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New projects lay the foundation for boom in Plainfield

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PLAINFIELD, Ind. -- A decade ago, this town was braced for transformation. With its new maintenance hub on the Southwestside of Indianapolis, United Airlines was expected to bring more than 6,000 high-paying jobs.

But many of those jobs never materialized, and it turned out that United had little direct effect on neighboring Plainfield.

While others staked their claims as vibrant bedroom communities, Plainfield remained a Plain Jane of suburban Indianapolis -- Quaker-founded and seldom confused with the high-end retail and heavy traffic of places like Fishers and Carmel.

But a year after the first wave of United layoffs signaled the eventual closing of its maintenance hub, Plainfield finally might be taking off.

One of the big reasons: Plainfield's proximity to Indianapolis International Airport, where a new passenger terminal and I-70 interchange will steer more traffic across the Hendricks County line.

Planners say the positioning of the new midfield terminal set to open in 2007 will, in effect, move the front porch of the airport away from Indianapolis and west toward Plainfield and its interstate interchange at Six Points Road.

While work has just started on the airport project, Hendricks County's largest town has already become a hot corner of suburban development with 5,000 new jobs, lots proposed for 2,000 new homes and talk of a new shopping mall called Metropolis.

Also in the works: tens of millions of dollars in parks and greenways, municipal water and sewer utilities, warehouse and distribution buildings.

Plainfield's growth remains modest compared with that in hotbeds of development north of Indianapolis. Its population of around 20,000 is less than half of the population of Fishers, the area's fastest-growing suburb.

Town officials say that's partly by design. Plainfield's growth has been carefully controlled to maintain quality and to minimize problems like traffic jams.

"The challenge for us is not to move faster than we really can move," said Town Council President Robin Brandgard. "And we have to keep some of that small-town atmosphere while we grow."

Wider roads are in place. Additional water and sewer plants are under construction. The new development is a mix of housing and business, creating a reverse-commute so that Plainfield is becoming both a place to live and a place to work.

"What has made Plainfield a hot location is a very pro-business attitude and a balance in our industrial and residential growth, which is so difficult for other suburban communities," said Kent McPhail, executive director of the Plainfield Chamber of Commerce.

Added Plainfield Town Manager Rich Carlucci: "We shouldn't look for growth just for growth's sake. When it's not planned or coordinated, that's when it gets bad and people get mad."

Plainfield's image got a boost last month when Eli Lilly and Co. announced plans to build an \$80 million distribution center to ship insulin and other medicines nationwide.

Other highlights of Plainfield's building boom:

- * Hometown company Galyan's, a sporting goods chain with plans to expand nationwide, will keep its headquarters in Plainfield. A 100,000-square-foot office building is under construction with \$7 million provided by the town because the council didn't want to see the company move to Indianapolis.

- * Continued development of warehouse and light industry in the town's industrial park is on pace to make it become the biggest in the Indianapolis area by next year. About 15 million square feet -- housing companies like John Deere, Hitachi and Brylane -- have been built in less than eight years.

- * At least 10 miles of new walking and cycling greenways have been built, and more are planned, linking every side of town with existing parks as well as the new White Lick Creek and Newby Lane parks to be developed.

- * New retail, including a J.C. Penney Co. department store due to open Nov. 12 -- about the same time the Penney store will close in the Lafayette Square mall on the Northwestside.

Indianapolis developer Chris White has told town officials the new Penney's might become an anchor of a new shopping mall, tentatively named Metropolis.

"These are changes that I never thought we'd see here," said insurance underwriter Mike Mason, shopping with his family last week.

"There's so much more to do in Plainfield than when I was growing up."

Indianapolis real estate investment veteran Dave Funke of Providence Partners Inc. said Plainfield leaders seeded the trend for new growth during the past decade with aggressive use of property tax breaks that stimulate investments and create jobs.

He said town financing for the Galyan's headquarters was a bold step.

"Economic development in these times requires that we recognize that we're at war with other cities and other states," Funke said. "We should make sure that we can help (locally grown) companies."

Tax breaks were once controversial, but no one has complained at many public hearings of the Plainfield council held to review tax abatements in recent years.

Plainfield officials point to falling tax rates the past four years in the town the abatement policy has brought more businesses to the tax base.

"Change is going to happen, and I think most people feel Plainfield has done a pretty good job of it," said farmer and former county commissioner John "Bud" Daum.

His family members have been prominent landowners for five generations in the Plainfield area.

"When most people understand that abatements have worked to keep taxes low for the rest of us," he said, "there isn't too much to complain about."

Call Star reporter Bruce C. Smith at 1-317-272-4403.

WHATS DRIVING THE BOOM?

* Construction of a new midfield terminal at the airport: The midfield terminal, which is set to open in 2007, will basically move the airport's front porch away from Indianapolis

and toward Plainfield.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS THIS HAS ENCOURAGED

* An estimated 5,000 new jobs

* Lots proposed for 2,000 new homes

* Millions invested in new civic improvements

SOME EXAMPLES

* Road work: Shifting lanes of I-70 to the south, widening Six Points Road and creating a new interchange between those two arteries.

* Retail outlets sprout up: In addition to the new Galyan s headquarters, other retail construction projects include a new J.C. Penney.

* New homes: Rockingham, Avalon Estates, Hickory Woods, Providence, Bentwood, Blackthorne and Oak Park are all under development.