

## Q&A: Christian Brothers Automotive franchise development director talks commercial real estate amid pandemic

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*Houston-based Christian Brothers Automotive operates more than 200 locations across the United States (Courtesy Christian Brothers Automotive).*

Josh Barker, the director of franchise development of Christian Brothers Automotive, spoke with *Community Impact Newspaper* about how the coronavirus pandemic has impacted business and provided insights on the potentially altered future of commercial real estate. The Houston-based automotive company, which was founded in the 1980s, has franchise locations throughout Texas, Georgia, Tennessee and Arizona.

Answers have been lightly edited for length and clarity.

**How did the pandemic affect any of the commercial office spaces that you oversee?**

Given the trust we have created with our customers, we have had some of our highest-volume days in the history of our business during the pandemic. The truth is, people are taking care of their homes, cars and other important possessions, so we have weathered this very well.

Our in-house real estate team looks at a variety of specifics when choosing franchise locations, including our key criteria: demographics, psychographics,

property size, price, zoning, traffic counts and nearby synergy partners. The research team will focus on what in the area is driving the main traffic arteries, locating nearby car dealers and primary competitors. Finally, we conduct an aerial tour in a helicopter to see if the site fits with our standards.

**Do you think there will be more of a shift towards work-from-home practices, with fewer renters occupying commercial spaces or renters renting less space for their businesses?**

Before the pandemic, the commercial real estate market was dynamic and competitive. Many different retail and commercial concepts are constantly vying for the best location to place their businesses. But now that COVID-19 is a factor, the real estate markets have already or are expected to loosen. There will be more opportunities for unconventional use of space.

Additionally, some who have been working from home are still having success and are not in a hurry to get back to the office. It's likely that typical office spaces might see a shift from the emphasis on large spaces for both individual offices and large conference rooms that are not as practical when more people might continue to work from home.

**How might the company adjust if this becomes the case?**

In our Houston corporate office, we are making a shift internally to a few days of permanently working from home and limited days in the office in July.

**If the opposite is true, are there particular areas into which you are looking to expand?**

We take great pride in the locations that we've established around the country and in our continued growth. A lot of that stems from our ability to identify and acquire the right real estate. From an operations standpoint, our entire team has seen a shift in how we do business, from touchless pickup and drop-off to implementing measures to increase social distancing. We feel confident in our availability to continue to grow. On a franchise level, we have never closed a

franchise location, and our corporate team has continued to grow in order to support the success of all 200-plus locations.

Editor's note: This story was updated at 9:48 a.m. July 8 to reflect Barker's role at the company. In a previous version of this post, Barker's title was incorrectly stated as CEO.

This article is online at: <https://bit.ly/38Lquyq>.