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**Downtown: Does Gwinnett have one?**  
*With 13 cities, the county's central hub remains a mystery*

**By Arielle Kass**  
 Staff Writer

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Staff Photo: Su Anderson  
 Some officials and residents believe Gwinnett Center complex was mentioned by a number of people as a leading candidate for the county's downtown district.



Joe Allen, director of the Gwinnett Place CID, thinks that eventually, the Gwinnett Place area will link with Discover Mills and the arena to create a huge district.

But Main Street may not go through downtown.

"People are definitely playing over here, they're definitely working over here but I don't think there's any expectation for this to become a traditional downtown," Masino said of the area. "I can never imagine the arena

LAWRENCEVILLE - The Gladiators and the Force play here. The Gwinnett Braves will soon join them.

Miley Cyrus, Keith Urban, Carrie Underwood and Kanye West have all belted out tunes within the county's borders. Shoppers flock to three regional malls, The Forum at Peachtree Parkway and The Avenue Webb Gin. Venues like Medieval Times have been popping up across the county. A water park has been proposed in Buford.

The time has long passed since Gwinnett County was just a sleepy suburb to its downtown neighbor, Atlanta.

But as Gwinnett grew, as it added shopping, eating and entertainment options, did it create a downtown of its own? Is there such a place as downtown Gwinnett - the central district where everyone comes together? Should there be?

Caryn McGarity, the director of Gwinnett's Convention and Visitors Bureau, said she doesn't think such a place exists. But that doesn't mean the potential isn't there.

Concertgoers, sports fans and students all come to the Gwinnett Center, whether it's to see a show, root for the home team, perform in a dance recital or take a walk through the sculpture garden. But once they're there, there is little for them to do other than what they came for.

If the huge arena complex became more of a hub, McGarity said, maybe it could be downtown Gwinnett.

"We definitely need this area to be more of an entertainment district, to have restaurants and a jazz club. We need more things within walking distance," she said. "I'd like to see more art galleries. ... I want people to find a really neat place to go and have dinner."

For Nick Masino, the vice president of economic development for the county's Chamber of Commerce, Sugarloaf Parkway - where the Gwinnett Center is housed - is already the county's main street.

being a true downtown."

It's the number of cars coming in and out of the complex that precludes that, Masino said. A true downtown is walkable, and between the sprawling parking lots and busy lanes of Sugarloaf, the area is not necessarily pedestrian friendly.

Even so, the Gwinnett Center complex was mentioned by a number of people as a leading candidate for the county's downtown district. Several county school bus drivers waiting at the Jacqueline Casey Hudgens Center for the Arts Monday afternoon, though, don't even think it's in the running.

"It's not feasible to do anything here," Ralph Draffen said. "Here, it's too busy, with all the activities going on."

Power of the feet

So where is downtown? It depends on who you ask.

Joe Allen, the director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District, said Gwinnett Place Mall has been the county's central business district for more than 20 years, now. While Pleasant Hill Road may not look like a traditional downtown, Allen said everything can be found in the area.

"For me, Gwinnett Place is central," he said. "We are that downtown area."

The answer is just as clear for developer Emory Morsberger, who has spent the past five years redeveloping Lawrenceville's downtown Square.

"Lawrenceville is blessed to be the county seat," he said. "It's almost in the dead center geographically. It has a huge base of employment. ... It's better than most on pretty much all fronts."

Other contenders for the title include the Mall of Georgia, the new AAA Gwinnett Braves baseball stadium that has yet to be built and, once it is redeveloped as a mixed-use community similar to Atlantic Station, the OFS site on Jimmy Carter Boulevard.

Morsberger said that project could take over what he thinks is Lawrenceville's downtown mantle, but its location on the edge of the county makes it unlikely. Other county draws - like the area malls and the Gwinnett Center - he dismissed outright.

"It's not a place where you go to hang out," he said of the Gwinnett Center. "You don't walk around it. When I go to downtown Atlanta, you can walk around."

Walkability is a huge issue for downtowns, county bus driver Michael Mueller said.

"Gwinnett County, the way it's built, is just spread out," Mueller said. "It's not really a downtown feel. You can't say, 'Let's walk over to the cafe.' You have to get in a car and drive."

Mueller, who is originally from Connecticut, said his version of a downtown area has sidewalks and is easy to get around. Some of the possible downtown areas could achieve a better status, he said, if only it was easier to maneuver around them.

Allen, of the CID, thinks that eventually, the Gwinnett Place area will link with Discover Mills and the arena to create a huge district. The two areas are already strongly linked, he said, with performers and athletes at the Gwinnett Center sleeping at the Marriott near Gwinnett Place Mall and fans heading into the area to eat.

Although the areas may be connected, chamber vice president Masino said, it is unlikely that they will become further intertwined.

"The great divide is I-85," Masino said. "It's not a welcoming thing to walk around a four-lane road. I'm not going to walk to Discover Mills. ... There's enough research that's been done. To create a true downtown, it has to be walkable."

Too big for a center

Maybe that means there is no place as downtown Gwinnett. Or that there shouldn't be.

"I don't think it has arrived yet," said developer Doug Spohn, who was involved in creating Duluth's downtown and is behind the delayed downtown project in Snellville. "People are only going to drive so far. ...To have one area in a county as large as Gwinnett is doesn't make much sense."

Charles Bannister, chairman of Gwinnett's county commission, said that as the county seat, Lawrenceville probably has more of a county-wide downtown than anywhere else in Gwinnett.

But even that is not a true center.

"The one thing Gwinnett County's doesn't have is a central town location," Bannister said. "I don't know that anybody planned or thought it out. I think Gwinnett County has done quite well without a downtown."

Lawrenceville resident Jon Mayes said he'd never before contemplated downtown Gwinnett's existence. And it doesn't make a difference to him whether there is one or not.

"I don't really think it matters," Mayes said. "You can't manufacture a downtown. It's real, it has substance. I can imagine downtown Gwinnett being filled with plastic chains. I want a place that's unique."

The county has a lot of regional draws that are unique, Gwinnett Village CID director Chuck Warbington said, but those areas are better classified as activity centers than true downtowns.

The new Gwinnett Braves stadium or a water park in Buford, for example, could entice people from across the region to come to the area, he said. But individually, they do not make up an entire downtown area.

And even if they did, Warbington said, that downtown would not belong to the entire county.

"It'll be just like another activity center," he said. "It'll be a major regional draw, but we've gotten too big to have one downtown draw for the county."

Cities provide a sense  
of community

For Warbington and others, that doesn't mean that downtown Gwinnett doesn't exist. It means there are several.

With 15 cities, Gwinnett County has more than any other in the state. And the majority of them have their own downtowns - whether it's a few stores, like Dacula or Grayson, or a large area with green space, shopping, food and entertainment options, such as in Norcross, Lawrenceville, Duluth and Suwanee.

Some cities, realizing their downtowns are lacking, are trying to create something more for local residents. A project in Lilburn's downtown is adding offices and condominiums. Snellville is creating a downtown district behind its new city hall.

Spohn, the developer of the Duluth and Snellville projects, said he thinks his Wisteria Drive development really will become Snellville's central gathering place.

Having a downtown, he said, creates a sense of place for an area.

Warbington agreed. He said that although 80 percent of Gwinnett residents live in unincorporated portions of the county, most identify with the city they are closest to, and by association, that city's downtown.

"People associate themselves with an area," he said. "They give a lot of residents a sense of place, a hometown where people gather."

Masino, who is also the former mayor of Suwanee, said each of the cities' downtowns has something unique to offer residents. Every one of them has something going on, whether in a historic downtown area or in new development, he said. Every one of them is different.

"Gwinnett's downtowns are so awesome," he said. "I don't think there's been a time in Gwinnett's history that

there's been this much excitement and opportunity in the downtowns."

#### Creating downtowns

Duluth's city administrator, Phil McLemore, said that city's town green was built almost exactly as he envisioned it. The new downtown area used to be a parking lot, he said, and the home of several empty buildings.

Since the town green and fountain came off the ground, other cities - most notably Suwanee - have followed similar plans, marrying water features and green space to create gathering spaces. Norcross is reinventing its downtown with Lillian Webb Park, adding that element to its city.

Robert Kirby and Michelle Lanford, Duluth High School seniors, spent Monday afternoon sitting on a wooden swing on an otherwise-empty Duluth Town Green. Lanford said she spends a lot of time there, playing frisbee or jumping in the fountain, when it's on.

Both said they like exploring other downtowns in the county, but have an affinity for Duluth's.

"It's an amazing place to go," Kirby said. "When there's a big festival, it's awesome. There's so much to be around."

Other downtowns continue to revitalize and expand. In Buford, Planning Director Kim Wolfe said a mixed-use project - Buford Village - near the historic area will not detract from that city's downtown, with its row of restaurants and art galleries. It has always been the downtown area, she said, and will continue to be in spite of new development.

The key to a good downtown, Spohn said, is a mixture of residential elements with social gathering sites. For a retail area to work, he said, it needs residents and employees to be nearby.

Bannister said there is no central business district in the county, but that each of the cities in Gwinnett satisfies a different need for residents. He described downtowns as places where people live, go to work, watch movies or enjoy the outdoors, but said there are no rules for what makes a proper downtown.

A downtown needs to be able to sustain itself, Spohn said. Particularly now, with gas prices rising, people want a downtown that they are close to, that is easily accessible.

Because Gwinnett's cities are so spread out around the county, Morsberger said he thinks what they offer is enough that there is no need for a central, county-wide district.

"People are seeking that sense of community," he said. "You don't have it in sprawling suburbs. People are looking to towns to provide that."

McLemore said although the county as a whole may lack one, the cities are able to step in to create the downtown feel that people want.

"It's parades down Main Street, it's schools in a cluster," he said. "It's where everybody knows one another. It's the Mayberry that people look to, that they grew up with on television."

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