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McDermott Enterprises renovating Shapiro's 300,000 s/f Phoenix Park; incorporating 2,530 solar energy panels

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During the last half of the 19th and early 20th century, the Samson Cordage Mill manufactured cotton rope at its mill. Today, one tenant at the newly named Phoenix Park, is at the forefront of 21st century technology, specializing in customizing embedded controllers and monitor circuits for thermal and airflow systems.

In 1988 Samson's owners put the property up for sale. Businessman Eric Shapiro had visions of what the old mill could become. "I knew the area, the property, and the potential." In 1998 Shapiro formed 18 Phoenix Park LLC and bought the 56-acre complex. This entity is one of several properties managed by The Lexvest Group, a commercial real estate firm of which Shapiro is president.

Phoenix Park restoration and renovation may have been daunting: the buildings were built between the 1850s and 1980s. Phoenix Park invested several million dollars renovating three-quarters of the 300,000 s/f complex. Shapiro is restoring square footage as new users sign leases. "I knew the buildings were worth saving and restoring because they have so much character. And I knew that the cost basis would make the rents very competitive. Tenants appreciate the value they're getting here."

Shapiro hired Robert McDermott of McDermott Enterprises who has overseen all aspects of construction management; Patrick Slattery for architectural services; Goldsmith, Prest & Ringwall, Inc. for civil/structural engineering and environmental permitting; and Senate Construction Corp. for some of the more complex construction services. They work with his in-house team: Susan Casper, director of leasing, Alison Manugian, construction administrator; Terry Atwood, facilities manager, Gerry Wheeler, superintendent and Joanne Smith, director of business development.

Phoenix Park's solar energy system is among the largest renewable energy projects in Mass. There are 2,530 rooftop and ground panels that offset the buildings' electrical load by about 40%. The project won the 2010 EPA Merit Award and awards from the Nashoba Valley Chamber of Commerce.

To date, dozens of traditional and new economy sector companies have leased 300 to 30,000 s/f. "Flexibility and value are the keys to leasing space in Shirley," Shapiro said. Attracting businesses to Shirley, a suburb of Leominster-Fitchburg and Lowell, at first was a real challenge. "But through innovative marketing, flexible leasing terms and offering businesses tremendous value, Phoenix Park found ways to attract tenants from all over eastern and central Massachusetts."

Architectural features make Phoenix Park attractive: high ceilings, wide corridors, exposed beams and brickwork, loading docks, heavy-duty floor capacity, parking, highway access, and proximity to the Devens Commerce Center and T Commuter Rail.

The windows allow natural light, perfect for craftsmen at Burkart Flutes & Piccolos, for example.

Open floor plans are ideal for such tenants as a sign company, a model train enthusiasts club, a home health care supplier, labs, a video production studio and ISS, a digital reproduction company, among others. The high-speed internet and energy-efficient systems meet the needs of high tech firms.

Overhead features include: modern mechanicals, energy-efficient lighting and HVAC systems, low-flow water fixtures, maximum insulation, energy-efficient windows, waste stream recycling, and a 600,000 Kwh solar energy system.

Shapiro, Casper, and Smith, work hard to attract tenants. Shapiro believes "Our tenants' success is our success. By helping businesses to succeed, they'll grow, stay longer, and someday maybe require more space. We've developed a culture that encourages and promotes a sense of community and helps tenants achieve goals and fill gaps." Among innovations designed to help tenants: paid moving expenses, marketing assistance, Chamber membership, tenant networking events.

Shapiro acknowledges the early challenge of attracting bank capital to a project such as Phoenix Park and credits MassDevelopment and local banks who supported his early efforts. He notes, "People agree with our motto: Phoenix Park is a great place to grow your business."

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