

As Shawnee rebuilds, local nonprofits and private developers differ over village's vision

Céilí Doyle - The Columbus Dispatch

<https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/local/2022/01/28/rural-ohio-black-diamond-development-shawnee/9160666002/>

SHAWNEE — There's no disputing that Shawnee, a former coal-mining boom town on the edge of Perry County's southern border, is experiencing a resurgence.

A festive red, white and blue sign welcomes visitors into "Historic Shawnee," where the renovated Black Diamond Tavern beckons travelers and locals alike to enjoy a burger and a beer crafted in partnership with students from Hocking College.

Offroads, an ATV parts and soon-to-be maintenance shop, opened in September, drawing in folks with a passion for four-wheeling through the nearby trails into town.

Further down Main Street, work is being done on several historic buildings, including the former Harigle Garage, which will eventually house a brewery, and the space's second-story floor, home to a newly renovated Airbnb unit.

It's a far cry from the Shawnee of 2020, when the village was just a shadow of its former self — a ghost town from the Wild West dropped in the foothills of Appalachia.

Black Diamond Development's impact on Shawnee leads to mixed response

But two years ago, a group of Columbus-based investors, the Black Diamond Development LLC, who have ties to southern Ohio, came to Shawnee, a village about 65 miles southeast of Columbus. The town's residents, village council, community organizers and county politicians, who traditionally doubt outsiders' intentions, have been thrilled with the real estate group's progress.

Many see their private investment as a blueprint for rehabilitating southeast Ohio.

But some people have reservations about the developers' dominance. They fear their work overshadows the mission of local nonprofits that also own buildings in town, like the Buckeye Trail Association (BTA) and Sunday Creek Associates.

Both are organizations that have championed Shawnee's reinvention for decades, through efforts to expand the Buckeye Trail into 100 miles of backpacking or by saving the town's jewel, the Tecumseh Theater, a once-ornate early 20th century opera house, from the wrecking ball.

"I love the Buckeye Trail and I love Black Diamond Development," Shawnee Mayor Bev Travato said. "There's always going to be arguments and differences of opinions, but I hope they can find a happy medium and do what's best for Shawnee."

With future projects on the horizon from all parties, all eyes are on Shawnee. There is a Tiny Home Village community, another collaboration between Black Diamond and Hocking College. And grant money was awarded to the BTA to build out the local trail system from Shawnee to Burr Oak State Park, and to Sunday Creek to restore the opera house to its former glory.

Should you 'put all your marbles in one basket'?

Historically, southeast Ohio has been burned by outsiders.

That's especially true of the Little Cities of Black Diamonds, a collection of forgotten or no longer existing mining towns, including Shawnee, that were once dominated by coal companies and manufacturers during the turn of the 19th century.

"The company-owned town hasn't worked in this part of the world because if you put all your marbles in one basket, and the company fails, you go back to this boom-and-bust cycle," said John Winnenberg.

Winnenberg, a long-time Shawnee resident and Sunday Creek Associates board member, has always been skeptical of outside investment, but doesn't argue that Black Diamond's development has helped the town believe in its potential.

"Still, we have to make sure we promote diversified investments," he said. "And that our nonprofit and public sectors rise to the opportunity and makes assets such as the Little Cities of Black Diamonds Council, Buckeye Trail Association and Tecumseh Theater grow throughout this process."

Cheryl Blosser, a founding member of the Little Cities of Black Diamonds Council, an organization dedicated to preserving regional history, tries to look at the positives.

"Change is always difficult," Blosser said. "I feel like someone has finally recognized that the town has value, not just the developers, but the people themselves."

Those people drive Andrew Bashaw, BTA's executive director, in his daily pursuit to give back to the community.

Still, he acknowledged that private investment is the one thing Shawnee has always been missing since he took over the BTA in 2008.

"By serendipity Black Diamond and Bret Adams came to us. All of us wanted the restaurant to be open and overnight accommodations (via Airbnb) — that's something we all celebrate, care about and are thankful for," Bashaw said. "But all human beings have slightly different visions."

The convergence between locals like Bashaw and Winnenberg and Adams, one of two partners at Black Diamond and a key investor, is a potential sticking point for future development in Shawnee.

Adams, an entertainment and sports attorney from Columbus, has been the main point of contact between the village, local politicians and Black Diamond. He declined to comment.

Winnenberg is concerned that Black Diamond's rapid property acquisition across the village is designed to push out nonprofit and government investment.

It's important for the local community to have a stake — both culturally and financially — in Shawnee's future, he said.

"And the jury is still out on whether the developers are in concert with that point of view," Winnenberg added.

Breanna Kitchen, the project manager in Shawnee for Black Diamond Development said in a statement that the organization is extremely proud of the progress they have made over the past 18 months.

"We were disappointed to learn from The Columbus Dispatch that our development vision may not be in alignment with not-for-profit entities operating in the Village," Kitchen

wrote. "However we will strive to engage those entities in productive conversations moving forward."

Black Diamond Development: A 'roadmap for other communities in Appalachia'

Sean Bartley, a Shawnee resident, remembers when Offroads, the ATV parts business he owns thanks to Black Diamond's restoration and flipping of the property, was a thriving laundromat.

"It was prime real estate because it was on the corner of town," he said.

For a long time that laundromat sat in decay. The building remained shuttered until Black Diamond bought the property last year and flipped it, eventually selling to Bartley.

Bartley, who has spent much of his life working in construction, is grateful for an opportunity to "get off the roof" when he's older. He has always had a lot of pride in his hometown, but the recent development has changed everything.

Ohio Senator Jay Hottinger, a Newark Republican who represents Perry County and the 31st District at the Statehouse, couldn't agree more.

"This is the best thing to happen to Shawnee and this part of Perry County since the breakthrough and the advent of coal mining days," Hottinger said.

As a representative of the region — both in the Ohio Senate and House — since 1998, Hottinger saw firsthand how little changed in Shawnee prior to Black Diamond's private sector investment.

"If these guys are successful, this can really be a roadmap for communities in Appalachia to have this second-wind," he said.

For Mayor Travato, being invested in Shawnee's future means being invested in Black Diamond Development.

As the leader of a town that has been historically misrepresented as uneducated and poverty-stricken, in a region where previous outside intervention has resulted in extractive industries profiting off of southeast Ohio and diverting it elsewhere, Travato understands community members' concerns.

But Travato believes that money invested and made in Shawnee by Black Diamond will be to the entire village's benefit.

It's a reality she experiences in real time when she heads down to her shop, Shawnee Mercantile, a vintage store in town, or to the Black Diamond Tavern, and she can't find a parking spot.

"Main Street is just full in a way we haven't seen before," the mayor said.

What's next for Shawnee?

The former coal-mining town is the midst of multiple developmental milestones, Travato said.

On the edge of town, Black Diamond developers are laying down the infrastructure for the Black Diamond Tiny Village, which will eventually lease 60 lots that folks with tiny homes can rent.

In partnership with Modern Tiny Living, a Columbus-based tiny home design and construction company, and Hocking College, Black Diamond will also install five tiny homes on the property which were built by students in Hocking College's School of Workforce Development. They hope to install the five tiny homes later this spring and open up the community later this year.

Sean Terrell, dean of Hocking College's Workforce Development, said the university often has its students doing smaller projects, "but I haven't seen a project of this size since I've been the dean."

Terrell said the college's partnership with Black Diamond is a testament to the kind of public-private collaboration that's essential to developing rural communities.

The milestones have continued since the Ohio Department of Natural Resources awarded the BTA and Sunday Creek Associates \$2.4 million and \$4 million grants, respectively.

The money, federal allocations from the Abandoned Mines Land Pilot Program, will go toward building out the full 100 mile-long Buckeye Trail and restoring the Tecumseh Theater over the next two to three years, BTA executive director Andrew Bashaw said.

Bashaw said he sees all of these of investments — private, public and non-profit — as an opportunity to emphasize that the people of Shawnee are the glue that holds the town's future together.

"It's this great, stone soup," Bashaw said. "Everyone's welcome to be a part of Shawnee's future success, but the people that hold it are the ones that live here."

Céilí Doyle is a Report for America corps member and covers rural issues in Ohio for The Dispatch. Your donation to match our RFA grant helps keep her writing stories like this one. Please consider making a tax-deductible donation at <https://bit.ly/3fNsGaZ>.

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