

They Built It: Now It's "Go Time"

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John Lynch Base Redevelopment Excellence Award

Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority (FCRA) is all about planned obsolescence. Executive Director Ivy Owen is working to put himself out of a job, and after nine years, he is well on the fast track.

“The authority was formed in 1997 to find developers for 6,000 acres that were once part of part of a nearly 77,000-acre Army post in western Arkansas that was closed in the 1995 BRAC round,” he explained. “All except 1,500 usable acres of the property are or will soon be occupied. When the development rights for those are sold, the authority will disband and the three local communities that received the land from the Army will take control of the property.”

Owen’s team has worked tirelessly since 2007 to market the land to investors, but early efforts were hindered by the state’s struggle to build a new section of Interstate 49 through the property. The 6.5-mile section finally opened in 2015. That milestone, combined with Owen’s efforts to engage investors he had known over the years and hiring a professional real estate marketer, has paid off.

The excess acreage of Fort Chaffee, a broad swath of remote, empty land, has been transformed into Chaffee Crossing, a mixed-use, “smart growth” community that has attracted more than \$1.1 billion in capital improvements.

The community, in a region hard hit by a diminished military presence and under-employment, now hosts a broad range of manufacturing and light industrial businesses that have invested \$500 million in facilities, some of which include North American and regional headquarters. These businesses have helped create 1,400 jobs since 2007.

And there’s more to come.

ArcBest Corporation plans to open a new \$42 million corporate headquarters for 975 management employees, representing 300 new jobs. Arkansas Colleges of Health Education will open the state’s first college of osteopathic medicine to train 150 students per year on a campus that will host 1,000 people by 2021. These two businesses alone will triple the number of jobs the authority has attracted and increase its economic impact by \$200 million per year. The medical college’s private foundation also plans to develop a \$70 million mixed-use, traditional neighborhood development featuring student housing,

retail and commercial space, and health care clinics.

Chaffee Crossing has attracted other educational institutions, including satellite classrooms of two state universities and a future Montessori school, along with churches, commercial businesses, restaurants, a veterinary hospital, a brewery and three retail shopping centers.

The community has a strong residential component with 1,600 single- and multi-family units across 19 developments ranging from million-dollar homes to townhomes, duplexes, upscale apartments, cottages for foster children and assisted living facilities for the disabled. Many outdoor recreational amenities such as parks, multi-use trails, golf, soccer, softball and fishing lakes are nearby.

FCRA is working with various agencies to fund construction of a new bridge across the Arkansas River to connect I-49 with I-40. While this is sure to attract more development, FCRA is looking not just for companies with deep pockets, but for investors whose goals are compatible with the community's smart growth ethos and philosophy.

While Chaffee Crossing has a bright future, many people stop by to try to relive a moment in pop culture history: Elvis Presley's famous Army haircut, which happened on Fort Chaffee in 1958. The barber chair, the building and the barracks where he slept are part of the Chaffee Crossing Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"One of the first requests I made of the authority's board after I was hired was for \$40,000 to design a historic district around the 'Elvis building' – which has become a major tourist attraction, drawing people from all over the world." Owen recalls, "I didn't think they'd give me the money – and the project wound up costing three times what I asked for – but they let me go out on a limb, and fortunately it didn't break."

Owen calls the FCRA's campaign to develop Chaffee Crossing, which was launched in the midst of a severe recession, a "challenging adventure," but realizes that it could have been worse.

"I didn't have to overcome back then the huge number of complex, federal and state regulatory hurdles America's defense communities face today," he pointed out, and urged those who are stepping into shoes like his to seek community and economic development training and certification, tap old networks and establish new ones, and "join professional associations like ADC to learn from what they're doing. You'll need all the help you can get.

"Never think you can go it alone."

