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South Hall gearing up for growth

Road, sewer projects key to future development

With the economy sluggish, South Hall hasn't seen much growth in recent years.

Oakwood and Flowery Branch officials say they have been focusing on roads, sewer and other internal needs to better position the area when the economy rebounds.

"I think we are postured really well for growth," said Oakwood City Manager Stan Brown.

The city plans in 2012 to recruit businesses that will help shore up weak areas in the city's commercial sector, he said.

Particularly, he would like to see Oakwood attract a "nighttime destination," such as a theater multiplex or family fun center, as well as a top-drawer, full-service hotel.

"We're not waiting for something to happen," Brown said. "We plan to go after businesses aggressively."

Before the economic downturn, South Hall was growing rapidly, with subdivisions springing up in the area. A new commercial center, including a hotel, took hold off Spout Springs Road at Interstate 985 in Flowery Branch.

The Braselton end of Spout Springs Road also has redeveloped. Commercial growth in that area has remained steady, even through the recession.

Buford, which is mostly in Gwinnett County, also has annexed land in South Hall, with much development taking place along Lanier Islands Parkway between I-985 and Ga. 13/Atlanta Highway.

Braselton, Flowery Branch, Oakwood and Buford have been working on regional planning, trying unsuccessfully to get federal money to bolster those efforts.

"The Hall County portion of Braselton is where we're seeing the most growth occur, so we want to be ready for whatever it brings," Town Manager Jennifer Dees said.

Bill Andrew, Flowery Branch's city manager, agreed.

"We don't have any funding now, but we still think that maybe there are some discussions that need to be had in working together on various issues," he said.

Transportation, for one, will be a key issue for years to come in the region.

In particular, the Georgia Department of Transportation expects to begin work on widening Ga. 347 between McEver Road in Buford to Ga. 211/Old Winder Highway in Braselton, a project it has divided into two phases.

A contract is set to be awarded in February for the widening of Lanier Islands Parkway between I-985 and McEver, with construction to begin in the spring.

The DOT nearly has all its right of way in hand, with construction estimated to cost \$14.1 million.

A contract is scheduled to be awarded in April for the widening of Ga. 347/Friendship Road between I-985 and Ga. 211.

Construction likely will begin this summer on the nearly 8-mile stretch, with the work starting at Spout Springs Road and running to Old Winder Highway in the area where Northeast Georgia Medical Center's new South Hall hospital will be built.

Also, area officials will be eyeing the July 31 vote on a 1 percent sales tax as proposed under 2010's Transportation Investment Act.

Voters statewide will decide whether to pay another penny per dollar on road work, with the issue being decided by districts throughout Georgia.

Hall falls in the 13-county Georgia Mountains district, with Hall and Forsyth counties the major players.

Several South Hall projects would get a bump in funding if the tax is approved, including the widening of Spout Springs Road and Ga. 211/Old Winder Highway from Ga. 53/Winder Highway to Ga. 124/Braselton Highway.

"I think Flowery Branch and South Hall will benefit greatly from that (sales tax approval), probably the most of any area in the (Georgia Mountains) region," Flowery Branch Mayor Mike Miller said.

The cities also have been working on sewer projects.

Oakwood has joined with Braselton on a line that eventually will connect the two cities, running along Winder Highway. Oakwood, which doesn't have a sewer system, would receive sewer capacity from Braselton once that project is completed.

The city also is running a sewer line up Winder Highway between the Walden at Oakwood apartment complex to Smokehouse Barbecue & Catering off Ga. 13/Atlanta Highway and Poplar Springs Road, a distance of about 2,100 feet.

Flowery Branch is moving forward on plans to eventually shut down a small sewer plant at Cinnamon Cove, a condominium complex off Gaines Ferry Road, and rerouting sewer from there to its main treatment plant off Atlanta Highway.

City officials hope the \$1.8 million project, which involves building two pump stations, will help spur development in the area.

"We're hoping to have that line completed, or largely completed, this year," Andrew said