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Making a home in Homestead

By SCOTT ANDRON

Bob Epling drives down one of Homestead's main roads and points to row upon row of brand-new condos and town houses with peach walls, red-tile roofs, and juvenile trees held up by wooden stakes.

"This was all potatoes and corn," he tells the visitor in his passenger seat. "If you came here three years ago, that would be all you'd see, as far as the eye can see."

A few minutes later, he points out the Richards Tractor and Implements on Campbell Drive. A line of farm machinery is parked out front, but just down the street is a new multiplex and shopping center with a Chili's restaurant, Atlanta Bread Co., and a sushi shop.

"Our little town is changing," says Epling, president of the Homestead-based Community Bank of Florida for the past three decades and a resident of the town for most of his life. "The face is changing. It's a community in transition."

If you haven't been to Homestead in a few years, you might not recognize it. Nearly 10,000 new families have moved into the area since 2000, a growth rate of 32 percent, or almost triple the county average. Now retail shops are moving in, and city leaders are looking to attract offices and industrial businesses.

Before Hurricane Andrew walloped Homestead in 1992, the city's two principal industries were farming and the Homestead Air Force Base, which then employed close to 10,000 people.

After the storm, the military reduced the site to an Air Reserve Base. The facility has taken on more personnel in recent years, but it's still nowhere close to pre-storm levels. It now has around 1,100 full-time workers, plus about 1,200 reservists who come to perform monthly drills. An additional 175 full-time workers are expected to arrive soon.

The Homestead Miami Speedway opened in 1995 but didn't have its first Winston Cup race until 1999. For several years, little other new development came to the town.

But by 2001, as developable land vanished from West Miami-Dade and Southwest Broward, and housing prices climbed to dizzying new heights in the region's older core cities, builders looked to Homestead for its cheap land and convenient site at the end of Florida's Turnpike extension.

Some 35 miles southwest of downtown Miami, they found cheap land and built homes they could sell at deep discounts compared to prices in Pembroke Pines or Miami Lakes.

Major home builders like Lennar, Shoma and Caribe came to town, and the Homestead area gained 9,700 new households from 2000 to 2007.

From 2000 to 2006, the city's population grew nearly 70 percent, from 32,000 to nearly 54,000 people, according to the U.S. Census. City Hall estimates that the number is now over 58,000 and will reach 70,000 within three years. The city's growth so far this decade is nearly twice the rate of the entire 1990s.

Neighboring Florida City jumped from 7,800 to 9,500 people from 2000 to 2007, and its mayor thinks the number now is closer to 11,000. Surrounding unincorporated areas also grew.

Among U.S. cities with 50,000 or more people, Homestead is growing faster than any other, according to the Census.

Despite this, many of the new homes are vacant because of the real-estate market bust.

For Homestead, however, all this is old news.

The more recent development is the flood of retail shops and shopping centers pouring into the Homestead area. Some highlights so far include two Home Depots, a Lowe's and a BJ's. A new 400,000-square-foot big-box center is under construction, with a Kohl's department store, Circuit City, Sports Authority and other category-killers expected.

Just across the Florida City border, a sign advertises a Best Buy on the way. One Starbucks has already opened in the area, and another is opening soon.

"We're seeing heavy development on the commercial end, and that absolutely delights me," said Lynda Bell, Homestead's mayor since November. "It has really been very exciting for the city of Homestead."

It hasn't been bad for some of the new merchants, either. Alex Diaz said he and his business partners saw the growth in the area and knew it meant a business opportunity. On Dec. 15, they opened Miyagi Sushi Bar & Grill in a new shopping center on the booming east side of town, a few doors over from Havana Joe's Cigar Lounge. Lunch hours have been slow, but he has had 30-minute waits for a table for dinner.

"We saw so many houses and nowhere to eat," Diaz said. "We've been doing phenomenal."

The new stores mean that Homestead residents don't need to drive to Cutler Bay or Kendall -- Dadeland Mall is a good 17 miles away, at least -- to go shopping.

To get an idea of how much money has been spent in the Homestead area, consider this: Epling's bank's assets more than doubled to \$508 million from 1998 to 2008.

In Florida City, which has a high percentage of low-income residents, longtime Mayor Otis Wallace also sees the retailers as a source of valuable jobs.

"When you didn't have a job, people feel blessed to have them," said Wallace, the mayor since 1984. "The retail jobs meet that need. A job is a job, so far as I'm concerned."

But over in Homestead, Bell and some other city leaders would like to see their city take the next step: building an employment base for skilled workers.

"The skill set in the area is changing," said City Manager Mike Shehadeh. "Very skilled labor are living in Homestead and the surrounding area. That was one of the biggest hurdles in the past."

Most of the newcomers are from Miami, many of them young families who came in search of more house for their money. Although educational statistics are not readily available, community leaders say many of the newcomers have college degrees or significant vocational training.

But since the population boom, traffic has become a problem. Community activist Angel Lazo worries that it will just get worse as empty houses in the city get filled with families.

"I don't feel the roads are going to meet the demands of the houses," said Lazo, an information technology project manager for a large company in Doral. He leaves before 6 a.m., and his commute is normally about 45 minutes. He moved to Homestead in 2003 from a condo near downtown Miami because he was attracted by the chance to buy a home on a real lot for less money than he'd pay in a place like Kendall.

"I enjoy it. It has that hometown feel," he said. ``But if we don't mitigate the traffic now we are going to be the next Kendall."

LIVING AND WORKING

Traffic poses a problem for commuters but perhaps an opportunity for new businesses. Community leaders believe they can offer an educated, largely bilingual workforce that would love some jobs that suit their skills closer to home.

City leaders are excited about the new, larger Homestead Hospital that opened in May and is already working on expansion plans. The hospital had 815 employees when it moved into the site, is now up over 1,000 and has 200 openings, mostly for nurses and technical jobs such as x-ray technicians.

Meanwhile, several developers are now working on the Homestead Park of Commerce, a business park near the speedway. So far, it's hard to say whether the park will create many new white-collar jobs, but the owners say it will meet a need for high-end warehouse and industrial space in the southern end of the county.

To date, the park has attracted a beer distributor, a boat manufacturer and offices for two federal law-enforcement agencies. A car museum also is planned.

One developer, ComReal Miami, is now seeking city approval for an additional 15-acre development in the park. The company plans to build 232,000 square feet of warehouse space, which could be divided among a number of tenants, said Ed Redlich, ComReal's vice president.

RACING OR R&D

Redlich said the site could attract racing-related businesses who need to be near the speedway or aviation businesses who contract with the Air Reserve Base. Research and development facilities and pharmaceutical firms also are possibilities, he said.

Ernesto Casal, whose Capital Commercial Group is marketing another 100-acre tract at the park, says he foresees at least one large "corporate user" who will bring many jobs to the site. He hopes to bring plans to City Hall for approval by summer.

The park is in a Foreign Trade Zone, which can convey tax benefits for some businesses.

Jeff Williamson, whose Republic Real Estate Advisors represents another 15-acre tract, said more mundane businesses like printers or plumbers also are possibilities.

"Nothing would please us more than to have a biotech company to come in," said Alex Sanchez, partner in a firm that owns the property Casal is listing, ``. . . but the market will dictate that, not us."