



Community Improvement Districts keep focus on the future



Elizabeth Hollister is executive director of the Upper Westside CID.

SPECIAL

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Almost every facet of business has been impacted in some way by the Covid-19 pandemic.

For the metro area's Community Improvement Districts (CIDs), one of the biggest impacts has been the acceleration of some of their top-priority projects due to construction being deemed an essential service and the lessening of traffic from stay-at-home orders. The pandemic also has led

to CID leaders themselves meeting regularly via Zoom to discuss their own region's issues and ways they can work together.

Several CID leaders shared with the Chronicle their current wins and challenges, budget concerns and what they are looking forward to in 2021 as the pandemic continues.

What were some of your CID's biggest "wins" in 2020 despite the pandemic?

Elizabeth Hollister, executive director, Upper Westside CID: Upper Westside CID completed 12 capital projects including signalized pedestrian crosswalks, pocket parks and public art initiatives. We launched a master planning effort to create a roadmap for project implementation over the next decade.



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Nicole Hall, owner and managing principal at Nickel Works Consulting LLC.

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Nicole M. Hall, CID administrator and owner/managing principal of Nickel Works Consulting LLC: The West End CID was awarded the Roadside Enhancement and Beautification Council (REBC) grant by the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) to assist with our signature landscaping project on I-20 at the Lee Street and Lowery Boulevard exits. We also received a contribution from Georgia Power to help with projects. We are working with the Atlanta University Center Consortium and the city of Atlanta for a third phase of the landscaping project.

Joe Allen, Gwinnett Place CID executive director: The biggest win of 2020 was Gwinnett County's purchase of Gwinnett Place Mall. This has been an effort the CID has been promoting for more than 10 years.

Malaika Rivers, executive director, Chamblee Doraville CID and partner, Lexicon Strategies: The CID launched in mid 2019, and since then, it has been a whirlwind. We spent the year developing our inaugural Mobility Master Plan, which identifies 28 capital improvements worth \$22 million. Earlier this month, the board approved advancing the first project, an effort with Doraville to provide safe pedestrian, bike and intersection improvements along Shallowford Road. Our sights are also set on working with Chamblee to improve traffic movement at the five-way intersection at Peachtree Road and Peachtree Boulevard. We are also representing our commercial business interests as the state plans the elevated Express Lanes along I-285, which will begin construction in 2023. We are also a funding partner with various cities and CIDs to develop Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) solutions in the future Express Lanes.



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Jim Durrett is president of the Buckhead Coalition.

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Jim Durrett, Buckhead CID executive director: We completed approximately \$800,000 of repairs to our sidewalks and crosswalks in partnership with the city of Atlanta. We began approximately \$5 million worth of street and streetscape improvements within the northwest quadrant of our district. We finished all of the prep work for the third and final phase of our Peachtree transformation between Maple and Shadowlawn. We established a security patrol that places off-duty Atlanta Police Department officers in co-branded cruisers during overnight hours, and we made substantial progress on numerous other major capital projects.

Gerald McDowell, executive director, ATL Airport CIDs: One of our biggest wins for 2020 was the completion of the \$13 million GDOT Diverging Diamond Interchange, servicing the intersection of Camp Creek Parkway and I-285. Our AACIDs Freight Plan, valued at \$313,000, was also successful. Based on some of the recommendations, we look forward to improvements throughout our districts, especially at the Camp Creek Parkway and I-285 interchange, that will offer a navigational ease for freight mobility. Another great win was the installation of 14 (30 as of February 2021) Flock License Plate Readers in both the Airport West CID and Airport South CID. [Also], as a result of our \$350,000 Transit Feasibility Study, we are now in the exploratory phase of a Personal Rapid Transit (PRT) system in the AACIDs Mobility District. Despite the pandemic, we created an AACIDs PRT Advisory Group with representatives from key transit influencers such as MARTA, GDOT and Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport.

Ann Hanlon, Perimeter CIDs executive director: Our Transportation Management Association (TMA), “Perimeter Connects,” has been a leader in telework efforts for over 15 years. [The program offered] 25 webinars and continuous surveys for HR professionals [to stay] on top of the changes and mood in the market. Our board also approved funding for 13 additional projects to incorporate into our Consolidated Master Plan. The DeKalb PCID continues to work with our partners at the city of Dunwoody and GDOT on designing improvements to the on-ramp to 285 eastbound from Ashford Dunwoody Road northbound and the Ashford Dunwoody Road Trail in front of Perimeter Mall. The CID and the city of Dunwoody together completed the mid-block crossing on Hammond Drive this past May.

Gil Prado, executive director, Boulevard CID: It was announced in 2020 that Amazon signed a more than 1.1-million-square-foot lease at the Chattahoochee Logistics Center along Campbellton Road. The new \$62.5 million facility will occupy a 100-acre logistics site, which once served as a clay mine. Also, the Fulton Industrial District is undergoing a 21st century transformation, with new class A industrial developments and redevelopment of older warehouses.

Alyssa Davis, Sugarloaf CD executive director: Our biggest win was the completion of our largest roadway project to date, Sugarloaf Parkway corridor improvements. This project was funded by the Gwinnett County SPLOST and the Sugarloaf CID. The CID contributed funding for aesthetic upgrades including mast arms, pavers and landscaping. Gwinnett County and the Sugarloaf CID were also awarded a \$750,000 SRTA GTIB Grant for improvements to Sugarloaf Parkway. This project will continue the improvements from the new entrance to the Infinite Energy Center parking decks up to Meadow Church Road.

Emory Morsberger, Gateway85 CID executive director: Gateway85 was able to meet and exceed project goals, welcome new members to the district, host the first virtual candidate forum for the Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners Chair position and much more.

Kristin Winzeler, North Fulton CID program director: We were able to open one of our largest projects to date, Windward Parkway Phase II, in November 2020. Windward Phase II is a \$7.18 million interchange and roadway improvement project, and partners included GDOT, SRTA, Fulton County and the city of Alpharetta. We also made progress on our NFCID bus

shelter program. In partnership with the city of Alpharetta, five bus shelters will be installed. The first two are under construction, and a total of three will be completed this summer.

Tad Leithead, executive director, Lilburn CID: Security cameras, Jackson Creek Trail, Hood Road/Bryson Park Design, and our wayfinding and signage program.

Matthew Lee, Tucker Northlake CID executive director: The adoption of the Downtown Tucker Grid Plan, to restore the alley and street grid from the 1890s, and our work with GDOT and the city of Tucker on a future express lane exit at I-285 and Northlake Parkway.

What challenges did the pandemic present to the CID and how did you overcome/deal with them?

Rivers: Like everyone, the pandemic forced us to think quickly in regard to the ways we connect with our community, however it did not hold up any of our planning efforts. In fact, it allowed projects under construction by the city of Chamblee to move faster due to the decreases in traffic.

Morsberger: The pandemic brought challenges including reduced in-person contact, mandated closures and questions of the future. We were able transition to online meetings, frequent communication with members and partners, staying tuned in with local health resources to provide updates to our members, and resumed maintenance and projects as they were safe to do so.

Durrett: Rising crime rates and a huge shift from office work to work-from-home were the most significant local impacts. We had already seen some upward trends in crime, but when the pandemic hit, they accelerated tremendously. We've helped APD boost overnight patrols by funding additional officers and vehicles, and we've also worked with the Buckhead Coalition and other civic leaders to create and implement a security plan to address some of the lawlessness within the district. We also had planned to roll out the next iteration of the Buc shuttle service. We put that on the shelf and will be pulling it out once people return to office work in sufficient numbers.

Allen: During the lock-down, the CID stepped up its marketing efforts to promote area businesses, including the creation of videos, Covid-19 resources on the website, Google Ads and an increased focus on social media. The CID unveiled an enhanced mobile channel showcasing the area's 170-plus restaurants, 20 hotels, hundreds of retail establishments, entertainment venues, car dealerships and other business services. In partnership with Explore Gwinnett, the CID published the 2021 Gwinnett Place Dining, Shopping & Entertainment Guide/map directory.

Hollister: This was a tough year for our businesses and residents. It was an especially hard time to focus on long-term planning. The city shut down the week of our very first master plan public meeting. We pivoted our community engagement to meet people where they were with a mailer, kids' activities, a text message campaign, wikimap, virtual visioning sessions and a socially

distant pop-up retail space. We heard from many folks who don't usually participate in civic meetings and relished the opportunity to experiment.

Davis: The reduced traffic actually made roadway construction easier. We had planning efforts for two of our longer-term projects underway, and we had to pivot to move public input online. We actually found success in moving to online meetings, which allowed people to attend who might have had a hard time attending in person.

Prado: Our area has more than 50 million square feet of industrial space and employs more than 28,000 essential workers in manufacturing, warehousing and logistics. While initial news about [the pandemic] caused many retail and office businesses to temporarily close, many Fulton Industrial District businesses were experiencing record demand. The CID was dealing with unprecedented truck traffic and parking issues. Some area employers reported a 250% increase in truck traffic during that same period. Fortunately, we were an available resource ready to assist.

McDowell: We adjusted our business model to virtual platforms. Our weekly beautification and public safety maintenance meant some staff members [had to] meet directly with consultants or local law enforcement, but fortunately, we have an office safety and Covid-19 protocol implemented during such meetings.

How did the pandemic impact your CID's budget?

Hall: The budget of the West End CID was impacted at the start of the pandemic when we halted our expansion efforts. The planned revenue increase was delayed due to the severe impact that the pandemic had on the businesses in the district, primarily the small businesses. We have seen a slowdown in property tax payments which we believe is due to businesses re-prioritizing funds to keep their businesses running. With the loans and grants available, we anticipate the property owners will get back on track with payments as the economy rebounds from the pandemic.

Morsberger: We are anticipating a 15% decrease in revenue due to the pandemic.

Rivers: Our 2020 property tax revenues actually ended 12% higher than originally projected because of the strong real estate growth in the community and the value that's been created. Having said that, those CIDs that house real estate assets that have softened during the pandemic (i.e. office) will see that reflected in future property revaluations, while those that have strong asset classes (i.e. industrial and logistics) will see even more value created. Chamblee Doraville has a healthy mix of assets. We are also in a good position to attract public funding from our cities, regional and state agencies, which will supplement our budget.

Davis: We didn't see big impacts in our 2020 tax collections but expect that the impacts will be seen in the 2021 tax assessments later this year.

Allen: The CID reduced its 2021 operating budget in response to potential reduced revenues in 2021.

Hollister: Taxes are based on beginning of the year values, so we expect the effects of Covid will become clearer in 2021.

McDowell: Fortunately, our budget was not impacted but there were slight delays in tax collections given the various governmental mandates or policy realignments for commercial property owners in our area.

What are your CID's focuses this year?

Hanlon: Our main focus is to continue to be resilient. We are engaged in conversations with Dunwoody and GDOT as GDOT moves forward with new and replacement bridge work in the district. Our board also approved funding for a mural that will be completed this spring at the bus entrance to the Dunwoody MARTA station.

Durrett: In addition to making progress on crime, we are on track to break ground on four major projects in 2021: the final phase of improvements to Peachtree Road; a roundabout at Phipps Boulevard and Wieuca Road; widening of Piedmont Road between Lenox and Peachtree; and the first phase of complete street improvements on Lenox Road. In addition, we will begin making repairs to the Peachtree streetscape that we have built over the past 15 years.

Leithead: This year our focus is security, wayfinding, beautification and the Hood Road project.

Prado: The pandemic accelerated existing trends related to the growth of e-commerce and shifts in the industrial real estate sector. The CID's focus on making the Fulton Industrial District safe, clean and vibrant was further reinforced by the pandemic's demands on e-commerce, food production and logistics needs.

Hall: Our main focus this year is our Interchange Gateway Project with GDOT and the execution of a public safety program in conjunction with the police departments of Atlanta University Center Consortium and the city of Atlanta. The pandemic has not caused the focus of this initiative to shift but the grant application and award notification are delayed. We planned a landscaping project to coincide with the opening of the new Morehouse School of Medicine facilities, however, the project is six to nine months behind schedule. The rollout of the Public Safety Plan will follow the landscaping installation.

Davis: In addition to working on our transportation projects, we are focused on community branding and preparing for people to come back in person. We are also continuing our expansion efforts to add more properties to the CID.

Winzeler: We kicked off an update to our master plan, Blueprint III, in late 2019/early 2020. The full update will be completed this spring. We made sure to take the impacts of the pandemic into consideration while going through this planning process.

Allen: Focus in 2021 will be redevelopment of the Gwinnett Place Mall site, the beginning of exploring ways to redevelop the site, engaging the Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners and county residents to set a new vision for the property.

Hollister: As the pandemic set in, we recognized a community desire for public art, to add some positivity to everyday routines. We set up a neighborhood art grant program, negotiated with MARTA to put a mural on their facility wall and hired local artists to paint our signal cabinet boxes. These projects were so well received that we decided to double down on the program for 2021.

Lee: This year our focus is on implementation of the Downtown Tucker Grid Plan, supporting the development of the Tucker Path and more long-range planning for the Northlake District.



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Gerald McDowell is executive director of Aerotropolis Atlanta CIDs.

McDowell: The pandemic emphasized the need for technology solutions for our property owners. For example, the use and addition of LPR cameras offered 24-hour monitoring. Couple this with our new AACIDs Public Safety Advisory Committee, with representatives from our six cities and two counties, and we now have access to several cameras throughout both Fulton and Clayton County.

Morsberger: We are focused on forging ahead with our infrastructure projects: installing sidewalks, pedestrian lighting, intersection upgrades and more. We're also looking at several projects resulting from our freight study to begin this year.

Did your relationships with other CIDs change because of the pandemic?

Hall: Nickel Works Consulting has worked with other CIDs and still are currently. Our expansion work with the South Forsyth County CID (SoFoCID) continued during the early months of the pandemic and we are currently working on another expansion for them. The 2020 revenue increased by approximately 62% and we anticipate a similar increase for 2021. We have been in touch with other communities with interest in forming CIDs, but our recommendation is to wait and revisit later in the year.

Davis: We are working with Gwinnett County and Gwinnett Place CID on the Loop Trail, one of the county's signature trails that connects our two CIDs. We are also working with Gwinnett Place CID and Gateway85 CID on the bus rapid transit (BRT) corridor study connecting our three CIDs.

Prado: CIDs work primarily independently because we are bound to a specific geographic area. At the same time, there is considerable sharing of communication and knowledge among CIDs, especially with issues that affect us all: the economy, transit, transportation and the pandemic. Everyone is looking for new opportunities to raise their levels of service, especially during challenging times.

Allen: With the pandemic, all the metro Atlanta area CIDs came together via Zoom to share experiences, best practices and support.

Hollister: It has always been energizing to swap notes with other CIDs as we all work to improve this great region. During the pandemic, the CIDs set up a regular check-in on Zoom, which I hope will live on.

Leithead: I was deeply involved with Cumberland CID and served on board of some others. We have a great partnership now with the other Gwinnett CIDs. We have all been affected by Covid, but progress has continued.

Hanlon: The region's CID executive directors "meet" [virtually] on a quarterly basis to discuss issues. This has been especially important during the pandemic as transportation projects across the state continued to move forward. We all are maintaining open lines of communication with GDOT on the larger regional projects and how they affect each district.

Lee: We are definitely closer as a result of the pandemic. We would have never agreed to meet as often in person due to the travel commitment, but informally gathering via Zoom has been a good fit. We've discussed everything from taxation and transportation to street racing and vacancies. As widespread as we are geographically, none of us is in a bubble.

Rivers: We are immediately adjacent to the Assembly CID, which covers the former Doraville GM plant, and have collaborated with them to identify access and roadway improvements that impact our shared local streets. Additionally, we are part of the effort by seven cities and four

CIDs to develop BRT in the future Express Lanes. We have our sights set on additional collaborations along Buford Highway as well. In the future, I see potential collaborations with the Perimeter, Buckhead and Gateway85 CIDs, as they are commercial markets relatively close to us. The pandemic has not impeded any of this work. It's just a matter of working smarter and looking around the corner to see where future opportunities may be.