

COMMERCIAL **Building**TM EDGE MAGAZINE

The Local Voice in Building

Harry Davis,
June Rabe and
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Sussex Development Corporation

Our Focus is on Project Details and Clients' Dreams



First Colonial Professional Center
Design by: Cox Kliewer & Company

Sussex Development Focuses on Project Details, Clients' Dreams

By K.H. Queen

Whether it's a small \$5,000 project like the ones that sustained the company in its infancy, the \$5 million medical buildings the company routinely builds now, or a \$150 million joint venture, Harry Davis and Sussex Development Corporation have established a reputation for attention to detail that builds repeat business.

When Davis founded Sussex Development in 1990 in Virginia Beach with then-partner George Whitfield, the commercial building market was in a downturn. Davis knew that first-hand. He had worked for two companies immediately prior to founding Sussex Development. Of those, one had closed its local office and one had gone out of business. To help ensure survival, their initial strategy for Sussex Development was minimalist. They ran a lean company and made some tough decisions.

“We started it off as a little bit of nothing,” Davis says. “We had a small number of employees and essentially no overhead.”

They had a two-room, 800-square foot office and two other employees. They were savvy enough to focus on the one sector of the market that continued to grow.

“All of our first projects were medical,” Davis says. “That was one part of the market that didn’t stop moving like the speculative real estate sector did. We went after medical projects, from the \$5,000 to \$10,000 jobs and on up. We renovated the men’s and women’s restrooms in the main lobby at Virginia Beach General Hospital as one of our first projects. Small and difficult, but it was a job.”

One of their bigger projects was finishing up the Ambulatory Surgery Center at Virginia Beach General, capitalizing on the relationships built in previous years.

“Those connections sustained us in the first years,” Davis says. “We showed people then that even though we were small, we could do the work. That’s what has continued to keep us going over 16 plus years – showing clients that we can do an excellent job so they’ll want to have us back to do something else, big or small.”

After several years in business, Davis and Whitfield faced a tough decision. The company was doing well but not well enough to support both of them. Davis bought out his partner and continued to build the company. Sussex Development has now grown to 22 employees and a 4,500 square foot office in the same location in Virginia Beach.

Sussex Development has maintained the same focus on details through the years and continued to build expertise working medical projects.

“Medical is a whole different state of mind,” Davis says. “It’s attention to detail. You’re not in the middle of a field, putting

up a metal building and some interior partitions and walking away. You’re dealing with infectious waste control, positive air pressure, medical gases ... It just goes on and on. The details involved in a project like that are so significant that it becomes a mindset. You can’t do anything halfway. When you build a medical project, you have to give 110 percent.”

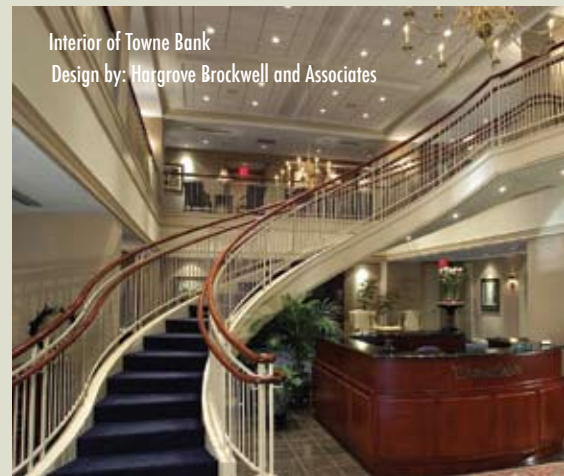
That kind of project fits in with Davis’ philosophy, which isn’t focused on growth but rather on being thorough, understanding clients’ needs and building long-term relationships. The company’s quality work has helped Sussex build ongoing relationships with several medical companies, as well as Towne Bank and Long and Foster Real Estate.

“Sussex is not big project oriented,” Davis says. “Sussex is not small project oriented. The lifeblood of the company revolves around the mindset of quality and details. I don’t look at it as ‘We do bank work or we do real estate work.’ Sussex Development is about working with owners one on one, understanding their dreams and making them a reality.”

Tom Nutt, vice president of land acquisition and development at the Long and Foster Cos. in Fairfax, has so appreciated Davis’ philosophy that he has followed him from company to company since 1987. Sussex Development has built Long and Foster real estate offices from Virginia to Delaware.



Ethan Allen at Columbus Station, Virginia Beach
Design by: Woodard Design



Interior of Towne Bank
Design by: Hargrove Brockwell and Associates



Rivers Edge South
Design by: Cox Kliewer & Company

“Having them has a contractor is like they work for you as an employee,” Nutt says. “I’ve always worked with Harry. Sussex is still doing work for us on a building they built for us in Virginia Beach 12 years ago. When you call them, you know it’s going to be taken care of. There aren’t going to be any excuses. They’re excellent to have around. I wish other contractors were like them. We have a lot of contractors we work with from Pennsylvania to North Carolina, but they’re the best.”

That reputation and the connections that Davis had made and maintained from one of the first jobs he had helped move Sussex Development into partnering on larger-scale jobs, including the new \$150 million Virginia Beach Convention Center and the ongoing remodeling and addition at Blair Middle School in Norfolk. In the mid-1980s, Davis had worked with Turner Harwood, the development arm of Turner Construction Co., one of the largest construction firms in the country. The company naturally turned to him to help first with the convention center, then with the school.

“The convention center is a project like no other in this area,” Davis says. “The architect is a world class architect using world class details. There were products and design details that hadn’t been seen locally before.”

Working on such large joint ventures moves Sussex Development into a completely different realm for the duration of the project. His local connections that the company has help streamline the process for the larger partner.

“Working joint venture projects, you’re working with multiple management styles,” Davis says. “You enter the realm where it’s not all about what you think personally. It has to be a team effort, especially when you’re working with someone like Turner on the Convention Center. They’re the majority player in the venture and they’re one of the largest contractors in the United States. You have to swallow your pride a little bit. You can’t walk into it and assume you’re going to be king. You have to be willing to work through things. You have to find a middle ground. Most construction people don’t do well at that. Their attitude is, ‘It’s either my way or the highway.’ If you go in with that attitude, you won’t survive.”



YMCA Elizabeth City
Design by: Turok Architecture




Rouse One
Design by: Davis Kane Architects



Instead of letting his ego get in the way, Davis has seized on the opportunities to learn.

“These projects allowed me to be involved in brainstorming on processes and issues with some of the most knowledgeable people in the industry,” he says. “It’s an experience not many people get.”

And it’s likely that future clients will see evidence of that knowledge being applied as Sussex Development continues to exceed expectations. 



Colonial Inn Design by: Cox Klierer & Company



Long & Foster Oceanfront Award Winning
Design by: Hargrove Brockwell & Associates