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FEATURED

Southpointe at 25: always a focal point, never a folly

Rick Shrum Jul 21, 2018 Updated 2 hrs ago



Photo courtesy of Washington County Redevelopment Authority

Breaking ground at Southpointe more than a quarter-century ago are, from left, Roland Bourke, director of the Washington County Redevelopment Authority; state Sen. J. Barry Stout; and Washington County Commissioners Metro Petrosky, Frank Mascara and Ed Paluso.

It began in the mid-1980s, with planners, developers and elected officials scrutinizing an expanse of mostly undeveloped land enveloping a once-notorious reform school. Transforming the rolling hills into a mixed-use business park, they believed, could be an effective salve for the economic ails of Washington County.



Celeste Van Kirk/Observer-Reporter

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Rod Piatt, president of Horizon Properties Group and one of the major developers of the business park, is shown at his office at Southpointe on July 6.

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County Commissioner Frank Mascara was a staunch believer in developing these 500-plus acres of Cecil Township, just north of Canonsburg. Western Center – a state residential facility for people with intellectual disabilities – operated there, on the site of the former Morganza reform school. But essentially, the state-owned property surrounding it was where the deer and antelope played.

Mascara the proponent, however, had many opponents. They referred to the plan, derisively, as “Frank’s Folly.”

“People said it was never going to work. They asked: ‘Why even do this?’” recalled Kerry Fox of Washington County Redevelopment Authority. But within a few years, the resulting public-private partnership orchestrated a project that, frankly, has not been a folly but a resounding triumph.

For 25 years, Southpointe has been taking care of business every day, taking care of business every way. This is a mixed-use park heavy on business, but also is home to homes, hotels, restaurants, retail, colleges, an ice arena and manufacturing. It comprises 806 acres, the original 589 of Southpointe I and the 217 of Southpointe II.



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A multi-image panoramic view of Southpointe from the Hilton Garden Inn

Holly Tonini

An estimated 300 companies have located there, some in their national headquarters, including ANSYS, Consol Energy, Range Resources and Mylan. Energy firms love the park, located in the midsection of the Marcellus and Utica shales.

“We’re really fortunate to have so many publicly traded companies in Southpointe,” said Rod Piatt, president of Horizon Properties Group, the lead developer of Southpointe II. His firm, Millcraft and Burns & Scalo Real Estate largely built Southpointe, where an estimated 15,000 people work and 1,000 live.

This is not a stereotypical business park, either, with cookie-cutter buildings. The structures, limited to four or five stories, are all different. Well-manicured green space abounds. Curbs, sidewalks and roadways are neat and maintained. And when lit up, Southpointe takes on the aura of a large city as nighttime commuters pass on Interstate 79.

“Landscaping is meticulously maintained, along with lighting and water. Trash is picked up every day,” said Mike Swisher, Horizon’s principal. “Every building gets a health report every year. This not only helps maintain property values, it makes it a beautiful park. A lot of time goes into making it beautiful.”

So much has gone so well there, but the launch wasn’t easily accomplished.

The stars aligned

“Many stars had to line up to make this happen,” Piatt said, flashing back to the “Frank’s Folly” days. His father was among the brightest in that constellation.



Jack Piatt, founder and chairman of Millcraft Investments, was a major inspiration behind Southpointe. He said in a telephone interview last week he was cruising down I-79 with Delvin Miller, horse racing legend and Washington County icon, when Miller said, “we should build a golf course here.” They were motoring past Western Center, high on a distant hill.

Rod Piatt, president of Horizon Properties Group and one of the major developers of the business park, is shown at his office at Southpointe on July 6.

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Piatt, who had a golf course community in Florida, said he called Mascara shortly afterward. "I told him that maybe we could do something with this land where we

could work, live and play."

The Piatts began to meet with the other commissioners, Metro Petrosky and Ed Paluso; Redevelopment Authority Director Roland Bourke and his predecessor, Keery McAmbley; and others.



The story of the Southpointe plant-nappers

There is a mini-dispute as to where – and when – the concept of Southpointe originated. Fox said McAmbley, a glider pilot during the invasion of Normandy, proposed the plan a few years earlier, "and Roland ran with it."

The bigger dispute, though, was whether there should be a park. “You wouldn’t believe the Cecil Township meetings,” Fox said. “Nobody wanted it. There was a lot of hunting and fishing on that property. We had to put horses up to block the roads.”

Yet, there were Southpointe supporters. “It looked like it could be an economic boom when the county was in distress,” Fox said.

Enter Mascara. “Frank was all in on this,” Swisher said. “He was a strong leader. If we did not have such strong leadership, someone could have panicked and said ‘stop.’”



Matt Piatt/Horizon Properties Group, LLC

An image of Southpointe II captured by a drone piloted by Matt Piatt for Horizon Properties Group, LLC

Also enter Barry Stout, the Democratic state senator from Bentleyville. He was a linchpin in the county acquiring the 589 acres of unused Southpointe I property in 1987 from the state. The commissioners purchased the land for \$706,710 – payable over 10 years, interest free. Seven

years later, Stout would be a key figure in another key project – construction of a \$17 million Hendersonville interchange at the northern end of the project, off I-79.

“Barry recognized that great development opportunities existed if you have great infrastructure,” Rod Piatt said.

The golf course? It was one of the initial entities to operate in the park, a nine-hole layout that opened in the spring of 1995, with the clubhouse in a townhouse. The other nine holes opened in fairly short order.

Gaining momentum

Swisher was working in Florida in the late '80s when Jack Piatt and the county hired him to craft the master plan for Southpointe. The process took awhile, but Swisher said the project gained traction, then momentum.

Tax abatements were a major factor early on, said Roger Carrier, who owns Hershey Leasing Co. and three buildings in the park. “For developers then, abating taxes for five years was a tremendous welcome sign,” he said. “As a businessman, you really feel good about that.”

Under the abatement, Carrier said, developers did not have to pay taxes to the county and Canon-McMillan School District for five years, or to Cecil the first year. They then had to pay the township a rising percentage of their tax responsibility each of the following four years.

“Within five years, every lot was sold (in Southpointe I),” said Carrier, current chairman of the Southpointe Property Owners Association. “It was Frank’s Folly, then BOOM – all were sold.”

Swisher said, “Once the abatement ended, the township and, to a greater extent, the Canon-McMillan School District had a



Photo courtesy of Roger Carrier

Construction of the entrance to Southpointe on the south end of the development

consistent revenue stream. Cecil and North Strabane townships are great places to raise families because of this consistent tax money.”

Moving in

Marty Beichner readily recalls the day his company moved to Southpointe.

“March 13, 1993,” he said with his trademark gap-toothed grin. A blizzard that dropped 27 inches of snow on the region coincided with the day Accutrex Inc. relocated its manufacturing operation from West Chestnut Street in Washington.

Beichner, a Vietnam veteran and a founder of his firm, had accepted an offer from Jack Piatt to move to the embryonic park 12 miles to the north. Accutrex, a precision metal fabricator, had its mettle tested in a way, becoming the first company to open in Southpointe.

“It was a beautiful building,” he said from his office in the south end of the park, where development first occurred. Turn from Morganza Road, cross the bridge and it’s on the right, just before AUMA.

Beichner has had no regrets about being there, especially since restaurants opened a few years ago in the park’s Town Center – satisfying a void nearby. He has liked the park all along.

Accutrex was followed into the park, in fairly quick order, by Baxter Health Care (formerly Mictec), Bailey Engineering, Stevens Painton and AEG Daimler Benz (formerly Bayside Automation).

Printscape, the former Iceoplex, is a short stroll from Accutrex. The facility was eighth business to open in Southpointe, in May 1995, and became an immediate drawing card. The Pittsburgh Penguins, Stanley Cup champions a mere three years earlier, started practicing there when the rink opened and remained until 2015, when they moved to the UPMC Lemieux Sports Complex in Cranberry.



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Marty Beichner, CEO of AccuTrex Products in Southpointe, stands in the machine shop at AccuTrex.

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Millcraft, Horizon and Burns & Scalo Real Estate

Development of Southpointe II began in 2004 on the Western Center property after the state facility was closed, and has had a profound impact, providing variety, vibrancy and greater viability to the park. Town Center is popular for its many offerings, including more green spaces, walking areas and dining destinations. A large apartment complex was built there. And the trendy concept of co-working loft offices is available nearby.

Park Place at Southpointe Town Center, a hotel-office complex, is expected to open soon in that vicinity. Swisher said it will have 50,000 square feet of office space, ground-floor retail and 90 hotel rooms.

In its 25th anniversary year, the park has a golden glow.

“No, I never envisioned Southpointe being as big as it has gotten,” Rod Piatt said. “I don’t think anyone could have projected this.”

Jeff Kotula, president of the Washington County Chamber of Commerce, praised Southpointe for continuing to “respond to an ever-changing economic environment. Over the years, it has seen a variety of focus industries contribute to the growth of the park and to our region. Southpointe continues to be the standard for successful public-private partnership in our region, state and – I would argue – country.”

Beichner, president and chief executive officer of pioneering Accutrex, calls Southpointe “a rousing success. I don’t know if other areas of the country are trying to mimic this (development), but it surely has been successful here.”

Perhaps more than anyone could have anticipated.

Rick Shrum

Business Writer

Rick Shrum joined the Observer-Reporter as a reporter in 2012, after serving as a section editor, sports reporter and copy editor at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Rick has won seven individual writing awards, including two Golden Quills.