



Hastings residents hope change leads to more business investment

By Stuart Korfhage
March 13, 2018

While the act of dissolution isn't expected to solve every issue facing the Hastings area, residents are hopeful that it can be the impetus for quality-of-life improvements in the commercial sector.

Last year, Hastings citizens voted to dissolve the city government and allow St. Johns County to absorb the town and provide all the regular services it gives to other unincorporated parts of the county.

The county has done so with considerable costs — as the Commission agreed in February to cover \$768,000 for a utilities services transfer. County Administrator Michael Wanchick has said a total of about \$3 million in capital improvement will likely be required over five years.

What it means for residents is that they are likely to pay less for water service and should also get a tax break since they won't face the additional city millage on their property tax bills.

But aside from saving a little bit in living expenses, what some are hoping for is better service from the business sector.

Deshaude Freeman is president of InBound Foundation in Hastings. The organization is committed to promoting economic development in the Hastings area and getting better social services like recreation opportunities and mental health assistance.

Freeman said he's had multiple conversations with county staff about improving services in his community and added he's already seen action on things like improving drainage, which proved to be a major problem in the last two hurricanes.

County communications director Michael Ryan said the county is also embarking on general cleanup projects in the area and is working on ways to better market the area to interested commercial partners.

Any investment would be welcomed, Freeman said, because there are so many needs not currently being met.

“Nobody’s going to move here if there’s nowhere to work,” he said.

“There’s very good potential here in Hastings.”

Fellow Hastings resident Chloris Baker agreed with Freeman.

“We need more jobs and we need more housing,” she said.

Baker, speaking from her son’s barber shop on Main Street, added that the town could really use a true grocery store and more efficient public transportation. She said the area lacks basic services like a laundromat.

Currently, Hastings has a few businesses on Main Street, including a Dollar General store and a branch of Capital City Bank. It’s unclear whether more businesses will join those in the near future, but Melissa Glasgow, the St. Johns County director of economic development, said conditions for opening a new business in Hastings have improved.

“The fact that you have the lower cost now associated with developing there with the utility costs that will be reduced with the result of the county taking over that system, the fact that you don’t have the additional millage rate that the town used to charge, it does present lower operating costs for someone considering opening a business there, and that is a good thing, too,” Glasgow said.

“Along the State Road 207 and Main Street commercial corridors that are available for development, I think there’s definitely opportunity for development there.”

Glasgow said there simply hasn’t been the residential growth around Hastings that other parts of the county have seen, so there isn’t any expectation that a large retailer will open there anytime soon.

However, it is reasonable to think that smaller enterprises like independent grocery stores or restaurants will be interested. The S.R. 207 corridor is a busy one, and Hastings might get more visitors in the near future with the expansion of the bike trail that passes through the area.

“A high-volume retailer in today’s environment is probably unlikely to look at the Hastings area for a new store, but that doesn’t mean that smaller independent retailers and restaurants won’t find the community a charming place,” Glasgow said. “The smaller independents, that’s part of the charm of a more rural area. They can provide a completely different environment.”

In an effort to make growth possible, the county has added the Hastings area to its Comprehensive Plan, which sets land uses for each part of the county.

Joe Cearley with the county's growth management department said an overlay district has been created to assure potential developers/business owners that all of the previous land uses for Hastings will still be allowed under the county's watch.

"The overlay district was just to maintain the status quo," Cearley said. "We didn't take away any property rights. Not much has changed with our rules compared with (Hastings city regulations)."

With so much growth around the county and with so much change in Hastings — which many see as being for the better — Freeman and other residents are hoping improvements come to make the area a better place to live. Freeman said there's plenty of space to grow.

"(I think) people are surprised by the fact that it's an abundance of land," Freeman said. "It's all here in Hastings. It's a good amount of potential."