



Cautious partnership becomes development powerhouse Unicorp

By David Wilkening
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ORLANDO — Several years ago, Lee Maher and Chuck Whittall used to regularly compete to find freestanding drugstore sites for Eckerd's or CVS. One day they met over a drink to consider joining forces.

"We were chasing the same deals, so we said, 'Let's see how it goes if we work together. We'll try two deals.' Those two led to four, and before we knew it we had 12 deals. Now, we average 40 deals a year," said Maher.

He and Whittall, the partners who started the Orlando-based Unicorp National Developments Inc., have also considerably broadened their development interests to the point where they have 32 employees and do \$250 million in development deals a year.

Quietly, with little fanfare and not much publicity, the pair doubled the size of Unicorp last year. They expect to double it again before next year.

Drugstore sites are still a core area of their business, but Unicorp has a niche of three other development areas: lifestyle centers, retail strip centers and residential. They are among the largest commercial retail developers in Central Florida.

"When it comes to town or lifestyle centers, we're definitely the largest in the area," Whittall said.

Unicorp has a portfolio of more than 50 commercial properties in New York, Arizona and Florida. Their signature is all over Central Florida at places such as the 130,000sf The Fountains at Bayhill. That two-story retail lifestyle development completed a few years ago is anchored by Ruth's Chris Steakhouse.

Unicorp has virtually com-

pleted WaterTower Place at Celebration, another 130,000sf lifestyle development. "It has banks, fast food, good restaurants. It's even got a gas component," Whittall said.

Another of their high visibility projects is at Baldwin Park, which will be virtually a new town with 3,000 homes on 1,000 acres that used to be the Orlando Naval Training Center. Unicorp is completing a mixed-use village with 177 apartments (the Majestic), and more than 212,000sf of office and retail.

The Altamonte Town Center is another of their projects. Ground-breaking started recently on the \$200 million project, with Unicorp responsible for a 25-acre mixed use development. Atlanta developer Michael Vlass and the city of Altamonte Springs are developing a new downtown. Epoch Properties is doing a 324-unit apartment and a 560-space parking garage. Unicorp is doing the retail and restaurant space.

Lifestyle centers have come to the forefront in recent years. "Eight years ago, there were maybe two in the entire country. Now there's over 100," Whittall said.

To casual observers, it may seem like lifestyle centers are comparable to a Shaquille O'Neal slam dunk. But that's not the case.

"Everyone thinks they have to have one," Whittall said. But first there has to be enough of a population base. Even with that requirement, residents have to be somewhat affluent. Then, there's the necessity of having the right mix of properties.

"The biggest part of building a lifestyle center is having good anchors — creating reasons for people to go there," said Maher.

Both Maher and Whittall have had experience in construction, which comes in handy for lifestyle centers because of build-



Lee Maher, top left, and Chuck Whittall were retail development competitors when they decided to try a couple of projects together. They've been collaborating ever since on projects like the 130,000sf The Fountains at Bayhill center in Orlando, above.

ing issues that are magnified for this type of development.

"Venting is very important when you are looking at complementary uses," Maher said.

Builders of these types of projects have to be sure that restaurant smells on a first floor, for example, do not permeate places where people live on a second story.

Both the partners think downtown Orlando is headed on the right tack — towards a lifestyle center existence where residents can also shop and find entertainment.

"What we saw in downtowns all over the country was that everyone was going home at 5 o'clock. People moved out to the suburbs and got farther and farther away," Whittall said.

clothes, for example. So the malls and the centers complement each other," he added.

Unicorp's general philosophy is to hang onto their own developments. They sell few and retain up to 80% of what they build.

Whittall and Maher clearly think a major reason for their success has been their attention to the high quality of details in all their developments.

"If you look at Baldwin Park, for example, the apartments all have granite countertops. Every apartment has huge balconies, Jacuzzi tubs and super-wide hallways," Maher said.

Maher and Whittall also attribute their success in part to their ability to maintain good relationships.

"One thing worth noting is that we have built a lot of relationships," Whittall said. "When we need money, for example, we have a good Wall Street relationship."

With their expertise in lifestyle projects, the partners have not wasted their experience in drugstore site selection. What do drug stores want in a new site?

"Always the same: Main and Main," answered Whittall. It's easy to find locations, he added, but often not at the right price.

Both partners are bullish on the rising value of real estate in Central Florida. Maher estimates real estate property values generally have been escalating at a rate of 10% to 12% a year. But both he and Whittall think there may be somewhat of a slowdown when interest rates are hiked, as expected.

They are bullish enough about Central Florida to build a new headquarters for Unicorp. Groundbreaking is expected in a few months on their new, 27,000sf office building at I-4 and Turkey Lake Road.



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