

***TAG Infrastructure Talks* Podcast: Public-Private Investment in Infrastructure:  
Community Improvement in the Atlanta Area With Kim Menefee**

**Host: Alan Poole**

**Guest: Kim Menefee**

**Alan Poole:**

Welcome to another episode of *Technology Association of Georgia (TAG) Infrastructure Talks*. My name is Alan Poole. I'm a corporate partner at Troutman Pepper, and I'm also the vice chair of the TAG Infrastructure Society. Today, we're going to be talking about an exciting project that's going on in the Cumberland area on the perimeter of the City of Atlanta. My guest today is Kim Menefee. She's the executive director of the Cumberland Community Improvement District or CID. Kim, welcome.

**Kim Menefee:**

Oh, thank you. It's wonderful to be here. Appreciate the opportunity, Alan.

**Alan Poole:**

Absolutely. So we're going to get into a really cool project you guys have going on.

**Kim Menefee:**

Yes.

**Alan Poole:**

But let's start from the beginning. Can you tell us about yourself and how you got to the Cumberland CID?

**Kim Menefee:**

Sure. I've been with the Cumberland Community Improvement District (CID) for about four and a half years. But I spent the majority of my career, 25 years, with WellStar Health System, where I was a senior leader there responsible for all of their external affairs, everything from marketing and government relations to all of their community programming and the WellStar Foundation, which all helped prepare me for this role here at the Cumberland CID.

Now, recognizing healthcare to transportation is a big switch from an industry perspective. But it's been wonderful learning about the transportation world and really seeing how CID investments play such a big part of improving our community.

**Alan Poole:**

So let's talk about what a CID is and how Cumberland came to be, and its attributes that let you develop these interesting projects.

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**Kim Menefee:**

No, happy to do so. Actually, the Cumberland CID was the first CID that was created in the State of Georgia. Community leaders in the Cobb area, in the Cumberland area, as you said, just north of the city of Atlanta, they were beginning to see how growth was happening. Cumberland Mall had opened in the late 70s. We had the first building at the Galleria Office Park, the Galleria 100 Building that had been built. But community leaders recognized that our county, Cobb County, really didn't have the resources to be able to help and support the development to the degree that community leaders wanted to see it grow.

So they looked around the United States and really found this model of this public-private partnership that could be developed, which ended up being a community improvement district. So they worked with our legislative leaders. Back then, that was Johnny Isakson and Roy Barnes, who both served in the Georgia State Legislature and really work to create the legislation needed. Eventually, a constitutional amendment was put forth to voters, and CIDs were born here in Georgia. So the Cumberland CID started in 1988. So we are celebrating our 35th year, which is really exciting.

From a CID perspective, commercial property owners, they agree to pay an additional property tax that then is reinvested and leveraged into building infrastructure and transportation projects that enhance the community. So in Cumberland, commercial property owners have invested over \$160 million in our 35-year history. That really has generated over two and a half billion dollars' worth of improvements in Cumberland, and those are infrastructure and transportation projects that really enhance the connectivity and the access and the character of the district.

**Alan Poole:**

So before the pilot program, we'll talk about what are some good examples of the improvements they've been able to accomplish that I presume couldn't have been done without the CID.

**Kim Menefee:**

No, absolutely. I mean, we partner with Cobb County. They're our primary partner. Then we also have partners at the state and the federal level. At the state level, we work with GDOT. We work with the Atlanta Regional Commission, the State Road and Toll Authority, ATL Link (Atlanta-Region Transit Link Authority), really to be able to look at what innovative projects can come forward to really work in partnership with the county and the state. And from a CID investment, we have worked to... we created the Cumberland Boulevard Loop, which is a five-mile road that goes around the Cumberland... the core of the Cumberland District. We've invested in expansion of Cobb Parkway, was... you know, is a very busy state corridor that runs through the core of the Cumberland District.

One of the most recent developments that we invested in with our partners was the redevelopment of the Windy Hill Bridge that crosses over I-75 in Cobb County, Georgia, and we have a project right now that is in development, adding an access point to the very successful I-75 Northwest Express Lane System. We are building a ramp in coordination and partnership with Cobb County and GDOT to be able to add an access point directly into Cumberland. And by example, that's a \$50 million dollar project. So the CID, we assembled the funding and then working with our partners are able to bring these projects forward.

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**Alan Poole:**

Is there any work needed to keep the commercial property owners ready to keep paying the taxes and be part of the CID process?

**Kim Menefee:**

Well, we're very fortunate. We have over 190 commercial property owners within the Cumberland CID. It is a six-and-a-half-square-mile district. And within that boundary, all of our commercial property owners pay an additional five mills in their property taxes that we then leverage. And the exciting thing is that they see the benefits of this investment.

They not only see the enhancement of the values of their property, but they see how these projects have really increased the value of the area. We're not an economic development organization, but we have a huge impact on the economic development of the area, attracting and retaining companies as well as adding people who live there. We have over 30,000 people who now live within the Cumberland area.

**Alan Poole:**

Well, let's move on to the pilot program you have going on that involves autonomous vehicles. How did you identify autonomous vehicles as something that was going to help increase the standard of living in the area?

**Kim Menefee:**

We work and create a master plan that really guides our work and have been doing so over decades. And in 2017, we created the next version of our master plan and identified this project. It's called the Cumberland Sweep, and it's a major mobility project that we're building within Cumberland. And we're very pleased with all of the investment that we've made and very proud of that investment, working with our partners to create an incredible road network throughout Cumberland.

But as our community is growing and changing, we felt like we needed to address and add other mobility options. So we created what's known now as the Cumberland Sweep, which will be a three-plus mile corridor within the core of Cumberland that will have dedicated walking and biking lanes and an autonomous shuttle system. So our goal for this project is to connect all of the major assets within Cumberland from the Battery Atlanta and Truist Park. Think about over to Cumberland Mall, and then the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Center and Cobb Galleria Center, and then over to the National Park.

We are unique as a CID. We have 840 acres of national parkland within Cumberland. So we want to help connect all of these major assets together with these new mobility options. So as part of this project, we are in design on the first segment. We've been very fortunate to raise and start raising and assembling funding to build the project. And as part of that, we expect to go to construction on the first segment in 2027. So we've been studying autonomous mobility for the last couple of years, really working to understand how the technology... It's new cutting-edge technology that we're seeing implemented more and more across our country.

And we really have been studying it to see how it could impact this project positively and be a part of the overall mobility... providing a mobility solution, connecting people with sort of that first and last mile challenge. So we've been studying the technology, and we decided to conduct the pilot program so it would help us learn. We want to learn about the technology. We also want to see how our community reacts to learning and seeing this new technology in action in our community.

**Alan Poole:**

Tell us how you came to select your autonomous vehicle partner, Beep, for this project.

**Kim Menefee:**

We have been studying, as I said, autonomous technology for the last couple of years working with Jacobs. They conducted a formal study for us, and then through this effort, as we were studying and looking out at potential partners, GDOT Commissioner Russell McMurry... As you know, GDOT's very progressive, looking at how they can continue to invest in creating more transportation opportunities and improving the network within Georgia.

And he introduced us to Beep. He had met Joe Moyer, their CEO. They are a national leader in autonomous mobility. Their headquarters is in Lake Nona, Florida. So we went down, and we visited their headquarters. They have a very strong autonomous network down in that area and really gained an understanding of how this technology could be and could be a major part of our project.

**Alan Poole:**

This project interested me because, for the past 10 years, there's been so much focus on rail, light rail, big stuff that may or may not ever come. And when I saw this project announced, I sensed some frustration from the rail-only folks that are, "Why are we focusing on this and not putting everything we can towards expanding MARTA (Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority)," or something like that. But it seems like there's a really important thing that they're missing about that, and there's an ecosystem, right, of mobility.

**Kim Menefee:**

Yes. There is.

**Alan Poole:**

And we all... I think it's very likely that autonomous vehicles are going to fit into that. So do you think that this pilot project will help us have a better understanding of where autonomous vehicles will fit, or do you already know that from your past study?

**Kim Menefee:**

Well, I think we're all learning. As I said, it's cutting-edge technology. And as you mentioned, from an ecosystem standpoint, it's part of the mobility solution and offering options to those who work or live in an area or just visit. And I think we can be very proud that our state leaders are

very focused on providing options and looking at what our overall mobility strategy can be for not only the city but the state. And we've been very fortunate. We've had a tremendous amount of interest from ATL Link from SRTA (Southeastern Regional Transit Authority), and particularly the Atlanta Regional Commission.

They have provided funding that has really allowed us to launch this project, which we're very, very proud of. To be in construction on this first segment, they funded the first segment. In addition to that, our federal leaders have been very supportive. Our congressional delegation, they have sought opportunities for us and helped us in being awarded funding on the project. So there's a lot of support and interest in seeing this type of technology advance not only in our community, and we see it as a way for us to help lead the region in learning more about what this technology can do for our community and how we can apply it. And that's what we are hearing from our riders, for example. We have a very successful pilot program we launched at the end of July.

It's called the Cumberland Hopper. It's free to the community. So we ran it a lot during the Atlanta Braves season, which we're very, very proud of having the Braves in the Cumberland area. And we've had over 3,600 riders. And what's really exciting for us to hear from them is that they feel safe and they'd like to see more autonomous mobility in the district. For those who are familiar with Cumberland, they know we do have really limited transit options today, but our goal is to connect our autonomous mobility and our AV vehicles into a broader network. So as transit grows in Cumberland, we want to connect in and make it available for those who work and live in the district or who visit.

**Alan Poole:**

So I think it's important to talk about the many benefits of this project that you really don't get with the heavier stuff like rail. I mean, rail-

**Kim Menefee:**

Exactly.

**Alan Poole:**

... is always going to be very limited in where it can go, but that's not necessarily the case for autonomous vehicles. And also, you have kind of a lower infrastructure need, right. You can share that with a walking bike path vision. Is that accurate to say?

**Kim Menefee:**

Very much so. I'd like to point out that these programs are governed by the National Highway Traffic Administration and safety is really their number one priority. So what they look for they actually approve these pilot programs. Many are running across the country, and they approve those and to make sure that pedestrians feel safe because the shuttles can run in the roadway, and ours is running in the roadway.

Currently, the shuttles will go up to 15 miles per hour, but we've already seen future generation shuttles that are being actually manufactured not in the United States yet, but they're coming,

and they'll be able to travel at 35 miles per hour, which is significant when you think about having these autonomous vehicles in the roadway. But they are proven to be incredibly safe. In fact, what happens if there are any issues, it's usually by humans, not by the technology. And as part of it... part of the AV shuttle program, for example, when you are on the shuttle, there are seat belts. Today, there is an attendant on board.

Now, future shuttles are designed so that there isn't an attendant there. But as we learn more about the autonomous mobility and what it can do for our community, I think that's where you're going to really see the popularity of it grow. And also from an... when you look at the economics of, it's a far better solution in certain highly congested areas. It's more affordable. Again, it's safe. It's comfortable. So I think as consumer trust grows, they see more of these autonomous vehicles out there that it will feel very natural to use them in their daily transportation.

**Alan Poole:**

So when does the pilot project... Does it have an end? And can you tell us what your vision for the next steps are after the pilot?

**Kim Menefee:**

Yes. Our pilot program will draw to a close in March of 2024. Our goal was to run it over a long enough period that we could actually run the shuttle in different scenarios. We run the shuttle through the Galleria Gardens, currently is one route. We have partnered with Piedmont Office Realty Trust, who owns the Galleria. They have really been very supportive in our efforts because what we do is we offer this service, again, free to their tenants and to their visitors and shuttling them through the Galleria Office Park up to the I-285 transit and pedestrian bridge that's located in front of the Cobb Gallery is center over to the Battery Atlanta.

So it gives them an opportunity to use the shuttle and to really experience the technology. Then we also have a second route that we run just on the bridge back and forth, and that's the route that we really use for special events from the Cobb Galleria Center. I mentioned the Braves games. So we run two different routes, and we run it at various times of the day. Once again approved by NHTSA (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration).

And we run these different routes so that we can learn in a variety of different weather, different seasons, different weathers, different times. And again, this data will go into our learning as we develop our overall network of shuttles. Based on our study that we've done with Jacobs; we anticipate having at least eight shuttles in our fleet once the Cumberland Sweep is fully built out. And our goal is to work with Cobb County and to be part of the transit network that is offered to everyone within Cobb County and particularly in the district.

**Alan Poole:**

So some of the steps you have to take before the AV project is fully up and running you need to finish construction of the sweep.

**Kim Menefee:**

We do.

**Alan Poole:**

And we also need to find funding for all this. How are you planning to tackle that challenge?

**Kim Menefee:**

Well, we've assembled the funding for the project about 13% at this point. We anticipate the project will cost about 150 million to complete. So we're looking at probably about a 10-year horizon to build out the Cumberland Sweep in total. But what we're focused on in phase one is connecting all of our key activity centers, from Cumberland Mall over to Cobb Galleria Center over to the Battery Atlanta.

And as we build out the project, we will be working to learn and to see how the technology impacts our community and what more we can add. We'll be evaluating the routes. We're evaluating those from not only the work standpoint but also from the visitor standpoint and making sure that we're addressing all of our key activity centers.

**Alan Poole:**

Can you tell us some of the lessons that you've learned so far trying to put together a brand new project?

**Kim Menefee:**

I can. As I mentioned, this is new technology that we're all learning how to implement. And so I think for all of us in the transportation arena, one of the things we're learning is that all the rules haven't been written. So we're working together, for example, as we're building out the first segment of the sweep, working closely with Cobb County and GDOT (Georgia Department of Transportation) in particular. We are all learning how to... really how to proceed in constructing this project to be successful. We have a lot of experience as a state in building the pedestrian component and adding in the pedestrian and the biking lanes, but the autonomous technology is certainly a new one.

So once again, just I think what we're learning is how we can work together knowing that we... the end goal is to be able to implement this technology. So from that standpoint, it's really looking at administratively how we can bring the project forward, working within the federal guidelines of using the funding, and so working together in partnership there. And then I think from just a ridership standpoint, what we're learning is that people really are embracing the technology.

Sometimes, people go into it cautiously, and they're like, "Oh, well." They're a little nervous about riding the shuttle, but what we're seeing is when they do ride it, they have a really positive experience and that they're eager to learn more. And I think that's what we'll continue to use and to use that data because as we go forward to assemble the funding, we'll be applying for grants. We leverage our funds-

**Alan Poole:**

Right.

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**Kim Menefee:**

... in the CID, so our... we always have an investment in our projects. We always have skin in the game, so the CIDs fully invested in building these projects. But we do work through our partners, as I said, and then we also do apply for grants. And a lot of this data will help drive being able to fund the project, quite honestly.

**Alan Poole:**

When you said that I was going to ask what you meant by leverage because, in some instances, that means debt, but in some instances, in the grant scenario, you usually have to match with a certain amount of your own funds. Is that more along the lines of what you were... had in mind when you said leverage?

**Kim Menefee:**

Yes, and the CID, we don't take on debt.

**Alan Poole:**

Ah.

**Kim Menefee:**

Also, we don't build our projects. We actually innovate and come up with projects that perhaps the county or the state can't afford to do that will really enhance our community. And so we do... When I say leverage is that we take the funding that we have through the CID.

As I mentioned, our property owners pay an additional five mills in taxes, and we leverage that money to draw down funding to build our projects. So that's what can... we will continue to apply for discretionary grants through USDOT, through the federal government, and just continue to look for avenues to be able to actually get the funding that we need to build the project.

**Alan Poole:**

So you mentioned you're obviously using a private partner to get much done. And in this case, Beep, it's their vehicle, their sort of design. Tell us about how your relationship with Beep works so we can sort of get an idea of the flavor of this particular partnership.

**Kim Menefee:**

Beep provides a turnkey service for us to be able to access these vehicles. The one that we're actually using is a Navya vehicle that's manufactured in France, and so they are able to provide these services to us. We work with them. That's who our contract is through. They actually are the ones who have the program approved through NHTSA. They also provide the staffing. They staff the vehicle with the attendance, and we work very closely with them in partnership to deliver the service to our community.



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So we have a contract with Beep, and then we also have agreements with the property owners, with Piedmont Realty Trust, with Cobb Galleria Center, and Cobb County to be able to access the road network and the bridge. So partnerships are huge in what we do. They're absolutely vital to being able to bring our projects forward. But what's truly exciting is how our community has embraced this project, the Cumberland Sweep, as well as bringing the hopper forward for our community, a lot of excitement, tremendous support. So working in partnership, we're all working together to be able to bring this program to our community.

**Alan Poole:**

Tell us a little bit about your ridership results so far. What's your kind of daily usage rate, and is... are you noticing differences? Is there a big difference between Braves game day and not Braves game day? I assume there is, but...

**Kim Menefee:**

Yeah, there is. There, you definitely have differences, and that's one of the reasons we're running the pilot over an eight-month period, is on game days, we had upwards of 300 riders per game, which is a record actually for Beep for the number of riders in one day.

**Alan Poole:**

Good sign.

**Kim Menefee:**

Yes, absolutely. And then, depending on the day, we still run... even when the Braves aren't playing, we'll utilize the route on the bridge. Last week, we actually had... there was a meeting over at Cobb Galleria Center, and we had 50 riders that came out and rode the shuttle.

And then daily averages over in the Galleria Gardens really vary. We can have 30, 50 riders, 100 riders in a day. It really just depends. But one of the learnings is that weather does play a role in the shuttle in terms of... The shuttles are air-conditioned. But as you know, here in Georgia, we have some warm summers-

**Alan Poole:**

Right.

**Kim Menefee:**

... so we're coming out of a really hot period. So we think the cooler temperatures are going to encourage people to come out and ride the shuttle up to the bridge and then be able to walk across and take advantage of the Battery-

**Alan Poole:**

Yeah.

**Kim Menefee:**

... and what they can enjoy there. So it does vary, but that was also intentional that we could learn from those different size audiences and learn expectations of our riders and what kind of services that they're seeking.

**Alan Poole:**

Yeah, the Battery seems to be providing potentially a good bit of help because I've seen statistics indicating that the amount of people that visit when there's no Braves game is still really impressive due to all the things that they offer.

**Kim Menefee:**

The Battery Atlanta is busy year-round. Annually, I know, in 2022, they had over 10 million visitors. So if you think about just the number of visitors, but also to your point, there are so many offices there. There's retail, hospitality. I mean, there's a lot for people to go and enjoy, and they keep the Battery, the Braves do, they keep it so busy and active, and it's a place where people really want to be.

And I think that's the major change in the Cumberland area over the last 35 years is that we have seen the district grow from being just a major job center, and it will continue to be. It's one of the most active job markets in the southeast, but now we have over 30,000 residents, and we have visitors year-round. So it's amazing how the districts continue to grow, and we're working to be able to meet those challenges.

**Alan Poole:**

So we've got a pretty good roadmap of where we hope the Cumberland Sweep and the Beep project will go.

**Kim Menefee:**

Yes.

**Alan Poole:**

Is there anything else really interesting on the horizon for the CID?

**Kim Menefee:**

Well, we think so. This year, we launched a not-for-profit called One Cumberland because, as I mentioned, our community is growing and changing in such a major way, and we want to invite the community to be able to engage with us and help us bring projects forward that enhance our community. When we talk about access and connectivity, that's where a lot of the road projects fit in, but also building the character of Cumberland and continuing to see it grow and how this community can be enhanced. So we are very excited to see where One Cumberland goes and how we invite the community to be our partner.

If everything from creating murals and public art in the district. As we go out and survey our community, they tell us they would love to see more festivals and events and ways to make Cumberland really active in all ways year-round. Take advantage of the National Park. We have actually two of the most active units in the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area (CRNRA) that are part of Cumberland. The Cumberland CID, we have a formal partnership with the National Park Service, and we're rehabilitating the most popular unit of the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area. It's the Paces Mill/Palisades Unit.

So we have a project, it's an \$11.8 million dollar project where we are actually rebuilding that park from the ground up to create a more national park-like experience. We want those that come out and use the park to be able to have better access to the river also to the trails. So we're expanding the trail network and river access. We're building a new visitor center, adding new parking. So that project is shovel ready. We have assembled 2 million of the 11.8 million needed, so we'll be working to assemble that funding. And once again, inviting the community to come out and help us fund that project and help us bring a revitalized unit of the CRNRA to our community.

**Alan Poole:**

It's crazy to think that there's still so much promise for the area, but when you sort of move on from the business focus to the life enjoyment focus, it's not hard to see.

**Kim Menefee:**

No. And we want to create... continue to enhance the amenities that are there, build on the quality of life, and we know One Cumberland can help us achieve that and really be a partner to the work of the Cumberland CID. We do see it continuing to grow. Major brands continue to choose Cumberland. Home Depot, their corporate headquarters, they've been there for decades.

And then to some of our newest partners, we have the TKE put their North American headquarters in Cumberland. Papa John's just moved their national headquarters to Cumberland. So we do continue to grow, and we do see not only our job market grow. We've got 3,400 businesses that support 84,000 jobs, so that has not slowed down. Even with COVID, we have not seen a change. And then the 30,000 plus residents that live there, mostly millennials and Gen Xers, and they are really contributing to changing the culture and the community of Cumberland.

**Alan Poole:**

What do you hope to see most in the next five, maybe 10 years, in your position as far as what the CID could do?

**Kim Menefee:**

Well, we'd like to continue to innovate and bring transformational progress to Cumberland. Our projects are focused on bringing that change. Adding this major mobility project with the Cumberland Sweep, we feel like it's going to have an incredible impact for generations to come

to change the district, making it more walkable and bikeable and really helping people enjoy all of the amenities and the quality of life in a greater and better way.

**Alan Poole:**

Does the CID have some kind of term where it has to be re-upped or continued or anything like that?

**Kim Menefee:**

Yes. CIDs actually renew every six years. So our board just voted to renew our work through 2030. So we are confident that we'll continue well beyond because there are so many things that we can continue and projects that we'd like to continue to help the area grow and continue to meet the needs as we add more companies and residents of the district, and we hope continue to build on all the visitors who come out and enjoy all the many assets that Cumberland has to offer.

**Alan Poole:**

Obviously, every community is a little different, but there are multiple CIDs in the state.

**Kim Menefee:**

Yes.

**Alan Poole:**

Some newer. Are there any lessons or knowledge you think that other CIDs need to keep in mind as they try and meet their own goals that you've divined from your time with Cumberland CID?

**Kim Menefee:**

Well, I think, first of all, Georgia needs to be very proud of having 30... There are over 30 CIDs in Georgia today, and we're very proud to be the leader in creating CIDs here. Now, those... over 30 CIDs are largely in Metro Atlanta, but we're seeing them pop up now around the state. I think, as I mentioned earlier, partnerships are absolutely key to helping CIDs really achieve their goals.

Our advice would be to continue to work very closely with your partners, your county leadership, your municipalities, as well as our state and federal partners. They believe in the value of CIDs. They really do see us as a partner, and I think that's something that has really grown over this last 35 years, and just to continue to work with those partners to see how you can continue to invest and grow your community.

**Alan Poole:**

Well, I think this has been a fantastic conversation. Any closing thoughts before we break for the end of the episode?

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**Kim Menefee:**

Yes, we hope everyone will come out and take a ride on the Cumberland Hopper, and please let us know what you think because one of the key things we're trying to learn and hear from our riders is if we have a survey that we'd love for people to come out and take the survey so that we can use that data to help us go forward in bringing this project to the community. And go to [cumberlandsweep.org](http://cumberlandsweep.org). To learn more, go to the Cumberland CID website. We have a tremendous amount of information there, learning about our many projects, but we just invite you to come out and ride the shuttle and hope you enjoy.

**Alan Poole:**

I can't wait. Thanks for joining us for another episode. It was really exciting to have the executive director of the Cumberland CID here to talk about this exciting new autonomous vehicle project. I hope you'll be interested in following us on LinkedIn, both Troutman Pepper and TAG, and following this podcast on your podcast listening vehicle choice. See you next time.

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