

Omar Boraie



DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Omar Boraie has grown into a major figure in New Brunswick area real estate since entering the field in the earlier 1970s. Boraie immigrated to the United State in 1970 from Suez, Egypt. He had graduated from Alexandria University in 1963 with a major in chemistry and biology. He then worked as an assistant professor and went to work in the private sector for Kraft Paper Company, a pulp and paper company in Suez. He worked and travelled around Europe for two years as part of an engineering exchange program to further his training in the pulp and paper industry. He then came to New Brunswick, New Jersey, initially to enter higher education and also accepted a position at Kimberly-Clark in Spotswood, New Jersey.

While working at Kimberly-Clark, and while in the process of purchasing a house in East Brunswick, Boraie was asked by the real estate agent to join her firm part-time. His real-estate career started by selling single- and multi-family homes in the New Brunswick area on a part-time basis while still working for Kimberly-Clark. He began to sense that this was something at which he could be successful and quit his job at Kimberly-Clark and starting working full-time in real estate. Boraie spread out into commercial and retail and started and in 1976, he opened his own office on 257 Livingston Avenue in New Brunswick. His business still occupies that first office.

Boraie described his feelings about New Brunswick at that time. He liked New Brunswick because “I saw Rutgers University. I saw two hospitals. I saw Cook College on the other side of town. I saw Squibb Pharmaceutical at that time. In eight years I saw a lot of potential because of the train station. It is close by to the Turnpike, Routes 1, 287, and 27. Close to Princeton University. And we have a lot of pharmaceutical companies around the area. We have Johnson and Johnson. And I figured New Brunswick is the place.” At the same time, Boraie began providing real estate services to Johnson & Johnson acquiring property and building houses. He mentions that in the 1980s it was difficult to obtain mortgages from banks but he had experience with the VA, FH and NUJ HFMA programs.

In the early 1980s, Boraie started making real estate deals in downtown New Brunswick. He bought the National Bank of New Jersey building on the corner of Church

and George Streets, at the time the tallest building in New Brunswick. Next, he acquired a block of land on Albany Street and built Plaza Tower 1 and later Tower 2, and then the residential tower One Spring Street. He indicated there was some opposition to his plan for the high-rise condominium building, but once the office building and One Spring Street were completed, then people saw these as successes.

Boraie attributes part of the success of New Brunswick to Johnson and Johnson's decision to keep its headquarters in New Brunswick, which he believes was due to "people like Jim Burke and Dick Sellars . . . They're good people. They believed in New Brunswick. They felt like they'd like to fulfill the promise or dream of Robert Wood Johnson to expand in New Brunswick, since he started in New Brunswick."

He also talked about John Heldrich and Dick Sellars starting the redevelopment and also praised Mayor John Lynch who helped them "put things together and things started to move in the right direction."

There was also stability in the city government, with Mayor Lynch, and then for 25 years Jim Cahill as mayor. About John Lynch Boraie said he was open minded and that "There are not so many mayors around that have that vision like John Lynch had at that time. Dick Sellars of course had a vision. Also the hospital site had Harvey Holzberg with a vision." He also cited the help of Middlesex County: "David Crabiell had the same vision: Why not expand New Brunswick because we have all these catalysts in New Brunswick?" In addition, he feels that New Brunswick people understand development and help make it easier to get things done than in other New Jersey cities.

The redevelopment involved the replacement of old Hiram Market buildings with new residential buildings. Boraie indicated that "I almost acquired maybe 80 percent of the Hiram Market, you know, by meeting with Mr. Dick Sellars at his office, and he asked me to help, which I did." He did not agree that the Hiram buildings should be preserved for historic reasons, "It was completely deteriorated. The King Building, which people thought should be preserved, was in terrible shape."

Boraie was also concerned about providing the appearance of safety in the city and once the office buildings opened, and restaurants came in, and people started walking in the streets, and moving to apartments nearby, then there was more safety. "I believe we are going in the right direction. Safety in the City of New Brunswick is very good. The number of newcomers to the City of New Brunswick is very good. We have a lot of good professional people coming to live in New Brunswick." The fact that two apartment projects are fully leased is "a sign of people feeling safe in New Brunswick. And it's close to the train station. Close to Route 1. Close to the Turnpike. Everything. So that's a good sign that the economy in New Brunswick is healthy."

Looking to the future, Boraie would like to see development further down George Street between the Heldrich and the Douglass campus “because this is a front mirror of the City of New Brunswick. Any people coming to New Brunswick come either down George Street or Commercial Avenue through New Street. They like to see something that impresses them. And I see George Street as needing some updating.” As for the Ferren Deck replacement, he believes mixed use is the best, with office, residential, and retail space. “But we should really do it in such a way as to leave a good impression when you’re walking out of the train station about what’s the City of New Brunswick all about. . . .And I hope one of these days we can renovate the train station and make it beautiful.” The walkways should be widened to connect Spring street to Easton Avenue to make it all more attractive.

KEY QUOTATIONS

[Quotations have been edited for grammar and alphabetized by topic]

Attractiveness of area

I liked New Brunswick because I saw Rutgers University. I saw there are two hospitals. I saw the Cook College in the other side of town. I saw Squibb Pharmaceutical at that time. In eight years I saw a lot of potential because of the train station. Close-by to the Turnpike, Route 1, 287, Route 27. Close by Princeton University. And we have a lot of pharmaceutical companies around the area. And I figured New Brunswick is a place. We have Johnson & Johnson in New Brunswick. [2]

Entry into the real-estate field

I went to buy a house in East Brunswick in 1974 I believe, '73-'74. And there the broker convinced me that since I know a couple of languages, ‘why don’t you come help us because we have a lot of Polish and German people in South River and in the area?’ And I found it might be a good idea. I spoke to my wife and so we decided to go ahead and get the license. And I went I took the license and after two weeks I started work. Two weeks Saturday, Sunday sometimes. And I started to feel like I love the business, . . . and I was hoping to finish my PhD in Biochemistry. . . . And I found out this is the kind of business I like to be in with people. And thank God I got my license and I started working and I did very very well, . . . I found that I’m making twice as much or three times as much as what I made at Kimberly-Clark . . . I decided to proceed in real estate. And I quit chemistry. . . . And I got my own office in real estate in 1976.[1]

Hiram neighborhood building acquisition

I was involved in Hiram Market. I almost acquired maybe 80 percent of the Hiram Market. Maybe 75 to 80 percent of the Hiram Market. You know by meeting with

Mr. Dick Sellars at his office and he asked me to help, which I did. . . . It was completely deteriorated. The King Building which you think should be preserved, it was in terrible shape. If the older building has some character and you can save it and in a good solid condition, yes, we should keep it. But if the older building is deteriorated, no matter what you do with it, it's unsafe. I personally feel you should, you know, just remove it and replace it with something nice. Because by the end of the day it's a cost. How much it cost you to do this building and how much the return as investor. And that's very important. [6]

Redevelopment

[Johnson and Johnson] stayed because there are some people like Jim Burke and Dick Sellars -- God Bless their souls. . . . They're good people. They believed in New Brunswick. They felt like they wanted to fulfill the promise or dream of the Robert wood Johnson dream as far as expand in New Brunswick since he started in New Brunswick. John Heldrich came after that and lots of other people came but the guy who did start moving toward redevelopment of New Brunswick was Dick Sellars. And we were lucky to have at that time a good mayor. Open minded mayor, which is John Lynch. . . . And they put things together and things started to move in the right direction. . . . [Lynch] had a vision. There are not so many mayors around that have that vision like John Lynch had at that time. Dick Sellars of course had a vision. Also the hospital site had Harvey Holzberg – he had a vision [on] how to expand. How to do thing the right way. . . . And David Crabiel [of Middlesex County] had the same vision. Why not expand New Brunswick because we have all these catalysts in New Brunswick? [4]

One Spring Street Tower

When I decided to do this building some opposition came and said "Well this guy's gonna fail." It's this and that. But then it succeeded. And after the success of this building everyone started looking. And when I started building One Spring Street there was some opposition. "The building is going to block every other direction of the people around." But later on it found out . . . it was the most successful project in the history of the City of New Brunswick at that time. We brought something which nobody else had. We did not just come and build just small apartments . . . We studied it and . . . we figured there is a market for it and de decided to do it." [9]

Future Development

We would like to see the hospital expand more here in New Brunswick. I would like to see Rutgers expand downtown New Brunswick. I like to see the New Brunswick as the piece of diamond which is rotating in every direction and directing everybody to come in. . . . I would like to see some development to go toward George Street, the other side of George Street. . . . Between Heldrich and Douglass. Yes, I'd like to see some stuff like this. Because this is a front mirror of the City of New Brunswick. Any

people coming to New Brunswick are coming either through the George Street or Commercial Avenue through New Street. They like to see something to impress. And I see George Street needs some update. [15-16]