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Successful Condominium/Townhome Conversions Begin With Site Engineering

By Aaron Hemquist, PE



Aaron Hemquist

One of the most important, yet often overlooked, steps in converting commercial buildings to condominiums or townhomes is using an experienced engineering firm to evaluate a site for redevelopment. All too often, eleventh hour phone calls are made to an engineering firm, because of the need for a grading plan or other critical information required by the city for submittal. This can lead to delays, costing time, money and approval.

Using qualified, experienced engineering consultants early on is especially important for developers who are looking to convert older buildings in popular core city areas where people want to live. Many of these facilities were built decades ago and have aging utility systems. Complicating matters, original plans and records are usually vague or nowhere to be found.

Times have changed, too. Cities are concerned about environmental issues with many having ordinances in place that require sites be brought up to current codes to manage stormwater runoff. In addition, redevelopment projects must comply with the American Disabilities Act (ADA), which

wasn't even a glimmer in legislators' eyes when many of these older buildings were constructed.

Here are six important considerations for using a qualified, experienced civil engineering firm at the beginning of a condominium or townhome conversion project:

1. Conduct a thorough research and examination of the existing property to determine the size, location and condition of all existing utilities and services. All too often, existing utility services are undersized, damaged or not up to code.

2. Obtain a current boundary and/or topographic survey, which show elevation, site features and property lines. This requires a field crew to produce a detailed survey of the site, which then becomes the basis for site design and further surveys. Often title companies and lending institutions require an ALTA survey, which is prepared in accordance with standards set forth by the American Land Title Association and Congress on Surveying and Mapping. ALTA surveys also show improvements, easement, rights-of-way and other elements impacting land ownership.

3. Prepare a stormwater management plan, which most cities require to contain pollutants, prevent soil erosion and reduce localized flooding. Holding ponds are typical solutions for new multiple housing unit projects, suburban shopping malls and roadways. But ponds are not very practical in core city areas where sites are close together and

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Industry Leader Spotlight: Jeff LaFavre

Jeff LaFavre is managing principal of the Minneapolis office of Colliers Turley Martin Tucker, a full-service commercial real estate firm. He joined the company in October 2004 to run its Twin Cities' brokerage, appraisal, property and facilities management, and corporate solutions divisions. Colliers has 6 million square feet of property under management in the Twin Cities, and the local office has grown from 28 to 43 brokers since LaFavre took the helm. Prior to joining Colliers, LaFavre was vice president of corporate real estate services at Bloomington-based United Properties. He was recruited to



Jeff LaFavre

help launch that division. In that role, he led a team that provided commercial real estate services for corporations and institutions. LaFavre began his career in commercial real estate in 1989 as a marketing agent for Trammell Crow Company. Two of his assignments at that time were leasing Normandale Lakes Office Park and Minnetonka Corporate Center.

What do you do in your current job?

"I help lead the charge here at the Minneapolis office and provide direction for our four business divisions, which are brokerage, appraisal, property management and facilities management, and corporate solutions. Although I have

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Landscape Architectural Planning Makes Developments More Successful

By Eric Johnson, ASLA

Real estate transactions, property being purchased and sold is an everyday occurrence. Do you know what you are really buying when the purchase agreement is completed? What are the constraints on the site? What is the net developable acreage vs. gross? What is the political approval process at the city, township or county?



Eric Johnson

Landscape architects who are experienced in land development are one of the trained experts that can help a developer avoid potential oversights prior to purchasing a site and enable the developer to maximize the value of the property through master planning, design, agency approvals and construction.

In short, landscape architects can help create extraordinary communities and successful developments that are functional, aesthetic, inviting, and ultimately cost sensitive and effective.

Top five reasons to utilize a landscape architect for your next development project:

1. Plan Development / Constraint Analysis

Landscape architects (LA's) bring a great deal of expertise in preparing detailed, comprehensive plans for a new site or renovation of an existing location.

Often situations involve comprehensive site planning and integration of engineering and design related requirements and other site features, which may include earthwork balancing, pond design, wetland avoidance, retaining wall location, landscape structure placement, proposed plantings and site lighting.

However, before creating such plans and designs, LA's will investigate all relevant statutes and ordinances relating to the site, explore the availability of utilities and review environmental issues and existing physical conditions above and below ground. Virgin land is almost a thing of the past in metro and suburban areas, which means that developers need to know what is underneath the ground on which they intend to build. LA's can also coordinate with other disciplines in the location and positioning of utilities and structures to minimize any impacts to the environment.

2. Familiarity with Governmental Agencies and Processes

Landscape architects are experienced in establishing a good rapport with governmental and regulatory bodies, including city councils, planning commissions, city planners and engineers; all crucial relationships to a site development project.

LA's often begin by identifying and becoming familiar with key officials involved in the decision-making process. They learn about a municipality's concerns and preferences over

urban sprawl, preserving the unique topography of an area, appearance of a neighborhood, preservation of trees and wetlands, management of stormwater runoff and other environmental issues. In the process, LA professionals research the city's zoning ordinances and review long-term plans, check existing data and identify additional surveys and topographical studies that may be needed.

3. Site / Engineering Integration

Extensive experience with the unification of site topography with developer's requirements is also a hallmark of landscape architects, along with relevant knowledge of environmental issues, such as preservation of wetlands and trees, and managing stormwater runoff.

The latter has become a major concern with many municipalities, especially in renovation or remodeling of older facilities in high density, core-city areas, new communities and subdivisions, shopping malls and business complexes. Municipalities often require stormwater management plans to suppress pollutants, prevent soil erosion and reduce localized flooding.



4. Detailed Design and Coordination

Landscape architects can also be extremely helpful in evaluating and selecting contractors and materials for

landscape construction.

LA's are familiar with ground covers, trees and shrubs and how these plantings may be added to a site to complement the aesthetics of a new or renovated building and grounds. Other areas of expertise include means to prevent erosion, retaining walls, decorative features such as fencing, benches and paving material to help define entrances and roadways, and elements such as water features and bridges.

LA's also offer expertise in evaluating bids and materials to provide the finishing elements for your project, including surfaces for roadways, walkways and parking lots. Likewise for retaining wall materials, bridges and other landscape structures.

5. Schedule

Consultation with developers and contractors to ensure adequate lead times is another important reason to consider utilizing a landscape architect.

As indicated above, most of the services provided by LA's are completed well ahead of actual construction because of the approvals, permits and variances that must be secured from local municipalities. Although this may normally take from 12 to 18 months, it can take much longer, perhaps several years, depending on the size and complexity of the project. In addition, LA's can provide comprehensive timetables and schedules for construction and finishing work.

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land is at a premium. Utilizing what small open areas are available, civil engineers design creative solutions that often include vegetative swales, infiltration areas, drywells, perforated pipes and underground storage systems.

4. Develop a plan for how a re-development project will work with existing utilities and possible ties into systems shared by adjacent properties. This is especially important when existing structures have common walls or very little space between them.

5. Engineer a design that will tie into existing grades and elevations, which is critical for buildings in areas with steep slopes, or existing roadways and sidewalks in close proximity. In addition, the site must meet ADA requirements, which often requires creative design and a collaborative effort with the design team.

6. Allow adequate time for an engineering firm to provide



the necessary research, surveying and planning. As a general rule, these can be accomplished in approximately six to eight weeks for large-scale redevelopment projects. Smaller projects will take about four to six weeks.

Finally, architects, developers and contractors should choose an engineering firm carefully. Get recommendations and select an experienced engineering firm that is knowledgeable and skilled in surveying and site development. The firm should also be knowledgeable and experienced with city requirements, able to respond to issues from city officials, and deal with unforeseen construction situations, including inaccurate utility records and unanticipated sub-surface conditions.

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several divisions reporting to me, I really wear one hat and that's working with our staff to set a clear vision that will help us continue to grow. I spend a good part of the day making sure our people have everything they need to do their jobs well. I also spend time meeting with our clients as well as prospective clients, mentoring people and recruiting new candidates for the office. Serving in this mentorship role, seeing the growth and aggressive expansion our firm is going through re-energizes my batteries. I enjoy helping people and having an impact on them both personally and professionally."

What are you currently working on?

"We're putting a lot of emphasis on growing our corporate solutions capabilities as well as our brokerage and appraisal divisions. Growth here means adding both new clients and new employees. We're also working to increase our management portfolio, which is difficult right now because of the many recent building ownership changes. We see that as both a challenge and an opportunity."

Where did you attend school?

"I graduated with a bachelor of science degree in marketing from Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1986. In 1991, I earned an MBA with a finance concentration from the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management."

Tell me about your family.

"My wife, Maxine, is a stay-at-home mom who's very involved in our kids' schools and our church. We have two children, Landon, 10, who is in fourth grade and Lauren, 7, who is in second grade."

What is the very first job you ever had?

"My first job was delivering newspapers when I was in fourth grade. It taught me responsibility and customer service. It taught me some financial wherewithal, and it definitely taught me how to be a salesman."

Why do you do what you do?

"What motivates me are people. One of my favorite expressions is 'one of the greatest challenges in life is people and one of the greatest things about life is people.' If you can get people to work together, it's magical. I enjoy helping people - both our clients in helping to meet their needs and exceed their expectations, and our people in helping them be the best they can be. I also enjoy a good challenge, and we have such a strong competitive field here in the Twin Cities. In addition, parts of our market have very flat-line growth areas, like property management, and I find that very challenging."

What is the one thing you would most rather do instead of working on a Monday morning?

"I love to travel with my family. We also love to play golf and downhill ski. I enjoy simple things, like going to a movie or out to eat."