

MARTA officials tour Gwinnett as part of rail extension study

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By Camie Young
Senior Writer
camie.young@gwinnettdaily.com

NORCROSS — More than an hour after rush hour was supposed to be over, Walter Kimbrough was surprised to find Interstate 85 was still at a standstill.

The gridlock may finally be enough to rally support for public transportation in Gwinnett, said Kimbrough.

The MARTA vice president was one of more than 20 officials who rode a bus Tuesday through the county's southwestern corner to study an extension of the Atlanta rail system.

"I think the time is now. The time has been," Kimbrough said. "I saw I-85 from a new perspective. ... The need is phenomenal."

Gwinnett voters rejected the extension of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority lines in 1990, but officials are hoping the county's dramatic growth and diversification have swayed the electorate to reconsider the idea. Officials from the Gwinnett Village Community Improvement District partnered with MARTA late last year to study the extension again. As part of that effort, Bruce LeVell, a Duluth man who serves on both boards, invited officials to tour the area.

"In the past, the public didn't truly understand the concept of transit," LeVell said. "Last time, they just drew some dots. You've got to give the public something more."

This time around, he hopes to incorporate artist's renderings to show his vision of transit-oriented development, which will allow people to live, work or be entertained near the stations.

"Instead of looking at computers and graphics, the engineers are here looking at it," he said. "I wanted them to buy into the CID."

In addition to the tour of Gwinnett Village, which spans I-85 in the Jimmy Carter Boulevard, Indian Trail Road and Beaver Run Road area, the bus continued to Gwinnett Place Mall, which was built in the 1980s, but is experiencing a revival thanks to its own community improvement district.



Officials from Atlanta's public transportation organization toured the Gwinnett Village and Gwinnett Place CIDs Tuesday.

"The whole community needs to be refreshed," the CID's Dave Rosselle said as he pointed out high-rise projects to the bus riders.

The mall was picked as the terminus of the rail extension in 1990, and Rosselle said the high density communities now being developed would be ideal for public transit.

Jayant Patel, the acting director of engineering, said Gwinnett County has changed drastically since the first study took place.

"I remember when Gwinnett Place was farmland," he said.

Not only would the MARTA extension help with traffic, officials said it is also key for bringing business to the community.

"Without this public transportation, I don't think we have the economic development we're talking about. They go hand in hand," said Shiv Aggarwal, the chairman of the Gwinnett Village CID board. "I think it's imminent. We have no choice; we must have it."