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03/12/09

### Car museum converts passion into tourist draw

**OUR POSITION:** Muscle car museum a bright spot in bleak economic times.

The two most uttered phrases among the patrons of Rick Treworgy's Muscle Car City Museum begin either "Did you see ...?" or "I had one ..." The recently opened museum taps a deep vein of nostalgia for broad-shouldered, high horse-powered machines that trigger waves of memories among their fans.

Located in the former Walmart on U.S. 41 in the Burnt Store Isles area of Punta Gorda, Treworgy's museum features row after row of multicolored Corvettes, Chevelles, GTOs, Camaros and other "muscle cars" that, for many, represent a high-water mark in American car manufacturing. The museum's opening is sharply juxtaposed against the decline and possible fall of the U.S. industry during the current recession.

Treworgy, a local businessman with interests in restaurants, warehouse and commercial space, also is creating dozens of jobs at a time when businesses across the country are laying off workers by the hundreds of thousands. He is already fielding inquiries from around the world and spends as much time arranging hotel rooms for curious out-of-town car club members as shaking hands with envious admirers strolling between the rows of shiny showcars.

The museum, which is already doing overflow lunch business, grew out of Treworgy's deep pockets and his passion for cars. For years, he displayed his collection, nearly 200 strong including 64 Corvettes from 1975 to 2006, in warehouses he owned. Word of mouth brought dozens of people to see his car each week. When the Walmart building went on the market, he seized the opportunity to make his collection into a museum. A story in USA Today prior to the museum's opening earlier this month brought calls from long-lost friends from Guatemala to Germany.

"We have gotten amazing national and international exposure," said Becky Bovell, Charlotte County's tourism director.

Jennifer Huber, the tourism bureau's public relations manager has been fielding calls from newspapers and magazines, car clubs and Internet bloggers. Visit Florida, the state's tourism agency, featured the museum in its latest publication. An American Automobile Association writer recently visited for a story that will run in AAA magazines and Web sites.

"It's drawn fantastic enthusiasm from car clubs. We can definitely see partnering with hotels to package with or even tie it in with the racetracks in Sebring and our racetrack here," Huber said. "Especially in these economic times people are really excited about it."

The museum opening also highlights a lingering obstacle to economic development. Over lunch in the diner, Treworgy noted the opening was delayed by the state over the licensing of the restaurant. A temporary sign at the museum entrance off U.S. 41 will soon be replaced by a permanent one, once the permit is issued. Between bites of his sandwich, Treworgy talked with a colleague, Chris Evans of Smuggler's Enterprises, to work out the kinks on the city's sign permit.

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Treworgy would rather be talking about cars than permits. There'll be plenty of time for that next weekend when some 200 Miami-area Corvette lovers roar into town for a show in the museum's parking lot. It's a place where people can set aside worries about today by reminiscing about yesterday and looking forward to a brighter tomorrow.

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