

# Better than ever

## Prosthetics firm is among companies helping turn old auto row on Main Street into technology row

Tuesday, April 1, 2008

Developer Ron Noe has waited a long time to see progress on Main Street.

As the owner of two buildings along the Main Street business corridors, one of them for 30 years, Noe has long hoped new development would spring from Peoria's old auto row.

That development may finally be under way. Noe recently sold his buildings - at 741 and 725 W. Main Street - to Donald Goertzen and Amit Bhanti, owners of Comprehensive Prosthetics and Orthotics, 416 St. Marks Ct.

"I'm glad to see business coming to Main Street," said Noe, who purchased the building at 741 Main Street, originally built as a Buick dealership in the 1920s, in 1978 from auto dealer Ed Houser.

Goertzen and Bhanit said they made the move because they needed more room for their business - making artificial limbs and support devices - and to get a more visible location. Both men also like that the two buildings are next to the Peoria NEXT Innovation Center at 801 W. Main St.

The center, the 48,000-square-foot business incubator that opened last year, now has 10 tenants, small start-up technology firms that look to develop into large firms, said executive director Nancy Wright.

The possibility that the section of

Main Street between University and North streets could be changing from auto row to technology row is a very real one, said Bhanti, who said he discussed the move with Wright. "We're avid salesmen of Peoria. We look to develop other business there," he said of the Main Street buildings.

The prosthetic/orthotic business will be set up at 725 Main Street, while the building at 741 Main Street, where State Rep. Aaron Schock, R-Peoria, maintains an office, will be occupied by other businesses, said Bhanti.

The prosthetic firm presently occupies several offices on the third floor of the Medical Arts Building on St. Marks Court. "We're crowded here. We need a lab five times bigger than what we have," he said of the area where artificial limbs are produced.

"(Moving to Main Street) is probably a bigger step than we wanted to take, but we thought that investing in this would create value. We hope to create a center that will not only attract patients from the central Illinois area but from all over the country," said Bhanti.

Partner Goertzen is excited about the future for his company that was formed three years ago.

"Staying up with changing technology in this business is a challenge. We've come a long way since the days of wooden legs," said Goertzen, who wears a prosthetic leg himself, after a logging accident in the 1970s.

"I was 21 when I lost my leg in an auger while logging in Alaska," he said.

The problems Goertzen ran into with his own artificial limb got him involved in the prosthetic business. "I was pretty unhappy with the wooden leg I had," he said.

Goertzen studied at UCLA and Northwestern and wound up working at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota for 10 years in the 1980s. Meanwhile, he didn't let losing a leg slow him down. "I can out-ski most two-legged people," said Goertzen, recounting awards he's won on ski slopes in New England and Colorado.

Since arriving in Peoria in 1990, he has seen tremendous advances in the prosthetics field. "We have the most advanced equipment in Illinois," said Goertzen, referring to technology used in the manufacture of prosthetic limbs.

"We have one 3,000-pound machine already on site (at the new Main Street location)," he said.

The pair have big plans for the expansion of their business on Main Street. "We're looking at developing a courtyard between the two buildings," said Goertzen, adding that extensive preparations would probably delay the move to Main Street until late in the year.

Once they make the move, Bhanti said there have been conversations with the Innovation Center's Wright about a possible collaboration. "Between Bradley University and the hospitals (at the foot of the hill), Main Street could become a knowledge center with an emphasis on health and research," he said.

That kind of cooperation is critical for economic development in the Peoria area, said Wright. "The resources in this town are astonishing. I don't want to be a time assassin but I can call high-ranking people (in Peoria) at any time," she said.

Wright is looking forward to new neighbors down the street while remaining optimistic the Peoria NEXT center will bring about the long-awaited renaissance on Main Street. "I don't know what the future will bring on Main Street, but everybody knows where we are. We've had a positive impact in a short period of time," she said.

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