of his Beltline purchase.

But Mason, who started his real estate career in Snellville in 1959, has an excellent track record of successful projects, Morsberger said.

"People look to him to get things done," he said.