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Pr. George's Takes a Bite of the Good Life Long-Ignored County Now a Retail Magnet

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On "jazz night" inside the Gladys Knight & Ron Winans' Chicken & Waffles restaurant, diners nodded and swayed. The music mixed with the low mirth of bar conversation, and it was easy to forget where you were. Not the restaurant. The county.

At half past 9, "American Idol" finalist Gedeon McKinney joined the band and channeled Al Green singing "Let's Stay Together." Cellphone cameras snapped away, and Jacquie Hayes-Byrd got almost giddy.

The Commerce Department information officer had brought a friend just to show off. "I used to live here 10 years ago, and nothing was here," she said. Now, "I'm proud as punch to be here."

Here, as in Prince George's County.

For decades, the county has struggled to shed its blue-collar image as it changed from white and working class to majority-black and middle class. The image problem lingered, development lagged and county officials and citizens groups complained bitterly about the dearth of high-end-shopping and dining options -- places to sit down, have a drink, take a date.

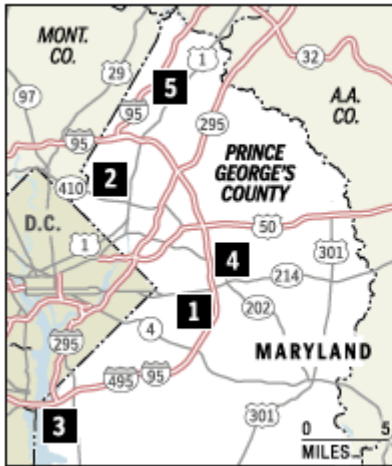
Ten years ago, the opening of the chain restaurant Applebee's in Largo was a big event, given that it was in one of the mostly black communities that felt particularly underserved after the gradual decline in the 1990s of once-thriving Landover Mall. Then, five years ago, the county's first modern retail and dining district arrived with the Bowie Town Center.



Khalilah Crudup, left, dances with her mother Janice Crudup during Wind Down Wednesdays at the Captial Center Blvd in Largo, Maryland. (Marvin Joseph/twp - The Washington Post)

Retail Revitalization in Prince George's

Construction on several new retail complexes is already underway in Prince George's County. The first is scheduled to open as soon as August. A look at what's to come:



Project	Size (acres)	Cost	Scheduled opening
1 Steeplechase <i>Restaurants, local service business and community stores</i>	110	\$100 million	August
2 University Town Center <i>14-screen theater, restaurants and upscale condominiums</i>	—	\$1.2 billion	Summer 2007
3 National Harbor <i>Hotel and convention center, marina, waterfront promenade, restaurants</i>	300	\$2 billion	2008
4 Woodmore Towne Centre <i>Wegmans gourmet grocery store, conference center, retail and residential space</i>	245	\$1 billion	Summer 2008
5 Konterra <i>Retail shops and space for governmental, educational or corporate facility</i>	2,200	\$3 billion	2009

SOURCE: Prince George's County Economic Development Corp. | GRAPHIC: Nathaniel Vaughn Kelso, The Washington Post - June 20, 2006

Two years ago, the Boulevard at the Capital Centre shopping center -- where Gladys Knight's restaurant is located -- opened in Largo, and the stores, restaurants and bars started multiplying. Plans for more than a half-dozen retail projects, from north to south, are promising to transform the county and deliver a range of swank, funky or family destination spots. The new offerings are changing the way people live, as more residents are staying close to home to eat out and shop.

In May, the county signed a deal with the high-end Wegmans Food Markets to anchor the Woodmore Towne Centre in Landover, a billion-dollar project that will include homes and more than 750,000 square feet of shopping space and is expected to open in summer 2008.

Next summer, the \$1.2 billion University Town Center in Hyattsville, a mixed-use development, will open with a brewery, sushi bar, white-tablecloth restaurant and 14-screen movie theater. And in 2008, the much-anticipated \$2 billion National Harbor project, promising to be the largest hotel, resort and convention center on the Eastern seaboard, will open on the banks of the Potomac River in Oxon Hill with high-end homes, shops, restaurants and entertainment.

Even with the additions, the county will lag behind its more commercially developed neighbors. But officials say the county is catching up. The changes are welcome to many residents, who wonder: What took so long?

Obstacles to Progress

At the Boulevard at the Capital Centre, as a recent spring afternoon gave way to evening, hundreds of people -- couples, families, small groups of friends -- gathered on both sides of "Restaurant Row."

The outdoor mall, which opened in 2003, and features a 12-screen Loews Magic Johnson Theatres complex and a Starbucks, quickly became the happening new place, and lines of folks waited for a table or chatted outside the Cold Stone Creamery ice cream shop.

The crowd was mellow, the vibe was easy, and it was almost like a scene from Adams Morgan -- if Adams Morgan were almost all black.

On a Saturday night, Denise Washington, 44, a store manager from Waldorf, and Brian Stokely, 44, a real estate agent from Fort Washington, waited for a table outside Stonefish Grill, part of the Restaurant Row, which also includes Red Star Tavern, Kobe Japanese Steak House and Gladys Knight & Ron Winans' Chicken and Waffles.

"Now it's not really necessary to drive to the city," Stokely said.

"Prince George's is turning into a community," Washington added. "It reminds me of Reston or Potomac -- communities that have things -- movie theaters, nice eateries."

"I don't know why it took so long, but I'm glad it finally came to fruition," she said.

After Applebee's opened in Largo, it was followed, with great fanfare, by BET Soundstage in 2001 (which later became Jasper's). Then restaurant growth stalled. "There was an institutional belief that restaurants couldn't survive in Prince George's County," said Jeffrey Ludwig, senior vice president of NAI Michael Co., a major commercial developer in the county.

Ludwig blames the crime rate, which was high in the county but low in the black middle-class community of the Inglewood Restaurant Park area, where Jasper's was located. Also, some investors believed that if restaurants weren't there, there must be a good reason, he said.

"After a year of beating my head against the wall, I had to either admit defeat or get creative," Ludwig said. Six years ago, he created the Vote4Restaurants Web site to try to market the county to potential investors. Thousands of county residents posted essays about how hungry they were for more dining options. Now, in addition to Jasper's, the restaurant park has an Outback Steakhouse and Ruby Tuesday, and earlier this month the NAI Michael Co. confirmed a land deal for a Copeland's restaurant.

Arthur A. Turner, chairman of the county Chamber of Commerce's Economic Development Committee, said many residents blame racism for the lack of interest. But most county officials have resisted saying so publicly. "The truth of the matter is the big 'r' word," he said. "Racism does enter into the equation."

Prince George's is the second-largest county in the state and, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, has more households making upwards of \$75,000 a year than any other Maryland jurisdiction except Montgomery County. But the county's median household income of \$53,659 ranks 11th in Maryland, just below the state average, according to the Census.

"There have been community leaders, business leaders, elected officials and others who have been laboring in the vineyards to get them to recognize there is a whole boatload of money that can be made in Prince George's County and, as a matter of fact, the only color that should matter is green," Turner said.

Former two-term county executive Wayne K. Curry (D), who was first elected in 1994 and is credited with encouraging the upscale housing that laid much of the groundwork for the county's new development, said race was a factor. But he added that the county also suffered from "self-inflicted wounds" -- including poor schools, escalating crime and financial mismanagement -- that made it difficult to attract some businesses. "That racial factor was one factor in a potpourri of influences," Curry said.

Kevin J. Malachi, senior vice president of the Prince George's County Economic Development Corp., said the seemingly sudden explosion of options is part of a cycle of predictable trends. "First you get the housing, then the office space. Then you get the retail and the nightlife as the market determines there's sufficient population to support them. The nightlife is last to come on board, and the fact that we're seeing it now is because we're reaching a critical mass in terms of population and the kinds of demographics restaurateurs look for."

Most county experts credit Bowie Town Center and development along the Route 301 corridor for the turnaround in the county's retail fortunes. In 2001, Bowie Town Center brought in stores including Ann Taylor Loft, Hecht's and Barnes & Noble and sprouted such eateries as DuClaw Brewing Co., Longhorn Steakhouse, Olive Garden and Uno Chicago Grill.

The decision to become the county's first major retail developer in the modern era turned out to be a good one for the Indianapolis-based Simon Property Group, developer and owner of the Bowie Town Center.

"We just knew there's a lot of wealth in the county," said Rod Vosper, Simon's vice president of development. "There was not a lot of existing product, and what was there was not very compelling. We felt like we had an opportunity to capitalize on other people's apprehension."

Bowie Town Center was built in a mostly white part of the county. It took longer to persuade retailers to consider the mostly black communities with similar income levels.

Reed Cordish, vice president of the Baltimore-based Cordish Co., which owns the Boulevard at the Capital Centre, said that when the company began considering the project, potential "tenants just said they didn't see themselves there."

"I think there were race issues," Cordish said. "It didn't meet the normal demographic they were used to seeing when they went into the suburbs. So it took more meetings, more time, more negotiation, more hand-holding." Then stores including Borders, Pier 1 Imports and the Loews Magic Johnson Theatres signed on, and the project gained momentum.

"It looks like we were visionary," but we weren't, Cordish said. "Why it wasn't obvious to other people, we don't know."

Wealth of Options

On a recent Saturday night, a line of cars cruised past the teen hangout Magic Johnson Theatres.

Heading away from the theater, the teenage chatter waned and the live-band sounds of Ynomrah ("harmony" spelled backward), spilled onto the sidewalk from Infusions Tea Cafe. Every so often, in front of Restaurant Row, one of the nearly 100 bikers, sitting-posing-chilling in black leather on their fluorescent Ninjas and Yamahas, revved their motors, and all heads turned.

Garland Brooks, 39, a letter carrier from Upper Marlboro, and his 13-year-old son, Garland Brooks Jr., were enjoyed the open air and a few scoops of ice cream. They often go to Capital Centre after the seventh-grader's baseball practice. The father has followed the county's changes -- although these days, who can keep up? -- and he is just glad he has more places to hang out with his son.

"We needed this," he said near the Gladys Knight restaurant, smiling. "It's been a long time coming."

Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.