

Your Community FOCALPOINT

Transforming Marietta's Franklin Road

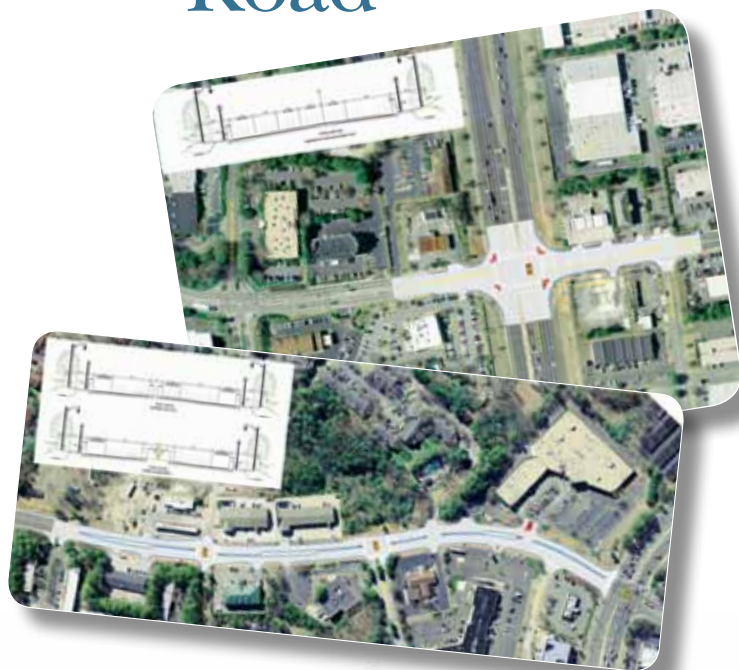
By Amy Selby

Franklin Road in Marietta is a stretch of small convenience stores, shabby strip malls and weathered apartment complexes. Most of the windows and doors are protected by menacing bars, and instead of sidewalks lining the streets, pedestrians have made a well-worn path in the patchy grass along the road. Marietta City officials see a bright future for this slighted thoroughfare, and have a plan in place to improve this business district that includes more than just curb appeal.

"The area way back when, 20 to 25 years ago, was one of those places for young people to be," says Jim Wilgus, city engineer for the City of Marietta. "The area was known for its apartments—now some of those apartments have aged and attracted a transient population."

Franklin Road, the stretch between Delk Road and South Marietta Parkway, presents a few challenges to the City of Marietta. The apartments and strip malls have a high vacancy rate, which in turn leads to declining rent and property values. The crime rate associated with the area's transient, lower-income population has driven businesses away. Plus, the area receives ample pedestrian traffic, but lacks adequate facilities and signals.

"The CCT has several stops along Franklin Road, but with the width of the street, there's not a lot of opportunities to safely cross the road. It's an accident corridor," says Wilgus. Thankfully, the City's Public Works and Economic Development departments are teaming up to improve pedestrian safety, spruce up the



blighted road's landscape and develop better uses for rundown properties. The collaborative effort has resulted in two SPLOST (Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax) projects and a new initiative developed by the City's Economic Development department. "We're exploring options to transform Franklin Road into a Global Green Tech Corridor," says Beth Sessoms, economic development manager at the City of Marietta. "We've been meeting with different property owners, we've started marketing it as a green tech corridor and we're gaining support. Our plan is to turn it into an ecosystem—not a technology park—we want it to be a place to live and work, with sustainable companies located in the corridor."

Global Green Tech Corridor

It may be in its early stages of development, but Sessoms has had success gaining support with the Global Green Tech Corridor initiative. Sessoms has formed three steering committees—marketing, property finance and intellectual properties—and has started a database of companies that might relocate to the area. The project has outlined a list of nine goals for the future of Franklin Road, including creating 750 new jobs within the corridor over the next five years and fostering an environment for learning between the private sector, the academic community and citizens, while creating a showplace for sustainable products. Ultimately, the City wants the Global Green Tech Corridor to become recognized as "the" place for companies developing sustainable solutions and products in the Southeast.

Currently, the initiative has a growing list of partners, including Southern Polytechnic State University, Kennesaw State University, Chattahoochee Technical College, the mayor of Marietta and the Marietta City Council members. Many local businesses have joined one of the three steering committees, including representatives from the Cobb Chamber of Commerce.

Roadway Improvements

The Public Works department has organized Franklin Road into five phases. The first two phases—at Delk and Franklin roads and the South Loop to Twin Brooks Drive—will start construction this summer. Construction includes adding wider sidewalks, ornamental light fixtures and

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landscaping. As funding becomes available, construction will resume south, down through the corridor, says Wilgus. The City and the Public Works department plan to transform Franklin Road into a more boulevard-style roadway, with a landscaped median, wider turn lanes and sidewalks and ample lighting.

A portion of Franklin Road received a prestigious Living Centers Initiative (LCI) grant from the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC). The LCI program issues grants to local governments and non-profit organizations that plan to enhance existing centers and corridors through transportation improvements and land-use development strategies with the ultimate goal of creating sustainable, livable communities.

"With the Cobb County Transit bus route running down Franklin Road, the City wanted to add pedestrian lighting and enhance sidewalks—the Atlanta Regional Commission felt the project fed into their goal for the Living Centers Initiative," says

Kyethea Clark, senior urban planner for the City of Marietta. "One of the reasons this was a project selected by the Atlanta Regional Commission was that it mixes pedestrians with public transit, and offers some public investment."

The total estimated project cost is \$4.7 million, says Clark. The LCI grant is an 80/20 federal grant, with the ARC funding \$3 million.

The Road to Transformation

Marietta has placed several designations on the corridor, including the label of Opportunity Zone, a state program that encourages businesses to come to the area through employee tax credits, and Tax Allocation District (TAD). In 2004, Franklin Road was granted status as a TAD to support redevelopment of the aging apartment properties and provide funding to develop underutilized and undeveloped property. The City has also made efforts to address crime issues with the Weed and Seed program, a federal program that brings citizens and resources together to prevent crime and improve communities.

Through the program, 20 communications students from Georgia Highlands College have volunteered more than 250 hours at various service agencies found throughout the Franklin Road corridor, including the Franklin Road Boys and Girls Club, Latin American Association, Girl Scouts of America and Marietta Youth Empowerment Through Learning. Each of these initiatives all play a role in the transformation of the corridor and illustrate the commitment the City and community has placed on this stretch of road.

"There's a lot of public investment in the area—our goal is to enhance the area for residents and businesses," says Clark. "I'm on the planning side, Beth Sessoms is economic development and Jim Wilgus represents public works—we all coordinate. Every piece is a building block for various investments. We're all excited and working in the same direction." ■