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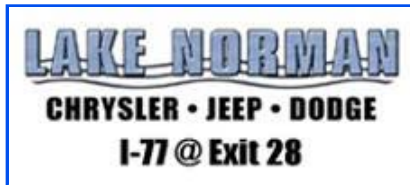
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2008

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Urban Concord: A tale of three or four cities

The City of Concord is morphing into a sprawling 50-square-mile metropolis centered on three or four mixed-use neighborhoods, the oldest being downtown Concord and the newest a project called Concord Gateway that will have 400,000 square feet of commercial space and 200 condominiums.

States Steve Osborne, Concord's community development and codes manager: "There are communities and developments that are trying to re-create that. And they're doing a very good job."

But he says he will always see downtown as the town center, lending Concord its primary identity. But will suburbanites centered on a mixed-use project 10 miles away feel the same?

Mixed-use neighborhoods, away from a traditional and historic downtown like in Concord, are developing their own Main Streets with shopping and services near their homes. Thoroughfares connecting businesses, homes, parks, schools and airports and the rest of the world continue to be important even in an internet world.

"They're taking the positive qualities," such as walking, lots of things to do, multiple uses that, Osborne says. With energy prices increasing, it makes more sense to follow that strategy. "It's hard to replace a downtown. It's been the center of activity for 200 years. It won't go away. It may get copied, but it won't be re-created."

"Certainly there's been more change in the past three to four years," Osborne says.

He says development is more specialized and there's more clustering. "That's happening all over the country. Afton capitalized it, downtown capitalized on it and Christenbury plans to," he says.

Afton Village, a project begun in 1998, is a mixed-use community of about 325 homes and businesses, outdoor plazas and greens, a YMCA and 60-acre park system, small restaurants and specialty shops. Another 200-250 or more homes could be added in future phases to the development near George W. Liles Parkway and Poplar Tent, according to Kelli Stevens, director of sales and marketing for Afton Village. Some parcels could be either residential or commercial space, depending on demand at the time of construction, she says.

Commercial space, excluding the YMCA, will top out at about 115,000 square feet, Steven says. About 40,000 square feet of commercial space is completed; restaurants, retail and medical services occupy the space, she says.

The developers of Christenbury plan a \$300 million community of about 470 homes in four villages off Derita Road, plus a 135,000-square-foot neighborhood shopping center anchored by a grocery store. About 37 percent of the acreage in Christenbury is to be preserved for nature trails, parkland and a greenway along Clarks Creek.

"We are a growing city, no doubt about it," Mayor Scott Padgett says. "We now have over 30 recognized neighborhood associations in Concord.

"Concord, like other growing cities, has a diverse and changing population and economic base."

Development not limited to one hub

Development is not just in the suburbs, the mayor says.

"Development is not passing by historic downtown," Padgett says. "In fact, we are making progress in our downtown revitalization including high density and mixed-use infill projects."

In the past five years, 23 properties downtown have changed hands, Osborne says.

"Those buying have had capital and vision," Osborne says. Most of those properties were smaller, existing buildings, Osborne says, the projects ranged from the \$100,000 Cabarrus Aesthetics salon to the \$2.5 million Paramount building that is now 100 percent occupied.

The former Cabarrus Bank and Trust building, purchased this month to be renovated in a \$2.5 million project for residential condominiums, already has sold all five units, Osborne says.

"Historic downtown will always be the center of our city, both literally and figuratively," Padgett says. "We continue to expand the retail and residential opportunities in the city center. Our city's greenway system is developing in a manner that connects downtown with other parts of Concord."

A growing number of public events and activities bring people downtown to experience what there is to offer, the mayor says.

"Finally, as the county seat and home to our municipal offices and the Concord Police department, downtown also serves citizens and business owners seeking numerous services," Padgett says.

Close enough to downtown for business

Prime business locations near the historic downtown district include Cabarrus Avenue and Church Street, Osborne says.

"Cabarrus Avenue has enormous opportunity for commercial development, with land being a little less expensive, high visibility, a good traffic pattern" Osborne says, and, in the long term, a possible greenway connection to the Downtown Connector Greenway.

Work may begin on the downtown greenway this month. The budgeted \$1.2 million greenway will help complete a walkable loop, connecting two parks with historic downtown Concord. The 3/4-mile trail will run from McGee Park to McCachern Boulevard, just across the street from the downtown Concord post office. From there, users of the trail may take downtown sidewalks to Les Myers Park.

Osborne hopes that some day-the approved greenway was two years in the making-a greenway connection to Cabarrus Avenue may be made.

Paul Lorenz recognized opportunity on Cabarrus Avenue and is the only new business construction project near downtown in years, Osborne says. The groundbreaking for the \$500,000 Lorenz Architecture office was held in early August, and the 48,000-square-foot, modern-looking facility is expected to be completed by February.

Lorenz, whose current office is on South Union Street, says he chose to stay near the downtown for several reasons.

"We really believe in urbanism and a strong downtown and all the plusses a downtown provides," including diversity, schools and hospitals, Lorenz says.

Also, it makes sense to be near the government center because the firm does work for the city and Cabarrus County; it's easier, for example, to show plans to those nearby, Lorenz says.

Lorenz's new office will be as green as possible, using recycled materials, natural daylight and rainwater, he says. Recycling, sustainability and being green are important goals for Lorenz. And with gas prices rising, it just makes sense for his firm to be near downtown.

"You have to think globally and that includes the location of your building," Lorenz says.

Lorenz Architecture also designed buildings in Afton Village and near Concord Mills Mall. Lorenz likes the concept of the suburbs, but finds he has what he needs near downtown.

Also, there's a big difference in rents. In the suburban neighborhoods, rent for commercial space can run \$20-\$25 a square foot. Downtown, the rents are much lower; Lorenz estimates he may lease out his ground floor for \$10 a square foot.

Suburb-within-city growth exploding

Why are the suburbs growing exponentially within city limits? It may come down to land in the city of almost 60 square miles.

Several sources noted there's not a lot of land available in downtown

Concord, but still lots of opportunity within the city limits.

Businesses such as department or pet stores are still needed in a town's mix; strip centers on major roads or near population clusters away from the downtown serve that purpose, Lorenz says.

Indeed, Lowe's Companies Inc. has a store under construction in what it calls Southwest Concord near Concord Mills Mall. The Lowe's is scheduled to open in November.

Bill Rinker of Rinker Commercial Properties notes that the downtown is still one of the important commercial centers for the city with efforts being made to increase its draw as a good place to locate commercially.

It's a matter of the city needing more than one commercial hub. "The growth in town has matured and it is built out," Rinker says, and commerce will follow rooftops.

"People look elsewhere to live and these developments need convenient shopping along with it," Rinker says. "Mixed-use makes it convenient for everyone."

"What's happening is that with those developments springing up farther away, those residents aren't looking downtown.

"They're looking closer to home," Rinker says. "It's all a product of the convenience. People want to have the things they need right close by."

Only in historic downtown

Downtown Concord is different than some of the other commercial centers in that it has specialty shops and professional businesses that support the legal system and government agencies.

A market study says identifies the demand for 300 to 400 residential units in the downtown. "You can fit 300 to 400 units in the downtown," Osborne says, "You have to look at Cabarrus Avenue and Church Street."

The market study, commissioned by the city and completed in April by Economics Research Associates, also notes the lack of land to be developed in the downtown: "Within the context of Concord as a very large and growing edge city in the Charlotte Region, downtown Concord is a very small and compact destination, with no remaining "greenfield" sites that can be easily developed. As such, further expansion of the downtown core can only occur through adaptive reuse or replacement of existing buildings and through increased densities/building heights, building off of the established historic character of the area."

Although the number of parking spaces has decreased since 2001, the city is considering proposals for additional lots.

Other factors will drive people to visit, and spend money, downtown. The ERA study notes the newly renovated 240-seat Davis Theater, which officially opens in September, located across Union Street from the City Hall Annex, is expected to become a significant demand driver for downtown.

Downtown is also served by the Old Courthouse Theater, a community theater venue with a 33-year history. It supports attendance of about 9,000 people annually.

Dual characters not just in Concord

Other communities in the Golden Crescent face the same issues of having seemingly two distinct faces: a traditional or historic downtown vs. new business erupting around residential growth.

Mooresville in Iredell County has the traditional downtown with established neighborhoods around it. Seemingly a world away, but only the other side of town, is the Highway 150 growth machine with big box and small businesses, residential developments of all sizes and, of course, the Brawley School Road sprawl.

Cornelius, small by comparison to Mooresville or Concord, still can be seen with two distinct characters. It has a traditional downtown with a government center, along with neighborhoods and an elementary school nearby. The big growth has been west of Interstate 77, where once-open land is filled with homes, professional offices and small businesses.

Huntersville's downtown is also in the older part of town, east of Interstate 77. New growth to the west brought large neighborhoods along with Birkdale Village at Exit 25, and Rosedale Shopping Center and the Presbyterian Hospital Huntersville at Exit 23.

University City has struggled to define itself, as it grew to a distinct entity of large neighborhoods, professional offices and businesses as a suburb in the city of Charlotte. Many in the massive Highland Creek neighborhoods there identify more with Concord Mills Mall and Lowe's Motor Speedway in Cabarrus County than with attractions in uptown Charlotte.

Some see Davidson as capturing a oneness in town identity. It has traditional downtown shopping with a bank, a post office, church, public library and Davidson College all along Main Street. In recent years, mentions of the "prestigious" or "historic" arts district - a little further south on Main Street - have become more prominent, although the official stance seems to adopt this as part of the "oneness" of town, along with the "college community."

Harrisburg officials are working to define and maintain the ultimate small town atmosphere. It wants low density, open spaces, diverse restaurants and a connected system of roads, sidewalks, greenways and bicycle lanes with a balance of commercial and residential development in the tax base.

Mayor Padgett sees the city of Concord as one entity, despite the growth away from the downtown.

"Rather than multiple entities, we are a city that provides a high quality of life and keeps up with the changing world in which we live," he says. "The various features of our community benefit everyone collectively."

Still, the ERA market study noted this policy factor: "Recent growth in the southwestern corner of Concord around Concord Mills has raised awareness of the growing physical distance between the east and west sides

of Concord. Keeping pace with this growth will remain a challenge."

Padgett describes his city this way: "Concord is a vibrant and growing city with a high quality of life for families and incredible potential for businesses. We are close to Charlotte, but offer world-class business amenities on our own. Our regional airport is the fourth-busiest in the state, and we have desirable corporate space in our business parks and shopping districts. We have a business-friendly incentive policy that helps balance residential vs. business development. It is important that we have opportunities for employment and that people can live where they work, thus be involved in the community."

What's next for Concord

Although development throughout the city has slowed with the economy, Concord's Community Development and Codes Manager Osborne sees a time when the market will pick up.

Future development, he predicts, will be located near Concord Mills, in the downtown and expansion of George W. Liles Parkway on both the Kannapolis and Concord sides. And Derita Road is ripe for industrial development, he says.

Meanwhile, American Development Industries Inc. announced that it plans to start construction next year of a \$125 million Concord Gateway at Interstate 85 and Poplar Tent Road. The 200,000 square feet of Class A office space - considered the market's newest and finest - 200,000 square feet of retail space, 200 residential condos, four restaurants, two hotels and a bank.

"There's very little Class A office space in Concord, so that development has a lot of potential, especially so near the highway," Osborne says.

Mayor Padgett notes a recent landmark agreement with Cabarrus County that limits growth to the south and east. "This insures that we move forward together in unison with our county partners," Padgett says. "Therefore, the future growth in the city will continue to be in the northwest area, along the I-85 corridor."

SIDEBAR:

View from a native: It's not the same town he grew up in

It's not the same town that he grew up in, but this lifelong resident considers all of Concord's change to be for the good.

Gary Walker has lived his whole life, except for few years spent in Colorado, in Concord.

"Concord has changed radically for the good," says Walker, president/CEO of Walker Marketing Inc.

He grew up knowing everyone and everyone knew him. It was the pattern

of generations. "There were no or few outsiders, people who weren't born here," says Walker, who will celebrate his 59th birthday this month.

Walker and his wife, Barbara, lived in a neighborhood off South Union Street for 15 years until they moved about a year ago. When they moved in, "everyone who lived there were lifelong residents."

Over the years that changed. When they moved, the old neighborhood had changed in what Walker calls a good way, with professionals, physicians, professors from UNC Charlotte as neighbors. "I didn't have that as a child."

The Walkers moved to Christenbury Hall, where Walker says he is the only Cabarrus County native. "And it's a good thing."

The migration of people from the Northeast has brought positive issues-growth and opportunities, Walker says.

The Walkers decided to move from their South Union Street neighborhood because Barbara, an architect, had remodeled the house three times and was contemplating a fourth. "My nerves couldn't handle it," Gary jokes.

The real driving forces were a desire to be closer to their offices in The International Business Park and closer to Barbara's father, who lives in the Taylor Glen retirement community.

They looked at several developments in the "suburbs" of the city, and Barbara fell in love with Christenbury Hall, Walker says. "And we didn't have to remodel.... Although we've added a screened-in porch."

They moved their offices from a Church Street location because they outgrew the space. Barbara had her architectural business in the building for six years before Gary moved his marketing enterprise there. Even after expanding to the maximum size of the lot, it wasn't big enough and they'd outgrown the space within two years, he says.

A move within the downtown was impossible because of the space needed.

"We decided that the interstate highway system is now the Main Street of our society," Walker says. The location at The International Business Park is convenient to Interstate 85 and airports.

"The interstate is the new Main Street. ... That was our driving force, along with availability of property," Walker says.

Walker says he's happy with the move, as are his clients when they need to visit. It's easy for Walker to get to Concord Regional Airport or Charlotte-Douglas International Airport, and easy for clients to get to him.

As an onlooker, not an authority, the city's downtown seems to be doing well, Walker says, and new stores are moving in.

"Downtown itself has character and charm, and its unique set of challenges," Walker says, including attracting and retaining the right mix of

retail.

"I think the downtown is vital and that there's growth," he says. "It's a beautiful area."

Downtown Concord, Walker believes, is blessed with dense population and city and county government headquartered there. "Those are benefits it has to offer."

The city's downtown will survive, he says, but will look different in years to come. Traditionally, people would drive downtown to go shopping, Walker says. If a business wanted to be a success, it needed to be located downtown.

Now, you can see the outward migration from the city to suburbia, Walker says. Retailers and other businesses look to locate near rooftops and spendable income. The Concord Mills Mall hub is a good example.

Bruton Smith Boulevard has the mall on one side and professional offices, restaurants, dry cleaner and other service industries on the other, Walker notes.

"There's all these mini Main Streets popping up all over near neighborhoods," he says.

"When I reflect on change, it's all been very positive," Walker says.

Growth brings challenges, but "things can be resolved, it just takes time," he says.

"We could be a little country town, but the leaders see we need to grow."

[HOME](#)

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