



Durant gets Big Industrial property enjoys a five-year run of expansion

By Richard Mize
Real Estate Editor

Sunday, November 19, 2006
Edition: CITY, Section: BUSINESS, Page 1D
Dateline: DURANT

DURANT — It all started with Big Lots Inc., its big distribution center and its 300 jobs.

With that \$110 million investment, announced in late 2001, completed in 2004, the industrial property market took off in Durant for what's going on a five-year run of expansion.

Next came Cardinal FG, a flat glass factory on a hill that made a perfect site — for the flow required in the manufacturing process — on the west side of town. That brought another 300-plus jobs.

Next came Hogan Logistics, Sitton Motor Lines, Texoma Sash & Door — with work forces of 18, 18 and eight — all in 2004.

Last year came Durant Plastics & Manufacturing, 12 jobs, Best Fender Products, seven jobs; and Allied Stone Inc., 50 jobs.

Other additions so far this year: Eagle Suspensions Inc., an eventual 150 jobs, American Heritage DC, 20 jobs, Willie Nelson's Earth Biofuels, 17 jobs, and an expanded NexxLinx, formerly CustomerLinx, and the promise of hundreds more jobs.

Durant also has commitments for 2007: Ed F. Davis Distributing, Icon Construction and Durant Shredder LLC will bring more employment to this Little Dixie boomtown.

It's added up in Durant, population about 15,000, where "jobs, jobs, jobs" is the mantra, said Tommy Kramer, director of the Durant Industrial Authority.

It's meant higher employment and population growth — Durant was the fastest-growing city in the state outside Oklahoma City and Tulsa in 2004 — and higher land prices.

It's meant some ranchers hanging up their cowboy hats in this historically cow-friendly section of Oklahoma.

"There is commercial land in Durant selling for as much as \$1 million-plus an acre. Land that used to sell for \$2,000 to \$3,000 an acre is now selling for \$5 to \$10 a square foot," Kramer said.

Ranches to industrial sites

Not much signals a shift in land use like hearing people talk about buying land "by the acre" and selling it "by the square foot." Kramer noted that he couldn't find affordable land to expand his own cattle operation.

"We have converted seven cattle ranches to industrial sites, golf courses and housing sites. Prairie land," he said. "There are people who've made millions in this county the past five years who never had a chance raising cattle and brush-hogging and haying."

Development has put the pinch on cattle raisers, said Clay Jones, the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service's agricultural agent for Bryan County.

"The main way it has affected cattle producers is in the cost of leased property," Jones said. "We've seen that shoot up on a parallel with land values in the west and central parts of the county around Durant proper."

Leases for grazing land account for 20 percent or more of all county cattle operations, he said.

Established Bermuda grass pasture that fetched \$10 to \$12 per acre year five years ago now bring \$20 to \$25 per acre annually, he said.

Small tracts of contiguous pasture have grown too expensive for most cattlemen to afford, Jones said. An 80-acre pasture, suitable for a part-time or hobby rancher, sold for \$700 to \$800 per acre five years ago.

Now, the same property comes with a price tag of around \$2,000 an acre, he said.

With cattle and calf prices still relatively strong, Jones said the only reason Durant-area ranchers aren't feeling a tighter squeeze is because some 40 percent of herds have been liquidated in the face of continuing drought.

In town, rising prices are less of a concern as long as demand is driving the increases.

"There are a number of things affecting commercial land prices," said Martin Vanmeter, broker-owner of Coldwell Banker Vanmeter/Radergroup, Realtors.

"Big Lots and Cardinal Glass, those two sites, one west of town and one south of town, as well as all of the activity at the Choctaw complex south of town — those three things, as well as the Wal-Mart Supercenter and the stuff that followed in that area.

"They've increased interest in commercial land and in speculative commercial land."

Highway can help

Could the future looping of U.S. 70 to the south, crossing U.S. 69/75 north of the Choctaw complex, affect Durant's growth?

Land will be acquired for the loop this month, he said, but the new highway can only help, especially at its four access points, where more commerce is sure to develop.

"My thought is that through traffic is not commercial traffic," Vanmeter said, especially heavy trucks.

"We're extremely congested with our infrastructure and our streets," and shifting highway traffic away from the center of the city will help relieve it.

None of Durant's recent good fortune could have happened a decade ago, Kramer said, and the difference goes deeper than Wal-Mart and the landing of a couple of big industrial employers.

"What really happened was the City Council and city manager and Durant Industrial Authority had this vision of opening up the Office of Economic Development (now in its ninth year)," he said.

"They realized that for decades, Durant had been in (a slow) mode, as Ardmore and Texas grew. We started marketing Durant (under) the slogan of 'Team Durant.' "

It's more than a slogan, though, Kramer said. It means business people considering a move here are put with local people — property specialists, job trainers or other educators and lenders — ready to go to work for them.

"When a company comes in here, we tell them if you want to become part of Team Durant, we'll make it happen," he said.

Richard Mize: 475-3518, richardmize@oklahoman.com