

# building DREAMS

People who are changing the face of Delaware. by Mark S. Reeve

Delaware is growing in a big hurry. U.S. Census Bureau figures for the period between July 1, 2004, and July 1, 2005, rank Delaware as the ninth-fastest growing state in the country. Consider that in light of the fact that Delaware ranks 49th in the nation for land mass.

Accompanying that rapid growth is a phenomenal building frenzy to house and serve all those new people, especially in Sussex County, which accounted for 50.3 percent of all new con-

struction value in the state for 2004. People are catching on that Delaware, especially its seashore, is one wonderful place to be.

Be not afraid. There's a new breed of engineers, land planners, developers and builders who are working closely with legislators and using leading-edge design to ensure Delaware will look good and work well for generations to come. Meet some of the people and companies that are changing the face of Delaware—for the better.

## Big Development

## Meets Small Town

### Ocean Atlantic Associates

It's the Thursday before Christmas in Paynter's Mill new town hall not far from Milton. With bells ringing in the hour and a fireplace sprinkling light across wide-board antique maple floors, residents gather with coffee and danish and talk while resting in plush furniture. Yet it's not holiday plans the new owners in Paynter's Mill are discussing, but builder issues they have with their new homes.

Ocean Atlantic Associates cofounder Preston Schell and vice president and

Paynter's Mill project manager Wendy Baker are meeting with owners face-to-face, hoping to sort out solutions. Schell and Baker meet with home buyers every few months in the neotraditional town they created, ensuring that people becoming part of that community will want to stay with it for many years to come. When it's over, every one of those residents feels satisfied that his or her voice is heard by someone who cares.

"We find it more important to keep our residents happy rather than trying to make them happy after the fact," Schell says.

It's not the kind of personal contact you'd expect from executives of a large development company. Ocean Atlantic Associates is a dense collection of capaci-

ties that encompasses every aspect of real estate development and marketing. It includes construction company Schell Brothers, an urban development company called Genesis Partners, retail sales unit Ocean Atlantic Commercial, commercial construction company ICS, an environmental consulting firm called Envirotech, a real estate sales division called Ocean Atlantic Agency and a half a dozen more related divisions. Its reach spans the Northeast, and it plans to develop mixed-use communities in Europe through Ocean Atlantic International.

Its extensive growth and success since Preston Schell and Gene Lankford formed the company in 1997 boils down to one overwhelming principle—keeping



Preston Schell of Ocean Atlantic Associates

people happy. It applies not only to customers, but to the people who make up Ocean Atlantic itself.

"One of the great advantages of working with Ocean Atlantic is that family comes first," says Wendy Baker. "We'll put forth our best effort, but we also recognize life is not all about work. We want people to have a passion about living."

That attitude is exactly what Ocean Atlantic tries to foster through its communities. Schell cites the company's passion for people's living environments—how the design can encourage people to take pride in their living situation. The company even holds town festivals, like that held at Paynter's Mill last summer, to foster hometown traditions and feelings.

The company cut its teeth with multi-use communities by developing and marketing the North Village and Town Center sections of The Village at Five Pointes near Lewes. The community was the first to realize a true downtown within an independent development. The Village at Five Pointes includes a full supermarket, dozens of stores and restaurants, banking and everything residents need within walking distance. Such manufactured towns are a national trend, and Five Pointes is the model for several similar communities planned for Sussex.

"Town centers are starting for a reason," Schell says. "People originally came for rural isolation. Now it's becoming more heavily developed, so town centers make real sense."

Wholly developed by Ocean Atlantic, Paynter's Mill takes the traditional town design concept further. Along with a mixture of single-family and multi-family homes, the community's Mill Commons features a true town hall fashioned after a traditional New England schoolhouse. The building attracts residents for Friday night chats by its wood-burning fire place and is a natural meeting and event venue. Included in the Commons are recreational facilities and considerable open space. In its next phase, the town's commercial district will add more services and amenities.

Ocean Atlantic makes considerable use of the its Big House condo design to preserve the traditional character of Paynter's Mill. Originated by Humphreys & Partners Architects in

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## Proof of Life

### The Bucci/Pollin Group

Anyone who worked in downtown Wilmington before 2000 knew how empty the streets were after dark. Like many urban centers, only the most desperate lived in the heart of the city.

When a New York-based developer called The Bucci/Pollin Group, Inc. blew into town in 1999, it announced plans to convert the just-sold Nemours Building into upscale apartments. Needless to say, few were convinced of its chances for success.

But brothers Chris and Robert Bucci knew Wilmington better than it knew itself. Having grown up and gone to school in the city, they were well aware of its potential. Within 45 days of completion, the Nemours apartments, named The Residences at Center City, were fully leased. When Bucci/Pollin bought the fire-damaged Delaware Trust Building in 2002 and created a \$50 million luxury residential high-rise called Residences at Rodney Square, they proved again that Wilmington could support a healthy downtown residential market. By 2005 nearly all of the 200 apartments had been leased.

"I think that virtually everyone was skeptical of the success of downtown residential when we started," says Chris Bucci. "We were driven to make sure that the product we were presenting to the community was just a first-class product, offering everything anyone wanted out of residential in downtown Wilmington."

Established in 1994, the real estate acquisition, development and management company is a partnership between the Bucci brothers, David B. Pollin, H. Wesley Schwartz and Greg Miller. Their property holdings throughout the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast total 6 million square feet of office space, industrial and retail space in 64 buildings, 784 residential units over four projects and 2,500 hotel rooms in 14 properties. Though deciding to convert former DuPont landmarks in downtown Wilmington represented a homecoming for the Buccis, the city wasn't every-



thing they remembered.

"The biggest thing about first coming back was that I felt safer in New York than I did in Wilmington. It's not the same now. The city has responded," says Bucci. "The only group that wasn't skeptical was our city government. They really believed in their bones it could work."

The partners knew they could deliver on the potential. "We had a unique perspective, having seen how successful the Nemours building was," Bucci says. "We knew there were people who wanted to live in downtown areas. We saw all these other projects working and thought, 'Why wouldn't it work here?'"

► **Ocean Atlantic Associates**

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Dallas, Texas, the Big House revolutionized multi-family construction by housing six to 10 units inside a structure that resembles a large single-family home. Each unit has separate entrances and access to garages, without having the apartment look of multifamily buildings.

Ocean Atlantic has developed its own innovation called E House, which helps absorb townhomes into a more traditional environment. Through use of open space on the facade, the E House looks like a string of separate single-families, though it is connected on the rear of the structure. The company gains the space-saving benefits of town homes while keeping them in character with the rest of the community. "We've never seen anything like it," says Schell.

The company plans to proliferate its communities throughout southeast Sussex. The Vineyards at Nassau Valley will integrate the scenic grape arbors of Nassau Vineyards off Route 9 with 82 acres of housing, green space, and commercial and recreational facilities. The community will

also ride another trend, using residential units above commercial space to create "live-to-work" opportunities. The community will include a hotel, movie theater and fitness center. Using the vineyard's quaint attraction, Ocean Atlantic intends it to be a wedding destination, dovetailing into one of the county's major tourism targets.

Another master-planned community, Heritage Creek, is planned for Route 5 south of Milton. Near the new middle school, Heritage Creek will be designed for families looking for walk-to conveniences.

Ocean Atlantic also develops a number of smaller communities and custom homes. Schell Brothers has become a leader in condo development in the Lewes-Rehoboth area, which has attracted many young professionals. The construction division built town homes and condos for The Peninsula at Indian River Bay golf community.

In addition, Echelon Custom Homes provides upscale luxury home design and construction. Echelon's interior design of the Iris model, showcased at The Peninsula, won the 2005 National Model Home of the Year Award from the

National Association of Home Builders.

To balance the business's development, Baker manages the Sussex County Land Trust. The trust uses funds from each Ocean Atlantic sale in addition to county funds to create conservation easements for thousands of acres. It has facilitated preservation of more than 2,500 acres of natural and agricultural land so far. Ocean Atlantic has donated more than \$500,000 of the \$1.5 million trust since it began.

The company's commitment to southern Delaware's quality of life is unusual for developers, but Ocean Atlantic is helping to ensure that no matter how much Sussex County grows, it will never be too far from its small-town feeling.

**OCEAN ATLANTIC ASSOCIATES SNAPSHOT**

**Established: 1997**

**Provides: Master-planned community development, custom home design and construction, architecture, engineering, land planning, real estate sales, environmental consultation**

**Projects in Delaware: The Village at Five Pointes, North Village and Town Center, Lewes • Paynter's Mill, master-planned community, Milton • Villas at Bay Crossing, townhomes and villas, Lewes Vineyards at Nassau Valley, mixed-use community, Lewes • Heritage Creek, master-planned community, Milton**