

Hamm has vision for hospital area

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You know you're a busy businessman when you have to write down all of the companies you have a stake in.

In Grande Prairie there's no shortage of successful businesspeople and there are plenty of people who own or operate more than one business. But then there's Henry Hamm, a man who has so much going on he needs a flow chart to keep track of everything.

Yet despite his extensive business holdings and involvement in the community, Hamm casts a small shadow as a man who doesn't have a huge public profile. He is a big name in the housing and development community through two of his companies – Prudential Lands and Dirham Homes – but for the most part is content to maintain a low profile.



Henry Hamm is involved with several businesses in Grande Prairie, including Dirham Homes. Last week, he donated 16 hectares of land for the city's new hospital. Photo: Darrell Winwood

That changed last week when Hamm made a big splash in the community by donating 16 hectares (40 acres) of land to Peace County Health for its new hospital. Another local family had previously donated land at the intersection of 132 Avenue and 108 Street but the deal fell through on different opinions in development. So when the health authority approached Hamm, who owns large tracts of land in the same area, he didn't hesitate.

I sat down with Hamm on Monday in his second-floor office to talk with him about why he got involved with the hospital development and his business success in Grande Prairie.

"I have a passion to be involved with the hospital. To have it on my land would be the right thing to do," said Hamm.

Hamm owns 184 hectares (460 acres) of land in the northwest corner of the city which includes the donated hospital land. He has big plans for what he'd like to build in the surrounding lands.

Keeping in mind that much of this would be subject to city development approvals, Hamm has a vision for the area that is similar to an urban village concept. It includes professional offices for doctors and medical services, high-density housing and transitional housing for those who need assisted care such as seniors. A possible hotel and restaurant, along with walking trails and some lagoons and parks, are all part of the possibilities Hamm envisions.

There is already a precedent for such development in Alberta. In St. Albert, the lands surrounding the Sturgeon Community Hospital resemble much of what Hamm envisions. There are medical offices connected by walking paths, and different kinds of housing that cater to retirees who are still living on their own and seniors who need nursing home-style care. There's also a drugstore, bank and restaurant on the site – it's a good example of making the most of limited space and has given that community a minor medical cluster.

For the cynical among us it's easy to say that Hamm will ultimately profit from the development around the hospital, and that may be true, but in reality that land would be developed whether the hospital was there or not.

"From what I see it's going to be state-of-the-art," said Hamm of the hospital.

Hamm is also a part owner of the nearby Bear Creek Golf Course and the development in the area could tie into the course. Hamm said plans are being considered now to redevelop part of the golf course to include mid-density multi-family homes and a possible national-chain restaurant as part of an expanded club house.

All of this development comes with a 10-year timeline, so don't expect to see bulldozers there tomorrow. The hospital is currently scheduled to open at some point in 2011, but we all know how fast construction can sometimes move in this city.

In the meantime, Hamm has plenty to keep him occupied. Dirham is one of the city's biggest homebuilders and in past years the company has struggled to meet demand. With the housing market significantly cooled this year, Hamm has been able to stop sweating so much.

"Things have changed from a year ago. It's not as brisk a pace but as our homes are completed they're selling," he said, adding it's become much easier to find staff and finish homes on time.

Hamm, like several business owners, is an example of a Grande Prairie success story. The affable man with an easy smile moved here in 1980 from the small coastal town of Black Creek, located halfway up the eastern coastline of Vancouver Island.

In his time here he has amassed a series of companies including Dirham and Prudential and his involvement in the Bear Creek Golf Course. He also is involved with Woodland Tim-BR-Mart, Nor-Alta Aviation, other paving and gravel companies and has developments and companies in Peace River, Fort St. John and further north. He also owns other tracts of land in the region and is always looking for more.

So I asked Hamm how he keeps a low profile with so many business interests.

"I like to have my people and my companies get the recognition," he said.

"Myself, I don't need or want it. We do a lot of things that change lives ... that's what I want my focus to be."

Hamm has been a Prairie man for almost 30 years, but the Pacific is never far away. In his spare time he enjoys going to a home he owns back on the island and still finds time to sail and fish and enjoy the water.

"The bottom line for me is to have fun and be involved with good people," he said. "I enjoy sharing it all with friends."