

## Olde town from page A1

trying to make it a competitive business.

"There had been a lot of deferred maintenance," he said. "But there was a lot of love for the inn. People in the community have been very supportive. They want the inn to survive."

### Staying competitive

But Smith, 44, had to find away to make costly improvements while being competitive with hotels and restaurants at the other end of the city on Grand River.

"We knocked the fence down and rebuilt much of it with the old wood," he said. "But you can't get away from the fact for a hamburger because of it."

If Smith felt he was swimming upstream, the purchase of the old car dealership by Enterprise Rent-A-Car, the addition of a new Pop Boys and improvements to many of the neighboring businesses along with new, tasteful lighting, sidewalks and landscaping "energized" him.

"We were very happy that we made the move here," says Mike Kane, vice president and general manager of Enterprise. "It's provided great access for our customer base."

The country's largest car rental company, which also leases vehicles for company fleets and sells cars in Farmington Hills is looking to expand.

"We've found that there is so much undiscovered business here, we are seriously considering another site in Farmington Hills," Kane said.

In fact, the company is looking at buying a facility on Grand River in Redford and a site at 14 Mile and Orchard Lake in the city, he said.

Residents and city officials alike are pleased that the company bought and improved the site. Enterprise even offered its site last June for the annual Rouge River Cleanup and bought lunch for the volunteers.

### Big investments

But Enterprise is only one of several businesses that see a future in the area.

Rick Lampi, Farmington Hills' community development coordinator, estimates that Enterprise has spent \$820,000 to improve the site where about 100 people work. Pop Boys has spent \$987,000 for its new building. Kitchen Wholesale has spent

about \$40,000 for renovations and cleanup. Home Protection has spent at least \$12,000 for its roof. Smith Lumber has purchased a new canopy and made improvements worth \$43,000 and Art's Rental has built an addition and new roof at a cost of about \$112,000, Lampi said.

The use of Community Development Block Grant money to offer low-interest loans and even outright grants to residents for housing improvements along with capital improvements including storm drains, street paving and water lines has gotten businesses and residents behind the area's revitalization.

"The key was that as we made these improvements, people saw them and started taking better



**■ 'The key was that as we made these improvements, people saw them and started taking better care of their own property.'**

**Rick Lampi**  
—community development coordinator,  
Farmington Hills

care of their own property and took pride in their houses and their neighborhood," Lampi said.

Improved code enforcement and the demolition of substandard housing also went a long way towards the improvement that should continue, he said.

All of this has meant a solid start for what Kane calls the city's "template" for redevelopment.

ment.

### Olde Town's new start

City Manager Dan Hobbs sees an opportunity to renovate many areas of the city, starting with Olde Town.

"In Texas, even though the cities are newer, the pattern of abandonment is there," said Hobbs, who has worked in city administration in the Lone Star state.

Hobbs said newer cities don't necessarily take care of their older areas. It takes a commitment, much like he saw in the last city he managed, to keep a city from fading.

"Greenbelt (Maryland) was the first city developed by the federal government 60 years ago," he said. "It has been revitalized several times."

Ultimately, Hobbs says, the difference between a city that loses the battle against blight and the one the successfully reclaims an older area is the community's perception about itself.

"It comes down to a commitment to the community," he says.

One of the most important, and too often neglected features of communities as they age, are rental properties.

And with several older trailer parks, apartment buildings and single family houses for rent in Olde Town, convincing landlords to keep those properties up is crucial to the future.

"This is a solidly middle-class neighborhood where people take pride in where they live," Hobbs says. "We have modest houses and good schools."

Farmington Hills, and especially the southeastern portion of the city, can break a pattern of suburban sprawl, he says.

"Right now, if we get on top of the rental housing properties, we have a wonderful opportunity," he said. "If we wait, we'll be catching up and that's hard."

Hobbs said Farmington Hills enjoys a reputation that allows property owners to charge top rent prices. He wants to make sure those landlords are taking care of those properties, rather than milking them and letting them go.

**Committed to community**  
Mayor Aldo Vagstad, who does not live in Olde Town but worships at St. Alexander's on



**Heart first:** Creon Smith, owner of the Botsford Inn since 1993, says he led with his heart instead of his head when he bought the historic property. Smith says running the Inn is a 24-hour-a-day job that he loves.

Shiawassee, said the area's residents are consistently the most committed to their area, which bodes well for Olde Town's future.

"When we had our city council meeting there (at Fire Station No. 3), the place was packed," Vagstad said.

And the improvements have been noticeable, says longtime

Olde Town activist Massie Kurzeja.

"The improvements have really helped property values, although traffic is still too fast on M-102 (M-6)," she said. "Grand River has become a major contributor to the tax base."

Kurzeja says she will continue to battle over code violations in

the area, like dumpsters that aren't screened, and other problems. But she and her husband don't plan on going anywhere.

"I love it here," she said. "I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather live."

Smith, who said he's still looking at about \$500,000 in improvements at the Botsford Inn down the road, said he's



**Farahat:** Botsford CEO Gerson Cooper takes a long view when it comes to the hospital's future and how that affects the community.

STAFF PHOTO BY BRYAN MITCHELL

## Hospital committed, as it grows

BY WILLIAM COULTANT  
STAFF WRITER

Gerson Cooper sits at a corner table at the Botsford Inn and considers the breakfast menu.

He should know it by heart, since he often eats at the historic Inn — so often that over the table there is a phone where he can take calls. Under the phone are the words "Cooper's corner."

He's earned the respect of those in the medical community, the area's business community and the neighboring residents, even though at times he has locked horns with them.

"We've never broken our word," he says proudly of his relationship with the hospital's neighbors and the city.

"Gersh" as his friends call him, surrounds the topic of health care and enjoys explaining it to anyone who is serious about its future. The Botsford General Hospital CEO has seen entire eras of hospital expansion, the "merger mania" that began in the 1970s, and the new era of preventive health care and a more decentralized approach to medicine.

"Facilities are becoming the least important aspect of health care," he says.

That is a profound statement coming from someone who has been with the hospital since before it built in 1955 in Farmington Hills. In many areas of medicine, the hospital boasts state-of-the-art care and facilities.

But with no room to expand at its present location, newer outlying clinics and contracting with neighboring businesses for parking are examples of the issues with which Cooper must battle.

"You'll never see another hospital built in Farmington Hills," he says. It's not a boast, but a realization that the traditional hospital setting is not where much of what's new in medicine will be practiced.

"We know how important satellite operations and collaborations will be," he says, adding that Botsford is currently working on arrangements with the largely down river Oakwood Health Care and a cooperative agreement with the University of Michigan Medical Center's cardiology division.

A new radiation and oncology facility on Eight Mile is another addition to the facility.

But like any business, the information age has taken its toll on medicine, another challenge for Cooper.

"We've underinvested in information services," he says and then begins an analysis of Botsford's plans to computerize and centralize medical records, making them available to more medical professionals while protecting a patient's right to privacy.

The giant hospital, which occupies more than 40 acres on its main campus, has been embroiled in conflicts, from time to time, over lighting that towers over the neighborhood, car headlights shining into house windows and the noise that sometimes accompanies a 24-hour operation.

But the hospital's efforts to ease those concerns have not gone unnoticed.

"They keep trying to be a part of the community," says Kay Briggs, who has lived at her house on Oxford Street in the hospital's shadow since 1924.

And for Cooper, that is a source of some pride for an institution that has cast a giant shadow over Olde Town.

John Anhalt, whose family once owned of the Inn and the property on which the hospital sits, has probably best summed up the hospital's importance and Cooper's role in that.

"I once said that Botsford Hospital is behind the Inn," Anhalt said. "Now I say that the Inn is in front of Botsford Hospital."

# Celebrate

# Mom

At first we gave Mom handmade cards and dandelion bouquets.

Later, when we earned an allowance, there was a dollar or two to buy something.

And no matter what, Mom always made us feel like it was the greatest gift she ever received.

So why not give her something truly special this year?

You'll find it at the Park...Laurel Park Place.

**Laurel Park Place**

For fresh spring attitudes, spend a day at the Park.

Featuring Jacobson's, Parklan and Savory Specialty Shops.

Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-8 p.m. • Sunday, noon-5 p.m. • West Six Mile & Newburgh Roads in Livonia • (313) 452-1100

**SCHERTAK**