

Fastest-growing community

One could 'make a killing with a pet store' in Los Lunas

BY DENNIS DOMRZALSKI | NMBW STAFF

Ralph Mims needs a few good restaurants – preferably Italian – a pet store, a bakery and even a funeral home.

Mims so badly wants a restaurant that he often walks into independently-owned eateries in Albuquerque and talks with them about his needs. The owners seem a bit surprised at first, but after they realize that Mims is the economic development director of the Village of Los Lunas south of Albuquerque, and that he wants them to open a restaurant in the village, they relax and listen.

"I knock on doors. I have a marketing package, and I tell them why Los Lunas is such a great place and why they should locate here," Mims says.

Los Lunas, 20 minutes south of Albuquerque on Interstate 25, has been the fastest-growing community in New Mexico for the past 40 years, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Between 2000 and 2010, the village's population increased by 47.8 percent, to 14,835 from 10,034.

With that increased population comes business opportunities, and Mims is on the hunt for firms that are looking to expand. He likes small businesses and restaurants.

"We have fast food, Mexican restaurants and Chili's, but we need more variety," says Mims, who started his job a year ago, after working for 15 years for the city of Albuquerque. "We could use an Italian restaurant, or a seafood place. We don't have a clothing store here, or a pet store. You'd make a killing with a pet store in Los Lunas."

"One of my strategies is to go to restaurants in Albuquerque to see if they want to expand. If they do, I tell them that opportunities are great in Los Lunas. Our permitting process is cleaner and faster than it is in Albuquerque. A building permit takes three weeks. The infrastructure is already in, so it's easy."

Mims likes the local, independent restaurants because their earnings stay in the state and because they're easier to attract than the big chains. He says one chain restaurant told him it needed a minimum of 150,000 residents to locate in a community.

In the early 2000s, Los Lunas boomed



RANDY SINER | NMBW

Los Lunas Economic Development Director Ralph Mims visits a strip mall in the village. Mims says his town needs more restaurants, a bakery, a pet store and even a funeral home. Los Lunas is the fastest growing community in N.M.

as inexpensive land and lower impact fees made homes less costly to build than in Albuquerque. With that population growth came commercial growth as retail and food outlets began to line N.M. Hwy. 6, which is the village's main street.

"We're probably the only community in America that has a Home Depot and Lowe's right next to each other," Mims adds.

The village, which is home to a large Walmart distribution center, is also looking for manufacturers. One of its biggest manufacturers, cabinet maker Merillat Industries, which employed nearly 300, recently idled its plant.

Mims says the village has put roads, sewage and water infrastructure in place in industrial parks west of I-25. Those projects have been paid for, so it won't cost new businesses more in terms of impact fees, he adds.

Village Manager Peter Fernandez says the town recently completed a \$16 million wastewater treatment plant and a \$6 million facility to remove arsenic from drink-

ing water. The village has finished a transportation study that identified the need for a second highway interchange off I-25 for access to the town.

"We have the right of way for it about two miles south of the existing interchange. We do not have the construction monies as of this date," Fernandez adds.

Los Lunas' growth has been good for Joell Torres and her family, which has owned Teofilo's Mexican Restaurant on Main Street for 25 years. In January 2009, the family purchased the historic Luna Mansion and spent six months returning it to its former glory as a fine dining establishment.

"Twenty-five years ago, Los Lunas was small and pretty quiet. There was one middle school and one high school. Now we've got two each," Torres says. "As the village has grown, it has become more diverse and we've seen the influx of a lot of chains, but competition is good."

While business at both restaurants has been off in recent years, it's still enough to

Los Lunas stats

Population, 2010	14,835
Population, 2000	10,034
Percent change	47.8 %
Housing units	5,916
Homeownership rate	72.8 %
Median home value	\$126,800
Median household income	\$43,108
Total no. of companies	994
Retail sales	\$318 million
Retail sales per capita	\$23,705
Accommodation and food service sales	\$38 million
Size (square miles)	14.6

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

keep them profitable, Torres says, adding that the two businesses complement each other.

Much of Los Lunas' boom occurred before 2007 and the economy's financial collapse and subsequent recession. The past five years have been slow, Fernandez says.

"Five years ago, we were issuing close to 450 building permits a year. This year, we'll be lucky if we issue 50," Fernandez explains, adding that the vast majority of those permits were for residential units. "Even in our biggest year, [fewer] than a half dozen of those [building permits] were for commercial projects."

Mims says he's waiting to secure commitments from developers for three strip shopping centers close to I-25. First Choice Healthcare Center is building an \$8 million medical center in the village, and a bank has committed to opening a branch there in 2012. The Public Service Co. of New Mexico operates a 50-acre solar electric generating plant in the village, as well.

Mims thinks there's a great opportunity for someone to build a travel center/truck stop near I-25.

"With Walmart, Home Depot and Lowe's, we have 300 trucks a day coming through town. It's a perfect place for a travel center," Mims observes.

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Can't make this date? The next Information Session will be Wednesday, December 14 at the Hyatt Regency Albuquerque from 11:30 am – 1:30 pm for a lunchtime walk-in session.