

One business and building renovation at a time: Second Street corridor hub for economic development

wydaily.com/business/2018/12/15/one-business-and-building-renovation-at-a-time-second-street-corridor-hub-for-economic-development

December 14, 2018



More than six years after Shorty's Diner opened on Merrimac Trail, Second Street and Merrimac Trail have become a popular section of town. (WYDaily/Sarah Fearing)

When Gil Short opened his retro silver, 1950s-style restaurant on Merrimac Trail in November 2012, the area was quiet and off the beaten path.

But Shorty's Diner, a family-run business named after a restaurant owned by Short's father, still thrived. Locals and tourists alike will sometimes travel more than 60 miles off course to visit the restaurant, Short said.

"People would ask me 'Why are you doing it on this side of town? Why on this side of the tracks?'" Short said Wednesday. "It's been great since."

Today, more than six years later, many other restaurants and businesses have joined Shorty's along the Second Street-Merrimac Trail corridor, morphing the area into a bustling, upcoming part of town.

"It's difficult to answer precisely" when the corridor began to grow, but it's been an ongoing process, York County Economic Development Director Jim Noel said.

The Second Street corridor has been targeted by local government for economic growth since at least 2014.

In recent years, old, unused buildings have been renovated and reoccupied with popular new destinations like breweries and specialty restaurants. Retail, like the Shops at Second Street, has also been added to the area.

“The owners of Casa Pearl ... they took a vacant building, a gas station nobody could seem to make work,” Noel said. “To take on the renovation of an old gas station is tough as it is. But starting a new restaurant on top of it – it’s pretty bold.”

Landing on Second Street and Merrimac Trail

Setting up shop in a less-popular area of town didn’t scare Short.

“I was always a pretty aggressive guy,” Short said. “I’m not afraid of a lot of things.”



Gil Short and his son, Tony Short, pose for a photo at Shorty's Diner, a family business in an up-and-coming area of Greater Williamsburg. (WYDaily/Sarah Fearing)

While searching for a building, Short had difficulties finding a locality that would accept his plans for a vintage silver facade and particular signage.

Shorty's finally found a home in a small sliver of York County in front of the James-York Plaza.

“He’s been a real leader in trying to revitalize that corridor,” Noel said.

The owners of Virginia Beer Co., which opened in 2016, also spent considerable time searching for the right building, passing on a Richmond Road location before settling on 401 Second St.

Unique in its geography, the Second Street-Merrimac Trail corridor spans Williamsburg, York County and James City County in less than a mile.

For Noel, that could mean inter-locality collaboration for economic development in the future.

“I think this is only the tip of the iceberg for what’s going to happen,” Short said.



The site of Virginia Beer Co. in 2014, before renovations for a taproom, outdoor patio and craft brewery operation.
(WYDaily/File photo)

Being unique

Second Street and Merrimac Trail are also set apart from some other areas because of their industrial and aged character.

“In York County, we don’t have much of that,” Noel said. “Those buildings have appeal.”

Craft breweries, small businesses and specialty retail stores also add to the culture of the area, giving it a “cool vibe.”

“It’s a double-bang,” Noel said. “It adds to the foodie and experimental retail, and it’s also great for our locals.”

Editor's note: In full disclosure, Gil Short, owner of Shorty's Diner, is the stepfather of Local Voice sales representative Bonny Markwith.

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