

## Developer is Building Character

BY DALE MILLER

Developing shopping centers in South Florida often requires the skill of a juggler, the patience of a priest and a good amount of personal character.

Character? Developer?

"The ability to confront adversity on a daily basis, to persevere in the face of that adversity, and to maintain a sense of optimism that all of the pieces, ultimately, will fall into place," said Jeff Berkowitz, president of Berkowitz Development Group.

Character.

Berkowitz has been building shopping centers in South Florida since 1978. His first project, which he completed part-time while he was still a practicing lawyer, was the 18,000 square foot Kendall Square shopping center in West Kendall. That's a far cry from the pioneering three-level, 350,000 square foot Dadeland Station project built on seven acres of land near the Dadeland North Metrorail Station in South Miami.

Today, the native of Boston, Massachusetts is hard at work developing the 25-acre, 267,000 square foot Aventura Commons project which will bring Best Buy and Target to Dade's northernmost city, as well as PetSmart, an expanded Whole Foods and an upscale liquor and wine store called Beverages and More.

"A shopping center has hundreds of moving parts," Berkowitz said. "The land has to be identified, placed under contract, zoned and platted and all sorts of land use approvals have to be secured. All that is on-going."

Meanwhile, in order to finance construction, Berkowitz had to secure leases from tenants and then find the design team to design project and builders to build it, all within the framework of a very limited budget.

"Then, when you get all of those pieces together," Berkowitz said, "that's when somebody like the Aventura Council decides to change all of the rules."

That's where character comes into play. After the two years he spent putting the \$30 million project together, the Aventura City Council proposed a new sign ordinance aimed at reducing the amount of "sign pollution" in the City of Excellence. The strict new rules would have severely limited Berkowitz's ability to build the project.

"All of a sudden, instead of having two-200 foot signs, there's a proposal that would limit the size of signs to 48 square feet," he said. "That's pretty small."

Forty-eight square feet is the size of a sheet and a half of plywood. If Berkowitz couldn't deliver the signs he promised to his tenants under the rules which existed at that time, he would have been in violation of every one of those lease agreements and would have had to start all over again.

To prevent that, Berkowitz spent nearly \$10,000 getting back to ground zero. He attended half a dozen Council meetings, with his lawyers, arguing for a more reasonable sign ordinance. He secured a permit from the city and erected the signs at Aventura Commons before the new ordinance was passed, fully a year before his tenants needed them. He'll still have to remove the \$65,000 signs in three years, but at least his tenants will open their doors to a "level playing field."

Berkowitz isn't sure whether he'll apply for variances after the three year amortization schedule expires, nor whether he'll join in the pending lawsuit against the city which will be brought by the Sports Authority.

For now, he's concentrating on finishing this project, which should open by the spring of next year, and moving on to the next challenge.

"We look forward to being good neighbors and corporate citizens," said Berkowitz. "The new stores will be a welcome addition to the shoppers in this community."