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Being Bohannon: One of Menlo Park's biggest names talks about his new hotel, his family history, and why developers aren't all that bad

by Rory Brown

Sitting at the end of a 15-foot-long conference table in his San Mateo office, David Bohannon reads the headline of a newspaper article and can't stop laughing.

"Five o'clock headache on Marsh Road," he reads aloud, a grin from ear to ear. He holds up the article — it's from a 1960 issue of the now-defunct Redwood City Tribune.

"Forty-seven years later, and people still don't want to be impeded on their way," he says. "The people of Menlo Park were complaining about traffic then, and they aren't going to stop now."

Mr. Bohannon has heard his fair share of traffic complaints, as his company, the David D. Bohannon Organization, owns more than 300 acres of land in east Menlo Park. He is CEO and president of the company, which also built and owns the Hillsdale Shopping Center and development projects in the East Bay.

Since he took on an executive role with the company 21 years ago, he's overseen those projects, and inherited the history that comes along with them. That history is evident in the massive, hardbound books of newspaper clippings, photographs and site maps highlighting projects undertaken since Mr. Bohannon's grandfather set the foundation for the company in the 1920s.

His grandfather (also named David Bohannon) sold residential lots of what was then unincorporated "Belle Haven City" — now Menlo Park's Belle Haven neighborhood.

"All of this was grazing lands and bay fields," says Mr. Bohannon, pointing out the window of his SUV while driving on Marsh Road. "My grandfather started selling residential lots, and then had a vision to create an industrial park."

From the 1940s to the 1970s, Bohannon Industrial Park took shape, as the elder Bohannon subdivided land and either leased or sold the lots to manufacturers such as Johnson & Johnson.

Frances Bohannon, the elder Bohannon's daughter, took over the company and the industrial park before turning over full control to her nephew, the current owner.

"It wasn't always a given I would be part of the family business," Mr. Bohannon says. "I wanted to do my own thing and prove myself before [working] for the family."

After graduating from Santa Clara University, Mr. Bohannon opted to "establish himself" by working up the ranks of a commercial real estate firm.

But when three top executives in the Bohannon Organization were killed in a 1985 plane crash, Mr. Bohannon came back to the family business to help fill the void.

Ditching politics

Since taking a top spot in his family's organization, Mr. Bohannon has been an outspoken player on Menlo Park's divisive political scene, but he says those days are no more.

In the past, he's criticized what he has perceived as "anti-business" or "no-growth" city policies, and thrown support behind what some people have labeled "developer-friendly" candidates in local elections.

At Mr. Bohannon's peak involvement in the "no-growth vs. pro-growth" political battle, he worked with residents of the Belle Haven neighborhood to defeat zoning restrictions proposed for the city's industrial district in 2002. Previously, his company contributed \$20,000 to "pro-development" candidate Christina Angell-Atchison in the 2000 City Council election.

But in recent years, he's backed away from politics, and he wants it to stay that way.

"People have gotten used to this two-sided political battle, and the last thing I need is to get involved with one side or the other," he says.

Former Menlo Park councilwoman Gail Slocum says Mr. Bohannon's recent track record suggests his intentions are genuine. She notes that he gave \$2,000 to all six council candidates before the recent election, and attended both election-night campaign parties.

"[Mr. Bohannon] has done what a lot of people haven't been able to do, and that's step back from this super partisanship," Ms. Slocum says. "He knows there's bigger, more important things than this dualistic battle."

Leading up to the November election, Mr. Bohannon co-chaired the Measure K campaign in an effort to pass the city's utility tax measure. His company contributed \$10,000 to the campaign, and Tyco Electronics and Sun Microsystems followed suit with equal contributions.

Being a developer

Even after removing himself from Menlo Park politics, Mr. Bohannon said he still faces the misconceptions and generalizations associated with being a Menlo Park "developer."

"I think developers represent change, and change is difficult," he says. "A lot of people in Menlo Park don't want change, so they don't want development. ... But now here we are — a very wealthy community that has turned its back on development for many, many years."

He recognizes that a lot of the anti-development sentiment comes down to a key issue: the fear that developing the city will lead to more traffic.

"Like it or not, Menlo Park, like every other city on the Peninsula, is growing," he says. "What was going on here in the 1950s is not going on now — this is a major urban center. ... I don't like the traffic either — every time I go home in the afternoon, I can't stand driving by Hillview School."

Mr. Bohannon says that like many residents, he's happy Menlo Park has prevented large stores from moving in and killing the character of the city, avoiding the "Wal-Mart effect."

But there's still room for change, he says, because development "renews" the community.

"Look at our downtown area," he says. "What's happening in downtown Palo Alto, and what's happening at Stanford Shopping Center significantly affects our downtown, ... but we just haven't recognized the need to make changes."

Dealing with change

Mr. Bohannon says he's in the process of deciding what changes need to be made on his family's property in the industrial park — a re-evaluation sparked by the dot-com bubble burst.

"Our vacancies are down and things are looking up, at the moment," he says, pointing to a three-building office complex adjacent to the Dumbarton railroad off Jefferson Drive — a campus just leased to Intuit, a software company.

"But in 2002, vacancies were pretty darn high. ... That reminded us the market is always changing."

Bohannon Industrial Park itself is evidence of the changing economy. Buildings at the park range from box-like 1960s manufacturing warehouses to 1990s office buildings with floor-to-ceiling windows.

"Some of the buildings haven't changed a lot, but what's going on inside them has," he says, noting that companies like Sun Microsystems have moved to sites originally designed for heavy manufacturing.

One big change on Mr. Bohannon's mind is a proposal to demolish two blocks of the industrial park to make way for a new hotel and office complex. He hopes to present the plans to the City Council in March.

"We're underperforming in this area," he says, sitting outside the proposed hotel site.

Giving back

Not all Menlo Park residents think of development plans or political donations when hearing Mr. Bohannon's name.

"David Bohannon has done a lot for this community," says Lorie Sinnott, a planning commissioner and a friend of Mr. Bohannon's since they were both first-graders at Oak Knoll School. "He's been unfairly treated by some people and by the press, and what's lost is how much he does for this town."

Mr. Bohannon gives regularly to community groups, such as the Boys and Girls Club. He also contributed \$250,000 to help establish the Belle Haven Community School.

Last fall, he donated \$1,500 to Jesse Fifita, a defensive lineman on the Menlo-Atherton football team who needed donations to pay for surgery due to a season-ending injury.

Earlier this month, Jesse signed a letter of intent to play football at Oregon State University, and Mr. Bohannon was there for the celebration.

"He needed \$1,500, and to me, it was a no-brainer," says Mr. Bohannon. "It's not too often you get to directly help someone like that."

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