

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

Meadows wants to transform Gwinnett Place

BY DOUGLAS SAMS
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From the time it opened in 1984 and for almost 15 years thereafter, **Gwinnett Place** was a healthy suburban mall surrounded by an ever-growing sea of the biggest names in American retail.

Scott Meadows was a **University of Georgia** student when Gwinnett Place was born and working for other real estate companies during much of its heyday, including the past 17 as a managing director with **Wells Real Estate Funds**.

Now, Meadows finds himself in a new role as president of **Wheeler/Brand Management Co.** He's also in the middle of a real estate conundrum. With the American suburban mall apparently past its prime, how does the more than 1 million-square-foot Gwinnett Place – and the retail district around it – adapt?

"I want to be part of that discussion," said Meadows, who took over as president of Wheeler/Brand earlier this year. "You look at this area and it has so much potential. The question is how do we make this work."

Brand Morgan, who acquired the company this year, believes Meadows can carry on the firm's legacy of leadership in the Gwinnett Place District.

Wheeler/Brand has deep roots there. In the '70s, the forerunner of today's company was founded by Scott Hudgens, the developer who built Gwinnett Place at Interstate 85 and Pleasant Hill Road.

Tom Wheeler and later Tom Kolb eventually joined Hudgens and helped expand the portfolio across Atlanta. By the '90s, when Gwinnett Place was still in its prime, the company had become Wheeler Kolb Management Co., and its presence was ubiquitous around the mall. Its signs dotted several of the best-known shopping centers in the district.

"We are a big part of its past and we want to remain a big part of its future," Wheeler said.

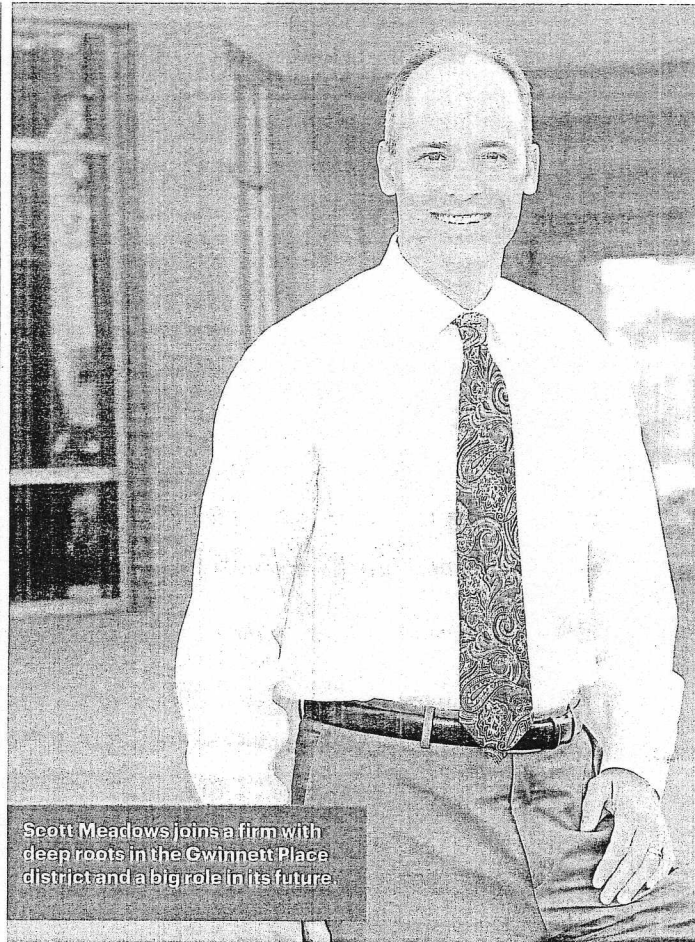
The firm still has a roughly 200,000-square-foot leasing and property management portfolio around Gwinnett Place.

"Scott Hudgens and Tom Wheeler are woven into the fabric of this area," said Joe Allen, executive director of the **Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District**.

"I always called Tom the godfather of the CID," Allen said.

Now, Meadows steps into the spotlight, with a chance to make a bigger difference in Gwinnett, a county he's lived in for almost 25 years. Gwinnett Place is a microcosm of a challenge facing many suburban areas across the United States. It's a symbol of growing population and prosperity in the northeast Atlanta suburbs, it's now a region in transition.

In the '80s and early '90s, it was the only mall in Gwinnett, one of the fastest-growing counties in the nation. For years, as metro Atlanta continued to



expand its road network, city residents left for the suburbs.

Gwinnett's population increased by 19 percent between 2000 and 2005, climbing from 589,000 to almost 730,000. The region's development patterns, linked to the automobile, kept branching northward, first to the Perimeter then up Georgia 400 and interstates 75 and 85.

In a way, Gwinnett Place mall and the retail district were victims of their own success. Developers saw how well the model had worked, so they began to copy it.

By the late 1990s Hudgens had teamed up with developer Ben Carter to build the **Mall of Georgia** in Buford. Two years later Discover Mills – now known as **Sugarloaf Mills** – also opened in Gwinnett. In 2003, some developers saw the writing on the wall.

"Atlanta's biggest problem is that we are just overbuilt with retail," Dan O'Leary told Atlanta Business Chronicle more than a decade ago.

About that time, development patterns also began to change.

After Atlanta won the bid for the 1996 Olympics, it helped usher in a period of renewed focus on the urban core.

In the mid-2000s, as Gwinnett Place

began to lose retail anchors, some developers floated the idea of adding residential towers to the district. The plans faced immediate skepticism. Then the worst real estate downturn the region has faced in more than 20 years snuffed out any lingering ambitions to bring more mixed-use development to the Gwinnett Place district.

Earlier this month, as Meadows looked out over the mostly vacant Gwinnett Place parking lot, he summed up the area's biggest problem.

"I think we have too much retail," he said. "And I think it's time to start thinking about the way we convert some of these properties to different uses."

There will be plenty of voices ready to chime in to that discussion: Gwinnett commissioners; **Moonbeam Capital Investments LLC**, which bought Gwinnett Place last year; the Gwinnett Place CID. All of them will be players in what could be one of the metro region's largest efforts at suburban infill development.

The discussion itself is a sign of the times.

"As a region we kept pushing out, we kept going further into the suburbs with development, and now we see that we can't," Allen said. "We believe we are the

SCOTT MEADOWS

Age: 50

Hometown: South Hill, Va., and Augusta

Lives in: Lilburn

Current job: President, Wheeler/Brand Management Co.

Previous job: Managing director, property services, Wells Real Estate Funds

Education: The University of Georgia

Family: Susan Meadows, wife of 27 years; children: Benton (22), Peter (19), Adrian (17) and Laura (15)

Hobbies: Boating and participating in what his kids love to do (swimming, playing music, riding horses)

central business district, the downtown of Gwinnett County."

One of the biggest challenges is likely convincing Gwinnett political leaders that residential projects are a critical component of any suburban redevelopment, especially Gwinnett Place. The district has about 47,000 daily workers, but only 6 percent of them live there, according to a study put together by **Bleakly Advisory Group**.

Meadows believes multifamily development has to be an option for the district.

"It's a good time to be thinking differently, though it's not an easy task," he said. "This effort is probably going to take the rest of my career. That said, we have been stuck and now it's time to be transformative. I think it's critical to look at live, work, play. We may go vertical. We may convert some of these properties to parks. We have a lot to think about, and I want to be a part of it."

EXECUTIVE PROFILE

If you know any executive whose hobby – or day job – is unusual enough to be in print contact Lisa R. Schoolcraft at lschoolcraft@bizjournals.com.