

A Center of Growth

Growth is More than Big Business in Huntley



A gazebo has sat in this spot in Huntley's town square since the late 1800's. This gazebo, built in 1994, is also featured in the village's logo and houses Huntley's Sesquicentennial time capsule, which was buried here in 2001. The gazebo also serves as an unofficial symbol to Huntley's dedication to preserving its small town charm, despite incredible growth over the past three decades.

By Chris Linden, executive editor

Chuck Ruth remembers when Huntley was truly a small town. It's the place where his grandfather attended a one-room schoolhouse and dropped out in the eighth grade and drove the village school bus. It's the town where his mother was in a class of 23, where he was in a class of 32, and his children were in a class of less than 100. He remembers when the city had maybe 500 people.

How times have changed. Today, Huntley boasts a population of nearly 30,000 people and a high school graduating class of 710. It's one of the fastest-growing communities in Illinois and an epicenter of business growth. It has retirement communities, shopping centers, a rising downtown district and huge warehouses, including an Amazon fulfillment center.

While Huntley has changed much in 30 years, what it hasn't lost is that small-town charm that encourages people to live, work and play here. Combine that hometown feel with the right location and strong assets, and you have a formula that makes this a continued epicenter of growth.

"I'm very proud of the job the city fathers have done in the growth arena, with a TIF district and controlled growth and a

proper mix of tax base to continue supporting the town," says Ruth, who owns several area businesses and has been active with his local Chamber of Commerce. "That can be said for the school district, the park district and the fire district as well. All have done a tremendous job of staying ahead of growth and doing the right things."

A Good Mix

The past three decades have been a boom time for this community set on the boundary of McHenry and Kane counties. First, the population doubled from 1990 to 2000. Then, it almost quadrupled in the rapid homebuilding of the early and mid-2000s, before the national housing market collapsed. Over the past 12 years, the village has grown another 14%, and estimates by the Chicago Metropolitan



Lisa Armour



Huntley's location and rapid growth has led to a number of commercial, residential and industrial ventures, including an Amazon fulfillment centre and Del Webb's Sun City, a high end retirement community.

Agency for Planning suggest the village could sit at 41,000 residents by 2050.

These days, the village is endowed with an attractive mixture for new residents and business leaders alike, says Lisa Armour, deputy village manager. "There's a good mix of housing opportunities that are available for people in Huntley, and that goes from traditional single-family to townhouses to the age-related Sun City development that targets active adults."

It's not just the rapid growth that's catching the attention of site selectors and entrepreneurs. Village estimates show there are nearly 101,379 people who live within 5 miles of Village Hall, and those people have an average household income of \$121,242. That's roughly double the national median and higher than the median of either McHenry County (\$93,801) or Kane County (\$88,935).

Armour also finds other advantages, such as a lower cost of living and doing business, and prime access to assets such as schools, health care and recreation.

There's another, much bigger advantage that Melissa Stocker hears frequently when she's connecting with businesses. For the village's director of economic development and marketing and recruitment specialist, it's all about location, location, location. Not only does Huntley have an abundance of available land, but the village conveniently sits between Rockford and O'Hare International Airport, with an interchange at Interstate 90 that makes it easy for goods and people to flow through town.



Melissa Stocker

"It makes it convenient for businesses that are trying to go in any direction, and there's less congestion than you might find in the city," Stocker says. "There's a lot of space to build, so there's readily available sites and there's an educated workforce. There are a lot of positives here."

Last year was a busy time for the village, as it approved commercial and industrial projects totaling some 1.63 million square feet and at least \$200 million.

The lion's share encompasses Huntley's biggest project ever: online giant Amazon's 1.1 million-square-foot fulfillment center just off I-90.

"The developer, Venture One, had a really good experience with the first project and moved through the Village's approval process very quickly," says Armour. They worked well with us and they liked this area, so they're now finishing up another 730,000 square-foot building on the west side of Illinois Route 47."

The Heart of Huntley

For all the impact of those industrial properties, there's also a thriving retail scene, and it's one that's growing as more national chains fill in the fields along Ill. Rt. 47.

Perhaps the real story, though, lies in the strength of locally owned businesses, says Nancy Binger, executive director of the Huntley Area Chamber of Commerce.

"Huntley is pretty unique in how many small businesses we have," she adds. "We're starting to scratch the surface on the more



The past year has seen several ribbon cuttings for new local businesses in Huntley, including P-Dub's Pet Hub.



The Village of Huntley has invested \$10 million in its downtown square, a charming setting that features local shops and restaurants and hosts the farmer's markets, concerts and events throughout the year.

nationally known chains. We can feel that coming a little more. But it's still a lot of small businesses.”

Over the past year, Binger has hosted at least 11 ribbon cuttings, many of them small and niche businesses like Morfoot Family Eye Care or P-Dub's Pet Hub, which specializes in high-end pet food and supplies.

Nowhere is the strength of local small business more apparent than in the village's downtown square, which has been the subject of a 10-year, multimillion-dollar plan by the Village to ensure its continued success.

Binger considers it a “Hallmark movie” setting that's created an idyllic place for people to gather, to dine, to shop and to enjoy the sort of community-minded events the Village and the Chamber deliver. The inaugural Cocoa Crawl last December brought together nearly 50 businesses and an estimated 1,800 people. Ice sculptures decorated the square, commemorative mugs sold out, and one couple got engaged beneath the town square gazebo.



Nancy Binger

“It shows me that Huntley is ready to have events like that in our community,” says Binger. “Our residents don't want to drive to Geneva and Crystal Lake and beyond

anymore. They want to have things in Huntley and they want to enjoy their town's own big events.”

Meanwhile, Village-sponsored weekly farmers markets fill the street every Saturday from May through October, and Tuesday-evening concerts draw crowds throughout the summer, drawing as many as 4,000 people. Events like the Chamber's Easter Egg scavenger hunt or the Pizzas, Puzzles and Pitchers event provide additional incentive for people to see what's new.



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The Cornell, a 37-apartment building, will be built just south of Main Street by True North Properties. The building shares the name with a former milk condensing factory that once sat on the property.

“If you were downtown in 2013 it would have looked much different than it does today,” says Armour, who’s been with the village for 17 years. “There was parking on both sides of Main Street. That was reconfigured. We laid brick pavers and made streetscape improvements along Main Street and expanded the square a bit to allow for a sidewalk on the south side of the square that had not been there before.”

Those improvements – including the removal of aging trees and the addition of a veterans memorial in 2016 – came as the result of a revitalization plan the village launched in 2010. At that time, the village had the “bones” of a quintessential downtown but it lacked the aesthetics and draw of more-developed communities, says Armour. The village has spent about \$12 million in infrastructure and parking improvements and made another \$260,000 available through a façade improvement grant, leading to an additional \$836,000 in private investment.

“Oftentimes it takes the municipality to be the first one out spending money,” says Armour. “That got those private businesses saying, ‘Hey, we need to improve the looks of our buildings, too, and there’s a program the village is offering that will help.’ Everybody’s pride in their properties increased through those investments.”

Further incentive comes from the downtown Tax Increment Finance District (TIF), a mechanism that freezes property taxes in an area to spur additional development. The TIF has spurred several developments downtown, including the arrival of two new apartment complexes.

Developer True North Properties Inc. is building 37 apartment units at The Cornell, a name inspired by the former milk condensing factory at this property south of Main Street. The Village bought the building in 2017, remediated and sold it to the developer in 2022.

One block north of Main Street, developers are transforming the former firehouse into a four-story building with 18 apartments

and ground-floor retail. Local burger restaurant D.C. Cobb’s is expected to fill the space this fall.

Meanwhile, the Village is also in talks with a developer to redevelop the former Village Hall at the northeast corner of the square.

“You see the building going up higher and now it’s making our little town look bigger and a little more city-like,” says Binger, who’s lived in the area for 15 years. “It can be shocking, but we’re growing, and I think we’re ready for it.”

Barb Lincoln’s family is fully bought in to the excitement. Her family owns Lincoln Farmstead, a barn-based wedding venue on Ill. Rt. 47, and they’re preparing to open the

Lincoln House & Co. coffee and wine bar downtown this summer. Setting up in an old limestone-faced building on Main Street, the family plans to sell wine, coffee and small bites in a setting that’s warm and inviting. Barb’s daughter, Savannah, will manage the joint with help from her brothers, Chandler and Tanner, as well as Barb and her husband, Chris.

“There aren’t a lot of places in downtown Huntley where you can go with the girlfriends and get a glass of wine and a salad and just hang out in a place that’s not a bar,” says Barb, an interior decorator by trade. “This is everything we love.”

Just to the west, the Village has rented out a vacant lot to build a publicly accessible patio to serve Lincoln House & Co. and other nearby businesses. Barb guesses it’ll also be a new hangout for work-at-home types and the new apartment dwellers.



The Lincoln family, who found success with a wedding venue on Ill. Rt. 47, will be opening a coffee and wine bar in Huntley’s downtown.





Lincoln Farmstead, a wedding venue just north of Huntley, was opened in 2019 by the Lincoln family. Offering a beautiful, rustic retreat for weddings and celebrations, the venue's success has led the Lincolns to pursue other business opportunities in Huntley's downtown.

“That was a huge draw for us, for sure,” she says. “Knowing that there are more than 50 new apartments and a minimum of 50 more people within walking distance – not to mention all the people who live on the streets close by – that’s exciting.”

The Lincoln family has lived in Huntley since 2005 and owned the historic farmstead since 2016. After renovating the property and opening for weekend weddings in 2019, they dreamed of ways to use a vacant shed as an everyday attraction, something to bring in business when there wasn’t a weekend wedding. The dream percolated, until word came last year that the stone building downtown was for sale. Something clicked for the family who used to live two blocks away on Myrtle Street.

“We used to love walking to the farmers market downtown,” Barb says. “Back then there weren’t as many attractions, but now there are new restaurants and everything’s had a facelift. It made it more appealing to walk to town and to go places, and everyone loves that feeling of being on the patio downtown. That’s something we wanted to continue with and expand upon.”

Just across the street, another newcomer is growing on the strength of downtown. LaShanda and Joseph Lewis, got their start selling loose-leaf teas at Huntley’s farmers market. They found the response warm and the people welcoming as they sold loose-leaf teas and tea drinks every Saturday morning. The Pingree Grove residents visited markets around the Chicago area, but something stood out about Huntley.

“We just felt like most of our customer base was here and we were hoping we could find something permanent,” says LaShanda. “At the time we were looking, there wasn’t

a spot here, and then it just so happened that something opened up and we were like, ‘We have to move on it. We’re just going to go all in.’”

Last December, the Lewises opened Irie Cup, where they now sell premium loose-leaf teas with a focus on health benefits. Plenty of familiar faces have walked into the store since its grand opening, and many more have found a place to relax with friends.

“It feels like home, and people are really enjoying the product we have here,” says LaShanda.

What Comes Next

There’s a catch to all of this growth in town: Sometimes, there’s just not enough space. Not that there isn’t available land – there’s still



LaShanda and Joseph Lewis, owners of Irie Cup, in downtown Huntley, started their business selling loose-leaf teas at Huntley’s farmer’s market.

plenty of that – but there’s a keen shortage of unoccupied, built-out spaces.

“We haven’t seen a lot of vacancies, which is amazing. We love that,” says Stocker. “It does, however, make it a little difficult when somebody comes to us and says they’re looking for a pre-existing space they can just move into.”

“If you don’t have that to offer, then there are some companies that won’t even consider your community,” adds Armour. “They’re not interested in building. It’s too costly for them.”

Stocker and Armour finds those to be mere growing pains, small inconveniences amidst Huntley’s continued growth. They and other Village leaders are setting their sights on what comes next. For starters, the Village is raising a new well and water treatment facility just south of the Walmart along Ill. Rt. 47, in an area surrounded by open fields and new construction.

“We were fortunate that money we received through the American Rescue Plan Act and developer contributions to fund more than half of that project,” says Armour. “We’re in a good situation for serving those new residents and businesses.”

That includes hundreds of planned homes in three area subdivisions. Building continues at Lennar’s Talamore subdivision, located just north of downtown off Ill. Rt. 47, while national builder D.R. Horton is planning 180 new residences at Cider Grove, off Dundee Huntley Road, with prices starting around \$400,000. Meanwhile, Ohio-based M/I Homes is planning 173 new single-family homes at Fieldstone, also located off Dundee Huntley Road.

Armour and Stocker are also watching what happens south of I-90, where there’s still ample farmland. Armour estimates there’s as much as 2,000 acres in Huntley’s boundaries and still more available in neighboring Hampshire and Pingree Grove.



Despite experiencing exponential growth over the past 30 years, the Village of Huntley has found a balance between big city convenience and small town charm.

Downtown, there are also plans to introduce a retail incubator, Shops on Main, that would go on vacant land at the eastern edge of downtown. The vision is for this space to host seven to 10 locally owned retailers that need a stepping stone into a permanent venue. Stocker estimates the project could open as early as next spring.

“Shops on Main will offer a great starting point for entrepreneurs and growing businesses,” says Stocker. “It will also provide additional retail opportunities for Huntley residents and visitors.”

Preserving that Small-Town Charm

Despite its growing size, Huntley is still a town where it’s easy to see familiar faces around Chamber events, school sports, restaurants and other local hangouts. Binger finds there’s plenty of camaraderie wherever you turn.

New things are popping up all the time, but for many local leaders there’s also a desire to preserve the individual charms of their hometown.

For Binger and her husband, a local chiropractor, that means maintaining connections and the “tight-knit family” that exists among local business owners.

For Chuck Ruth, a founding member of the local Chamber of Commerce, there’s still something familiar from the past – and it’s something that should be preserved for the future.

“I wish them well and wish them all the growth they can get, but I also like the storied past,” he says.

Change is scary, but Binger also finds it’s exciting for her hometown as it reaches new heights. Cocoa Crawls, summer concerts, 5K races and other community events are showing ever-higher levels of detail, she says, and they’re helping to put Huntley on the map.

“It’s become big-time thinking,” she says. “We’re now thinking like a big city – but not too big. We’re finding that balance of doing things well and giving people opportunities in a way that still makes it feel tight-knit.” ■



Work continues at Talamore, a Lennar-built resort style community in Huntley that will feature a variety of homes and amenities.

