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Business corridor remains busy, but is starting to age

BY SUE KIESEWETTER | ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

When Jim Bonaminio opened Jungle Jim's International Market in 1975, he could see the potential for growth along Fairfield's Ohio 4.

"We need to enhance the shop-ability of Route 4," Bonaminio says. "We need to aggressively approach that. They need some more of me on Route 4."

Thirty-one years later, the focus is back on Fairfield's aging, heavily traveled business corridor, which some say needs a face-lift to keep up with new shopping centers going up in nearby West Chester and Fairfield townships.



"We heard from several folks that 'You turned your back on Route 4' or 'You don't care,' " says Tim Bachman, the city's director of development services.

Not so, Bachman says. In fact, the city has begun taking a serious look at nearly six miles of the road that stretches roughly from Interstate 275 north to the edge of Hamilton. Among the efforts:

Miami University's Center for Public Management and Regional Affairs released findings this week from a study that catalogs the number of buildings along Ohio 4 along with their ages, use and occupancy.

The city planning commission and council are studying an update of a 1992 Thoroughfare Plan, a planning document that will guide future development along Ohio 4 and other key roads.

Businesses have been surveyed about signs throughout the city, particularly along Ohio 4.

Thousands in the area travel along Ohio 4 to shop for cars, catch a movie or shop at Jungle Jim's - the corridor's best-known business.

The good news: The vacancy rate for businesses along Ohio 4 is about 8 percent.

The bad news: Most of the buildings were constructed in the 1970s and 80s, says Jennifer Patterson, project manager for the Miami study.

Those buildings often look outdated and many need expensive upgrades to heating, air conditioning and electrical systems.

"Maybe some of these buildings may need to come down," Patterson says. "The strip malls popular in the '70s and '80s may not be what today's demographics want or will be driving (to)."

"The (Miami) data substantiated the story that many of us thought," Bachman says. Development along Ohio 4 "is a true bell curve. It bumped up in the '60s, its heyday was in the '70s and '80s. It slowed down in the '90s and is picking up a little in the 2000s."

Most of the growth in the past five or six years has come in the mid-section of the road, between Nilles and Seward roads, according to the MU study. That's where Jungle Jim's is, along with

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Fairfield's key commercial area is Ohio 4, which is heavily traveled but is cluttered with signs and shows its age compared to newer shopping areas in Fairfield and West Chester townships.

What's next

Discuss Miami University's study and authorize more research, including creating a focus group to identify business needs and propose ideas to improve the corridor.

Study other older commercial corridors nationally and locally, including Delhi Pike and Beechmont Avenue.

Finish and adopt the thoroughfare plan.

Revise the city's sign ordinance.

many car dealerships.

Since opening, Bonaminio has expanded several times and brought in Tom Raper RV as a tenant. He's also added retail space to his 70-acre complex.

"They're the barometer," Bonaminio says. "I talk to my tenants every month. They tell me they're doing fabulous."

Many other places along Ohio 4 need some work.

"There are pockets ... struggling to keep tenants," Patterson says. "It's still a viable area. It isn't necessarily broken."

Land along the corridor doesn't change hands often.

Only a handful of tracts larger than a few acres remain undeveloped. Of the 37 parcels of remaining undeveloped land, 10 are for sale.

One 13.6-acre tract is priced at \$1.5 million. A 6.5-acre parcel is priced at \$819,000.

It remains unclear what the city can do to modernize the look of businesses along the corridor. The Miami study is just the beginning of what could be a long discussion about the future of Ohio 4, Bachman says.

"The next question is now that you have the information, what do you do with it?"

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