

Innsbrook: The Next Generation

By Harry Kollatz Jr. - Published: July 27th, 2011

In 1979, Glen Allen and Short Pump were country crossroads. Inn(e)sbrook was a lane, not a development. In 30 years, the Innsbrook commercial park has gone from the next new thing to a candidate for a massive makeover.

Back in 1997, an entrant to Innsbrook Today's "You're Very Innsbrook If" contest quipped, "You think the Fan is something you use to keep cool and that the Bottom is what you sit on."

The statement wasn't mere braggadocio from a Far West End suburbanite tweaking Richmond's venerated neighborhoods. There was truth in the sarcasm.

Innsbrook had been growing while nearby Richmond stagnated due to multiple urban problems, from crime to challenged schools.

But by 2009, for the first time, entire buildings stood empty in Innsbrook. Wachovia Financial Securities packed up for St. Louis; LandAmerica Financial Group and Circuit City went bankrupt; Capital One consolidated its offices at West Creek in Goochland; and Owens & Minor got its own place in Hanover.

The vacancy rate shot up to 25 percent by the third quarter of 2009. Out of that has come a new direction for the region's first office park. Innsbrook, with newly approved land uses, is growing up into something that will resemble a city. It will go vertical.



Born the same year as Innsbrook, Kevin Smith embodies the park's live, work and play concept. He works at Markel, lives in nearby Willow Run and oversees St. Baldrick's Day. *Chris Smith photo*



Innsbrook and its entrance on Broad Street. *John Henley photo*

Worklivenplay

This is the era of Innsbrook Next.

The owner and neighborhood associations met during the past two years to determine how best to transform a commercial office park into something else.

It's suburban redevelopment.

In Innsbrook, though, there's no old funky warehouse district for artists to squat in or for kids to throw raves. There's no riverside adorned by rusting and tumbled reminders of an industrial past.

Innsbrook came of age in a time of information processing.

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Sidney J. Gunst Jr., a self-described “ambitious 28-year-old with an idea and no money” proposed in 1979 what became Innsbrook to Henry Stern and David Arenstein. They owned 291 acres of the Erin Shades farm in western Henrico.

Stern and Arenstein had built Three Chopt West and English Hills apartments. They considered a similar future for Erin Shades.

Gunst contemplated something like what Reston Town Center would become up in Northern Virginia, a mix of retail, restaurants, offices and residential space. Zoning requirements, however, divided commercial, retail and residential land uses. The concept of urban mixed-use zoning hadn’t yet made inroads in Henrico County.

“I wasn’t a genius,” Gunst says. “I didn’t break any new ground. I worked within the requirements then in place while emphasizing excellent design, given the restrictions.”

Gunst isn’t anti-city. He grew up in and around the Fan, first on Mulberry Street and then at Tuscan Villa Apartments. He lived for years in a 3-mile radius around Patterson and Forest avenues. Biking across the country and climbing Mount Everest came somewhat later.

By Innsbrook time, he’d already designed a subdivision called Rosemont off Dickens Road. He was working for the Short Pump-based Pruitt development family.

If an eye exam had gone another way, Gunst might’ve become a Navy fighter pilot; instead he saw in the fields of Erin Shades the potential not for corn or cattle but an opportunity to do something big. This would become a place to live, work and play. When said almost as one word, as Gunst does, the phrase sounds like an incantation.

“Worklivenplay” made Innsbrook appear.

Not by magic. And not overnight.

“How Cities Get Built”

Hewlett Packard opened offices at Innsbrook in October 1981. Then came American Home Funding, Virginia Power and CIGNA. As Innsbrook grew, a library, hotels and fire stations opened. Nearby, the planned communities of Wyndham, Twin Hickory and Wellesley came tumbling out of each other like Russian nesting dolls.

Gunst ticks off Innsbrook’s — and suburbia’s — reasons for existing: subsidized roads, cheap energy, land-use planning that caters to automobiles, and strict separation of building types that encouraged what became known as sprawl.

For Innsbrook, Gunst didn’t want neocolonial buildings mixed among contemporary designs, and he didn’t want oceans of concrete. He favored trees, lakes and pocket parks, and Burrell Saunders connected with Gunst’s vision. He worked for the busy Virginia Beach-based firm CMSS, now H&A Architects and Engineers. Innsbrook was Saunders’ first effort at large-scale planning, and paths and trails separated buildings.



Innsbrook’s early days, when the business park was considered too far from other development.
Photo courtesy Innsbrook Foundation

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By 1999, Innsbrook's numbers looked great: more than 5 million square feet of space, 17,000 jobs at more than 400 companies in 85 buildings. Highwoods was constructing offices for the new credit-card company Capital One, which had spun out of Signet Bank six years earlier. About 6,000 Capital One employees worked in 16 Innsbrook locations that gave the owner's association reason to trumpet Innsbrook as "Richmond's largest employer."

In a May 1999 Richmond magazine article, architect Saunders prophetically said, "Difficult to conceive of today, but redevelopment will eventually come to Innsbrook. That's how cities get built; in successive stages, one layer on top of another."

From the Neighborhood

Kevin Smith was born the same year as Innsbrook, in 1979. He works and lives there. He's 10 years and a day younger than the other Kevin Smith, the director of Clerks, that paean to strip-mall minimum-wage anomie.

Our Kevin Smith, growing up near the University of Richmond, knew about Innsbrook mostly through its concert series. This was before the Pavilion, when the music was just off Broad, where Silver Diner is today. "Lynyrd Skynyrd seemed to be there all the time," he jokes.

Today he works for the insurance carrier Markel Corporation in one of those office-park jobs that even he finds difficult to explain. He says it's best described as information-technology support. That is, when you mess up your computer, he's the guy who figures out what you did wrong. He graduated from Virginia Tech in business management. One day, he may run a restaurant, maybe along one of the lakes where the Innsbrook Next plan envisions such endeavors.

From his office, Smith can see a lake with a fountain and, if trees weren't in the way, he'd view his Willow Run house. The parking lot for the building where he works is catty-cornered to the end of the street where he lives, but he seldom takes this walk.

"I tend to drive because I like to run errands during lunch, but in the afternoon, I'll walk my dog around the lake." It's a Great Dane named Jackson. Kids love Jackson. "They'll run up and ask me, 'Is that a small horse?'"

On Aug. 20, he's marrying Wendy Walton, whom he met in 2010 during the Richmond Corporate Games at Innsbrook. "We work in the same building but not the same company," he explains, with a slight laugh. "She's with Highwoods." Highwoods Properties, based in Raleigh, N.C., is Innsbrook's primary developer.



In a 1950s-era photo, farms stand on land that is now Innsbrook. Photo courtesy Innsbrook Foundation

Hard Times

Another major builder in Innsbrook's early period was the family-run Lingerfelt Development Corporation, which in 1995 became part of the Liberty Property Trust. Alan T. Lingerfelt served as Liberty's senior vice president for a dozen years. In 2007, Lingerfelt retired from Liberty. With his son, Ryan, he decided to fire up the old family business.

"Then the world ended," Lingerfelt says of the economic downturn in 2008. For two years they built nothing, instead concentrating on management and leasing. In 2010, the opportunity arose to purchase properties, when Liberty Trust chose to reposition its place in the market by leaving suburban office parks in Virginia and Pennsylvania.

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A team of 20 people worked for six months to close the deal. Lingerfelt says wearily, “If it hadn’t have worked out, I would’ve tied a big brick around my ankles and tossed myself off a bridge. Thankfully, it didn’t come to that.”

In May, his company purchased 14 buildings in Innsbrook and its environs — almost a million square feet worth close to \$100 million, including offices Lingerfelt had built for Innsbrook, like Liberty Plaza I and II and Rowe Plaza.

Suburban Retrofit

Driving through Innsbrook today, there still seems to be a proliferation of rental signs, but vacancies, Innsbrook officials say, are down from the 25 percent of 2009’s third quarter to around 8 percent today. Capital One has bought two buildings in the park, and Snagajob.com is moving to a new building later this year.

About two years ago, Paul Kreckman, vice president of Highwoods and president of the Innsbrook Owners Association, started leading serious discussions throughout the business park about what was needed to ensure its continued growth.

Sheila Sheppard Lovelady, outgoing director of the regional Partnership for Smarter Growth, has observed the re-imagining of Innsbrook with enthusiasm. The suburbs of the recent past have grown according to decisions of private landowners, making it difficult to coordinate planning. “You get development that doesn’t make sense,” she says. Lovelady feels that the new land-use plan for Innsbrook “may become a national example ... of how to retrofit the suburbs.”

In September 2010, when Henrico County approved the new Innsbrook land-use designations, not all residents agreed. A Sadler Green resident was quoted in the Richmond Times-Dispatch saying that if he’d wanted to live in downtown, he would’ve moved there.

The changes at Innsbrook won’t occur rapidly. Henrico County’s planning director R. Joseph Emerson Jr. describes the Innsbrook Study Area in phases, each undergoing rigorous review, over a period of decades.

The first changes are likely to occur west of Cox and south of Nuckols roads, with the construction of new residences, more retail, parking decks and higher rise buildings.

Innsbrook’s massive makeover won’t magically occur, and not overnight.

Kreckman says that the proximity of offices, retail and residential options, ranging from starter homes to homes on a golf course, provide Innsbrook with ample means for redefining itself. Adding more rooftops is one way to make that happen.

Back in 1979, Gunst wasn’t certain potential residents wanted to drive through the park to get home. He had set aside 26 acres of land southeast of Cox and Nuckols roads for residences. Bob Atack built The Village with 72 houses. Gunst recalls, at the time, Henrico wanted low density and distinct separations of residential, commercial and retail. “It’s a dramatic evolution from then to what we’re looking at doing at Innsbrook from this point on,” Gunst says.

Emerson says that as the phases progress, some paved lots will give way to new buildings and parking decks. “The new plan is about going vertical,” he says. High-rise buildings — in designated sections, some perhaps in excess of 20 stories — mean that parks and public spaces will emerge.

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Highwoods is asking the county to rezone 188 acres in Innsbrook for urban mixed-use development, which would include up to 6,000 apartment and condominium units. (The county's Planning Commission could review the application this month.)

Kreckman says, "If you think about how development typically occurs, people move out and populate residential subdivisions, retail follows the rooftops, and last to come out is the office buildings."

Not only is there room in the plan for some form of interior Innsbrook shuttle or tram, but Kreckman notes, "I can see us some years time having a monorail."

Before the monorail, though, what's more likely — though not soon — is a dedicated transit station near the Innsbrook Shoppes connecting with GRTC's proposed bus rapid transit down Broad Street and an Innsbrook circulator.

Community Spirit

Kevin Smith attended all the Innsbrook Next meetings. At one of them, he posed a question about townhouses and shared walls. He was surprised that those in attendance favored them. During a series of architectural discussions in which audiences rated their preferences, parks and landscaped streets with sidewalks won over bare parking lots and strip malls.

Smith doesn't stay in Innsbrook for everything. "I'm a social butterfly. I have friends in the Fan and downtown. I go to all the festivals."

Still, Smith is active in starting new Innsbrook events. He brought St. Baldrick's there in 2010, to the courtyard behind the Innsbrook Shoppes. The premise is that men shave their heads to raise money for children with cancer. The first event garnered \$33,000. This year, combined with St. Patrick's Day, 5,000 people showed up to enjoy the family atmosphere with inflated castles, a petting zoo and face painters, and live broadcasts by Cox Media outlets. St. Baldrick's 2011 shaved 100 heads and yielded \$42,000.

The law firm of Allen, Allen, Allen & Allen recently named Smith as one of its 2011 "Hometown Heroes" for his extensive volunteer work for the Central Virginia Food Bank, Junior Achievement, Special Olympics Virginia, among others.

In the meantime, his wedding-rehearsal dinner will be held at the Richmond Marriott West that, he jokes, is between their office building and home. The Aug. 20 wedding, however, will take place at The Diamond before a Flying Squirrels game.

"I'll throw the first pitch, we'll have the game, and then fireworks."

Innsbrook can't offer anything quite like that. Maybe that's next.