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'Field of Dreams'

Rick Finholt's high tech vision became a reality

He could be considered the father of high tech in St. Charles County. He built it and they definitely came.

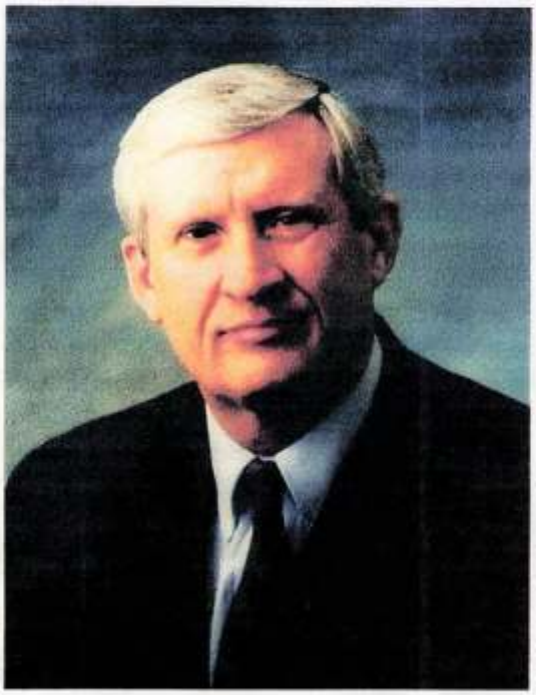
When Rick Finholt, 57, came on the St. Charles County scene in August of 1989, nobody was talking about high technology corridors.

Thirteen years ago, the University of Missouri System hired its first executive director for the then unknown Missouri Research Park. With a resume that reads more like a library reference list than an employment history, Finholt, the scholar, became Finholt the executive director.

Finholt is married to Mary Kay and has two grown sons, John-Michael, 28, a movie maker and film student in California, and Thomas, 26, a college student.

So how does an American Literature professor from a state university end up building a technology super highway?

He was teaching American Literature at Ohio State University in 1982 when Arthur Adams, dean of humanities at the university and the man whom Finholt said he has modeled himself after, decided him write a feasibility study for Ohio State University Research Park and retired six months later. Finholt soon immersed himself in the work and became the director of the park.



Finholt has written: two books, 17 reports plans, studies and brochures, two scholarly articles, and two articles on technology and real-estate as well as edited one book.

A native of Chicago, Finholt is passionate about film making and the theories involved in viewer response to films. He likes tennis, golf and reading. But whatever the discipline, whatever the interest, Finholt is known for taking it to extremes. "I was trained as a scholar and I really believe in research," he said. As for economic development and growing economies, "Development decisions have to be made on a rigorous market demand analysis."

For four years leading up to Finholt's arrival in St. Charles County, Trammel Crow Co. had been developing the roads, sewers and electric for the grounds of the Missouri Research Park, but no tenants yet existed and some offi-

alleged contamination from the Weldon Spring Munitions area. Areas on and near the Research Park, including the Village of Weldon Spring and the August A. Busch Memorial Conservation Area, had just been included in the EPA's Superfund Site. The designation could have meant suicide for the hope of ever drawing the nation's top research companies.

Aside from the concern for cross contamination of uranium and TNT in the area, Finholt had to face the "physical and psychological distances" long-time St. Louisans as well as St. Charles Countians had become accustomed to.

"Besides the fact that people perceived both physical and psychological distance from everything going on in St. Louis, we were much too close to the Weldon Spring Munitions Area," Finholt said.

"If you're in the coal mining business, you go where the coal is. When you're knowledge-based, you need intellectual capital; the knowledge of the workers."

But as entrepreneurs and visionaries usually do, Finholt had a plan. He enlisted the services of Geotechnology Inc., an engineering and environmental services firm in St. Louis and Kansas City, to spend the next year studying the site and proving to the Feds that the Missouri Research Park was "clear of contamination and in no danger of being cross contaminated in the future."

"Had the University of Missouri System not stepped in and done that, demonstrated that this site was clean and submitted it to the EPA, we would not have had this development out here," Finholt said.

Finholt said he noticed that north of Olive Blvd. in St. Louis County and south of Manchester, the average income in St. Louis County dropped just about in half. It was thought we were in the wrong place. I went to the economic developers in St. Charles County and told them that I think we have an opportunity to do a high tech corridor.

By 1991, the Research Park had been granted a clean bill of health, thanks to Finholt's efforts and the work of Geotechnology. The metropolitan area's premier research park was on its way to becoming the beacon of technological growth in St. Charles County and the Carbon Fibers Division of Zoltec Corporation moved in.

Finholt's work was just beginning. The yet-to-be-noticed executive director was already pressing to have a conceptual development plan and implementation strategy for the Highway 40 High Technology Corridor of St. Charles County drawn up.

Two studies completed in 1992 and 1994 by Development Strategies outlined the potential for a high tech corridor and a plan to see it to fruition.

Finholt, who had walked the entire 750-acre property, that before had been used for grazing experimental cattle herds for the university, had finally produced what would become a major interest in growing high tech business in St. Charles County. Officials on both sides of the river were beginning to see the significance of development opportunities existing along a 14-mile stretch of the Highway 40 corridor in St. Charles County, between the Missouri River on the south and Highway A on the north. The corridor represents about 40 percent of a larger 36-mile St. Louis Technology Corridor extending from downtown St. Louis to Wentzville.

Today the corridor includes such notables as WingHaven, a $750 million master-planned community that employs more than 9,000 people in approximately 2.2 million square feet of office/service/institutional space, 2 million square feet of research and development space and 400,000 square feet of retail space.

The O'Fallon Corporate Center, the Hawk Ridge Business Park and the Monsanto Research Farm are also located along the corridor. The $5 million Highway 40 overpass from the park to the North Outer Road now known as

Technology Drive, serves as the new entrance to the park. Entrance and exit ramps onto the overpass from Highway 40 to Technology Drive should be completed by 2005.

The $90 million MasterCard International Headquarters is located just down Highway 40 at Winghaven.

When Finholt began marketing the park, he looked for research-oriented companies. Then he attempted to provide the atmosphere he knew those types of businesses and their employees, as well as their clients, would favor. He also noticed that the uneven, rough terrain was a "spectacular piece of ground, perfect for a first rate golf course" and that there were "not enough golf courses to serve the market in St. Louis."

"I was creating a campus feel, an amenity-rich environment, stressing the exclusivity of the park," Finholt said. "We were the first park in the St. Louis area to do this."

Finholt said he used what he already knew to guide him in his marketing efforts. "There are a lot of things we know about high tech industries. They are knowledge-based as opposed to resource-based institutions. If you're in the coal mining business, you go where the coal is. When you're knowledge-based, you need intellectual capital; the knowledge of the workers. All the companies here would say they are within a narrow market niche; either they are the best or are one of the best in their field. That makes them people-dependent. Companies like that tend to want to cluster together in an amenity-rich environment."

Those amenities include a world-class golf course designed by Tom Fazio and a country club as well as walking and hiking tails that wind through picturesque hills and woods.

Finholt said the University of Missouri System is a broadly-based research university with agricultural, medical, engineering, optometry, arts and sciences, law and veterinary schools. "They're one of the most broadly-based institutions in the country."

Finholt said the Missouri Research Park has surpassed all of his expectations, but there is still work to be done. With the recent sale of Puritan Bennett and its now open lot, as well as troubles with other high tech companies along the corridor, Finholt is realistic about the winds of change.

"High tech industries in Missouri and everywhere are in trouble right now. But once you build the infrastructure, you've created the facilities. Technology morphs from one thing to another. Technology not only needs to be created and attracted but it needs to be managed. What we're learning is how to focus on new areas of technology such as bio-medical, plant sciences and military technology. That I see as the growth area in high technology."

In May, the University of Missouri and the Missouri Department of Economic Development, with the backing of Fort Leonard Wood, dedicated the first office building at the University of Missouri Technology Park at Fort Leonard Wood. "The first technology park in the nation to be located on an active Army post." The $2 million building is jointly financed by the University of Missouri System and the Department of Economic Development through its subsidiary the Missouri Technology Corporation. The 62-acre business park will provide office space and other facilities for Army contracts and suppliers, as well as other federal, state and local government agencies. Finholt will manage the Fort Leonard Wood Park.

After paying seven percent of net revenue to the Army, the university will get 55 percent of what's left, with the development department getting 45 percent. Finholt said once it's full, the first building would generate $25,000 to $30,000 a year for the park's partners.

The park constitutes the third leg of Missouri's life-sciences triangle. Along with the plant sciences and the medical sciences, this is the environmental component of the equation that completes the triad.

Plans for the park include more than 400,000 square feet of space for research, office and educational and manufacturing facilities in 17 buildings.

The Missouri Research Park currently houses 15 companies with over 1 million square feet under roof on 134.5 acres, excluding the golf course. The companies jointly employ 1,428 people.

When the Missouri Research Park is fully developed, only about 200 acres will be leased to tenants. The golf course occupies 200 acres and the remaining 300 acres will be left as green space.

Finholt said his hard work and tenacity has paid off in a big way. "It didn't happen by accident. It was really the result of planning. I think there's a myth in St. Louis and real estate circles that St. Charles County just got lucky and that growth was heading that way anyway. The Technology Corridor was planned and chances were taken. We were putting in highly restrictive zoning and you don't do that sort of thing unless you've studied the market."

By Robin Jefferson