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Organized To Be Aggressive

Community improvement districts tax themselves to find solutions and get projects shovel-ready

BOBBY L. HICKMAN



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At a time when GEORGIA'S leaders continue to seek answers to traffic congestion, transit funding and aging infrastructure issues, community improvement districts, or CIDs, are pushing ahead with creative solutions to the region's most pressing problems.

Georgia has more than a dozen CIDs, mostly in the metropolitan Atlanta area. Infrastructure gets most of their attention, with projects ranging from building a tunnel under Interstate 75 in Kennesaw to planning a new Windy Hill/I-75 interchange in the Cumberland area to undertaking a novel redesign of the Ashford-Dunwoody Road and I-285 interchange at Perimeter Mall. But CIDs also pursue less obvious, lower-budget initiatives, such as organizing commuter pools, landscaping intersections and making streets more pedestrian-friendly.

CIDs are formed by business owners in a particular area, who tax themselves to support local projects. Local governments must endorse their formation, and creation of a CID requires action from the General Assembly.

"The challenge for CIDs," says attorney Robert Turner of Stites & Harbison, who has worked with community improvement efforts as a board member of the Atlanta-based MillionMile Greenway, "is convincing the majority of businesses within that area to join."

Once the district is in place, land-owners pay extra property taxes of up to 2.5 percent.

The CID, Turner notes, can use funds to support such projects as road, sidewalk and related construction and maintenance; public transportation; parks; water and sew-age systems; and parking facilities. "Funds must be used to benefit the community – not for something like paving a road to one store," he says.

Cumberland Adapts

Created in 1988, the Cumberland Community Improvement District (CCID) was Georgia's first. But adjustments made over the years are allowing it to react efficiently to some new realities, says Executive Director Malaika Rivers.

In earlier years, CIDs mainly used their tax revenues to advance design and preliminary engineering on proposed projects, she notes. But over the past several years, state and federal governments have had less money available to build roads, bridges and other infrastructure.

"We've adjusted our business model to bring more of those projects to completion, which can include paying for construction," Rivers says. "CIDs have adapted because the point of a CID is to advance your projects effectively."

Over the past 22 years, CCID has leveraged about \$9 million in local funds towards projects exceeding half a billion dollars in value, she says. Most of those funds have gone to road construction, but the CID is also involved in smaller projects such as landscaping enhancements. "Twenty years ago, our work program was just a few roads," Rivers says. "Now we've got about 50 projects of several types in various phases, mostly design."

The CCID covers 5.5 square miles at the intersection of I-285 and I-75 in Cobb County in the Cumberland/Galleria area. Rivers says a recent market impact analysis shows the CID has 1.7 percent of Georgia's jobs and accounts for 5 percent of the state's economy. "This area could see another two- to four-million square feet in development over the next 10 years," she adds. "We want to be able to accommodate and capture that growth."

Transit and transit-oriented development are the largest issues facing the district, Rivers says. "We're the only office market that doesn't have access to rail, which is certainly a disadvantage for us." The CCID is working with state and county officials to plan for high-capacity rail. "We're encouraging and partnering with the government agencies shepherding those projects through," she continues.

The largest pending project is reconfiguring the Windy Hill interstate interchange. "It's been on our books for 20 years," Rivers says. "We're hoping to advance this under the regional SPLOST if it is approved by the voters in 2012," she says. The project cost could total \$100 million. Other work in progress includes widening the U.S. 41 bridge that connects Cobb and Fulton counties, adding more trails, building pocket parks and operating one of the largest van pool programs in the country.

The economic slowdown has not been a major factor for the CCID, Rivers notes. Revenues were down about 3 percent from 2008 to 2009, and an eight percent decrease is expected this year. Those figures translate into a \$200,000 drop in a \$6 million revenue stream. "That's not a huge chunk," Rivers notes. "But if it continues to decline, it impacts our ability to bring money to the table."

"We're all about getting 'shovel-ready' – a phrase that didn't exist 10 to 20 years ago," Rivers says. CID leaders are in constant contact with government officials at all levels to make sure projects continue to move forward. "Whether it's money from a highway bill reauthorization, the local SPLOST or the proposed regional SPLOST, we explore every possibility under the sun," she says. Some projects, such as small streetscape work, the CID funds on its own. "But for projects in the \$5 million to \$100 million range, we work to make sure they are not precluded from being considered for outside funding sources."

"CIDs are action- and implementation-oriented agencies," Rivers says. "When a streetscape takes eight years to build because we're using federal funds, there's something broken in the system. But it's our job to move these projects along – either at inchworm pace

or lightning fast.”

Town Center's Best Year

The Town Center Area CID (TCACID), also in Cobb County, was created in 1998 and is having its best year ever, according to Executive Director Lanie Shipp. TCACID has spent several years on studies, engineering work and project preparations, she says. “At a time when the economy is in such dire shape, we are beginning to come out of the ground with a lot of things.”

The TCACID covers about six square miles at the junction of Interstates 75 and 575. The area includes Town Center Mall and its office parks, Kennesaw State University (KSU) and Mc-Cullom Airport. “We’re the only CID to encompass an airport,” Shipp says.

The district’s largest project is an extension of Big Shanty Road, which will provide another east/west corridor to relieve traffic on Barrett Parkway and Chastain Road. Construction began in November 2009 on a project that will take up to two years to complete. Big Shanty was split by the construction of Interstate 75; the project will reconnect the two segments with a tunnel under the interstate. The road will also provide easier access between Kennesaw State University on the west side of I-75 and its new sports complex on the other side of the interstate.

The Noonday Creek Trail, a pedestrian and bike path that will connect KSU, Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park, Cobb Parkway and Bells Ferry Road, is another project. Construction was completed this fall on a section near McCullom Airport, and work will begin in early 2011 on the next segment near Town Center Mall.

In addition to its own revenues, the TCACID received more than \$13.6 million in outside funds during 2009-2010. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided more than \$8 million for Phase I of the Big Shanty Extension project, and the district received \$1.75 million from the Georgia State Road and Tollway Authority (SRTA) for Phase II.

A \$50,000 Georgia Transportation Enhancements (GATEway) grant will fund landscaping around I-75 and Barrett Parkway, while a \$50,000 Livable Centers Initiative grant will help with another phase of the Noonday Creek Trail. “The CID has leveraged its investment to bring other funding to invest in these area projects,” Shipp notes.

“The thing we really lack is transit,” Shipp continues. “Other areas already have it, or [are] much closer to transit than we are.” The CID is working closely with Cobb County on a proposed light rail system that would link the Kennesaw/Town Center area with Cumberland Mall and Acworth.

“We have a site adjacent to the park-and-ride lot on Busbee Parkway for multi-modal transit,” Shipp says. The site will provide connectivity among light rail, van pools, buses and other transportation options. TCACID is also working with government entities on alternative lanes on I-75 and automated traffic signal timing projects for area surface roads. “We’re encouraging anything with a transit component that would come through this area,” she adds.

Shipp also notes her area has done well despite the economic slowdown. “While it’s been devastating for so many people, we’ve only been bruised,” she says. Large company employment has been hit hard, but fast-growing Kennesaw State University has steadied the Town Center economy. She notes a recent University of Georgia study found KSU has a \$4.5-million annual economic impact, accounting for 6,000 jobs on and off campus. The poor economy also provided an advantage when contracts were let for construction projects. “We got better prices on that work, so it all came together at a good time,” Shipp says.

Perimeter Prepares

The Perimeter Community Improvement Districts (PCID) are composed of two legally distinct CIDs – one in Fulton County and another in DeKalb County – that operate jointly to serve the Perimeter market, according to Yvonne Williams, president and CEO. The seven-square-mile footprint lies within four jurisdictions: the two counties plus the cities of Dunwoody and Sandy Springs.

The Perimeter district, in its 10th year, encompasses the largest concentration of medical jobs in the metro area at “Pill Hill,” where Northside, St. Joseph’s and the Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta hospitals are located. The district includes two of the most heavily traveled highway corridors, the northern segment of I-285 and Georgia 400. There are three MARTA stations (Medical Center, Dunwoody and Sandy Springs) in the district, with a fourth (North Springs) immediately adjacent.

Some 100,000 workers commute into the market, and the area could add another 35,000 by 2018, Williams notes. Perimeter has 28 million square feet of leased office space, giving it the top market share in Metro Atlanta.

“This area was a rural pasture in the 1960s,” Williams recalls. It evolved from a typical suburb 20 years ago to an urban center around 2000. While transportation has been a major factor in that evolution, the PCID has also worked to give the Perimeter area a sense of place through such initiatives as pedestrian and bike trails, signage, transit-centered multi-use development and branding.

Williams says the district has leveraged \$14.2 million in local funds into \$86.3 million in transportation and infrastructure projects. Most taxes raised from Perimeter property owners have gone towards design, although in some cases the PCID has “paid full freight” or pooled its money with DeKalb’s to provide matching funds.

The group’s most recent projects were the \$32-million Perimeter Center Parkway flyover bridge, which opened in 2007, and a companion \$8.4-million intersection improvement project. Construction is currently under way on the \$18-million Hammond Half-Diamond Interchange, which provides a gateway from the Hammond Bridge to Georgia 400. Like the flyover bridge, the Hammond project was studied for 20 years before the PCID investment jump-started construction. The project aims to reduce congestion on Abernathy Road and provide new market access when it opens in early 2011.

The newest project is the planned Ashford-Dunwoody Diverging Diamond Interchange (DDI), a reconfiguration of the intersection to improve traffic circulation that requires only one new ramp. It will be the first DDI in Georgia and only the fourth in the United States. Williams says upgrading the Ashford-Dunwoody interchange on I-285 was delayed for years as a huge reconstruction project with a price tag of at least \$150 million. “In 2009, we challenged our engineering firm to come up with creative ways to improve traffic flow on the interchange,” she explains. The result is the DDI. The CID provided \$100,000 to start the project, and SRTA added an \$800,000 grant. The DDI could be completed by 2011.

Longer term, Williams says the CID is involved with regional planning for an east/west I-285 transit corridor to connect the Cumberland, Perimeter and Doraville areas. She says planners are looking at such options as express bus or bus rapid transit while the state tackles expanding lane capacity on I-285. The potential redevelopment of the former GM plant in Doraville a few miles to the east could provide opportunities to make transit even more significant along the I-285 corridor, she notes. Williams also wants to introduce more greenspace into the market over the next 10 years.

She acknowledges that the economic downturn has affected the Perimeter area. Office vacancy has been as high as 22 percent, although it was hovering around 17 percent in late summer. “The good thing is that while we have a number of projects pre-approved, we did not have a lot of construction occurring,” she says. When the credit markets open up and the economy rebounds, there are a

number of mixed-use projects ready to go.

“The CID is a fascinating model,” Williams says. “We’re organized to be aggressive to get design under way, and then to seek grants and funds to deliver the projects.” The traditional government role has changed over the last 10 to 20 years, she indicates. “CIDs make sure those projects get accelerated to be shovel-ready. No matter if it’s a sidewalk or a bridge or a streetscape, CIDs provide resolution to the agenda items that are important to Atlanta.”