



jsb-writer

Julie S. Bettinger

[Home](#)
[Professional Profile](#)
[About Her Work](#)
[Writing Samples](#)
[Credentials](#)
[Contact](#)

Freelance Writing • Marketing Communications • Magazines • Brochures • Websites

WRITING SAMPLES

Magazine Articles

Tallahassee Magazine November/December 2005

They're turning dirt at the intersection of Centerville Road and Buford Boulevard, on the south side of Publix.

What's ahead? A 35-acre business park, with the first leg of the long awaited Welaunee Boulevard running through it.

The project, called Regional Center, is the culmination of a four-year effort that involved hot afternoons knocking on doors, tense negotiations with homeowners and the city, international investigative work and a major monetary investment without any assurance of a return.

But as Regional Center LLC partner Doug Behrman says, "Ninety five percent of any cool idea is grunt work," which is why so many big ideas don't come to fruition. After all, he asks, "Who's gonna do the grunt work?"

So, here's the story of what happened in the trenches while creating what some are calling "the welcome mat" to Tallahassee's future  Welaunee Plantation.

The seed of an idea

Most of the haggling over the new Blairstone extension had ended and construction was starting about the time that Robert Parrish was itching for another property to develop. The majority of his northeast Tallahassee office buildings were leased and there was still a demand for inventory.

At the same time, Doug Behrman, who had worked with Parrish to get his own home built years before, was in the market for a new business venture. Formerly with Super Lube, Inc., he and previous partner John Lewis had taken the company from one location to 74 before Behrman sold his interests in 1999.


The experience of helping to build that company was invaluable. Behrman says it gave him an opportunity to develop a skill for turning underutilized properties into prime business locations.

After reconnecting, Behrman and Parrish struck up a loose relationship to see what they could do together.

The two were looking for commercial properties to develop, mostly on the northeast side of town, Behrman says. There was a 6.34-acre piece on Fleischman Road that was for sale. It was contiguous with other residential lots off of Settlement Road that they thought could be rezoned to commercial, if they could get the owners to sell.


The partners made an offer on the parcel for sale and tied it up, thinking it was big enough to do something, even if they didn't get the other properties next to it.


"At that time, we weren't aware that there was going to be a continuation of Blairstone Road into Welaunee Plantation through there," Behrman says. The more they studied the plats of the area, the better it looked. Then they discovered the city's plans to eventually have the Blairstone extension at Centerville Road meet with a new road called Welaunee Boulevard right through the heart of the tract they were trying to assemble.

That meant they were working with the front door of Tallahassee's future  the massive 7,000-acre Welaunee Plantation, which was already slated for development.

Whoah.

Thar's gold in them thar hills

Still, the businessmen were about 18 tracts away from creating the ideal site for what they had in mind  an upscale office park with an eatery or two.


Regional Center - AerialAnd because most of the tracts had been passed down through the generations without wills or probate, it was going to involve dozens of property owners and dozens more of their extended family members listed on the titles to bring about a sale  any real estate buyer's worst nightmare.

Guided by the vision that the property was worth more as commercial development than its current residential zoning, Parrish and Behrman were in a position to offer the families a better value than what appraisals indicated, a pretty powerful tool for negotiation.

Behrman started going door to door, contacting the families with an offer to purchase their property. Some people welcomed him, but others saw him as an outsider and weren't receptive to his proposal.

Parrish and Behrman learned that a realtor named Na'im Majeed, with Century 21 First Realty, had some contacts there and he had already spoken to some of the homeowners about selling. So they combined efforts.

"Naim kind of greased the skids," Behrman says. "He had somewhat of a track record and he knew a lot of these people."

It took almost two years to arrange purchase of the 43 acres  19 individual parcels that ranged from half an acre to 7.5 acres.

"At times it went very smoothly," says Behrman. "Some people contacted us and said they'd like to sell. Other people, we had to contact and go through a period of negotiations."

"It was always by committee," Parrish says. "Every piece involved several family members."

At one point, Parrish says, one individual who represented a central piece of property was waffling, and he says, "all of a sudden we were in a panic."

The investment team was about to have a sizeable real estate holding with a huge hole in the middle. "The person was literally ready to walk away two or three times," Parrish says, "and the whole deal would teeter."

When either men caught wind of deals about to fall through, Parrish says, "We'd go talk to the family member and resolve whatever issue it was."

"Every one had a different story, essentially," Behrman adds. Some were related and there were different living arrangements and ownership arrangements. "Some had moving and living concerns. Every one you had to kind of look at what their particular needs are and try to satisfy them."

For example, Behrman says an 81-year-old woman, who had been living on the property as long as anyone could remember, needed a place to relocate. "We had to look at alternative homes for her and give her living options before she would consider selling," he says. Realtor Majeed made the arrangements and she eventually sold.

Cleaning up the titles

So now the developers had agreements in hand to buy the property from the owners, but because there wasn't a clear title on most of them, numerous other family members had to sign off on the sale ⁰⁰₁₈ which meant some extensive snooping by an international private eye.

"There were huge probate issues on this property," Behrman says. "In order to get one piece, we had to get 23 signatures. Everyone wants to know 'What's my share? How much am I getting and why am I signing this?' Everybody has their own doubts."

In some cases, he says, the people being asked for signatures to clear the title weren't receiving proceeds from the sale. "So they wanted to know 'Why should I sign? I'm giving something away.'"

Clearing all parcel titles was attorney Danny Manausa's problem. A partner with Smith, Thompson, Shaw & Manausa, P.A., he specializes in real estate law.

Though Manausa's firm had to do much of the investigation, he credits Na'im Majeed's representation of the sellers' interests in helping pave the way to get the signatures needed. He did everything from picking up elderly relatives from the airport and shuttling them around, to explaining the real estate deal to families. "We would not have been able to clear the title without Na'im," Manausa says.

Settlement not settled

Another challenge cropped up for the developers when Manausa discovered that Settlement Road itself ⁰⁰₁₈ which provided access to all of the properties ⁰⁰₁₈ had never been signed over as an easement. It meant even the current landowners had no legal access to their property, as it was still in the name of former plantation owner Leon F. Lonnbldh, long since deceased.

That's when Manausa's job got really interesting and he started to get a sense of the property's roots, as well.

All records indicated that Lonnbldh was a bachelor, originally from England. It appeared that he had never had children, so whatever he still owned went to his sister's children and then to their children.

Manausa's private investigator located one of Lonnbladh's relatives in South Florida who had a copy of the family tree. They used the genealogy to contact Lonnbladh's other living relatives, as far away as Africa. Manausa says he used the Internet to help close the gap between them, as he directed the relatives to a website with satellite images of the property during telephone discussions to better explain the details.

Manausa says it appeared that after Leon Lonnbladh deeded the land over to ancestors of the present day owners, he left Tallahassee to return to England.

How ancestors of the Settlement Road families received the initial title is but a guess. Though Manausa found copies of some of the original transactions, there was no record of why he deeded the land over or how much was paid, if anything.

One former property owner said that Lonnbladh gave it to the slaves who worked on his plantation. They would then farm their homestead and work on his land, as well.

Manausa says that goes along with his experience researching other plantation properties. "Traditionally, it was done as a 'thank you' for service," he says.

A difficult chapter

In the years between when the property was transferred from Lonnbladh and prior to Regional Center breaking ground, the land fell into a bit of disarray. For a time, it was home to an old jook joint called "The Big Oak," says Leon County Sheriff Larry Campbell, which was a haven for gambling and drinking. Then the age of crack cocaine hit and things got out of hand in the late 1980s.

Once located in a remote part of the county, the city limits had, by that time, absorbed the community. Large buildings like a grocery store and medical center had become its neighbors. Crime in the area increased.

Because it was centrally located, yet buffered by woods, it was an ideal meeting place for drug dealing, says Tallahassee Chief of Police Walt McNeil.

Homeowners found themselves held hostage by the rampant crime going around them, until TPD and the Sheriff's Office created a series of special operations to address the problems. It took a decade, but both law enforcement agencies agree that the problems had turned around by the end of the 1990s.

"We had to get ownership by the people who lived there," McNeil says. "I can't tell you how many officers got into fights and chased folks on foot. Most of the stuff we did in there was on foot. You had to go into the enclave and deal with the element there."

"It used to be a real mess," agreed Sheriff Campbell. "I think it's a good example of the neighborhood community watch and community policing partnership. They have to let us know what's going on."

Another rescue, of sorts

Though some people might mourn the loss of the Settlement Road property to development, attorney Danny Manausa looks at the sale of the 19 parcels as a good deal for the sellers. That's because he's seen too many instances where people in similar circumstances ended up losing their property to taxes.

"Once you get five to six generations from the owner, and there's no will, soon there's 50 people who own the property," he says. "That means a lot of times the taxes don't get paid."

Very often a developer will then buy the tax deed at a bargain price and the family members lose any value they might have had otherwise, not to mention their home.

In this case, though, the property owners were able to get the maximum value for their land. "These people did well," Doug Behrman says. "It was really a financial windfall for them."

Negotiations still ahead

Once sales were complete and all titles cleared, Parrish and Behrman faced their next challenge: negotiations with the city of Tallahassee to develop it. They spent another 18 months hammering out what's called a "163 agreement," which basically lays out the responsibilities of both parties ⁽⁹⁾ the city and the developer ⁽¹⁰⁾ and protects each of their interests.

City Attorney Jim English says he doesn't usually get closely involved with a lot of developments. However, things were different with Regional Center.

"The primary reason is that this is where the next stretch of the Blairstone Parkway is going," he says, "and that's a huge concern for city growth."

English says Robert Parrish initially came to him anticipating the city's need to acquire property for the right-of-way. "He came in way ahead of time and said, 'Here's what I'm doing,' laying the cards on the table," English says. He told the city that he didn't want them to think he was trying to get ahead of the game by purchasing the right-of-way, only to sell it to them at inflated prices when the time came to build the road.

Parrish told English whatever he was buying that they needed for the road, he would either give it to the city or sell it to them for the same price he paid. "That's no cost or mark up," English says, "and that's really, really good for the taxpayers."

It also helped the city avoid the legal fees that would have been required with imminent domain ⁽¹¹⁾ a huge savings of time and money.

All together, Regional Center represents a sizeable value to the community, English says.

"The property was so under utilized and then you have the savings of putting the roadway through ⁽¹²⁾ plus all the taxable value that will be added. That's a very big number."

English says this is a situation where government and the developer worked together and saved the taxpayers money. "He took the real estate risk away from us," English says. "More developers ought to do that."

Sinking plans?

Not to say that negotiations between the developer and the city didn't get tense at times. Including the discovery of a sinkhole on the property. It turned out to be on the city's portion, where the road was going.



"It could have been a lot worse," says English. "It turned out to be not as bad as we thought." The sinkhole was dry and was not connected to the groundwater.


Still, it was 95 feet deep, so the city hired Ardaman & Associates engineering and consulting firm

to fill it with grout and stabilize it. Parrish says, "It delayed the project a few months, but now it's a non issue."

Now that Regional Center is off and running, Parrish can hardly contain his enthusiasm for the project when he explains what it will mean for the capital city.

Regional Center - Map"Where else in Tallahassee do you have a major artery with quality development on both sides?" he asks. He says his company and Capital Regional Medical Center are closely coordinating entrances to the Parkway to assure complementary design.

While Regional Center is keeping Parrish and his development team busy, he's already looking ahead at another 25-acre northeast tract. That's where he's planning to introduce a new concept to Tallahassee called a "lifestyle center"  high density residential with office and retail within a mixed-use site. It's more of a village than town center concept, he says, in that the street level is reserved for businesses and top levels for multi-family housing. Parking is scattered throughout, too, giving people the best of all worlds  conveniences within walking distance of their homes, and easy access to their vehicles.

It's an open-air shopping concept, an alternative to the malls, says Parrish. "Kind of like Hyde Park in Tampa or Market Commons in Arlington, Virginia  very vertical."

Considering how well the projected 300,000 sq. ft. of office space at Regional Center has been received, Parrish says he's confident there will be a demand for the approximately 300,000 sq. ft. of office space planned within the lifestyle center project.

Stay tuned.

-###-