

Hot Retail Sales Helps Drive Villages Growth

Retailers prepare for more shoppers than ever before.

By **JOE PEDERSEN**
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THE VILLAGES

Thousands of shoppers made a considerable economic impact Saturday and Sunday at Spanish Springs.

It wasn't just what they purchased during the 15th annual Art and Craft Fair, but also the dollars they spent afterward at retailers and restaurants throughout The Villages.

The spending power of snowbirds and permanent residents alike kicked off

the winter season in a spectacular fashion, bringing smiles to merchants at nearly every retail center in the community.

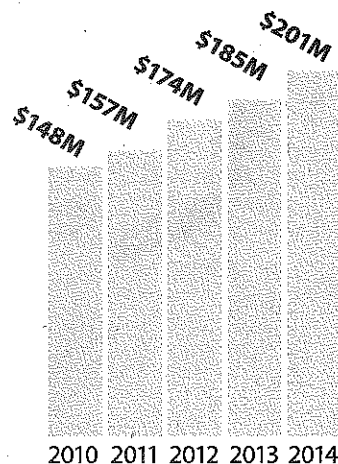
And it's all coming on the heels of brisk holiday sales for many Villages retailers and restaurateurs.

"While we haven't yet received the official results, there are early indications that we had a successful holiday shopping season," said Scott Renick, The Villages director of commercial sales and leasing.

At City Furniture's stores in La Plaza Grande and Lake Sumter Landing, the retailer is experiencing big increases in the sales of couches, beds, tables,

CONTINUOUS GROWTH

Historic retail sales in The Villages metropolitan statistical area prove the point. The portion of The Villages GDP has grown since 2010.



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Beverly and Jim Schermerhorn, new residents of the Village of Pennecamp, shop in Van Heusen Izod in Lake Sumter Landing on Tuesday.

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chairs — just about everything, said Carlos Ortiz, the Lake Sumter Landing store's showroom manager.

"Starting in December, so many homes are being sold and we absolutely see that with our own sales," he said.

"In the two years we've been here, we've seen a substantial year-over-year increase."

Historic retail sales in The Villages metropolitan statistical area prove the point.

The portion of The Villages gross domestic product that makes up retail grew steadily to \$201 million by 2014 from \$148 million in 2010, according to the federal Bureau of Economic Analysis.

And it's clear the trend is continuing, judging from activity at The Villages Golf Cars retail sites in La Plaza Grande, Lake Sumter Landing and Brownwood.

Over a recent 10-day period, the golf cart retailer rented more than 400 golf cars, nearly its entire inventory, said sales manager Christopher Laufersky.

"We beefed up our rental numbers by quite a bit, to about 450 rentals," he said.

"Between Dec. 20 and Jan. 1, we had less than 20 carts available among all our stores."

While snowbirds are making a definite impact, other economic factors are fueling the retail success in markets such as The Villages, said Sean Snaith, an economics professor at the University of

Central Florida in Orlando.

The jobs market is much stronger in Florida under Gov. Rick Scott's administration, combined with a stronger dollar and lower gasoline prices, he said.

But that's not necessarily why retail in The Villages is growing, Snaith said.

"Growth in The Villages has been somewhat impervious to a lot of factors as far as the economy is concerned," he said.

And snowbirds definitely are fueling the current optimism in markets like The Villages, Snaith said.

"There may not be the winter urgency pushing retirees south like we've seen in the past," he said.

"But I would expect The Villages to continue to see strong performance in its economy and in its retail."

While the holidays were busy, what The Villages is experiencing now is just the tip of the iceberg, Renick said.

"With winter weather that is mild even by Florida standards, and the increased traffic we're seeing already, I am optimistic that this year's season will be productive for the businesses in our community," he said.

During this time of the year, it's not uncommon for retailers' sales to dip in other parts of the country, but not here, Ortiz said.

"Our sales keep going up until about April or so, when Villagers start to go back North," he said.

That's not surprising, but what is surprising is the kind of merchandise that is selling.

Coastal items in particular do exceptionally well, Ortiz said.

"They want a coastal, tropical look that they don't see up North," he said. "Something with a spring feel to it."

And that's certainly the case at Picture You in Spanish Springs, store manager Cheryl Ciskie said.

Metal wall decor is one of the highest-selling items in the store, but it has to be tropical-themed, she said.

"We've experimented with northwestern landscape, Mediterranean scenes, and it didn't go over well," Ciskie said.

But if it looks like Florida, it's hard to keep it on the shelf.

"We did fantastic over the holidays," Ciskie said.

"The coastal, metal-wall decor did really well this year over last year."

It may be January, but as any Villager will tell you, the shopping season has just begun.

Two shoppers who typify what's happening in the community are Pauline Misuraca, of the Village of Country Club Hills, and her friend Elaine Vavra.

For 15 years, Misuraca has watched the crowds of shoppers grow exponentially at the Spanish Springs Art and Craft Fair.

"We never miss a craft fair," Misuraca said. "There's something there for everyone."

The friends spent the brisk Saturday exploring tents filled

with garlic, olive oil-based dip and art, during their quest for the "perfect purse."

After making their purchases, they stopped by Panera Bread for a warm bowl of soup.

"There was a time you had to go off the property, to Leesburg or Ocala, if you needed something," said Vavra, of the Village Rio Grande. "Not anymore. Everything you need is close by."