

Hot spots for growth

Saratoga Boulevard, Five Points, downtown and SPID beyond Airline are where it's happening

**By Jennifer Stump
Caller-Times**



David
Pellerine/
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From suburban sprawl to urban renewal, major growth and construction will continue to be on the very edges of Corpus Christi and in the heart of downtown, local business leaders said.

Commercial businesses will continue to follow residents out to the newest residential developments, but at the same time, the nostalgia and convenience associated with the renovated restaurants and bars in downtown will continue to draw customers, they said.

Real estate leaders pointed to four major areas that they expect to grow: Five Points, Saratoga Boulevard, South Padre Island Drive near Airline Road and the downtown entertainment district.

"Office and retail follows the population," said **Matthew Cravey, president of NAI Cravey Real Estate Services Inc.** "That's what is really driving it, and it almost always snowballs. All of this activity sort of breeds more activity. If you've got a lot of businesses or homes, all of those people need to eat somewhere. It just keeps growing out exponentially."

Five Points

Cravey and other said major retailers will continue to be attracted to the Five Points area, which has become a shopping hub for people who live in northwest Corpus Christi and beyond.

"It draws from such a diverse and large region," Cravey said. "If you live in Mathis or Odem or Sinton, that's your closest major shopping. It acts as a funnel bringing everything into Corpus Christi."

The traffic along Interstate 37 and Farm-to-Market Road 624 brings people from Robstown, Annaville, Calallen and other more rural areas past Five Points every day, Cravey said.

Retailers study those demographics and see how many people in a certain radius - often one, three or five miles out - will use that area for shopping and entertainment, he said.

For the Five Points area, that means more businesses like the Super Wal-Mart or Luby's Cafeteria that opened there recently, Cravey said.

"Retailers are finding little pockets that they missed," he said. "They're

just getting more strategically located."

Real estate broker Joe Adame, of Joe Adame & Associates, said new residential development in the Calallen area will continue to bring businesses to the Northwest area. But the drive-by traffic of people who live in more rural areas will have a huge impact, he said.

"People might not live in that area, but they drive by all the time," he said.

Saratoga Boulevard

The far southern area of Corpus Christi also will continue to boom with new residential housing and smaller neighborhood businesses such as restaurants, drug stores and dry cleaners, real estate sales professionals said.

In particular, Saratoga Boulevard is expected to become a central point for Corpus Christi in the future, they said.

"We just can't keep up with all of the inquiries into that area," Cravey said. "You've got land. You've got the hospitals."

Foster Edwards, CEO of the Corpus Christi Association of Realtors, also said Saratoga is poised to become a hub area for Corpus Christi one day.

"Somebody did a good job planning Saratoga," he said. "When Crosstown gets extended and Saratoga becomes a more arterial street, that is laid out very well. You've got homes and room for larger commercial development. I think that over the next several years it is going to be a big area for growth."

South Padre Island Drive

Major retailers are finding that SPID past the Airline intersection offers something that's hard to find in the real estate world: available land on a major highway and proximity to the city's most popular retail area, Staples and SPID.

The 16-screen Century Theaters recently opened, Applebee's Restaurant is under construction and Vista Automotive Group has begun clearing a 42-acre site at SPID and Daly Drive that will be its new home.

"I think that some businesses were kind of worried because that area is still kind of sparse," Cravey said. "But they thought they would get in there while they can."

The area is a short drive to both malls and the Staples intersection, which Cravey said is likely to remain Corpus Christi's retail hub.

Padre Island is also affecting the development of SPID past Airline, Edwards said.

Edwards said retailers are becoming more attracted to the edge of SPID because upwardly mobile island residents drive past every day. He

said that more young families are moving to the island, bringing commuters past the new developments on SPID daily.

"We tend to think of the island as a retirement place," Edwards said. "It's not. I've heard that one in six island residents is under the age of 18. You've got thousands of houses out there. City folks tend to hang a left and go to the beach and we forget about all of the growth that's happening to our right on the island. It's a whole city out there."

Downtown

The next step in the development of downtown will be the addition of residential housing, business leaders said.

The area has seen a boom in clubs and restaurants along Chaparral Street, which many have compared to a smaller version of Austin's Sixth Street.

"We've got such a variety," said Norma Urban, president of the Downtown Management District. "The best thing is, people are moving in and look what they did to the façade of their buildings. It really helps upgrade those old, tired buildings."

Urban said the entertainment district will continue to grow, along with the renovation of office space downtown.

"How could it go wrong? This is probably the only downtown on the Gulf of Mexico that has a view like we do. It's a million-dollar view and not too many people have taken advantage of it."

Adame said more people are expressing an interest in moving to downtown apartments.

"Once you have residents, you become a true city again," Adame said. "It's happening in cities all over the country. I don't see why it wouldn't happen in Corpus Christi. Our downtown has a great location by the water."

The older architecture is what's attracting people to the area, he said.

"There's a desire out there for something other than a new building," Adame said. "I think downtown offers some charm and nostalgia that you can't find other places."

Dr. Keith Rose and his partners in P2R, a development company, recently renovated the Weber Building at 319 N. Mesquite St.

The upscale club 21 is on the ground floor; 10 loft apartments upstairs will open in March.

"If you look at the state and the country right now, urban renewal is the hot topic," Rose said. "When I moved here a little over a year and a half ago, I thought Corpus had a beautiful downtown. I was very surprised that people weren't living there. It just made sense."

Rose said he expects that other lofts will open in the downtown area because of the growth of the entertainment district and the proximity to

the workplace.

"There's no commute to work," Rose said. "When you want to go out, you just walk out your front door. I've been told about 6,000 times that we would fail, but 21 is packed all the time. We've already leased half of the lofts.

"Corpus can be a very exciting, dynamic place. It just needs to realize that."

Staff writer Jennifer Stump can be reached at 886-3778 or by e-mail at stumpj@caller.com