

The Augusta Chronicle

Business

Scuttlebiz: Martinez may finally get a makeover

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Columbia County officials are targeting Martinez for its first “tax allocation district.”

By most objective measurements and statistics, Columbia County is one of the better places to live in the metro Augusta area.

But let’s be honest: Its gateways are pretty uninviting.

The Washington Road corridor through Martinez is a prime example. The mishmash of decades-old shopping centers, used car lots and title pawn shops between the county line and Evans make the community’s main entryway look tired. Outdated. Mediocre. Dare I say...low-rent?

Granted, both sides of the street have sidewalks (which is more than you can say for portions of Washington Road in Richmond County), but what good is walkability if there is nothing to walk *to*?

Seriously, when was the last time you saw a pedestrian strolling by **West Town** shopping center?

Columbia County leaders have discussed revitalizing Martinez for years, and the topic was a key talking point among candidates in the recent District 2 commission race.

But now things are starting to get serious.

By next year, Martinez’s commercial corridor could become the county’s first “tax allocation district,” an economic development designation better known as a TAD.

Last month the **Development Authority of Columbia County** contracted with Atlanta’s **Bleakly Advisory Group** and the **Dentons** law firm to help create a redevelopment plan for what could be the county’s very first TAD.

“If this works out well, it will be a good case for the rest of the county to see what our opportunities are for redevelopment,” said **Robbie Bennett**, the development authority’s executive director.

Other gateways, such as Belair Road and the Grovetown corridor could also benefit from a TAD. “Let’s start with one, lets get it right and get everybody on board,” Bennett said.

The development authority’s project manager, **Taylor Brittan Edwards**, is working with the consultants to have a plan by November so that a TAD is in place for the 2021 tax year.

Of course, the plan would need to be approved by the development authority’s board as well as county commissioners and the board of education.

Roughly 52% of Columbia County voters in the 2018 general election gave TADs a thumbs up by voting “yes” to granting the county “redevelopment powers” under state law. The question also was on that year’s ballot in the city of Harlem, where it was approved by a 56% margin.

Redevelopment powers are used by dozens of other Georgia communities – including Richmond County – to incentivize commercial development and redevelopment in specific areas.

Atlanta, for example, used a TAD to redevelop the derelict Atlantic Steel mill property into the Ikea-anchored **Atlantic Station** neighborhood. Augusta used a TAD to attract **Costco** to anchor the booming **Village at Riverwatch** shopping center.

The basic concept is that taxes levied in a TAD are used to finance redevelopment within the district, rather than going into a general fund and getting disbursed elsewhere.

TADs give county officials the ability to freeze property taxes in the district and use any assessment increase above the frozen figure to fund infrastructure improvements that lure developers.

That’s how North Augusta attracted investors for its \$230 million **Riverside Village** development. (In South Carolina, redevelopment powers are known as “tax incremental financing,” or TIFs.)

What a TAD could do for the Martinez corridor remains to be seen; district lines haven’t even been established yet.

“We do not have a preset notion of what this is going to look like from our side,” Bennett said. “The consultant will come in and look at it and make recommendations on the tracts that (the TAD) should include and give us what they think the projections of growth really are and hopefully help us manage the process.”

Bennett said most of the area under consideration already is part of a state opportunity zone, which encourages commercial investment by providing tax credits of \$3,500 per job.

The credit, coupled with the benefits of a TAD, could help spur redevelopment in an area Bennett calls a major “gateway to the community.”

“The only way you’re going to get somebody to do something there – whether its a small mom-and-pop or a large developer – is to identify an opportunity for them to be successful and help them mitigate their risk, plain and simple,” he said.

DITCH DIGGERS AND CABLE HANGERS: They are probably the largest local company you’ve never heard of: **Southeast Utilities of Georgia**.

When telecom giants such as **AT&T** and **Comcast** expand their cable and fiber networks in your neighborhood, it is Southeast Utilities’ contractors who bore the holes and dig up your yard.

“They send out the bill and we pretty much do everything else,” company president **Chris Walker** said jokingly. “We’re ditch diggers and cable hangers.”

Now Walker’s 230-employee, five-state operation is part of an even larger company you’ve probably never heard of: **Congruex**.

The Boulder, Colo.-based engineering and construction company, which is backed by New York private equity firm **Crestview Partners**, announced its acquisition of Southeast Utilities this past week. Financial terms of the deal were not disclosed.

Walker is retaining a 25% stake in the venture and is staying on to continue managing operations from its offices on Franke Industrial Drive. The company’s telecom engineering and maintenance services in Georgia, Alabama, Florida, South Carolina and Tennessee generated roughly \$80 million in revenue last year.

The 60-year-old entrepreneur said the time was right to be part of a larger company.

“It’s the best thing that could have happened,” he said. “One man running all that stuff is not easy.”

Congruex’s acquisitions during the past three years have made it one of the country’s largest broadband engineering and construction firms.

“The acquisition of (Southeast Utilities) immediately strengthens Congruex’s ability to further support critical infrastructure needs in the Southeastern United States,” Congruex CEO **Bill Beans** said in a news release.

Walker started the company in 1996 with about 20 employees working for cable provider **Jones Intercable**, which was acquired by Comcast in 1999. As demand for broadband took off, Walker started setting up satellite offices in other states.

He said the behind-the-scenes company will remain an active corporate citizen.

“Nothing has changed except for our parent company,” he said. “We are very local-oriented. Our company is probably the largest supporter of the **Boys and Girls Club**. We do a little mentoring and buy all their computers.”

Walker also will continue running his **Super Trucks** business on the side with partner **George Stickler**. The duo trick out Ford F-650s for construction companies as well as the occasional pro athlete, celebrity and Middle Eastern sheikh.

“Yeah,” Walker said. “We’re still making custom trucks.”

SPEAKING OF TELECOM: Comcast announced this past week it plans to hire more than 80 new customer-care representatives across its southern region, which includes Georgia and South Carolina.

The positions are virtual/work-from-home jobs that handle general account inquiries and help customers troubleshoot technical problems.

The positions offer benefits, a 401(k) match, an employee stock purchase program and a health insurance plan that begins the first day on the job. And employees living in Comcast service areas get free **Xfinity** television and internet services.

Interested? Get ready for this web address: <https://comcast.jibeapply.com/main/jobs?keywords=Customer%20Experience%20Billing%20Rep%20-%20Virtual,%20Remote,%20Work%20From%20Home%20&sortBy=relevance&page=1>.

Sorry that isn’t more succinct. That’s just how it is.

EVEN MORE TELECOM: Silent alarms – they’re not just for banks anymore.

It’s perhaps a sign of the times that **Augusta Telephone** has started offering panic buttons “that can be mounted under a desk or counter” to offices and schools.

The Martinez-based company, an **Atlantic Technologies** affiliate that specializes in VoIP phone services, said the buttons can send an emergency message or activate two-way communication.

Another gadget the company offers is thermal cameras that can “measure visitor’s, customer’s or patient’s body temperatures discretely.”

I guess you could call that a “COVID cam.”

KEEP YOUR DISTANCE: The COVID-19 pandemic is still throwing bars and restaurants for a loop, despite the lifting of restrictions on dine-in services.

You'll notice your favorite eateries are operating a little differently. People in south Augusta will see changes at the **Huddle House** at 2626 Tobacco Road in Hephzibah when it reopens July 14.

"The dine-in experience will look different now – all staff are wearing PPE, there's no condiments on the table and of course capacity is being monitored to maintain social distancing," a company spokesman said. "But the employees, managers and the owner, who are all local residents, are proud and very excited to be back serving their community."

SWINGIN' WITH SRP: Augusta's new **Topgolf** entertainment venue opened this past week to much fanfare. If you head over to the attraction at the Village at Riverwatch, you'll notice the facility's outdoor live-music venue is called "SRP Stage."

That's because **SRP Federal Credit Union** is the "official credit union partner of Topgolf Augusta."

"SRP is a proud supporter of our community and we couldn't miss the opportunity to get involved with this new and exciting attraction coming to our own backyard," SRP Federal Credit Union CEO **Harry Gunsallus** said.

What I really want to know is who paid to have the street name changed from River Shoals Parkway to "Topgolf Way."

THAT SINKING FEELING: A North Carolina-based environmental group says **Plant Vogtle's** unit 3 reactor under construction near Waynesboro is "figuratively and literally" sinking into "the red Georgia clay."

In May, the **Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League** filed a petition with the **Nuclear Regulatory Commission** requesting an Atomic Safety and Licensing Board hearing on a license amendment request, or LAR, for the 1,100-megawatt plant. It says the nuclear island – the massive concrete structure that supports the reactor – is sinking under its own weight.

The claim came about after **Southern Co.'s** February request to reduce safety margins because of the "seismic gap" between the nuclear island and adjacent concrete structures.

The anti-nuclear group made a presentation at the licensing board's July 1 preliminary hearing. The board has 45 days to determine whether to hold an evidentiary hearing.

Southern Co.'s **Southern Nuclear** subsidiary, which would operate the plant for **Georgia Power** and its co-owners, said the "petitioner's unsupported allegations are without merit."

"Southern Nuclear submitted its license amendment request (LAR) for the Vogtle 3 & 4 project as a normal part of the process of constructing a nuclear power plant," the company said in a statement. "This LAR is based on a safety evaluation that demonstrates that the amendment to the license would continue to provide assurance of public health and safety."

The NRC, whose inspectors monitor the construction site daily, this spring reported the LAR request posed "no significant hazards."

Anybody wanna make a bet on whether the unit is really "sinking?" I'm not a seismic engineer, but my money is on "no." We'll see what the experts say in the coming weeks.

I'LL TRADE YA: Last but not least, this past week saw the enactment of the new **United States-Mexico-Canada Trade Agreement**, or USMCA. Some folks call it the “new NAFTA.”

Whatever you call it, the **Trump administration** says it has the potential “to create nearly 600,000 jobs and generate up to \$235 billion worth of economic activity in the United States.”

Backers say it will level the North American playing field – particularly for U.S. agricultural producers – while critics say the \$1.2 trillion pact is full of protectionist measures that distort free trade by giving the U.S. more power over its top two trading partners.

It will be interesting to see how it pans out in Georgia, where Canada and Mexico are by far the largest importer of Peach State goods, particularly poultry, tractors and cars.

South Carolina's No. 1 export destination, interestingly, is China. Canada and Mexico come in at No. 2 and No. 3, respectively.

Trump called NAFTA “a total disaster,” and made dismantling it a campaign promise in his first term. This year he's campaigning to do something about trade problems with China, a nation whose No. 1 export to the U.S. this year has been, well, a total disaster.