

# Face Off: Community Improvement Districts' driving regional transformation



February 2024 — The Greater Atlanta region's growth has been significantly influenced by the progress and innovation of its improvement districts. Alyssa Davis, the executive director of the Sugarloaf Community Improvement District, and Gil Prado, the executive director of the Fulton Industrial Community Improvement District, have led transformative projects over the past year. These initiatives have catalyzed the region's evolution driving it forward.

In interviews with *Focus*, Davis and Prado offered valuable insights. Davis discussed the CID's expansion, enhanced security measures, and improved community offerings. Prado, on the other hand, focused on major transportation, safety, and beautification initiatives. Together, their contributions reflect a commitment to enhancing the region's infrastructure and appeal. Additionally, their perspectives shed light on the challenges and opportunities facing the region amidst a rapidly evolving landscape.

## WHAT HAS KEPT THE IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT BUSY DURING THE LAST YEAR?

**Alyssa Davis:** Over the past year, we achieved significant milestones. We successfully expanded the CID, increasing our value to over six times the initial value at our formation in 2016. Securing over \$17 million in projects through the SPLOST program will further propel our growth as these projects are implemented over the next six years. We doubled the area covered through our landscape maintenance program, benefiting new members and the greater Sugarloaf community.

We enhanced security with 35 flock cameras featuring license plate readers, aiding the police. New banners celebrating the district's diverse offerings were installed, highlighting work, dining, shopping, and more. A notable project involves a mural underpass, complemented by upgraded LED lighting. The state-approved permit for this mural signifies exciting progress scheduled for spring 2024. Lastly, an economic impact study revealed that we contribute 7% of jobs in the county, employing almost 27,000 workers and making a \$15.6 billion impact on the state of Georgia.





**Gil Prado:** Last year, a major project was the design of the Cascade Road and Fulton Industrial Boulevard intersection improvement. This elaborate project involves partnerships with GDOT, the city of South Fulton, and ARC also involved. We are currently in the design phase, which has been ongoing for a few years. Federal projects take time, but we hope to start the project in 2025.

Another major transportation project involved receiving \$3.5 million from ARC for an improvement at Donald Lee Hollowell Parkway and Fulton Industrial Boulevard. This intersection involves the city of Atlanta, GDOT, the CID, and ARC. This

funding is federal, with the CID contributing a 20% match of \$890,000. Currently, we are negotiating contracts and setting expectations for the project.

In public safety, we installed 34 license plate readers throughout the district, providing excellent coverage. These readers help in crime fighting, allowing police to search for specific vehicles involved in crimes. Lastly, in landscaping and beautification, we aim to keep the district clean and beautiful. We maintain about 12 miles of roads, a 20% increase from last year.

## **WHAT OPPORTUNITIES ENHANCE THE DISTRICT'S APPEAL AND EFFECTIVENESS?**

**Davis:** We are truly a business and entertainment district, highlighted by the recent grand reopening of the Gas South District's Convention Center. They not only renovated but significantly expanded the facility. Our Sugarloaf Mills mall goes beyond retail, featuring numerous entertainment venues. The area boasts attractive Class A office spaces, housing great companies.

Also, as part of our community vitality, we are witnessing substantial growth in new apartment developments. This expansion contributes to creating a vibrant live-work-play environment, fostering a dynamic and thriving community.

We've made significant efforts to improve traffic flow, but there is a clear need for alternative growth and transportation modes. Our focus includes advancing trail connectivity in the area. Recently, the county approved a transit expansion plan, featuring high-capacity transit services. This development is crucial for enhancing the overall experience for our business community and residents alike.

**Prado:** Over the last four years, especially during and after COVID, the industrial real estate sector has boomed. Initially, around 2020, people staying home led to a surge in online grocery shopping and other deliveries, boosting the freight and trucking industries. Our district, with its focus on food production and housing companies like Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Frito-Lay, Quaker Oats, and Publix Bakery, experienced a spike in job creation and production. This trend continued even into 2023/24, with industrial real estate demand at an all-time high and a record-low vacancy rate. Since 2018, we have added about 5 million square feet of industrial space.

A notable challenge and opportunity is the redevelopment of older properties. Since Fulton Industrial was established in the 1960s, many buildings are aging and need redevelopment. We've seen properties being purchased, demolished, and then rebuilt with modern industrial facilities. The challenge lies in the aging infrastructure, but the opportunity is our proximity to Metro Atlanta and the high demand for such properties, making redevelopment a worthwhile investment for developers and industry.

## **WHAT IS YOUR OUTLOOK FOR THE NEXT COUPLE OF YEARS AND YOUR TOP PRIORITIES FOR THE DISTRICT WITHIN THAT TIME FRAME?**

**Davis:** We're actively working and expanding, with a focus on involving more property owners to enhance our impact. Initiatives like the Loop Trail project aim to connect our district to neighboring areas, fostering long-term growth. Additionally, collaborating with the county for potential transit expansion presents a significant opportunity, which could be transformative for our district.

Our investors primarily consist of property owners, with businesses being tenants rather than members of the CID. While small businesses are crucial, our focus is on benefiting them through projects that enhance the overall appeal of the area, making it more desirable for potential opportunities and business growth.

As the CID, we also strive to serve as a valuable resource. Collaborating with esteemed partners such as colleges, technical schools, Gwinnett County, Partnership Gwinnett, and the Gwinnett Chamber, we aim to be a connector, facilitating small businesses' access to potential resources within the community that could contribute to their success.

### **PRADO:**

Last December, we commissioned Kimley Horn to create an EV master plan for the district, focusing on publicly accessible EV charging for cars and trucks. The plan will assess the district's electric capacity to support a surge in electric vehicles, including forklifts and lawnmowers. The plan will also consider the demand for the next 10 years and identify potential projects for implementing EV charging stations. Additionally, we're looking at wayfinding signage to direct people to these stations.

Another focus is truck parking in the district, potentially integrating truck parking, wayfinding signage, and EV charging at a single site. This is part of our EV's innovation and logistics implementation plan, which follows our freight cluster plan from 2020-2022. With the Inflation Reduction Act, we expect funding for such projects over the next seven years and aim to be prepared to apply for and receive these funds. This plan is expected to benefit the district until at least 2030.

We are also focusing on the redevelopment of the I-20 Fulton Industrial area. Fulton County has acquired several problematic properties in the area, primarily hotels associated with crime, and is working on redeveloping and remarketing them. We'll be partnering with the county on this major project.

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT:**

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<https://boulevardcid.org/>