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Road trip for MARTA staff

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Gwinnett County drivers out and about Tuesday morning may have been doing double-takes.

Yep, that was a jam-packed MARTA bus winding its way through Norcross and the Gwinnett Place Mall area.

But no, the bus is not part of any new service.

The vehicle carried MARTA officials and a group of Gwinnett business leaders on a field trip of sorts to kick off the transit system's fresh look at a possible expansion to the traffic-choked county.

The cost of the \$100,000 feasibility study is being shared by MARTA and two Gwinnett business groups, the Gwinnett Village and Gwinnett Place community improvement districts.

The study comes 16 years after the last attempt to bring MARTA service to Gwinnett. County voters rejected the plan by a 2-to-1 margin.

But the county has changed greatly since then. Population has doubled, with a dramatic increase in the number of Asian and Latino residents. The county started its own bus system, a relatively small operation that includes express routes to Atlanta and limited local service.

"We believe that the time is right now to talk about rail expansion in Gwinnett again," Gloria Gaines, MARTA's chief planner, said as the brightly colored MARTA bus roared up I-85 from Atlanta.

Tuesday's tour was intended to give MARTA staff and board members a close-up view of the area that could be served by a rail line extension. MARTA's northeast line now terminates in Doraville, just inside I-285 a few miles below the Gwinnettline.

The 1990 plan called for a 10-mile extension of the rail line, to Gwinnett Place Mall. Three stops were planned — a Norcross station at Jimmy Carter Boulevard and Buford Highway; an Indian Trail station near I-85; and at the mall.

The study will, among other things, take a look at those locations and determine if any changes are needed.

Gwinnett businessman Bruce LeVell, the county's lone member on the MARTA board of directors, said it might make more sense for the southern part of the line to run closer to I-85, where development is more dense and large-scale projects are in the works, such as a proposed redevelopment of the sprawling former Lucent Technologies plant.

It's not clear how much it would cost to shift the line. The 1990 plan called for much of the rail line to be built in the right-of-way of power lines.

LeVell said a transit line could help boost the Gwinnett Village area, which includes a number of aging industrial parks and dated shopping centers in the Norcross area.

But Asian and Latino business have been moving into empty storefronts, leading a revitalization that includes plans to redevelop a huge shopping strip.

The area around the proposed Indian Trail station is a bustling commercial district that includes a Lowe's home improvement store and a Carmax car dealership. Nearby, developers plan to turn a wooded patch into a mixed-use complex with twin 25-story condominium towers.

"There's a whole lot of activity getting ready to go on this corridor," LeVell said.

Gwinnett Place Mall remains a hub of commercial activity, though it's been somewhat eclipsed by newer, glitzier developments farther north, such as the Mall of Georgia and Discover Mills.

Dave Rosselle, director of operations for the Gwinnett Place CID, told MARTA officials that plans are under way to redevelop the old Macy's location with twin 25-story high-rise condos. Nearby, Gwinnett developer Wayne Mason is leading a team planning a mixed-use development.

As the road trip wore on, the bus riders struck a cautiously hopeful tone. They see the need for improved transit, but understand the enormous political and financial hurdles that are in the way.

To join MARTA, Gwinnett voters would have to approve a penny-on-the-dollar sales tax — a dicey proposition given the county's conservative bent and history of shutting out big-city transit.

County commissioners have been cool to the idea, reluctant to offer support given the trouncing MARTA received the last time around.

As the tour wrapped up, the Rev. Walter Kimbrough, a MARTA board member, said Gwinnett offers a huge opportunity for the transit system.

"We've got to be successful in being people-movers — to get more and more people out of their cars and to use public transportation," he said, noting that traffic on I-85 was bumper-to-bumper at 10:45 a.m. Tuesday.

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