

Voters to weigh in on tax allocation district referendum

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LAWRENCEVILLE - A new revitalization tool under consideration on ballots could not only mean new life for Jimmy Carter Boulevard and Gwinnett Place Mall, but it could even mean slower growth in Gwinnett's more rural areas, campaigners say.

The problem, though, is explaining that to voters.

Michael Sullivan, an attorney from Lilburn, is a leader in the Revitalize Gwinnett campaign, which is pushing a referendum to allow tax allocation districts in the suburban county. The tool, known as TADs, was the means of paying for Atlanta's new Atlantic Station.

If the item passes, the county could designate an area for redevelopment and earmark the projected increased property tax value for infrastructure improvements in the area. Developers could leverage bonds to get the money for the improvements, and the bonds would be paid back when property values rise and, therefore, taxes go up.

But the biggest misconception, Sullivan pointed out, is that a TAD means a tax increase. Instead, the millage rate stays the same and taxes only rise if the value of the property does.

In the past several years, the county government has approved community improvement districts and ordinances for senior housing and high rises in attempts to breathe new life into old, dilapidated neighborhoods and shopping centers.

TADs, Sullivan said, could be the final piece of the puzzle.

"TADs are the most powerful tool," he said. "There's no other tool that can provide the infrastructure needs."

Mark Williams, who is chairman of the CID board surrounding Gwinnett Place Mall, said he's already heard some interest in bringing a project like Atlantic Station to Gwinnett.

"There's a very good possibility of something similar to that in the area," he said. "Gwinnett Place had its heyday time. It's time to get the excitement back to the area."

Sullivan said redevelopment could bring a new surge of growth and prosperity, possibly convincing people to buy homes closer to jobs instead of

a new subdivision in the fast-growing parts of the county.

"If you can create safe, attractive, vibrant places to live closer in town, people will flock to that," he said. "You decrease the development pressure on the farther out places."

If the referendum passes, commissioners would still have to approve specific plans for a TAD.