

# 'He's Done the Most with it'

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The executive director of the Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority has been working since 2007 to redevelop the site of a closed Army installation into a thriving, multi-use community and economic engine in western Arkansas.

Ivy Owen knew he was turning the corner in his drive to transform 7,000 acres of vacant land in western Arkansas into a thriving business and residential community when he overheard two women talking in a local Wal-Mart in late 2009.

“When a shopper who was asked where she lived answered, ‘Chaffee Crossing,’ I started to feel pretty good about where we were headed,” Owen recalled. He explained that up until then, people still were calling the community “Fort Chaffee” because the land had been part of a 72,000-acre Army post that was designated for closure in the 1995 base realignment and closure round.

“We’d been working hard to redevelop and rebrand the property and when I heard the resident refer to the community by its new name, I took that as a sign our efforts were really taking off,” he explained.

Owen relocated to Fort Smith, Ark., from Mississippi in 2007 to become the third executive director of the Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority (FCRA). He is responsible for developing the property to attract businesses, educational institutions and other organizations to this part of the state.



The Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority donated 200 acres to the Arkansas Colleges of Health Education for a new medical college opening in August 2017. Photo provided by the Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority.

He knew that to spearhead the massive challenges involved in developing Chaffee

Crossing, he would have to draw on the skills he mastered as an economic and community developer in Mississippi and Tennessee. He brought more than 40 years of experience in the field to his new job, including serving as community development director for the seven communities of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, which was a challenge on several levels.

“They were already pretty successful with a lot of industry, two huge casinos and two championship golf courses. They were also pretty clannish and didn’t like outsiders coming in and telling them how to design and implement a land use program, and 75 percent of them didn’t speak English,” Owen recalled. But he made friends with the tribal chief who cared more about what he could do than where he was from. He spent many nights in community meetings with an interpreter translating his smart growth and new urbanism concepts and how they could benefit the tribe.

“It took seven years but by the time I left, the council had approved the first smart growth plan for the area adopted by any tribe in the nation,” he said.

Today, under his stewardship, 1,600 acres of the property is available for development. Chaffee Crossing, parcels of which are located in the cities of Fort Smith and Barling and Sebastian County, now hosts 15 company and government agency headquarters, including transportation and logistics giant ArcBest, handgun and air rifle manufacturers Walther Arms and Umarex USA, and pet food manufacturer Mars PetCare, to name a few. The community also has satellite classrooms for two universities, a future Montessori school, a veterinary hospital, several churches and the campus of the Arkansas College of Osteopathic Medicine, which will open in August on 200 acres of land donated by the redevelopment authority. There also are three shopping centers and 24 residential developments that can accommodate 2,300 single- and multi-family units, recreation and a historic district, which includes a military museum.

To support this development, the redevelopment authority has funded the construction of miles of streets and water, sewer and utility lines, worked to ensure a segment of Interstate 49 that runs through Chaffee Crossing and Owen continues to seek federal and state funding for \$2.5 billion in funding to complete a segment of the highway that would run 180 miles from Chaffee Crossing to Texarkana on the Arkansas-Texas border.

Through its efforts, the authority has attracted more than \$1.45 billion in capital improvements, created more than 3,500 jobs and pumped more than \$100 million annually into the local economy.

Owen and his team also found an innovative solution to dealing with the damage caused

by a 2008 fire that burned 150 historic barracks in 2008, but missed the building where Elvis Presley got his first military haircut 50 years earlier. They obtained a cleanup license that allowed them to use an asbestos-removal process approved by the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality, rather than one certified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. In so doing, they saved FCRA and local residents thousands of dollars.

In recognition of the authority's accomplishments, the Association of Defense Communities honored Chaffee Crossing with the John Lynch Base Redevelopment Excellence Award in 2016 and the Base Redevelopment Excellence Award in 2012.

This success betrays the fact that the first few years on the job weren't easy. It didn't take Owen long to realize that he would have to be an innovative and flexible planner, a well-connected networker and marketer, and a highly accessible and persuasive emissary for Chaffee Crossing. This combination of traits would help him convince businesses to locate there and overcome local resistance to some aspects of the project.

Judith Hansen, executive editor of the Southwest Times Record newspaper for 22 years, watched with admiration as Owen transformed the shuttered Army post.

"Everyone wondered whether Ivy would be able to pull it off, but he's been there the longest and done the most with it," Hansen noted. "Before he arrived, the land was so open and empty, I used to give my kids driving lessons out there. Now, there's manufacturing, light industry, retail, restaurants, housing, schools and nonprofits—and there's still so much building going on that, as Ivy will say, 'If you haven't been to Chaffee Crossing this week, it's as though you hadn't been there.' I don't know where folks are taking their kids for driving lessons now."

But Owen didn't invite all comers; he focused on courting the type of investment in Chaffee Crossing that would be acceptable to the communities surrounding it, Hansen pointed out.

"Ivy could have allowed the land to be exploited for less clean types of manufacturing than what's being done there now or focused on just one type of development. Some local developers could have gotten in there and pushed through projects that benefited them alone. And there were those who wanted no development—to keep the land wild— while others pushed for all of it to be commercially developed," she said. "But he sought a variety of perspectives and was willing to consider different options that would benefit people throughout the region, not just Fort Smith. He also had the patience to wait for the right opportunities to come along rather than just jumping into projects that wouldn't be

the right fit.”

Owen’s dogged approach to all things Chaffee Crossing has not gone unnoticed in other circles.

“Ivy quickly became familiar with the assets in this region and forged relationships with officials in the local towns and the state agencies and legislature to obtain the necessary funding for basic infrastructure projects,” said Judge David Hudson, the chief executive officer of Sebastian County.

“In addition to encouraging enterprises to settle here, thus providing local jobs, he ensured there was space for neighborhood subdivisions and set aside 40 acres to add to the regional park, and developed a partnership to build bike and running trails, making Chaffee Crossing a desirable place to live as well as to work,” he added.

But Owen is not one to rest on his laurels. The redevelopment authority’s board of trustees recently extended his contract through the end of 2018 and he’s still hard at work, seeking funding for the completion of I-49 and on improvements to regional river, rail and airport services.

“There are also a lot of leaky sewer and water lines dating back to the Fort Chaffee days that need to be replaced. Fort Smith has an Arkansas Air National Guard base that pilots unmanned aircraft and 65,000 acres of Fort Chaffee that is an Arkansas Army National Guard Joint Maneuver Training Facility. We’d like to get a manufacturer or a supplier to locate at Chaffee Crossing so their products can be test flown out here. We’re also hoping to attract medical equipment manufacturers or a medical R&D organization to support the medical school, which has set aside space on its campus for those types of activities,” Owen said.

“You never want to be in a position where you can’t provide support to a developer that wants to come to your area,” he continued. “That’s the only thing that would cause me to want to retire and I’d go out with my tail tucked and my head down. But I don’t see that happening. The good thing is that when you’re successful, people like to tag along.”

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