



Entrepreneurial Ideas:
Nicole Hall, West End CID administrator, at the West End MARTA station

An Interesting Year

South Fulton CIDs have met 2020's challenges with creativity, hard work and systems to foster success.

BY KAREN KIRKPATRICK

South Fulton County offers up a mix of distribution facilities and warehouses filled with the e-commerce goods that are keeping folks stocked as they stay home. The area is also home to historic sites, higher education institutions, small businesses, hotels, restaurants and major tourist destinations. All have been impacted by the pandemic. Thankfully, most are also covered by one community improvement district (CID) or another.

CIDs are voluntary, self-taxing districts where commercial property owners come together to take on issues including public safety, beautification and transportation. The five CIDs in South Fulton are West End, Atlanta Downtown Improvement District, Boulevard, Aerotropolis Atlanta and South Fulton. The challenges they've faced from COVID-19 vary, but leaders in each CID are rising to the moment with hard work, creativity, determination and a focus on showcasing what makes their district unique.

Embracing the Community

The region's newest CID officially cranked up in 2017 in one of the city's oldest communities, the West End, home of small businesses, historic properties, colleges (Spelman, Morehouse and Morehouse School of Medicine are all part of the West End CID) and industrial sites that straddles I-20 around the Lee Street and Joseph Lowery Boulevard exits.

And thanks to heavy hitters and committed local business and property owners on the CID board, West End CID has seen success in a couple of areas in its short life.

Leveraging funds, the new CID has been able to tackle some public safety initiatives in its first few years, says Nicole M. Hall, CID administrator. "The first year we were able to put in cameras to help the public safety and [address] crime issues."

The CID has partnered with the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) on landscaping the I-20 interchange at Lee Street, according to Hall. There's more work coming there and over to Lowery Boulevard and I-20 that will create a gateway of sorts for the colleges in the area. Word of funding – a \$50,000 grant – for this project came through in September from GDOT's Roadside Enhancement and Beautification Committee.

In addition, Hall says, the CID will work with the city of Atlanta on initiatives related to teens hawking water bottles unsolicited to motorists waiting at the exits in the CID. "We're looking forward to coming up with some ideas, entrepreneurial ideas, for the youth."

It's another way that the West End CID, with its close-knit community and small businesses, is different from some of the more industrial CIDs around the city.

"We ... initiate a lot of programs to help businesses, and typically that is not the



Beautification: Landscaping along I-20, courtesy of the West End CID



Positive Things Happening:
Morehouse School of Medicine
in the West End CID

the King Center, Centennial Olympic Park, the Georgia Aquarium, College Football Hall of Fame and National Center for Civil and Human Rights, it's also "where all this social unrest played out," Robinson says of the protests this summer. "A lot of peaceful protests."

But, he insists, that's the role of the downtown community, to be the gathering place not just for peaceful protests, but for events at hotels, restaurants, sporting venues, and convention and tourist sites.

"COVID has really affected that part of our economy," Robinson says. "We are patiently waiting on a vaccine because I don't think you could make people feel safe any other way at this point."

The quiet has not kept Robinson and his team from working.

There are economic development projects continuing, he says. "We have big projects like the Gulch in south downtown and they're progressing," he says of the 40 acres of mostly railroad tracks and parking lots that's envisioned as a mixed-use development.

But as the pandemic has dragged on, other projects have become more important.

"We turned our attention to helping prop up the safety net in down-

town," Robinson says. COVID has exposed hospitality workers, medical professionals and homeless people to myriad challenges, which Robinson knows he can't solve. Still, the resources of the CID are helping people in ways they haven't before.

Arts & Entertainment Atlanta (AE) doesn't sound like a program to support people dealing with the challenges of a pandemic, but it has become one. Designed as a neighborhood activation and economic development project, AE is a blend of art and advertising that lights up downtown.

Launched in 2017, AE brought new creative signage to particular areas of downtown. Most of the time, the large, digital signs are dedicated to advertising. Other times, though, the signs are reserved for public purposes such as art with a specific focus on local artists and public service announcements.

"During the COVID era they've become incredibly important, for a couple of reasons," he says. "One is that we're showcasing the work of artists during this time. But we also are using them for public service announcements for testing programs or messages to the public about all the things you want people to do in order to stay safe."

"It's become a different kind of plat-



Redirecting Resources: Clockwise from top right, AE signs display public service announcements related to COVID; A.J. Robinson, president of the ADID; and a rendering of The Stitch



role [of a CID]," Hall says. "Because it's a unique CID with so many small businesses, it gives us more of an opportunity to be a support for the community in general."

As the coronavirus has taken its toll, businesses and property owners have needed the CID's support.

"In general, because these are smaller businesses, a lot of them being minority businesses, they've definitely been impacted," Hall says.

Restaurants have pivoted to takeout, and many businesses have been able to take advantage of grants and loans from the city of Atlanta and the Atlanta Wealth Building Initiative, an organization that addresses the city's racial wealth divide.

Hall says she thinks that, for the most part, "people are still surviving. They may not be thriving, but I think they're surviving right now. We see a lot of positive things happening."

When the Gathering Stops

The Atlanta Downtown Improvement District (ADID) is smack dab in the middle of where people gather in the city. That has presented a number of challenges during the pandemic, when gatherings have been limited.

"It's been an interesting year," says A.J. Robinson, president of the ADID and its parent organization Central Atlanta Progress (CAP). "There is always something that is going on and bringing attention to this area. Of course, that all is predicated on people meeting other people, and that is exactly what is not happening at the moment in the middle of COVID."

The ADID is home not just to iconic institutions that draw people, including

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Meeting Vital Needs: Joddie Gray, South Fulton CID administrator

form in the COVID year,” he says. “We believe this concept is going to be picked up in other areas around the country and in other areas of Georgia.”

AE isn’t the only unique project the ADID is working on. Progress on The Stitch, a proposed combination of urban greenspace and public parks that would go over the top of the Downtown Connector, has slowed during COVID-19, but work hasn’t stopped.

They’ve completed a number of feasibility studies and now have moved into the fundraising and partner-seeking phase.

“The logical partners for us are the city of Atlanta, MARTA, the state,” Robinson says. “But it’s just hard to get anybody’s attention here in terms of committing to a big infrastructure project like The Stitch. We’re just patiently waiting for the cloud to clear to advance our work.”

Once The Stitch (so named because it stitches together the two sides of downtown currently cut by the Connector) is sewed up, it will be another gathering spot in a community committed to drawing people in. And that’s important, even in this era of social distancing.

“One thing that we’ve learned just from the last few months of what’s going on here is that our community ... is very visible,” Robinson says. “And we’re very proud of that. We have a very resilient community. We will continue to be resilient. But, dealing with COVID, social unrest and what is a tremendous amount of unemployment, particularly in the hospitality industry. ... We did not predict [this] at the beginning of the year. It’s challenging and an opportunity at the same time.”

Essential Workers

In the South Fulton CID, people – essential workers – continue to gather to produce the products that have become vital during the pandemic. The area, a large logistics center, covers 6,446 acres of commercial and industrial property mostly along the Oakley Industrial Boulevard corridor.

“We have a lot of essential businesses in the area,” says CID Administrator Joddie Gray. “A lot of our businesses stayed in operation throughout the pandemic.”



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Some of the businesses helping keep folks safe and fed – not just during the pandemic, but all the time – are Clorox, Duracell, US Foods and Owens Corning.

“Obviously, Clorox [is essential with] all the wipes and everything we’ve been needing,” says Gray. “US Foods, they deliver to the hospitals. Owens Corning is making a piece for the ventilators. Clorox was

making a piece for the test kits. Really important work going on in the area, where they weren’t able to stop. They might have slowed down operations, but they still needed their workers to get to work.”

And they needed them to get there safely. To help, MARTA put in a special bus route from the College Park MARTA station to the Oakley Industrial Boulevard area. That’s probably had the biggest impact on the CID during the pandemic, Gray says.

“It is a safer, faster, more efficient route,” she says. “It has 10 stops along our corridor, so it goes directly from the College Park Station to our corridor. Having the safer, more reliable form of transportation in our area during the time when people need to get to work – that’s been good.”

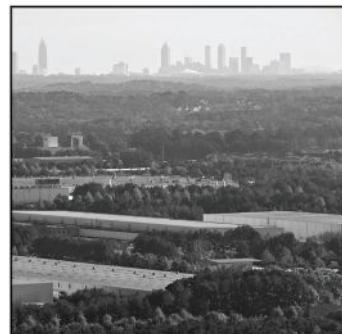
Safe transportation is an important part of the CID’s work – and two key projects are under construction now.

“One is the Bohannon Road sidewalk project,” Gray says. “That again is for our essential workers who are walking from MARTA to their businesses.”

The second project, the Howell Avenue extension, is a way to keep pedestrians and drivers from being stopped by trains. “We have a CSX intermodal facility in our area,” she says. “At least once if not several times a day the train will block the roadway for anywhere up to 30 minutes. This is an additional route that’s going to help people be able to get to work.”

Despite these active CID projects, Gray keeps going back to the MARTA route. “My main concern,” she says, “is really keeping that MARTA route going long term. The route before was very dangerous. Really taking the time to not just think about economic development, that’s very important to us. It’s really important to get our workers to work safely and effi-

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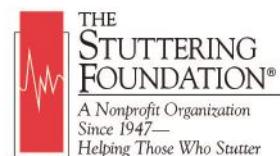
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ciently. Making sure that we are able to staff these essential services. That's really our focus during this time."

Increasing Activity

Another region of essential businesses is the Fulton Industrial Boulevard area. The Boulevard CID is supporting those workers and businesses throughout this pandemic.

"I would say the majority ... of businesses and workers in Fulton Industrial are considered essential," says Gil Prado, executive director of the Boulevard CID. "So, even in the height of the pandemic ... [the CID] was still pretty busy."

The area is home to essential food production companies, including Frito-Lay, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Quaker Oats and Publix's pie-baking facility.

"There actually was an increase in activity," Prado says. "Around the April time-frame, we were having issues with truck parking. Literally in the middle of the pandemic we had a property owner complaining that there were trucks parked in front of their facility. We figured out the trucks came from the neighbor next door. We went to talk to that company and they said, 'We apologize. We had a 250% increase in business.'"

This at a time when there were no cars on the roads in most of Atlanta.

Logistics companies are also keeping

the area hopping. "I was talking to UPS just recently," Prado says. "They're basically running their holiday schedule [in August]. They are as busy as Christmas time right now."

Speaking of Christmas deliveries, Amazon announced over the summer that it would set up shop in the district. The e-commerce giant has taken 1 million square feet at Fulton Industrial and Campbellton Road and will be fully operational before the holiday season.

"A lot of people are shopping at home," he says. "It's benefiting Fulton Industrial."

To help keep truck (and other) traffic moving smoothly around the district, the CID is working with the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) on a freight cluster plan that will study things like trip destinations, improving accessibility, safety and truck parking – which, as it turns out is a struggle for many property owners.

"Truck parking has become a huge issue," Prado says. "A lot of times [trucks] arrive at ... say, 4 a.m., but the facility, it's not open until 8 a.m. So, where do they go for those four hours? What do they do? Truck parking is a big regional issue, and it's definitely an issue here for us."

The plan will take about a year to put together. "We'll be getting a lot of public input, a lot of stakeholder input, not just the big companies – UPS and Pepsi and Coca-Cola – but even talking to the truck drivers and really finding out what their issues are."

The area is also seeing an uptick in private development, Prado says, including five new e-commerce warehouses at Fulton Industrial and Riverside Drive.

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Exciting Development:
Clockwise from top, Boulevard CID's Americold warehouse; CID Executive Director Gil Prado; and a Ryder truck facility

And lest you think a warehouse is a warehouse is a warehouse, Americold has a state-of-the-art refrigeration facility under construction.

Americold "tore down one of their buildings and they're building a new building on the same piece of land," he says. "We're seeing the district get to a place where it makes economic sense to tear down a building and build a new one."

It's a sign that businesses really want to be in the CID, he says. "And that's an exciting development cycle."

Good and Busy

There's been a lot of talk about the downturn in air travel, which might leave some thinking that the area around Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport – the world's busiest airport last year – has slowed along with the air traffic. That would be wrong.

"Because we're located in the airport area and with a number of e-commerce operations ... we've seen an increase in truck traffic, which has caused some additional congestion on our roads," says Gerald McDowell, executive director of the Aerotropolis Atlanta CIDs (AACIDs).

A transit feasibility study that wrapped up in early 2019 and led to several projects – including the potential installation of a personal rapid transit (PRT) system – should help. If it sounds like something out of the *Jetsons*, well, you're not far off. Though it will stay on the ground.

"We discovered [through the study] that there are a lot of jobs in the airport area that are 24/7 jobs, but our MARTA system goes out of operation for a couple of hours overnight," McDowell says. "Workers who rely on public transportation are stranded."

PRT could become an affordable solution to the transit challenges of the 300,000 people who work in the district. The idea is for on-demand podcars that run on a designated track to be available day and night to move people more economically and safely around the airport area. The podcars would run from the airport's domestic terminal to College Park, Hapeville, Mountain View and the international terminal.

Another project that came out of the Transit Feasibility Study is the Virginia Avenue Smart Corridor Study, done in partnership with the ARC, that looked at new and emerging transportation technologies along a two-mile stretch of Vir-



Addressing Transit Issues: From left, the Virginia Avenue smart corridor and Gerald McDowell, executive director of the Aerotropolis Atlanta CIDs

ginia Avenue with the goal of improving safety, walkability and mobility.

"There will be some smart technology that will be installed for crosswalks, for traffic signals, even for bus stops," that will enable people with vision or hearing challenges to safely navigate the area, McDowell says.

In addition to these new initiatives, the

AACIDs are continuing with two ventures that McDowell calls "signature programs: our public safety program and our beautification program."

The beautification program has seen the annual investment of \$500,000 to maintain more than 15 miles of right-of-way including landscaping, mowing and trash removal.

AACIDs invest about \$600,000 each year in public safety, McDowell says, funding that has led to a 40% to 50% reduction in crime in the region. The newest project is a video system that allows businesses to upload security footage to the cloud, which police departments can access in real time.

These initiatives all support the vision adopted by the AACIDs a couple of years ago, says McDowell. "We seek to build a 21st century infrastructure that will support future development of the airport area." ■

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