



## Progress slowly taking hold along West King Street

By Sheldon Gardner  
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Some on West King Street view U.S. 1 like a gulf that disconnects the area from the heart of St. Augustine and its regular crush of tourism.

“We call U.S. 1 the Grand Canyon,” said Cindy Kern, owner of Custom Marine Canvas on West King Street.

Despite that separation and some challenges, the area of West King Street that sits closest to U.S. 1 is experiencing commercial growth. Tenants farther west on the road are hoping the trend moves their way, and some say it’s just a matter of time.

Kern and Rob DePiazza, owner of Screen Arts on West King Street, said the section of town just east of West King Street has seen more tenants coming in and less business turnover in recent years.

“One of the things that affects the west side is what happens on the east side of U.S. 1,” DePiazza said. “What’s happened over there is now you have nearly 100 percent occupancy. You’ve got rents soaring, and so that drives smaller businesses that aren’t quite able to pay the rents over there and aren’t really tourist-oriented [to look] elsewhere. ... I suspect what’s going to happen is it’s going to continue pushing west. You already see that happening.”

West King Street changes dramatically from its U.S. 1 to Holmes Boulevard, with a dense collection of business near U.S. 1 and a sparse selection of them as one travels near Holmes Boulevard.

The official West King business district is within St. Augustine city limits, and a merchants association led by DePiazza has formed from Palmer Street to U.S. 1. There, many businesses

can be found, such as a sweets shop and boutique bakery, eateries, a coffee roaster, a marine supply shop, photography and graphic design businesses, a beer and wine home-brewing supplies store, a beer brewery and a T-shirt and printing shop.

“It’s been a real renaissance in the last few years,” said Livia Ammar, who has been running Ammar Beauty Supply in the area for more than 30 years.

Despite the steady flow of traffic down King Street, adequate parking in the area is a concern, she said. Her business is attached to a parking lot, an amenity that some other stores lack.

She and others said parking in the area would help promote further development — on-street parking was removed several years ago because of a repaving project. She said she also supports the city directing people to the West King Street business district instead of just downtown, and other business owners supported having the district highlighted by the city.

DePiazza, president of the local merchant’s association, said the area has been commercially driven for many years and has gone through dips and peaks in activity. He fully opened his graphics business at his current location in the ’90s, but the business has been around since the ’70s.

“I love this area. ... For a long time it’s had kind of a bad reputation for no good reason,” DePiazza said. “People perceived it as being dangerous or questionable, and we’ve always defended that because it’s completely wrong. ... So I’ve always liked it over here, and I’ve always defended it. It’s finally evolving to that point where you can come over here and hang out, and there’s things to do.”

West King Street sits in an area referred to as West Augustine, or the west side of St. Augustine. Part of the road is in the city limits and part is in St. Johns County.

Addressing crime was a focus years ago of West Augustine advocates such as Greg White, a member of St. Johns County’s West Augustine Community Redevelopment Agency Steering Committee. With much change having been brought about on the crime front, officials have focused more in recent years on getting expanded sewer access — to help eliminate septic tanks — and drawing more businesses to the west side of West King Street. Part of the reason is to provide more job opportunities for people who live there.

Among the businesses in the area are barbershops, a couple of convenience stores and a barbecue stand. The biggest recent step in economic development for that portion of West King Street was the opening of Family Dollar in 2016.

White said he’s been calling developers as far away as Texas to get them interested in opening a bank, retail or other stores to open in the area.

“We haven’t had the developer that’s willing to say it’s going to work,” he said, adding that they’re looking for larger numbers of visitors like on County Road 210. “We’re not going to stop until we make the right connections.”

He suggested a couple of things that could help spur growth.

Local governments could highlight the history of West Augustine instead of just downtown, so that the area can benefit from tourism, White said.

White is also hopeful that West Augustine could become an Opportunity Zone as part of a program approved by President Donald Trump in 2017. The program is designed to draw investment in low-income areas by allowing temporary tax deferment, according to the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity.

For Joyce Reese, running a business in West Augustine is also a stage for ministry. She and her husband run a food stand called Reese’s Cookout next to her clothing shop on West King Street, Styles 4 You.

Reese lives in Palm Coast, but she grew up in the area. She is a pastor in Hastings and sometimes provides free meals and clothing to people in need — along with songs and prayer — at the site.

She said she opened the businesses because people on the west side needed a place to get home-cooking and quality clothes.

“There’s nothing over there on that side for the people,” she said.

Business was slow when they first opened about a year ago, but the customer base has grown, especially for the food shack, she said. She said she’d like to see more development in the area, more places for people to go and things to do.

Pam Lee, co-owner of Hands Anointed beauty salon near Reese’s shop on West King Street, also said she’d like to see more development come their way.

What might help would be a beautification effort of the street and for businesses to crack down on loitering outside of their storefronts, she said.

“I think it should get the same beautification as other areas,” she said. “Make it beautiful. Make the appearance nice. [Plant] flowers. ... Make it attractive to live on this side,” she said.

When brother and sister Moses and Zaneta Floyd opened The King’s Chair barber shop on West King Street on the edge of the city limits, raising expectations was part of their goal, Moses Floyd said.

He described the operation as a traditional barbershop, which offers services such as a hot-towel shave, with modern conveniences. The shop is adorned with custom woodwork by Moses Floyd — he runs a custom wood-working shop in West Augustine called Outta Kontrol Customs.

“We get a lot of surprised reactions,” he said.

The Floyds decided to open at the location in part because their dad owns the land. But the business also gives them a chance to promote the area as a viable part of St. Augustine, a place where businesses should not be leery to locate, Moses Floyd said.

“This side of St. Augustine has a lot more to offer than what it might look like on the surface,” he said.