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Developers make push to add retail to county

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by [Tonyia cone](#)

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Since Austin-Bergstrom International Airport opened in 1999, the population in Bastrop County has exploded, increasing about 20 percent from 2000 to 2006.

That growth isn't going to slow down anytime soon, according to the Roan Report, a 2005 study commissioned by the Bastrop Economic Development Corp. Bastrop County is expected to grow another 16 percent by 2009. Even though the rooftops have arrived, retail has failed to keep up with the growth in recent years, but that's set to change as developers turn their attention to the area.

Austin-based Durhman & Bassett Realty Group Inc., which worked with San Antonio-based grocery chain H.E. Butt Grocery Co. in Bastrop in 2003, has 61 acres under contract at Burleson Crossing, a retail site at the northwest corner of State Highway 71 and County Road 304.

"Retail has not kept up with demand in Bastrop County," says Steve Durhman, president of Durhman & Bassett. "A lot of folks have been looking at Bastrop for a while, and we're trying to help them find a spot to land."

Durhman describes Burleson Crossing as a dynamic retail center that will blend Bastrop's

architectural heritage with landscaping, shading and a trail program that reflect the area's rich natural environment.

"We're trying to keep it from having the sterile feel of being along the freeway," Durhman says.

The development company has talked to many retailers and has not heard any opposition to setting up shop in Bastrop. Those who cannot fit the area into their schedules this year are considering doing so in the near future.

"You can only get so many of these stores in a market in a year," Durhman says. "It's Bastrop's turn. I think the market is strong once you bear it out."

Durhman & Bassett plans to break ground at Burleson Crossing this fall. Some of the stores will open in 2008; the rest will open in 2009.

The BEDC study showed that of all retail categories studied, only demand in the hardware and garden category is being met. While there are plenty of Home Depot, HEB and Super Wal-Mart stores in Bastrop County, many residents leave Bastrop to shop for other everyday items such as clothing, Joe Newman, BEDC president and CEO, says. Additional demand for retail has been created by tourists visiting state parks in the region and the Hyatt Regency Lost Pines Resort and Spa, as well as the more than 40,000 cars that drive through the area on SH 71 every day.

"Retailers and restaurants rely on traffic counts, not just rooftops. There's a lot of leakage," Newman says, adding that the area stands to benefit from the sales tax dollars that more retail will generate. "We try to keep property tax down, so we need retailers in here for revenue stream."

In order to attract retailers to Bastrop County, Newman says a new sewer plant and water well have been built recently.

"We're trying to do what we can to avoid having to do what other cities around Austin had to do," Newman says. "They put a moratorium on building because they weren't ready for it yet. We're working with building permits and developers to make sure it's a win-win for everyone."

Durhman says this type of project hasn't been done before in Bastrop for exactly this reason. It has taken a large enough center, such as Burleson Crossing, to justify the cost of working with the city on infrastructure challenges.

"Somebody needed to go down and work hard at figuring out these issues," Durhman says. "When that happens, other people follow. "

Starting around 1999, Austin, to the west of Bastrop County, saw a boom in both population and retail. While Bastrop County saw a growth in population, the area saw little movement in retail projects. Now that Austin-based Endeavor Real Estate Group LLC has its sights on more than 100 acres for a retail project, the dynamics are finally changing, says Susan Wendel, president and CEO of the Bastrop Chamber of Commerce. "We're excited that developers of the caliber of Simon and Endeavor are looking at us," Wendel says. "That must mean something's happening here."

Indianapolis-based Simon Property Group Inc. previously considered retail development in the area, but abandoned plans for the land in 2005.

In order to attract interest in Bastrop County, Wendel says the Downtown Business Alliance, the city of Bastrop, the chamber and the BEDC do as much as possible to identify businesses' needs, provide answers to those considering moving into Bastrop and refer businesses to area resources, such as suppliers and vendors. This approach encourages new businesses, from small local companies to large national chains, to move into the area and helps existing businesses expand, she says.

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