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Cumberland growth rate will demand rapid transit

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SOUTH COBB - Zoning already has been approved for eight high-rise condominium towers in the Cumberland area, and its proximity to two major interstates has the region poised to continue as a high-density haven, officials said Wednesday.

Business leaders and Cobb Commission Chairman Sam Olens gathered at the Georgian Club on Galleria Parkway yesterday to discuss Cumberland's history and its 10-year outlook.

The focus, of course, was transportation.

"If we continue to grow the way we have the last 20 years for the next 20 years, it's going to be gridlock," said Tad Leithead, senior vice president of development at Atlanta-based Cousins Properties and chairman of the Cumberland Community Improvement District.

A vision shared by Olens and Leithead, who also serves as chairman of the Atlanta Regional Commission's Transportation and Air Quality Control committee, is one of bus rapid transit systems along Interstate 75 to connect Cumberland with the rest of metro Atlanta.

In 10 years, there will be sidewalks along Cumberland Boulevard to provide a pedestrian-friendly environment with access to the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre and a mix of retail and restaurants at a renovated Cumberland Mall.

"We want people to ride down the elevator from their condominium, walk to work and walk to lunch, and then walk home," Leithead said. "We'll still have our dependence on the single-occupancy vehicle," but people will be able to go without their cars if they want."

Leaders agree it's hard to implement that vision in the face of a \$7.7 billion state and federal funding shortfall for transportation improvements, which lawmakers have dubbed a "crisis."

"The challenge we have today is an environment with no money, and we're in an environment with no money," Leithead said.

A \$3.8 million transportation study conducted by the Cumberland CID six years ago planned to have the first phase of a light rail project connecting Town Center and Cumberland under construction in 2005, he said.

Instead of going with that plan, which drew a \$2.8 million appropriation from former Gov. Roy Barnes, incumbent Gov. Sonny Perdue has favored less-expensive Bus Rapid Transit and High Occupancy Vehicle Lanes on I-75.

After years of planning, even that project has been placed on the long-range Regional Transportation Plan, Olens said.

"I certainly understand why the governor supports BRT considering you can build seven BRTs for the price of about one light rail," Olens said. "But there's no east-west access in our region. It takes me longer to get to Gwinnett County than it takes to get to Clayton, which is a real problem.

"I think, frankly, we're going to have to bite the bullet and go with light rail. The question is when."

Eventually, the region also will have to explore an outer loop for greater access to the 10-county metro area, and a truck-only system, which Olens says is needed because "40 percent of the vehicles on our roads are not going anywhere in metro Atlanta."

Without connectivity in Atlanta and Cobb County, economic development will slow.

"When businesses express interest in Cobb, they never even ask if we have an educated work force because they know the two school systems and the universities take care of that," Olens said. "The question that frankly puts me under the table is, 'What are you doing about the traffic?' It's really hard to give a short-term answer to that long-term problem."

Despite the transportation metro-Atlanta faces, cooperation from the Cumberland CID and the business community has the area well-positioned for "smart growth," Olens said.

"Without the CID, this just would not exist," he said. "Can you imagine driving through this area without Cumberland Boulevard?"

Meanwhile, the CID is investigating whether to annex a 1-mile strip of Akers Mill Road into the district and implement a \$1.5 million streetscape plan on Cumberland Boulevard.

"We've got rezoning applications ready to come out of the ground and the property surrounding the performing arts center is ripe for redevelopment," Olens said. "There's no better place for development in the region."

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