Cobb County Comprehensive Transportation Plan Update 2040

THE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

This document presents an overview of existing transportation conditions and needs in Cobb County, Georgia, an urbanized county within the Atlanta, Georgia metropolitan area. This document is one of several documents that will comprise the Cobb County Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP) Update 2040. The data and findings described in this document provide a foundation for identifying specific strategies to maintain and improve Cobb County's transportation system in both the near term and long term future. This document is organized in three major sections:

- The Big Picture – summarizes the major themes and conclusions
- Community Highlights – briefly summarizes the characteristics and unique issues of each of Cobb's six cities and two Community Improvement Districts
- Countywide Existing Conditions and Needs Assessment – presents extensive data for the entire county.

Home to nearly 700,000 persons, 30,000 businesses, numerous fortune 500 companies and important regional institutions, Cobb County is a developed, urban county. Yet, the County is far from being built out; numerous opportunities exist to capture market trends and continue to develop or redevelop. Infill development and redevelopment will continue to be the focus of development activity, unlike the "greenfield" development (that is, developing land for the first time) of years past. There are still parts of the county which are suburban and less developed and should be preserved. As Cobb's communities and economic drivers vary greatly across the county, continued development will likewise not be homogeneous, but will reflect the needs and opportunities of each community.

A CTP is a blueprint for transportation strategies and specific investments. A CTP helps ensure that individual projects are compatible with one another and consistent with the community's overall needs and goals.

The county's transportation system has been expanded over time to serve growing economy and population of the county, and is now substantial with major roadways in place to serve future generations. As development patterns continue to solidify and undeveloped land becomes scarcer, additional transportation capacity will come more from improving existing corridors rather than the construction of completely new major travel corridors. It will be increasingly important to identify solutions that optimize existing infrastructure and improve system efficiency. The existing roadway network can be better utilized through means such as improving intersection efficiencies, improving network management, and adding new, strategic roadway connections in key locations. Additionally, new advances in intersection design and computerized traffic management systems present opportunities to extract more mobility from existing corridors.

Many roadway corridors were originally built to accommodate cars, and now

struggle to equally accommodate walking, biking, and transit. Yet, trends in Cobb County demand more travel choices –more walking, more biking, more transit. While Cobb County and its six cities have made great progress in these areas, significant gaps still exist in creating a more robust multi-modal system. Similarly, facilities for biking are being developed, but are lagging behind the increasing demand as Cobb's citizens are biking more.

Cobb Community Transit (CCT), the second largest transit system in the state of Georgia, provides fixed route, express and paratransit services. However, the demand for transit service in certain areas suggests that additional infrastructure is both needed and cost effective. In particular, the demand for transit service within the Cobb Parkway (US 41) corridor suggests that improvements in transit service, frequency, reliability, and availability are warranted.

Photo: Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre
Photo Credit: John Ripley

While Cobb County continues to enjoy a robust economy, many factors indicate that continuation of past strategies will be ineffective to maintain future growth and prosperity. The demographic, market and business trends all point to a need to think differently about our built environment – in which the transportation system plays a key role. Things are changing, and our investment strategies need to change accordingly. For example, while Cobb's population is still considered young as compared to neighboring counties, Cobb County has recently lost population in the young professional age groups. Market and economic data and findings indicate that this is an important age group for attracting new companies to locate in Cobb. Population and demographic data indicates that this specific age group values convenience, accessibility, and mode choice. Perhaps not throughout the county, but in targeted areas, Cobb will need to provide a more urban, convenient built environment, including a supportive transportation system.

The Big Picture is the result of the evaluation of extensive data describing the existing transportation system and conditions, as described throughout this report. In addition, a large public outreach effort was conducted in order to help define transportation needs and priorities. Valuable input was collected from citizens, community leaders, business organizations, elected officials, and city and county staff. Their input, along with the analysis of existing data, helped define the following **Guiding Principles**:

- Maximize Performance of Transportation System
- Improve Access and Manage Traffic Congestion
- Achieve Traveler Safety and Security
- Drive Economic Competitiveness
- Lead with Cost-Effective Solutions

These Guiding Principles provide the yardstick against which to compare existing conditions, define "needs," and later, to develop recommended strategies and projects to improve the county's transportation conditions. Strategies and projects to maintain and improve Cobb County's transportation system will be prioritized based on these guiding principles and discussed in the next report, Recommendations. With these principles in mind, the following sections summarize the most relevant existing conditions and statements of need.

GROWTH TRENDS

Conditions

Although the total population in Cobb County is growing, the growth is slowing. Approximately 170,000 persons are forecasted to move to Cobb County between 2010 and 2040, an average of about 56,000 per decade, which is significantly less than the 80,000 added between 2000 and 2010. That population growth from 2000-2010 was especially strong in Acworth and Kennesaw.

Cobb's communities vary in the age groups attracted there. Older populations (over 65) are greatest in Marietta and Powder Springs. Acworth, Austell, and Powder Springs have the highest concentrations of children and teens (under 20). Only Powder Springs ranks high in both children and seniors. Overall, the population is aging, with the percent of the population over 55 growing faster than any other age cohort. The county as a whole

The 60-64 age cohort was the fastest growing in both Cobb County (91.4 percent) and the Atlanta MSA (102.2 percent) from 2000 to 2010.

lost population in the 25-34 age cohort. This young professional age cohort is an integral component for attracting new businesses to the county.

Declining household sizes results in increased household formation. Between 2000 and 2010 in Cobb County, the average household size declined and the number of households increased. This trend results in more trips per household on average.

Although Cobb County is not as ethnically diverse as nearby Fulton or DeKalb counties, it is becoming increasingly diverse in both race and ethnicity as the county continues to mature.

Educational attainment is high in Cobb County on average, with over 50% of the population having a college degree. This statistic does very widely, however, in different portions of the county.

Needs

- Attention should be given to providing for and attracting the 25-34 age cohort, because those are the young professionals which potential new companies are seeking.
- The current transportation system will need to adapt to better accommo-

date the needs of older drivers and to provide alternate transportation for those who can no longer drive safely.

- Continued growth in the number of households will result in continued growth in travel demands, which will have to be addressed.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Conditions

Similar to many Atlanta area communities, new home sales slowed dramatically during the "Great Recession." But, they did not halt in all portions of the county. The city profiles presented later in this report identify those specific areas where growth continued right through the recession.

Cobb County has a very mature retail market. The upper end of the market is well-covered with two regional malls (Cumberland and Town Center) and three lifestyle centers (Avenue East Cobb, Avenue West Cobb, and Vinings Jubilee). On the whole, the county's malls, lifestyle centers, and power centers are performing well. Some areas of the county, however, also have a great deal of older strip center development, much of which is aging and suffering from high vacancy rates.

Although its' growth has slowed, Cobb has a healthy office market. The Cumberland area is the largest and strongest office area, and the area surrounding Town Center Mall and the Windy Hill area east of I-75 also have extensive office development. Over the short term, rental rates do not indicate support for a great deal of new office, however over the longer term; Cobb should continue to grow as an office market.

Needs

Photo: One Ivy Walk, Vinings.

- Demand for new office development remains very low as vacancies are still being absorbed from the recent downturn.
- Similar to the rest of the Atlanta area, the industrial market is remaining fairly constant and not showing any significant growth currently. Industrial uses help to diversify both the job market and the tax base, and these uses should be supported where viable and appropriate.
- While single family residential growth dominated growth in the past, current trends suggest that future demands will have a vastly different mix, with more desire to develop mixed-use and multi-family developments.
- Cobb Competitive EDGE, the county's economic and community development strategy, completed a competitive assessment of the county's position in the economy. The most important existing and the most promising emerging targets were identified as the following: Healthcare Services, Travel and Tourism, Bioscience, Aerospace and Advanced Equipment Manufacturing, Information Technology and Software, Professional and Business Services, and Wholesale Trade.

PLACES

Conditions

Land use affects trip distance, mode split, commute patterns, driveway placement, and total amount of trips generated. Therefore, land use regulations have the ability to improve or reduce transportation efficiency across the county.

Much of the county is dominated by established single-family neighborhoods. However, there has been a move towards somewhat denser development in the most highly sought-after areas as land has become scarce. Large-scale townhome development has taken place in the areas with easy access to job centers. Before the economic downtown, there were signs of multifamily development in Cumberland. Cities, town centers, and employment centers (such as Community Improvement Districts) possess significant opportunities for continued infill of mixed uses. These newer, more dense, mixed use infill developments present great opportunities for Cobb County to continue to capture growth in a way that minimizes the need for additional infrastructure.

Needs

- The transportation system needs to serve industrial, manufacturing and warehousing uses well to ensure a strong economy and local jobs.
- Established residential areas and newer, dense, mixed use centers need to be well connected so that these areas complement one another and allow for shorter trip making.

TRAVEL PATTERNS

Conditions

Based on U.S. Census data, residents of Cobb County are commuting to jobs throughout the region. Top employment destinations for Cobb citizens include: Town Center area, I-75 and US 41 corridors (within Cobb and also Buckhead, midtown Atlanta, downtown Atlanta, and Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport), I-285 corridor (including Vinings, Cumberland and the central Perimeter area), Dobbins Air Reserve Base, Emory University/Centers for Disease Control.

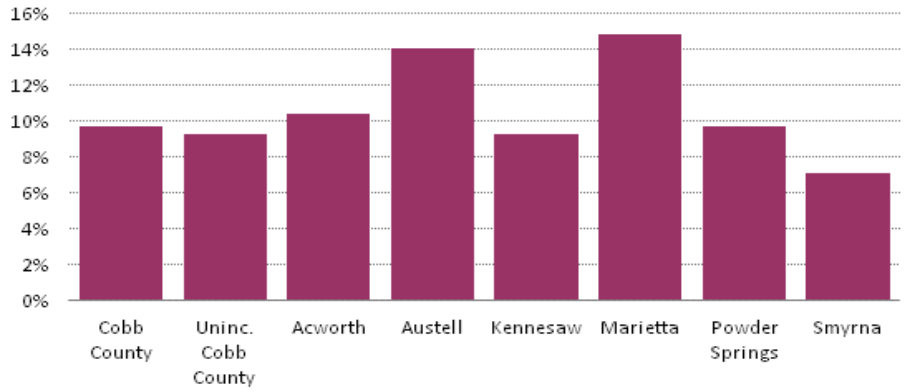
Both I-75 and I-285 serve as critical connections between Cobb County residents and jobs, as does Cobb Parkway (US 41) and to a lesser extent South Cobb Parkway.

Single-occupancy vehicle (SOV) is the dominant mode choice in Cobb County; however, there is diversity throughout and the percentage of SOV, high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) and public transit varies. Generally, SOV mode share is highest outside of Marietta and HOV and public transit mode shares are the highest in Marietta. Transit mode share is influenced by the availability of transit, so it is understandable that areas of the county not currently well served by transit show low transit use today.

Needs

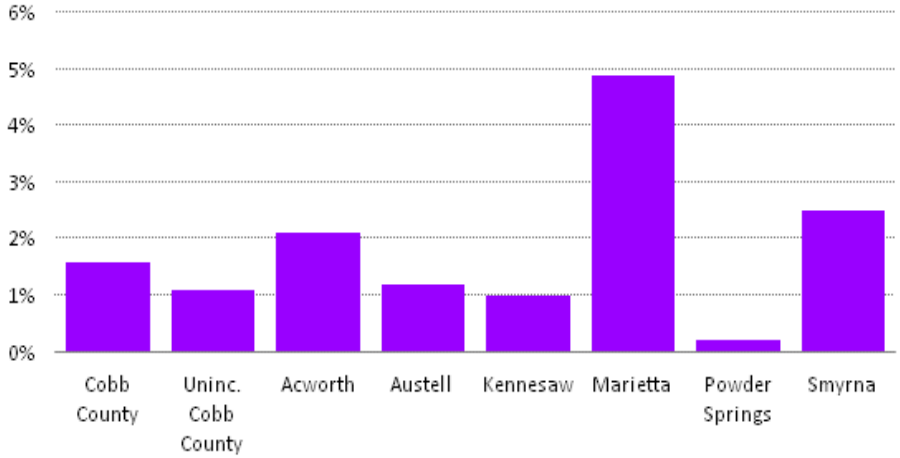
- Cobb County experiences a significant number of outbound and in-bound commuters. Transportation investments made in Cobb County will need to serve both county residents and employees from around metropolitan Atlanta who have jobs in the county.
- There is a need to invest in a multi-modal transportation system to serve all users. While the SOV and HOV commute shares are currently much higher than the transit mode share, the analysis of job locations for Cobb residents and residence locations for workers employed in Cobb County indicate that a substantial percentage of commuters are traveling to fairly defined areas. Transit services could serve these commute flows, especially between Cobb County and the city of Atlanta.
- Commuters in Marietta and Austell could benefit most from HOV improvements, and Marietta and Smyrna commuters could benefit the most from transit improvement.

Journey to Work HOV Mode Share (2010)



Source: U.S. Census

Journey to Work Public Transit Mode Share (2010)



Source: U.S. Census

Transportation Funding

Conditions

Revenues to build, operate, and maintain transportation systems have held steady or declined in recent years, despite cost increases. This is true of funds

from the federal, state and local levels. As a result, a greater portion of the local funds must be allocated to system preservation and maintenance needs. Although available state and federal funds have decreased in recent years, those funds are also more flexible in how they are used at the local level. This presents some opportunities for more creative funding.

Needs

- Cobb County's past transportation investments have relied on past Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) programs, where voters had input toward a list of projects and subsequently approved that local funding program. While that model continues to support system investment, more reliable sources of funding need to be committed to capital, maintenance, and operation of these important assets.
- Opportunities for partnerships or leveraging of resources should be given top priority to maximize the impact of local funds.
- As funds are more scarce that in the past, projects with the greatest cost-effectiveness should be given top priority.

VEHICULAR

Conditions

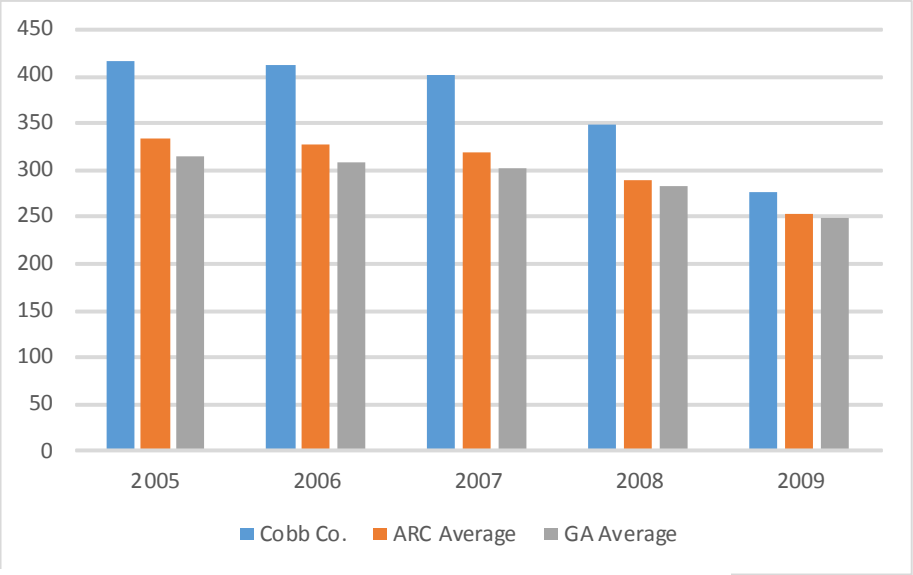
Improvements in roadway design, education, and enforcement have led to a steady decline in crash rates. Cobb crash rates have steadily declined since 2005 resulting in a 34 percent reduction in crash frequency from

Transportation facilities are costly to construct, operate, and maintain and are one of the most expensive elements of public infrastructure.

2005-2009. There are still some crash hot spots in the county that deserve particular study and investment.

Regular, peak period congestion is experienced on roads such as Dallas Highway

Crash Rates by Year (per 100M VMT)



Source: Critical Analysis Reporting Environment (CARE) database

(SR 120), Barrett Parkway, Austell Road, Canton Road, Cobb Parkway (US 41), Johnson Ferry Road, Mars Hill Road, Powder Springs Road, Roswell Road (SR 120) and Windy Hill Road. While some level of congestion is expected in any urbanized area, the most critically congested areas warrant special attention.

There are approximately 150 regionally significant thoroughfare miles within Cobb as part of the Regional Thoroughfare Network (RTN) identified by ARC and many of these corridors experience congestion under current conditions. Additionally, there are several state and county roads for which travel times exceed acceptable congestion levels.

Needs

- Despite crash rate improvements, fatal crash locations as well as general crash hotspots need to be addressed for improved safety.
- In the short term, intersection and traffic operational improvements are needed to improve congestion.
- The 521 transportation bridges in Cobb County are regularly inspected. Only 2.7% are currently classified as structurally deficient. However, 17.8% of the bridges, which are currently classified as functionally obsolete, will need to be rehabilitated or replaced.

TRANSIT

Conditions

Photo: CCT Marietta Transfer Center

Cobb County has about 147 miles of express bus routes and nearly 330 miles of local bus service, which makes CCT the second largest transit provider in the state behind MARTA. Some transit services in Cobb are also provided by GRTA and MARTA. The Cobb transit user will use one to three transit agencies on a single trip. In 2007, total CCT system ridership was 4.64 million trips. By 2011, ridership had fallen 5.7% to 4.37 million. It is likely that the Great Recession and cuts in service contributed largely to the drop in CCT ridership.

Some CCT routes are well used – particularly those within the Cobb Parkway (US 41) corridor. In fact, CCT Route 10 is often “standing room only.” This corridor contains and connects some of the densest concentrations of origins and destinations in the county, and therefore, sees the greatest demands for transit service.

The state of Georgia ranks 46 of 50 states in terms of their contribution toward public transportation. In fact, state contributions are negligible. Therefore, CCT is funded mostly from farebox revenue and by Cobb County local taxes.

The two main public providers of Human Service Transportation (HST) are CCT and Cobb Senior Services (CSS). Both of these provide fixed route and paratransit service. There are also multiple private providers of transportation.

Demand for HST services is likely to continue to grow significantly as the county's population ages.

Needs

- Improved transit services are warranted only where conditions are right for effective and efficient service - in particular, within the dense and busy Cobb Parkway (US 41) corridor.
- Public input generally supported express bus service as a form of transit that best meets the needs of the county's widely dispersed employment centers. Queue jumper lanes at intersections and transit signal preemption were suggested to speed up service.
- Expansion of the local bus service to more areas of the county, as well as to destinations outside Cobb County, such as Paulding County and the MARTA system were encouraged through public input.
- HST is complicated and can be confusing to users. A consistent Mobility Manager, an efficient operation, an updated database of all transportation options, and informational programs for low income populations are needed

FREIGHT

Conditions

Primary freight generators are generally located near interstate and state highways. As such, the interstate highways see the highest volumes of truck freight traffic. In addition to the interstate highway corridors, five arterial corridors in Cobb County are classified as Regional Freight Corridors, which are important to regional freight movements. Two of those (SR 92 and US 78) each carry over 2,000 trucks per day.

Other corridors, such as SR 6, SR 120 and SR 5, serve an important function of connecting truck freight generators to the interstate highway system.

Photo: Freight Traffic

The majority of rail freight moved through Cobb County is through-traffic with some spurs serving businesses located near the mainline. Important intermodal facilities within Cobb County move freight from rail to trucks before that freight reaches its' final destination. With nearly 82 miles of rail, Cobb County has approximately 56 at-grade intersections. Between 2000 and 2008, 32 motor vehicle crashes involving trains occurred.

Needs

- Increase capacity and/or improve operations along major truck freight routes. Due to the slow acceleration and deceleration speeds, heavy trucks are impacted more significantly from congestion. Increasing capacity or improving operations through roadway widening or signal timing

programs would improve travel times and eliminate the number of stops. More innovative ideas, such as the planned truck friendly lanes on SR 6, should be considered on additional corridors.

- Evaluate safety needs at high truck crash locations not only for safety purposes, but because these crashes often require longer clearance times creating more congestion than those involving only passenger vehicles.
- Reduce at-grade railroad crossings because they present a safety hazard to crossing vehicles and pedestrians. They are an operational issue when trains block the crossings and thus cause traffic delays.

BIKE AND PEDESTRIAN FACILITIES

Conditions

Review of the year 2013 inventory of county sidewalks reveals a total network length of 733 miles, which translates to a 21.7 percent roadway coverage rate. So, there are still many miles of roadways not served with sidewalks. Goals set forth in the Cobb County 2008 CTP and the Cobb County Bicycle and Pedestrian Improvement Plan identify the need to accommodate both pedestrians and cyclists in new development plans and road construction, so it is expected that the bicycle and pedestrian facilities network will continue to grow with the county.

Photo: Silver Comet Trail

Findings from the Cobb County Bicycle and Pedestrian Improvement Plan indicate that high vehicular volumes, geometric obstacles, lack of paved shoulders, gaps in sidewalks and other factors contribute to a countywide bicycle and pedestrian level of service (LOS) D. The plan suggests that bicycle facilities are acceptable, but there is room for significant improvement which could be facilitated through road widening, road diets, resurfacing, and other locally funded projects.

The county has an extensive 48 mile network of multi-use trails and side paths, including the Silver Comet Trail, Kennesaw Mountain to Chattahoochee River Trail and the Noonday Creek Trail. The growing number of trails provides connectivity between several activity centers.

Needs

- Gaps and deficiencies in the sidewalk system have been carefully studied, identified, and mapped. While the county has constructed many miles of sidewalks, there still exists significant need to continue to refine and complete the sidewalk system. Those sidewalk investments should pay particular attention to completing facilities where there is high pedestrian demand and along transit routes.

- In west Cobb, there is a need for expanding sidewalk coverage on primary roads. In central Cobb, creating sidewalk coverage on secondary roads is needed to ensure connectivity to community facilities and transit stops. In south Cobb, expanding sidewalk coverage on primary roads and connecting to community facilities and transit stops is needed.
- By prioritizing future bicycle facilities that are connected to existing and programmed multi-use trails, trails can serve as the backbone of a connected network.
- Improvements to walking and biking facilities in proximity to colleges and universities in the county can alleviate some of the demand for parking, and serve to improve student health and quality of life. Universities are considered to be significant generators of walking and biking trips.

EXISTING STUDIES

Conditions

Currently, the county has many planned transportation projects included in the regional transportation plan (PLAN 2040), including both programmed and long range projects. The CTP Update will reconsider the priorities of those planned projects, as well as consider the need for new or revised projects.

Cobb citizens have a long history of supporting SPLOST packages for both capital improvements and education. In March 2011, voters approved a four year SPLOST which would fund capital improvements for parks, public safety, county buildings, and transportation. The transportation project list includes street resurfacing, new sidewalks, intersection improvements, and thoroughfare improvements.

Photo: Marietta Square
Photo Credit: John Ripley

Each of the cities and the county create comprehensive plans that outline the vision and action plan over a twenty year timeframe. These provide valuable input to this CTP Update process.

Within Cobb County and the cities, there are many types of small area plans that aim to manage growth, transportation, infrastructure, and service provision in the community. One type of small area plan is a Livable Centers Initiative (LCI) study area. There are 12 LCI's in Cobb. These studies encourage local jurisdictions to plan and implement strategies that link transportation improvements with land use development strategies to create sustainable, livable communities consistent with regional development policies. LCI's and other small area plans provide valuable input to the CTP Update process.

Needs

- Recent previous efforts have been reviewed and are used as input for this review. Identified needs and projects from previous studies should be incorporated into project recommendations.

POLICIES

Conditions

Many existing policies will provide direction to recommended strategies and projects in the CTP Update. In 2009, Cobb County adopted a Complete Streets policy to provide safe and effective transportation for all residents of the county. This policy applies to all new Cobb County transportation projects.

The Cobb County Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan (PDMP) was prepared by the Cobb County Emergency Management Agency (CEMA) to address natural and manmade threats that will aid the process of reducing or eliminating the loss of life and property damage resulting from local threats. Examples that directly involve the transportation system include hazardous spills on roadways and evacuation routes needed during storm emergencies.

Adopted transportation policy in the Cobb County Comprehensive Plan includes a commitment to better access to destinations in the future. Existing zoning regulations promote creating conditions to do so, such as mixed-use zoning and overlay districts, connectivity requirements, inter-parcel connectivity, and development regulations.

Cumberland supports Transportation Demand Management (TDM). The Cumberland CID does this by providing financial support to vanpools and a relationship with the Clean Air Campaign.

Needs

- Following the implementation of the PDMP will help to make all of Cobb County a safer place to live and work for all citizens.
- The CTP and Comprehensive Plan should be companion documents in that the policies and recommendations align.
- Population and employment growth in the county will have a profound effect on the county's transportation system and quality of life. Limited funding is available to build additional capacity to address congestion. Given these challenges, clear plans and strategies are needed to protect Cobb's quality of life.
- Transportation Demand Management (TDM) strategies are especially effective when implemented in conjunction with land use planning and infrastructure improvements that accommodate pedestrian, bicyclists, and transit users.

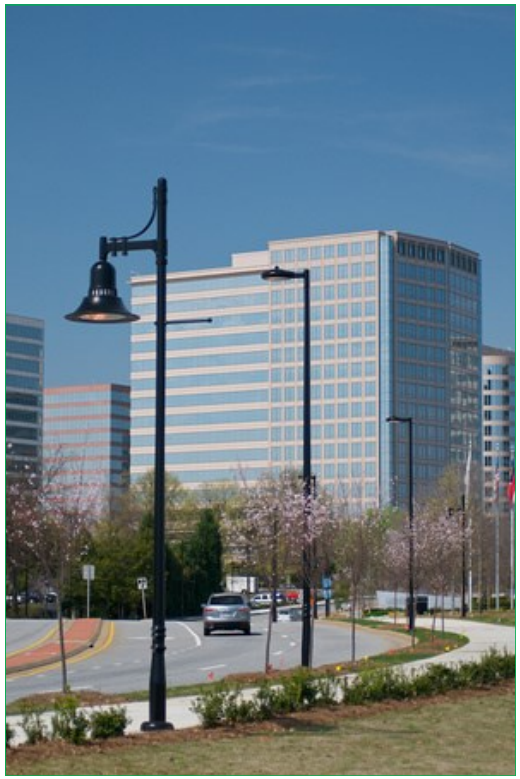


Photo: Cumberland
Photo Credit: John Ripley