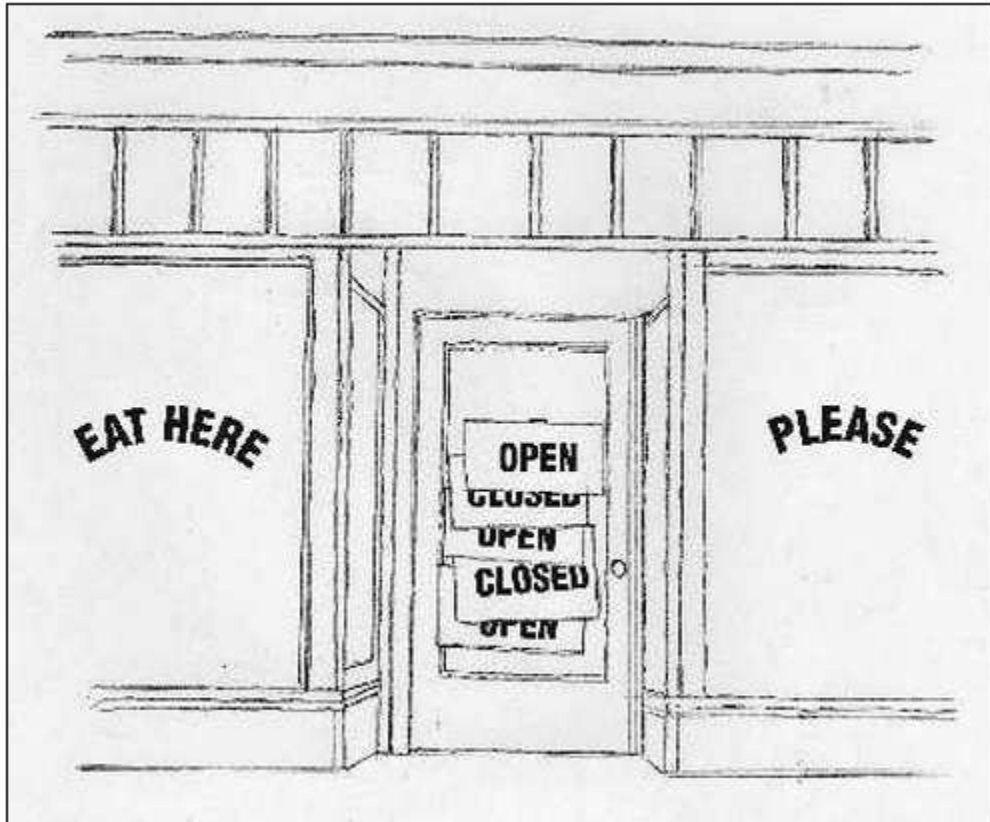




Failed Brandon restaurants couldn't escape boulevard's curse

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BRANDON

This place is cursed. Nobody makes it here. Are you sure you want to do this?

They tried anyway, at least five hopeful businesses over 10 years. On a corner on the busiest road in a bustling suburb, on a spot practically perched on the brink of making it — they couldn't last.

The family restaurants that moved into 509 E Brandon Blvd., alongside six lanes of traffic that shift to seven, played just about every gimmick. But their owners still walked out, one after the other. Some shut down after a single year, all left with dining dreams of profits and franchising dashed.

This lot on the southwest corner of Brandon Boulevard and Montclair Avenue seems wedged into a blind spot. Even at neighboring businesses, people need prompting to remember the string of nonsuccess stories.

It's not out of the ordinary to see a location turn over several times. But five times in 10 years? Why? Why does this place get lost somewhere between here and there?

In 1998, Johnny Spieldenner ran Gatorz Southern Rock Cafe with his grandfather and uncle. They spent months hand-crafting tables, chairs and countertops. They booked jazz and blues acts, organized karaoke and ladies' nights, coaxed a family chef to punch up the American menu.

It should have worked.

But Spieldenner, now 38 with his own construction company, recalled looking out the windows of his empty restaurant at the masses of backed-up cars on Brandon Boulevard. "What the heck?" he thought.

"Any day of the week, you go to Outback and it's packed," he said. They didn't expect lunches to be so slow, but the little family-run restaurant couldn't appeal to suburbanites' preferences for chains. They couldn't catch customers for drinks, either, as people zoomed past heading to Ybor City. And it was a little tricky to turn into the parking lot.

Even when he managed to attract crowds — Bike Nights roiled the neighborhood with some 500 motorcycles — he felt like it wasn't necessarily a boon. An ascending lease eventually drained the Spieldenners, who sold the restaurant in 2001.

Other owners tried other gimmicks: Dinosaurs! Mayan rain forest! Classic Spanish! All-you-can-eat!

Nothing stuck. The location seemed to doom them. The money trickled away.

Vickie Carapella, the former owner of dinosaur-themed steakhouse Bedroc's (1995-96), ruminated on how road construction quickly forced hour-and-a-half waits on Saturday nights into extinction. Still living in Valrico, she passes by her old restaurant.

"Every time something went in there," Carapella said, "deep in your heart, you go, 'Buddy, you're making a big mistake.' "

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Ask [Steven Silverman](#) about the curse. He knows the stories. He just doesn't believe in them. As the commercial broker who negotiated the property's sale in 2011, he puts his trust in numbers. And not ones preceded by big dollar signs.

"Traffic is moving too fast," Silverman said, "so they're not getting the spur-of-the-moment kind of people. By the time you see it, it's gone."

Even with its frontage visibility, the property falls between two commercial hubs elsewhere on Brandon Boulevard. So drivers whiz by, too focused on where they're going to stop.

When he started marketing the property, the building had been vandalized, the copper wiring and air conditioners stolen. But it had finally drawn a crowd. Vagrants were living inside, Silverman said.

Gone were the mom-and-pop shops that had tried so often over the years.

"When you keep making the same mistake over and over again, you realize that something isn't right," he said. "You have to change something, so you repurpose the property."

He sold the parcel — worth \$1.3 million in 2006 — for \$665,000, according to records.

"It's going to be, Pow! In their faces," Silverman said. "It's going to be a destination and that's what needs to happen there to survive."

So what's the place that can finally break the curse and get people to pull over? Family Dollar, a national chain that doesn't care about locals' urban legends.

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