

From brownfields to beauty

Developer still has his eyes on East Jefferson Boulevard.

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MISHAWAKA -- Bob Stephens was a teenager when he was kicked out of the quarries where a concrete company mined sand and gravel on the north bank of the St. Joseph River.

"I tried to fish there," he recalled. "But it was private to Kuert, then Valley, Concrete. I used to be asked politely to leave."

But he saw enough back in the 1960s to make him believe the area around those quarries would be a great place to live.

That memory has led him to build some rather nice houses on old industrial sites. And he has also become a leader in efforts to revive and update a stretch of East Jefferson Boulevard.

Roots of his vision

As an adult, Stephens wound up in Chicago, working in real estate.

"I knew the children and grandchildren of people who once moved out of the Loop and into the suburbs," he said. Some of those children and grandchildren wished they lived in the Loop.

"I saw this whole thing going on (moving back downtown)," Stephens said. "I wanted to bring it here."

So in 1993, he started looking at brownfield land, land that was once industrial, on the north side of the St. Joseph River.



Developer Bob Stephens stands in the former Briscoe Mobile Home Park on East Jefferson Boulevard in Mishawaka. It's one of the pieces of property he bought as part of an effort to fix up the area.

Tribune Photos/GENE KAISER

He and his partner, Frank Darnell, saw things there that others didn't.

"Everybody else saw abandoned brownfield sites," Stephens said. "He (Darnell) saw the river. And he saw lots and lots of cars going between Elkhart and South Bend."

"Demography is important in my business," Stephens continued. "All you need to do is grab them (people traveling by)."

A river of ideas

So they bought the property where Stephens was not allowed to fish as a youngster. And they proposed building homes with starting prices at \$250,000.

That brought out the skeptics.

City employees always thought there was potential in that property, according to Mayor Jeff Rea, who worked in the city's planning department at that time.

"But we wondered if the market could support it (Stephens' proposal)," Rea said. "It (the land) was pretty raw. It took a real vision to see beautiful mature trees and lakes that could be shaped."

Stephens confesses that selling Barrington Estates didn't go that well at first. Sales of the lots were turned over to Realtors.

Nobody bought.

But Stephens is a pretty determined man and began working the telephone himself.

"I cold-called out of the Yellow Pages," he said. "I called doctors, lawyers, business people, anybody I thought would have the (financial) ability to appreciate this kind of lifestyle."

He talked about the river, Willow Creek and the quarries being turned into lakes.

And he sold the most expensive houses in Mishawaka.

He also sold the idea of living in the city, with city services such as water and sewer lines.

He also sold schools, the police department and the fire department on the idea.

His vision continues

With that success under his belt, Stephens and Darnell bought the old Owens Corning property and other land west of Barrington Estates in the early 2000s.

Selling his vision for Highland Village, which is now being built there, was easier. Homes there start below \$200,000.

The new development has spawned other work.

Not everything between Highland Village and Jefferson Boulevard was really to Stephen's liking. There was the vacant Nolen's Discount Sales, an old Quonset hut.

Also there were DeCook's Inn and Briscoe Mobile Home Park, both fairly old.

So Stephens bought them and paid for having occupied mobile homes moved to other trailer parks. That move was a relief to the city, since it was as though Stephens was doing redevelopment for them.

Rea said 22 of the 40 mobile homes in the park had been tagged for no occupancy because they didn't meet minimum housing standards.

"We were wondering how to address that," Rea said. "We weren't sure what we could do."

Because Stephens solved that problem for them, city officials decided to use federal funds to tear down DeCook's, Nolen's and the office at Briscoe.

Stephens is now in the process of buying Twin City Mobile Home Park on the north side of Jefferson and says he is negotiating to buy other property.

He envisions traffic circles, or roundabouts, at the intersections of Jefferson Boulevard and Fir Road and Jefferson and Merrifield Avenue.

He'd like to see a couple of restaurants between them, along with a couple of small strip malls, maybe with a coffee shop and other offerings.

Stephens would also like to see a convenience store in the area of Jefferson "so people can buy some groceries without having to drive 10 miles."

He envisions a sort of old-fashioned neighborhood in which people can get the services they need.

City is developing, too

While he's working along Jefferson Boulevard itself, the city is busy sprucing things up to the north.

Mishawaka is fixing up streets and sidewalks on East Borley Avenue and streets to the north.

The Redevelopment Department also will build 11 new homes as part of the First-Time Homebuyers Program.

Stephens is excited about that because it gets homes in another price range into the neighborhood.

Improvements to Jefferson from Byrkit to Elder also should be finished next spring.

Stephens also has a memorandum of understanding with the city of Mishawaka under which he would develop the old Uniroyal/Ball Band property downtown as IronWorks of Mishawaka.

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