



Rendering of EBRM's proposed development at 600 N. Broad St.

Condo Craze on N. Broad Street

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The Wilkie Buick, Chevrolet & Subaru dealership at 600 N. Broad is moving, but not far.

The Subaru dealership is moving across the street to a smaller building that now serves as Wilkie's used-car lot. The Subaru maintenance operation will move two blocks south to a building at Broad and Buttonwood that now houses Wilkie's auto-body shop.

Wilkie is dropping the General Motors models from its lineup, according to Wilkie president Dan Polett.

Meanwhile, the two buildings that have housed the main dealership for the last 16 years are falling prey to Philadelphia's condo craze.

Developer Eric Blumenfeld of EB Realty bought the super-block from Polett for \$9 million. That's whopping big profit for Polett, who bought the property 25 years ago, when values on North Broad were minuscule. Polett moved Wilkie into the current location from Broad and Cecil B. Moore in 1993 to make way for the Liacouras Center. Polett, 70, is retiring and his son Robert will become presi-

dent of Wilkie Subaru. Blumenfeld is just now putting the finishing touches on Lofts 640, an old pharmaceutical-manufacturing building on the northwest corner of Broad and Mount Vernon streets. He began to convert the abandoned factory into 285 loft apartments two years ago.

It was a gutsy, pioneering move. No one but Blumenfeld and his bankers believed that a building on North Broad could draw high-rent tenants. But Blumenfeld pulled them in with perks like free cable, indoor parking, a heated indoor saltwater swimming pool, a gym and roomy lofts with killer views from 12-foot windows. And did I mention the entry court with the bubbling stream and rose garden?

Soon tenants will be munching on rustic Italian cuisine at a courtyard cafe operated by Mark Vetri, award-winning executive chef and owner of the Vetri restaurant at 1312 Spruce. The as-yet-unnamed cafe will have a Broad Street entrance and outdoor seating in walled courtyard between Lofts

640 and the historic Old Zion Lutheran Church.

"Everybody says it is impossible to do retail on North Broad Street because there is no pedestrian traffic. I say, 'Bull....' There is no reason for pedestrian traffic to be there. Give them a reason and they will be all over it," Blumenfeld said.

His new project will provide plenty of reasons.

Spreading out the latest architectural drawings of the proposed development last week, Blumenfeld stabbed a finger at various points on the schematic indicating retail spaces.

"I've got to build it and they will come. This wants to be like a Trader Joe's. This here wants to be a neighborhood bank. This here wants to be [PLCB] superstore because I'm a wine fanatic," he finished.

Blumenfeld plans to demolish the existing one-story showroom and maintenance shop and replace it with a four-story structure topped with a village of three-story townhouses. The first four floors will accommodate retail and restaurant spaces, and a lifestyle spa/health club.

Blumenfeld boasts that his spa and health club will compare to the Sporting Club at the Bellevue on South Broad. "This property becomes to North Broad what the Bellevue is to South Broad," he

boasted.

The rooftop chalets will have sweeping views of the Center City skyline and the Ben Franklin Bridge.

The six-story building behind the existing showroom will provide parking for 400 cars on the first three floors, and loft-style condos on the top three levels.

It is an ambitious plan, but no one has ever accused the 43-year-old Blumenfeld of going for the low-hanging fruit. He is an adventurous developer willing to invest in neighborhoods before they become safe. The Wilkie project will bolster the millions he has already invested in Lofts 640.

Other EB Realty projects include the Marine Club, at Broad and Washington; Abbots Square, at 2nd and South streets; and the Cigar Factory, at 4th Street and Girard Avenue. He recently sold the vacant Divine Lorraine Hotel, at Broad Street and Fairmount Avenue, to a group of European investors for \$10.3 million.

The Wilkie project is the biggest of Blumenfeld's career in terms of its potential impact on the surrounding community. If he succeeds, other entrepreneurs will follow - and quickly.

(Last week, the Rendell administration said it wanted to sell the State Office Building, at Broad and Spring Garden streets, just south of the Wilkie complex. That site could be developed for residential use as well.)

Polett, who has operated dealerships on North Broad since the early '60s, is astounded by the changes along a roadway that may soon live up to its Avenue of the Arts North billing.

"Quite frankly, I didn't see this type of transformation taking place at this time," Polett said. "But I think what we're seeing today is truly a renaissance. Not a speculative renaissance, but a real renaissance of North Broad."

Although Blumenfeld's design has yet to pass muster with the Spring Garden Civic Association, president Pat Freeland said the group's zoning committee is "very excited" by the project. The project design will be presented to the community for a vote later this summer.

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