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Commercial and residential growth in the formerly quiet area near the Moore County Airport has proliferated in recent years, encouraged by a \$6 million highway realignment completed in December 2008. That project — undertaken at the urging of the FAA and on their dime — shifted traffic away from the Moore County Airport flight path and more toward Sandhills Community College.

Zerillo's Pizza, the first tenant at Mill Creek (left), is hoping to help fill the area's void for local food. Read about it below.

AIRPORT NEIGHBORHOOD SPREADING ITS WINGS

“ The area surrounding Mill Creek Village is one of the fastest growing in the county. **”**

Barbara Klug
 Mill Creek Developer

BY LAURA DOUGLASS
 Staff Writer

The landscape continues to transform around the roundabout at the intersection of N.C. 22 and Airport Road with new businesses under construction and new proposals before town leaders.

Commercial and residential growth in this formerly quiet section of Moore County have proliferated in recent years, encouraged by a \$6 million highway realignment completed in December 2008. That project — undertaken at the urging of the FAA and on their dime — shifted traffic away from the Moore County Airport flight path and more toward Sandhills Community College.

In short order, two large commercial developments sprouted up on either side of N.C. 22. Mill Creek Village and the mixed-use development of Tyler's Ridge anchor growth in the area, and both sites

are expanding with new structures, new businesses and new proposals.

Harris Teeter was the first major player to set up shop, opening a 53,000-square-foot store at Mill Creek in September 2011.

It was joined by several smaller businesses in a secondary retail building that currently houses Mean Bean Coffee, Great Clips, China One and Modern Movement.

More recently, Mill Creek Partners Jack Kramer and Barbara Klug began construction on a 6,550-square-foot “mirror image” retail building that is positioned on the other side of Harris Teeter.

“The area surrounding Mill Creek Village is one of the fastest growing in the county, with two new high schools within miles of the site on the books to be built.

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Zerillo's Pizza, owned by Jimmy Sr. (pictured), along with his son and both of their families, will be a casual neighborhood restaurant.

Zaxby's, Huddle House on Horizon for Southern Pines

BY LAURA DOUGLASS
 Staff Writer

Zaxby's is coming to Southern Pines, and Huddle House could be hot on its heels.

Calling itself a “fast-casual chicken restaurant,” Zaxby's launched in 1990 from Statesboro, Ga., and recently celebrated the grand opening of its 800th location. One of the country's fastest growing franchises, the chain also was named earlier this year to Forbes' top 10 list of Best Franchises.

The restaurant chain made its name selling to college town crowds, with a featured menu of fried chicken and grilled chicken-based sandwiches and salads — or Zalads, as the company



ARCHITECTURAL RENDERING COURTESY OF ZAXBY'S

calls them In 2014, the company hit \$1 billion in sales, with many locations outselling Taco Bell and Wendy's, according to QSR magazine. In 2015, ex-

pansion continued, with Zaxby's ranked 10th nationwide for growth.

The Southern Pines Town Council recently approved an architectural re-

view request submitted by Zaxby's for a new restaurant on U.S. 15-501, adjacent to Chili's. Plans call for a red brick exterior but, traditionally, the company decorates its interior spaces with sports memorabilia and artwork more tailored to each location's surrounding community interests.

It's expected that Zaxby's will be a strong competitor to the perennially popular Chick-fil-A restaurant that sits almost directly across the highway. Both offer menus viewed as a step-up from fast food, and each provide dine-in and drive-thru options.

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Growth

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Additional subdivisions within the Whispering Pines jurisdiction and Sandhills Community College and The O'Neal School just around the circle, all make this area a perfect location for more service businesses and restaurants," said Klug.

The first tenant announced for the new building is Zerillo's Pizza. Leasing options with other tenants are ongoing, and Klug said negotiations are also underway to develop one of five nearby outparcels.

"There is a lot of excitement with the coming of Zerillo's Pizza coming to Mill Creek Village later this year.

Owners Jimmy Sr. and Jr. and their wives, Debbie and Lorna, bring experience and expertise, having owned and operated four previous restaurants in Florida," Klug said.

Zerillo's menu will feature New York-style hand-tossed pizza along with appetizers, pasta, chicken dishes, subs and desserts.

"Hand-tossed is the only way to make an authentic New York-style pizza. I guarantee our customers will love the food and the atmosphere," said Zerillo Sr.

The restaurant will serve beer and wine, with a few beers on tap. Indoor seating for 48 people is anticipated, and additional outdoor patio seating will allow for up to 30.

"Our main focus will be on pizza, but we will serve some pasta dishes and a lot of chicken dishes. We will be very casual. There are no waiters or waitresses, and no tipping is needed," Zerillo said. "If you want to stay and eat, you can go grab a table and we'll call your name when your food is ready. We are very family-friendly. Our reputation in the past has always been a good neighborhood restaurant."

Zerillo retired to Whispering Pines three years ago after owning and operating three New York-style pizza joints and two sports bars in Florida. He decided to start this new local venture because it offered a chance to work with his oldest son, and they're joined by an old friend he described as the "absolute best guy in the pizza business."

"We hope you will feel comfortable here, and we hope you will come back. Our restaurant is the kind

of place where we want to get to know your name," he said. "Our business depends on repeat business. We are very friendly, and I am a firm believer that the customer is always right."

Zerillo said his unique name has already attracted plenty of attention.

"I'll be shopping at Harris Teeter, and if I'm buying something and they see my name, people always ask, 'Are you the guy?'" he laughed. "Everyone wants to know when we're opening."

Unfortunately for hungry folks in the roundabout area, it'll be a few more months wait before the pizza oven is fired up. The restaurant is not set to open until December or January 2017, but Zerillo promises it'll be worth the wait.

"It will be real pizza. New York-style means a thin crust with a really good homemade pizza sauce. This is not something you get out of a can. It'll have some nice herbs on it, and the crust will be just a little on the hard side," he said. "And you can't put a cheap cheese on a good pizza, so cheese is important. We will go with one or two of the top cheeses in the market."

Across N.C. 22, a new business has also been proposed in the Tyler's Ridge development.

A public hearing to consider a new day care facility on Olivetree Lane, adjacent to the new Southern Pines Ace Hardware store, has been continued to November before the Southern Pines Town Council. The undeveloped site was initially approved for three single-family homes, but developer Jim O'Malley said the location is better suited for the early education center he's proposed.

He also anticipates developing land in front of Ace with approved plans already in place for a strip shopping center.

"The center is already designed, and I am waiting for tenants. I will not build it as an empty shell," said O'Malley. "There are lots of restaurants on U.S. 1, but where I am is an entirely different market. The planned new high schools will have a positive effect, and there is also a lot of residential construction going up."

The strip center footprint includes a sit-down

style restaurant on one end with an outside dining patio, and a drive-thru restaurant with a dedicated lane on the other.

"I see great potential for a pharmacy, a freestanding bank building, and more restaurants on the outparcels. The strip center itself could be a mecca for a number of different fast-food type restaurants," O'Malley said.

Limited Options

The limited food options in the area — at least for now — have not escaped the attention of Ace Hardware co-owner Kathy Hooper.

"We decided to invite in food trucks to set up in front of Ace. They have become such a trending dining opportunity, and we felt it was a good way

for local chefs to have a new outlet and place to go. This is a new market for them," she said.

Hooper said she would like to have a different food truck set up out front, five days a week. Local food trucks spotted recently at Ace include Wildfire Pizza, Market Place restaurant, and Southern Pines Dawg Wagon.

"We feel like there are a lot of contractors in the area who stop by the hardware store every day. They want to give their crews a chance to eat. And this also serves regular customers who just want to stop in and have lunch with Ace," Hooper said.

Ace is highly visible and accessible from N.C. 22, but future plans for Tyler's Ridge include a

secondary entrance into the development from Airport Road.

Capital Drive is not yet developed, but O'Malley has in-hand approval for a right-in/right-out intersection on Airport Road from the state's Department of Transportation.

With his recent acquisition of a three-acre adjacent parcel to the commercial section of the development, he said there may be the possibility of creating a full-movement intersection.

Road Could Widen

A suggestion to broaden Airport Road to a four-lane corridor, between N.C. 22 and the Pinehurst Traffic Circle, was included in a list of more than a dozen long-term transportation projects considered

for Moore, Lee, Orange and Chatham counties.

These discussions were part of a two-year prioritization process that helps planners narrow the list of potential projects for the region.

Scoring for each project is based on current traffic conditions, as opposed to future needs, and Airport Road didn't make the cut with scores below the threshold for serious funding consideration.

However, with increasing pressure from new development in the roundabout area in play, the proposals will likely be pulled back on the list for reconsideration down the road.

Contact Laura Douglass at (910) 693-2474 or laura@thepilot.com.



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