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Flour Bluff attracts businesses

Demographics and cheap rent are selling points

**By Stephanie L. Jordan
Caller-Times**

When a Papa John's Pizza franchise opened in January in Flour Bluff, manager Charles Dilworth thought the location would have average sales, given that the franchise already had more than a half-dozen locations in South Texas and the Valley.

Sales at the South Padre Island Drive location were great the first week, but that's typical, Dilworth said.

Then curious Flour Bluff residents stopped in for carryout instead of delivery, asking to see how the pizzas were made. That's unusual.

He figured that six months after the opening, things would have slowed down. They haven't.

"When you're new in the area everybody flocks to you," Dilworth said. "You expect that business to drop off in five months. It hasn't. My biggest challenge is to be able to maintain customers and keep them happy. There are so many of them.

"The community has just been great."

Papa John's isn't the only retailer to have discovered Flour Bluff in recent months. Several new businesses have popped up along South Padre Island Drive and so far the businesses seem to be doing well, they reported.



George Gongora/Caller-Times

J.R. McKinzey checks on a pizza at the Papa John's Pizza in Flour Bluff. Sales at the pizzeria have exceeded the modest expectations manager Charles Dilworth had for the store when it opened in January. On any given weekend, Papa John's makes 300 to 400 pizzas a day.



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Denis Rousslang shows examples of antiques from her store, Dixie Antiques. Recent growth and development in Flour Bluff have turned her hobby into a thriving business.

"The island is growing fast and the Bluff has just blossomed," said Denise Rousslang, owner of Dixie Antiques, an antique store in Flour Bluff.

Passersby notice new awnings and signs for places such as Blockbuster Video and Carr's Cleaners while making the drive to Corpus Christi or Padre Island.

"People are rediscovering Flour Bluff," said **Matthew Cravey**, president of NAI Cravey Real Estate Services, which owns and manages property in Flour Bluff. "For a long time Flour Bluff has been tainted. But businesses are deciding it's a safe place to locate. Safe in that people from the island will come in and residents already there won't have to go to the Southside to shop anymore."

With six people doing nothing but taking orders on Friday and Saturday nights and 15 drivers delivering pizzas to residents from Airline Road to the Bob Hall Pier, Dilworth said his clientele is a pizzeria's dream. Monday through Thursday evening, the store cranks out 150 to 200 pizzas a day and utilizes eight delivery drivers. On weekends, Papa John's makes 300 to 400 pizzas a day.

"We have a couple ladies who come here from Portland every week to get pizza and bring it home," Dilworth said. "We have people calling from Ingleside asking if we can deliver there. People are happy they don't have to drive to San Antonio to get us anymore."

One explanation for the recent development is that retailers now have better demographic information on Flour Bluff thanks to improved technology. Using mapping software, companies can study 1-mile blocks for population, age groups, competition, income levels and other demographic information.

Also, rent in Flour Bluff, just several exits south of the malls and strips of businesses on South Padre Island Drive, is much cheaper. That translates to more businesses willing to take a chance.

"(Rent) can be so cheap that an antique shop could make it," Cravey said. "You're going to see smaller businesses in Flour Bluff as the Southside moves closer and closer."

When Rousslang and her husband, Gary, decided to set up shop for her antique business, she thought the perfect place would be a building she spotted nine years ago when she moved to the area from Minnesota.

Attracting competition

Nestled between Flour Bluff and the JFK Causeway, the store is close to the water and visible enough for travelers on South Padre Island Drive to take note of the "Dixie Antiques" sign as they head toward Corpus Christi.

"We got into antiquing to get a feel for it and we didn't expect to make a living at it," Denise Rouslang said. They're able to keep their prices below that of the average antique store so they can sell items quickly and go to auctions and estate sales more frequently for new merchandise.

Cravey thinks development will continue as long as the populations in Flour Bluff, south Corpus Christi and the island continue to grow.

One thing that drives development is that chains tend to feed on one another - when a hardware retailer decides to open in Flour Bluff, other hardware retailers take note and consider the location as well.

"They're looking for pockets of people," Cravey said. "They're trying to get more market share which is why you have Blockbuster moving closer to Hollywood Video."

Capturing a market

Blockbuster Video opened last Thanksgiving. Many residents are still discovering the new store and the weekends are becoming increasingly busy, store employees said.

"People still don't recognize we're here," said Blockbuster manager Jimmy Lawson. "People come in here thinking we're still the auto parts store it used to be. But we've seen a steady incline. People who live on the island stop here. We're perfect because they can come on their way home from work, check things out, and bring them back on their way back into the city."

When selling the Flour Bluff community to potential businesses, Cravey said the demographics of the area can be a plus. With a broad range of socioeconomic levels, businesses can capitalize on those trying to save money and those with deeper pockets.

Right around the corner

"What you're finding is businesses coming here offering services that people don't want to make a long drive to get - things like videos, medicine, groceries," Cravey said. "But still I don't think that we're going to get a really big store here. But with Wal-Mart, next to Eckerd,



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Russell Henson shops for videos at the new Blockbuster Video in Flour Bluff. The location helps the store attract residents from Padre Island going to and from work, says the store manager.

next to H-E-B ... and they're doing well. And I think they're helping others.

"Many of the businesses are good, solid ones, but I'm not sure some of these businesses would survive without the island."

About 75 percent of Rousslang's business comes from tourists looking for knick-knacks they can pack in luggage. Area residents buy the larger furniture pieces and sets of dishes. Even though she may get more exposure elsewhere, she's not looking to move.

"The Bluff is really going to be the place to be in Corpus Christi," Rousslang said. "People in Corpus Christi don't want to believe it, but I really think that's just the way it's going to be."