

Cobb County, Georgia Cobb County's Sunbelt Success Story Confronts the Future

It doesn't look like much now, just 60 acres of Georgia pines and vines. But what is coming to this patch of brambles could ignite the Cobb County economy like no single project has since a warplane factory opened during World War II.

At least that's the hope of county leaders and economic developers. The site, near the intersection of interstates 285 and 75, is where the Atlanta Braves major league baseball team will construct a \$672 million stadium that's scheduled to open in 2017. Alongside the ballpark, the Braves plan a mixed-use development to draw residents, shoppers, diners, and office workers year-round.

Excitement is high. Cobb County Commission Chair Tim Lee and other officials predict the county's \$300 million investment will pay off handsomely.

"It will be a catalyst to completely transform an area that's already the economic hub of Cobb County," said Brooks Mathis, senior vice president of economic development at the Cobb Chamber of Commerce.

Not everyone is convinced. Taxpayer groups have protested the county's financial commitment to the project. Media reports say the public tab will amount to more than \$500 million over three decades of paying off interest on bonds and other expenses.

The ballpark complex "is going to change things, certainly, in that part of Cobb County," said Don Sabbarese, an



economist at Kennesaw State University in Cobb. Eighty-one games a year, which will likely draw a combined 2.5 million to 3 million fans, and a major real estate project will undoubtedly generate economic benefits such as hotel stays, sales taxes, and restaurant meals, Sabbarese said.

On the other hand, there will be costs in addition to those already known, including higher public safety, utility, and transportation costs. Whether the benefits ultimately exceed the costs, Sabbarese added, "is very hard to predict."

Another chapter for a quintessential Sunbelt suburb

One thing is certain. No matter how it turns out, the Braves' move 12 miles up I-75 will be the latest chapter in Cobb County's evolution as a countywide version of the quintessential boomtown of the Sunbelt South. Today, according to 2013 U.S. census data, Cobb has 707,000 residents and more than 300,000 jobs, making it a bigger employment center than any Georgia metropolitan area besides Atlanta.

Immediately north-northwest of Fulton County, home of the city of Atlanta, Cobb has gained 100,000 people since 2000 and more than a quarter million since 1990, data from the U.S. Census Bureau show. Cobb County has on average added the population of the city of Charleston, South Carolina, every 10 years since 1970. By 1990, a majority of Cobb Countians were born outside Georgia, according to Thomas A. Scott, a historian at Kennesaw State University. Cobb County—and metro Atlanta gener-



Big changes are on the horizon for Cobb County, which will become home to the Atlanta Braves' new stadium starting in 2017.

Cobb County, Georgia

Population	688,078
Marietta population	56,579
Total housing units	286,490
Median household income	\$65,180
Median home value	\$203,000

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census



ally—grew thanks to the ingredients that built the Sunbelt South: defense spending, the interstate highway system, aggressive industrial development efforts, low business and living costs, and a pleasant climate year round.

Of course, without Atlanta, Cobb County as we know it wouldn't exist, a fact that remains as true now as ever, said Tad Leithead, chairman of the Cumberland Community Improvement District (CID), a self-taxing group of commercial property owners located where the Braves plan to move. In fact, some of the demographic and economic forces that long propelled suburbs like Cobb have dissipated. Consequently, those places may need to rethink their development if they are to continue to grow, according to some observers.

Suburban shopping and office complexes exist because of easy automobile access. In its first 15 years—1988 to 2003—the Cumberland CID focused on making its pocket of Cobb County ever more car-friendly, helping to build roads, access ramps, and parking decks, Leithead pointed out. For the CID, Cobb, and metro Atlanta more broadly, car-driven growth succeeded in many ways. The 5.5-square-mile Cumberland CID today encompasses some 50,000 jobs—including the headquarters of the Home Depot Inc., WellStar Health Services, and Genuine Parts (NAPA)—and the majority of Cobb's management and executive positions, according to the CID. Through the 1980s up until the housing bust and recession, Cobb and metro Atlanta consistently ranked among the nation's

leaders in employment and population growth.

"We grew, but we grew badly; we sprawled," said Leithead, who also is former chairman of a regional planning body, the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC). "But it worked for 50 years. A lot of people made a lot of money. People did well. But the distances got too great, traffic got too bad. It's like a rubber band that's stretched out: it either has to snap back or break."

That rubber band of Atlanta congestion has eased back lately. Metro area traffic is no longer among the top-five worst in the country, according to the Texas A&M University Traffic Institute, but mainly because of the recession's impact on volume. And the area's congestion remains the nation's seventh worst, according to the institute's most recent ranking.

It is not just traffic that has Cobb at a crossroads. Demographics do not play to the county's traditional strengths: good schools and safe, affordable housing for families. For one, there are fewer families these days. Between 1970 and 2012, the portion of U.S. households that were married couples with children under 18 plummeted from 40 percent to 20 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. (See the related story on page 6.) Meanwhile, in the wake of the Great Reces-

sion, younger adults have shown considerably less interest than older Americans in owning houses and cars and taking on the associated debt, according to research including a 2013 study by economist Richard Fry of the Pew Research Center. Finally, numerous studies have shown that younger adults prefer urban living. In fact, in recent years, that trend has propelled many cities like Atlanta to grow faster than their surrounding suburbs for the first time in many decades, according to the Census Bureau.

"We definitely face that," said Mathis of the county's chamber of commerce said of the demographic currents. Mathis points to himself: he is 31 and lives in Atlanta's thriving urban district of Midtown, not in Cobb County.

On the bright side for Cobb, developers in the county are moving to create more urban-type walkable developments, particularly in the Cumberland area that is only about 10 miles from Atlanta. The Cumberland CID is situated near hiking trails in the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area, and the CID has launched several projects aimed at making the area more conducive to walking.

"We're lucky in that we're not trying to create this environment so far outside the city," said Mathis.

He has a point. Residential development has radiated so far outside Atlanta that Cobb, especially the closer-in parts of the county like the Cumberland district, are almost considered intown markets,

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The home of the Braves: Cobb County's plans for the Atlanta Braves ballpark (shown above in blue) involve a mix (shown above in red) of retailing, restaurants, hotels, and parking.

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said Domonic Purviance, a housing market analyst at the Atlanta Fed.

No longer just a bedroom community

Cobb has matured in many ways. For example, the county has a net inflow of commuters every day, according to the ARC, meaning that more people drive in for work than drive out. Like many suburban counties, Cobb also has grown more diverse ethnically and economically. It is still affluent, to be sure, with a poverty rate of 12 percent compared to 17 percent for all of Georgia, and median household income of \$65,000, 31 percent higher than the state level, according to Census data. But the number of older and less well-off residents has increased sharply, which will place demands on county services that were not a concern for many years.

Cobb also took a hit from the recession. Employment fell by 13 percent, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, about twice the rate of job losses nationally. No class-A office building (top-tier buildings that command the highest rents) has been built in Cobb since 2000.

Cobb's economy still sound

For all its challenges, Cobb County is hardly in dire straits. The county employment base is anchored by several large corporate headquarters. A Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Company plant, which opened during World War II as the Bell Bomber factory, employs nowhere near the 32,000 it had at its peak decades ago. But it remains an economic mainstay with 6,300 people on the payroll. Cobb's housing market has improved after the stinging recession. And all told, nonfarm employment as of mid-2013 had climbed back to within 2 percent of its prerecession peak, according to the most recent data from the BLS.

Cobb's debt rating on general obligation bonds remains among the top 1 percent of counties nationwide, according to the county's website. Fitch Ratings recently cited a "stable economy" and sound public management in explaining its rating. The county's population is highly educated: 44 percent of county residents over 25 have at least a bachelor's degree, compared to just under 30 percent of Americans and Georgians. Culturally, Cobb boasts a highly regarded perform-

ing arts center that is home to the Atlanta Opera and Atlanta Ballet. Now the Braves are heading up the interstate.

Cobb County probably won't again grow as spectacularly as it did in the 1980s and '90s. That's all but inevitable, Sabbarese said. The county faces challenges similar to those faced by most suburbs and by the Atlanta area at large. But Cobb will confront those challenges armed with considerable economic strengths. ■

This article was written by Charles Davidson, a staff writer for EconSouth.