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## Gwinnett grows up

County banking that high-rise condos will attract professionals

Atlanta Business Chronicle - January 12, 2007 by Michael Antrobus Contributing writer

Metro's Atlanta's fastest-growing county -- and one notorious for growing out more than up -- is looking to add some height to its girth.

In a bid to address rapid growth, Gwinnett leaders have seized upon a concept more common in trendy, cosmopolitan corners of the metro area -- vertical development.

The pressure to "go vertical" comes in large part from Gwinnett's population explosion. The population increased by 19 percent between 2000 and 2005, climbing from 589,000 to almost 730,000. Meanwhile, Gwinnett County is home to more than 30,000 businesses, and 20 percent of Fortune 500 companies have a presence in Gwinnett, according to Gwinnett Magazine.

In December 2005, Gwinnett County commissioners amended zoning laws to allow mixed-use developments and residential high-rise condominiums up to 300 feet and 25 stories.

The new towers are limited to high-rise residential districts within major activity centers, which falls in line with Gwinnett's comprehensive land-use plan. The county's four major activity centers each lie off Interstate 85: near Gwinnett Place mall, the Mall of Georgia, the intersection with Sugarloaf Parkway and along Jimmy Carter Boulevard.

Now Gwinnett County's skyline is set to be forever altered by the Michigan-based architectural firm founded by Minoru Yamasaki, designer of the World Trade Center in New York City.

Yamasaki Associates Inc.'s vision for Gwinnett also includes twin towers. Scheduled to break ground this spring, La Belle Verde in August became the first residential high-rise to win commission approval.

Keith Kim, Yamasaki's project manager for La Belle Verde, said Gwinnett residents tend to be "old school" when it comes to new development, but most recognize the need "to provide housing for the rush of professionals working at new companies."

Yamasaki hopes to help usher in a new era of luxury urban living in Gwinnett that will lure more businesses to the county, Kim said.

La Belle Verde is one of three high-rise projects already in the pipeline. The other two are being developed by Wayne Mason, who is responsible for helping shape Gwinnett in the last couple of decades, and Publix shopping center developer George Thorndyke.

Mergers and acquisitions have seen some of the county's largest employers -- including Novartis' CIBA-Vision, Alcatel-Lucent and Cisco's Scientific Atlanta -- gobbled up by corporations with headquarters outside Georgia.

Still, the county is home to more than 320,000 jobs, the number of which grew by more than 12,200 between 2003 and 2004. That's a gain of 4.2 percent, compared with 1.2 percent for the

entire state.

The county's 2006 budget of \$1.5 billion was more than half that of the state of Nevada's and larger than the budgets of some Central American nations.

Nevertheless, commissioners split 3-2 in their 2005 vote to allow high-rise condos.

Those voting against the measure allowing mixed-use and high-rise developments favored greater restrictions on density, as well as requirements for green space, said Gwinnett Planning Commission member Peggy Boydston.

"I think [residential high-rise] is still the niche which we don't fill in Gwinnett for professionals who don't choose to have single-family homes," Boydston said, "[but] we have to be careful as we zone them that we end up with top-quality residential."

County officials concluded the high-rise condos will mostly attract empty nesters and childless couples, therefore placing little pressure upon schools. They also concluded the new developments would not clog roads.

"Those are educated hypotheses," Boydston said.

Gwinnett commissioners required La Belle Verde to limit development to 75 percent of its 4.7 acres and to landscape the remaining 25 percent.

They also required that there be two separate entrances and exits to the complex.

Thorndyke's The Grand at Gwinnett is the next mixed-use tower project in the pipeline, with a zoning application hearing before the Gwinnett commission set for Jan. 23.

Located in the parking lot of the former Macy's at Gwinnett Place, Thorndyke's development also calls for a mixed-use retail and office complex and two 25-story towers. He said the architectural rendering of the project represents a precise snapshot of what he hopes to build, right down to the colors.

Thorndyke hopes to build both towers at the same time, breaking ground this fall and finishing by the winter of 2008. Each tower will feature a different view: one facing downtown Atlanta and the other toward the Appalachian mountains.

Helicopter rides have confirmed that from about the 10th floor up, residents "on a clear day [will] see the snow in the mountains in North Georgia," Thorndyke said.

The developer will not begin pre-selling units, which will range from \$350,000 to \$3 million, until winning final approval from the county.

"In the market research we've done, we see some pent-up demand for these things," Thorndyke said. "That doesn't mean [Gwinnett] can't continue developing single-family residential neighborhoods, but we need to look to the future."

Mason's \$600 million Global Station to be built on roughly 40 acres near Gwinnett Place is still very much in the conceptual stage, said spokeswoman Jane Langley.

One possible scenario, featured in a rendering, would include 10 towers in an unspecified mix of retail, office and residential space.

Mason said in a written statement that Gwinnett's move toward allowing vertical growth would ensure residents more green space and less dependency on cars.

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"As our demographics change, many people increasingly want a different lifestyle," he said. "For them, quality of life means a live-work-play environment, one that includes pedestrian access from their homes to their jobs and to restaurants, shopping, culture."

The \$179 million La Belle Verde development, on Steve Reynolds Boulevard at Shackleford Road, is to include 263 units, ranging from one-bedroom spreads to 2,313-square-foot penthouses. The towers will rise out of a shared three-story mixed-use complex, featuring a mall, fitness area, indoor driving range and daycare center.

"I do love the concept," said Bill Lawson, branch manager and associate broker at Harry Norman, Realtors.

"I think Gwinnett County needs them. The young people need them. We need them to keep the empty nesters from moving out."

#### The Grand at Gwinnett

Developer -- George Thorndyke

Location -- Gwinnett Place Mall

Height -- Two 25-story towers

Progress -- Zoning vote in Jan. 2007

Groundbreaking (tentative) -- Fall/winter 2007

Completion date (tentative) -- Winter 2008

Units pre-sold -- None before zoning approval

#### La Belle Verde

Developer -- Yamasaki Associates Inc.

Location -- Steve Reynolds Blvd.

Height -- 300 ft., 25 stories

Progress -- Approved August 2006

Groundbreaking (tentative) -- April 2007

Completion date (tentative) -- April 2009

Units pre-sold -- 100/263

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