



## Commercial activity accelerating in St. Johns County

By Stuart Korfhage  
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Although the activity at the sprawling Durbin Park has taken the lion's share of attention, there are a host of commercial projects in St. Johns County of all scales.

Some of these projects are expected to bring some major companies here, including Wawa and Hardee's. Others are larger endeavors with room for many new stores and restaurants without specific tenants announced yet.

A request has been submitted to the county to modify the Absolute Development PUD on U.S. 1 to change the Z-best Rental store to a Wawa convenience store/gas station.

Wawa has recently expanded its operations to Northeast Florida. It recently opened its first stores in Jacksonville. It's already moved into the Daytona Beach area.

The chain started its Florida convenience store operations in Orlando in 2012 and needed just four years to reach 100 stores in the state.

At the first Jacksonville store openings in December, Brian Duke, regional director of real estate, told the Times-Union the company has a total of 16 sites under contract in the area. Another half-dozen have contracts pending. After next year, he said he expects the company to open three to five each year in Clay, Duval and St. Johns counties. The company has close to 800 stores in six states and has been averaging one new store a week recently, Duke said in December.

The company did not respond to inquiries specifically about the proposed St. Augustine store.

The new Hardee's is also still in the planning phase. Developers have asked to rezone approximately 1.1 acres of land from Open Rural to Commercial General to allow for the proposed Hardee's restaurant at State Road 16 east of Green Acres Road — near the entrance to the St. Augustine Outlets.

St. Augustine previously had a Hardee's at the corner of West King Street and U.S. 1.

In the northern part of the county, two new shopping centers near the intersection of County Road 210 and St. Johns Parkway are seeking tenants.

The Shoppes of St. Johns Parkway center is slotted for the northwest corner of the intersection. It is being developed by Sleiman Enterprises.

"There's considerable interest in the Shoppes of St. Johns Parkway from several first-class retailers," said Toney Sleiman, partner at Sleiman Enterprises, in an email to *The Record*.

"We expect to share new tenant updates by the end of April. For now, we're in the early stages of leasing and look forward to bringing exciting new retailers to St. Johns County residents. Shoppes of St. Johns Parkway will have 57,905 square feet of retail space, and we expect it will create 500 jobs in the local community."

On the southeast corner of the intersection, Ash Properties is developing a shopping center called The Forum at Greenbriar.

It's planned to have 81,000 square feet of space for lease, according to the property brochure. The brochure also says the property is "located within 5 miles of an affluent trade area with household incomes exceeding \$112,000."

The activity in the commercial sector is a reflection of the county's swift growth in recent years, said Melissa Glasgow, the county's director of economic development.

"Our population growth is driving much of the commercial interest, and both have been very strong for the past few years," she said in an email to *The Record*. "These new retail options will bring shopping closer to our residents' front door, while also benefiting the county through increased ad valorem property and sales tax revenues."

There has been no shortage of commercial building activity throughout the county in recent months. A report from St. Johns County's Building Services department said that the valuation of permitted commercial activity in January was \$56.7 million, which was a huge increase over January 2017 (\$12.3 million).

While the numbers can fluctuate month to month, the more telling figure is the year-to-date valuation for fiscal year 2018, which began in October. The total valuation year-to-date is just shy of \$78 million. At the same period last year, the total was \$45.5 million.

"It truly is an exciting time for commercial development in St. Johns County," Glasgow said. "There are a number of new retail centers coming online in the next year or two throughout the county, so businesses finally have a variety of options to choose from as they consider expanding into the St. Johns County market."