

# Leaders find encouragement in community, even with failing mall

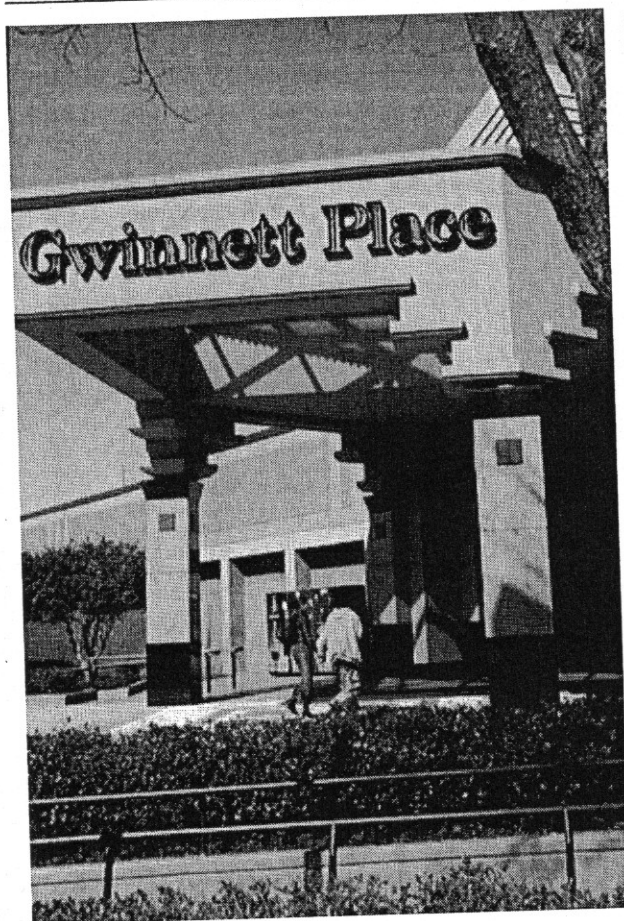
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Gwinnett Place Mall is one of the three major indoor malls in the county. If trends continue residents will have more choices in outdoor malls that are targeted for the communities.

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 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."

