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Gwinnett Place Mall could be headed for revitalization

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Posted 6:57 p.m. Monday, April 13, 2015

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By Arielle Kass - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The owners of troubled Gwinnett Place Mall have big plans for the property, once considered a crown jewel in the region.

But those plans – for more restaurants, green space, offices, a hotel and residences on the property – are far from imminent.

The possibility that redevelopment could take a while, if it comes at all, has local business leaders looking for ways they can breathe new life into the surrounding area, long considered Gwinnett's downtown, regardless of the mall's fate.

"Right now, people are hungry for ... the plan to redevelop this area," said Joe Allen, director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District.

When Gwinnett Place opened in 1984, it drew shoppers from all over the region. But the openings of Discover Mills (now called Sugarloaf Mills) and the Mall of Georgia in the 1990s cannibalized its traffic. The mall struggled to keep up with the changing market and competition from online sellers.

Allen is spearheading a drive to make to area attractive to redevelopment by adding green space. Initially, the green space would have connected to mall. But, given the worries about the future of



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Gwinnett Place, the latest draft of a plan that would add trails to connect nearby McDaniel Farm Park to a park-like traffic circle at the intersection of Pleasant Hill Road and Satellite Boulevard, largely avoiding the mall.

"There's a lot riding on what happens there," Allen said of the mall, "There's a lot of expectation."

Still, he said, his group and the county have some control over the future of the area, regardless of the mall.

"The day will come where there will be a halo effect," Allen said of projects like the trails.

At the mall, owner Moonbeam Capital Investments intends to add more restaurants to the outside of the building, like Cumberland Mall has, in the first phase of the redevelopment. Shawi Pryor, Moonbeam Leasing and Management's senior vice president, said he wants to add green space to make Gwinnett Place feel more like Atlantic Station.

He said he's also considering trying to lease an empty big-box space as a medical facility and demolishing part of the mall. However, Pryor wouldn't go into detail about those possibilities. Moonbeam, which has another dozen malls, has owned Gwinnett Place since October 2013. It paid \$13.5 million for the property.

Pryor said the ownership is "actively pursuing" filling some of the mall and its outside areas with office and medical tenants, a college, a hotel and a residential component.

"We can't release the plans to the community until we have something concrete that we do believe can be executed," Pryor said.

A piece of the parking lot in front of the Korean grocery store MegaMart has been approved for high-rise residential construction, but all the mall's landowners must agree before anything is built, said Moonbeam CEO Steven Maksin. In addition to Moonbeam, the mall's anchors – like Macy's and JCPenney – own their own buildings.

Nothing will change in the short term. Pryor said it will be 2016 or 2017 before the work goes forward. Maksin called it a "multi-phase" project.

"We're restricted in terms of what we can do today," he said. "A full redevelopment is five years down the road."

Of the 13 malls Moonbeam owns, Maksin said the redevelopment of Greeley Mall in Colorado is furthest along. Moonbeam just announced that it was adding a new anchor this summer, the home decor store At Home. Moonbeam has owned that mall since 2012.

Though Gwinnett Place still has a number of national tenants – Victoria's Secret, Forever 21 and Foot Locker among them – it has also lost tenants like American Eagle. JCPenney closed earlier this month. And the roughly two dozen tenants Pryor said the mall has added since Moonbeam took over are largely local retailers, many without a Web

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presence. The percent of Gwinnett Place that was filled, which was in the mid-40s, is now in the high 60s, Pryor said.

"We embrace entrepreneurship," Pryor said. "Our doors are open to everyone interested in selling their wares."

Business at the mall is still good for Lindell "LJ" Jones, owner of Greatest Barbers Barbershop. But Jones said he doesn't depend on walk-ins from the mall, and he doesn't get many.

In late March, most of the shoppers in Gwinnett Place on a Friday afternoon had come for JCPenney's going-out-of-business sale.

Phyllis Lynn said it had been years since she was last at the mall. She lives near the Mall of Georgia, she said, and goes there instead. Lesvia Serrano typically prefers Sugarloaf Mills. And Meaza Amehatsion goes to Perimeter Mall or Lenox Square because she thinks the quality of goods is better there.

"I would not go back to Lenox if I could find it here," she said.

Gwinnett County commissioner Jace Brooks said Moonbeam continues to talk to the county about Gwinnett's intent to redevelop the area. The mall "is critical," he said, and remains a major priority for the county. Leo Wiener, chairman of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District, said he is looking for evidence that changes are in the works a year and a half into Moonbeam's ownership.

"Any minor redevelopment is a step in the right direction," he said. "People are in their corner. They would support whatever they do."

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