

Envisioning a New Route 1, Rising From Ashes

Buildings Burned To Make Way for Revitalization

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On Saturday morning, Mukesh Majmudar, owner of the Valencia Motel on Route 1 in North Laurel, helped Howard County's Department of Fire and Rescue burn down two of the motel's five buildings.

As flames whipped out of the motel's blown-out windows, drivers gawked and business owners stepped out of their pawn shops, liquor stores and car dealerships to take a closer look. Howard County Council Chairman Guy Guzzone (D-Southeast County) watched as the roof of one building collapsed.

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Howard County Department of Fire and Rescue's Jason Scarf, left, and Capt. Doug Welsh participate in a controlled burning at the Valencia Motel on Sunday. (Ryan Anson For The Washington Post)

"Finally, from the flames and the ashes comes the revitalization of Route 1," said Guzzone, who has pushed to transform the corridor since coming to office in 1998. "It's exciting. It's hopeful."

For the past four years, Howard County has been studying ways to revive the part of the Route 1 corridor that stretches through the county, connecting Elkridge and Jessup, Savage and North Laurel. Setting the Valencia ablaze was a symbolic step in that direction.

Just down the road, Dreyer's Grand Ice Cream Holdings Inc. is doing its part. This week, the Oakland, Calif.-based ice cream maker announced plans to invest \$180 million into expanding its manufacturing plant and creating a new regional distribution center at the corner of Route 1 and Whiskey Bottom Road.

The expansion should add at least 300 full-time jobs to the 250 existing ones when it's finished, most likely in 2007, said Peter Laport, project director for Dreyer's, which makes Edy's, Nestle and Haagen-Dazs ice creams.

For about a decade, Dreyer's toyed with the idea of building an East Coast plant in Pennsylvania. But in summer 2003, it purchased Nestle, which was operating the Laurel plant. To keep Dreyer's in Laurel, Howard promised to defer \$1 million in property taxes for four years and to invest another \$1 million in road access and infrastructure improvements, Laport said. The state is offering its own incentives, which Laport declined to disclose.

"Howard County and the state provided great reasons to come here," Laport said. "But we also have a wonderful existing plant already. So we're leveraging our existing work force here on Route 1."

Route 1 began in 1741 as a dirt road lined with taverns that served Colonial travelers headed to Philadelphia. It eventually extended along the East Coast, attracting a hodgepodge of businesses that catered to travelers. The end result: a proliferation of neon signs and other "visual clutter," as the county puts it, and hazardous conditions created by cars entering and leaving roadside businesses.

In time, Route 1 ranked as one of the nation's busiest and most dangerous roadways, a county report said.

When Interstate 95 and the Baltimore-Washington Parkway were built, traffic subsided. Today, auto-centric commercial strips with discount muffler shops, hubcap stores and car dealers dominate parts of the highway as it winds through Howard. Parking lots belonging to plumbing and welding supply shops also dot the road.

In 2000, the county launched an effort to create a more thriving commercial zone there. Committees were formed. Consultants and constituents weighed in. Architects drew up plans. The state and federal governments chipped in money.

In February, the county government rezoned about 1,740 acres to allow the development of housing, retail and office buildings. And developers have responded with projects now under consideration by the Howard County Department of Planning and Zoning. In Elkridge, for instance, a plan is underway to build 110 townhouses, 208 apartments and 70,000 square feet of commercial space opposite the Troy Hill Corporate Center, said Jeff Bronow, the planning department's research chief.

Guzzone said that rather than force less desirable businesses to move, they are hoping to encourage them to do things to increase the value of their properties or sell their businesses to others who want to do that.

I'm hoping if I take the first step, it will cause a chain reaction," Majmudar said. "If the revitalization effort did not exist, if I didn't believe there is change coming, I would not take this kind of risk."

Majmudar says the Valencia has been doing a steady business since he bought it nearly 10 years ago, thanks to its location near the Laurel Park racetrack. But he thinks a new motel on a vastly improved Route 1 could make far more money. So he plans to sink \$5 million into rebuilding, refurbishing and converting the two single -level buildings into a Sleep Inn, part of the Choice Hotels family.

Majmudar, president and chief executive of Star Hotels in Columbia, also owns five other hotel franchises, including a Hilton in Columbia and a Hampton Inn at College Park. He said he has been impressed by the county's approach.

He was able to save on the Valencia's demolition costs by getting the fire department to burn down the two buildings. In exchange, the fire department used the space for training exercises for about three weeks leading up to Saturday's fire.

Homeless families temporarily housed in those buildings by the Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center, a nonprofit that provides emergency shelter, were moved months ago to the three other buildings that weren't burned down. But after the Sleep Inn opens, possibly in late December, the rest of the Valencia's property will be torn down. Majmudar is considering opening a restaurant in their place, he said.