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Brunswick enjoys transformation

Well-placed city's star rising

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Brunswick -- Been to Brunswick lately?

In a handful of years, a town derided as Brunstucky -- known for chronic flooding and denigrated as a magnet for mobile homes and shotgun-toting natives -- has morphed into a go-to retail hub for the fastest-growing section of Northeast Ohio.

Credit location, location, location.

As people pour into rural Medina County, the city sits a half-hour from Cleveland and no more than 20 minutes from Akron, the turnpike and Cleveland Hopkins International Airport.

And new retailers are attracted by Brunswick's collection of niche businesses, like a scrapbook headquarters, a custom Harley-Davidson shop and a petting farm.

Such businesses draw an eclectic mix of shoppers from as far as 150 miles away, according to research from the Brunswick Chamber of Commerce.

"If you could pick up a city and put it someplace, the ideal location would be Brunswick," said Murray McDade, executive director of the Brunswick Area Chamber of Commerce.

Brunswick has all kinds of unique attributes.

McDade said the chamber fields calls from other states when events are held by Mapleside Farms, a rustic country restaurant, bakery, gift shop and old-fashioned ice cream parlor operating on an apple farm.

Winking Lizard Tavern, known for its World Tour of Beer, will open on Brunswick's busy Ohio 303 because its research says the town's Giant Eagle is the area's top beer seller.

There's also "no restaurant or any place to go from Strongsville south until you get to Route 18," said Winking Lizard spokesman John Lane.

In the same plaza, a newly opened Buehler's Market took over a shuttered Tops Supermarket. At the grand opening this month, shoppers from Parma, North Royalton and Strongsville showed up, said Buehler's spokeswoman Mary McMillen.

On 143 acres of former nothing now stands the Brunswick Town Center, a shopping Mecca of big-box anchor stores and quaint specialty shops. Behind that will be an education quad where Cleveland State, Kent State, Baldwin-Wallace and the University of Akron are among the schools looking to locate a campus.

A \$250,000 nature center, paid for by the city's first-ever federal grant, is proposed in the area as well.

The Cleveland Clinic and Southwest General Hospital are putting up new medical buildings, and talks are under way with Medina General Hospital for a free-standing emergency room.

Not the Brunswick that used to be

This isn't the Brunswick of old, where hard rains would overflow blocked sewer lines and flood streets, private basements and the city manager's office.

Four years of construction that cost \$9 million plugged the leaks.

And it's not the Brunswick of old, where a builder would tack on an extra \$10,000 in anticipation of difficulties working with city officials.

When Rob Rapp was planning a new building for his Homestead Insurance company in 1987, he noticed a \$10,000 charge listed as "Brunswick factor."

The builder told him that was the cost for dealing with a city.

But things have changed. Rapp said that when a contractor recently was assessed a permit fee twice - once in December and again in January - because of the new year, it took one phone call to get a refund.

"The bureaucracy is gone," Rapp said.

Managing the city's growth, development

Much of the credit is handed to Bob Zienkowski, Brunswick's city manager for the last four years. He made changes, including customer service training for the staff, to cement the city's new focus.

Building inspectors now carry cell phones and respond immediately, as opposed to waiting a day or longer.

Need a weed trimmer? The city will lend one to you. Short on chairs for the graduation party? Those are available, too, free to city residents.

Lori Thuener served on a committee of business owners Zienkowski assembled to assess the city's business attitude. Old rules dictated that all buildings be red brick, like Thuener's Creative Cuts hair salon. That restricted chains and franchises from building their signature models, and the committee suspected it caused some businesses to bypass Brunswick. Zienkowski said he heard the same rumor.

The committee suggested nixing the restriction, and familiar franchises like Steak & Shake sprung up.

"They listened to us," Thuener said.

Many small towns are looking to preserve their wide-open-space appeal and avoid the congestion that commercial development often brings.

Zienkowski came to town with a plan for economic development in the commercial and industrial sectors. Residential, commercial and industrial property revenue has increased from about \$250,000 in 2004 to \$2.27 million last year.

The bulk of that is the commercial and industrial growth.

Zienkowski also hopes to create an improved traffic-signal system to manage Ohio 303 congestion.

Service director Sam Scaffide said Zienkowski recognized and capitalized on the city's assets.

"With the help of City Council he took a sleepy community living in the past, dusted it off and made it stand up to be counted. Now the city has a bright future."

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