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Bargain buy becomes 57 acres of big dreams; [STATE Edition]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Plans call for Citrus Country Groves to operate from the human resources office at the front of the property, with a new retail outlet expected to go up along U.S. 301. Eventually, [Jim Guedry] wants to build a day care center behind the offices for everyone on the property to use.

If nothing else comes true, if his dreams of multiple employers each bringing 30 to 40 jobs behind rows of shops and offices, doesn't become a reality, Guedry said the purchase was still a great move. The land is paid for; there is no debt. And Citrus Country Groves has the room it needs to install a warehouse full of new processing equipment to expand.

New beverage plant owners [Don Dueker], Jim Guedry and [Ronnie Triplett] began their Florida business in 1978 with Jim's Produce.; Computer-generated image shows the planned Dade City Business Center from the north along U.S. 301. Four new strip; retail and office space centers are seen in the middle.; Computer-generated image shows the planned Dade City Business Center as seen from U.S. 301.

Full Text (1003 words)

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(ran East edition)

From a roadside produce stand along U.S. 19 in Tarpon Springs, Jim Guedry and his partners have come a long way.

This month, their journey took a giant leap as they embarked on their biggest venture yet: turning 57 acres of rundown industrial land and 410,000 square feet of warehouses and offices at the old Pasco Beverage plant into a shiny new business park that promises to change the face of northern Dade City.

"I'm excited just talking about it," Guedry said.

Driving a golf cart across the vast expanse of his new acquisition Wednesday, Guedry, 49, was the picture of enthusiasm. Over and over, he spread his arms wide to emphasize the sprawling complex he had just taken over. Speeding through rows of connected, vacant warehouses, he pointed out features.

"Just look at that," he said, peering down a long corridor of railroad loading bays. "That's beautiful. Look at all that."

He has a new logo and name for the site: "Dade City Business Center."

And he has artist renderings of how it will look someday. Already, crews have been demolishing old

buildings and tearing down the chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. Signs advertising space for lease were up by Wednesday.

Guedry and his partners, Don Dueker and Ronnie Triplett, started together peddling produce near their St. Louis homes in the 1970s.

In the summer, they made good money, Guedry said. In the winter, not so good.

"The winter would come and just eat our lunch," he said. "That was eight months out of the year, we were just starving."

A trip to Florida changed his perspective. The winter was pleasant and brought tourists. The summers were slow when snowbirds went home.

"It was like, 'Wait a minute. This is the opposite. We do well for eight months and starve for four.' That was a lot better," he said. "I came down, and they came right after me."

In 1978, the three opened Jim's Produce.

"It was a little lean-to by the side of the highway," Guedry said.

When they began concentrating on citrus shipping, they evolved the business into Sun Groves.

In 1992, they bought the Oakley Groves stand at the State Road 54 and Interstate 75 intersection.

"There was nothing there," he said.

But with a campy mix of gift shop items and fireworks combined with a nationwide fruit shipping operation, their new venture, Citrus Country Groves, became a success.

This year, it was time for another change. Wesley Chapel is booming, and becoming cramped. There was no room to expand Citrus Country, and the land the business held had become valuable.

Guedry went hunting for new digs.

"A real estate agent suggested this place," he said, driving through a wide parking area that he hopes will become a business park. "I said, 'Are you crazy? We couldn't afford something like that.' "

But with good timing and a cash offer as Pasco Beverage prepared to shut down it

all came together, he said.

When Pasco Beverage put 37 excess acres at the plant up for sale in 2002, the asking price was \$5.75-million. Guedry and his partners bought all of that land and more for \$1.7-million.

Now, Guedry has plans.

Already, talks are under way to bring the plant into the Dade City limits. The new owners say they like the idea of having a city hall close by to expedite business, not to mention the availability of Dade City water and sewer lines if they need them.

City Manager Harold Sample said the city has been eager to annex the land for years. In addition to property taxes, the city would collect a piece of the sales tax revenues from retail outlets at the property. Sample said he was also eager to hear plans Guedry had for improving the looks of the plant, which has been an eyesore at the northern gateway to the city.

Plans call for Citrus Country Groves to operate from the human resources office at the front of the property, with a new retail outlet expected to go up along U.S. 301. Eventually, Guedry wants to build a day care center behind the offices for everyone on the property to use.

Arrangements are being negotiated to take down the ugly electric substation along U.S. 301 and bury the power lines. The chain-link fence will be replaced by something in wrought iron and brick. Buildings facing the highway will be sandblasted back to the original brick, if possible, and the old smokestacks may come off the factory in the back, where a giant mural of small-town life could adorn the largest of the buildings.

And Guedry, who is single, has his eyes on the loft of one of the old, wooden garages.

"That's going to be my apartment," he said. "It's great. Old, wood floors, high ceiling."

If nothing else comes true, if his dreams of multiple employers each bringing 30 to 40 jobs behind rows of shops and offices, doesn't become a reality, Guedry said the purchase was still a great move. The land is paid for; there is no debt. And Citrus Country Groves has the room it needs to install a warehouse full of new processing equipment to expand.

"We can take Citrus Country, put it right here, and do nothing," he said. "But look around. This town definitely needs a shot in the arm, but with the growth in Wesley Chapel and the way Zephyrhills is growing, there's nothing like this left. It's a matter of time; this is going to be great."