

NEW FRONTIER HISTORICALLY RURAL OSCEOLA COUNTY IS BUSY PLANTING SEEDS FOR GROWTH THAT CAN BE FOUND IN A VERY DIFFERENT CROP: INDUSTRIAL PARKS.

By Kevin Fritz

AT A GLANCE

Osceola County

Population: 286,331

2010 Projected Population: 340,000

Current Per Capita Income: \$22,360

Square Miles: 1,506

Municipalities: Kissimmee, St. Cloud

County Info: 407.343-2200;

www.osceola.org

Officials are selling the county's natural resources as industrial assets, including 1,322 square miles of land and 184 square miles of water.

Osceola County is on the brink of a new frontier. Previously holding hard to its rural past while explosive growth occurred around it, the once-cattle county of metro Orlando now wants to be a part of that growth. As such, it is beginning to remove its tourist-doorstep persona and replace it with more industry and higher-paying jobs.

"Industrial parks are on the front burner," says Maria (Grulich) Toumazos, director of the Osceola County Department of Economic Development, without hesitation.

And some of the needed space just may be right under her nose.

Toumazos has been speaking with Avatar Properties, the developers of Poinciana and the Poinciana Office and Industrial Park — the largest industrial park in Osceola County — about the possibility of expanding that facility. The industrial park is nearing capacity, and there is land available, with Avatar owning about 47,000 acres straddling the Polk County line.

Tony Iorio, Avatar's vice president of development, affirms he's had preliminary discussions with Toumazos about the possibility of expansion.

"We have adjacent land that could be potentially [used for expansion]," says Iorio, although he stresses that no decisions have been made. He says the land is presently zoned residential, but Avatar's master plan was created to be adaptable. He adds that Avatar will look at job creation, along with industrial and office park options, in making any decisions. "There is flexibility," he says. "We have to be creative in this marketplace."

Indeed, the 1,545-acre Poinciana

Office and Industrial Park is at the center of possible new industry growth, given its size and location as the final planned stop on the current blueprint of the impending commuter rail system. Attracting interest from manufacturing companies could hold the key to success, and already a plastics manufacturer, Norseman Plastics, based in Toronto, Canada, has announced it will lease space at the Poinciana facility and add 38 jobs to the area. Not coincidentally, plastic represents metro Orlando's most commonly manufactured product, according to the Society of the Plastics Industry Inc.

Yet, if Toumazos has her way, there will be several additions to complement that anchor. At present, she is actively looking for other Osceola land tracts to accommodate industrial parks, as well as seeking out private developers as partners on projects.

"It pays for them to do projects here," she notes.

One location for a new industrial park being talked about is on Highway 15, which connects Highway 192 in Osceola County to the Orange County line, where the much-heralded "medical city" is rising at Lake Nona. Toumazos sees the connection between the two counties as an "exciting opportunity." She also knows that location and price play leading roles, saying that everything does not need to be in Lake Nona to support the new medical complex.

"People don't know borders," she asserts. "We can blend into the area, and we need to capture that."

Toumazos says she recently invited site consultants from other states — key

decision makers for companies considering relocation — to visit the county to see what it has to offer. "We usually go visit them," she says, "but this time around, we had the consultants come here. It's good to have them in your own backyard."

That way, according to Toumazos, she can also tout Osceola's natural resources.

"We have land and water," she says. "There are areas that don't have the water or the land." For the record, Osceola County consists of 1,322 square miles of land and 184 square miles of water. Included in those totals is picturesque Lake Tohopekaliga, which covers 18,810 acres and 42 miles. By contrast, neighboring Orange County consists of 1,004 square miles of land and 907 square miles of water.

The county has another asset, too: available labor, which she uses to sell following a review of the county's unemployment numbers. "We have a good labor force available, and that is important," she says, noting that if the unemployment rate is too low, it's hard to show that a sufficient workforce is available to prospective industries.

Toumazos, who is always looking at the positive side of things as she moves forward with her initiatives, appears poised to help Osceola reach its new frontier.

"I focus on what can be done," she says, "and people are out there always looking for opportunities."