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Business Development Section

Making Cedar Center 'whole' again

BY: CHRISTINE GORDILLO Freelance Writer

When The Coral Company purchased the University Heights portion of Cedar Center seven years ago, Coral CEO Peter Rubin had a simple goal in mind: "Make it a gathering place ... a place where people want to run into their neighbors," Rubin says.



"What we try to do is fix the urban fabric." Peter Rubin, CEO The Coral Company



Turning commercial properties into sought-after destinations is the thread that runs through all of Coral Company's many commercial development projects, from Shaker Square to Lakewood City Center to Strongsville Pointe. The mission of the company, celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, is to improve the quality of life in neighborhoods surrounding its properties and engage residents in their community.

"What we try to do is fix the urban fabric," Rubin said.

Which may be easier said than done, especially when it comes to a place like the former Cedar Center.

"The University Heights side was not in as desperate a need for redevelopment as the other (South Euclid) side, but it had certainly passed its useful life," explains Rubin. "The buildings were obsolete in an engineering sense and an aesthetic sense." Shoppers had to put up with poor parking, frustrating traffic, and worn-out storefronts.

But through meticulous planning, sophisticated design, critical cooperation with city officials and existing tenants n oh, and the arrival of Cleveland's first Whole

Foods Market n The Coral Company has managed to accomplish its mission with Cedar Center.

Despite the difficulties any business endures during a construction project, existing tenants say that on the whole, they are pleased with the results.

Mark Vogley, owner of the MotoPhoto franchise at Cedar Center for the past 12 years, says he's noticed a significant pickup in foot traffic since Whole Foods opened in March. His business is finally getting back to its pre-construction levels, and despite small complaints like lack of adequate signage, Vogley said Coral has done "a nice job redeveloping the center."

Longtime tenant Nassif Chamoun, who has run Georgio's Oven Fresh Pizza Co. since 2001, also says business is "starting to pick up" again in his new location (His original store was in the portion of the plaza that was demolished to make way for the Whole Foods building).

The nitty-gritty of urban design helped transform Cedar Center into the convenient, easy-to-use place Rubin envisioned.

"First we needed to fix the planning building blocks ... traffic, access, parking, visibility," Rubin explains. Through cooperation with University Heights and county officials, Cedar Road was widened, a new central entry point was added, and a traffic light installed at the new entrance.

Also critical to the redevelopment was the back-of-the-building revival.

"The back was isolated, underused and neglected," says Rubin. "One of the promises we made to the people of University Heights is that we would activate the back." Now with the larger back parking lot, the parking ramp entrance for Whole Foods, O'Reilly's Pub, the License Bureau, Tuesday Morning and new tenant First Watch (an eatery) on the corner, "we were able ... to animate the back."

Once Coral had its building blocks in place, the next step was landing a "transformational" tenant for the new building at the corner of Cedar and Warrensville Center Roads. Enter Whole Foods Market.

Although Rubin did not have Whole Foods in mind when constructing the new portion of the plaza, the grocer's arrival at the plaza couldn't be a more perfect fit.

“They’re the inspiration for what’s being done here,” Rubin says. “When you shop in the Whole Foods store, the experience is more than just shopping ... It’s social and engaging,” Rubin adds. The way the store is set up from its café to its fish market to its salad and dessert buffets “encourages interaction; you end up in conversation with people.” It’s exactly the kind of urban meeting place Rubin strives to create with all of Coral’s projects.

And the community has responded. Although Whole Foods recently laid off 15% of its employees due to initial overstaffing, Whole Foods’s vice president for Mid-Atlantic regional operations Jane Mueller says the “response to the store’s arrival has been incredible.” It continues to perform beyond Whole Foods’s projections even after the initial surge in interest, drawing customers from as far east as Madison and far west as Avon Lake.

“Coral has been incredibly supportive” of our efforts, Mueller notes. “They are making it easier for people to shop and get in and out of that area.”

The 127,000-square-foot retail plaza is about 85% full. The only large space available is the nearly 17,000 square feet that formerly housed Cedar Center Lanes. Rubin is considering splitting it into multiple lots, as it’s been difficult to find the right tenant for such a big space, the developer admits. And Rubin won’t settle for just any tenant. If the space is to remain intact, he wants a “transformational” tenant on the level of Whole Foods to boost the dynamic of the plaza.

Rubin is also in talks with Inland Real Estate Group, the owner of University Square across the street, to find ways, such as joint marketing, to bring a more cohesive feel to the corner of Cedar and Warrensville Center Roads.

“We’re looking at how to make a stronger physical connection across Cedar so that University Square and Cedar Center feel like they relate to each other,” Rubin says. Right now, Warrensville Center Road “feels like a barrier.”

While the bones of the project are in place, finishing touches aimed at further enhancing the shopping experience are still incomplete, namely lighting and landscaping. You can bet The Coral Company will be on top of it all, literally: In February, Rubin moved the company’s headquarters from Beachwood to a 7,000-square-foot office on the second floor of the new Whole

Foods building.

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