

Halfway to Omaha?

ADEL BRUSHES ASIDE REMOTE REPUTATION, LOOKS TO GROW

BY PERRY BEEMAN



Adel is eyeing a 1,000-acre annexation to the south of town for mixed development.

PHOTO BY DUANE TINKEY

WHY TAX ABATEMENT?

Adel City Administrator Anthony Brown said that as Iowa struggled in 2001 to come back from recession, “things really just weren’t picking up here in Adel.” There were 70 buildable lots and maybe two developers in town, he said. “The council and business community came together to say, ‘What can we do to jump-start this?’ We were only seeing a handful of homes each year,” Brown said. “Three homes. Five homes. Whereas before, in 2004-05, we had 12 or 15, sometimes 20 a year.”

The 100 percent residential tax abatement brought 400 homes — 140 in 2016 alone.

The bump in population in turn has drawn some new commercial development — a restaurant or two, a new branch bank building “Those housetops draw commercial,” said Deb Bengtson, director of Adel Partners Chamber of Commerce.

The tax abatement runs through 2025 after a series of extensions. It is a seven-year, 100 percent abatement for new homes. Renovations that bump up the assessment by 15 percent or more qualify on the increased value.

“We’re beginning to see people do some renovations and maybe some fix-ups, which is real plus, said Bengtson.

Adel’s strategic tax abatement play has coaxed area developers to build hundreds of homes in the picturesque, riverside community in Dallas County the past few years.

There’s talk of a 1,000-acre annexation to the south for mixed development. A new private events center for 300 is planned. A new aquatic center opened in 2013. New soccer fields and ball diamonds are in some long-range plans. Heck, voters even approved a 130-bed, \$22.9 million jail and sheriff’s offices recently, so even the criminals will have new lodging.

City Administrator Anthony Brown said the city has developed new strategic plans to guide development, zoning and parks improvements in the next few decades. The town square, anchored by one of the state’s most beautiful courthouses, got a face-lift as the city put together a facade project using federal grants, city money and cash from the businesses themselves. Architects made sure it was all in keeping with the historic nature of the square, which is surrounded by cobblestone roads.



Adel put together a \$1 million public-private project to update facades on the town square.

PHOTO BY DUANE TINKEY

A big question: How fast will Adel grow? It's farther from Des Moines than Waukee, one of the state's fastest growing cities, and still has a small-town feel. But it's only a short jaunt from the western edge of the Des Moines suburbs to Adel.

A controversy is brewing over the city's planned 1,000-acre annexation south of town. Brown says the development could take 15 or 20 years, but residents see graders and stakes in the area already and have launched a petition drive to stop the move. Some posters on "Adel, Iowa Rant and Rave," a closed Facebook group, support the development and added tax base. Others say the city isn't adequately controlling growth, or the potential for it.

Deb Bengtson, director of Adel Partners Chamber of Commerce, said the image of Adel as being far out of Greater Des Moines has faded as Waukee and other Des Moines suburbs have marched west. Now families are coming to town because they like the quiet, the schools, sports teams that give many local students a chance to play.

Brown said the potential annexation of 1,000 acres on the south side — at the request of a half-dozen or so property owners — has prompted a lot of community discussion. Most likely the area would be housing, with perhaps some commercial. But Brown said it would be a 15- to 20-year build-out, given the fact that just two housing developments have come into an area on the east side annexed in 2007.

"The events center is going out there, and maybe one or two other businesses, but it hasn't exploded," he said. "When you hear 1,000 acres (on the south side), you might think, 'Oh my gosh, that's more every-

thing,' and some people like that and some people really don't like that. If we don't annex, we have eight or nine property owners asking to come in with all this land, and if we wait, maybe those landowners sell and subdivide and then you are dealing 25 or 50 property owners" and a more difficult annexation, he added.

In that scenario, the city would have passed up a chance to control the development, he said.

"It's been a healthy discussion at the City Council and in the community," Brown said. "It's been a large process."

Adel's population stood at 3,682 in 2010. Brown said it now stands at about 4,200.

Bengtson said attendance had been flat or declining in the schools before the city decided to offer tax abatement. "The city felt they needed a jump-start and to get people thinking about Adel," she said. It used to be people thought Adel was a million miles from Des Moines, and now maybe it is 25 minutes. Waukee has grown out, West Des Moines has grown out. You don't feel like there is that big gap."

Yet Adel is still a commuter town. Bengtson said 66 percent of Adel residents work outside the city, mostly in West West Des Moines, Clive, Urbandale and downtown Des Moines.

Brown said residents often tell him the schools were a main draw when they moved to town.

Bengtson agreed: "It's one of the highest rated districts in the state. Great graduation rate." Another plus: small class sizes. "People love that."

“ We’re beginning to see people do some renovations and maybe some fix-ups, which is real plus.”

Deb Bengtson, *director, Adel Partners Chamber of Commerce*

In addition, Brown noted, many families thought the small town would mean their children would have a better experience on sports teams.

The town square makeover came when the city took \$500,000 in block grant money, pitched in \$250,000 from city coffers and raised another \$250,000 from property owners. The fund paid for new facades on a handful of buildings.

The momentum continues. The events center is going up. Lincoln Savings Bank has a new building at the main highway intersection in town. Dental Dental is building a new place. Another firm is looking to rehab a downtown building with a restaurant on the first floor, offices on the second and loft apartments on the top.

The city has worked with the Iowa Department of Transportation, Iowa State University and Trees Forever on transportation, trails and parks plans. ■



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HAVE AN IDEA OR TIP?

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