



East Peoria's 'Luck' Won't Run Short

By Michael Smothers

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Thomas Jefferson found "that the harder I work, the more luck I seem to have."

Other cities should be as lucky as East Peoria.

With sales tax revenues tripled over the past two decades and a property tax rate 60 percent lower, it's been on quite a roll. Until recently I chronicled the last seven years of those best of times as the East Peoria beat reporter for the Peoria Journal Star.

We're now weathering what's generally accepted as the nation's worst economic storm in 80 years. Among other impacts far more relevant to people saving for retirement, their children's colleges or simply their next mortgage payments, some large and mid-level retail chains are telling developers not to hold their breath waiting for them. They've scaled back plans for new stores, closed existing ones and, in a few cases, gone bankrupt.

Economists say good and bad times run in cycles. There's no guessing here how long this one will last. Yet if there are any factors which combined can support a city's confidence that it will not only withstand the storm but continue to strengthen its economy through development, East Peoria has them.

They are the land, the area's population, the roads connecting them, a stunning record of success, the vision to adapt with the city's changing character, often admirable cooperation between public and business community leaders — and, yes, some luck.

Blackjack Boulevard, for example, would've been a nameless road leading to a warehouse for Dale Burklund's local beverage distributorship had he not met a man in the casino development business while vacationing in Antigua in 1991, the year Illinois legalized riverboat gaming. Burklund called the encounter "a stroke of luck" that, long story short, produced the Par-A-Dice Casino and East Peoria's estimated \$4 million annual share of its gaming tax revenue.

Whether the Par-A-Dice's docking was the pivotal development in the city's rapid evolution, it and ensuing projects generated the tax revenue that helped fuel some fresh, aggressive ideas for how the city once known as Bluetown could build its sales tax-based economy as its industrial base shrank. Gone by 1997 were Caterpillar Inc.'s oldest factories on a centrally-located swath of land the size of downtown Peoria. Open by then, however, were Harbor Pointe gated community and Stoney Creek Inn at EastPort Plaza, not to mention tourist magnets EastPort Marina and EastSide Centre.

Then, as the century turned, the focus shifted south, where public and private planners continue trying their brand of luck with the goal of building nothing less than a new downtown.

Successes have already produced a Camp Street corridor solid with new retail, restaurants, the Embassy Suites hotel and Riverfront Conference Center, with more projects on tap. They give the city an even stronger tax base it can use to invest in itself.

It has committed to that with EP2010. Where Caterpillar's oldest plants once stood on 86 acres, a mixed-use community of retail, office and civic structures will soon rise, with an expected overall value of \$130 million. Both the city and the master developer its chosen for the project, Cullinan Properties Ltd., have good reason to be confident they'll succeed despite the current economic hurdles.

"It's fortuitous that we're uniquely located" for the project, said Dennis Triggs, who's spearheaded most of City Hall's redevelopment efforts. EP2010 will join the Embassy, the conference center and Riverside Center on the kind of centrally located, formerly used and environmentally reclaimed site that retail chains now covet.

They and the developers seeking to lure them call the areas "in-fill" sites. Rather than chasing new consumer bases such as subdivisions sprawling along cities' beltway rims, they're increasingly seeking locations "in the geographic centers where a lot of people work, play and drive," Triggs said.

Last month, an even larger development of the same model opened on a former landfill site in a densely populated Los Angeles suburb. Another, called Midtown Memphis, was unveiled on 28 acres worth of reclaimed blocks near that city's historic neighborhoods.

East Peoria's luck, the kind Jefferson found in steady abundance, won't run out anytime soon.