

# Finding the right mix: Experts on Gwinnett Place Mall's long-awaited redevelopment

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## GWINNETT COUNTY

By August, the team managing the redevelopment of Gwinnett Place Mall expects to put forth its final plan to the public.

Local leaders plan to raze most of Gwinnett Place Mall, a fossil of suburbia's past, and [replace it with a dense mixed-use development anchored by housing](#).

The team managing the redevelopment unveiled two strategies, which call for 2,400 to 3,800 residential units and a mix of office, retail and park space. Now it's about creating the right mix, developers and planning experts say.

The county is expected to select a final strategy, along with cost estimates, for transforming the site by August.

"You've got to have enough of all of the different seasonings and flavors to make the dish special," said [Nicolia Robinson](#), director of urban planning and design at Cooper Carry. "If you omit something, then it's bland."

The county purchased most of the mall for \$23 million, following repeated broken promises by former owners to restore it. The mall, once a de facto downtown area,

started to decline in the early 2000s after the Mall of Georgia and Sugarloaf Mills opened.

Avalon in Alpharetta and Halcyon in Forsyth County are often viewed as blueprints for creating suburban mixed-use destinations. The county and its partners hope create something equally as viable.

The county challenged [Vanasse Hangen Brustlin \(VHB\) – the lead consultant on the project](#) – to only present “data-driven, market-supportable and financially feasible” plans, said [Joe Allen](#), executive director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District. That’s why 25-story high-rises are off the table, he said.

One of the strategies proposes a denser development that would take shape at a faster pace, which residents overwhelmingly preferred at a recent event, Allen said. It also includes a cultural center with performance and event space.

The buildings at the project could average between three to six stories. The core of the mall would be replaced by a central greenspace with smaller parks and trail connections around the property.

## **Creating a cultural hub**

The cultural center and greenspace could help create a “public realm,” Robinson said, in which visitors can take part in the development without walking into a store. Robust event and programming schedule will be crucial for bringing the site to life.

Both plans include walkability and bike improvements for Ring Road, which encircles the mall property and connects to Pleasant Hill Road. Bus rapid transit – in which buses run mostly in dedicated lanes with signal prioritization – [would be worked into the final plan](#).

A successful destination requires a great location, a box checked by Gwinnett Place Mall. It’s close to Interstate 85 and in the heart of the most diverse county in the Southeast. Local restaurants offering worldwide cuisine dot the busy stretch of nearby Pleasant Hill Road.

“I think the public’s ready for something to happen,” Allen said. “Everybody wants to continue to enhance the diversity that is Gwinnett Place. We don’t want to lose that at all.”

County leaders plan to integrate the existing character of the area into the final redevelopment plan. Ideas include an international library, food entrepreneur incubator space with ghost kitchens and event space dedicated for nonprofit and cultural organizations.

"I applaud them for that," said RocaPoint Partners Principal [Phil Mays](#), whose firm conceived Halcyon. "How do you ingrain yourself into the fabric of what's already there? I think that's a good first step."

## **The right ingredients**

Most of the flourishing mixed-use centers attract a robust daytime population, plus a nighttime population of residents who interact with the development after workers head home, said [Tim Perry](#), managing partner at North American Properties.

"I think it's a good solution that accomplishes all of that," Perry said. "It certainly has the ingredients that truly makes it a mix of uses."

Perry's firm is best known in Georgia for bringing Avalon to Alpharetta and pioneering the transformation of [Colony Square](#) and Atlantic Station. He cautioned that development cycles should include a mix of uses from the get-go rather than staggering each use.

"With that much land – and if done with all those uses at the right time – you're creating the market for it," Perry said.

The reimagining of Gwinnett Place could take about a decade to complete, Allen said, based on the timeline for similar mall revitalizations in other states. Mega Mart, Beauty Master and Macy's – all independently owned in separate buildings – are set to remain on the site.

Rather than developing only off market conditions that change every few years, a timeless project comes with flexibility, Robinson said. It will add a layer of longevity to the project if the uses can fluctuate throughout the decades.

"There has to be a reason that people want to be there," Mays said. "That's the key piece to placemaking."



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