

Columbia's COPT turning Fort Ritchie in to a Fort Suburbia

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During World War II, the hills around this tiny Western Maryland town rang with the sounds of gunfire and explosions produced by German-made small arms.

No, it wasn't a sneak attack by Bund members or fascist fifth- columnists.

The U.S. Army officers based at nearby Fort Ritchie, then an intelligence training center, were training German-born Jewish immigrants to operate seized Third Reich military equipment in preparation to deploy them as counterintelligence operatives in Europe.

The hills have long since gone quiet, as over the years, one after another, the tenants of Fort Ritchie pulled out their operations, leaving Western Maryland's biggest military installation to rust into the serene Blue Ridge Mountain scenery. Fort Ritchie was shuttered in 1998, the victim of action by the Base Realignment and Closure Commission in 1995.

Now, more than 80 years after its construction, Fort Ritchie is stirring once again, as contractors hired by Maryland's largest owner of office space, Columbia-based Corporate Office Properties Trust, dig shells and live ordnance out of the hillside, preparing the site for environmental remediation and redevelopment.

Fort Ritchie is beginning a new life as a planned community: a brand new city in the mountains, tailor-made for white-collar workers in the communications, defense and intelligence industries, complete with a picturesque lake, a shop-lined Main Street and luxury bungalow houses in the surrounding hills.

"This is going to be an area where you look back on it and you say COPT had the right vision," said Charles J. Fiala, a senior vice president at COPT and manager of the Fort Ritchie project.

COPT acquired the 591-acre property in November 2007, paying what local commercial brokers say was a shockingly low price of \$5 million. The previous owner was PenMar Development Corp., a state- run company that took control of the site from the Army in October 2006.

The purchase agreement between COPT and PenMar required COPT to invest at least \$7.5 million in the project and to take steps toward the generation of 1,400 jobs to replace the 2,500 jobs -- and \$30 million in annual public works budget -- that were lost when the base closed.

But COPT president and CEO Rand Griffin said he saw incredible potential in Fort Ritchie and went well beyond the minimum requirements for redeveloping the site.

"That \$7.5 million was just a number in the negotiations," Griffin said. "They wanted to make sure someone didn't just buy this thing and flip it without making an investment. ... It's strategically located near other government facilities, and we felt we could ... create a very attractive vision of a place where you can work and live and play and walk to work. There aren't many places like that around anymore."

COPT officials said that over the next 10 years they will invest \$256 million to develop 1.7 million square feet of office space and 673 housing units, ranging from 1,200-square-foot apartments to 8,000-square-foot mansions. COPT estimates that as many as 4,500 jobs may be created.

In addition, the developer is seeking corporate tenants for a large, high-security office park similar to its National Business Park in Annapolis Junction, near Fort Meade.

A \$1.47 billion real estate investment trust, COPT has a long track record of attracting large corporate clients that have contracts with the military.

The National Business Park houses about 30 defense contractors, including such high-profile corporations as Booz Allen Hamilton, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman and Computer Sciences Corp.

Fort Ritchie is located about five miles from Raven Rock, a secret, underground Department of Defense facility that many believe to be the "undisclosed location" where Vice President Dick Cheney was sequestered during the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

"We're in the business of supporting defense, federal intelligence and IT," Fiala said. "They like areas where you can create setbacks, control the perimeter and the rest of it."

Response from the nearby community has been positive, according to local officials.

"There was a pretty significant decline in the population of that area as all those military families left," said Tim Troxell, executive director of the Hagerstown-Washington County Economic Development Commission. "I hope they're going to see a nice revitalization of that area, not only from a job opportunities standpoint but from a commercial standpoint."

Two small communications companies, Indus Corp. and Microtech Solutions, have already leased office space at Fort Ritchie, and Hagerstown Community College will start holding classes in one of the fort's renovated office buildings in mid-March.

Construction has also begun on a \$4.6 million, 22,000-square-foot community center to be used by the residents of Cascade and nearby Sabillasville. The building is expected to open in June. Since acquiring the first 500 acres of Fort Ritchie in late 2006, COPT has spent \$6 million to demolish 625,000 square feet of old interior space.

The developers expect to break ground in mid-2008 on a substation operated by local energy provider Allegheny Power, and in six months, COPT expects to have full cell phone coverage on the site.

On a recent rainy afternoon visit, The Daily Record toured facilities and saw the layout for the proposed new town of Fort Ritchie.

The site is divided into seven parts: the historic district, a two-part restricted business zone, a community recreation area, two residential districts and a forest preserve.

The historic district includes the lakeside officer's club building, a handsome Tudor-style two-story structure that the developer says is being considered for restaurant use.

Nearby, Barrick Avenue, which serves as a frontage road for the 38 "finger buildings" -- small, barracks-style structures that once housed National Guard and Army officers and their families -- will be converted into a Main Street and the site of the town's main retail district. The identical stone buildings give the street a prefabricated feel that recalls Levittown, the famous, early post-World War II suburb on Long Island in New York.

On the far side of the lake, the land creeps away from the water in terraced hills, where Fiala says mid-sized single-family townhouses will be built. The families that live there and work at the nearby office park will enjoy singular amenities, he said.

"You'll be able to look out over the lake, take a walk down to the lake, stick your feet in the water, maybe [we] will even let you fish," he said.

The future restricted business zone, separated from the rest of the town by the old firehouse, which will be converted into a two-way tollbooth style auto gate, houses a structure that was once a supermarket and another large building that held a bowling alley for the soldiers who once lived here. Both buildings sit eerily empty, waiting to be converted into office space.

Further to the west, in a meadow on a hill, five huge U-shaped cradles, made out of Army Corps of Engineers concrete, once held massive propane tanks. In the past few weeks, said William D. Hofmann, COPT's property and environmental services manager for Fort Ritchie, a subcontractor hired to demolish the structure has ruined two pieces of heavy equipment trying to break through it.

"All the concrete up here is massive," he said. "He learned his lesson."

On the northwest side of the property, a thick forest spreads out over the green hills. This portion will be built up with large, luxury tract houses on streets called "Woodchuck Lane" and "Cushman Avenue." Another road in the residential area is called "Griffin Drive," which is named after COPT President Rand Griffin and PenMar Board Chair George Griffin, who are not related.

The new, reinvented Fort Ritchie will take between 10 and 15 years to complete, according to COPT officials.

It is "the largest development project of its kind ever to happen in Washington County," said Brien J. Poffenberger, president of the Hagerstown-Washington County Chamber of Commerce.

"It takes an asset that has been here for the whole 20th century ... and really leverages it to its absolute best capacity," he said.

Rand Griffin, however, is taking a more modest approach.

"We tend to ... be quiet about things, to just go and perform," he said. "Ten years from now, this will be the kind of projects that people write about and tout as very significant, but today we're just concentrating on going about it in the right way."

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