

Gwinnett Place CID strives to keep business area viable

It used to be pasture and a trailer park. A truck stop sat nearby.

Then, in 1984, Gwinnett Place mall opened, and the Pleasant Hill Road area in Duluth became the county's retail hub.

Today of course, this commercial core has fierce competitors. Discover Mills. The Mall of Georgia. The Avenue Webb Gin. The Forum.



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MY OPINION

The Gwinnett Place mall area hasn't hit rock bottom, though. An old Service Merchandise is now Wild Bill's, an entertainment venue. A shuttered Borders has turned into an Asian health salon. Cho Won, a Korean diner, occupies an old Folks restaurant building.

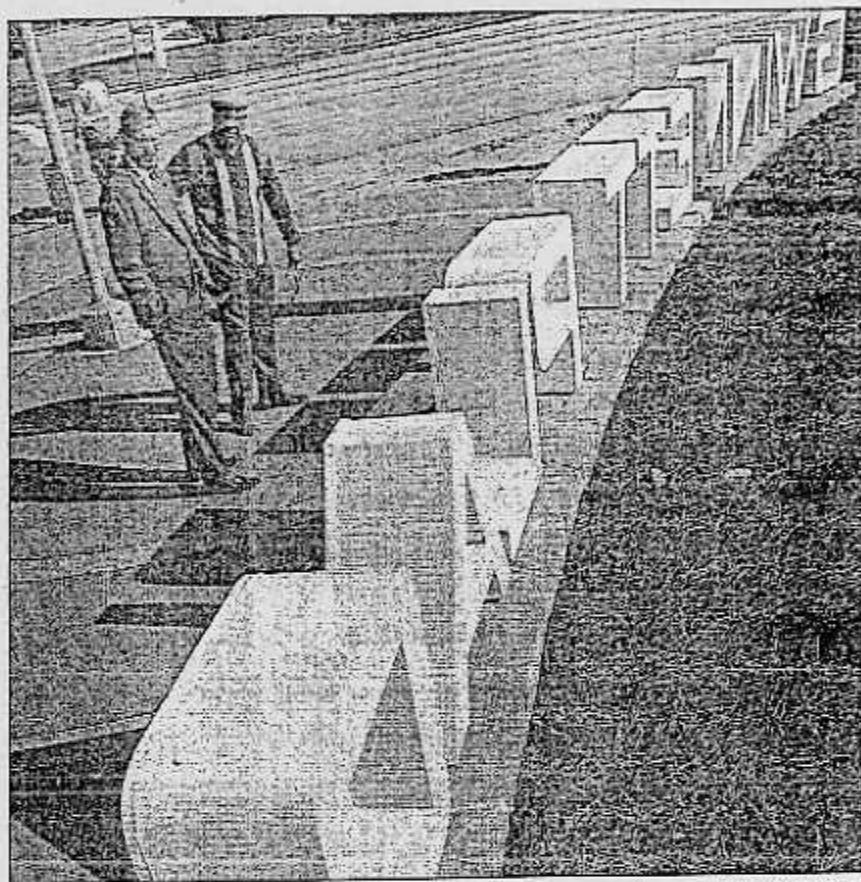
So by no means has the commercial core vanished.

"It's just different," said Joe Allen, executive director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District, a special district funded by a tax on area properties.

It's the CID's goal to keep this central business corridor from going to pot, from becoming another Memorial Drive in DeKalb County. The district comprises nearly 200 commercial properties valued at \$560 million. It stretches from Pleasant Hill Road at Crestwood Parkway to Satellite Boulevard. It's an area four times the size of downtown Decatur.

On Wednesday, the Badie Tour stopped by Allen's office to see what's cooking and what's planned. He drove me around the district to point out cosmetic improvements, and to explain projects years from reality. If they ever happen.

In the Gwinnett Place mall area, traffic has a choke hold. About 65,000 cars travel Pleasant Hill Road every day. The CID has made transportation a priority. It's trying to devise projects that improve mobility and redirect cars to side streets like Old Norcross



VINOWONG / Staff

Gwinnett Place CID director Joe Allen shows Rick Badie the new gateway monument sign at the corner of Satellite Boulevard and Commerce Avenue.

Road and Breckinridge Boulevard.

A CID transportation study found that, to improve traffic, it would take about \$65.5 million. Reconstruction of the Pleasant Hill Road/I-85 interchange is a must. The study recommends a "single-point interchange" that would provide three thru-lanes in each direction across the bridge as well as dual left-turns. Another idea is to build an overpass north of Pleasant Hill Road that connects Venture Parkway and Breckinridge Boulevard.

Of course, road projects these days are like pipe dreams. The state Department of Transportation faces a \$7.7 billion shortfall. Just to balance the books, road projects are being put on a long-range wish list.

Allen acknowledges what many call a transportation funding crisis. But that doesn't negate the CID's wish to ease traffic woes on Pleasant Hill Road.

"Traffic is our No. 1 issue," Allen

told me. "We can't fund improvements, but the CID can do feasibility studies, bring key people to the table and say, 'What do you think?'"

Allen, though, isn't discouraged. The way he sees it, time is on the CID's side. Traffic upgrades are long-term goals. There's plenty to do in the interim. Add sidewalks. Install signage. He took me to the intersection of Commerce Avenue and Satellite Boulevard, where one of a dozen or so "Gwinnett Place" markers has been erected. He stressed the necessity for high-rise residential projects.

"Someday," Allen said, "this will be the new Buckhead."

For more information about the Gwinnett Place CID, visit www.GwinnettPlaceCID.com.

➤ Rick Badie's column appears on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Contact him at 770-263-3875 or e-mail: rbadie@ajc.com.