



The Souderton location before Village Centre Properties began renovating it in 2007.



The Souderton office suites are on the National Register of Historic Places.

Makeover turns deserted mills into active spaces

Village Centre Properties gives rundown buildings another chance to thrive

David Campbell

Years ago, cigars and pants. Today, office suites.

At the turn of the 20th century, Blooming Glen and Souderton each boasted a cigar manufacturing plant. The Fretz Pants Factory called Pipersville home.

Those three buildings are now under the ownership of David Halliday's Village Centre Properties, which, in simplest terms, purchases historic structures, fixes them up and then leases them out to tenants.

"They're all these turn-of-the-century buildings, they all need to be rehabbed, and they're all in these village centers," said John Schwarz, owner of Schwarz Brand Studio of Pipersville, who is helping Halliday enhance his business. "It all follows on the same sort of aesthetic and also sense of purpose, which is creating a place for people to go, creating a place for businesses to go."

Halliday owned a construction company prior to launching Village Centre Properties. For the most part, he built office buildings and hotels, but the travel industry crumbled following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 and Halliday needed to look elsewhere to keep his creative juices flowing.

Even before Sept. 11, Halliday had laid the framework for Village Centre, snapping up the old Fretz Pants Factory in 1996 or '97 and turning it into a comfortable and usable space.

"I looked at it as a new career," said Halliday, taking questions on the lower floor of the Blooming Glen building two weeks ago.

He purchased the Blooming Glen edifice in 2003. It reopened in 2005. The Souderton complex was bought in 2007 and opened in 2009.

Each structure takes about 18

months to renovate. He won't take just any property. It has to fit the Village Centre Properties mold.

"We don't want a 100-year-old building that someone has renovated so much we can't get the integrity out of it," he said. "The aesthetics of it all is something I'm passionate about."

A history buff, Halliday has two of his buildings, Blooming Glen and Souderton, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Blooming Glen site was formerly the Unek Havana Cigar Company, built in or around 1901. The Souderton location took home the Montgomery County Revitalization Award for 2010. He described its Renaissance.

"We decided to refinish all the hardwood floors in the lobby and all the hallways and the bathrooms, and then carpet the offices," Halliday said. "We have to walk a careful line as to making it a comfortable, professional and quiet office environment, but trying to bring into it whatever character we can from the old building... They don't have the same characteristics sometimes of what you need for an

office and what you need for an historic building look."

Halliday has his limits. He isn't willing to drive more than an hour from his Central Bucks County home — he grew up in Doylestown — for a property. And the price, of course, has to be reasonable. Add to that the sheer dearth of available buildings that fit the Village Centre brand and Halliday figures he has three to five years of stock left.

"A lot of these buildings are pretty ugly to begin with," he admitted. "For us, we want to make sure the properties that we do stay within the character."

"We believe in bringing back these great architectural specimens," Schwarz added. "We like what that does for the community and for the revitalization of the community."

In this age of going green, Village Centre Properties is doing its part, too. Halliday called it his natural green movement.

"The carbon footprint for tearing down and putting up a new building is huge," he said.

By incorporating energy-effi-

cient technologies into his renovations and a modern sensibility, Halliday can offer prospective tenants a home away from home inside a piece of history.

"Any worldwide business can come in here and have a great office," Schwarz said.

Space is available. Halliday suggests calling his business phone (215-453-3000) or visiting vcpros.com. He has more than two dozen tenants currently.

"We're trying to create a place where people can go; it's inspiring," Schwarz said. "There's a community, and we're part of the community."

For Halliday, a jack of all trades in the industry, Village Centre Office Suites are eye catching certainly, but they're much more than glistening hardwood floors and unforgettable light fixtures. They're the complete package, blending old-school traditions with new-school amenities.

"Our mantra is about the experience," Halliday said, proudly. "The experience of the community and the experience of the tenant."



months to renovate.

"We're looking for a village or town that has a very active main streets program because that shows us that they're serious about redeveloping the area," Halliday said. "Right now, we're looking for distressed properties that are 100 years old."

He's checked out properties in Reading, Pottstown and Easton, among others, to add to his collection, but so far, other than a recent purchase in Emmaus, using outside investors, Halliday's holdings remain at three.

Halliday is highly selective,



The Blooming Glen location as it looked decades ago.



Village Centre Properties owner David Halliday, right, in the Souderton building's lobby. Souderton opened in 2009.

At the dawn of our 10th year...

...the Bucks County Herald wants to celebrate with others who have reached a 10-year landmark. In Volume 10, which starts with the October 6 issue, we will feature businesses who started in or around 2002.

Each month starting in November, and through the next year, the Herald will tell the success stories of 10 at 10. That's 10 businesses, one story a month for 10 months. And we will introduce some of the longtime contributors to the Herald. Many have been with us from the start.

Do you know a business that fits the description? We'd like to hear their stories and we hope you will send them. We want to know the challenges, the discoveries, the growth, the setbacks, the rewards and the hopes of enterprising people in Central and Upper Bucks County.

You can clue us in about a business you know at herald@buckscountyherald.com.

