

SHOPPING CENTER IDEA AHEAD OF ITS TIME?

Plaza Once Symbolized Future For Bolivia

BY TERRY POPE

Twenty years ago, four Bolivia men shared a dream. They would build for the tiny town a shopping center, the kind one would find in larger towns miles away. "I think we were a little ahead of our time," said John Kopp, one of the men who pooled their financial resources to build Big Four Food Store and the Bolivia Plaza.

"We had a good business," recalled Kopp. "It was quite a store."

The shopping center that once housed Big Four is being demolished by Brunswick County, which bought it in 1988 as storage space. Bolivia has been without a grocery store for more than eight years.

"There's room for a supermarket in Bolivia," said Ina Mae Mintz, mayor. "Our older people don't want to go to Southport. They get too confused."

Big Four opened its doors in November 1971 with 7,200 square feet of shopping space. A number of smaller shops were later added for a total space of more than 11,000 square feet. It had become a true shopping center on U.S. 17.

"We wanted to make Bolivia grow, so we kept adding on to it," said Kopp.

Other investors were local residents James Malcolm Knox, R.K. "Bobby" McKeithan Jr. and William A. "Bill" Kopp, John's brother. Big Four got its name from the four big investors.

But the greatest strength in starting the business may have also been its greatest weakness in the end. With four partners involved, it's hard to run a business like a business, said Kopp.

Ironically, Big Four lasted four years. "This day and age, it would work," said Kopp. "At that time, we didn't have beer and wine sales."

Most people purchase beverages while grocery shopping, he said.

In the last four years, town officials have tried to lure another grocery store to Bolivia, said Ms. Mintz. One grocery chain acquired an option on some land, but has yet to make a decision on whether to build.

"There's land here if somebody wants to pursue it," said Ms. Mintz. "Maybe someday we'll have our store."

Seeing Red & White
In 1975, Big Four and its shops were sold to Lloyd Williams, a South Carolina businessman who turned it into a Red & White, a chain grocery that, at the time, also operated a Shallotte store.

Williams had purchased more than just a building, for the four partners of Big Four still felt strong sentimental ties to Bolivia's first and only shopping center. Williams had purchased a part of Bolivia history.

Bolivia's estimated 280 residents continued to shop at their hometown store, but its new owner, citing management problems, watched the business flounder. He closed the Red & White's doors for good about eight years ago. A restaurant and shops at the center closed soon after.



BRUNSWICK COUNTY Building and Grounds employee Wayne Lewis uses a backhoe to demolish the old Bolivia Plaza.



MINTZ

When a fire destroyed Kopp's service station in Supply in 1983, inside were the documents and files he had saved from his days of operating Big Four. The fire burned the paperwork, Kopp's last remaining physical ties to the old store. He built a smaller convenience store about a block from the old Big Four in Bolivia.

Williams reportedly sold the property to a group of investors associated with Jones Variety Stores, operating under the name of Jones and Cartrette Building Fund of Tabor City. In January 1988, Brunswick County bought the building and its 1.28 acre tract from the company for \$75,000.

The property had been appraised at \$231,000.

John Smith, county manager at the time, asked commissioners to buy the building as storage space for an overflowing government complex near Bolivia. If the county would pay a third of the cost, \$75,000, the remaining two-thirds of the 1.28 tract would be given to the county as a "gift," said Smith.

But the building lacked regular maintenance and was already in need of major roof repair. Smith estimated the total cost of purchasing and renovating the building to be around \$125,000 to \$145,000 for the front section and between \$300,000 to \$340,000 for the entire building.

Earlier this year, commissioners decided to demolish the building and to sell the property.

"I hate to see it go," said Kopp. "It was a nice building. It could have been restored, for someone wanting to make the investment."

Bolivia's Big Boost

On Nov. 18, 1971, a headline in *The Brunswick Beacon* stated "Newest County Supermarket Adds Luster To A Burgeoning Bolivia."

"The trend toward continued progress in the county received another big boost with the opening of Big Four Supermarket of Bolivia last week," the article stated. "Bolivia appears to be one of the fastest expanding areas of the county and near-by facilities for shopping have been necessary for future progress."

The article told of the Big Four's attractive lighting, all new tile and refrigeration equipment. Its 13 employees were led by Manager Don Sumerlin of Leland, who planned to move to Bolivia.

In an ironic twist, the building was praised for its "new innovation in roofing," which would later spell its doom in 1991. Its polyurethane covered flat roof was considered a material of the future, a modern wonder.

"The first of its kind in the county, the new roof is flat, constructed with a base coat of tin," the article stat-

ed, "over which the polyurethane mixture is sprayed, making a one-piece covering that is very lightweight, a good insulator and extremely durable."

It was years of idleness that destroyed the roof, said Kopp, not the design.

"Anytime you build a building with a flat roof, it takes maintenance," he added. "It was built to commercial standards of the day."

The Final Days

County Manager David Clegg was county attorney when Smith advised commissioners to purchase the old Red & White building as storage space.

Clegg said he wants all county departments housed at the government complex on U.S. 17 near Bolivia. He didn't understand why Smith advised commissioners to buy the building.

The new board of commissioners now agrees and hopes to build a warehouse at the complex for storage space.

Estimates to replace the old Red & White roof were so high that the property is now more marketable as a tract of land, said Clegg. Commissioners have voted to tear the building down.

Clothes for distribution by the county's Volunteer and Information Center (VIC) were once stored inside the building, along with outdated county financial records and documents from the board of elections and other departments.

VIC later stopped distributing clothes to the needy, but the remaining clothes were left behind.

"The condition of the building was so bad that most of the clothes were ruined anyway," said Clegg. "I also didn't like the fact that Department of Social Services records were stored there in front of a window."

The county pondered what to do with the building for more than a year, he said. Commissioners determined it would be best to tear the building down and to try to recover its \$75,000 investment.

"The weather affects the inside about like it does the outside," said Clegg.

So Bolivia's first shopping center will be demolished.

Thriving Operation

"The first week after opening proved to be a tremendous success for Big Four," the 1971 *Beacon* article stated, "an indication of a thriving operation that will grow with the future."

"Big Four was built by residents of the county, for the county and reflects the optimism of a progressive community."

It was big news for the town that first incorporated in the spring of 1911. When the Waccamaw Shingle Co. burned and W.O. McKeithan's sawmill business slowed in production, the town dissolved until a group revived its charter in 1914.

Legend has it that an early settler consulted a world globe when choosing a name for the town. His finger landed on the country of Bolivia in South America.

But what the residents really need today, says Mayor Mintz, is another shopping center.

But, she adds, "Nobody seems to see the future of a grocery store here."

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