

Suburbs building walkable urban centers to lure millennials, empty nesters

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In Dublin, the massive Bridge Street Project is taking shape. In New Albany, the Village Center is growing. In Hilliard, Station Park and Trailhead Park projects are being planned.

These developments are part of a growing trend: Suburban cities in central Ohio are moving away from the sprawl of single-family homes and embracing walkable, amenity-filled urban centers like the ones in the Short North, the Arena District and the area Downtown near Columbus Commons.

The goal in Dublin, New Albany, Hilliard and other municipalities is to attract millennials and empty nesters who crave this type of environment and are pacing the population growth of central Ohio.

“More than 80 percent of the growth in central Ohio will be households with one or two people with no children,” said Terry Foegler, Dublin’s director of special initiatives for the Bridge Street District.

These numbers come from the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, which predicts that the population of Franklin County and the six contiguous counties — Delaware, Licking, Fairfield, Pickaway, Madison and Union — will grow from 1.8 million to 2.3 million by 2050 — propelled by the millennials and empty nesters.

“From a regional perspective, our ability to attract and retain young talent will be one of the strongest factors to predict our economic success,” said Foegler, who was a member of the committee that prepared the report.

City planners and developers had anticipated this unusual trend.

“It’s rare that we see this kind of one-two punch of two completely different demographic groups who have similar residential demands: the urban live, work and play model,” said Mike Simpson, president of NAI Ohio Equities.

Attracting these two groups is a competition taking place across the country, Simpson said.

Those areas that do it successfully will grow and prosper. Those that don’t will lose not only residents, but also the businesses that cater to them and the property taxes and payroll taxes they pay.

The goal of MORPC’s so-called insight2050 report is to help central Ohio communities better prepare for this future by looking at infrastructure and transportation and by developing more mixed-use projects such as “the Lane in Upper Arlington, the Heights in Worthington and ... the Bridge Street District in Dublin,” the MORPC report said.

“If the region acts collaboratively, we’ll all be more successful,” Foegler said.

In New Albany, the centralized Market Square is becoming more of a gathering place with the construction of the \$13 million Philip Heit Center for Healthy New Albany wellness center. Another new project is the \$6 million Market & Main Building, home to the Mellow Mushroom pizzeria and Hudson 29 restaurant at street level and to offices above.

“The focus is on quality of life and access to amenities to attract a quality workforce,” said Jennifer

Chrysler, New Albany's director of community development. "It's really about how to help people live and work smarter and increase productivity.

"That was always the plan here: balance and sustainability."

New Albany has the luxury of a blank slate and empty lots to create this type of development, while older communities must redevelop.

"It used to be that companies located where the CEO wanted to live," said Brent Crawford of Dublin-based developer Crawford Hoying.

"Now, it's what the employees want, and they want to leave the office and walk to restaurants and bars and shopping, all in one location, and live close to where they work."

Empty nesters are also driving development, including Crawford Hoying's Bridge Park West condominium project in Dublin.

"We have reservations on 37 of the 41 units, and we're still months away from groundbreaking," Crawford said. "And 35 of the 37 are empty nesters. They're pouring in from Muirfield and Tartan Fields."

This is the reverse of what happened 30 or 40 years ago, when city dwellers moved to single-family homes with large lots in the suburbs and drove everywhere they needed to go.

"We found that there is likely already enough large lots of detached homes for the coming demand, and we need to focus our housing choices on smaller lots and apartments and attached condominiums," said Kerstin Carr, MORPC's director of planning and environment.

This is what led Dublin to create the 1,100-acre Bridge Street District and change the city's zoning rules to allow for denser developments offering retail, residential and office spaces.

Crawford Hoying announced plans about a year ago for the \$300 million Bridge Park project within the district. It will include 150 condominiums, 650 apartments, 200,000 square feet of office space, a 150-room hotel, a 21,000-square-foot convention and banquet space, eight to 10 restaurants and 60,000 square feet of retail space.

Construction has not started on Bridge Park, which will be connected to the city's historic center to the west by a pedestrian bridge the city will construct.

"This is a huge trend and is here to stay for a long time," Crawford said.

In the heart of Hilliard, Station Park will feature an amphitheater and multi-use building, while Trailhead Park will have lockers and other amenities for cyclists and pedestrians using the 7-mile Heritage Trail.

The parks will cost a combined \$5 million and are expected to be open in June.

"We're reacting to the trend we see," said Clyde R. "Butch" Seidle, Hilliard's public-service director and city engineer. "People don't want to have to get in their cars to go everywhere and to do everything, and that carries through to our development plans."