

U-M VP Jim Brinkerhoff at the park site in 1959. The Chamber of Commerce wanted to create an economic dynamo.



ANN ARBOR NEWS

The UNDERWHELMING HISTORY of the ANN ARBOR RESEARCH PARK

Launched with high hopes, it never really took off.

by Grace Shackman

W

hen Jeff Hauptman, CEO of Oxford Companies, saw three parcels

for sale near the entrance of the Ann Arbor Research Park recently, he bought them—but not for research.

The sale included two buildings—and Oxford immediately tore down the one at the northeast corner of Research Park Dr. and State St. Thanks to its visibility on State, “the lot was worth more vacant,” Hauptman explains. The buyers, who previously built the Staybridge Suites on the southeast corner, plan another new retail building there.

The second building, next to the one he tore down, was built for Hoover Ball & Bearing. Hauptman sold it to Gift of Life Michigan, which connected it to their existing building next door. Gift of Life also bought his third lot to extend its parking lot.

The Ann Arbor Research Park was built to lure corporate research facilities to Ann Arbor, but today only six of its twenty-seven buildings are devoted to research. Most are occupied by nonprofits and others needing inexpensive office space. Four are currently for sale and others are underused, judging from the scarcity of cars in their parking lots. Five empty lots overgrown with weeds make the park look even more forlorn.

But this is not a story of a wonderful place suffering the ravages of time. The park was never a big success, in spite of the great hopes of its developer, the Greater Ann Arbor Chamber of Commerce, and the local and state officials who encouraged its creation.

T

he chamber launched the project in 1959. Auto-parts maker Bendix and pharmaceutical firm

Parke-Davis had recently opened research facilities in Ann Arbor, inspiring business leaders to see a new economic niche for the city. As they explained in an *Ann Arbor News* article, the park would create jobs, expand the tax base, and “truly stamp out our community as the Research Center of the Midwest.”

But building a research park in a small college town was a stretch. Most were in larger communities on the east or west coasts, where they had a whole slew of universities to provide brain power. And most were outside cities along major highways.

The chamber didn’t want to encourage urban sprawl, so its leaders were happy when they found almost 210 acres in Pittsfield Township bounded by S. State on the west, Ellsworth on the south, and I-94 on the north. In addition to the expressway, it was near three airports (Ann Arbor, Wil-

low Run, and Detroit Metro) and a short drive to the U-M campus and downtown Ann Arbor.

The land was under the control of Marian Abbott, president of Micrometrical Manufacturing, which had a new building on the northwest part of the proposed park. (Still there and much enlarged, it’s now used for various U-M purposes, including a sleep clinic.) The rest of the site was farmland.

Abbott removed one big obstacle—finding the money—by agreeing to be paid as the lots in the park were sold. The next challenge was to annex to Ann Arbor in order to hook into city services. Since Ann Arbor only annexed land directly abutting the city limits, the chamber first had to persuade a number of homeowners between the site and the city to annex. The city, too, agreed to take prorated payment for the water and sewage hookups, roads, and curbs as the lots were sold.

The chamber started with the ninety-eight acres closest to State, platting thirty-three lots on either side of what is now Research Park Dr. Two acres of grass and trees were planned to form a greenbelt at the boulevard entrance on State, with a more modest entrance off Ellsworth.

Governor John Swainson declared it “good for all of Michigan” when Federal Mogul bought the first lot in August 1961. The auto-parts maker hired Ann Arbor architects Colvin, Robinson to design a modernist building in the center section. Upon completion, company officials were quoted saying “We’re happy, we just want neighbors.”

Next, a consortium of Detroit investors built what they called “the Research Park Rental Facility” to serve companies that didn’t need a whole building. (That’s the building Hauptman tore down.) The third buyer was Tecumseh Products, maker of compressors and small engines. U-M president Harlan Hatcher, who was on its board, convinced the company to locate in the park. That’s the building Gift of Life expanded by connecting it to the building it bought from Hauptman.

They were followed by Berry Electric, developers of garage-door opening systems, and two more Federal Mogul buildings. Federal Mogul is still in two of them; the third is now a charter school, the Ann Arbor Learning Community. Berry’s building is now the Ann Arbor Center for Independent Living.

Those early ground breakings were big celebrations with generous coverage in the *Ann Arbor News*. Swainson’s successor, George Romney, always showed up to be photographed wielding a plasma gun or posing on a bulldozer.

Then the project stalled. For three years—1965, 1966, and 1967—nothing happened. The *Ann Arbor News* published pictures of overgrown lots. Chamber president Bill Bott admitted that the “period of barrenness” was unexpected; he blamed it on a “tight money situation” that had hit the country, plus a “reduction in govern-



Oxford Companies CEO Jeff Hauptman bought a building at State and Research Park Dr.—and tore it down. “The lot was worth more vacant,” he explains.

PHOTO, RIGHT: J. ADRIAN WYLIE

©April 2018

Ann Arbor Observer

The
**UNDERWHELMING
HISTORY**

of the
**ANN ARBOR
RESEARCH PARK**

ment financed research and development contracts.”

In 1966, the chamber worked with commercial realtor Carl Brauer to develop the eastern half of the park. At Brauer’s suggestion, they had it rezoned from research to light industrial, hoping that companies might build factories first, then add research facilities.

In 1969 Comshare, a computer time-sharing company, moved into a building designed by local architect Bill Hobbs. Two years later, KMS Fusion took the old Micrometrical building. Named for its founder, Kip (Keeve) Milton Siegel, KMS hoped to develop nuclear fusion as a source of low-cost, non-polluting energy. It also took part of the old Berry Electric building.

Physicist Charles Armentrout started work at KMS in the Berry building in 1986, moving to the headquarters building two years later. Shortly after his move, CEO Pat Long closed the Berry building, and the rest of its occupants crowded into the headquarters. To relieve the pressure, Long bought the buildings on either side of the State St. entrance.

“KMSers beat a dirt path through the weeds between our HQ building and the KMS building on the north side of Research Drive,” Armentrout recalls. “A pretty rugged walk but I made that trip a lot.” Eventually Long built a road connecting the headquarters parking lot to the circle and got city council to name it KMS Drive.

In 1979 Herman Miller’s Facility Management Office designed and built a headquarters at 3971 Research Park. Its head, Bob Propst, had invented the office cubicle to give offices more flexibility but was disappointed that his “Action Office” was often used to make them more rigid and claustrophobic.

At Facility Management, Propst gathered architects, planners, and human be-

Governor George Romney and U-M president Harlan Hatcher posed at a 1963 groundbreaking.



ANN ARBOR NEWS

A billboard promoted “The Research Center of the Midwest.”



ANN ARBOR NEWS



vis Farms is now just one of many newer research parks in Pittsfield and Ann Arbor’s north side. By comparison, the Ann Arbor Research Park “is dated, and most companies are looking for something more modern with better amenities,” Hauptman says. “They have wasted road width and minimal aesthetics. However, if someone is looking for a bargain, there are opportunities there. They still have a great location.”

SPARK president and CEO Paul Krutko agrees with Hauptman on the park’s shortcomings, pointing to the lack of consistent landscaping, streets that look uncared for, and a generic presentation. “When you get there, it doesn’t look like you’ve arrived anywhere,” he says.

Former Ann Arbor mayor Lou Belcher points to another problem: “Software companies can rent wherever. They need less space and like to be downtown, near other professionals and amenities like coffee shops.”

People “used to move to work,” Krutko says. “Now they first choose where they want to live. This means companies follow the talent instead of having the talent follow them.”

Krutko thinks the future of research parks is to diversify. “They should change zoning to encourage housing and commercial entities. They can be mini-town centers.”

But reports of the Ann Arbor Research Park’s death may have been premature. Its thirty-year stasis was recently broken: Zoller, a German company that supplies high-precision machine tools and software systems to manufacturers, just moved its North American research, sales, and service headquarters into a sleek modernist building in the middle of the park.

Zoller’s architect, David Gebhardt, worked for engineers Ayres Lewis Norris & May in the 1970s, and helped design the firm’s now-empty building there. Asked why the Zoller site hadn’t been built on sooner, he explains that a power line ran through it; Zoller had to pay DTE to reroute it. The fact that Malletts Creek runs at the back of its lots may also have discouraged development.

The first new building in the park since Avis Farms opened in 1988, it also reflects how much the city’s building requirements have changed in three decades. Zoller installed state-of-the-art bio-infiltration ponds to collect runoff—and a sidewalk, the only one in the park.

Asked why Zoller chose this spot, Gebhardt answered: “It’s a nice park with space between the lots, room for additional parking, proximity to Ann Arbor, and it’s near the expressway and the Ann Arbor airport.” It sounds a lot like the assets the chamber stressed when setting it up almost sixty years ago. ■

haviorists to study how best to structure white-collar workplaces. In keeping with the principles of Action Office, “there were no interior walls,” recalls Clark Malcolm, who worked there as a writer. “They used carpet tiles, so wherever they were doing a layout for an office, they could just lift the tile to plug in for electricity.”

Herman Miller closed the Ann Arbor operation in 1991, and the building became the local Social Security office. That change would have upset Propst. Malcolm notes that the feds turned it into “a rabbit warren of little offices, protected with bulletproof glass.”

Architect John Hinkley of Hobbs & Black worked on buildings in the park in 1980 and 1988. “The first was a two-story building with an atrium for Ervin Industries,” he says. “Ervin makes abrasives to polish chrome. The other was a spec office building.”

Both buildings are still there, though one has vacancies.

When Armentrout started working in the research park in 1986, he recalls, “there were many buildings, but also a lot of empty lots and, yes, weeds.” And there weren’t many amenities. He remembers that when Mark’s Midtown Coney Island opened across State St. from KMS in 1987, “we were all thrilled by the fare. On opening day they ran out of food and had employees racing to grocery stores to buy more hot dogs.”

The following year the city directory listed twenty-eight buildings in the park. Most were still research operations, including those of three car companies—Honda, Mercedes-Benz, and Nissan. (Honda and Mercedes are still there, but Nissan has been replaced by Subaru.) But that same year, a potent new competitor opened farther south on State: Avis Farms.

Warren Avis, the rental-car company founder, took the research park idea but made it more attractive. He left a house and barn on the property and added water features, walking and running paths, a volleyball court, and picnic area.

Avis Farms’ first phase filled up so fast that he immediately built a second. The Ann Arbor Research Park, meanwhile, was frozen in time—it would be thirty years before it saw another new building.

► **After Avis Farms opened in 1987, the Ann Arbor Research Park was frozen in time.**