

ADVERTISEMENT

Subscribe

You'll find it in print

To subscribe call 877-335-8149 or go to www.hartfordbusiness.com



HARTFORD BUSINESS JOURNAL

- NEED TO GROW YOUR BUSINESS?
- RESEARCH YOUR COMPETITION?
- FIND HARTFORD'S LATEST BUSINESS NEWS AND ECONOMIC TRENDS?

<http://www.hartfordbusiness.com>

Why Edgewater Hill won E. Hampton neighbors' hearts

BY **GREGORY SEAY**

7/14/2014



PHOTO | PABLO ROBLES

East Hampton developer Stephen J. Motto, left, Lisa M. Motto, and Amenta Emma architect Chris Legiadre in front of the first-phase commercial construction at Edgewater Hill on Route 66 in town.

The Stephen J. Motto family's vision of a commercial-residential anchor on Route 66 on East Hampton's eastern rim began taking shape a decade ago, as they were erecting the first units of their then-nascent Laurel Ridge housing subdivision.

The 88-lot, over-55, active-adult community development, after a slow start exacerbated by the recession, is now built out, drawing many of its residents from other parts of the state to this former lakeside-resort town of just under 13,000 residents in Middlesex County.

Steve Motto and spouse-business partner Lisa M. Motto are focused on their latest realty venture, Edgewater Hill — a mixed-use development with office-retail space and apartments planned for its first phase.

Even with its "A"-list Hartford architect who designed West Hartford's Blue Back Square and a nationally renowned "new urbanism" planning adviser on board, Edgewater Hill stands out most for its embrace in a town where many past development projects were greeted by skeptical neighbors and ultimately smothered in politics.

Billed as a "walkable" village, Edgewater Hill, proponents say, is proof of what can be achieved with patience and open-mindedness between land promoter, local land-use overseers and town residents. It may yet prove a magnet to keep more of East Hampton's high-school and college grads in the town and state, observers say.

"This is an additional gem to our community — the lake (Pocotopaug), the Village Center, the Route 66 corridor," Town Manager Michael Maniscalco said. "This is a gem that is going to enhance our community."

"At the end of the day," Maniscalco added, describing Edgewater Hill, "it's a live-where-you-work-where-you-shop-style community."

The Mottos' East Hampton-based Dream Developers broke ground June 12 on Edgewater's \$8 million initial phase: An 18,000-square-foot office-retail building fronting Route 66; and, beginning shortly, construction of five, two-story buildings, each with eight garden-style apartments.

The retail-office building is slated for occupancy in late fall; the apartments by next spring, Steve Motto said.

"This is definitely the biggest undertaking we've ever done," Lisa Motto said.

When fully developed over the next decade, Edgewater Hill's development pricetag will exceed \$50 million, making it East Hampton's most expensive commercial development in decades, the Mottos and others say. Farmington Bank is financing Phase I.

"I think it's going to turn into something nice," Stephen Motto said. Dream Developers is general contractor on the first phase, employing about 50 workers on-site.

James P. Carey, East Hampton's town planner and long-time building official, said Motto reached out to his office early into the project, gathering Carey's and other planning and commissioners' and public input.

"I was involved in that project for so long, I can't remember not being involved in it," Carey said.

In that way, Carey said, the town was able to give Motto valuable guidance in shaping a land-use proposal such that planning and zoning commissioners, rather than haggling with the developer over extraneous items, were able to look at Edgewater in the context of the town's overall land-use aims and objectives.

The result was that despite squawks from the usual local cast of development antagonists, the P&Z commission took the rare step for East Hampton and most other Connecticut communities and approved Edgewater's site-use proposal — unanimously, authorities said.

The town even sealed its commitment to Edgewater with a five-year, graduated reduced tax-assessment schedule for the land and future improvements.

That the Mottos also are town residents did not play into the project's approval, Carey said. If anything, he said, it placed them and Edgewater Hill under even more scrutiny.

"Steve is someone who lays it right on the table, sometimes to his detriment," Carey said. "But he wanted an open process in which town leaders and neighbors had input. Planning and zoning really did a thorough job on this."

"In this case," the town planner said, "we're carving something out of the woods."

Part of the 74 acres set aside for Edgewater Hill was where the rundown White House Motel once sat, a remnant of East Hampton's pre-World War II past as summer destinations for Nutmeggers and New Yorkers. Dream Developers razed the motel after acquiring the site.

Next door is Laurel Ridge, a sloped parcel with single-family homes hugging winding streets and that also for generations held stands of mature trees that are part of the Meshomasic State Forest. Motto bought Laurel Ridge from a previous developer who had already subjected himself to a withering land-review process amid worries that more houses would burden the town's school system and other municipal services.

Even building Laurel Ridge's houses — originally priced from \$300,000 to \$450,000 — proved a challenge once recession hit, Motto said. Building began sporadically in 2004, with the last units completed in 2010.

Later, a local dentist acquired a small, under two-acre tract fronting Laurel Ridge's Route 66 entryway. The dentist contracted Motto to erect a 7,500-square-foot medical office to house his practice and several tenants.

Motto says most Laurel Ridge residents rave about the quality of their houses he built, along with a community center and other amenities.

Motto's ability to deliver on Laurel Ridge, plus his willingness to bring town planners and residents early into Edgewater Hill's review process, helped the development gain approval, officials said.

P&Z Chairman Ray Zatorski said he and fellow commissioners appreciated that the Mottos deviated from the usual

developers' playbook of hiring a squad of lawyers and land-use and traffic consultants to try and ramrod through a proposal "as if we're a bunch of country rubes."

Dream Developer's Edgewater proposal, Zatorski said, also took into account an earlier regional planning study that emphasized East Hampton's need for more rental housing. Edgewater's 40 apartments arose from that study.

The town's planners say it was Stephen Motto's willingness to listen, as much as his Edgewater Hill vision, that won them over.

"This just wasn't another strip-mall development," Zatorski said. "This is a developer who has a long-term interest in East Hampton."

"We would like this, first, to be successful," Zatorski said of Edgewater. "The last thing we want is a half-finished development abandoned by the developer, leaving the town to clean up the mess."

Motto grew up in Berlin but he and Lisa moved to East Hampton 15 years ago. Steve Motto said that after graduating from Porter & Chester Institute, where he studied architecture and civil engineering, he got into construction, working for contractors who built everything from houses and buildings to golf courses.

Laurel Ridge was the couple's first solo development.

In between building-out Laurel Ridge, Dream Developers erected custom houses and did housing renovations in Essex and communities near the shoreline while the Mottos continued to flesh out and pursue land-use permits for Edgewater Hill.

Gerald "Gerry" Pastor and spouse, Jane Porterfield, opened Educational Playcare for pre-kindergartners in Avon in 1986. They agreed to lease 12,000 square feet in Edgewater's first commercial building within 15 minutes after meeting the Mottos, Pastor said.

"Their passion was infectious," Pastor said. "They talked about their own childcare experiences. They saw what we do and convinced us it was a good idea."

Educational Playcare is investing about \$200,000 to open its seventh Connecticut facility, employing around 40, by November, Pastor said. A Mansfield facility also is set to open then.

Motto says Dream Developers has no desire to expand beyond the kinds of projects it's done or doing in Connecticut.

"We're not like other developers," he said. "We like to do planned developments that have meaning to them."n

© 2014 HartfordBusiness.com