

Whitehall's rebound lures new businesses, residents

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Yianni Chalkias is proud to say he was first.

He started his fast-casual Greek restaurant, King Gyros, in a former Taco Bell building at 400 S. Hamilton Road 26 years ago. That was when no one was describing Whitehall as a draw for investment and development, or a lure for first-time homebuyers.

Five years ago, he invested in expanding the dining room. He added 65 seats and hired a painter to work overnight for three months to create a detailed mural of Greece all over that dining room, patio and three exterior walls.

"I didn't get any incentive to do that," Chalkias said.

He sensed a change, he said. Perceptions were shifting.

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The regulars come for the falafel and gyros, and the dinner crowd has picked up quite a bit.

"We do a good takeout and a very good drive-through," he said, plus there's catering. He fully expects, with Whitehall luring major employers to settle right down the street, that lunch will be even more crowded than it is.

As goes Whitehall, so goes King Gyros.

City leaders say the numbers show that Chalkias' feelings are more than a hunch. Property values in Whitehall rose 17.9 percent since their last valuation three years ago, marking the second-highest increase in Franklin County, behind Grandview Heights, according to the Franklin County Auditor's Office.

The Whitehall school district is one of the fastest-growing in the state. All five school buildings are new. The district is losing fewer students to charter schools than in previous years.

In the first half of the year, crime was down 11 percent, police say.

From January through August, 54 businesses have opened or were in the process of opening in Whitehall, an increase of 116 percent over that period in 2016. More than 1,600 new jobs have been created or committed since 2012, according to the city.

When you're a member of Mayor Kim Maggard's cabinet, revitalization isn't chess or checkers.

"It's a Rubik's Cube," said Zachary Woodruff, Whitehall's economic development director.

"Everything plays off of everything else. The end result is total community development."

Businesses

The owners of Priority Designs, an industrial design firm that creates products for major corporations such as Nike and Moen, see that strategy coming to life each time they look out the second-story window of their

office at 100 S. Hamilton Road.

A 19-acre site once filled with nearly 300 blighted, crime-ridden apartments is transforming into a \$50 million mixed-use development called Norton Crossing. Soon, a park, upscale apartments and shops and offices will fill the lots.

The city bought the property last year. It saw an opportunity and seized it, Woodruff said.

A similar “leap of faith” brought Priority Designs to Whitehall in 2015, owner Paul Kolada said.

The office building they bought and gutted was a vacant car dealership.

The former showroom is a conference center. Designers’ desks fill the old service room, with an office dog roaming the aisles. The car-painting booths from the collision repair shop stand as relics of the building’s past life but are also used on product prototypes today.

“We couldn’t afford something this big or this spacious if it wasn’t in this area,” Kolada said.

The business, formerly of Gahanna, brought more than 50 jobs and \$4 million in payroll.

Landing Priority Designs “was our Orange Barrel Media moment,” Woodruff said. Orange Barrel Media moved into the Franklinton neighborhood west of Downtown, he explained, and other businesses started to pay attention to areas ripe for redevelopment.

That sense of opportunity caught Brad Wasserstrom, too.

He’s the president of his family’s 116-year-old restaurant supply company, which is growing but was constrained by its 50-year home in the Brewery District.

The company explored potential sites in central Ohio, but in Whitehall “you just get this feeling that there’s this upward swing that we wanted to be a part of,” Wasserstrom said.

The grand opening of the new Wasserstrom headquarters at 4500 E. Broad St. was Oct. 25. The company stripped the 1980s office building down to the walls and completely reconfigured it, with low cubicles, bright colors and lots of natural light. All 240 employees are gradually moving in.

The company, like others, was sold on the city’s easy access to the airport and highways and its affordability, but also because the city’s leaders have a vision and can sell it, Wasserstrom said.

“It’s truly amazing, what (Maggard and Woodruff) have been able to accomplish over the last few years,” said Michael Simpson, president of NAI Ohio Equities, the Columbus realty firm that sold the property.

Nearby Norton Crossing was a key attraction and will offer Wasserstrom’s employees amenities, he said.

“A lot of people right now are all about Downtown; that’s where the millennials want to be,” Wasserstrom said. “But the oldest millennials are beginning to move to the suburbs again as they’re having kids. They realize, ‘I don’t want to live in a fifth-floor walk-up or (take) an elevator when I have to walk the dog or take the kids to school.’”

He’s betting that the inner-ring suburbs will be the winners.

Neighborhoods

Unlike most central Ohio suburbs with land to sprawl beyond the Interstate 270 Outerbelt, Whitehall is landlocked and built out.

No development project in the 5.2-square mile suburb east of Columbus is started on a blank canvas. Everything is a re-invention or a renovation.

The same holds true for the city's residential areas, but officials are finding ways to make homes and the areas surrounding them more attractive to potential buyers.

The city provided grants to more than 90 homeowners to spruce up their homes' exteriors. The program paid for 50 percent of improvements, up to \$7,500.

A down-payment assistance program, in partnership with Huntington Bank, has helped 73 families buy homes over nearly three years.

The average Whitehall home price in August was up 7 percent over the same time in 2016, from \$79,172 to \$84,679. To date, 130 homes have sold this year, compared with 99 the year before.

"As soon as you put a house up for sale, it's gone — even if it's overpriced," said real estate agent Art Russo, who has been selling homes in Whitehall for 41 years. "I just think it's the best square footage per dollar in central Ohio. ... You can make \$50,000 a year and buy a nice house there."

He cited several reasons the market in Whitehall is hot, including that city services are "unbelievable."

"They're the best in town for snow removal, better than even Bexley and Grandview," Russo said, and Whitehall has strong police and fire departments.

North Hamilton Road, a major gateway into the city, was recently enhanced with \$3 million in improvements.

Heartland Bank Corp. will open its headquarters at Whitehall Community Park, on North Hamilton, by the end of the year. The 60,000-square-foot facility will bring 100 jobs and \$5 million in payroll, but its biggest impact will be through its employees' income taxes, which will establish a parks improvement fund for the city.

The \$1.4 million in improvements over the next six months will include a pond, canoe launches on Big Walnut Creek, meadows, prairies and reforestation. That's in addition to a recent announcement that an activity center in the park will be transformed into a branch of the YMCA of Central Ohio, a \$5.5 million project.

The city also plans to expand the 65-acre nature park by about 20 acres, following the closure of the adjacent Four Seasons Golf Center and driving range. An additional 14 acres of that site will be developed.

"It will be an oasis in the middle of an urban jungle," Woodruff said.

Officials are also sprucing up Etna Road with a \$2.5 million project that includes a new bicycle path, five rain gardens, landscaped medians, decorative lights and more than 200 new trees. A grant covered 75 percent of the costs and the rest was covered with tax-increment financing from a nearby development project.

The police department has hired a crime analyst, obtained three K-9 units and appointed two school

resource officers to help reduce crime, and the plans appear to be working. This year, violent crime is down 34 percent and burglaries are down 43 percent.

The future

Since first taking office in 2012, Maggard, whose second term started in 2016, said it feels good to see positive changes. But instead of taking a break or patting herself on the back, she's looking ahead.

The year she was elected, the city re-branded itself and adopted a new slogan, "Opportunity is Here."

But how long will that last? Forces outside the city's control, the economy for one, could change everything.

"We have to keep moving," Maggard said. "We can't stop to take a breath."

The crime rate might be down, but that's a perception the city will have to work on.

Mike Boothe and his son, Matt Boothe, regulars at King Gyros, said Whitehall's proximity to the high-crime, high-poverty Near East Side of Columbus, where they live, is still a problem. Criminals target the inner-ring suburbs where there's a little more money, they said.

Whitehall also has a larger problem with drug addiction and overdoses than its neighbors, a fact that the mayor readily acknowledges. With grant funding, Maggard is starting one of the first specialty mayor's drug courts in central Ohio to connect addicts with help.

"To be successful, we have to talk about what's going wrong, too," she said.

A self-declared "two-person traveling road show," Maggard and Woodruff said they'll continue to be ambassadors for the city and the success of every community member, from the owner of the local gyro shop to the CEO of a sizeable corporation.

"I can take a little pride in what we've done, but not a lot — at least not yet," Maggard said. "There's still so much more to do. I'm already thinking about what's next."

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