

## Mixed-use developments popping up across county

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By Arielle Kass  
Staff Writer  
[arielle.kass@gwinnettdaily.com](mailto:arielle.kass@gwinnettdaily.com)

LAWRENCEVILLE — The intersection of Highpoint Road and U.S. Highway 78 used to have a huge ditch, an abandoned monument shop and several boarded-up houses. Now, it's a pile of dirt — but one on its way to becoming a mixed-use redevelopment.

"The area was really run down," Jim Corcoran said. "It had basically been left to idle."

That's why Corcoran and others saw it as a prime place to implement a little-used zoning provision that would allow the seamless mixing of homes, retail space, offices and parks.

The designation has only been used twice before — in 2002 at Global Forum, a development on Buford Highway at the Doraville city limits, and in 2004 at Brookwood Village on U.S. 78. But late last month, developers for the proposed Global Station and Satellite Business Center both requested the ability to apply for mixed-use redevelopment status.

Their projects will get a regional review before going through the normal county process.

The county only has three mixed-use options including high-rises, Planning Director Steve Logan said. All are only permitted in Gwinnett's major activity centers, near the Mall of Georgia, Sugarloaf Parkway's intersection with Interstate 85, Gwinnett Place Mall and Jimmy Carter Boulevard.

The U.S. 78 mixed-use project was approved before those restrictions were put in place.

Jeff West, Gwinnett County's manager for current planning, said the mixed-use designations are an underused means of performing redevelopment.

But Corcoran, a member of the Highway 78 Community Improvement District's board and the vice president of development for the Morsberger Group, said he is unlikely to request the designation again.

"It was the right application for what we attempted to do," he said. "I'm not sure we would do another one, though."



Peachtree Ridge senior Ben Emerson reacts during the fourth quarter of the Class AAAAA state championship game.

### On the fast track

The mixed-use redevelopment designation, or MUR, pushes redevelopment applications to the front of a planning agenda that can sometimes have a wait time of 11 months before being heard by the planning commission, then the Board of Commissioners.

The process begins with a designation by the Board of Commissioners that the area is, in fact, appropriate for redevelopment. It is then submitted to the Atlanta Regional Commission for a development of regional impact study before going through the normal planning methods.

Mixed-use developments, or MUDs, are similar to their redevelopment counterparts. As long as those applications are in a major activity center, they do not require special permission to proceed.

Other differences center around how much land is required for the application and whether it is vacant or occupied. Logan said no MUDs have been applied for in the county.

Corcoran, who was the county's director of planning from 1993 until 1999, said what comes after the designation keeps projects from progressing as quickly as their fast-tracking intends.

A concept plan, detailing everything from wall materials and proposed trash cans to the types of flowers and lawn furniture that can be used, requires approval as well. For the Global Forum, that document was 42 pages of pictures and information on paper that measured 11 inches by 17 inches.

"There are problems with the time frame," Corcoran said. "Because of the amount of detail that's involved, you have to tell them down to the specific nail. ... It's very time consuming."

Logan said the projects are intentionally intensive.

"They're not easy to do," he said. "Most developers specialize in something. These projects tend to combine these areas of expertise. Not everyone can do them."

Still, he said, the extra layer of approval may discourage some people from even beginning the process.

### Bringing uses together

For planners, the draw of a mixed-use development is the variety of options and connectivity that can occur. While some developments have business centers next to homes or parks, only truly mixed-use projects can have an apartment on top of a store or homes dotting trails.

Logan said for businesses and residents, the draw is another type of living. "It creates a different kind of environment," he said. "You can meet your entire life's needs in one of these areas."

That's the basis of the "live, work, play" slogan, the phrase that is heard in connection with typical mixed-use developments and the county's new high-rises.

One, La Belle Verde, has already been approved with about 40 percent of its units sold. That project, on 4.7 acres on Steve Reynolds Boulevard, will be

\* developed by Yamasaki.

Developer George Thorndyke unveiled his plans for a high-rise known as The Grand at Gwinnett at the old Macy's building at Gwinnett Place Mall earlier this month. That project calls for two 25-story residential towers, offices and retail space.

Global Station, the third, is one of the two MUR applications.

Wayne Mason, a local developer who worked on Buford Highway's Global Forum, also applied for the MUR designation for the proposed high-rise on about 42.5 acres bounded by Pleasant Hill Road, Old Norcross Road and Satellite Boulevard.

It would feature two 25-story high-rise buildings with 974 units. It would also have a 320-room hotel, a 320,000-square-foot convention center and mixed office and retail space.

Jane Langley, a spokeswoman for Mason, said he sold the Global Forum property several years ago and would not be able to comment about the project. Global Station, she said, would be ready for a high-rise rezoning in February, and she did not want to comment about the project before then. It is on the current site of the Gwinnett Prado and Gwinnett Station shopping centers.

Joe Allen, executive director for the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District, said he believes high-rise developments are the future of the area. All three are in the CID.

Allen said he is looking forward to the area's redevelopment, and local business owners have also expressed satisfaction with the plans.

"We're in the very early stages, but I think we could almost become the next Buckhead, next Midtown, next Perimeter Center," he said. "The first seeds are being planted that will allow this city to grow."

#### Cities part of the process

Gwinnett's cities also encourage mixed-use building. Planners estimate that there are five projects under construction in Duluth and eight in Suwanee. Snellville and Lawrenceville also have mixed-use projects in the works.

Josh Campbell, Suwanee's principal planner, said the city likes the projects because it has a lot of influence over the final designs. Plus, they tend to be popular.

The mixed-use Atlantic Station in Atlanta's downtown has become a destination for diners and shoppers. Campbell said one Suwanee development sold 30 units the first day homes went on sale.

"Obviously, we value it here," he said. "We think it's working out well for us here. We think there are a lot of benefits to mixed use."

One of those benefits, Ken Suddreth said, is that buildings that have more stories allow for more greenspace in a development. Suddreth, Duluth's director of planning and development, said people have always had the opportunity to build planned developments there, but that interest didn't really peak until 2000.

The developments help get people out of their cars, he said, and encourage shorter trips even if people do drive.

Getting people to meet and speak with each other is another benefit of the mixed-use plan.

"It brings people together," Suddreth said. "It encourages more interaction."

Suddreth said the goal of mixed-use developments is to give people more options than just a single-family home in the suburbs. Campbell agreed.

"It creates an area that's livelier than a typical neighborhood," he said.

#### Risky business

But the mixed-use concept is still fairly new, and Logan said the people who take on the projects are taking a big risk.

"They're large-scale developments," he said. "Someone with the wherewithal to put these deals together doesn't come along every day. Anyone doing this project is pioneering."

Global Forum, on Buford Highway, appears near completion while Satellite Business Center, the other active MUR application, is due for completion in 2009.

That project, on 38.49 acres at the current NCR site on Boggs Road and Satellite Boulevard, would feature retail, offices, restaurants, seven-story condominiums and a golf course.

West said NCR plans to shrink its current facility but would still remain on the land.

Global Station would be ready in 2011 and Brookwood Village, the U.S. 78 MUR, is on a similar time line with construction expected to finish in 2012, Corcoran said.

Whether any particular development is the actual first one in the county or not, Suddreth said, they are all part of the first group. All are equally responsible for the concept's success or failure.

"It's good that people are willing to step out," he said. "I think it's a good thing. We would not be supporting something if we didn't think it had possibilities."

Because they are new and because of the commitment involved, mixed-use applications require a lot of attention. But Corcoran said he would like to see even more energy put into the revitalization efforts of areas that are falling behind.

"They certainly can be a useful tool to revitalize an area if done properly," he said. "I think the county needs to get creative in some of their problem-solving exercises. I certainly don't think we can sit around idly and allow some areas to fall down into a state of decay."

\* JUST NORTH of GPCID