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Article published Dec 16, 2007
Dec 15, 2007

Business is booming on the east side of town

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HOUMA -- The once dying retail sector along Grand Caillou Road is coming back to life.

"There has been a substantial renaissance that has taken place," said Terrebonne Parish Zoning and Planning Department Director Pat Gordon, pointing to new neighborhoods and expansions of existing ones as proof.

The Woodlawn Ranch subdivision is being expanded, he said, and the development of Patriot Point, across the street from Ellender Memorial High School, is under way.

The area has also seen strong growth in its retail offerings, most notably with the Wal-Mart on Grand Caillou Road, but also with banks, strip malls, restaurants and two new hotels. A third hotel, Baymont Inn & Suites, is under construction.

Gordon explained that in the 1960s, east Houma was considered to be the "country," but this began to change when the tunnel was built under the Houma Navigation Canal. The thoroughfare connected the cities two sides, causing both Tunnel Boulevard and Grand Caillou Road to explode with commercial developments. Previously traffic had to use bridges to cross the waterway, long replaced models with a design that required motorists to sit and wait each time the span had to be opened to allow boat traffic to pass.

Some 40 years later, the once bustling shopping centers became aged husks with vacant parking lots, largely due to the oil bust of the '80s, which crippled the local economy.

"It seemed like business wasn't coming to the east side of Houma," said Terrebonne Parish Council Chairman Alvin Tillman.

"The east side was very quiet. Business was not coming up," said Terrebonne Parish councilman Peter Rhodes.

He added people considered it to be a "dying side of town."

Only in the last five years has the area stirred with new development.

Gordon credited the construction of the Grand Caillou Road Wal-Mart in 2002 for much of the area's revival.

"It's had a ripple effect," he said. "I believe the resurrection of this was because of the Wal-Mart."

Terrebonne Economic Development Authority CEO Mike Ferdinand explained that Wal-Mart officials

makes a decision to open a new store based on demographic numbers.

Other retailers and restaurateurs use the same numbers, but are more willing to move to an area once Wal-Mart leads the way. Its competitors want to cut into its market and other businesses want to form a symbiotic relationship.

Ferdinand called this "collateral development."

When Wal-Mart officials first said they wanted to open a store on Grand Caillou, Tillman said there was a lot of opposition to the retail giant. Local business owners said feared the store would siphon away customers. And residents predicted drainage woes, traffic and noise problems.

"There was a lot of opposition to the Wal-Mart," Rhodes said.

Tillman did point out that bringing Wal-Mart into the community was not entirely bloodless, either.

"I'm sure Wal-Mart has had a negative impact on some of the businesses," he said.

But Tillman said Wal-Mart's net effect on the local economy has largely been positive, pointing to the new businesses it's drawn to the area, like Pepper's Pizzeria and Synergy Bank.

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita were also a boon to the area, prompting industrial businesses, like Murphy's Oil, to relocate from New Orleans to east Houma.

Rhodes said three major projects fixed some major drainage issues between Grand Caillou Road and the Houma Navigation Canal. And the Port of Terrebonne begin construction about five years ago, an operation that also played a part in the east side's economic success.

Future projects for Grand Caillou Road include \$10 million expansion of Industrial Boulevard. The stretch south to Thompson Road will be increased from two lanes to five.

Construction is expected to begin on the state-funded project sometime in late 2009.

"We need that to happen. That is one of the major thoroughfares on that side of town," Tillman said.

Gordon credited state Sen. Reggie Dupre, D-Bourg, for pushing the road project through the Legislature.

Another project Gordon talked about is the Prospect Street Bridge replacement. The current two-lane span, which crosses Bayou Terrebonne, will be replaced with a four-lane bridge.

Estimates put the state-funded project's cost at \$12 million and construction is also expected to begin sometime in late 2008 or early 2009.

"We're looking forward to that," he said, adding that even if it creates some short-term inconvenience, the expansion will be worth it in the long-term.

Rhodes said the area might also see the opening of a Houma Police substation in early 2008. The department's headquarters is on the west side of the tunnel, at the corner of Honduras and Wood streets.

Tillman proposes putting a second station at the corner of East Street and Memory Lane inside an old ballroom. The ballroom, of course, would need to be remodeled.

But no matter how much the Grand Caillou area grows, Gordon said he doesn't think it will ever be

the retail powerhouse Martin Luther King Boulevard has become.

He said Houma has four main retail spots, Southland Mall, Martin Luther King Boulevard, Main Street and now Grand Caillou. But the Martin Luther King area has become the retail magnet for the region, drawing shoppers from surrounding parishes.

"Houma, La., is no longer the small town I grew up in. People are actually leaving the big city to come here to shop and for medical care," Dupre said.

He added that as Martin Luther King takes on more regional importance, east Houma will become the center of shopping for locals.

Dupre owns a 75 percent share in Bourg Supermarket and said his business has been boosted by locals wanting to save time and gas while avoiding the crowds and traffic of Martin Luther King Boulevard.

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