

from the front page

A DAILY SUN SPECIAL REPORT

Villages Business Growth Improving Area Economy

The number of businesses in the newest areas of the community grew 38 percent just last year, bringing more jobs and opportunities.

By DAVID R. CORDER
Daily Sun Senior Writer

THE VILLAGES Only one word describes The Villages current business climate.

That word is "wow," judging from the annual business patterns report released Thursday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

It's particularly striking in ZIP code 32163, the section of The Villages in Sumter County south of County Road 466A to the Village of Fenney.

In just one year, the number of businesses in that ZIP code grew by nearly 38 percent to 91 retailers, restaurants and service providers.

That growth put a lot of money back into the local economy, too, with those 91 businesses generating slightly more than \$37.8 million in annual payroll, a 253 percent year-over-year increase.

All of this growth boils down to increased consumer choices as well as creating jobs that enhance economic opportunities for residents and other businesses, said Jada Glover, Sumter's economic development professional.

"The commercial growth in and around The Villages, and even more so in the 32163 area, which includes the villages of Fenney and Southern Oaks, is significant," she said. "All of these new businesses, from medical to retail, offer our residents a better quality of life and easier access to products and services. There is a diversity in the existing and growing customer base in Sumter County that makes it a great place to do business."

Bright Outlook

The proof of this vitality is no more apparent than at TooJay's Original Gourmet Deli at Brownwood.

Since its opening in 2015, sales have exceeded company expectations, said Christopher Artinian, president and CEO of West Palm Beach-based TooJay's Management LLC.

"We very much appreciate

the relationship we have built with The Villages community since 2004," he said, referring to the stores it opened first in Spanish Springs then later at Lake Sumter Landing. "We proudly opened our third Villages location in Brownwood in September 2015. That said, we have watched the population steadily grow ever since."

The future looks bright, too, Artinian said. "We are very excited about the new homes and communities being built," he said, referring to Fenney and Southern Oaks. "Our team looks forward to meeting our new residents and delivering simply great food with great experiences."

The population Artinian referred to is the designation of The Villages metropolitan statistical area, which includes all of Sumter but not The Villages in Lake or Marion counties, as the country's fastest growing MSA for the fourth consecutive year, Census reported in its annual March report.

From all indications, an overwhelming percentage of the MSA's 5,114 new residents in 2016 found domiciles in the 32163 villages of Labelle, Osceola Hills, Charlotte and others in Sumter.

But that number does not include the spectacular residential growth in the 32163 villages of Pine Ridge or Pine Hills, which will be counted as part of the Fruitland Park census.

It's nothing but constant and steady residential growth, too, which typically attracts commercial growth, Lady Lake Postmaster Denise Buell said.

"In the 32163 ZIP code, it's more residential growth at this time," she said. "Now, in comparison to the two, there is business growth. But the biggest portion always will be residential."

Postal delivery trends to the area clearly indicate continuing growth, Buell said.

"When you look at it, and the ratio, there is new growth in commercial that is supporting the residential," she said.

222 firms, but showing only a 2.3 percent growth over that four-year period.

Next came health care at 192 firms, up 31.5 percent.

Other prominent industries included professional, 126 firms, but down 4.5 percent; accommodation and food services, 124 firms, up 14.8 percent; real estate, 117 firms, up 46.3 percent; and administrative and support, 88, up 11.4 percent.

Those 1,383 businesses reported 2015 annual payroll of \$716.9 million, a 27.7 percent increase over 2012.

In terms of payroll, real estate rental and leasing firms produced the greatest percentage increase, 99.8 percent to \$11.3 million.

Please See NEXT PAGE



Sherri McCowan, a server, carries a tray of food to waiting customers Thursday at Too Jay's in Brownwood Paddock Square. Since its opening at Brownwood in 2015, sales have exceeded company expectations, said Christopher Artinian, president and CEO of West Palm Beach-based TooJay's Management LLC.

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The following firms also recorded substantial payroll growth:

Information providers, 58.8 percent, to \$4 million; finance and insurance, 58 percent, to \$42.3 million; health care, 51.3 percent, to \$191.3 million; administrative and support services, 50.7 percent, to \$35.2 million; transportation and warehousing, 50.7 percent, to \$7.4 million; accommodation and food services, 41.9 percent, to \$52.9 million; and retail, 26.8 percent to \$84.4 million.

This is only the tip of the iceberg, in the opinion of Sumter County Commission Chairman Doug Gilpin.

"It's been amazing to watch," he said. "Ten years ago, I had a thought that we would be driven by commercial and industrial growth, and that's how we're going to keep our property taxes low."

This year, the commission is expected to hold the property tax rate for the 13th consecutive year at or below the rolled-back rate, the state-defined delineation point for a tax decrease or increase.

"While everyone has an eye on population growth, and we're having good population growth, that won't be something that happens forever," Gilpin said. "The commercial and industrial tax base is where we're going to gain over the next 10 years. And you can really see it happening now."

Contrarian Strategy

The Villages commercial growth runs counter to what most residents find elsewhere, said Scott Renick, The Villages director of commercial development.

Commercial development typically follows population growth in most markets, he said. That's not true in The Villages.

"In the retail world, retail follows rooftops," Renick said. "In The Villages, we've



Palm trees fill the median near the new Chase Bank where construction continues Thursday at Lake Deaton Plaza.

Louis Brems | Daily Sun

developed sort of a contrarian perspective to that historic trend, with rooftops following commercial."

The increase in population, combined with the increasing business patterns, creates a dynamic that benefits not only residents in terms of consumer choices but also the vitality of the existing businesses, as well as the ones to come, he said.

"For businesses already in the community and those yet to come here, this is nothing but great news," Renick said. "There were a number of years when The Villages was not that well known, and retailers did not understand this market. This consistent population and business growth we've seen has accelerated the interest."

The commercial interest in The Villages market only grows larger with the release of these key Census reports, he said.

"We're hitting markers that

translate into retail business interest regardless of where they are located," Renick said. "This actually makes it easier for retailers to better understand our market."

Another benefit is regional in nature — job growth, he said. "Commercial development brings jobs, and opportunities for families," Renick said. "The impact is more than providing our residents with increased convenience through golf cart access and a diversity of consumer choices. It's got a broader reach than that."

That is apparent in the commercial growth outside of The Villages throughout Sumter, Glover said.

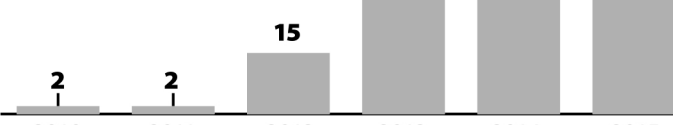
It also means enhanced economic opportunity not only for residents and businesses within the 32163 region, but elsewhere throughout Sumter and the surrounding counties, she said.

"We're even seeing expansions in the county specifically in the areas of agriculture, manufacturing and distribution industries," she said. "The continued growth last year and this year is encouraging. The businesses and residents of Sumter County and The Villages benefit from this continued growth. It also generated employment opportunities for citizens in Sumter County and the region."

David R. Corder is a senior writer with The Villages Daily Sun. He can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 9066, or david.corder@thevillagesmedia.com.

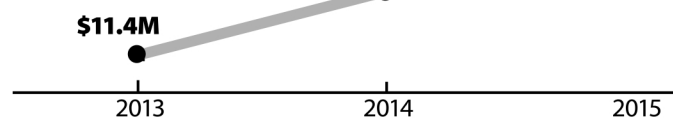
Business Growth

In the span of just five years, the 32163 ZIP code has seen tremendous business expansion, growing from only two businesses to 91 businesses. The 32163 ZIP code extends south of County Road 466A to the Village of Fenney.



Payroll Growth

Payroll in the 32163 ZIP code from 2013 to 2015 grew by 233 percent.



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