

## The Blueprint for an Economic Recovery: NOAA

By Douglas Wilson

In 2009, Douglas Wilson Companies began the process of overseeing and protecting an important and complex building project—the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s research facility on the campus of the University of Maryland.

From its initial vision, the NOAA project has been ambitious and far-reaching. The building will be the new headquarters for NOAA’s National Centers for Environmental Prediction (NCEP). The entire spectrum of forecast tools—from climate to weather, including ocean and precipitation forecasts—will be produced at this NOAA facility. Louis Uccellini, director of NCEP, captured the power of the building: “This is where America’s weather and climate forecasting begins,” he said.



From an architectural and functional perspective, the building was developed to complement the research that will take place there. The innovative design by HOK Architects reflects NOAA’s mission “to understand and predict changes in the Earth’s environment and conserve and manage coastal and marine resources to meet our nation’s economic, social and environmental needs.” The building is configured in a series of curving wings that intersect in the central atrium and includes features that demonstrate environmental sensitivities, from its planted “green roofs” to bio-retention areas to a storm water cistern to collect water for irrigation.

The building design seeks to achieve the U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED Silver certification.

The NOAA building got off to a promising start in 2006 when ground was broken. Three years later, however, amid a series of disputes and lawsuits, the lease was in default and the project had abruptly stopped. That is where Douglas Wilson Companies entered the picture as the receiver for the NOAA project. We knew that this building was a centerpiece of the University of Maryland’s research park, and we knew the building had implications for our environmental and economic future. We also understood the complexities of this project—navigating and negotiating with a series of interested parties to achieve a successful outcome.

We immediately began discussions with the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), the agency responsible for meeting the space requirements of federal agencies, and Bank of America, which provided financing for the NOAA building. At the time of the default, the project was nearly two-thirds complete, but it still required more than \$65 million to be finished.

Our discussions extended to the offices of U.S. Sen. Barbara Mikulski of Maryland and U.S. Rep. Steny Hoyer of the 5th Congressional District of Maryland that includes the NOAA site. They were both keenly aware of the implications of the project. The building would be the headquarters for 800 federal employees and would provide important research capabilities to bolster our understanding of climate and weather forecasting. We engaged with the University of Maryland, which viewed the NOAA building as a vital component of its M-Square research park, a crossroad where government, private industry, technology and science converges.

After several months of conversations, negotiations and compromises, we were able to get the NOAA building back on track. The GSA and Bank of America agreed to

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commit \$65 million for the completion of the building, and we hired Skanska, a global project development and construction group with expertise in public-private partnerships, to finish the construction of the 270,000 square-foot NOAA facility. The project resumed in March 2011, and we expect it to be completed in March 2012. We have regained momentum on the facility, and we are confident that a year from now NOAA researchers will be working in the building on a series of pressing issues.

We believe that the NOAA project provides a blueprint for how the economic recovery can work. A successful recovery must involve cooperation among the financial sector, national and local government, education and research. These are the players in the NOAA story, and through this cooperation and convergence the project is back on track, and it will have an impact on the regional and national levels.

What we saw in the NOAA project was a commitment on the part of the GSA, Bank of America, government officials, education leaders and the private sector to work out the details of the project. They all understood that the stakes were high, and they were willing to take

intelligent risks to resume the project. At the end of the day, NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Prediction will provide essential tools for the United States to anticipate and respond to the immediate threat of a hurricane as well as the long-term challenges of climate change.

There is no question these remain difficult and challenging economic times, and we encounter projects that have failed for one reason or another each day in our business. A recent USA Today story captured at once the challenges and promise of the commercial real estate market. The story pointed to a report that lenders "were still saddled with \$181 billion in distressed loans in February, according to Real Capital Analytics (RCA)." The story emphasized, however, that the commercial real estate market "is turning around far more quickly than analysts expected, with troubled loans falling, occupancy rising and office building sales surging in the largest markets." What we have seen in the NOAA project is a promising sign, a sign that through collaboration and a belief in common ground we can move our economy forward.

