

DEVELOPMENT Loans to lift corridor? Cobb commissioner proposes seed funds. Development sought for Canton Road from Marietta to Cherokee.

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A Cobb County Commissioner is pitching a nontraditional funding formula to revitalize a declining corridor in the northeast part of the county.

JoAnn Birrell is hoping to establish a revolving loan fund that can be used to boost the development and expansion of small businesses in the Canton Road corridor.

The four-mile stretch, which runs from the Marietta city limits to the Cherokee County line, is currently a mix of old and new.

Longtime businesses, vacant properties and box stores -- particularly on the southern end of the road -- are interspersed with newer businesses and recently constructed neighborhoods.

Last year, the county identified 38 commercial sites along the corridor that were blighted or vacant. Birrell's plan focuses on redeveloping more than a dozen of those sites.

"With the downturn in the economy, it's like everything thing else with businesses facing hard times and folding," said Birrell, a first-term commissioner who's lived in the area since 1995. "We're seeing some improvement but want to do more for this area."

In the past few years, Cobb has spent about \$4 million in local sales tax funds on street and landscape improvements, including sidewalks, in the Canton Road corridor, one of Cobb's oldest developed areas. Area businesses already are eligible for tax incentives for improving their properties.

Funding additional redevelopments has become tougher as government money has dwindled and alternatives like the proposed regional transportation tax have failed. Birrell had included about \$6.3 million in road improvements along the

corridor as part of a list of local projects to be funded with the transportation tax dollars.

Instead of waiting for those resources to resurface, Birrell and her mix of community stakeholders are proposing establishing a nonprofit organization that could accept seed money from the county's development authority. The nonprofit would use that money, perhaps \$25,000 to \$100,000, to make loans to companies looking to locate in the area, she said.

Cobb Economic Development Director Michael Hughes calls the loans "gap financing," used to close a deal with a company.

"We hope this will be a kind of economic development of our own in the northeast corridor," said Frank Wigington, president of the Northeast Cobb Business Association.

The area will get a boost from a planned Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market scheduled to open in a shopping center along the corridor later this year. The loan program could lead to additional development, residents said.

Carol Brown recalls when she moved into the area almost two decades ago. At that time, lax zoning and some indifferent business owners made for a corridor shabby with salvage yards, unwanted garbage and rundown buildings. The county's efforts, thus far, have drastically improved the area, but more can be done, she said.

"The further a corridor has gone into decline, the longer and harder it is to turn it around. The Canton corridor is no different than any other community that has fallen behind," Brown said. "Right now, the economy is not conducive to major redevelopment, but hopefully the initiative will generate some interest."

While the community committee works on the nonprofit designation, a mixer showcasing the area is scheduled for the fall.

Birrell plans to return to the development authority for a formal funding request once the nonprofit and organizational

structure is established.