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COUNTRY GROVES RELOCATING // Citrus packer packs for Dade City move; [STATE Edition]

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Citrus Country Groves now owns 75 percent of the former Pasco Beverage juice complex on U.S. 301 north of downtown. Chief executive officer Jim Guedry, along with partners Don Dueker and Ronnie Triplett, bought a big chunk of the run-down industrial site last October, days after closing on a deal to sell their 2 acres in Wesley Chapel to make way for a Honda motorcycle dealership.

The move means a major expansion for Citrus Country Groves, which has more than 100 employees, about half of them seasonal. Guedry said he'll add 20 seasonal positions. With the larger warehouse space, the operation can be limited to normal business hours. In Wesley Chapel, the machines ran 24 hours a day.

A train passes behind the idle machinery on the packing line at the new Dade City processing plant of Citrus Country Groves in a section of the former Pasco Beverage juice complex. The machinery sits idle until the season begins in the fall.; (ran East edition); Citrus Country Groves co-owners, Jim Guedry, Ronnie Triplett, and Don Dueker, pose on their company's new loading dock in Dade City

The scent of fruit juice lingers, but not much else.

Citrus Country Groves, in preparation for an October opening in Dade City, is gradually closing its Wesley Chapel operation.

The packing house at State Road 54 and Interstate 75 stands empty. Only the retail store, peddling kitschy Florida souvenirs and fresh-squeezed juice, remains open.

In Dade City, at the citrus shipper's sprawling new location, sorting equipment snakes through cavernous warehouses. Unlike in Wesley Chapel, there is room to grow.

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The partners hope to draw 20 to 30 more businesses to the site, now known as Dade City Business Center. Guedry said he envisions a mix of manufacturers and retailers, not just companies looking for warehouse space.

"We're hoping to be an incubator for small businesses," he said. "We'd rather have businesses with employees to make the place alive."

Dade City is in the process of annexing the old beverage plant, a boon to the tax base that officials never could pull off when the site was owned by Lykes Pasco and later Pasco Beverage.

And the move means a major expansion for Citrus Country Groves, which has more than 100 employees, about half of them seasonal. Guedry said he'll add 20 seasonal positions. With the larger warehouse space, the operation can be limited to normal business hours. In Wesley Chapel, the machines ran 24 hours a day.

"We'll be able to do in eight hours what we did in 24," Guedry said.

But he acknowledged he's expanding in an industry whose end is in sight.

"We figure we've got five to eight years left in the citrus business, and we're planning accordingly," he said.

He likened the disappearance of agriculture in Pasco County to what happened in Pinellas, which used to be covered by orange groves and dotted with packing houses before they gave way to development.

"I think the demand is dwindling down," he said, while real estate values are escalating. "I think the store will probably be here for a long, long time. But running citrus commercially will see its end."

In the meantime, Guedry plans to capitalize on his commodity. Once the new packing house is up and running, he'll drive tourists through on trams to witness the sorting, washing and packing process.

"It will bring people to Dade City," he said. "There are very few tours of packing houses because there are very few packing houses."

The new 6,000-square-foot retail store, which will front U.S. 301, will still sell fruit baskets that can be shipped virtually anywhere. But the store, Guedry thinks, will draw more snowbirds and locals and fewer tourists than the shop next to the interstate.

"We'll make it more of a folksy marketplace," he said.

But for the next few weeks at least, travelers along I-75 will still see the wooden cows that have become a landmark at the Wesley Chapel intersection. Everything in the store, except the fruit and juice, is 40 percent off.

Ray Legler, who works in the store squeezing juice, has watched the warehouse empty out and the doors get boarded up.

"We're coming to the end of the road," he said.

