

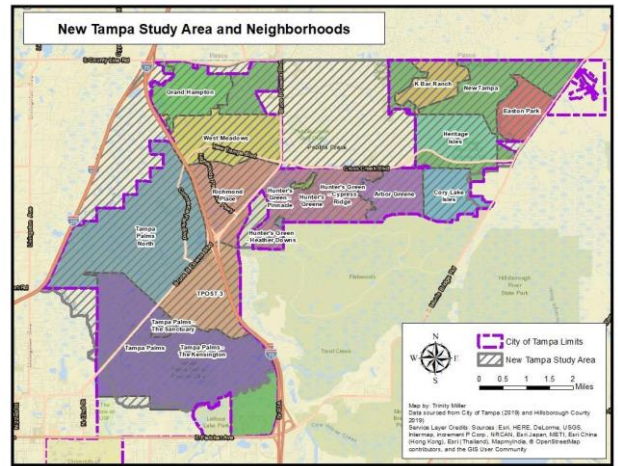
MARCH 27, 2020

Is New Tampa Losing Businesses? SPA Team Investigates

By Samuel Becker, USF MURP Student

New Tampa, the area northeast of USF, was largely undeveloped until it was annexed into the City of Tampa in the 1980's. Since then, it has seen rapid housing growth accompanied by commercial development, largely along the Bruce B. Downs corridor. But residents, and some community leaders, have been concerned that the commercial life of the community is not as robust as it could be. Moreover, some believed that new developments in Wesley Chapel, north of the county line, were drawing shoppers away from New Tampa.

City of Tampa Mayor Jane Castor and Councilmember Luis Viera invited the USF School of Public Affairs, led by MURP student Samuel "Sam" Becker and MURP Program Director Dr. Mark Hafen, to help shed some light on this issue. Our SPA team undertook a mixed-method research project to better understand the community and its commercial life. We reviewed planning documents; used federal census employment data to study local employment patterns; and researched (and mapped) retail establishments along Bruce B. Downs to assess openings and closings.



We also talked to many members of the New Tampa community face-to-face. These conversations took place in interviews, as well as town-hall type meetings focused on the local business climate. A recent meeting, where we presented preliminary findings, is discussed in this [Tampa Bay Times article](#).

Many residents and business stakeholders expressed concern about retail closings in the area, but our research actually uncovered some good news. Although 57 New Tampa businesses had closed since 2015, 94 new businesses had opened, a sign that the area has some underlying strengths. Why, then, are there concerns? We

suspect that the visual impact of empty stores, especially big-box stores, along the highly visible Bruce B. Downs Blvd. leaves a strong impression, even if new businesses are opening elsewhere.

Those with whom we spoke to have also expressed a desire for New Tampa to have more of a local identity moving forward. Perhaps, some have remarked, the community should worry less about competing with Wesley Chapel for big-box retail chains, and think more about attracting local retailers that would help this rather sprawling community develop a stronger sense of place.

Among other things, our team recommended forming a local Business Retention and Expansion Committee to create a small business comprehensive plan, considering state-of-the-art "placemaking" initiatives like New Tampa-specific signage and slogans to give the community a better sense of identity, and organizing centrally-located community gatherings and events to bring residents together. Working with our MPA counterparts, our MURP students have also developed a New Tampa Community Preferences Survey to gather even more citizen and business input.

We're proud of this project because we think that we've been able to contribute to an important community conversation. We spend our classroom time learning how to conduct research and use the results to address real-world problems, and here is a perfect example of how we can undertake projects that contribute to our training, while at the same time making a difference across Tampa Bay. We are glad that Mayor Castor and Councilmember Viera came calling when they wanted to know more about New Tampa's retail corridor and we look forward to working with our elected officials on future projects!

