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Big changes on U.S. 41 stretch
 Business, lodging and hospital plans to alter scenery from Page Field into Fort Myers

By Dick Hogan
 Originally posted on July 31, 2006

Business hasn't changed much in the 17 years Jack Lurie has owned Tropical Hardware on Cleveland Avenue in Fort Myers — but now big changes are coming to the four-mile corridor that runs into downtown from Page Field on the city's southern edge.

The city has hired urban planning consultant EDAW to help create a master plan with different types of development encouraged in specific places, said Don Paight, director of the Fort Myers Redevelopment Agency. A public meeting will be Tuesday, Aug. 22, to seek input.

Among the ideas so far:

- More medical buildings are needed near Lee Memorial Hospital, along with some new residential development.
- Mixed residential and retail projects will be encouraged in the area near Colonial Boulevard, where the old Albertsons grocery store is now being renovated as a La-Z-Boy Furniture Galleries store.
- Near the Fort Myers Country Club municipal golf course, city officials would like to take advantage of the golf course views to encourage midrise residential buildings that also would provide a buffer between the retail operations along both sides of Cleveland and the single-family homes that are only a block or two back from the highway.

Cleveland's character has stayed remarkably consistent during the years, said Lurie, who started in the South Trail Shopping Center south of Braman Avenue and moved seven years ago to just south of South Street.

"It's obviously a well-traveled road," he said. "Our traffic count is about 45,500 vehicles a day."

Also, he said, Cleveland serves as a dividing line between the high-income neighborhoods to the west and the less-affluent area to the east. That makes it easy for him to stock a wide variety of goods ranging up to home generators.

Here are some of the changes that are already taking place along Cleveland Avenue inside the limit:

Holiday Inn reserves spot

Holiday Inn is coming back to the Cleveland Avenue corridor.

Development Opportunity Corp. bought the 123-room Quality Inn Historic District Hotel south of Edison Avenue earlier this year and, after \$3 million in renovations, will reopen it as Holiday Inn in October. The building originally opened as a Holiday Inn in 1991.

Phil Hugh, president of the development group, is a former Holiday Inn corporate executive.

His company also is putting a Dunkin' Donuts on the site of a restaurant building that was demolished adjacent to the hotel.



Valerie Roche/news-press.com

Building progresses on Lee Memorial Health System's Page Field Medical Village along Cleveland Avenue in Fort Myers.

Order Picture

IF YOU GO

- WHAT: Public meeting on city's plans for Cleveland Avenue
- WHEN: 6 p.m. Aug. 22
- WHERE: Auditorium of Lee Memorial Hospital, 2776 Cleveland Ave., Fort Myers
- INFORMATION: Call 332-6813

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Edison Mall face-lift

Edison Mall is in the midst of a \$10 million face-lift that includes a 43,000-square-foot addition.

The 40-year-old enclosed shopping center is being given a Mediterranean-style facade and a new "lifestyle component" — which means open-air access to stores fronting Cleveland Avenue.

Earlier this year, the mall owners announced 13 stores were either coming or expanding their existing operations.

Lee Memorial plans

Lee Memorial Hospital doesn't plan on moving its massive presence from Cleveland, but Dave Kistel, vice president of facilities and support services, said some changes are afoot.

Two wings of the hospital were knocked down earlier this year to create 200 new parking spots at the campus. "That's going to help with seasonal traffic."

Eventually, Kistel said, a new tower will be built on the campus, but that's still in the planning stages.

Also on Cleveland — a few miles down — is the Page Field Medical Village, which includes the Lee Convenient Care operation with a pediatric physician's office adjacent to it. A women's services medical office is under construction at the same location and will complete that facility, he said.

Engineer stays put

Johnson Engineering has been in its present location on Johnson Street just off Cleveland Avenue near the Caloosahatchee Bridge overpass since 1972.

"About five or six years ago, when we decided to build another building, we said, 'Do we really want to stay here or should we go out to Colonial Boulevard and buy a big piece of land?' said company president Steve Morrison, who started with Johnson in 1977. "We came to the conclusion that we're blessed where we are. At noon some of our people go over to Centennial Park. It's a nice place to be. And the people we need permits from and deal with are close by: South Florida Water Management District, the county, Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council."

Big corner plans

The big retailers who dominate the stretch of Cleveland near Colonial are even more enthusiastic about their location.

Warren Jalving, a former executive with La-Z-Boy, has for 13 years owned a La-Z-Boy Furniture Gallery just north of Colonial and is preparing to move in October to what he says will be an even better location in the building south of Colonial where Albertson's grocery store operated until two years ago.

Jalving will go from the 14,000 square feet he has now to 36,000 square feet in the 54,000-square-foot Albertsons building, and will be adding Kincaid Home Furnishings and La-Z-Boy Kids stores as well.

He's renaming the project the Clock Tower Center, and also plans to add landscaping along with a gazebo along the canal that runs through the property. "We want to make it a really interesting corner for the city."

Eye on vacant property

One building that's a symbol of Cleveland's sometimes seedy history is the now-defunct Paradise Club, a former adult dance club, just south of Braman Avenue, which closed in 1998. The property remains vacant.

But Ronald Davis of Ronald Davis Associates said his company and Innovative Development LLC hope to change that.

"We've got some very exciting things planned" with a mixed-use project of up to six stories with medical, retail and residential space, he said. "There's a real demand for everything we have planned."

Company headquarters

Land-use consulting company Morris Depew Associates next month is consolidating its offices on Altamonte Street and Cleveland Avenue to a new 10,500-square-foot headquarters that's almost completed just south of Lee Memorial Hospital.

"We're looking forward to getting together" under one roof, said Morris-Depew president Dave Depew, noting that it's still close to the government agencies the company works with. "Also, we feel it's got pretty good access to Interstate 75. It's an ideal location."

Longtime businesses

But even as Cleveland changes, some of the business owners who operate along the road say they won't be affected much.

Mike Holm, who for 10 years has owned Fort Myers Schwinn Cyclery along Cleveland — first on Courtney Street and now just south of Fort Myers Country Club — said he likes the visibility of his present location and the relatively slow traffic that makes it easier for drivers to turn in.

But mainly, Holm said, he's thrived over the years by attracting a base of loyal customers.

"Most of my clientele come from downtown to down along the McGregor corridor, all the way out to Gulf Harbour."