

# SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN

## South-side growth spurt: Businesses flock to Airport Road, bringing promise of jobs, revenue

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Sandra Baltazar Martinez On Airport Road, on the city's southwest side, workers are leveling land for Guadalupe Credit Union's new 6,650 square foot bank. Others are setting up the new Dollar General store, which is expected to open soon. And Carlos Garcia, developer with NAI Maestas and Ward, is showing prospective tenants around Esplanade Village, a new commercial building at Paseo del Sol.

"People have been saving a lot of money for the past several years," said Christian Sanchez, a broker with NAI Maestas and Ward in Santa Fe, who along with Garcia, is helping six Latino business owners move into the 8,750-square-foot space at Paseo del Sol (next to AutoZone).

"These are people who are struggling in their current position and want to take that shot of going into business on their own," Sanchez added.

Many new businesses are looking to provide services to the rapidly growing southwest corner of the city -- the most densely populated area of the city, according to 2010 U.S. Census figures.

In the past two years, the city has issued 58 business licenses to operate off Airport Road, according to David Tapia, project specialist with the city's Finance Department. The licenses belong to already established business owners or those who will start operations soon, Tapia said. And between January 2011 and April 12, 2012, the Land Use Department approved eight commercial permits, all for Airport Road, the director, Matthew O'Reilly, said. The permits are for new construction, remodels or additions.

According to the Southwest Area Planning Initiative, a city study, over the next 10 to 15 years the southwest side of town could add 3,000 to 5,000 new jobs.

Among the new south-side businesses is Anytime Fitness, a 24-hour gym that opened on Airport Road in October. Further west, Family Dollar, AutoZone and Walgreens also opened within the past year. Latinos Unidos mini market moved into an existing space about a year ago.

The 7-acre Esplanade Village already has six tenants, including two Mexican restaurants, a hair salon and a mini market. All six businesses expect to open by summer. Managing partner David Johnson said Esplanade Village LLC is starting to plan a 15,000- to 16,000-square-foot building and is talking to a national retail store about moving in. Johnson said the company's tenants might include a medical office and a national fast-food restaurant in either the second or third phase of the development.

"There's lots of residential housing in this area ... and it's neighborhood friendly," said Johnson, explaining why he decided to start building on the land his family has owned since the 1970s.

Carlos Garcia, Esplanade Village developer, said the commercial subdivision has the potential to bring in about 300 new jobs.

By June, Marylin Martin and her husband, Jorge Romero, hope to open Sabor de Vida. The couple had been searching for space for a sit-down restaurant for two years. It wasn't until they saw the growth on the southwest side, particularly Airport Road, that they decided Esplanade Village would be the perfect location.

Jorge Romero and his brother, Javier Romero, both natives of Chiapas, Mexico, will be the chefs. They've worked in several Santa Fe restaurants and together have 28 years of cooking experience. This will be the family's first business. "We want to bring southern Mexico's flavors," Jorge Romero said.

"What Chiapas has is flavor," added Javier Romero. "We are going to have specialty items such as *cochinita pibil*. It's pork meat, marinated in achiote sauce, scallions and wrapped in banana leaves."

The family expects to have a total of seven employees and be open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

"It's exciting to start something you can call your own," Jorge Romero said. "I've always worked for someone else, I've always had a boss and now I'm going to be the boss and it feels strange."

Also opening in Esplanade Village in June is Gordita's Restaurant. Luis Chávez, owner of LCH Construction LLC, said it will primarily be operated by his wife, Mónica Montes. This will be their first restaurant, as well. Chávez said he wants to invest in a different type of business because in an economic downturn he doesn't always have construction jobs.

"We're going to have corn and flour gorditas, fajitas, hand-made corn and flour tortillas and Mexican hamburgers," Chávez said. He explained that gorditas are thick tortillas, stuffed with different types of meats and Mexican hamburgers are handmade meat patties with a slice of ham on top.

Chávez said he chose to open a business off Airport Road because "this area is where commerce is growing. Plus, this is where [Latinos] live, but I hope Anglos also come to enjoy our food."

Once the restaurant is in full operation, Chávez will have four job openings.

Another sign of south-side growth is that a group of 17 established Latino business owners is organizing the Asociación de Comerciantes del Sur-South Side Merchant's Association. The bilingual business association is a few steps away from applying for a nonprofit status. The group has a governing board, made up of both Spanish and English speakers, and is working to boost its membership. It has invited Capital High School students who are part of the Distributive Education Clubs of America business class to build their website.

La Cienega resident Mike Luna, said he's glad to see new businesses, like AutoZone, on the south side.

"It's closer to where I live, I just come on Highway 599," said Luna, a retired Army staff sergeant. "This way I don't have to go all the way into town, it's closer and there's better customer service here."

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