

# *Downtown Corporate Center A Vision and One Bold Step*

First came a flood of epic proportions.

Then came the fire.

When the smoke cleared and the water receded, downtown Grand Forks lay in shambles.

Everything had flooded and 11 historic buildings had burned. The central business district was ruined.

City officials knew that a bold step was needed to restore the faith that downtown could come alive again. So they decided to take that step and help stage a comeback.

One year after the flood, they broke ground for a \$14.4 million corporate office center that would anchor the new downtown, replace most of the burned office space, revitalize the tax base and keep jobs in the central business district.

Today, a pair of stately buildings provides a powerful presence in the ever-emerging downtown that has refused to die.

“We thought it was one of our anchor projects when we did it,” said John O’Leary, former director of the Grand Forks Office of Urban Development. “We’re more convinced now that’s exactly what it was. We’ve seen it work as a catalyst to bring other private-sector money to the table in large and small projects alike.

“For example, restaurants and little shops have opened up around the corporate center,” O’Leary added. “There was a four-million-dollar investment to redo another building nearby. The owner of that building told me he wouldn’t have had the confidence to spend that amount of money downtown had the corporate center not been there.”

The center consists of two structures: a five-story, 70,000-square-foot building that houses a bank, a major law firm and a major accounting firm; and a three-story, 30,000-square-foot building across the street, most of which is now home to a Medicare claims processing center. The bank, law offices and accounting firm all were located downtown at the time of the disaster. The processing center, which is run by a health insurance provider, is a new business to Grand Forks.

## **Adding Flood Protection**

But building a premier business anchor was not enough. The buildings, both of which are in a floodplain, had to be protected from a possible



*Grand Forks' new five-story corporate center features built-in flood protection measures.*

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future flood. So, in keeping with local floodplain ordinances, several precautions were taken to reduce or prevent future damages. For example:

- ◆ Neither building has a basement.
- ◆ Both buildings are encircled by a special concrete wall that is 1½ feet high and hidden behind a brick façade. The wall serves as a flood barrier to protect the building to the base flood elevation.
- ◆ A rubberized, waterproof membrane was installed as well. The membrane lines the concrete wall and extends below the main floor, creating a bowl effect, to keep water from seeping into the buildings—both from the outside and from below ground.
- ◆ Special flood-protection barriers have been custom-made for all the ground-level doorways. The barriers, which are aluminum panels lined with rubber gaskets, can be slipped into a special track that sits about 2 inches inside the doorways to keep floodwater from entering the structures.
- ◆ Panel boxes for the electrical systems in both buildings are above the base flood elevation.
- ◆ In each building, the mechanical equipment has been located on the roof to keep it above potential flood levels.



*Flood protection has been added to this second part of the corporate center as well. Here, boilers are located on the third floor to keep them high and dry.*

- ◆ When the elevators are unoccupied, they now “rest” at the top of the buildings instead of the bottom. Traditionally, elevator cabs rest in a building’s basement or on the main floor. Putting the cab at the top reduces the susceptibility to being flooded.
- ◆ At the five-story building, an emergency generator has been upgraded and has been located on the roof instead of at a lower level that could be impacted by floodwaters. Building codes require a certain generator size to provide emergency power for the elevators. But a larger-capacity generator was used for the two-building complex so that it also could power the heating system and additional emergency lighting for a period of time.

- ◆ At the three-story building, a boiler room that houses the hot-water radiation heating system is located on the third floor—again to keep it high and dry from floodwaters. The system is used to heat both buildings via special piping that runs through a skywalk connecting the pair of structures.

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According to the project's architects, the flood-protection measures added less than 1 percent to the total cost of the complex—mainly because so many of the measures were incorporated in the design and construction phase rather than being done after the fact.

Funding for the project came from three main sources: \$5.25 million in federal Community Development Block Grant funds, \$3.5 million in federal Economic Development Administration funds, and a \$5.66 million revenue bond issued by the City of Grand Forks.

Rental income will be used to retire the initial bond debt and to cash flow the upkeep of the building. Any excess income will be used for activities that benefit low- and moderate-income individuals and that create or save primary-sector jobs—both of which are required conditions of the federal funding.