



Invested in Success

The Northeast Atlanta CIDs help communities by straddling the public and private sectors

BY RALPH ELLIS

PHOTO BY BECKY STEIN

In the fall of 2013, Gwinnett Place Mall changed hands. Moonbeam Capital Investments, the new owners, wanted to revitalize the three-decades-old mall.

Shawn Pryor, Moonbeam's senior vice president, said the executive director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District contacted him before the deal was even closed.

"Joe Allen said, 'I want to be your guy to make sure you're connected to the right people in the business community,'" Pryor recalls. "We purchased the mall on Friday, and on Tuesday his entire group of business and civic leaders were there to see what they could do to help us out."

For the community improvement district, or CID, that wasn't just a case of business networking. CIDs are invested – literally – in the success of their neighbors.

Property owners in a particular geographic area form CIDs so they can pay an extra tax – up to five mills – to help fund local projects. To be formed, CIDs need the blessing of local government and the General Assembly. When government officials plan traffic, infrastructure or public safety projects, CIDs expect to be part of the conversation.

"The beauty of CIDs is we come to the table with money," says Chuck Warbington, executive director of the Gwinnett Village CID. "We're putting our money where our mouth is."

Community improvement districts have existed in Georgia for 30 years and play an important role in economic development by straddling the public and private sectors.

"CIDs are not governments," says Jim Brooks, executive director of the Evermore CID in Stone Mountain. "They have a very specific purpose. That is to add value to property owners."

Opening Doors to Development: Ann Rosenthal, Tucker-Northlake CID president, at the site of The Meridian at Tucker, a new shopping center under construction in the area

Discover
Your Garden

State Botanical Garden of Georgia

A UNIT OF PUBLIC SERVICE & OUTREACH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Special thanks to our 2015 Gardens of the World Ball Corporate Sponsors



Raising \$210,000, the proceeds from this event went directly to the Garden's most recent campaign, the Children's Garden.





Making Connections: Shawl Pryor, senior vice president at Moonbeam Capital Investments, the new owners of Gwinnett Place Mall

Last August, the Gwinnett Village and Gwinnett Place CIDs teamed up to conduct a weeklong community conversation called the Great Exchange to find out what people want and need in transportation.

"Any expansion of transit in Gwinnett County will come through our CID," Warbington says. "We really felt if anybody needed to lead that discussion, it should be our CID."

Some of the findings were surprising. Though Gwinnett citizens voted "no" in a 2012 regional transportation referendum, most Great Exchange survey respondents favored mass transit.

"The big takeaway out of that is the changing paradigm of Gwinnett residents and business owners wanting transit in Gwinnett County," Warbington says. "It helps with the refuting of folks when they say Gwinnett County would never vote for it."

The Gwinnett Village CID has spent plenty on road projects, including \$1.7 million on the Jimmy Carter Boulevard DDI. It opened to traffic in March 2015 and is the third DDI in Georgia.

CIDs may seem like another layer of bureaucracy, but they make local government more efficient, especially in Gwinnett County, says Emory Morsberger, often called the CID guru in Georgia. He started or helped expand nine CIDs and serves on three CID boards.

"The county looks to the CIDs to lead the way for their specific areas," Morsberger says. "That's a good thing. It saves the county money."

In Gwinnett County, CIDs have funneled millions of dollars into transportation projects. Two of the biggies are the diverging diamond interchanges, or DDIs, over I-85 at Jimmy Carter Boulevard and Pleasant Hill Road. DDIs improve traffic flow by routing cars into the left lanes over bridges to make left turns easier.

CIDs are authorized by the Georgia Constitution as a mechanism for funding projects and services like street and road construction, landscaping, new parks, water and sewage systems, signage and public transportation systems.

A majority of the commercial property owners within a CID's boundaries must vote to form the CID and be subject to its taxes, fees and assessments.

Metro Atlanta has 20 CIDs. Here's how the seven in the northeast metro area are helping their communities.

LESS CONGESTION

At 14 square miles, the Gwinnett Village CID is the largest in Georgia. It represents more than 500 commercial property owners and \$1 billion-plus in property value. The CID leadership always thinks about transportation – and not just asphalt and concrete projects.



Long-term Focus: Joe Allen, executive director of the Gwinnett Place CID

The interchange is expected to improve traffic flow for a nearby, major piece of economic development in the CID.

The Jacoby Group has opened the Atlanta Media Campus and Studios at the old OFS site near the interchange. The 160-acre campus, which has already played host to crews filming *The Hunger Games*, *Furious 7* and *The 5th Wave* among other big-budget films, will eventually feature six soundstages, classrooms, offices, a hotel and multifamily housing. It aims to become the biggest movie studio in Georgia with 10,000 employees.

Nearby, the \$15-million Eagle Rock Studios opened in the spring of 2015 with four sound stages next to the parent company's beer distribution center.

Ryan Hoyt, a senior leasing manager for warehouse giant ProLogis and a Gwinnett Village CID board member, says members usually find the CID to be responsive to their needs. For instance, they may call the CID when they see a pothole or graffiti.

"We can pretty much pick up our phone and have something resolved in a week or so," he says. "If you're dealing with a municipality, it can take longer."

REDEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS

One of the ongoing concerns of the Gwinnett Place CID is the economic health of its namesake, the aging Gwinnett Place Mall.

To aid the revitalization of the mall and surrounding areas, the CID adopted the ACTivate Gwinnett Master Plan, which envisions more greenspace around the mall, walking trails and transportation connectivity.

"We're focusing on redevelopment scenarios so the area can remain successful for the next 30 or 40 years," says Allen.

"We're looking at more of a mixed-use concept," says Pryor. "So though it will be a primary destination for shopping and restaurants, we look to add components to the property, such as medical, office and multifamily."

The Gwinnett Place CID employs a security patrol to complement the police and cleanup crews that remove trash

GWINNETT VILLAGE



JENNIFER TALCUP.COM

from roadways. From January to November 2015, those crews collected 34.9 tons of trash and picked up 863 illegal signs, Allen says.

“We take very seriously the broken window phenomenon,” he says. “If we see a broken window or trash or an illegal sign, we deal with that very quickly.”

But like all CIDs, relieving traffic congestion is the Gwinnett Place CID’s top priority. Financially, it makes sense.

“We’re seeing for every dollar the CID invests in traffic, the CID receives \$8 in return,” Allen says.

The CID’s most visible accomplishment was the opening of the Pleasant Hill Road and I-85 DDI in June 2013. The CID contributed about \$500,000 for the project and pays ongoing costs for landscaping and lighting.

“It benefited anybody who’s a commercial property stakeholder in the CID,” says Andy Sunlin, a CID board member and the leasing director at Cushman and Wakefield, a commercial real estate services firm.

The CID is involved in improving other intersections, such as Pleasant Hill Road and Club Drive, where the CID allocated about \$850,000 toward the total \$3 million cost of the project, Allen said. Construction should start there in late 2016.

BIG PLANS

The Evermore CID is the oldest in Gwinnett County. It was formed in 2003 to give business owners input into the state Department of Transportation’s plan to eliminate reversible lanes on Highway 78, the main road through Snellville.

Today the Evermore CID covers 7.5 miles of that road and includes 489 parcels of land and 600 businesses. Sixteen percent of the CID’s landmass is in Snellville, the rest in unincorporated Gwinnett, says CID Executive Director Jim Brooks.

Brooks says the CID’s main project is construction of the

Money on the Table: Chuck Warbington, executive director of the Gwinnett Village CID

Evermore North Boulevard, a collector road that will run parallel to Highway 78.

“By putting this collector road to the north, we can take local traffic and move it onto the collector road,” he says. “It will offer a route for emergency equipment.”

The 4.2-mile road will be built in phases, with the first section scheduled to open early this year. Brooks says the entire road should be finished in 2020.

The project will cost about \$24 million when completed, Brooks says, with the CID funneling about half that through Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) money and other funding. The federal, state and local governments will contribute the rest.

“You can judge where people’s priorities are by where they spend their money,” Brooks says.

Keeping the new road and Highway 78 looking good is also important. The CID will spend about \$150,000 yearly for landscaping and lighting, Brooks says.

“We talk about the big projects, but many times the fact that the area is well kept and maintained and the businesses are thriving is a big thing,” he says.

“We have no big box stores in the corridor that are vacant. That was a huge accomplishment for the CID,” he says. “The bottom line is, the more economic opportunities there are in a CID, the more we feel like we are fulfilling our mission.”

A MORE PLEASANT PLACE

One of the Lilburn CID’s major goals is to improve the intersection of Lawrenceville Highway (U.S. 29) at Rockbridge Road. That’s where you’ll find the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, an ornate Hindu temple that rises more than 70 feet above the suburban landscape.

“That temple, which is built to last a thousand years, is a major tourist attraction and asset to our area,” says Morsberger, the Lilburn CID’s executive director. “We want to enhance the pedestrian traffic, the vehicle traffic and overall appearance of the area around that temple.”

Most of the CID’s work focuses on U.S. 29, including plans to improve often-clogged intersections at Jimmy Carter Boulevard and Ronald Reagan Parkway.

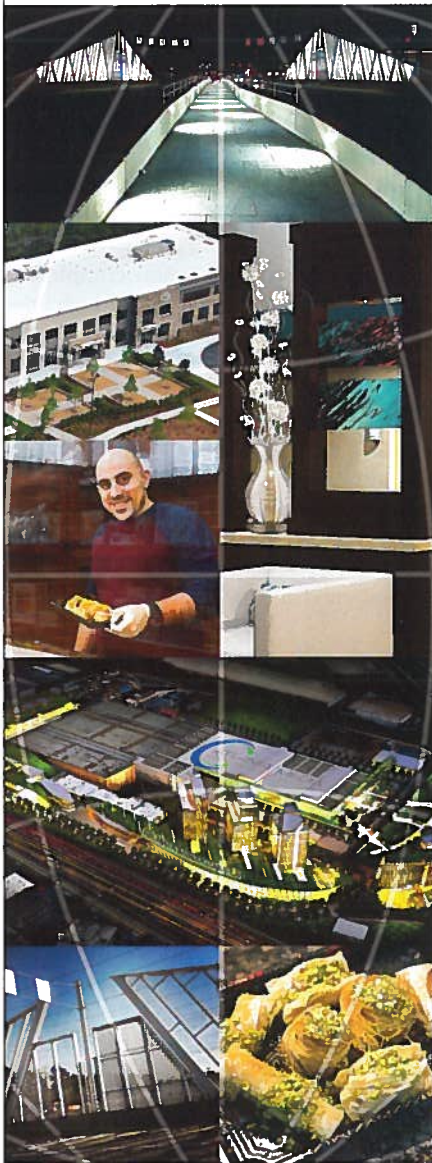
The CID is also involved in a project to improve the U.S. 29 median and has contributed about \$200,000 to those efforts, Morsberger says. That includes landscaping and making the median roadway better looking and more pedestrian-friendly with lighting, pavers, benches, trash receptacles, plaza spaces and signage.

“It makes it a more pleasant place. And when it’s a more pleasant place, then property values go up,” he says.

The CID is working with the Lilburn city government, the county and the state DOT on a plan to realign Lilburn’s Main Street where it intersects U.S. 29. That would be a major step toward a new city hall and library.

The Lilburn CID adjoins the Stone Mountain CID in DeKalb

Gwinnett's GLOBAL GATEWAY



Gwinnett Village
Community Improvement District

Visit gwinnettville.com
For More Information



County, which Morsberger also manages. That's no problem in the world of economic development.

"It's very synergistic," he says. "It works out very well with people who own property in both counties."

The Stone Mountain CID encompasses the downtown area and portions of Mountain Industrial Boulevard and Highway 78 north to the Gwinnett County line. Recent projects have included a \$34,000 investment to plant more than 100 trees and shrubs throughout the Mountain Industrial Boulevard corridor in an ongoing effort to enhance the area's appearance and define a gateway to the district's main corridor. The CID also installed 10 light posts along the Mountain Industrial bridge over Highway 78, one of DeKalb County's busiest bridges, to improve driver safety.

A TREMENDOUS ASSET

The Braselton CID, the smallest in Georgia, was formed in 2011 with a limited mission: To build a multi-use path.

The paved, 10-foot-wide LifePath connects Braselton with the new Northeast Georgia Medical Center, Chateau Elan and other subdivisions, says CID Chairman Scott Snedecor. It's a major draw that's used by walkers, joggers, bicyclists and people driving golf carts.

"It's a tremendous amenity to the community, and it's a relatively unknown amenity and will probably be the impetus for a boom," Snedecor says.

Building the path was not as simple as it sounds. Though it comprises only 24 land parcels, the CID spans portions of three counties – Gwinnett, Hall and Barrow – and includes the town of Braselton along state roads 347 and 211.

The CID chipped in about \$400,000 for the original 1.7-mile section of the project, Snedecor says. Other government entities are involved in extending the path outside the CID boundaries, and it may eventually reach 11 miles.

Now that the path is complete, Snedecor isn't sure what lies ahead for the CID.

"We're real hesitant to look for projects for projects' sake," he says. "We've got a couple of years to collect to pay the [LifePath] project back. Once we pay that off, we can evaluate and talk to the property owners and decide what we'll do next."

SEIZING THE MOMENT

The Northlake area's last big development occurred about a decade ago when Target opened, says Tucker-Northlake CID President Ann Rosenthal.

That's why she's excited about the coming of the 200,000-square-foot shopping area called The Meridian at Tucker. It's scheduled to open in the fall of 2016 at Northlake Parkway and LaVista Road and is expected to have a Dick's Sporting Goods, DSW and Hobby Lobby in the mix.

"We see this as the catalyst that will open doors for other big developments," she says.

The area wasn't really unified on the development front for years, but in 2013 the Tucker CID was formed. It annexed the Northlake area across I-285 the next year, adding more than 200 parcels.

The CID took a big step last spring with the completion of a master plan. That provides a blueprint for future development and redevelopment, including transportation improvements and multi-modal transportation options. The master plan also makes the CID eligible for federal funding for revitalization.

The CID has already invested in beautification on the main corridors, especially at the intersection of LaVista Road and I-285. The CID hired a landscaper based in the CID because "we wanted to utilize local folks and keep funds in the business community," Rosenthal says.

The CID wants to improve traffic flow for vehicles by synchronizing the traffic signals and possibly remaking some of the main intersections. But it's also looking out for pedestrians and cyclists.

One goal is to build a walking-biking trail that would run along the CSX rail line to Johns Homestead Park in Tucker. That trail could connect to the Stone Mountain bike path. The CID is seeking a grant for a feasibility study.

The CID would also like to create a multi-modal connector for LaVista.

"I believe in the next seven or eight years, we will have people movers between Northlake and Tucker and then going to the Doraville MARTA station," she says.

"The time is right for progress to take shape here," she says. "We are seizing the moment." ■