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Cleaning up: Gwinnett County CID Executive Director Chuck Warbington aims to lower crime around the Jimmy Carter Boulevard, Indian Trail and Beaver Run Road Interchanges

Our State: Gwinnett County

Refurbishing, Redeveloping: A fast-growing metro county focuses on improvements

By Carol Carter

Chuck Warbington probably never thought of himself as a superhero. But - a little like Clark Kent in the phone booth - Warbington shed his persona as a mild-mannered civil engineer and became a crime fighter when he took his job as executive director of the Gwinnett Village Community Improvement District (CID).

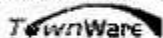
Long heralded as one of metropolitan Atlanta's fastest-growing counties - where much was new, newer and newest - Gwinnett faced an unpleasant reality a few years ago. Leaders admitted the patina had worn off parts of the county, most notably areas of southern Gwinnett. So county officials went to work trying to figure out how to first stem the decline then turn it around.

The solution they came up with was CIDs - three of them. Warbington's CID - covering the Jimmy Carter Boulevard, Indian Trail and Beaver Run Road interchanges along Interstate 85 - is the newest, formed this past March. The others are the Gwinnett Place and Highway 78 CIDs.

Thirty miles northeast of Atlanta, Gwinnett is nestled amongst Forsyth and Hall counties to the north, Barrow, Walton and Rockdale counties to the east and DeKalb and Fulton counties to the south and west.

The county grew so fast, says Scott Morris, director of economic development for the Gwinnett County Chamber of Commerce, that some areas of community development were overlooked by necessity while the county was running as fast as it could just trying to keep up with growth.

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Gwinnett managed its phenomenal growth, Morris says, "as best as I think anybody could have. There aren't too many places out there that have ever had to deal with growth this fast and manage it in a way that has maintained - as Gwinnett has - one of the better school systems (and the largest) within the state of Georgia. We managed the growth and still kept the faucets running."

Now, Morris says, "I think we've kind of caught up to the degree to where we're putting some more focus back into the community infrastructure. When you look at what's happening with the county at large," Morris says, "what you're seeing is the more established municipalities on the southern side are dealing now with a lot of redevelopment - old downtown Norcross, Snellville and Lawrenceville."

Lawrenceville visibly demonstrates Morris's point. On that city's pretty town square, trendy shops such as the Paper Fairy and the Flying Saucer Cafe and Bakery have moved in, setting a Buckhead-esque tone that didn't exist there before and which may become even more evident now that Lawrenceville has become a college town. The new four-year Georgia Gwinnett College, located near the intersection of Georgia 316 and Collins Hill Road, is Georgia's 35th state college. It was scheduled to begin junior-level courses this fall and be fully operational as a four-year college by 2008-2009.

Coinciding with the redevelopment of many of its downtowns, Gwinnett is - for the first time - also dealing with older commercial facilities. "There's still new stuff coming in, but for the first time we're seeing a lot of emphasis put back on the next phase of the highest and best use of the southern half of the county," Morris says.

Most brand new development is occurring in the northern part of the county.

Growing Upward

Something else new to Gwinnett is a coming skyline. High-rises were unnecessary when the county's growth spurt began 20 to 30 years ago "because we didn't have the density of people," Morris says. But last year the Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners voted to allow both high-rise buildings and mixed-use developments in major activity centers along the Interstate 85 corridor.

Two huge new projects may be coming to Gwinnett County. Developer Wayne Mason's proposed Global Station, a mixed-use development, would combine retail, condominiums and commercial properties near Gwinnett Place Mall. And a Philadelphia company may purchase the 144-acre OFS Brightware fiber-optic plant at I-85 and Jimmy Carter Boulevard. If completed, Warbington says, the project will include commercial property, lofts and condominiums, and a hotel.

In August the Gwinnett Commission approved a proposal for two 25-story condominiums on Steve Reynolds Boulevard. To balance this type of growth, Morris says, there still are plenty of good industrial tracts available, "and something like 800 plus buildings on the market."

Warbington has noticed a lot of property changing hands in his CID - and not just once. "It's changing two and three times, a real good indication that there are a lot of speculators coming in because this is good investment property right now."

But property value isn't Warbington's top concern. It is, instead, reducing crime. "Crime is number one, and I would probably say that crime is number two," he says. The crime consists mainly of theft, drugs and prostitution.

The last diminished for a while when some hotels in the area filled up with victims of Hurricane Katrina. "But once FEMA cut off the money for the Katrina victims, the hotels started going back to trying to stay afloat and doing what they can to do that"

Laura Best-Moore, her husband and two partners own eight Burger King franchises, all but one in Gwinnett County. They had nine, but closed the one on Jimmy Carter Boulevard partially because of crime. "We had a couple of armed robberies there where

the manager's life was threatened," Best-Moore says, "and even the Burger King Corporation was willing to let us close that location."

One big problem with theft emanates, Warbington says, from the area's demographics, specifically the large number of Hispanics in his CID. "I'm not saying that the Hispanic population is criminal, but a lot of crime follows because Hispanics carry a lot of cash on them. A lot of the people that we end up arresting know to come to this area. So that's one of the things we're going to try to do is work with some of the Hispanic leaders to help them understand that banks are good."

The problem with the banks, says Victoria Chacon, publisher of La Vision, a Hispanic daily newspaper headquartered in Norcross, is that they require two forms of identification to cash checks, and many Latinos carry only one form of ID.

Still residing where he grew up - in tiny, quiet, Dacula in the northern end of Gwinnett County - Warbington says he was thrust into unfamiliar territory when he began his job as head of the Gwinnett Village CID: "Being from this area and growing up in this area, to be honest, I don't know how to outreach to different types of population," he admits. Realizing his own limitations on this front, Warbington says he is counting on the diverse makeup of his board of directors to help him out.

Diverse populations from various cultures, Morris says, are coalescing in Gwinnett County, coming from other parts of the United States partly because they find clusters of people like themselves in the county and partly because they know there are growth opportunities in Gwinnett.

"We have much more diversity in our population today than we've ever had," Commission Chairman Charles Bannister noted in his 2006 State of the County address. "Instead of a mostly white, suburban, bedroom community, Gwinnett County is now more like the great American melting pot where many cultures mix and swirl together to make an aggregate that's stronger than any of its individual components."

With two Burger Kings near Gwinnett Place Mall, franchisee Best-Moore would like to see more office and residential and less retail in the area. "Right now, the area is not a destination in itself. It's just an area that people want to get through as quickly as possible to access the freeway. We'd like to see it really become a destination."

Changing Patterns

Changing traffic patterns is a priority for all three CIDs and for Gwinnett County as a whole. The county's Comprehensive Transportation Plan projects that demand for transportation services will continue to be strong over the coming decades with Gwinnett residents expected to make nearly 2.5 million total trips per day over the next 20 years, an 85 percent increase over current trip numbers.

The county broke ground on 37 road construction projects in 2005, and Joe Allen, executive director of the Gwinnett Place CID, is hoping for more efforts to alleviate congestion at Pleasant Hill Road, Steve Reynolds Boulevard and Old Norcross Road.

Next up on his to-do list is transportation. "We have just finished a transportation study, and we're getting ready to prioritize the recommendations that came out of it. On the list of possibilities is everything from changing intersections to streetscaping, that is, adding decorative mast arms for traffic lights, along with coordinating streetlights, benches and trash receptacles similar to those in DeKalb County's Perimeter Center CID."

Transportation changes can't come quickly enough for Scott Rolston, general manager of Gwinnett Place Mall. "We don't have 10 or 15 years," Rolston says, "so if there is anything the CID can do to move along transportation programs, we want to see that. The road in front of the mall was not designed to handle the amount of traffic that it has now. It makes getting to my shopping center very difficult."

That would be a problem for the mall in any case, but Rolston has the added issue of competition from Gwinnett's two other malls, Discover Mills in Lawrenceville and The Mall of Georgia in Buford.

Surprising as it is to many Atlantans who still think of Gwinnett Place as one of metropolitan Atlanta's newer malls, it is, in fact, two decades old and the area around it is in decline, which is among the reasons the Gwinnett Place CID was created.

Allen - who grew up in Gwinnett, attending elementary, middle and high school in the county - is among those who say it seems like yesterday when the mall sprang up out of a cow pasture. The only property still in the Gwinnett Place area that also was there when the mall was built is a cemetery. Everything else from back then is gone, Allen says, swallowed up by 4.3-million square feet of retail space.

The area declined, Allen says, because of mergers, moves and the recession of 1999-2000, which he says hit Gwinnett especially hard. A prime example of a merger, he says, is the combination of Rich's and Macy's department stores. Macy's moved into the Rich's space at Gwinnett Place Mall, leaving a huge vacant parcel, which has been purchased but not yet developed. Likewise, stores outside the mall such as Wal-Mart and Target upgraded to larger formats, then vacated their old facilities.

"I think they gave the perception that the area is going down," Allen says. But fortunately, that attitude is changing. "There's a sense of optimism now that we didn't have, say, two or three years ago when we started doing this," he adds.

Brett Harrell, executive director of the Highway 78 CID and former mayor of Snellville, was jubilant on a Friday morning early in the summer, having just received "great news" on two items he'd been working on for quite some time. One was the CID's request to the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) for a design variance to plant crepe myrtles in the new median that will be constructed on a six-mile stretch of Highway 78 inside Harrell's CID.

The second was GDOT's approval to replace overhead wires that hold the traffic signals at 13 intersections with mast arms and to add illuminated signs informing motorists of the cross street they're approaching. This project also will add fiber-optic cameras and radar detection devices to monitor traffic volume and change the lights according to the volume.

Construction of the Highway 78 median is set to begin early next year, and the work will take 24 months. The bulk of funding will come from GDOT. But, Harrell adds, "We were successful last year in getting \$10.1 million out of Congress in the federal highway bill."

Northern Expansion

While parts of Gwinnett work to revitalize, the northern portion is preparing for - and experiencing - growth. In fact, the county's population is projected to increase by 62 percent over the next 20 years, with employment expected to rise by 89 percent.

Beautiful new town centers are evident in Buford, Suwanee and Duluth and herald additional growth. In Duluth, which has created a modern and inviting live/work/play environment around its busy Town Green, additional improvements are on the way, to the tune of \$7.03 million.

Gwinnett County exemplifies the complete spectrum of development, Morris says - from established cities such as Duluth, to places like Dacula and Braselton, which are just joining the game.