

## Outstanding New Building Project

### ***Narrative***

### ***Publix Supermarket***

#### Fort Myers CRA

Without a healthy residential population, it was difficult to attract the retail businesses, restaurants, and entertainment components required to create a revitalized urban center. In the case of the Downtown District, the downtown was faced with the conundrum that it needed residents to attract the retail AND yet it needed a grocery store to attract the residents. The solution: the Fort Myers CRA formed an innovative partnership with one of the high-rise developers and a national real estate firm in order to bring a top-brand, full service grocery store into the district.

### **Innovation**

- The CRA was faced with two major obstacles before a grocery store would agree to locate in the Downtown District: a residential population too small to attract a top-brand, full service grocery store and securing a site large enough to accommodate such a store. Overcoming these two obstacles called for the formation of innovative solutions and partnerships. First, since the surrounding residential development was not complete at the time a grocery store was being pursued, a five-year rent abatement, funded by TIF dollars, was used to attract the 40,000 sq. ft. Publix. Secondly, since the only downtown site large enough to accommodate the grocery store and adjoining parking lot was owned by Cameratta Properties, the developer of High Point Place and the proposed 12-acre First Street Village, the Publix project also required convincing Cameratta to sell 1/3 of his property to Regency Realty to accommodate the Publix. The combination of a tax increment rebate to cover the developer's potential lost revenue, coupled with the benefits generated by having a new Publix located across the street from his High Point Place and First Street Village projects, convinced the developer to sell.
- Developing an innovative design was crucial to the success of the project since the Publix supermarket would be located on McGregor Boulevard, a state-recognized historic scenic highway, as well as surrounded by single family homes and condominiums purchased primarily for their riverfront views. The CRA worked closely with Publix, Cameratta and Regency to design a store façade which ensured the beauty of the area remained uninterrupted by the introduction of a large, commercial supermarket.
  - To maintain the visual flow of McGregor Boulevard, the front of the store and the parking lot are located in the center of the block, with the back of the store—facing McGregor Boulevard—designed to look like a high-quality storefront featuring faux windows, doors and architectural features.
  - One of the more brilliant features of the design is that the loading docks, dumpsters, and all “back of the house” functions are fully enclosed and covered with an attractive roof for visual and sound protection from the surrounding neighbors, including the views from above.
  - In an effort to ensure the project did not encroach on the neighborhood, the parking lot was designed with townhomes, retail shops, and a landscaped trellis lining the parking lot to create a more aesthetically-pleasing pedestrian experience.

## **Impact on the Community**

- Building the Publix in close proximity to nearby buildings and neighborhoods allows residents to enjoy socializing with neighbors as well as shopping. Many residents are able to walk or ride bicycles to the store in lieu of driving, resulting in smaller, more frequent shopping trips that create more opportunities to meet and get to know their neighbors. Neighborhood social interaction and security has improved, and the gas savings residents experience is an added bonus. Enjoyment of the social interactions and the gas savings is not just limited to the direct neighborhood, many people working in the core downtown area stop at Publix on their way to or from work.

## **Funding**

- A five-year rent abatement of \$600,000 per year, funded from the Downtown District's tax increment funds, was used to entice Publix to open before the surrounding residential development was completed. The presence of the grocery store boosted sales in the surrounding new and existing residential developments as well as encouraged improvements in the surrounding commercial developments. Within 18 months of Publix's construction, over \$7 million of improvements and new construction occurred within a one-half mile radius of the project. Pointe Royale, a high-rise community, made approximately \$4 million of improvements; while two engineering firms, a law office, and an insurance office have recently expanded and/or completed extensive façade renovations as well.

## **Problem Solving**

- Building the Publix grocery store directly in the midst of downtown residents solved a number of community problems. The grocery store provided a unique shopping experience and created a meeting place for residents occupying the nearly 3,000 residential units in downtown, much like a town square did in centuries past. A full-service grocery store also helped to attract new residents to the new riverfront condos adjacent to it, like High Point Place. Additionally, the convenient shopping for elderly shoppers in the nearby Presbyterian Towers and in the surrounding area delighted these citizens, reducing the need to find motorized transportation and allowing them to maintain an active lifestyle.
- One of the primary challenges in attracting a top-brand, full-service grocery store to the only downtown site large enough to accommodate this use was that not all of the residential development was complete, an issue with supermarkets looking for a strong customer-base upon opening. Further complicating things was the fact that this site was owned by a developer who already had plans for a large, twelve-acre mixed-use project and was not planning to sell off 1/3 of his property. The combination of a tax increment rebate to cover the developer's potential lost revenue, coupled with the benefits generated by a new Publix opening across the street from both of his projects convinced the developer to sell. The rent abatement to Publix enabled the CRA to work with Publix to achieve the high quality design necessary for the project to successfully be woven into the fabric of the neighborhood.
- The location of the site identified for the new Publix grocery store is situated in the historic Edison Park neighborhood and fronting on McGregor Boulevard, which was recognized as a historic highway by the Florida State Legislature in 1975. The problem to be surmounted was not only designing a unique structure to complement its surroundings, but engaging Publix to partner in redesigning required facilities like loading docks, trash receptacles, and the back of the building, both to fit the historically-significant area as well as to maintain visual and sound protection for residents, some of whom live directly across the street from the supermarket. The design was accomplished by creating Florida-Mediterranean stucco-over-block architecture, as detailed in "Other Exemplary Aspects of the Design, Plan or

Program”. With the rent abatement from the CRA as an incentive, Publix agreed to use an extraordinary cutting-edge design better situated to an urban environment than their normal store prototype.

### **Applicability to Other Communities**

- Other communities facing similar difficulties in bringing a grocery store to their downtown area may find the following lessons learned from the Fort Myers experience helpful:
  - The timely use of rent abatement to lure a major chain supermarket when the retail customer base may not be established completely, as well as using the rent abatement as an incentive to encourage creative building and site design to meet specific community needs;
  - Offering tax increment rebates to existing developers who may hold some or all of the land for the proposed grocery store;
  - Active marketing of the benefits of a neighborhood grocery store to potential residential developers and/or potential end-users; and
  - The importance of a neighborhood market to the community in terms of convenient shopping resulting in more frequent shopping trips and the subsequent increase in pedestrian and bicycle traffic with its health benefits. In addition, there is the town square effect, which builds the community through increased social interaction between neighbors.

### **Other Exemplary Aspects of the Design, Plan or Program**

- The high-quality rear façade, completely-enclosed loading docks, mature landscaping, and parking lot which is accessible only from the side streets are all exemplary aspects of the unique design that Publix agreed to provide in order to attain a pedestrian-friendly, urban design. These design elements, described in greater detail below, were crucial to placing the grocery store in this particular historic district and on this particular lot.
  - The back of the store—featuring faux windows and doors, benches, and planters filled with lush vegetation—is as attractive, if not more so, than the front of the store.
  - The fact that the loading operation is screened by an attractive roof in the building’s covered dock design, allowing deliveries to be made out of the view of the surrounding neighborhood, shows the level of detail and thought that went into this design.
  - Even included in the design was attention to how the roofs of the building would be seen from existing and potential high-rise residential units. (See Slide 2, 3, & 6)
  - The Florida-Mediterranean stucco-over-block architecture includes added trim to make the massive commercial building feel less angular and more inviting than the traditional strip mall store.
  - The parking lot, positioned in the center of the block out of view of the scenic highway, is cloaked on three sides by retail businesses on the west, townhomes on the north, a vine-laden trellis on the east, and the store on the south. Since the parking lot is only accessible through side streets, passersby on the two main roads, McGregor Boulevard and First Street, would not even be aware that they were driving past a large supermarket if it weren’t for the tasteful signage announcing the fact.
  - Mature landscaping, in the form of tall palms continuing the roadside palms paralleling the road for which McGregor Boulevard is renown, and other tropical vegetation, completes the design to tie Publix into the historic neighborhood.