



Hastings sees opportunity for more investment in Main Street business district

By Colleen Jones
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Walk down Main Street in Hastings and you'll see vacant storefront after vacant storefront — a virtual retail desert — as if time had stood still and left the town behind.

That could be changing.

A karate dojo took up a space on Main Street last year. There's a new children's nursery. And Dave Pelletier, owner of The Spot Cafe in St. Augustine, is opening up an eatery he's calling Norma D's Kitchen at the former home of Johnny & Beanie's.

There are signs of even greater momentum, too. Nearly 50 people came out last Thursday to the Lord's Temple on East Gilmore Street to a Hastings Vision Workshop, a town hall meeting to get input from residents on how to grow the small rural community.

Officials see an opportunity to showcase Hastings and its potential at an opening of the Hastings segment of the St. Johns River-to-Sea Loop, a bike trail that winds through five counties. (The trail was scheduled to open Nov. 17, but residents learned from the Florida Department of Transportation this week that the opening had been pushed back to the spring.)

Herb Hiller, economic development coordinator for the St. Johns River-to-Sea Loop, gave examples of communities like Winter Garden and Titusville where the bike trail has sparked the revitalization of business districts.

Last year, Hastings residents voted to dissolve the town government and allow St. Johns County to absorb the community and provide all the regular services it gives to other unincorporated parts of the county, including promotion of business investment and tourism.

But what kind of economic growth and development is possible in Hastings?

Melissa Glasgow, St. Johns County director of economic development, takes a fairly positive outlook.

"The Hastings area is poised to attract commercial and industrial growth in the long-term," Glasgow said. "Types of businesses conducive to Hastings might include independent retailers,

restaurants and professional service providers along Main Street, and small production and distribution centers along State Road 207 on the outskirts of the community.”

One after another, residents spoke out at the vision workshop to say they wanted to rebuild pride in the community so that they and their children would want to stay in Hastings.

Some say the town does have some things going for it in terms of attracting business to Main Street.

According to Glasgow, “Hastings and the southwestern area of the county benefit from proximity to SR 207, a designated four-lane truck corridor that connects I-95 to U.S. Route 17 across the St. Johns River. ... Completion of the First Coast Expressway and its connection to I-95 will also bring the potential for economic activity further south in the county.”

But the town also faces challenges, particularly in terms of infrastructure needed to support growing commerce and industry.

“We know a lot of entrepreneurs stay away from Hastings because of the drainage issues,” Deshaude Freeman, president of the InBound Foundation in Hastings, told The Record.

Another obstacle has been funding, Freeman said.

“People are trying to get access to capital [to launch] new businesses,” Freeman said.

InBound, a community development nonprofit, has been trying to put an administrative building to process small business loans somewhere on Main Street but so far has been unsuccessful. It’s also promoted the idea of bringing a mental health facility to town.

In addition, without the residential growth that other parts of St. Johns County are seeing, Hastings’ lack of density likely won’t attract a large retailer to the area, according to Glasgow.

“Businesses potentially locating in the Hastings area would also have to attract workers that need to drive farther if they don’t already live in the area,” Glasgow added.

Some of the ideas mentioned were a theme park like a Daytona Lagoon, or a shopping plaza or mini mall.

“You almost need for people to have a reason to be diverted [from SR 207] to come down Main Street,” said Amanda Turbeville, who works at the Chicken Koop, one of the area’s few restaurants. “You don’t just drive down there because it’s kind of off the beaten path.”

If not a high-volume retailer, there would at least an opportunity for more mom-and-pop stores and jobs to go along with those businesses.

“Hastings is very unique; it’s a lot of land and a lot of potential,” said Freeman. “But it’s hard to keep a business going if you don’t have a lot of funding and advertising.”

Next steps in the visioning process include mapping out specific areas where development could occur and hiring a consultant to guide that process.

Glasgow also said her office is working to update promotional materials for Hastings and that it would use its resources to target commercial development opportunities through site consultants, brokers and developers.

In an interview in May, Pelletier told The Record, "We really feel that we're going back to be able to draw from East Palatka, Coquina [Crossing], Elkton, the farming community, Flagler Estates. I think that we'll be a welcome fit. I hope to inspire other people to invest in the area as well."