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L.A. PARKER COLUMN

HHG Development Associates on architectural steroids

By L.A. Parker

Trenton, April 17, 2008 - A 90-minute executive session by City Council members Tuesday night gave me a chance to catch up with some of Trenton's local players, including developer Don Brokate.

We discussed the state of Trenton before Brokate related a favorite television commercial.

"There are a group of people on a city street, and this guy goes by and litters," Brokate said.

The people point at the paper and discuss the dirty deed.

"And then this other guy comes along, picks up the piece of paper and throws it in a receptacle. He then just keeps moving," Brokate finished.

Who would have ever thought such a simple commercial could sum up the city of Trenton.

While a drag on the Broad Street Bank hampers downtown revitalization, a business group named HHG Development Associates scouts Trenton with residential rebirth on its mind.

David Henderson, John Hatch and Michael Goldstein comprise HHG. The trio has struck the motherload with lofty ideas about turning old housing stock and deserted factories into market-rate residences.

Finished products warrant sales that range in the low \$100,000s up to about \$300,000.

Misrepresent the letters of HHG and you get HGH — human growth hormone — a synthetic drug that promises to reverse the aging process.

But this is HHG, guys who pick up the morning newspaper and, no matter the headline, know that by day's end they will have posted a positive subtitle. Henderson, Hatch and Goldstein pick up the discarded paper because they don't have time to point and complain.

HHG develops 29 residences on five sites on Centre Street. Goldstein said eight of the properties have been sold for the Trenton Ferry project.

Plus, a billboard on I-95 South near Scotch Road trumpets the HHG project for three guys who seem pumped up on business HGH and premium dreams.

Tuesday night, City Council offered HHG one-year exclusivity to create 44 lofts in two abandoned factories in the Roebling District near Mott Street.

If this space mentions any more of the trio's successes, rumors will fly that they have employed my services as a marketing representative.

But the truth, Goldstein said, is that "We have been very successful with Internet marketing."

Goldstein talked about receiving inquiries from as close as New York City and as far away as New Mexico.

Henderson and Goldstein left the meeting handing out business cards as if they were rock stars, and Trenton Mayor Doug Palmer sounded like a fan even though Hatch and Henderson were past adversaries.

"They both worked for Betty Holland when she ran against me," Palmer recalled. "But I'm a huge fan of theirs. They love Trenton and do great projects that enhance the city. That's why I am always ready to work with them. Their projects are well thought out. HHG has a solid track record."

Based on past performances, HHG could probably sell Trenton a Brooklyn Bridge if they were ready for a major swindle.

Instead, City Council members usually nod approval and climb aboard the HHG express for a wonderful ride of ingenuity, architectural design and quality development.

Developers could take a page out of the HHG playbook and shoot for the moon.

Brokate later would tell City Council members that while Trenton has its share of problems, there is a need to give attention to positive achievements occurring here.

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