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FOCUS: CONSTRUCTION, DESIGN & ARCHITECTURE

Fidelity builds a 'record-setter'

By Marion Davis,
PBN Managing Editor

The topping-off was purely ceremonial: The steel work on Fidelity Investments' \$200 million new office building is still two or three weeks away from completion, and the skeleton of a whole section of the building lacked more than a few pieces when the crowd gathered around.

But it was still quite a sight, the long stretch of steel and concrete and a few panels of glass, surrounded by enormous machinery and huge piles of dirt and rock. And the cluster of men in signal-yellow T-shirts and orange safety vests, watching the beam rise toward the sky.

The workers – about 240 right now – see the progress every day, but still, the topping-off, on June 22, was a chance to celebrate the ambitious task they've taken on.

They're building the largest office building in Rhode Island, 577,000 square feet on four levels, plus a five-level parking garage with 2,277 spaces and a 480-foot walking path in-between.

The skeleton is made of about 3,500 tons of steel. The exterior will include 35,000 square feet of stone, 115,000 square feet of glass, 4,000 hand-laid bricks and 400 pre-cast concrete panels. And the interior includes energy-saving features meant to earn a Silver LEED rating.

"This is going to be a record-setter," John Muggeridge, Rhode Island general manager for Fidelity, told the crew. "It's going to be the answer to a trivia question: 'Where is the largest office building in Rhode Island?' Everyone's going to think 'Providence.' No, it's Smithfield."

Muggeridge, who has represented Fidelity in the state for 11 years, noted that this is the third building he's seen go up on the campus, and when it's done, the financial company will have more than 1 million square feet of real estate there.

William J. Gilbane Jr., president and chief operating officer of Gilbane Building Co., which is running the project, noted that 900 Salem St. will require a total of more than 1 million man-hours of construction work. Altogether, Fidelity will have commissioned 2.5 million hours.

Neither company is new to such huge projects. Muggeridge noted that Fidelity has buildings going up "all over the place," and Thomas Comella, a Gilbane vice president and the project executive for 900 Salem St., noted that Gilbane has "hundreds of jobs" under way, though "they're not all as large as this."

Still, taking a visitor on a tour of the construction site, both men spoke of the many ways in which this building stands out in the world of commercial construction.

Fidelity is sensitive to the location, for instance – to the fact that the whole parcel had been woods, and trees shouldn't be taken down carelessly. So the company has had Gilbane go to great lengths to save trees and avoid wetlands, which



PBN PHOTO / STEPHANIE EWENS

A STEEL BEAM, signed by the workers who are erecting Fidelity Investments' \$200 million new office building in Smithfield, sits on a still-unfinished portion of the building after the topping-off ceremony on June 22. When completed, the 577,000-square-foot structure will be the largest office building in the state.

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Comella said helped define the shape of the building and its location on the campus, a seven-minute walk from the other buildings.

"You had to fit it where you could," he said. And such has been the effort to save trees that in one spot, there's an island of trees whose leaves actually touch the concrete, and whose roots end right on the edge of the road.

The dirt piles have also been strategically placed to minimize the need for tree-clearing, Comella said, and much of the dirt and rock that has been removed is being put back in as fill later on. Recycling materials, he said, has been a priority in general. And rather than clear lots of space for the trucks bringing in pre-cast concrete, Gilbane set up off-site staging areas and then has trailers bring individual pieces to the building.

And though the site now looks a bit like a wasteland, Muggeridge said the low-profile design will help it blend in better and feel like it's "on a more human scale." There will also be a "green" roof on the deck in the back, and extensive landscaping.

Near the parking garage, Gilbane is also building a 6,000-gallon cistern to store rain water, reducing stormwater runoff and also providing a water supply to irrigate the landscape.

Kenneth Fisher, a principal in the Gensler architectural firm's Boston office, said his firm always includes "sustainable strategies" in its designs, and Fidelity "has taken on some more aggressive approaches which we're happy to adopt."

Along with the cistern, which Fisher considers a particularly important feature, the building itself will have a high-efficiency "envelope" that will allow it to maximize the amount of daylight from the windows, but also be well-insulated.

The entire interior will also have a raised floor – 18 inches above the concrete slab – with all the cables, wiring and heating, air conditioning and ventilation system inside. Having the HVAC come from the floor, he said, produces higher-quality air, he said, and it also is more energy-efficient, because when you cool the air, for example, it flows directly to the level where people are, rather than having to come down through hot air.

The difference, Fisher said, is that air can be cooled just to 60 degrees, rather than 55.

The ceilings are also unusually high, Fisher noted, 10.8 feet from the finished floor. That will maximize the natural day-lighting, he said, and it also allowed for a high-efficiency artificial lighting system that directs light at the ceiling instead of directly downward.

And along with plenty of recycled construction materials, Fisher said, the building will have carpeting and other finishes with recycled content, and all materials, to the extent possible, are being obtained from local sources, so less shipping is required.

Given all these efforts, Fisher said he's confident that Fidelity will attain Silver LEED certification, which requires a combination of meeting basic benchmarks and earning points above and beyond that. Only about 20 buildings in the state are even registered with LEED.

Yet the first task at hand is to finish 900 Salem St., and there's plenty of work left to do. The plan is to start moving in around the third quarter of 2008, Muggeridge said, but it will be a "phased completion, phased occupancy," as Comella put it. It's possible that the project won't be finished until the first quarter of 2009, he said.

But once the skeleton is done, the work will speed up. One of the priorities, Comella said, is to build a large section of the parking garage so it can accommodate the cars of construction workers. It's already crowded along the driveway, and that's with half the crew he expects to have soon. "We'll have 500 to 600 workers when we peak," he said.

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