

PRESS-REGISTER

Thomasville has big plans

With \$400 million in developments ahead, thriving town could break the mold in rural counties

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THOMASVILLE -- A new hospital building, a new civic center and more than \$400 million in developments are planned for the next three years in this Clarke County city that has no interstate, nearby metropolis or history of booming growth.

Despite a fairly remote location -- Thomasville is about 100 miles from any major city -- every shop downtown is rented or being renovated, developers are building urban-style housing and the rental market is tight.

If Thomasville succeeds in its grand vision for the next half-decade, it will be a regional oddity. As many of Alabama's rural communities struggle to hold onto population, Thomasville has high hopes of redefining itself as a thriving city halfway between Mobile and Tuscaloosa.

City officials estimate that Thomasville is now home to 5,000 people, up from 4,649 at the time of the 2000 Census. Mayor Sheldon Day said that the growth rate will only escalate in the next few years as more employers arrive and more housing gets built.

By 2010, the city expects to have a population of 7,000 to 8,400, a spike of 50 to 80 percent for the decade.

"You can grow in a rural community," Day said. "Even one which some people would say is in the middle of nowhere."

Adding an extra table

In Thomasville, an increase in new neighbors can already be seen at the afternoon story-trading and caffeine consumption in the Delmar Restaurant.

"It's getting so populated, we need two coffee tables!" 67-year-old Luther Gaddy said.

The dozen or so men split between the two tables said that the growth has been manageable thus far. Sure, traffic is a little busier, especially on U.S. 43, but Thomasville,

by all appearances, remains a tight-knit place.

The men still see people with the same last names rooting for the city's baseball and softball teams. They said that they still know most people in Thomasville.

"But it's certainly not the same town I came to," said 65-year-old Bill Scott. "It's going from a rural community to more of a hustle-bustle town."

Bill Harrison, 59, said he worries about how growth will affect the identity of Thomasville. "I wish it wouldn't get so big so quick," he said. "I'm not against progress, but I like the quietness."

Despite a little uneasiness, just about everyone said he'd rather see a vibrant Thomasville than a city that's ailing and shrinking like too many others in the region.

Day said he has been wooing developers for his entire decade in office. Only now are the first major projects breaking ground. He said patience and confidence are paying off.

He said he used to have the same thoughts about why Thomasville wasn't attracting industry: It didn't have an interstate, so it couldn't get much done.

But he said he changed his attitude.

"Economic development doesn't just happen," he said. "People have to make it happen. If highways bring development, why are Lowndes County, Greene County and Sumter County not growing? They have exits."

Industrial suitors

In December 2004, Louisiana-Pacific announced it would build a strand board plant in Thomasville. Now, a newly formed industrial park on the south side of the city is drawing suitors and Day predicts it will be nearly full by the end of 2008, bringing even more jobs.

In coming years, Day said, Thomasville may even be in a position to ask developers to help pay for their impact on the city.

This year, the city is working to complete \$25 million in infrastructure upgrades to prepare for growth. Costs like these could be shared by developers if Thomasville can become a destination, he said. That is something that even some large cities like Birmingham have not done.

Day said the city is attempting to focus on many other areas to add to its attractiveness. He said he recognizes that only 30 percent of Thomasville High School graduates go on to pursue four-year degrees. Instead of trying to push that number higher, he said the goal is to provide a college-preparatory education for those who want it, while also providing a

practical education for those entering the workforce sooner.

The high school has partnered with Alabama Southern Community College in efforts to produce skilled workers who can enter jobs in local industries like timber and manufacturing technology.

"Businesses know they can get the white collar employees to come," Day said. "They are looking for the blue-collar laborers. Industry will come to where there is a labor force."

Appeal to youth

The city also is trying to appeal to younger people. Day, as an example, points to the 650-seat theater to be constructed this year as part of the civic center. It will have a sound system similar to that of Mobile's Saenger Theatre, and will offer a new regional venue for cultural events and concerts.

Kathy Dean, University of Mobile spokeswoman, said a 650-seat theater in Thomasville would be a natural stop for its touring student performance groups.

The city is paying for the theater through a raise in business license fees, a one-cent meals tax and lodging tax of \$2 per night per room.

Thomasville is also considering allowing alcohol sales. It has asked the Legislature to approve a public vote on whether Thomasville will become the second wet city in dry Clarke County.

Jackson began alcohol sales at the end of June, and collected \$200,000 in alcohol tax revenue in the first six months. That city also became home to three new restaurants, and enjoyed a 13 percent increase in sales tax revenue.

Developer Mike Inlow is investing in the Thomasville buzz. He's building a string of small retail units with apartments above, extending the city's downtown area. He's also sitting on some 50 acres near downtown and more land in the industrial park.

"I bought into their vision," he said. "I was skeptical at first, but there is a lot of potential there."

Kevin Bierschenk, chief executive officer of the Southwest Alabama Medical Center, said that leaders of the privately run hospital see the same growth projections as the city. He said that the construction of a replacement hospital -- costing almost \$30 million -- shows their dedication to Thomasville.

"This doesn't happen in rural Alabama," he said. "You don't see new replacement hospitals."

He said the hospital has expanded its services, and that the demand exists to expand further. The hospital added an orthopedic surgeon in January, Bierschenk said.

'A unique place'

"This is a unique place," said Debra Fox of the Southwest Alabama Chamber of Commerce. "It has a small-town feeling, but a progressive attitude."

Several new construction and development projects in Thomasville will break ground this year, making this a critical time for the city in Day's view.

As any small city grows, challenges go beyond the logistics of providing police and fire protection and adequate water and sewer services.

One growth-management expert, Eric Seltzer, director of the Portland State University's urban studies and planning department, said a city like Thomasville will need to think regionally as it expands.

Nearby communities will be affected by higher traffic counts on connecting roads, for example. A growing city can be a bad neighbor, Seltzer said.

Seltzer said that in a city the size of Thomasville, everyone still knows one another. But rapid growth sometimes creates two cities: The old guard and the newcomers. "Will the town wake up in 10 years and still know itself?" he said.

In order to succeed, Seltzer said, a growing city needs to embrace its new arrivals and make them part of the community.