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Business geographers see a different market world

Paul Ivice

Correspondent

Plans for the University Corners mixed-use development across from the University of Florida campus in Gainesville were much smaller before the developers consulted with a business geographer.

"He said, 'Build it and they will come,'" said Michael Conroy, president of the University Corners development, recalling advice from university professor Grant Thrall, one of a growing legion of business geographers working in the relatively new field in North Florida.

Thrall has been a professor at the university since 1983 and created the business geography curriculum there.

"What he refined for us was a very good sense in exact numbers of the number of students from the university and others in various lifestyle segments," said Conroy, whose \$150 million, mixed-use project is scheduled to break ground in June.

"He told us that students are not wage-earners but they come from families that are very affluent so their spending power is very strong."

Conroy said schematic design of the University Corners development is nearly complete. The three-block project on University Avenue is in the center of Gainesville, Conroy said, and will include retail spaces, commercial office space and about 300 condominium units.

The developers have had "significant interest" in the retail spaces, Conroy said, and all of the condo units have been reserved.

He said Thrall's business geography advice -- which he described as business demography combined with market studies -- boosted his confidence in the project. "I couldn't imagine doing another project without him," Conroy said

When he was in high school in the 1960s, Thrall had no idea when he helped his mother on weekends with her work as a marketing analyst for General Electric Co. that business geography would become his life's work.

"The work then was very laborious and repetitive, pulling information from large books of data," Thrall said. "We knew the distance people would travel to a GE store, so we'd count the number of people in that range."

If it exceeded a certain number and did not negatively impact surrounding stores, a franchise would be awarded, he said.

Now the work to gather that information takes only a few hours instead of a weekend -- and with more accuracy, Thrall said. A business geographer can forecast within a 3.5 percent margin of error the revenue a

store will generate, he said.

"This is the secret of multi-branch retailing today," he said, noting that many companies have hired his former students to conduct such analyses. "They're all making more money than I am."

The jobs in the private sector for business geographers are plentiful, and well paid, Thrall said. "The outlook is very strong for continuing growth in the business geography field," he said.

Thrall has worked as a consultant on projects in both the public and private sectors. In addition to his work on the University Corners project, Thrall recently completed the "Geographic Access Report" for the Florida Board of Governors. That report will be presented at a Board of Governors meeting March 24 in Tampa.

He said he helps companies on both ends of the spectrum -- to decide where to locate new stores or which ones to close in a pullback. "It's either hire me now or hire me later."

Mostly, Thrall concentrates on training his students. That fact brings recruiters from big corporations by the dozens to campus. "It's a common demand that's out there in the marketplace and an extremely limited commodity," said Wayne Wallace, director of the career guidance center.

Business geography students have worked at corporate headquarters for Blockbuster Inc., Wal-Mart Stores Inc., Publix Super Markets Inc., Office Depot Inc. and others, Thrall said. "Also, my students find employment at headquarters for large banks, REITs, and large housing development companies."

Andy Sherrard, a partner in O2B Kids, a chain of four child-care facilities in Gainesville that hired Thrall as a consultant in 2003, said Thrall conducted a market feasibility study to determine where and how many facilities he could put in town without cannibalizing his existing facilities.

"The primary aim is to find out from a psychographic standpoint where do the people currently using our facility live and whether there are more areas where there are enough people like them," Sherrard said.

Thrall described business geography this way: "[It] takes the guesswork out of marketing and lowers the risk for developers and investors."

jacksonville@bizjournals.com | 396-3502

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