

## CITY OF FORT MYERS

Fort Myers is a bustling waterfront city of 68,000 residents and a multi-county population of 1.2 million. "We're a growing community," says Donald Paight, executive director for the City of Fort Myers. "Tourism numbers go up every year. In March, our airport set a record by having 1.2 million people go through in one month."

With tourism bringing in steady dollars, the city's economy is on the rise—resulting in an environment ripe for development. "Developers are building again," Paight says. "Building permits are up 38 percent this May over last May." A new 225-room Sheraton Hotel, for example, will start construction early next



Downtown Fort Myers has a 54-block streetscape redevelopment program.

year and will connect to the city's convention center.

Additionally, new housing projects are starting to come back online, which will continue to fuel retail growth. "We have 256 condominium units with an average price point of over \$500,000 per unit, and we are planning to open sales centers at end of the year and start pre-sales," Paight says. "In peak times, we brought a lot of residential to our downtown area with approximately 3,500 units. Three years ago, we started a free trolley that connects nearby high-rise condominiums to downtown. This is an extra perk to drive traffic and make the downtown area as business friendly as possible."

Thanks to the city's pro-business attitude and the success of downtown's 54-block streetscape redevelopment, retail and restaurants are thriving downtown. "We used to have a high vacancy rate, now we have a high occupancy rate," Paight says. "Most everything that's available has been rented."

Restaurants, in particular, are performing well. For example, Ford's Garage,



Tourism in Fort Myers has risen.

a local business that signed a licensing agreement with Ford Motor Company, is now opening five themed restaurant locations. "We have about 20 restaurants in our core downtown area, and over 50 total downtown," Paight says.

The majority of Fort Myers's restaurants and retail shops are local or regionally owned, which Paight says helps distinguish the city from its neighbors. However, the city is looking for regional or national tenants that are unique, and would continue to set its downtown apart and be a tourism draw.

"We have a very historic downtown area that dates back to 1886. It is an authentic main street environment," he says. "Fort Myers offers a unique retail opportunity on a beautiful riverfront that is part of the Intracoastal Waterway."

## ACR Makes Old Shopping Centers Good as New

American Commercial Realty Corporation (ACR), a firm that focuses on redeveloping under-served properties, has been very active in Florida lately.

In Gainesville, ACR is overseeing the redevelopment of a shopping center called Live Oak Shoppes. The 21-acre site is contiguous to a new Walmart Supercenter. "It was formerly a grocery-anchored center that fell into disrepair," says Rick Baer, chief operating officer for ACR. "It is at a tremendous location and has tremendous opportunity."

ACR is re-tenanting the existing 66,000 square feet of space with a mixture of active retail merchants that are in the apparel, variety and hard-goods businesses, Baer says. Additionally, property has 40,000 square feet of space for future development.

"Gainesville is extremely well-positioned for the coming decade," Baer says. "The north side of town, where we are located, was recently opened up for residential development. That's why Walmart is there, and that's what makes it an exciting area for us to be."

In Naples, ACR is redeveloping an 87,000-square-foot center called Naples South Plaza. Located on the south side of town on U.S. 41, the property will be anchored by a Sears Outlet, Dollar General and Anthony's Ladies Apparel. "We will have a fourth major anchor that will be announced shortly," Baer says. "That will trigger the balance of the property. Naples and the South Florida markets are booming, and this is a prime retail location."

On the northeast coast, ACR has a couple of redevelopment projects in Daytona and Jacksonville, including a center that is a perfect example of how the company's redevelopment strategy can work. "In Daytona, we took a center that was 50 percent vacant during the last few years, and added a Sears Outlet and Bravo Supermarket," Baer says. "Occupancy is now 90 percent."

In fact, due to the amount of work the firm has in the northern part of the state, Baer said he is excited to announce the opening of a new ACR office.

"In order to better serve, we're opening a new office in Jacksonville in August," he says. "It will focus on the leasing, management and development of properties in nearby markets."

— *Lindsey Walker Marce*

on the rise again in South Florida. "There are a few large developments on the books with Brickell City Centre, Miami Worldcenter, American Dream Miami, Fashion Mall, Metropica, and the Sawgrass Mills expansion," says Beth Azor, founder and owner of Azor Advisory Services. "So, after a void of new development, there are plenty of new opportunities for retailers to expand. As far as investment sales goes, Publix supermarkets continues to be one of the top purchasers of shopping centers, and fast casual restaurants continue to lead the pack in leasing space."

Looking forward, continued population growth, consumer demand and foreign investor interest will fuel retail both in the hot infill locations and out into high-potential suburban markets and gentrifying urban areas.

"You're going to continue to see foreign capital and independent national companies come into Miami," says Emran Ally, vice president at CBRE. "Wynwood Arts District and Design District, everyone knows about those markets. I would say next is Nemo and what I call the Little River in Northeast Miami. You've got the Vagabond Hotel, Panther Coffee, and Paulie G's Pizza