

Carmel: A city of change

By: Brian Weiss

Carmel, Ind. – Western Carmel has changed; no longer are the fields of corn present or the densely wooded areas filled with white-tailed deer. No longer does a 15-minute commute turn into half an hour after finding oneself stuck behind a slow-moving tractor. And no longer can Western Carmel call itself a rural community because it has become a modernized suburban city.

Located in the southwestern part of Hamilton County, Carmel first began as a small fur-trading outpost known as Bethlehem in 1833. Here Native-Americans came from throughout the state to trade precious items. It wasn't until 1846 that Elizabeth Peele gave the city its current name. But it wasn't until much later that the city would start to see significant changes.

In the book “Carmel – A second discovery,” Dorothy Smith says there were two main reasons why Carmel saw a large increase in population, “The first was the concern and interest in schools by the young families and the second was the planning by the state for the extension of Keystone Avenue and Interstate I-465, both primarily to serve traffic coming north from Indianapolis, but also opening up the pleasant, rich farmlands and shaded woods of Clay Township near Carmel.”

Both education and transportation would play a key role in the continued expansion of the city throughout the decades.

A referendum was passed in 1954 that called for the enlargement of Clay Township, where the city of Carmel was located, and the creation of a unified school district – Carmel-Clay Schools. A school board was created and just a year later Orchard Park Elementary was built. So

began the process of building one of the largest and most prolific public school systems in the state.

In 1958 Carmel High School was built. The high school, which continues to be the sole one in the city, has seen many renovations over the years to accommodate the ever-increasing number of students, the largest being a three-story Freshman Center in 2005.

The city of Carmel's population has skyrocketed in the past decade and a half. According to the 2000 Census, 37,733 people lived in the city. That number increased to 79,191 in 2010, more than doubling in a ten-year span.

That being said, the percentage of the population under the age of 21 stayed steady at around 32 percent. A large reason being that families wanted their children to attend schools in the Carmel-Clay district.

"We think a lot of those kids have moved to this community to attend our schools, so we have noticed an increased enrollment that probably corresponds with that," Carmel High School Principal John Williams said.

According to the Indiana Department of Education, Carmel High School graduated more than 96.3 percent of its 2012 class, putting it in the top five percent of state schools. The school district also ranked No. 2 in the state for ISTEP scores in 2012 with 92.6 percent of its students passing both the English and math portions of the test.

"It's sort of cyclical because we have so many families moving in from outside of Indiana and they ask what the best school corporation is and often times Carmel is mentioned,"

Creekside Middle School Principal Tom Harmas said. “It becomes an attractive place when you know your children are going to get an excellent education.”

Creekside Middle School was the direct byproduct of the increased population in the city. With a large majority of the population increase happening on the western part of the city, another middle school was needed so students would no longer need to be bussed the long distance to Carmel Middle School. However, the population has continued to increase on the west side of town and now Creekside faces an overcrowding problem.

“We’ve gone from 832 students to 1,590 and Carmel (Middle School) currently is about 400-450 kids less than us, Clay (Middle School) is about 300 kids less. So there’s room on the eastside of Carmel for redistricting.”

This isn’t the first time Carmel has faced redistricting problems. The district redistricted more than 2,000 students in 2001 following the 2000 Census and the construction of Towne Meadow Elementary and College Wood Elementary on the western part of the township. The new schools began to attract a large amount of families to that side of town.

But education isn’t the only reason why Carmel has seen a large population spike and the transformation from a rural farming community into a bustling suburban city.

“I think low taxes is one (reason), you can come out here and build a nice home and the taxes are very low here. You’ve got good police protection, fire protection and parks,” Clay Township Trustee Douglas Callahan said.

According to the Indiana Statistical website, Carmel has the lowest property tax rate in Hamilton County at 2.04 percent. Neighboring cities like Fishers (2.2 percent), Zionsville (2.55 percent), Noblesville (3 percent) and Westfield (3.09 percent) have substantially higher tax rates.

That low tax rate has seen the number of households increase from 13,597 in 2000 to 29,134 in 2010, most of which have been in neighborhoods on the Westside. The large amount of farmland and wooded area fit perfectly into developers plans for modern, suburban neighborhoods. New neighborhoods were sprouting up every day, to the dismay of some.

“I moved to a rural city, not to the city of Carmel,” Greg Plantega, a Clay Township resident of 25 years said.

Plantega lives in the Southwest Clay part of the township; a longtime rural area that was its own township until Carmel decided to annex it in 2004. Southwest Clay has an assessed value of around \$1.4 billion at the time, of which Carmel wanted to take advantage of. The annexation saw an increase of property taxes from 1.48 percent to the current Carmel percentage of 2.04. The lower tax rate was a large reason why Plantega and other moved into the area years before the annexation. Many residents fought the annexation, including Plantega.

“I didn’t want to be annexed, didn’t want the higher taxes,” Plantega said.” “I haven’t seen any increase in police protection or that sort of thing.”

A group of Southwest Clay residents formed a group called No Ordinance for Annexation (NOAX) to fight the cities planned annexation, inevitably losing in the Indiana Supreme Court.

The annexation of Southwest Clay allowed the city to spend the newfound money on the Westside of town, opening up the floodgates for increased growth. A large part of that growth would be the introduction of roundabouts into the area.

Carmel began replacing intersections with roundabouts in the late 1990's and currently boasts the title of the U.S city with the most roundabouts with more than 80. According to a study by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, roundabouts decrease traffic accidents by 40 percent.

“I think (roundabouts) are a big plus, as far as moving the traffic, they are wonderful. When you have auto accidents on roundabouts they aren't as serious as traffic signals because you don't have that potential for head on accidents,” Callahan said.

The cities current project is implementing roundabouts on US 31, a major roadway connecting residents from not only Carmel, but also a majority of northern Indiana to Indianapolis and the western part of Carmel to the downtown area. The project is causing long delays and congested traffic in the area but Callahan says that the project will prove to be worth the trouble after it's finished.

The western part of the city has long been seen as the little brother to the rest of Carmel, the rural, farming community that minded its own business. But with a low tax rate, new schools in a thriving system and easy access to other areas of the city, the western part of Carmel has ditched its historical rural title to become a modern, suburban city.

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