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Form and Function

West Metro CIDs are making better transportation modes more aesthetically pleasing

By Jennifer Hafer



Sense of Place: Gil Prado, Boulevard CID executive director

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What do transportation, transit and trees have in common? Besides beginning with the letter “t,” they are all important ingredients for helping commuters get around west Metro Atlanta in a more seamless, connected and visually appealing way.

While the Town Center and Cumberland community improvement districts (CIDs) are excited about the potential of MARTA coming into Cobb County, the Boulevard CID, in southwest Fulton County, is investing heavily in landscape improvements, streetlights and gateway signage.

“We’re using these things to delineate the boundaries of the district,” says Gil Prado, executive director of the Boulevard CID. “It helps create a sense of place and brands the district.”

Improving Intersections

This summer, the Boulevard CID completed a streetscape project at the interchange of I-20 and Fulton Industrial Boulevard. The project included all new landscaping that stretches a half mile north of the interchange and a half mile south along with streetlights, trash cans, brick pattern crosswalks, gateway signage with the CID’s logo, curb repair and a “beauty strip” throughout Fulton Industrial. There is also an area 20 feet in diameter reserved for a public art display on the I-20 westbound off-ramp.

“This is the front door of the district, so it’s important for us that that area look professional and clean and welcoming to the visitors and people who work in the Fulton Industrial area,” Prado says. “Landscaping maintenance will include picking up litter once a week along 10 miles of roads, which is about 55 landscaped acres.”

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The Fulton Industrial corridor is one of the largest industrial corridors in the eastern United States. It consists of about 5,000 acres of industrial property and includes more than 46 million square feet of industrial space and more than 550 industrial buildings.

“There are about 25,000 jobs in the district, representing more than \$1.5 billion in payroll,” Prado says.

Next up are landscape improvements at Camp Creek Parkway and Fulton Industrial Boulevard. Currently there are incomplete sidewalks, no streetlights and only a few trees in the area, according to Prado.

“This area is where all the restaurants are; it’s a services hub,” he says. “We want to make it more walkable and beautify the area. This is where the 25,000 workers go to eat lunch, and we want to make that experience a more pleasant experience.”

Improving the intersections of Camp Creek Parkway and Cascade Road at Fulton Industrial are also top priorities. The Georgia Department of Transportation was working on intersection improvements at Camp Creek and Fulton Industrial this summer, while the Boulevard CID is in the design phase of improving the Cascade Road intersection.

In 2016, \$1 million of Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (T-SPLOST) proceeds were earmarked for the Cascade Road project. Improvements could include dedicated turn lanes, and construction is expected to begin next year.

“It’s a bottleneck, and we’re trying to come up with strategies to relieve that,” Prado says.

Transit Options

Cobb County has long been a bastion of “Never MARTA,” but in November 2019, residents will vote on how, and if, to expand transit in the county.

“Cobb County has a sophisticated bus system, CCT, now CobbLinc, that provides connection to MARTA and covers most, if not all of the county,” says Tad Leithead, interim executive director of the Cumberland CID. “The system is run by the Cobb County government, they own the buses, and that’s Cobb’s transit system right now.”

That could change, however, thanks to the passage of state HB 930, which allows individual counties to pass a penny sales tax to fund transit. It’s expected, if voters say yes in November, that the retail sales tax would generate \$145 million to \$150 million a year in Cobb County.

“Cobb is working on a transit study now on how and where it might make sense to connect to MARTA,” Leithead says. “Options range from bus, flex bus, BRT [Bus Rapid Transit], light rail or heavy rail, and they’ll be [ranked] in order of cost versus return on investment. The CIDs and the chamber are participating in that conversation.” If approved by voters, the county could raise as much as \$4.5 billion over the 30-year life of the tax.

“This gives us the opportunity to do something significant in transit,” Leithead says. “We’d like to see connection to MARTA north to the Galleria and to KSU [Kennesaw State University]. This is an opportunity to look at connectivity.”

A provision in HB 930 gives Cobb an additional option of creating a special taxing district – in one section of the county – to support transit. If the county chooses this option, the board of commissioners and members of the local legislative delegation will draw the boundaries of the district and come up with the project list to put before voters. If the commissioners decide against that idea, they would create a countywide project list for voter approval.

“What’s extremely important to the Cumberland CID is connection to MARTA that will give us access to a regional transportation network and the airport,” Leithead says, “and it’s important to link to Town Center and KSU, which would be primary targets for riding.”

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As home to the 36,000 students at KSU and more than 100,000 employees, the Town Center CID has travelers from the north, east and west creating through traffic, as well as regular commuters and visitors within the district creating a need for increased access and multi-modal transit options.

“HB 930 has opened up new opportunities for Cobb County and our region,” says Tracy Rathbone, executive director of the Town Center CID. “We will be able to delve into transportation alternatives such as express bus services, additional Park & Ride options and explore other options, including the possibility of some sort of rail connectivity. More transportation options bring greater connection to the region and economic development to our county.”

According to Rathbone, the Town Center CID has been studying the topic of transit in the district for nearly two decades, working with the Cumberland CID to identify paths for regional connectivity.

“We played an active role in the creation and passage of HB 930 and are deeply involved in the work within Cobb to determine the best strategies and solutions for moving forward,” Rathbone says. “It is our responsibility as a CID to provide mobility solutions and roadway improvements that solve for both our immediate and long-term traffic issues. We understand that this is a critical part of our community’s success.”

During the Cobb Chamber’s strategic planning process in 2017 to prepare for 2018-2022, the chamber talked to more than 1,000 business leaders across the county through interviews, focus groups, surveys and input sessions, according to President and CEO Sharon Mason.

“Business leaders identified traffic congestion and transportation mobility as their greatest challenge, and in particular want increased connectivity for their employees to get to work more easily, for top talent and workforce recruitment and to improve overall quality of life,” Mason says. “A major factor is that more than 61 percent of our citizens work in a county outside of Cobb and more than 63 percent of our Cobb workers are coming from another county to work in Cobb, so connectivity between counties is very important.”

Expanding transit and mobility in the county is critically important to prepare for the region’s continued growth and to remain competitive for job creation and retention as the No. 1 state to do business, Mason says.

“We support moving forward with input from citizens to determine the best option for Cobb that would connect with the region and believe that our future success as a county, region and state depend on our current and future transportation challenges being met and overcome,” she says.

Leithead says the Cumberland CID, the Town Center CID and the Cobb chamber are “eager” for expanded transit in the county.

“From 2016 to 2017, 45 percent of development prospects ruled out Cobb because of a lack of access to transit,” he says. “The chamber and the CIDs are eager to see transit come to Cobb, so we’re supportive, but it’s a matter right now in the hands of the Cobb County Commission.”

While the chamber and the county’s two CIDs are anxious to roll out the welcome mat to more transit in Cobb, at least one county commissioner is reserving judgment, for now.

“I have concerns with a countywide option and special service districts with regard to funding and usage,” says JoAnn Birrell, commissioner for District 3 in Cobb. “I can’t say I support anything right now until all the options are discussed and residents have an opportunity to weigh in. Regardless if the board agrees on a certain option, it will have to be a referendum for the citizens to decide in November 2019.”

Though expanding transit in Cobb is a hot topic around town, the community's business leaders know there is no single solution for curing the county's traffic woes. Luckily, there are several major improvement projects already underway.

The Town Center CID announced in May that Phase III of the South Barrett Reliever project received \$10.4 million in federal funding from the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) – the largest award for a regional roadway project during that funding cycle. The grant was released through ARC's Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), which allocates federal funds for the construction of high-priority projects.

"Since its inception, the Town Center CID has focused on increasing mobility and improving connectivity in the Town Center area," Rathbone says. "The South Barrett Reliever is a key component to reaching that goal. Once completed, it will offer an alternative route for Barrett Parkway, reducing congestion at the I-75 interchange."

The South Barrett Reliever project is the Town Center CID's largest infrastructure project to date and will cost more than \$45 million.

"Everyone who lives, works in or commutes through Town Center has experienced the congestion on Barrett Parkway," Rathbone says. "Soon, the South Barrett Reliever will ease some of this headache, offering more options and reducing traffic. Once this four-phase project is complete, it is expected to relieve traffic on Barrett Parkway by 22 percent."

Phase III of the South Barrett Reliever includes a bridge over I-75 and the newly constructed managed lanes. It will widen, realign and extend Shiloh Valley Drive across the interstate to a widened Roberts Court, forming a continuous road. Preliminary engineering and design is underway, and Phase III is expected to break ground in 2020.

There are two major road projects underway in the Cumberland CID, including a ramp from Akers Mill Road to the new managed lane system. Phase I of the ramp project is under construction, with a total project cost of \$40 million.

"The ramp will open in 2021, best case scenario, but I'm an optimist," Leithead says, "and I think it's doable."

Another north-south route aimed at relieving congestion is the Terrell Mill Connector. The \$30-million project is being funded entirely by Cobb County and the federal government, according to Leithead.

"This route connects Windy Hill Road north to Terrell Mill Road," he says. "Right now, all of that north/south traffic is either on 75 or Powers Ferry. On the west side, that north/south traffic is on 41."

It may take a while for all of the transportation and transit improvements on the west side of Atlanta to come to fruition, but commuters can look forward to a future with multi-modal transportation options that improve accessibility and mobility for all.

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