

'Fort Vegas' sees renewal

Bistro, gym and retail spaces are replacing poker parlors and brothel

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FORT MILL TOWNSHIP — The video poker machines are gone and new businesses are popping up around the area once called Fort Vegas.

"That's kind of the entrance to Fort Mill for people going home from Pineville (N.C.) or the exit for people going from home to Pineville," Zeke Samples said.

Samples opened SBS Surreal Body Solutions, a personal training gym, in one of the former video poker parlors on Hwy 51 in February. Before he opened SBS, an Internet gaming cafe operated out of the former video poker parlor. That business was shut down after a series of raids on similar businesses around the county that confiscated computers and other allegedly illegal machines in 2006.

"A lot of independent business people are doing their part," Samples said.

He said York County needs to step in and do some things to help change the look and feel of the area.

"The general sense of the area is that it's all industrial businesses here on my street," Samples said. "But now we're starting to pull in a lot of non industrial businesses."

He points to Narrowway Productions and Randy's Computers along nearby Hwy. 21 and Passion8 Bistro opening across the street from SBS. And less than a mile down Hwy. 21 Food Lion is about to open one of its Bloom grocery stores near Regent Park.

Samples would like to see road signage directing people towards Regent Park and Fort Mill on Hwy. 51, and road improvements such as a median.

"Right now, people just drive by and there's nothing to really attract their attention to the businesses here," he said.

Some of that obviously falls on the building owners themselves, and Samples is planning to repaint his building and remove the striped fabric balloons still attached to the front corners of the building. He also plans to install more plants around the exterior. But, he said, area business owners need the county's help to really turn the area around.

Across Hwy. 51, Jessica and Luca Annunziata are preparing to open Passion8 Bistro in another former video poker parlor. The couple plans to open this week, Jessica Annunziata said.

"We're excited because we spent a lot of time and effort making it into what it is now," she said.

The Annunzias have lived on the North Carolina side of Carowinds Boulevard for the last two years, and were happy to find the building available earlier this year. The couple basically tore everything out of the building and rebuilt the inside from the ground up.

Before they moved in, the building housed the A & K Diner. Before that, it was used as a brothel. Annunziata is looking forward to resurrecting the building as a first-class restaurant.

"We realized there weren't any nice places to eat that weren't chains," she said.

Passion8 Bistro will feature a full tapas menu, a bar, and lots of fresh pasta dishes. Luca Annunziata, the chef, worked for "Good Housekeeping" creating recipes. He has cooked all over the world on cruise ships and was the personal chef of Tim and Nina Zagat, founders of the Zagat Survey,



PHOTO COURTESY OF JESSICA ANNUNZIATA

Luca and Jessica Annunziata are looking forward to opening Passion8 Bistro on Hwy. 51 after spending several months renovating the building that formerly held A&K Diner, an illegal brothel and a video poker parlor.

a rating survey of restaurants, Jessica said.

"We named it 'Passion8' because everyone Luca cooks for always says he's so passionate about it and the number eight is also the symbol for infinity," Jessica Annunziata said. "If you're always passionate about what you do, that's the path to joy."

Back at the corner of Hwy. 21 and Hwy. 51, Rally's Biker Leathers and Accessories has recently expanded and added more merchandise. The store originally opened in the Carousel Center in November 2006. In July, it moved into a larger space in the center.

"We started really small and felt our way through the dealer networks and have been adding vendors constantly," co-owner Mike Fratus said. "The development of this area will help us in that more people will see where we are."

Fratus and his four partners started Rally's as an alternative to higher priced motorcycle dealer based distribution networks. The store carries everything from leather clothes to helmets to bike accessories

to jewelry. Rally's serves a well defined niche market and Fratus said the best way to reach it is to show up at every biker event and charity ride in the area.

Fratus was one of the motorcycle riders who escorted the U.S. Capitol painting to Main Street for the recent Art on Main event. And the shop is sponsoring two upcoming charity rides, one called Ride 2 Read to raise money for the Rock Hill School District, and another to raise money for the family of Ryan Donkersgoed, who was killed in a traffic accident in July.

The shop has a highly visible location as thousands of people pass by every day on Hwy. 21/Carowinds Boulevard. And even though the biker community is a niche market, it is made up of people from all walks of life.

"It's everyone from doctors and lawyers to the guy that just walked out of prison two days ago," Fratus said. "The motorcycle community is not only the most giving community, they're the most dedicated people you'd ever want to meet, Society's perception of bikers is way off base."