

Leaders find encouragement in community, even with failing mall

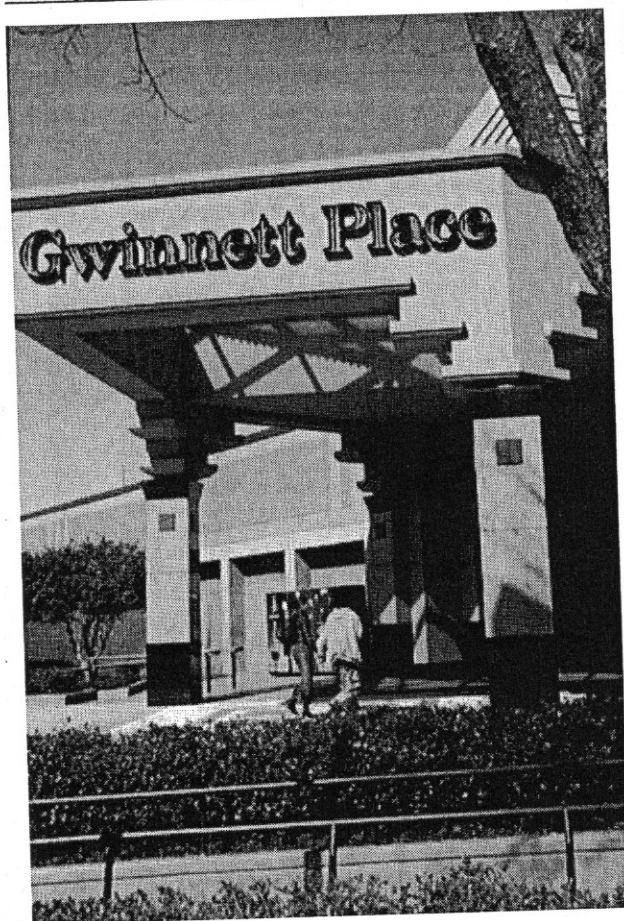
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Gwinnett Place Mall is one of the three major indoor malls in the county. If trends continue residents will have more choices in outdoor malls that are targeted for the communities.

centers dotting every highway, but in the late '90s an even bigger mall opened less than 15 miles away. Along with the niche Sugarloaf Mills, which offers outlet stores, the county has two of the trendy outdoor malls in Peachtree Corners' The Forum and Snellville's The Avenue Webb Gin.

"That began to dilute the novelty, the uniqueness of Gwinnett Place Mall," Nash said. "But that whole area is still very important to Gwinnett County."

Allen described it as "a vibrant marketplace of many distinct cultures and experiences."

DULUTH -- The newsletter last week sang praises: "More positive news for Gwinnett Place CID." But it couldn't be referring to newspaper headlines.

Not in the same week that Belk announced it would pull its location from Gwinnett Place Mall, another hit for the metro Atlanta shopping center that went through foreclosure a year ago.

The mall, once a symbol of the growth and glory of suburban Gwinnett, has been a sore spot along Pleasant Hill Road for years, so much so that the surrounding business owners signed up to tax themselves in the community improvement district to try to find a way to help it thrive.

But while some of the area businessmen wonder if former owner Simon properties (which owns the nearby Sugarloaf Mills and Mall of Georgia) abandoned the nearly 30-year-old mall last year, they have hopes that the new owner, McKinley Inc., will find a way to revive it. And they take solace in the success of the surrounding area, where new investments have brought a new shine to storefronts and restaurants and a pride back to the community.

With or without a revitalized mall, leaders find things to celebrate.

"It is important to know that the overall rebirth of the area is no longer completely tied to the success or failure of the mall," CID Director Joe Allen said. "Over the last decade, greater Gwinnett Place has begun to evolve while the mall declined." Coming of age Gwinnett Commission Chairwoman Charlotte Nash remembers when Gwinnett Place Mall opened in 1984.

Working in the community where she grew up, Nash knew that the county had grown from its rural roots, but "we all thought that (developer) Scott Hudgens was crazy. How could it possibly draw enough people to be successful?"

For the first month or so, the stores were packed, but the novelty wore off quickly and Nash thought people would go back to Athens, Gainesville or Northlake to do their shopping.

The next Christmas, it was evident that Gwinnett had a place as a shopping mecca.

"It was a symbol of a coming of age for Gwinnett County in some way," she said. "It demonstrated that we were (growing)."

And as the county's budget manager at the time, she said the impact to the local tax digest was tremendous.

But over the decades, Gwinnett's shopping options grew. Not only are strip

One of the most culturally diverse sections of the county, it has become a melting pot of Asian and Hispanic businesses, something that mall managers tried to embrace several years ago while trying to hold on to traditional anchor stores like Macy's.

One of the anchors was vacant for years after the merger of Macy's and Rich's, but it was filled a couple of years ago by Asian superstore Mega Mart.

Citing corporate policies, current mall manager Debra Irving said she could not discuss McKinley's plans for the mall or comment on the Belk announcement.

But Allen said the relocation of corporate giants like NCR and Merial to the office space surrounding the mall is one of many recent accomplishments of the "greater Gwinnett Place" area.

Recently, Kaiser Permanente of Georgia completed a \$52 million expansion, and local auto dealers have invested millions of dollars in renovations along Satellite Boulevard. Eateries like Red Lobster, Chili's, McDonalds and KFC have also undergone expensive remodeling, and hotels like the Marriott Residence Inn and Candlewood Suites have gone through remodels.

In terms of government investment, construction on a diverging-diamond interchange on Pleasant Hill is expected to greatly relieve traffic, and miles of sidewalks and streetscapes were installed last year, Allen noted.

"These investments would not occur if there was no hope for this area," he said. "Greater Gwinnett Place's strategic location in the heart of the region's most vibrant community has many of the amenities, infrastructure and transportation needed to complement the rebirth of the area. With all these advantages, greater transformation is possible, ahead of any rebirth of the mall." "Long journey" Both Allen and Nash said retailers have all had to adapt in recent years, not only since the economic recession cut people's spending habits but because of the growth in online shopping.

In a place with newer and more attractive options, Allen said Gwinnett Place Mall may have to do even more to remain competitive.

To that end, the CID has partnered with county and regional officials to find a better way to mix uses in the area, provide transportation options and embrace the diverse population. Tax incentives have been created to draw jobs and businesses.

Nash said the county is keeping its eye on the area, and many agree that change has to come.

"As an entire community, we must understand that doing nothing or maintaining the status quo would lead to failure because it places the area at a disadvantage relative to other competing communities," Allen said. "Gwinnett Place must continually evolve and remake itself if it is to be competitive again in the marketplace."

The process has been slow, but Allen said the signs -- most of them -- are good. And a new and energetic owner for the mall could be the last key to the community's re-emergence.

"These are only the first steps in a long journey to transform the area. There are still many details to be worked out," he said. "But we are beginning that journey toward transformation and re-emergence. So, yes, there is hope."