

# Commercial Development

## Decatur's commercial projects assist city's diversification

By KERRY L. SMITH

DECATUR - The city and major developers recognize 1998 as the beginning of a successful transition from a largely manufacturing-based city to a more diversified economy.

Mayor Terry Howley, a Decatur native and city head since 1995, said the evolution from mainly blue collar to significantly white collar is easily seen by tracking the success of local commercial development the past 24 to 30 months.

"A lot of what we've seen in Decatur is a positive byproduct of the strong national economy," Howley said. "Probably for the first time in history, Decatur has more white collar workers than blue collar workers."

Archer Daniels Midland's expansion of one of its three processing plants is expected to create up to 150 new jobs, most of them professional positions, over the next several months.

Howley said the corn and bean processing giant, whose national corporate headquarters is in Decatur, has brought a sizable number of research and commodities trading jobs to the city.

"Decatur's economy is definitely more diversified than it was five and 10 years ago," Howley said. "Our goal is to continue to diversify, to keep what we have now and add those pieces we don't yet have."

What Decatur is lacking, Howley said, is a complete interstate system. Although Interstate 72 goes through Decatur, east to Champaign and west to Springfield, the city's economic development commission is aggressively advocating the widening of U.S. Route 51 from two to four lanes south to Centralia.

The city is closely watching who will buy TWA.

"If the deal goes to American Airlines, we may lose our commercial service to Decatur," Howley said. "TWA is the only commercial airline service we have."

Dredging Lake Decatur to increase its current capacity is a 10-year, long-awaited project that Howley said will begin this year.

"When the lake was built in 1920, its depth was eight to 10 feet, and now it's only two to four feet deep," he said. "Lake Decatur has not been dredged since it was created, and it's a major concern."

There is a lot of lost capacity that we want to recapture so our city can continue to grow."

ADM and A.E. Staley, Decatur's other huge bean processing company, together use the daily water equivalent that 100,000 residential users consume, Howley said.

"We're in the process of completing the sale of one of the city's two water treatment plants to ADM for \$20 million, and we're extremely pleased," he said.

Many commercial development success stories across Decatur are attributable to Cardwell Development Corporation. CEO John Cardwell said the enthusiastic progress his company

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**Terry Howley**  
Decatur mayor

has achieved since 1998 is a sign that Decatur has indeed recovered from its mid-1990s recession that cost the city more than 10,000 jobs; several strikes at Caterpillar, Firestone and other manufacturers spurred the downturn, he said.

"Nineteen ninety-eight was the year it all turned around in Decatur," Cardwell said. "You get a big footprint like a Super Wal-Mart, a Walgreen's and a Circuit City to come in, and that stimulates the ankle-biters — the development of additional retail centers."

Cardwell and partner James Randall practice their company's theme that "vision is diversity." Their commercial development successes include two Super Wal-Marts in Decatur, one that opened in 1998 and one in 2000, two stand-alone Walgreen's sites in 2000 and adjacent retail centers.

"Best Buy is taking a bite at us," Cardwell said. "We're still locating a site for them."

Decatur's old retail area has undergone a major facelift, thanks to Cardwell Development. In 1998, the ancient Northgate Shopping Center underwent a \$4 million renovation. The area now boasts four office complexes holding an array of stockbrokers and insurance specialists, Cardwell said. Schnuck's, K's Merchandising Mart and Office Max have also moved into this section of Decatur, at Pershing Road and U.S. Route 51.

"The most exciting story we tell is the renovation of Decatur's downtown and west side," Cardwell said. "The city purchased the old Sears building and we worked to convert it into what is now the Decatur Public Library."

The former Sears Automotive Center is another Cardwell project and now exists as a nine-story shopping mall with a second-floor professional office complex.

One Main Place is an 1850s hotel reconfigured three years ago into 60,000 square feet of retail and office space.

Cardwell Development's \$3.5 million renovation of the 380,000-square-foot Fairview Park Plaza on Decatur's west side will be completed in June.

The development is recording an increase in its occupancy rate from 50 percent to 90 percent.

"We're really encouraged and optimistic about the future of development in Decatur by what we're seeing today," Cardwell said.