

NCA, Streetscape “Attract” in 2009, Lavista Traffic Timing a “Go” By Tom Doolittle

Slow commercial property transactions near Northlake Mall reflect national trends, but community leaders recently pointed to some new business activity and public interest in street appeal near the 1970's era “inner-ring” business area. On June 18, a crowd of about 150 responded to a well advertised 9th Northlake Community Alliance (NCA) annual meeting at the nine-month old Doubletree Hotel (owned by Legacy Management Group, Inc.). The meeting was upbeat, being the first since the Lavista Road streetscape improvements were completed last summer. NCA Chairman Tom Ulbricht of the Winding Woods area, a former land planner with DeKalb and Fulton Counties, conducted a reelection of several trustee positions that were “turning over” and made a wide range of announcements (below).

NCA as Community Liaison

Ulbricht said that the 501-c-3 volunteer organization is committed to increased outreach efforts into the various communities around the mall. He also made an appeal for financial contributions to help with public information initiatives, including replacing the familiar green and white meeting announcement signs that are stolen regularly. Based on an informal count, this year's annual meeting at the Doubletree Hotel was attended by at least three times the number of people as last year at Briarlake Baptist Church. Interest in and awareness of the group from local residents has picked up since the completion of the street improvements.

The nonprofit community group also seems to be the “go to” agency for development inquiries about the commercial district around the mall. NCA Trustee meeting guests in the past year include an Emory University official to discuss the medical school's newest hospital here and representatives and JLB Partners, a firm that is building apartments next to Northlake Mall. NCA has consistently emphasized that the group takes no position on individual property zoning decisions.

NCA's Ulbricht says he is aware of pending projects including: an assisted care facility waiting for financing and county permitting, to replace the publicly maligned Northlake Inn and the Candlewood Suites Hotel, both on Northlake Parkway east of I-285. Ulbricht also stated that a two-story dental office has been proposed across from Briarlake Baptist Church. During the evening meeting, Ulbricht generalized that other large scale redevelopment in the area is being held up by economic conditions.

Other development on hold: the Isakson-Barnhart company, owner of the locally familiar “Best Buy” Center, presented a redevelopment plan, pending the purchase of the now-closed Siemens Electronics site to the District 2 community council last year. The retail/housing company says the property purchase is on hold due to national financial conditions.

The Atlanta Journal and Constitution reported that “Northlake/I-85” is the retail submarket with the lowest property vacancy rate in the Atlanta region.

Traffic Timing for “Lavista Grid” will bid in July

Anyone who travels along Lavista Road near I-285 knows what its like to sit at traffic lights with no crossing traffic anywhere in sight. Unfortunate stranded drivers also grit their teeth while inching from one stop light to another attempting to cross the 1969-christened interstate highway. If all goes as planned, we may soon see congestion relief from a new traffic “timing” system along Northlake's primary artery. Solving convoluted intersections runs a close second with mall improvements on the “locals” wish list.

The NCA chairman wrote in an e-mail, “I have been told by county transportation director John Gurbal that the Northlake grid traffic light system overhaul... will be included in the Stimulus Money, 1st round, for advertising probably (this month). It has been signed by the Governor.” Ulbricht added that the project will probably take several months to select a bidder and begin the project.

The county government's public information officer did not respond to several requests for specific information about “traffic timing” plans in Northlake.

Streetscape News

Ulbricht talked about the Lavista Streetscape and landscaping condition. Sidewalk, lamppost, benches and curb landscaping installation were completed last summer (2008). Ulbricht acknowledged that some trees were lost to the multi-year drought that depleted water supplies in North Georgia. He also mentioned NCA's numerous volunteers that have mowed and cleaned Lavista Road curbs once per month for many years. According to Ulbricht, the volunteers have been asked to stop their work by the streetscape project manager Post, Buckley, Shue and Jernigan (PBS&J) which hired a subcontractor to maintain the landscaping.

No questions were raised at the annual meeting about Lavista's current condition. However, one former school board member took issue with the lack of follow-on care, complaining, "the money that was paid to plant the Northlake area and put in the lighting has been misspent if there is no upkeep." PBS&J did not respond to phone messages about its subcontractor's status.

An additional \$570,000 from Federal and local sources will pay for streetscape expansion along the periphery of Northlake Mall along Briarcliff to Northlake Parkway as far as the funds will allow.

Mall Steps Up, Replaces Crescent Moon

Many residents within two miles of Northlake Mall, opened in 1971, attend NCA meetings asking about plans for changes at the "inner ring" shopping center. Marie Moore, the mall's fourth manager in six years, was installed just a few weeks before the 2008 NCA annual meeting. Now in place for a year, Moore was able to provide news with some confidence. "Northlake Mall is on Simon Properties radar screen", the Cobb County resident implied the home office is evaluating the mall and its market and that she personally is "looking for unique and complimentary businesses that add to the property and fulfill the needs of the surrounding community." Referring to "grassroots" activities that she hopes to make the mall "the center of the community", Moore mentioned opening meeting spaces and outdoor activities like the movies last year.

The Northlake Mall general manager announced that a "casual diner" will fill the former Crescent Moon space in September. Crescent Moon went out of business about a year ago.

See www.nlake.org for additional information about board meetings, tree-planting and other volunteer efforts.

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Briarcliff-Lavista intersection realignment for pedestrian access in front of Northlake Mall, completed summer, 2008.