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Building Good Will and More

By ANTOINETTE MARTIN

Times being tough for New Jersey real estate, the news is mostly hard to take; but this concerns some news that isn't.

In recent weeks, a Hoboken charter school's desperate need for new facilities was met by a community-minded developer, architect and construction team, who transformed a long-vacant building for school use in under three months.

And a real estate developer, in response to his wife's breast cancer, organized a major landlord effort to finance cancer research: At 250 properties with more than 70,000 units, \$10 is being donated for each lease signed this month. "Sometimes, being in the real estate world means you can make really good things happen in the overall world," said Andrew B. Abramson, the president of Value Companies, which is based in Clifton.

Mr. Abramson, whose wife, Lisa, had two bouts of cancer in seven years, set up the Cure Breast Cancer Foundation in 2007, after her recovery. It helps underwrite the work of Dr. Larry Norton, the medical director of the Evelyn H. Lauder Breast Center at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan, who is testing his theories on tumor growth and metastasis, and how to treat them.

This month, for National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, Mr. Abramson signed up many of the largest landlords in New Jersey — including Roseland Property Company, Sterling Properties, Segal & Segal, and dozens of others — to "give back for a good cause."

The rental business has been faring better in recent months, according to market reports, with some companies starting to eliminate leasing incentives like a month's free rent, which became commonplace during the worst of the recession.

Not so for the building and construction industry: The number of construction starts is still at low levels. In the case of the Hoboken Charter School, this real estate adversity happened to help, at least in some respects.

"Work is slow pretty much everywhere," said James F. Caulfield, who with his brother, Robert, is a principal of the Fields Development Group in Hoboken, where his family has been in the real estate business for three generations. "When we got the call about the school, we were able to jump right on it," he said.

He got the call last June from George Cahn, whose company Cahn Communications does public relations for Fields Development — and whose 7-year-old daughter attends Hoboken

Charter. Mr. Cahn outlined a "totally frantic" situation, and asked if Fields could help.

The kindergarten-through-Grade-12 Hoboken Charter, like all such tuition-free charters, receives public school aid from the state but is not eligible to occupy a public school building without paying. It had been renting space at the Demarest High School for a dozen years.

Last fall, it was told it had to move out by the start of this school year, because space was required to house students displaced from another public school while it underwent repairs. (Later, there turned out to be room enough for the high school-age charter students to stay put.)

By dint of determination, and some real estate smarts on the part of parents like Mr. Cahn, the charter was able to find and lease a new facility in Hoboken by last June, said Deirdra Grode, its principal. But that still left school officials scrambling: The "new" building was the old Academy of the Sacred Heart, a former Catholic school at 713 Washington Street that had been vacant for six years.

"The problem was, the building was falling apart," Mr. Caulfield said.

A local architect, Dean Marchetto, had speedily drawn up a plan to bring the building up to code requirements, and expressed willingness to spend long



hours at supervision. But readying the building in time would still require herculean efforts by a construction team.

Mr. Caulfield cataloged some of the issues: “The fire escapes needed to be replaced, the roof had lots of holes in it, the plumbing and heating were shot, some asbestos removal had to be done, rooms needed to be reconfigured, new bathrooms put in, etc., etc.”

Luckily, he said, “senior guys” were free. “I could donate the time to oversee a six- or seven-day-a-week work schedule. Subcontractors were available, and dying to work. We just took their cheapest bids, and pushed on through.”

A miracle of sorts took place at the old parochial school — which coincidentally Mr. Caulfield’s aunt, now in her 70s, attended as a girl. The work was done correctly, so there was no need for redos despite the hasty pace.

A certificate of occupancy was issued one week into the regular school year. And Hoboken Charter’s 200 kindergarten-through-Grade-8 students were bounding up the steps and being welcomed “home” by Sept. 22.



Tom White for The New York Times

Andrew Abramson, in white cap, joins a fund-raising walk for a breast cancer foundation.