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3 towns boom with new people, business

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Construction continues at Earth Fare Commons at Lady Lake, where Miller's Ale House opened in early December. Trailwinds Village Shopping Center in Wildwood also has added several businesses, including Jersey Mike's Subs and Aldi. George Horsford, Daily Sun

The communities surrounding The Villages are experiencing another round of expansion. Lady Lake and Wildwood have seen residential and commercial growth in recent years, and Fruitland Park's population has more than doubled in the past five years with commercial growth expected to be on the way. Fruitland Park was Florida's fastest-growing city of more than 10,000 people and third-fastest growing in the United States from 2010 to 2018. The city grew 143% during that time, to

10,122 people from 4,166, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Wildwood grew 37.6%, with 7,024 people in 2018, up from 5,106 in 2010, according to the Census Bureau. Lady Lake grew 11.4% from 14,021 to 15,622 in that time.

Business owners and developers have responded to the population growth.

New shopping centers, restaurants and other businesses have opened or are under construction, and roadway expansion and new and expanded government facilities testify to the areas' growth.

Lady Lake

Commercial growth is what's happening in Lady Lake.

When Miller's Ale House opened Dec. 2, it was the first business to welcome customers in the new Earth Fare Commons of Lady Lake shopping center.

Earth Fare and Goodwill will be anchor tenants in the shopping center and will open in May, said Martin DelleBovi, executive vice president of Benchmark Development Corp.

A dental office is under construction in the plaza, as well as Mission BBQ, which received approval for its site plan on Dec. 16 from the Lady Lake Town Commission.

DelleBovi said Lady Lake's growth and the planned widening of U.S. Highway 27/441 attracted him to build Earth Fare Commons right across U.S. Highway 27/441 from Lady Lake Crossing shopping center, which Benchmark built in 2015-16.

The growth also is spurring the town of Lady Lake to begin to plan to add more space at Town Hall.

"We need to start looking into the future for expansion," Town Manager Kris Kollgaard told the Town Commission in a workshop in November.

She proposed a 10,000-square-foot expansion in a wooded area on the north side of the existing Town Hall and south of Texas Roadhouse.

A covered walkway would connect it to current offices, where staff of some town departments already are split in different areas. The addition would allow some departments to consolidate their offices again, Kollgaard said.

The town's commercial and residential growth is fueling the need, Kollgaard said.

Miller's President Ray Holden said he's been watching this area grow and has seen how well other restaurants in the area are doing.

"We've always liked that market," Holden said about Lady Lake and The Villages. "It's grown over the years. We felt like this was the right time."

Miller's Ale House already has restaurants in larger cities, including Miami, Tampa, Orlando and Jacksonville, and now is ready to expand into smaller cities. The Lady Lake restaurant is Miller's 55th location in Florida.

The casual sports restaurant and bar received requests to open a new restaurant in The Villages area, said Scott Hamilton, Miller's regional manager.

Mitch Stratton, of the Village of Pine Ridge, said he had been there four times in the first month Miller's Ale House was open.

"We've always enjoyed Miller's Ale House. We sit outside at the bar to enjoy the food and the weather," he said.

Wildwood

In addition to a substantial population rise, commercial growth has taken off in Wildwood, said Melanie Peavy, Wildwood city development services director.

"We feel positive that the commercial growth outside of The Villages is hopeful for the city, and we look to continue on with good quality growth," she said.

Trailwinds Village shopping center on County Road 466A in Wildwood has been in the works since about 2012, she said.

Taco Bell, Wendy's, Jersey Mike's Subs, ABC Fine Wine and Spirits, Aldi, Circle K and other stores already are open. A Publix is now under construction on the shopping center's 150 acres.

The entire shopping area is expected to be finished around 2022, Peavy said.

Residential development also is underway, including workforce housing.

Adjacent to Trailwinds, construction began in 2019 on the Beaumont development, which is on another 150 acres.

The development will include residential and commercial properties, such as a Home2 Suites hotel and 405 single-family homes and townhomes. All projects have been approved, Peavy said.

A development of tiny homes on County Road 466 in Oxford was approved before the end of 2019, and four models have been added there, Peavy said. And ground recently was broken on a new Dignity Memorial funeral home on Powell Road.

In some of the older areas of the city, several single-family homes are being redeveloped for other uses, such as medical and real estate offices.

Feb. 29 was announced as the grand-opening celebration date for Your Life Senior Living memory care community on Powell Road and Broken Arrow Drive. And a new assisted-living facility on Huey Street and Powell Road has been approved.

Other notable growth happening in Wildwood includes a recently approved facility expansion for Sumter County Public Works.

Fruitland Park

Commercial projects are expected soon in Fruitland Park in response to the city's population boom.

Fruitland Park experienced its biggest growth spurt from 2015 to 2017, when The Villages expanded into the city with the Villages of Pine Ridge and Pine Hills.

The city has been updating its land development regulations in anticipation of the commercial growth it expects when widening of County Road 466A from The Villages to U.S. Highway 27/441 is complete.

City officials envision new restaurants, stores and medical offices along a four-lane 466A.

Mayor Chris Cheshire and City Manager Gary La Venia are working with the Lake-Sumter Metropolitan Planning Organization to get state funding for the county to widen the rest of 466A from Poinsettia Avenue to near the Village Park Campus of First Baptist Church of Leesburg, which opened in September.

“Fruitland Park is now on the radar of developers who a few years ago didn’t know it existed,” said Greg Beliveau, principal of LPG Urban & Regional Planners Inc., which worked with Fruitland Park to update its regulations and represented Benchmark Development Corp. and other developers throughout Lake County.

He said he’s been getting calls from developers in Palm Beach County asking about Fruitland Park, and they get excited when he tells them about the city.

“Fruitland Park is going to blossom. I see it blossoming in a positive way,” Beliveau said.

The growth of Fruitland Park also will demand city projects.

The city finished its new library in July. City officials expect to seek bids and award a contract for a new public safety building later this year, and a new public works building after that, La Venia said.

The city also is pursuing expansion of its sewer system.

Lake County Public Schools is planning a new and larger replacement for Fruitland Park Elementary School scheduled to be fully funded in 2021-22 and to open in 2024.

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