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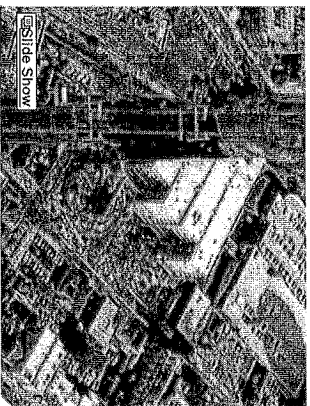
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New Health Hub Delivers Something for Everyone

05/25/2012
By Tom Stabile

The 620,000-sq-ft Wellness Plaza in downtown New Brunswick, N.J., puts a new spin on the concept of mixed use. While it brings together commuter parking, shopping convenience and a decked-out fitness facility, the \$105.1-million project also serves a larger purpose: It is a critical part of the effort to redevelop a former industrial hub.

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Photo Courtesy of Aerial Photos of New Jersey
Slice of Life. The project includes a supermarket, a fitness center and a parking garage for both urban and suburban dwellers.

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Managing work next to the Northeast Corridor's primary rail lines posed another hurdle, says Dennis Muckaitis, senior vice president for Joseph Jirgoli & Son, Lawrenceville, N.J., the construction manager on the guaranteed maximum price contract. The cranes must always be positioned to avoid any potential fall onto the tracks, he says. The team also had to focus on maintaining public access to the busy station, all while on a tight schedule.

"You had to make your dates or you never would have made it in on time," he adds.

The Wellness Plaza will offer a little of everything on its 1.8-acre site, including a combination of poured concrete for the nine-story helix and precast sections for most of the garage, Muckaitis says.

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The project is also an important link in a larger rethinking of the downtown area, which has four additional development parcels nearby, says Christopher Paladino, president of the New Brunswick Development Corp., or Devco, which is the developer on behalf of the city's parking authority. "This is the first stage of a redevelopment project that we think will include at least another 1.5 million square feet of office, residential, retail," he adds.

Paladino had for years been planning to attract an urban grocery store and fitness center, both of which are integral to serving nearby university students and other local residents as well as commuters on their way to the city. The goal was to create a "convenience" space for commuters with work-out facilities they could use in the morning before taking the train to work, and a market for them to pick up groceries before heading home, Paladino says.

Urban Challenges

The effort posed typical urban construction challenges, including relocating prior tenants. "We didn't turn a farm field into a supermarket," Paladino says. "We had 12 different parcels to assemble the property for this project. We had to do demolition and utility relocation, and we had to address environmental issues given the fact that New Brunswick is an old industrial city, and there had been several factories on this site over its history."

The team also tackled design and engineering challenges, such as finding ways to minimize shopping-cart and foot traffic, and positioning the fitness center's three swimming pools beneath the helix—two vertical circular ramps connecting to the parking levels.

It also mixes two levels of retail—the Fresh Grocer supermarket and the fitness center, which will be jointly operated by Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital and Fitness & Wellness Professional Services—with the parking facility. The fitness center will have a large exercise floor, training rooms, fitness and dance studios, and an 11,000-sq-ft aquatic center below grade, with a competition lap pool, a therapy pool and a therapeutic whirlpool.

The project itself is a multipronged collaboration between several municipal, county and state agencies, the retail tenants and Penrose Properties. Paladino says. It also features "cobbled together" financing from sources such as the 2009 federal stimulus act and various state and federal tax credits, he says.

Favorable Winds

The effort has enjoyed a few favorable winds, including the mild winter and wide availability of industry firms and workers because of the still-slow development market, Paladino adds.

The biggest challenges include the tight site and the structural puzzle of the helix. One large task was redesigning the street grid, including vacating several streets and extending another. Site excavation brought unexpected obstacles, including asbestos, oil tanks and underground piping that "would never show up on any drawings because it went back so many years," Mockaitis says.

Meanwhile, siting the helix above the pools required the team to support the concrete ramp structure while giving the aquatic center column-free spans, Mockaitis says. The team used a system of transfer girders to shift away the weight of the helix.

The staggered availability of various parcels led to an uneven pace for demolition and pile installation, so on some segments, it has already topped out.

"The last two column lines will go up this month," says Sarah Clarke, executive vice president at Devco.

The team expects to finish structural work later this month, Mockaitis says. It was nearly done with the helix in late May, freeing the crane to install the last precast sections. After that, it's "a race to the finish," he says, completing interiors and enclosure. The team has already installed most underground utilities. One big task ahead is the supermarket's extensive mechanical work, he says. Still, the endgame is a lot clearer.

"You should have talked to me four months ago," Mockaitis says. "I'm a lot calmer now."

PROJECT TEAM Developer: New Brunswick Development Corp.; **Owner:** New Brunswick Parking Authority; **CM/GC:** Joseph Jirgoff & Son; **Architect:** Electrical Mechanical Engineer; Paulus Sokolowski & Sartor; **Cast in Place Concrete:** Tri-State Construction; **Precast:** High Concrete Group; **Caissons:** Moretrench American; **Glass and Glazing:** Almond Glass; **Plumbing:** Brian Trematore Plumbing & Heating HVAC; **Binsky & Snyder:** Fire Protection; **Cerullo Fire Protection**

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