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Some auto dealers still expanding, building

BY BOB COX
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At a time when sales of new cars of all types and price ranges are badly depressed, some dealerships are still opening new locations, building facilities and expanding old ones.

At a groundbreaking Thursday for his new Fort Worth Audi dealership, owner Bobby Baillargeon said he'd been asked several times why he's investing \$2 million in a new location now.

"I believe in myself. I believe in my team. I believe in Audi," Baillargeon said. "And most importantly I really believe in the Fort Worth economy."

New car and truck sales in the U.S. last year were at their lowest level since 1992, 13.2 million vehicles, and the rate of sales in November and December was the lowest in 25 years.

Comprehensive sales results haven't been released yet for the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

Baillargeon, owner of DFW Audi in Euless, the only other Tarrant County outlet for the high-end German-made autos, said he'd been working for three years with Audi to get approval to open the outlet near University Drive and White Settlement Road.

Baillargeon bought the 1.5-acre site three years ago from the Autobahn dealership group and then worked to convince Audi's U.S. leadership that the Fort Worth market could justify a dealership.

The changes in Fort Worth, with a booming downtown, fast-growing condo, apartment and retail developments along Seventh Street, and the Trinity River project all bode well, Baillargeon said.

"I think this is a great location for luxury cars," he said. "A lot of people work downtown, and we'll be close and convenient for service."

Baillargeon isn't the only area dealer betting on the future now, even amid a fast-deteriorating national economy.

The Frank Kent dealership group plans to begin construction this year on a \$20 million site for its Honda dealership on the west side of Loop 820 in southwest Fort Worth, across the freeway from the existing location.

Will Churchill, co-owner of the Kent dealerships, said it's just good business to go ahead with the big project at this point, regardless of the current economic outlook.

"I've got to have it ready when the boom hits so I'll be able to take advantage. There's always going to be cycles," Churchill said.

The new facility will include a 75,000-square-foot sales and service complex on the 12-acre site. Churchill said the group just finished a \$3 million rebuilding of its Buick-Pontiac-GMC dealership facilities.

In Arlington, Classic Buick-Pontiac-GMC is building a stand-alone used vehicle sales facility on adjacent land the dealership had previously purchased from the Don Davis dealership group.

And Park Place Motorcars, the Mercedes dealership on Bryan Irvin Road in southwest Fort Worth, has been remodeling part of its showroom-office complex to add a separate "Smart Center," which will handle sales of the tiny Mercedes-built Smart cars beginning in February.

When the new Baillargeon dealership opens — the target date is Aug. 1 — it will be the first time Fort Worth has had an Audi dealership since 1994.

Baillargeon said that his Euless dealership sells about 400 new vehicles and similar number of used ones a year and that he expects the Fort Worth dealership to do as well.

He will hire 25 people to staff the 16,000-square-foot dealership.

Fort Construction of Fort Worth is the contractor. Wachovia Bank provided the financing.

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