

# It Takes a Village...

## Unique Retail Center is Taking Shape in East Longmeadow

By *GEORGE O'BRIEN*

As the Falcone family continues to expand its chain of Rocky's hardware stores — there are now 26 locations across New England and more planned — it is also moving forward with a new real estate development business called Falcone Retail Properties Inc. That subsidiary's first large-scale development, East Longmeadow Center Village, featuring more than 100,000 square feet of retail and office in a campus-like setting, is nearing completion.



**J**ames Falcone had the original vision back in the early '70s.

That's when he acquired the former Popular super market on Main Street in East Longmeadow as the home for the next piece of the Rocky's hardware store chain he was building, as well as some adjacent lots, including part of an old red stone quarry that provided the material for Town Hall and many other buildings in the community. With that assembled real estate, Falcone, still chairman of the Rocky's chain run by his son, Rocco, started thinking about a larger retail complex.

It took more than 30 years to pull all the pieces together — from land acquisition to permitting to securing anchor tenants — but Falcone's vision is now rounding into its final shape.

It's called East Longmeadow Center Village, a retail/office complex with several components, ranging from a Walgreen's pharmacy to a Health Trax loca-

tion; a renovated Rocky's store to a mix of retail operations, including a Spoleto restaurant. Developed in phases, the project is expected to be completed by year's end, with several retail operations due to be open by the end of the summer.

The village marks the first large-scale initiative undertaken by Falcone Retail Properties, LLP, a real estate subsidiary of sorts within the Rocky's operation that is headed by Falcone's son, Jayson, an attorney who handles a wide range of legal matters for Rocky's. But it is certainly won't be the last.

Indeed, Jayson Falcone told *BusinessWest* that the FRP is close to finalizing plans for another retail complex venture in Westfield, and has another project is taking shape in Vernon, Conn.

"This is an emerging business for the family," he said, noting that FRP was formed two years ago as the Village project pro-

gressed. "This is our first big project, and I think it's going to be a great opportunity for us, and a real asset for the community."

*BusinessWest* looks this issue at how this unique concept came together, and what lies ahead for Falcone Retail Properties.

### Right Place, Right Time

As he talked about East Longmeadow Center Village, James Falcone shook his head as he went back over in his mind all the pieces that had to fall into place to make the venture reality.

"It's been like putting a puzzle together — and it's taken 35 years to do it," he said. "It's exciting to finally see those last pieces come together and for all those plans to come to fruition."

Falcone and his family have been persistent in their quest to build the Village, as it's called, because they believed the site and the concept both worked.

The site, as the name of the project implies, is in this growing

community's center, just off the infamous rotary and the seven roads that funnel into it. The concept, meanwhile, is to take the municipal institutions that exist on that site — Town Hall and the town library — and meld them with a broad mix of retail, office, and even fitness-related ventures to create a true destination. There, people could shop, eat, fill a prescription, work out, take out a few books, and get a dog license — all from one parking space.

That was the theory, anyway, and to make it real, the Falcones needed to acquire several parcels within the complex between Main Street and Crane Avenue to create one large block, and some, including a closed Pride gas station fronting Main Street, didn't come easily or quickly. "It took a lot of phone calls to (Pride owner) Bob Bolduc before he finally said 'yes,'" said James Falcone.

They also had to come up with a workable design concept that blended form with aesthetics,

forge agreements with town officials that would create what amounts to shared parking facilities, and convince residents and town leaders that the project wouldn't make an already tenuous traffic situation even worse.

Other than that, it was really pretty simple.

"It's been challenging, and it's taken a long time to get it done," James Falcone told *BusinessWest*. "But we're really excited about what's taking shape here."

And while plans for the Village have been coming together for three decades, he continued, they really started to gather steam over the past five years, and have seen several variations on a central theme — a retail/office center that was *not* a strip mall, but rather a campus-like setting.

The complex would take its design cue from Town Hall — its tower has been replicated to some degree in the 'Rocky's' portion of the complex — and other buildings in the center of town, and would mix aesthetics, convenience, and a wide array of retail to create a real destination center, said James Falcone.

It took roughly a year to obtain final permits and approvals, he continued, and also to finish what he called "customer education."

Elaborating, he said that because of the project's location, size, and unique design components, town officials and residents needed assurances that the Village would complement the town's center, not disrupt it.

"One of the things we've discovered over the years is that one thing the public doesn't like is uncertainty and not knowing what's going on," he explained. "We made it a priority from the very beginning to keep the town fathers and the general public abreast of what was happening.

"Sometimes, the thirst for information was greater than our ability to provide it," he continued, "But by working together with town, we've made it beneficial for everyone."



*James, left, and Jayson Falcone say the East Longmeadow Center Village is the first, but not the last, large-scale development for Falcone Retail Properties.*

Staff Photo

### Center Pieces

The current village complex has come together in phases, said Jayson Falcone, noting that process started when his father and some other partners acquired what was then a New England Health & Racquet, renovated it, and signed Health Trax as an anchor tenant.

The next phase was to acquire a building fronting Maple Street that was once home to Shawmut Bank, and demolish it to make way for a Walgreen's pharmacy that opened roughly a year ago. The third and fourth phases, being undertaken simultaneously, involve renovation and modernization of the Rocky's store and construction of new retail space adjacent to that storefront, as well as construction of a new building, going up at the west end of the property, that will have an office component (roughly 6,000 square feet of Class A space) and more retail.

Several tenants have been signed on for the Rocky's component of the project, said Jayson Falcone. They include a Starbucks, Family Wireless, Super Cuts, and Spoleto, the Northampton-based restaurant that will open its second location in East Longmeadow. Meanwhile, negotiations are ongoing with several prospective tenants for both the office and retail components of the last building in the 10.5-acre complex.

Overall, the development includes roughly 100,000 square feet of retail and office space, including Walgreens and the Health Trax, he said, noting that nearly two-thirds of that total is under under contract.

"There has been a lot of interest in this project, because of both its location and its uniqueness," he said, noting that East Longmeadow's surging population, coupled with its proximity to Longmeadow and northern

Connecticut have made it an increasingly popular choice for retailers and service businesses alike.

The Village represents the first large-scale real estate development for the Falcone family, and coincides with continued expansion of the Rocky's chain of hardware stores. That venture, which started with one small store in Springfield opened by James Falcone's father, now boasts 26 stores across New England and now into Florida.

Where and how other real estate developments unfold are functions of opportunity, said Jayson Falcone, noting that some projects make take shape around existing or future Rocky's locations, while others will not involve the hardware chain.

Negotiations are in the final stages for a project in Westfield, where Rocky's has a store on Main Street, he said, noting that an announcement should be made within a month. Meanwhile, the Connecticut project, a smaller-scale development, at least when compared to the Village, is also moving forward.

### Village People

As he offered *BusinessWest* a tour of the Village site, Jayson Falcone gestured to the new building taking shape at the west end of the property near Crane Avenue.

"This was all old quarry ... we had to take a lot of large rocks out of here," he said. "This was a pretty rough piece of land."

Transforming it and other parcels into the Village has been a 30-year process, one that gives the town a destination retail center and the Falcones' new commercial real estate venture an attractive addition to its emerging portfolio. ♦

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