

Developers, businesses flock to Newtown
Planned expansion at Curtis Corporate Park among new construction

By Joe Gould
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NEWTOWN — Curtis Corporate Park's plan to build a 24,200-square-foot building is just one project on a laundry list of commercial and industrial developments around town.

The local development should prove a boon to the town in the form of jobs and tax revenue, said Elizabeth Stocker, director of economic development and community planning.

"New jobs and definitely new taxes on the real estate," Stocker said. "Depending on what they put in those buildings, we could see even more property taxes."

The corporate park, owned by Curtis Corp., is erecting the new building without having a tenant, said owner Don Droppo Sr. Suitable for light manufacturing, warehouses or distribution, the building won approval last week from the town Planning and Zoning Commission.

The structure would house the office park's second occupant, in addition to Curtis Packaging.

Furniture retailer La-Z-Boy Furniture Galleries built a new headquarters and distribution center and moved into the 30,000-square-foot building on Aug. 1, said Tom Greene, principal owner.

La-Z-Boy, which has a handful of stores in Connecticut, found handling inventory and warehousing at each store was inefficient and cumbersome. Though the weak economy hurt La-Z-Boy's business, it did not dull the need for a centralized distribution center, Greene said.

"The economy is not good, and we've been struggling, though the last month has been better," Greene said. "We just want to be ready when" the economy improves.

Distribution centers like La-Z-Boy find Newtown attractive for its proximity to Interstate 84 and routes 25 and 34. That's why Braun Moving, on Barnabas Road in Sandy Hook, decided to expand its 19,700-square-foot warehouse by 28,300 square feet.

Braun, which employs 140 people, plans to add as many as 10 jobs. The company juggles a mix of local and long-distance moving, storage, and product distribution.

Newtown "is closer to our customer base in southern Fairfield County, the Gold Coast. Commercial real estate down there is real expensive," said owner Phil Braun, whose company is beginning its expansion.

Business may be booming in the building trades, and not just locally. "Call a plumber or an electrician, they might take six weeks to get out here," Braun said. "The builder I'm working with is working on several other projects."

According to Joe Wrinn, a commercial-industrial Realtor with the Goodfellow-Ashmore Agency, companies are investing in property because interest rates are low.

"I've seen a lots more sales than leases in the 10,000- to 50,000-square-foot range," Wrinn said. "Downsizing is creating space where, hopefully, new companies will move in."

Though Newtown's location is attractive, Wrinn has seen growth throughout the Newtown-Danbury area because companies are drawn to its educated work force.

The region is home to technology companies that Wrinn called "recession-proof," and which could be looking to expand.

Smaller expansion plans in Newtown include a 3,600-square-foot addition to a Queen Street medical office, a 15,000-square-foot expansion at 14 and 18 Church Hill Road, and a new 7,500-square-foot office building on Berkshire Road, among others.

Some expanding firms are in areas of business that benefit from a recession.

Mike Bodetti's consulting firm, TNT Partners, negotiates with telecommunications companies on behalf of corporate clients and audits their telephone bills to save clients money.

The recession has been a boon for Bodetti, who two years ago worked out of his garage.

TNT's clients — which include GE and Priceline.com — are in strong negotiating positions.

"We provide a self-refunding service. We reduce the client's cost such that it costs them nothing to hire us," Bodetti said. "They're hiring us even as they're laying people off."

As TNT grew, Bodetti bought land on Berkshire Road and had a 7,500-square-foot office building constructed for the company. After going through the process, Bodetti realized he could build another office building, rent it out, and generate more profits for the company.

A down economy seemed like the right time. "The economy goes up and down all the time," said Bodetti. "It's the people who do something when the economy is at its peak that have the most problems as it goes down."

The town may yet have more space for commercial-industrial development. According to Stocker, town officials are considering plans for a new industrial park on 40 vacant acres along Commerce Road that would be part of the Fairfield Hills property the town plans to purchase from the state.

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