

THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

Business Center Ripe For Growth

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DADE CITY — Tooling on a golf cart through the cavernous emptiness of the former Pasco Beverage Co. plant, **Jim Guedry** sees nothing but potential.

"We'd like to see a car restoration company go in here," **Guedry** says, parked outside the open bays of what was the truck garage.

And does he have a car restorer lined up for the slot?

"Not yet," **Guedry** says with a grin.

Guedry carries in his mind the kind of clients he'd like to see at his Dade City Business Center, from fish farmers to warehouse operations to medical records storage. For now, though, he's got a handful of small tenants and a mountain of available space — almost 700,000 square feet.

All that empty space has made **Guedry** the darling of Pasco County's economic development gurus. But a year after he bought his chunk of the Lykes family's shuttered factory, **Guedry's** still figuring out what he's got and what to do with it.

"To take a guy who puts oranges in boxes and turn him into a land developer is difficult," says **Guedry**, president of Citrus Country Groves. "But we think we're in the right place and the right time."

Guedry bought 23 acres of the juice plant last spring with the proceeds from the sale of the two acres in Wesley Chapel that had housed Citrus Country since 1992.

The fruit distributor had outgrown its space and needed a new home, **Guedry** said.

A Honda motorcycle dealer eventually will move into the space in the shadow of Interstate 75.

Guedry initially shied away from the enormous hulk of the juice plant but was more interested when the Lykes family agreed to sell it off piecemeal. **Guedry** paid cash and set about clearing out tons of debris left behind when Pasco Beverage closed in late 2003.

Crews also tore down two unsafe buildings on the property's perimeter and storage bins that lined the center of the property.

Since taking over, **Guedry** has spent \$70,000 to repaint the exterior of the buildings along U.S. 301 — including the water tower, which now bears the Dade City Business Center logo. He also has hired a few former juice plant employees as the core of the 15-person staff he says he'll need to run the business center.

Citrus Country's offices have moved to their new home by the plant's loading docks. The distribution lines remain in Wesley Chapel while new lines go up at the business center.

Meanwhile, **Guedry** finds himself in the role of landlord and salesman — two jobs he says he knew little about when he started.

"To be honest with you, it's been a struggle," **Guedry** said, piloting the golf cart among 50-year-old buildings.

"We didn't have that real estate savvy, but we're getting it."

Guedry is finalizing a deal with a commercial real estate company in Tampa to find tenants for the business center's biggest spaces, which run between 25,000 and 49,000 square feet and include refrigerated warehouses. **Guedry** and his staff will handle the smaller leases.

Guedry hopes to have the business center fully leased by the end of next year. He plans to build more office space and — the state Department of Transportation willing — a new entrance off U.S. 301 in 2007.

Ready For Rent

When **Guedry** put his business center on the market, he handed Pasco's economic development specialists something they were eager to have: hundreds of thousands of square feet of ready for rent.

"That's primary inventory for us," said Bryan Kamm, industry recruiter for the Pasco Economic Development Council. "Right now I'm showing that to a majority of the clients that come in."

In the past year, Pasco's two most prominent industrial parks — West Pasco Industrial Park in Odessa and One Pasco Center outside San Antonio — have sold their last lots. Other parks are in the pipeline, but none is ready to rent.

In the past three to five years, Pasco's bounty of available industrial land has shrunk to almost nothing as manufacturers have left more expensive sites in Pinellas and Hillsborough counties for room to grow in Pasco. In short order, those businesses have eaten up the acres of industrial land that long sat fallow. Some of those same industries are likely to find **Guedry's** land appealing, said EDC president Mary Jane Stanley.

"This opens up all sorts of possibilities for Dade City," she said.

By breaking up the property, the Lykes family did more to expand Dade City's tiny manufacturing base than they could have by keeping the plant intact, Stanley said.

Stanley and Kamm agree **Guedry** is setting an ambitious schedule by planning to have his property fully leased by the end of 2006.

"But you've got to be ambitious as a leaseholder," Kamm said, "because that's your business."

Giving It Another Look

Guedry says the EDC has brought in about three-quarters of the 60 or so businesses that have looked at his property since November. The rest have come through ads in local newspapers and magazines, he said. Kentucky-based Varsity Grafix was one of the first to stake a claim at the business center. The printing company leases about 3,000 square feet at one end of the old truck garage. An octopus-looking T-shirt screener sits in one bay next to the office.

"We were looking for pretty much anything that would suit us," said Jared Maynard, who leads Varsity's three-person Florida expansion.

In his search for space, Maynard considered the business center early on but was put off by the size. He explored sites in Tampa before returning to Dade City and giving **Guedry's** venture another look.

"It seemed like **Jim** and his staff wanted to work with us as far as marketing to grow our business," Maynard said.

Since operations began in January, Varsity Grafix has made T-shirts for the Taste of New Tampa and for several other small buyers.

Maynard and his staff live in Dade City and like the fact that they don't have to fight Tampa's traffic to get back and forth to work. They already hope to expand their operation in the near future.

"We'd like to move into a facility two to three times this size," Maynard said.

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Jim Guedry already has in mind the type of tenants he would like to see fill the nearly 700,000 square feet of space at his Dade City Business Center.

Jared Maynard of Varsity Grafix looked at sites in Tampa before settling on the Dade City site, and he's happy with the choice.

The conversion of the former Pasco Beverage Co. plant into the business center has provided needed industrial space in Pasco, economic development officials say.