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## Candlewood Suites rises at Midlink

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KALAMAZOO - "Activity begets activity."

That's the message from David Smith, president of Midlink Business Park in Comstock Township, the site of a new hotel construction project.

"We have over 70 percent occupancy right now in two buildings," he told *MiBiz*, saying it will also have a new deal being announced in a couple of weeks.

In Smith's opinion, the strong occupancy rates in Midlink East and Midlink West spurred the building of a hotel at the park. The 95-unit Candlewood Suites then prompted the improvement of 16 acres for further retail development.

"It's a successful evolution," said Smith.

Part of InterContinental Hotels Group, Candlewood Suites will be an extended stay hotel, according to Candlewood Suites owner and developer Andy Patel.

"Every room has a kitchen," said Patel, noting other amenities like a free fitness area, free onsite laundry and wireless Internet.

Patel found the Midlink site attractive for a few reasons.

"The area is performing better as far as the economy goes," he said, pointing to jobs being added by Midlink tenants like Kaiser Aluminum.

According to Smith, Midlink deals last year included Kaiser Aluminum with over 450,000 square feet, Tourney Consulting Group with 20,000 square feet and W. Soule for 68,000 square feet.

From Patel's perspective, the universities and pharmaceutical and life science companies that bring people into town also make the property appealing.

"It's known as a lodging exit in town, but there's nothing new and fresh," said Patel of hotels on the east side of town.

He sees the location as very strategic. Although an extended stay hotel, Candlewood Suites will also welcome transient travelers. Patel noted the many sports tournaments that take place in Kalamazoo and that Wings Stadium is just across the street from the hotel.

According to Patel, Peabody Group in Lansing serves as architect and CPM Construction Inc. in St. Joseph is the general contractor for the hotel. The project broke ground at the end of March.

Patel anticipates Candlewood Suites opening at the end of fall or early winter.

"(The hotel) starts to fold right into the vision we had," Smith said.

That vision for Midlink identified the viable retail area around Sprinkle Road. According to Smith, the park did significant work to examine the best possible uses of land. "A hotel is one of them," he said.

The hotel became the first part of Midlink's retail vision to fall into place.

"Andy did a fabulous job of getting financing and making it happen," Smith said.

He considers this achievement no small feat, especially considering Patel did it in the "crosshairs of economic malaise."

Besides a hotel, Midlink recognized food service as another big item. Smith envisions the "fast, casual restaurant concept" in the park's future. Rather than fast food restaurants like McDonald's — which Sprinkle Road already has — he points to possibilities like Panera Bread or Chipotle Grill. Additionally, Smith foresees opportunity for credit unions, convenience stores and maybe even a daycare center at Midlink. The park has already started preparation.

"When we closed the deal with Andy, we needed to be able to put in roads," said Smith.

Future retail developers at Midlink will find everything in place — like gas, electric, water, sewer and roads.

Even though commercial real estate — especially the retail segment — has taken some hits lately, Smith believes Midlink has a story to tell.

"We've always had a story to tell, but every day it gets better," said Smith.

He acknowledged the tough economic environment. However, Smith feels that there are always people doing well. With all the activity at the park, he expressed optimism.

"The canvas is starting to get painted," said Smith. "People don't have to squint as much."

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