

A C A D I A N A

BUSINESS

NEWS & ANALYSIS on COMMERCE in SOUTH LOUISIANA

With no money from the feds and just a trickle of revenues coming from the state, the time has come to seriously consider tolls to fund I-49 South. And while the Lafayette chamber is prepared to make the push, someone in the Legislature or the administration will have to champion it, says chamber Chair Kam Movassaghi.



Taking Its Toll

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Damage Assessment: Even though the regular session doesn't end for another two months, there are already victories and defeats for Acadiana's business community.

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A Little Breathing Room

New construction has slowed, but it's not nearly time to write its obituary.

Regardless of where the opportunity arises, from a telephone call to a lunch date — and even in the typical rest room conversation — the question surfaces daily: Are you still busy? As accustomed to the question as I have become, it still amazes me how much people enjoy discussing new development. Fortunately, the answer to the question is “yes,” but with an asterisk. Yes, the commercial real estate industry is busy, and many people are doing very well, but the wholesale growth with no constraints has definitely come to a screeching halt.

The evidence is all around us, but you have to spend some time inventorying what is going on in a more cumulative manner. Many people might not notice the message that scrolls on Raising Cane's reader board every few minutes on the corner of Pinhook and Kaliste Saloom roads, but it's touting expansion: There will be a new Cane's in Broussard this summer. The company recently started turning dirt at its new site in front of the Wal-Mart Supercenter, and there is also another Cane's opening in Opelousas, the Baton Rouge chain's first store in that market.

What about the guys who were popping up on just about every corner during the “boom,” your friendly neighborhood drug-store? They still seem to be doing more in the Lafayette area than just about anywhere else in the state. Two Walgreens stores are going vertical as I write, and you might see two new CVS locations follow. Not only will these additions create convenience to the consumer, but the money that will go to the landowners, construction companies, real estate brokers and legal counsels involved — plus the future employees — get circulated multiple times within our community. This creates the small barrier that helps to thwart off the big-bad recession monster from our sanctuary.

Sticking to the retail theme, more than 60,000 square feet of new retail space are being constructed along the Highway 90 corridor headed south toward Broussard. In these developments, expect some familiar national brands such as Dollar Tree, Hibbett Sports, Quiznos, and Hershey's Ice Cream (with more to come), along with some local favorites. To appreciate this level of activity, it's important to fully understand the scrutiny any retailer



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gives a potential new location, especially the national varieties, as they have many higher-ups to answer to — chief among them Wall Street. Acadiana should feel good about these stores opening in our area, because it means that there is confidence in what is going on down here. It is easy to overlook the huge investments that are being made in our community because the stores are so much fun to shop in, but it's a strong sign for us that hundreds of thousands of square feet have been put in commission over the last 18 months or so.

The next big question is often about our office sector. For now at least, it's holding its own. Take a look at what is under construction at the corner of Settlers Trace and Beaulieu Drive next to The Landing apartments. At this writing, eight new office buildings are planned for the site ranging in size from 3,500 square feet to 15,000 square feet. This is a very substantial office development that is happening under most people's radar since it is just off the beaten path. In addition, Regency Park, Versailles Square and Farrell Plaza office parks have had new buildings come on line very recently, with area remaining for additional structures.

Another common tangent of the ‘are we

done yet’ question relates to apartments. It is quite apparent that The Reserve at Acadiana, the 276-unit apartment project that is dead in the water just behind the Mall of Acadiana, has scared many people; but rest assured, this development came to a halt because of sketchy financing and not because additional units are not feasible in this market. We all should feel lucky that we only have one such major project that has stalled, as much of the rest of the nation is dealing with half completed projects much more frequently. River Ranch's Main Street Annex, an \$18.5 million project scheduled to be completed in the summer of 2010, is a perfect example of new investment continuing to take place. And don't be surprised if you hear of another new complex announced for the area soon.

There are many other good retail, office, multi-family, industrial, and hotel projects either under way or that have just opened that are positively impacting the Acadiana area — not to mention the hundreds of millions of dollars being pumped into our economy by Our Lady of Lourdes' new \$211 million hospital complex and Lafayette General Medical Center's \$75 million renovation. The potential spin-off

of complementary services from the projects they have planned is mind-boggling.

Thanks in large part to health care projects, the length and total dollar amount of the new permit list tracked by local government remains stout, and it will continue to grow if just some of the speculation and rumors that are swirling around the campfire come to fruition.

Is the local commercial real estate scene still busting at the seams at the rate it was going when the stock market was sky-rocketing and the Go Zone incentives were in place? Of course not. But is it still chugging along a track with a solid foundation and good fundamentals? Most definitely.

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The Thibodeaux family did not have to travel far to find paradise. That is part of Acadiana's unique makeup. Frank Thibodeaux, a son of Bob's Tree Preservation Inc. founder Bob Thibodeaux, describes the area as “a virtual garden paradise with the world's greatest people who are passionate about life.”

Passions for the Thibodeauxs include providing tree care services and helping to save our Louisiana coastline through Bob Thibodeaux's efforts to plant thousands of trees with his organization, **Acorns of Hope**. Their tree farm consists of approximately 100 acres of native shade and flowering trees.

For the Thibodeauxs, managing historic Louisiana landscapes is a fulfilling experience.

The family ownership of Bob's Tree Preservation Inc. includes Bob and Dot Thibodeaux and sons Frank and Neal Thibodeaux.

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