

San Antonio Express-News

Businesses came first. Housing followed.

Web Posted: 02/17/2007 11:55 AM CST

Jennifer Hiller

Express-News Business Writer

Most developers aim for rooftops.

Build enough houses and the businesses will come, goes the traditional thinking.

Charles Martin "Marty" Wender developed Westover Hills backwards.

He pursued businesses first in the 3,500-acre master planned community.

People used to call him crazy for it. Even friends asked him, "Why would anyone want to work or live that far west?"

But after luring everything from SeaWorld to Microsoft, Wender has helped shift San Antonio's job and population center westward.

It turns out that if Wender's crazy, he's crazy like a fox.

"It was infill," he insists. "Everybody kept saying it was the Far West Side. But it was still inside (Loop) 1604."

Wender bought the land in the 1980s and modeled the mixed-use development after properties in California — lots of trees, wide boulevards and reliable utilities. He figured if he wanted to lure out-of-state companies he needed to make them feel at home.

When executives or relocation specialists visit San Antonio, Wender sticks to them like barbecue sauce to fingers.

"I pick up customers at the airport and tuck them in bed at night," he said. "I take them everywhere myself. I tell them there's one rule: We do whatever you want."

He says he listens to clients. "What do you want?" he asks them. "What are your needs? How can I give you those needs?"

His workaholic ways and his enthusiasm for San Antonio helped him land companies like JPMorgan Chase Cardmember Services.

He has a bumper sticker that proclaims, "Thank God It's Monday" and his workdays are fueled by Tab, which his assistant delivers instinctively during the rare moments it appears he's running out of steam.

"I don't hunt, I don't fish, I don't play golf," Wender says. "I sell. I love what I do. The worst part of the week is Friday afternoon when everyone else is out playing golf."

His wife of 37 years, Rene, doesn't mind. She understands the business so well that he copies her on most of his work-related e-mails.

"On the weekend, if we want to do something we go look at real estate," he said.

Wender is trying to lure three more data centers to Westover Hills. His life's goal is to be the guy who brings the most jobs to San Antonio.

With just about 500 vacant acres left in Westover Hills, he's also searching for his next big project.

"When I retire is when Porter-Loring (Mortuary) comes in," he says, pointing to his office door. "I'll tell them to hang on a minute. I want to go straight into the box."

jhiller@express-news.net