

Anticipation of new troops fueling development off post

By April Groves
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While most news of the day tends to point toward a continued downturn of the real estate development market, current activity in Liberty County seems to be going against the grain.

There have been no announcements of new, large retailers for the community in the past year, but the business community seems to be holding its own. For instance, the only major retailer that has recently announced plans to close a local business was Goody's Family Clothing. And that was because of a problem with the company nationally not being able to get the credit it needed to continue operations, not problems specific with the Hinesville store.

Local developers, builders and business owners are seeing steady sales and growing possibility in what is widely believed to be a down market.

"We have been sitting on some of this stuff for about two years," says developer John Carnes. "But now things are really happening. We can't seem to get them up fast enough."

Houses are selling

Carnes Construction, which is out of Richmond Hill, is currently working on approximately five subdivisions in the area. According to Carnes, many of the homes have already sold and the new construction has had a lot of recent traffic. Construction includes single-family and multi-family properties as well as some commercial development. Hinesville Professional Center is slated to open at the end of April and has filled some of the commercial space. That development is across Highway 196 from Liberty Regional Medical Center.

Carnes also noted that the city and his company, Carnes Construction, have worked well together to ensure that the housing availability in the area is ready for the expected

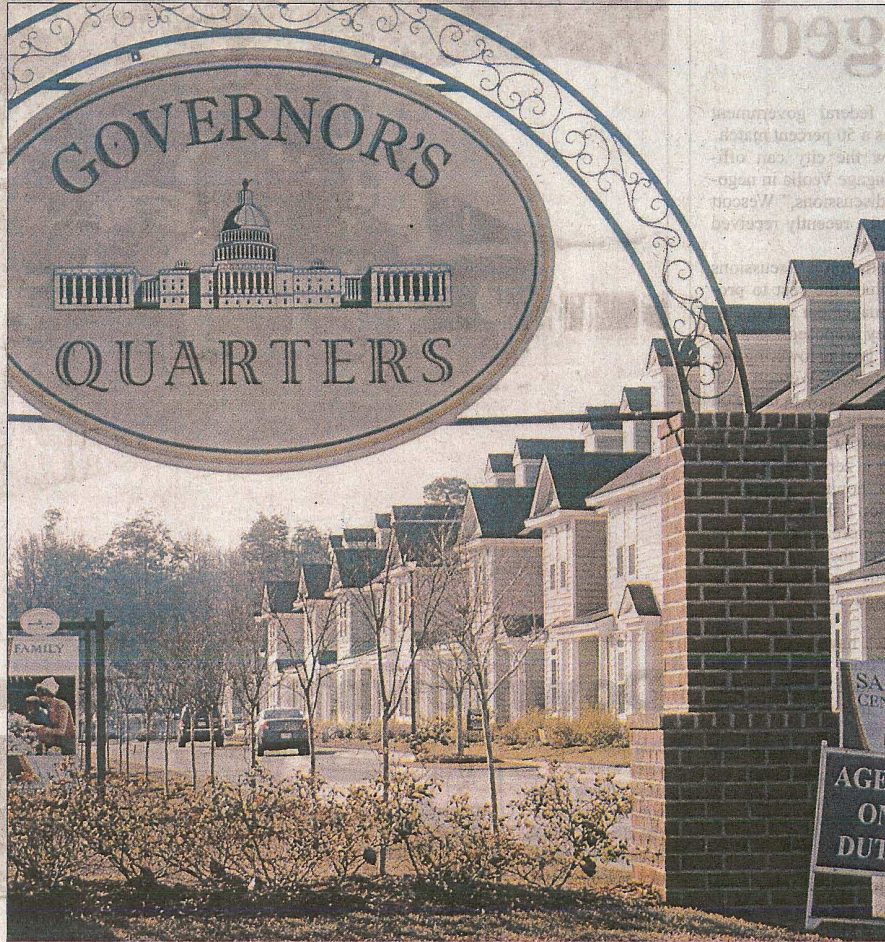


Photo by Frenchl Jones

The first part of Independence under construction is Governor's Quarters off 15th Street Extension. The overall mixed-use development, which is just off Fort Stewart will have more than 10,000 housing units when it is built out to capacity. One of its developers says it is the largest development under construction in the Southeast.

growth. Carnes attributes much of the stimulation in the economy to the upcoming troop buildup.

This idea is echoed by local developer, Clay Sikes.

"The next 36 to 48 months will be very good. We should enjoy a really good up pick."

Sikes is currently working on one of the biggest master planned developments in the Southeast. Independence will offer more than 10,000 homes in price range from \$180,000 to \$600,000. Sikes believes the growth is completely troop driven.

The biggest obstacle he sees is the availability of funding to complete the projects.

"The two local banks are doing all they can do. We have to educate other lending sources on the need."

Sikes said Maj. Gen. Tony Cu-

colo, commander of Fort Stewart and the 3rd Infantry Division, has been instrumental in accomplishing this goal and his support is unprecedented.

"I think that really speaks to the urgency of the situation," Sikes said.

Executive Director of the Liberty County Chamber of Commerce, Kenny Smiley, agreed.

"Gen. Cucolo's words at the November Chamber of Commerce meeting were to get prepared because they are coming."

Smiley said many local businesses are doing just that. Many are continuing the initiative to promote special programs that cater to the military population. Smiley said restaurants are doing well in general with some looking to expand.

Startup counseling

In order to support the growth in the business community, SCORE counselor Cathy Thomas meets with individuals at the Chamber office on Wednesdays. SCORE is a nonprofit organization that assists business owners nationwide.

In addition, new businesses are interested in the growth and are investigating Liberty County as a potential area for new business.

"We were recently featured in Georgia Commercial Properties Magazine," Smiley said.

While he could not release additional details, Smiley also added that a new hotel owner is seriously considering Hinesville as a new location.

While current population numbers are growing slower in Liberty in comparison to the statewide growth, Smiley expects a larger than average increase by 2013.

"We are expecting 10,000 people by 2013 at a minimum. Starting in 2010, the contractors will be arriving to start building in support of the buildup."

Smiley believes that these large numbers will continue to promote growth and development in Liberty County businesses.