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High-rise area to stay retail

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DULUTH - A nearly vacant shopping center once intended for a high-rise development will be filled again with stores and restaurants, its new owners said.

As Phillips Investments, sisters Ly Phillips and Debbie Nguyen bought 42.5 acres July 19 that now hold the dilapidated Gwinnett Prado and Gwinnett Station shopping centers.

While Gwinnett Station will be filled with retail, the sisters have not ruled out the possibility of putting a high-rise on the land currently occupied by Gwinnett Prado.

Already, Phillips said, the Gwinnett Station shopping center is 90 percent leased. She expects to repave the parking lot, power wash and paint the buildings and finish a face-lift so new tenants can begin to occupy the space in November.

"I love that piece of property, I love it," Phillips said. "It's big enough to do anything you want to do."

For now, the Gwinnett Station portion of the property, which is bound by Satellite Boulevard and Pleasant Hill and Old Norcross roads, will add The Loop, a grocery store like Super H Mart, a high-end hair salon and spa, a jewelry store and a travel company. Restaurants will include Ming Barbecue, Lee's Sandwich, pho restaurant Dai Loi, the Anh Thi coffee shop and wedding cake maker Dongphuong Bakery.

Phillips said many of the stores have other locations on Buford Highway.

She said before buying the land for \$30 million, she researched the area, learning that a lot of Asians live on that side of town. Phillips, herself Vietnamese, said she can picture Pleasant Hill becoming similar to Buford Highway - an area that she loves - and that she hopes to invest in more property on the stretch in the future.

"I love Pleasant Hill Road like I love Buford Highway," Phillips said. "If we keep this property for 10 years, we'll probably make that place worth a lot of money, and we plan to keep it."

Before the land was sold last month, developer Wayne Mason had requested permission to build Global Station on the property, a development with 974 condominiums, 200 lofts and a 21-story hotel in addition to 100 office condos, a movie theater and a convention center with two halls, meeting rooms and an exhibition area.

That request has been tabled until October, but Phillips said she would likely scrap the proposal because she has no experience with high-rise developments.

However, after a meeting with Gwinnett Place Community Improvement Director Joe Allen, Phillips said she would be open to selling the Gwinnett Prado portion of the property to someone who would develop a high-rise.

"If that's what the county would like to see, we'll probably do that," she said. "The money's not important. We'd like to do something good for the county."

Phillips said she called Mason every month to make sure he wasn't going to sell it to someone else. In fact, she

said, she sold other land she owns for less than its value to raise the money to buy this piece.

Allen said he welcomes the fact that new businesses will be coming to previously empty storefronts but that he would still like to see a mixed-use residential high-rise near the Gwinnett Place Mall.

"We would much rather see a flourishing center than one that remains vacant," he said. "That's a good initial first step, but that will definitely be our end game, to have those type of developments here at Gwinnett Place, high-rises with mixed use, with offices."

One successful high-rise, Allen said, will ignite others in the area.

In addition to the application to put condos in Global Station, two other high-rise developments were proposed around Gwinnett Place Mall.

One, La Belle Verde, was approved a year ago, but has been plagued by financing and other problems and has not broken ground. Another, The Grand at Gwinnett, was denied in February by county commissioners who said the plan to put condominiums in Gwinnett Place's parking lot was not sufficiently integrated with the mall.

Phillips said if she doesn't sell the Gwinnett Prado land for high-rises, she might build a site for wedding receptions and a store like Sam's Club geared for Asian shoppers.

The investor said she intends to hold onto the Gwinnett Station portion of the land for a long time, calling it the best piece of property on Pleasant Hill Road.

"When you look at something and right away you know for sure what you're going to do, you know how good that piece of property now is," she said. "I love that property."

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