

Developer Looks Homeward

by Linda F. Jarrett

Jonathan Browne grew up in Webster Groves. He loves the city and, always in the back of his mind, he had the idea of living and working in the same geographic area. Then, in 1997, Browne, president of the Novus Companies, got the idea of doing a development in the center of Webster Groves where he would finally be able to ply his trade in close to home. At the time, Novus was located in Kirkwood, but Browne was looking to move. "We were originally contacted about doing this development by Peter Hickson, a retired banker who grew up in Webster Groves," said Browne. "His grandfather is the namesake of Hickson Middle School, and he was looking for redevelopment in a community where he had some history."

The concept for The Shoppes at Old Webster was born. The four-acre site near the intersection of Lockwood and Gore Avenues features a four-story, 61,000 square foot multi-use office building and a one-story, 10,000 square foot retail building. A 60,000 square of level parking garage is scheduled for completion this July. The project cost \$17 million, including \$4 million in tax increment financing. From the summer of 2001 is a long time for a development, from conception to birth, so to speak. Everyone involved with The Shoppes talked of the challenges that seemed never-ending starting with approvals, getting permits and reviews, then more reviews and approvals with the Webster Groves City Council. Other problems included a congested work site and having to perform work without interfering with the neighboring businesses. Working in a small area, Browne said, "was a nightmare I don't think anyone anticipated. We affected 20 different property owners that were contiguous to us and that we disrupted in some way or another all the time."

Novus gave the task of planning and negotiation to Fru-Con. "We actually had two projects going," said Browne. This project came on the heels of the Kirkwood Bend Center, where he was impressed by Fru-Con's commitment and willingness to take a risk. "As a developer, risk means a lot to me. It's part of our daily business and when someone takes a risk with us, it certainly catches my attention. "These guys came in and spent a lot of time with us before any contracts were signed, doing preliminary pricing and helping us do pro forma budgets for cost so we could validate some of our assumptions. When someone makes a commitment like that, when it's time to go, you're a lot farther down the road with someone who's been working with you and designing and pricing for the last nine months."

Fru-Con Project manager Dave Jongebreur said, "Originally, the understanding was for us to get the entire site simultaneously to work on the garage and office and retail buildings, but due to some issues regarding Novus's purchasing property from Straub's and some easement issues, the only thing that was available was the office building. So we started on that." Then, he said, came problems with sewer lines running on private property and owners not giving up the easement for work to occur until those issues were negotiated. "We didn't get the MSD (Metropolitan Sewer District) permit until last August, and we had started on the office building in February 2000." Working alongside the railroad tracks presented its own set of problems. Jongebreur said, "It made it interesting. At some point, we were redoing sewers 30 feet away from the track with holes as deep as 25 to 30 feet. "Then, there were some heavy overhead electrical lines close to the railroad tracks that had to be relocated. Dealing with the railroad as an entity was time-consuming, but once we got going on the office building, we were on our way."

Jongebreur said work on the retail center went well. The center is located next to Straub's Grocery Store, which is at 211 W. Luck wood Ave., and, according to Jongebreur required some negotiating. "We had to do a lot of coordination with Straub's and be as least disruptive as possible because they stayed in business the whole time. We were working as they were making and receiving deliveries, and they were very understanding."

Another challenge, Jongebreur said, was the soil under the office building. "At one time, an old Union Pacific Depot was located on the site where maintenance on the trains and tracks was done. Some of the soil was contaminated and we had to remediate and send it out to a special landfill." Soil proved to be a challenge for the parking garage also. Jongebreur explained, "The soil itself wasn't of a quality-bearing capacity for the way the garage foundation was designed. The geotechnical engineer will tell you that when you're getting ready to pour the concrete and footings, you have to go down to a soil that reaches a certain compaction so your building doesn't sink when you're pouring." They dug to the designed depth, but the soil wouldn't compact as needed. The choice was either to keep digging until they got to the correct bearing pressure or to redesign the garage foundation. He said, "Since we didn't know how far we would have to dig, we changed the garage to drill piers. We drilled down until we got to bedrock and poured concrete in the hole all the way up. I think in Novus's and the city's minds, that was a safer way to go."

Bob Polk of Farnsworth & Polk, civil engineers for the project, said, "Any revitalization of an old business district where civilization has been for 150 years, where several different buildings were built and demolished in the area where you're trying to build, will present obstacles." That was the case here. At one time, this area was all warehouse buildings. These were torn down for parking lots, but the foundations were left below ground and paved over. When you run into existing foundations, you have problems, and time was spent on who would be responsible for the additional cost. Rebuilding old sewers, Polk said, proved to be another challenge. "The storm sewers weren't big enough for this new development. The sanitary sewers had to be replaced and we had to reroute utilities around the parking garage. All the utilities had to be rerouted around the development and, at the same time, you had all the building owners in the surrounding areas that had to have their services intact. It was tricky."

Of course, before any of the infrastructure was started, the buildings had to be designed to fit the esthetic of the area. Buildings in Old Webster are decades old, and anything new could easily ignite rage among the residents who valued the charm of their city. To Skibbe Uhlig, Inc. fell the task of the exterior design. The firm had to fit the rather-large building, much larger than others in the area, into a small site and make it look like it belonged there. Carl Uhlig said the site constraints were very tight "and that's what drove the size of the project. It was designed with red brick to fit in with the old Webster style. The buildings that were already there were warehouse-type buildings and we wanted our project to blend in with the city." Combining utility brick, in two shades of red; precast concrete; and punched out windows worked in giving the building a look that is in character with the surrounding structures. Uhlig said punched out windows fit in better than the glass bands currently in vogue in office design. "It's a big building with smaller buildings in front of it, so it needs to blend in." The penthouse with its sloped green roof has added to the character of the office building. Uhlig said, "It's more like- a residential roof and caps it off nicely with balconies." One of the top floor suites has a beautiful view of the Clayton skyline jutting above a sea of trees. Those interviewed expressed surprise that Clayton could be seen from Webster Groves, but the view, indeed, is spectacular.

O'Toole Design Associates designed the office interior. Lisa Elrod, project designer, said Browne had "specific ideas" about what he wanted in the building. "He tends to like the earth tones and warmer color schemes so that gave us a direction for colors. Everything is very natural and open," she said. The unique floor in the downstairs lobby is composed of several different porcelain tile sizes to create an offset pattern. Lighting throughout the building is consistent with the warm overtones of the design. Elrod said, "We also tried to create a dressier look in the lobby with layered drywall which looks like molding."

O'Toole also designed the Novus offices using cultured rock. "It's called Eldorado stone and it's a stone veneer which is thinner than regular rock. Jon got the idea for this from an Eddie Bauer store! It's nice to have an idea of what the client wants and go from there." As a result of designing the office building, O'Toole is also designing offices for several of the tenants. Elrod said, "This will enable us to blend the tenant offices with the public spaces."

The development is 75 percent rented and, as Browne planned, Novus has moved its offices to the top floor of the office center. The Farnsworth Group also moved its offices to the new building, which has space for 12 tenants and another four to six in the retail building. The parking garage will provide 170 much-needed spaces for the district. Browne said he hoped to have an "upscale" restaurant in the downstairs of the office building, but that will have to wait until the garage is completed. "No one will commit until they know the parking situation."

Polk said he also had been waiting for an opportunity to move their offices into Webster Groves. "I've been working here for 25 years and was waiting for this development to occur to revitalize the downtown area, and we wanted to be part of that revitalization. We committed to Jon early on to not only design the development, but to move into it." Jongebreur said Novus has done a good job of blending the development into the surroundings. Even the streetlights at The Shoppes are the same as on Gore and Lock-wood, keeping the same atmosphere with period lighting. "No other developer could put forth a proposal, so when the city went out for a developer, Novus put together a good game plan of retail and mixed office. And the area certainly needs more parking," he said.

Indeed, Webster Groves City Manager Milton Matthews said: "The redevelopment corporation had been established 12 years ago and although there had been a number of proposals brought forth for that area, most of them had never gotten past the discussion stage." Browne said what this development does is unify a split business area with a building that's consistent and sensitive to the existing flavor and architectural look of the area. "What we had was little shops, business, retail and offices on Gore and a traffic-generating anchor, which is Straub's, to the west with a mortar mixing plant in between. There was no continuity to that district, small as it was. What we've done is put similar use shops in the middle, which joined the traffic of a grocery store and small shops with a building that architecturally fit with the turn-of-the-century business district. We then supplemented that with a public parking garage in the center so now both sides of the district are benefiting rather than being divided by an inconsistent use."

He praised Pioneer Planters Bank, the construction lender, and Pioneer Bank, who provided the bond financing. "They have worked exceedingly hard making it happen. Both banks have gone above and beyond the call of duty."

So, the Shoppes at Old Webster have not been unlike gestation and birth. Pregnancy and labor leave a lot to be desired, but the end result usually pleases everyone!