

# 'Opportunity' headed to Gwinnett Place with job incentives

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LAWRENCEVILLE -- Soon, there could soon be a new "opportunity" for job creation in the struggling Gwinnett Place area.

On Tuesday, commissioners approved the creation of an Urban Redevelopment Area and plan, the first step in creating an Opportunity Zone, which would give businesses that add two or more new jobs to Georgia a \$3,500 tax credit for five years. The Georgia Department of Community Affairs makes the final decision on opportunity zones.

The DCA created the first local zone in the Gwinnett Village area in early 2010, and another was added by the city of Norcross.

According to a report, the unincorporated zone had 383 new jobs added in 2011.

"The creation of an Opportunity Zone provides one of the strongest economic development incentives available in the state of Georgia to encourage redevelopment and job creation in a community. It provides a powerful job tax credit," said Joe Allen, the executive director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District.

The CID, a collection of business owners who agreed to tax themselves to fund improvements to the area outside Duluth, paid for a study to create the zone. Allen told commissioners the incentive could work to revive the once-prominent mall area now marred by high vacancy rates, unemployment and a foreclosure crisis for the centerpiece of the district, the Gwinnett Place Mall.

According to Gwinnett Planning Director Bryan Lackey, the area qualifies for the incentives under 2010 Census statistics.

"This incentive is very popular with employers across a wide range of industries including manufacturing, retailing, warehouse and distribution, health care and new business startups," Allen said. "Existing employers can also benefit from an Opportunity Zone based on net increases in their current number of employees. As a result the number of Opportunity Zones is rapidly expanding statewide."

Also Tuesday, commissioners gave their seal of approval to an updated Livable Centers Initiative study for the Gwinnett Place area. Leaders first studied revitalization efforts 10 years ago, but the update would qualify the community for Atlanta Regional Commission funds for transportation and other upgrades.

"Gwinnett Place is poised to transform into a mixed-use activity center that will serve as a gateway to greater Gwinnett County," Allen said, adding that leaders are hoping to make improvements using public-private partnerships. "Through the LCI process, stakeholders gained an understanding that doing nothing or maintaining the status quo will likely lead to failure, because it places the area at a competitive disadvantage. Gwinnett Place must evolve and remake itself if it is to be competitive again in the marketplace.

"To achieve this vision, the study recommends the implementation of new economic development strategies, the revision of local land use policies and regulations, new transportation investments, as well as other public investments aimed at changing the current suburban development pattern," Allen added, explaining the hopes to create a "Great Lawn," a green space on both sides of Pleasant Hill Road that will act as a public gathering space.

The plan also stresses the need for more multi-modal transportation facilities, pedestrian walkways as well as additional roadways and bridges to provide connectivity.

In a third move for the area Tuesday, commissioners approved a two-year renewal of a check-cashing facility at Gwinnett Place Mall. The business drew concerns from the community when it was originally approved two years ago, but was passed without comment Tuesday.