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## Gwinnett County: Boomtown Revisited

Ben Young published September 2008

### Retrofitting Metro Atlanta's "old growth suburb"

Gwinnett County was the fastest growing county in the country during a transitional period, when the strip centers of the 1970s and shopping malls of the 1980s were beginning to lose their luster and the roads connecting them, increasingly clogged with traffic, became more and more dangerous.

Now that the county has boomed to a population of 743,000 and gas prices have soared to nearly \$4 a gallon, leaders here are in the process of revamping the dated infrastructure while simultaneously launching the biggest economic stimulus effort in the state.

Partnership Gwinnett – a public-private, \$10 million, community and economic development initiative led by the Gwinnett County Chamber of Commerce with the goal of creating 65,400 jobs in the county over the next five years – already has racked up some startling successes. Hewlett Packard, in consolidating its datacenters, chose Suwanee as one of its six locations, bringing 140 jobs; solar cell manufacturer Suniva will bring 100 tech jobs to Norcross; Meggitt Training Center, a firearms training company, relocated and expanded its global headquarters, bringing 400 jobs to Suwanee and some \$80 million in investment. All told, Partnership Gwinnett announced 40 companies that relocated in

Gwinnett or expanded facilities, accounting for more than 2,900 jobs in just the first year of its existence. Gwinnett Medical Center is in the midst of adding a five-story tower and recently received its Certificate of Need for open heart surgery, which is expected to bring more than 500 doctors to the Lawrenceville campus. The AAA Gwinnett Braves are moving into a new state-of-the-art stadium in 2009, adding to tourism that already brings in more than \$1 billion and 2 million visitors annually. Gwinnett also joined economic peers from Atlanta to Athens to create the state's first regional effort to market the biotech and life science corridor – "Georgia's Innovation Crescent."

"In one week, we had the groundbreaking for the Gwinnett Braves stadium, the announcement that

Suniva would locate in Norcross, learned of the CON at Gwinnett Medical, and Gwinnett Public Schools had 12 of 18 high schools named among the best in the nation by Newsweek," says Demming Bass, the Gwinnett chamber's vice president of communications and business services. "For all this to happen so fast is really exciting, and the great thing is, it's only just starting."

"I felt like I gave up best mayoral job in Georgia when I left Suwanee," says former mayor Nick Masino, the chamber's vice president of economic development. "Now I have best job in the state."

### **Boosting Incentives**

Bass notes that Gwinnett is larger than four states, and, were it a city, would be the 16th largest city in the country after San Francisco. "And yet, we were reactive – we had a limited amount of resources, and were only responding to economic development. We basically worked on what came in, and had no formal business retention and expansion plan. It was successful to a point, but we were not generating the types of leads and numbers we needed for a market our size."

By increasing staff from one to 10 (eight full time), the chamber has boosted its number of active projects by 97 percent over last year, Bass says. "We made more than 200 business retention visits this year – prior to that, it was only a handful."

Staff aside, the true key to Partnership Gwinnett's success has been the county's support, in the form of the most aggressive tax incentives in the state. Initially passed in 2006, the county's economic incentive ordinance, which allows it broad flexibility to give tax breaks to businesses, was retooled in April. "We were behind the ball," Masino says. "Gwinnett was the fastest growing county for multiple years in a row; we just never needed [incentives]."

The tax breaks played a critical role in landing two new recent additions to Gwinnett's corporate landscape – Suniva and Megadefense Systems.

As valuable as they are, however, incentives aren't always a necessity. Meeks reports that Uline Shipping Supplies, which was considering relocating, turned down a potential \$800,000 property tax incentive over the next 10 years. The Chicago-based company will remain in Gwinnett, consolidating its facilities into an expansion that, over several years, will create 500 jobs.

While incentive ordinances are used by Cobb, DeKalb, Fulton and all over Georgia, Gwinnett's is based on a model Alfie Meek, Gwinnett's director of financial services, learned from colleagues at Georgia Tech: Incentives require not just jobs but net return to the county's bottom line. Meek says his program wasn't created in a vacuum.

"We got hammered in 2001 – we lost thousands of jobs in the high-tech recession," he says. "We've also seen an imbalance in our tax digest. Residences don't quite pay for themselves, and we have a housing industry in recession. But now we have a more diverse economy. With Partnership Gwinnett, we couldn't be in a better place going into hard economic times."

### **A New Landscape**

Millions of dollars also are being invested in shifting Gwinnett's landscape from "super-retail" to an atmosphere more conducive to mixed-use, mid-rise and tasteful office development. Additionally, the incentive ordinance was retooled in April to encourage more investment into areas in need of revitalization. "It [the old one] just was not going to work everywhere in Gwinnett County," Masino says.

Greenfield development is still an issue – the county turned down a rezoning request last year that would have bulldozed a popular 9.4 acre strawberry field outside Dacula, for instance, to build a shopping center. In addition to the ordinance, Gwinnett is using self-taxing Community Improvement Districts and overlay districts to revitalize areas in need of reinvestment.

These correlate with city and local projects that emphasize preserving or rebuilding quality of life. Lilburn has spent \$2 million on the Camp Creek Greenway Trail, and for the first time in Suwanee's history, its Comprehensive Land Use Plan calls for a shift from greenfield development to redevelopment of its gateway, Town Center, and Peachtree Industrial Boulevard nodes.

"Duluth's pretty built out, and it's hard to find chunks of land, so our primary focus is revitalization and infill," says Duluth Planning Director Clifford Cross. "We have new overlay districts on our Buford Highway corridor and downtown area; probably a direct result will be density and open space transfer along the area. This will require building on substandard lots – most are so small that we need to provide the developer with incentives to make it worthwhile.

"Quality of life plays a major role in economic development. It attracts businesses because employees want to relocate someplace good; not just roads and bridges. The overlay district will help establish that standard."

### **Retooling Transportation**

While parks, education and healthcare (Gwinnett Medical Center recently replaced Joan Clancy Hospital with a new facility, GMC – Duluth, which offers 81 rooms and an intensive care unit) are important to Gwinnett's quality of life, traffic is another huge issue. Leaders hope to combat gridlock with light rail in addition to (and sometimes creating) high density.

Now that midrise development has emerged in exurban cities such as Lawrenceville, Duluth and Buford, the Gwinnett Place and Gwinnett Village CIDs are hoping to work that magic inward, and are expecting explosive results. Their proximity to Spaghetti Junction and the Doraville MARTA station makes these interchanges potential blockbusters.

"We're not considered this way, but we are the urban corner of Gwinnett," says Chuck Warbington, executive director of Gwinnett Village CID. The state's largest, it covers 12 square miles and is centered on the Jimmy Carter Boulevard/I-85 interchange. "If [light rail] were to go right through what we're trying to do, you may not even need a car to be connected to downtown [Atlanta]. So in terms of price per acre, it would be more lucrative for property owners to sell out to high rise developments."

Active Gwinnett County voters did support MARTA extension to Gwinnett last year according to a Gwinnett Village CID poll, but at the time were less supportive of a penny tax to pay for it. A nonbinding vote in July asking if residents would support a 1 percent sales tax for a MARTA expansion, however, turned up results of 53 percent against and 47 percent in favor.

Warbington believes the close results show overall support for rail. With better wording and a little explanation – each party's primary election ballot worded the question differently, and neither offered details of how land or money would be used, he says – results would have been different. "We believe Gwinnett will ultimately support rail mass transit with a well thought out vision, defined cost, and a land use plan associated with it," he says.

"We're trying to get our way out of this traffic mess. I go out and hear from the business community that people just do not think we can pave our way out of this. The whole goal over the last 50 years has been to add another lane, build another road, and I believe we are beyond that now. We need to look at all alternatives to correct our traffic congestion problems."

"It mirrors the trend you see in the rest of Atlanta – congestion is a big issue," adds John McHenry, Gwinnett Village CID Program Director. "What we heard at our public meetings on a redevelopment plan is 'Give us some other way to get around rather than tapping the brake on I-85.'"

The joint Gwinnett Place/Gwinnett Village redevelopment plan, calling for light rail as well as sidewalks and streetscape beautification projects, now goes to Norcross voters and then to the county for

approval.

"It took several years for Buford Highway to become so disparate [there was no zoning initially], so it will take some time to make it nice – pedestrian friendly, cars in the back of buildings – and connect all the dots," says Norcross Mayor Bucky Johnston. "The community in general is looking for that type of redevelopment. So many things are going well, we have to keep it going – the winds of change are fickle."

### **Rethinking Retail**

These are long term plans – high rises don't replace parking lots overnight. But Gwinnett Place CID Executive Director Joe Allen notes that property owners are taking the long view.

"Although some of these centers that are 20 years old still have more years of useful life, area property owners are also thinking five to 20 years out – they know Gwinnett Place can't stay the way it is today," he says. "That's why we're involved in the debate regarding Tax Allocation Districts [TADs were also on the July ballot], so that when property owners are ready to take the next step, they have the redevelopment tools available."

More immediate results from the Gwinnett Place CID – sidewalks, streetscaping and branding elements, daily community police patrols, landscaping, litter removal and intersection improvements – have already had positive effects. In addition to these short-term results, the Gwinnett Place CID remains focused on its top initiative – replacement of the Pleasant Hill Road Bridge. Without the CID, these improvements would not be occurring. These short-term and long-term redevelopment strategies are playing an important role as Gwinnett's business community, with local and international connections, is revamping retail in the area.

"We have Assi Plaza Duluth, which is primed to become the largest international food market in the country, moving into a former Walmart. The former Macy's in Gwinnett Place Mall will open early next year as M Marketplace, an "East-meets-West" department store owned by a South Korean firm with 22 department stores in Asia. The Gwinnett location is the first of many planned for the United States. We also have a lot of high-end Korean, Thai and Japanese restaurants joining traditional dining establishments in the Gwinnett Place area."

Other renovations and reuses include the upscale Plaza at Breckenridge, offering more than 24,000 square feet of retail and condos, and Xiacom Wireless moving into 37,000 square feet of Gwinnett Center on Pleasant Hill Road. Gwinnett Technical College, which is moving into some 32,000 square feet on two levels of the Gwinnett Place Mall Belk wing. Gwinnett Tech also just received \$18.5 million in the FY 2009 state budget, which, along with an anticipated \$5.3 million in the FY 2010 will go toward a new Life Sciences building.

Such results are helping economic planners get the message to communities that improvements, and giving the government flexibility to enable them, bring fast bucks. The Evermore CID, designed to improve Highway 78 from Stone Mountain to Snellville, has identified 86 projects worth \$160 million. While the improvements were designed primarily for safety (\$60 million went toward putting a median into the highway's center lane), the area has already seen Premiere Dermatology invest \$4 million into a 20,000-square-foot facility, and gaming company CCP/White Wolf, which opened with 30 employees in August 2007 and has grown to 78 employees today, recently forecast hires of up to 200.

"Property values have risen by 40 to 50 percent since we started the CID five years ago," says local developer and Evermore board member Emory Morsberger, who, as chairman of the Georgia Brain Train Group, is also pushing for commuter rail along U.S. Hwy. 78 to Athens. "Once all four sections of the 7.4 mile corridor are finished next spring, we're expecting a huge amount of activity. In fact we just hired an economic development director for the Evermore CID."

"After 30 years with little investment, it is definitely time," adds Evermore CID Executive Director Brett Harrell. "We're really only at the beginning of seeing it pay off."

### **Tackling Tourism**

Gwinnett County also is angling to grow its bulging tourism economy, which already accounts for more than \$1 billion annually. Some 2 million visitors pack 98 hotels countywide.

Events at Gwinnett Arena, which opened in 2003, are going gangbusters, accounting for half of the county's visitors in 2007. Sports teams – including the Gwinnett Gladiators (hockey), which drew 203,624 fans in 2007, and Georgia Force (arena football), which brought more than 80,000 people to eight games, will be joined next year by the AAA Gwinnett Braves, who are relocating from Richmond, Va.

While Embassy Suites is breaking ground on a 259-room hotel on Sugarloaf Parkway, the Atlanta Marriott Gwinnett Place is undergoing a \$6 million renovation. Meanwhile, the new 129-room Holiday Inn at Gwinnett Place will include 700 square feet of meeting space.

But Lisa Anders, marketing communications director for the Gwinnett Convention and Visitors Bureau, thinks the county can do better. "Given our current size, Gwinnett Center can compete for only 10 to 20 percent of today's meetings. An expansion would allow us to access another 60 percent of the shows that are out there," she says. "The potential to increase our business lies in meetings that need between 100,000 and 200,000 square feet of space."

She hopes Gwinnett Center, a public-private partnership, will yield a 300- to 400-room hotel connected to the convention facility, and double exhibit space to 75,000 square feet.

Meanwhile, the twin engines of redevelopment and economic incentive are likely to benefit the county's economy and produce higher salaries. Masino notes that although Gwinnett was hurt by the technology bust, its history gives the county some advantages in attracting new target industries such as healthcare and high tech.

"The U.S. has never rebounded from where they were, but we're way ahead of national average," he notes. "Scientific Atlanta brought 500 new engineering jobs to their campus in Lawrenceville; Xiacom Wireless will bring 100 jobs with an average salary of \$100,000. Time Warner's fiber division just moved their regional offices to Gwinnett out of Fulton. Gwinnett Technical College is one of the best in the state, if not the best."

Yes, a lot is riding on the county's ability to use the TAD mechanism and bring rail or transit to help connect its many cities. Still, Gwinnett may yet establish itself as a model for retrofitted smart growth in a dramatic transformation that could benefit counties throughout the region.

Whether building a new city center or fixing a broken development, the county brings new meaning to the words "It can be done."

### **Gwinnett County At-A-Glance**

#### **Population**

(2007)

Gwinnett County, 776,347; Lawrenceville, 28,851; Duluth, 25,838; Snellville, 19,983; Sugar Hill, 16,170; Suwanee, 14,034; Lilburn, 11,542; Buford, 11,160; Norcross, 10,111; Loganville, 9,547; Auburn, 7,261; Dacula, 4,484; Braselton, 2,573; Berkeley Lake, 2,014; Grayson, 1,404; Rest Haven, 147