



# Committed Communities

**On the western side of Metro Atlanta, these five community improvement districts are enhancing the region for businesses, residents and visitors**

**BY KENNA SIMMONS**

PHOTO BY JENNIFER STALCUP



In a city like Atlanta where business is basic to its DNA, having a way for commercial property owners to voluntarily tax themselves to improve the infrastructure and public safety of their community just makes sense. That's what community improvement districts (CIDs) do, and it's no surprise that there are more than 20 of them in Metro Atlanta.

Five CIDs on the western half of the metro area are tackling everything from landscaping at interstate interchanges to creating nature and walking trails to building bridges – literally. Some are laser-focused on their traditional role of roads and streetscapes, while others are developing greenspace and launching bike-share programs. All of them are committed to making their communities stronger for businesses, workers and residents.

## Gateway Marietta CID

Executive Director Joe Knight describes the Gateway Marietta CID as being sandwiched between two heavyweights, the Town Center and Cumberland CIDs. What's in the middle? A big gap – and that's what Gateway Marietta wants to fill.

Formed in 2014, the new kid on the block came about as one of the efforts to

**Good Impressions:** Gateway Marietta CID Executive Director Joe Knight

tackle the area's biggest problem, the downtrodden Franklin Gateway corridor (formerly Franklin Road). Over a number of years, aging apartment complexes there fell into disrepair, and the area became notorious for crime. The city of Marietta "decided to start over," Knight says, allocating \$64 million to purchase and tear down some of the apartment complexes in 2013 and embarking on an ongoing redevelopment effort.

It's already sparked massive changes. Major League Soccer team Atlanta United FC built its 37-acre, \$60-million headquarters and training facility on Franklin Gateway. The Home Depot moved its IT department to the area. And crime is down about 40 percent since the CID was founded.

Despite its small size – the CID generates about \$300,000 a year – the district has already launched a multi-year, \$1.3-million landscaping project at the Delk Road and South Marietta Parkway exits on I-75. The first phase was completed last year.

"We're going to look at anything that's going to make a good first impression [for Marietta]," says Knight.

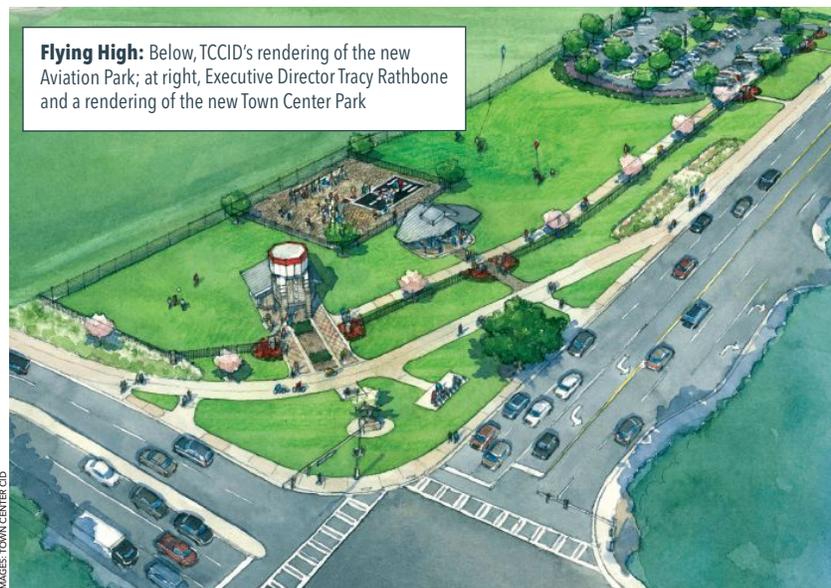
It's also working with the Cobb County Police Department to purchase equipment for mobile security cameras and license plate readers that allows the police to link their smartphones with security cameras at participating private businesses.

And it's engaged in two major feasibility studies that could have big impacts. One looks at reworking the South Marietta Parkway interchange to make two big parcels of land accessible for development. The other explores extending Franklin Gateway from Banberry Road to State Route 120 (Roswell Street). The main driver there is the I-75 managed lanes, which are 27 miles of reversible toll lanes scheduled to be completed in 2018, that will have an entrance/exit at 120.

"Currently the CID is about a half-mile away from one of the entrances and exits," Knight says. "You kind of have to go around your elbow to get to your thumb. So we're trying to see if we can create a direct shot."

As for the district's long-term future, Knight says it may be a cliché but he believes the area can be a true work/live/play community anchored by Atlanta United. "This could be one of the major soccer headquarters in the Southeast," he says. "So you'll have the state-of-the-art [soccer] park, plenty of affordable housing options and lots of great places to work."

One thing the district could use is more retail and restaurants. "There are a few good options in the area, but if you work along Franklin Road and you want to go out for lunch, you have to drive to Marietta Square or Cumberland," Knight says. "We'd love to see more options that make it walkable for people who work there."



**Flying High:** Below, TCCID's rendering of the new Aviation Park; at right, Executive Director Tracy Rathbone and a rendering of the new Town Center Park

IMAGES: TOWN CENTER CID

## Town Center CID

Relieving traffic congestion. That's the kind of meat-and-potatoes project that's on every CID's menu, but it's not the kind of chef-inspired creation that wins national accolades. Except in North Cobb County's Town Center CID.

That's where the award-winning Skip Spann Connector, a \$17.3-million project between Cobb County, the Georgia Department of Transportation, Kennesaw State University (KSU) and the Town Center CID (TCCID), links Frey Road to Busbee Drive. Nearby universities – KSU and Chattahoochee Tech – held a competition where students submitted designs for the lighted bridge over I-75 that has bike and pedestrian lanes on both sides. The winning design features a metal structure that reflects the outline of nearby Kennesaw Mountain.

Not only has the connector, which opened in 2016, garnered state and national awards for engineering excellence, it's also cut traffic on Chastain Road by more than 19 percent. It proves that a good infrastructure engineering solution doesn't have to be a boring one, says Tracy Rathbone, executive director of TCCID. "We are looking at infrastructure, [and] we are also looking at aesthetics and quality of life," she says. "How you can put something in place that alleviates traffic, reduces congestion and gets people moving, but also [adds] aesthetically to the community."

Traffic is definitely a concern in TCCID. More than 100,000 workers travel in and out of the area every day. To meet this ever-growing need, the CID is taking a multimodal approach of its own.



First: Roadways. In 2010, work on Greer's Chapel Road kicked off a much larger project, the South Barrett Reliever, that will provide a badly needed alternate around the always-congested Barrett Parkway. A second phase now under construction will realign and put a double-lane roundabout at Shiloh Valley and Greer's Chapel, which Rathbone notes is one of the district's most dangerous intersections.

A third phase will add a bridge over I-75 that, Rathbone explains, will allow people "to access all the businesses along Barrett Parkway but never [have] to get on it." It's projected to reduce traffic along the parkway by 22 percent.

But roads alone won't solve the issue. The Town Center CID started a bike-share program through Zagster, a Massachusetts-based company that designs, builds and operates bike-sharing programs for communities. Starting with just 20 bikes, the program now has the highest ridership of any of Zagster's cities nationwide. And yes, an expansion is planned.

Rathbone says the district wants to transition the program from primarily recreational to functioning as another mode of transit. "We're not going to have bike lanes down Barrett Parkway," she says. "But we can very easily accommodate bike lanes down Busbee or Barrett Lakes."

Last but definitely not least is greenspace. The TCCID is working on three main spaces: Adding amenities to Bells Ferry Trailhead; creating a 3-acre, multi-use Aviation Park next to the Cobb International Airport; and the big one – Town Center Park, 42 acres adjacent to Town Center Mall. Rathbone calls it the crown jewel for the area. Once complete, it will be one of the largest greenspaces in the county, with a small lake, a woodlands area and a linear park that incorporates part of the Noonday Creek Trail between Bells Ferry Road and Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park.

"Commercial developers as well as residential developers see the need for greenspace and trail connectivity and different modes of transit throughout their developments," says Rathbone. "I think that's why you are seeing CIDs look more broadly at infrastructure and quality of life, rather than [just] focusing on the more traditional roadways and traffic signals."

## Cumberland CID

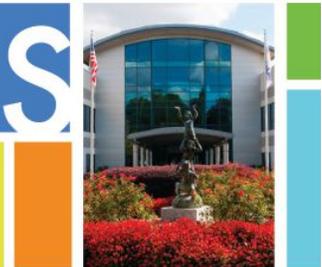
The oldest CID in the state has the newest big development right in its middle: Sun-Trust Park, aka the Atlanta Braves' new home. But when you see "a lot of orange cones," in South Cobb County's Cumberland CID, as executive director Malaika Rivers puts it, they're not all a direct result of the new ballpark.

From improvements to highway interchanges like Windy Hill at I-75 to streetscapes and landscaping, there are more than 20 construction projects underway.

"Many of those are CID projects that have been shepherded by our organization,"



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PHOTOS: CUMBERLAND CID



**More Than the Braves:** Cobb Parkway in the heart of the Cumberland CID, left, and CCID Executive Director Malaika Rivers

she says, noting that infrastructure improvements require extended timelines. “It’s not as though we can think of an idea and then deliver it in a year’s time. These are projects that generally take about 10 years to deliver.”

Others were goosed by the Braves’ decision to move to Cumberland and were put on the fast track “to meet the demands of

some of the transportation network improvements,” says Rivers.

The first project to start construction after the Braves’ announcement was the widening of Highway 41 (Cobb Parkway) to three lanes each way with additional turn lanes from Paces Mill Road to Akers Mill Road; that project was completed earlier this year. It also includes a 12-foot-wide multi-use trail. The



### Planning for future regional progress

- Public Safety Patrols
- Infrastructure Enhancement
- Wayfinding Signage
- Master Planning

Virginia Ave. (Current)

**AeroCIDs Master Plan (2017)**



Virginia Ave. (Concept)



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bridge over the Chattahoochee was replaced in 2016.

The busy Windy Hill interchange, on the other hand, is one that the Cumberland CID has been working on since its inception in 1988. It's a major east-west artery connecting Smyrna to Cumberland, and that intersection has long been a crash-prone zone. The interchange is being re-configured into a diverging diamond to improve traffic flow and safety, with completion expected this fall. Windy Hill was widened and new sidewalks, lighting and landscaping added. Funding came from the CID, a Cobb County Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST), Georgia Transportation Infrastructure Bank (GTIB) grant and federal funds.

One of CCID's highest-priority projects is working with GDOT to design and build an entrance/exit ramp "from the heart of Cumberland" at Akers Mill Road to the I-75 managed lanes. "That's about a \$50-million improvement that we're working on with the state to deliver in the next few

years," says Rivers. Without it, Cumberland drivers would either have to veer across four to five lanes in traffic or travel several miles on surface streets to get on the managed lanes.

Like its counterpart to the north, CCID is focused on people, not just cars. "We're trying to continue our primary mission of mobility and accessibility while also understanding that real estate trends are very much about connectivity and facilitating walkability," says Rivers. For more than a decade, the CCID has been working to build out a trail system that connects workers and residents to the national park along the Chattahoochee River. Rivers says about 60 miles of trail networks are scoped, with 38 miles built and another 22 on the books.

The area has "great bones," she says. Still, one thing on the wish list is a regional transit connection. "Whether that means rail or a rubber tire system – the technology is to be determined," Rivers says. "But this submarket is only growing in prominence. We're already 5 percent of the state's entire economy, and now we're going to be even greater."

## Boulevard CID

Fulton Industrial. It's the biggest industrial corridor east of the Mississippi River, but the area encompassed by the Boulevard CID, along the southern part of Fulton Industrial Boulevard, has been neglected and blighted. When the CID launched in 2010, it focused hard on the basics of public safety, landscaping and cleanup. And it's still making sure those basics are covered seven years later, even as its plans are growing more ambitious.

## MAKING AN EXTRAORDINARY IMPACT

There has been no shortage of incredible rewards for the work that commercial property owners and partners began nearly 30 years ago at the Cumberland CID. Cumberland is experiencing 5 Class A Office Towers, 1.7M square feet of office space, 625K square feet of retail and 5,300 residential units, all of which are part of a \$5B pipeline in private and public investments. This is all made possible because of government partners and business investors like you.



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# By the Numbers

## Gateway Marietta CID

**Footprint:** Approximately 1 square mile

**Founded:** 2014

**Revenue:** Approximately \$300,000 annually

**Commercial Parcels:** 70

**Notable Inclusions:** Atlanta United FC, The Home Depot technology center

## Town Center CID

**Footprint:** 6.25 square miles

**Founded:** 1997

**Revenue:** \$47 million in 20 years

**Assets in the District:** More than \$1.3 billion in real estate assets

**Notable Inclusions:** Kennesaw State University, Cobb County International Airport, Town Center Mall

## Cumberland CID

**Footprint:** 6.5 square miles

**Founded:** 1988

**Revenue:** \$5 million to \$6 million annually

**Commercial Property Owners:** 184

**Notable Inclusions:** The Home Depot, Genuine Parts Co., GE Energy, Travelport, The Weather Co., SunTrust Park

## Boulevard CID

**Footprint:** 8 square miles

**Founded:** 2010

**Revenue:** \$1.2 million annually

**Industrial Space:** 46 million square feet

**Notable Inclusions:** McMaster-Carr Supply Co., Miller Zell, UPS logistics center, Fulton County Airport

## Aerotropolis Atlanta CIDs

**Footprint:** 15 square miles

**Founded:** Airport West CID, 2014; Airport South CID, 2015; combined 2016

**Revenue:** \$2.5 million annually

**Properties:** 1,100

**Notable Inclusions:** Delta Air Lines, Chick-fil-A, Porsche North America

“Having the district be clean, safe and vibrant” is how Executive Director Gil Prado describes it. Public safety is always at the top of the list. In recent years the CID has worked to get property owners to sign up for a program that allows police to come onto private property and arrest trespassers. It has also worked with the district attorney’s office to open a community court in the district, so that minor crimes can be adjudicated in the area. Court officers know the people who come before them by face and name, says Prado, and the CID can help connect people to needed services. He describes it as “actually finding a more tailored solution for why they’re committing the crime in the first place.”

Now Fulton Industrial Boulevard (FIB) is poised to benefit from Atlanta’s place as a freight and logistics hub. UPS is building a \$400-million logistics center near Fulton County Airport that will bring in 1,200 jobs, and another company is eyeing property on the south side of FIB for five e-commerce warehouses. A truck plaza



**Clean, Safe, Vibrant:** Boulevard CID Executive Director Gil Prado

with a restaurant is going in at the I-20 interchange. Across the district, vacant lots aren’t staying that way, and rental rates are on the rise, too, says Prado.

The CID has been working on the designs for road improvements, landscaping, streetlights and street furniture along FIB at the I-20 interchange. The plan even includes a space for public art. The investment is designed to spur more redevelopment at the interchange, says Prado, including retail and restaurants.

“There’s some investment; not as much as we hoped,” says Prado. “Hopefully by the end of the year, once we’ve finished making these investments, food services companies and restaurants will see the value of coming into the area.”



## Master Planning:

Aerotropolis Atlanta CIDs Executive Director Gerald McDowell, left, and a rendering of proposed improvements to Camp Creek Parkway



Designs for improving other FIB intersections at Cascade Road and at Camp Creek Parkway are scheduled for this year, with construction starting in 2018.

## Aerotropolis Atlanta CIDs

East Point. College Park. Hapeville. Atlanta. The two Aerotropolis CIDs – Airport South and Airport West – that in 2016 combined into a 15-mile district encompass a number of cities, plus two counties (Fulton and Clayton). It makes for a busy agenda.

After completing a master plan in 2016, the Aerotropolis Atlanta CIDs have 27 projects planned over the next five to seven years, according to executive director Gerald McDowell. These fall under two goals: changing the brand and perception of the area, and economic development. Public safety, wayfinding, beautification and infrastructure are all part of the mix.

The master plan identified industrial development as the near-term priority, with residential and retail following, and office as a long-term goal. That makes sense given the district's location next to Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport.

Already, crime is down 34 percent in Airport West, thanks to 24-hour private security patrols and extra patrols by off-duty Fulton County police. In Airport South, where off-duty patrols haven't yet been implemented, crime is down 7 percent.

Aerotropolis Atlanta CIDs Program Director Kirsten Mote calls 2017 “a big design year” as the CIDs dig into the project list, which includes plans to enhance three main corridors, Virginia Avenue, Camp Creek Parkway and Phoenix Boulevard; investigating a truck connection between Camp Creek and South Fulton Parkway to alleviate congestion; and establishing a unified brand for the district through wayfinding and signage.

One of the district's challenges – all those jurisdictions – is also a big plus, because it increases the number of potential funders on a project. For example, Mote says when the CID submitted an application for a Livable Communities Initiative plan, nine local partners contributed. “We're going to get a \$250,000

study, and each partner only had to contribute \$25,000,” she says. “That's a huge return on investment.”

But it does mean that coming up with a plan for unified branding may take longer. “Each of these historic neighborhoods has their own unique identity, and we want to enhance that, not take away from it,” Mote says. And then there's the airport, an iconic brand in itself. That's why making all of it work together is probably going to be a year-long process, says Mote.

“We've got a lot of ambition,” she says, “but I'm confident we can accomplish this.” ■

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