

**Des Moines Register**

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Developers hope that the new Mezzodi's restaurant will lead a resurgence

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The Giudicessi family took a chance and placed their latest venture, Mezzodi's, in the sparsely occupied Wakonda shopping area along Des Moines' Fleur Drive.

Since its Dec. 6 opening, the restaurant has consistently drawn large crowds of diners. Co-owner Ron Giudicessi said business has exceeded projections by 30 percent.

The family, which also owns Christopher's restaurant in Beavertdale, has faith in Mezzodi's. They believe the south-side restaurant will soon be at the center of a commercial boom.

"Things are coming full circle, I think, again," said Giudicessi.

The Fleur Gateway Redevelopment Corp. helped make Giudicessi a believer. The group and the Dunbar/Jones Partnership planning firm proposed developing the area as a village center with a bookstore, coffeehouse, ice rink and a movie theater to replace the Fleur 4 theaters that closed in November.

South-side leaders believe Mezzodi's is on the front edge of a commercial resurgence. They will present their growth plan to the Des Moines City Council early this year.

"I think it's pretty exciting to see people focus on creating development along Fleur," said south-side lawyer Tom Ross, who leads the push for redevelopment. "I just think there's a lot of optimism about Fleur Drive right now."

Mezzodi's sits front and center on property on the east side of Fleur Drive, between McKinley and Watrous avenues. Ross and others targeted the area partly because it is often a visitor's first look at Des Moines upon leaving the airport.

Businesses began leaving the Wakonda shopping area about 20 years ago. Target left a glaringly empty building when its store closed in the early 1990s.

"Twenty years ago there was a decision to build SouthRidge instead of build up Wakonda," said Doug Adamson, principal landscape architect with Dunbar/Jones.

Property owner Michael Coppola of Coppola Enterprises, a member of the redevelopment group, had another perspective.

"The south side is a very difficult dynamic to understand," Coppola said. "Because of that, it's easiest for retailers to follow each other. It's a very frightening experience for retailers to think about breaking outside that pattern. It's risky."

In early November, an Earl May garden store left the area. Former store manager Tim Donovan said decreasing sales, a lack of room to expand and poor traffic access led to the decision.

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The latest departure fails to deter the development group. When Target's lease expires this month, Ross said he expects that building will be redeveloped. The area also includes two successful grocery stores -Hy-Vee and Dahl's.

David Sinnwell, executive vice president of Dahl's Foods, said the company bought the building from its landlord last year. The 45,000-square-foot store in the Wakonda shopping area will expand by 4,000 square feet this spring.

"We wanted to stay right where we are," Sinnwell said. "It's a good store."

The village center concept also proposes space for a park, more retail stores, another tower housing development like the Park Fleur complex and a bike trail.

"We've got to find a mix of retail to help stop the tide of people going to West Des Moines or Urbandale for what they need. Once you get that back, you get people thinking about this as a destination point," Adamson said.

Photo\_By: MARY CHIND/REGISTER PHOTOS:

Mezzodi's: Co-owner Ron Giudicessi, right, visits with patrons Bryan Debban, left, and Dwayne McAninch at Mezzodi's restaurant on Fleur Drive. At top, a sign is fastened to the exterior of the restaurant.

Bar area: This is the bar area in Mezzodi's restaurant, which opened on Dec. 6.

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