

County leaders take notes on Virginia mixed-use city

09/30/2006 -

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FAIRFAX COUNTY, Va. — In the middle of suburban Virginia, people live, work and play among high-rise condos and corporate headquarters in a downtown with parks and restaurants.

It's Fairfax County's version of Atlantic Station, and the kind of urban environment Gwinnett County leaders are considering bringing to Atlanta's suburbs.

About 50 leaders from the government, business and civic communities stayed this week in the Reston development. The stay had Joe Allen, director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District, dreaming about the future of the Duluth-area mall.

Developers are working on plans to convert the former Macy's at the mall into high-rise condos.

"We're pushing out. We're creating the new Main Street, that new downtown for Gwinnett," Allen said. "We're creating the downtown of the 21st century." That's how developers described Reston, which was a dream of a landowner dating back 50 years.

The shops and houses finally opened in 1990 after several iterations of a design, Alan Ward of Sasaki Associates said, some of which included large shopping centers and malls.

But Ward said the more traditional main-street idea took hold because of the ability for people to interact outside on sidewalks, in parks and in open-air eateries.

"The residents in northern Virginia are desperate to have a place where they can come and walk around," he said. "There's this desperate search for a community center. ... It's that place in the center of the community that you identify as the heart of the community."

The concept isn't yet complete, with new condos currently going up.

"It was so bizarre to see a city springing out of a green field," said Bob Kettler of KSI Services. "But there was a texture and a feeling here that make a walk down the street so desirable. It doesn't match up with the barrenness of other suburban development."

Chairman Charles Bannister said the concept could serve Gwinnett well, especially as the land fills up but population continues to come.

"These high-rises we're talking about would be a step in the right direction," he said. "It takes years to put these together."

Allen said he knew the idea of a denser community could be a hard sell to the community, but he believed it was worth it, especially in terms of revitalization.

"Change is Gwinnett's one contrast," he said. "We've got to be willing to change."