

As landfill fills up, so does bank account

Robert J. Davis, entrepreneur, says his venture is a money making machine

By TONI CARPIO
of the Potomac News

Robert L. Davis, at 47, spends much of his life surrounded by the stark, brown walls of his makeshift office.

Davis needs only a telephone and a desk to do business as president of a developing firm whose primary focus centers around landfills.

Dozens of 18-wheelers drive by Davis' office in an hour's time to dump tree stumps, brush and chunks of concrete at Potomac Landfill in Dumfries.

"It's noisy and it sometimes gets on my nerves, but when I look down here at the end of the day and see \$10,000 to \$15,000, with \$1,000 overhead — in one day — it's worth it," Davis says.

The local developer works near his Montclair home as the operator of the county's only legal industrial landfill. As construction in the Washington metropolitan area continues, builders are spending thousands of dollars disposing of tree stumps concrete and other building waste.

Davis estimates it costs \$40,000 per acre to clear land in the Washington suburbs before any building can begin.

"I want to have five landfills in two years ... anywhere," he said.

Davis has spent 21 years as a general contractor and developer, building apartments, shopping centers, even a school. He says landfills will occupy the rest of his professional life.

Davis came to Prince William in 1983 to build 500 townhouses on 83 acres which is now Potomac Landfill, at the Va. 234 and Interstate 95 interchange. The homes were to be priced at about \$90,000, he says.

The Dumfries Town Council turned Davis' offer down. Davis came back to the council with a request for a landfill permit. It was granted. The state granted him one as well.

"... I feel like sending the Dumfries people candy and flowers every day for turning down my request (for apartments)," he says.

Since the landfill opened, Dumfries officials have tried to take back their permit, but the town lost its court case and a subsequent ap-

peal to the Virginia Supreme Court.

According to the permit, the Richard L. Davis Development Corp. can operate its disposal business for the life of the landfill.

Davis came before the Stafford County Board of Supervisors to propose a private sanitary landfill on 600 acres adjacent to Stafford County's burgeoning heavily used public landfill. His request has been denied, but he hopes officials will change their minds.

Although Davis is overwhelmingly pleased at the success of the landfill business, he expects to close it and open an industrial park. Future plans for Prince William, including a cloverleaf interchange at Dumfries, appeal to Davis.

"If you're going to buy land, its location, location, location," he says. "We have land all along I-95.

Davis speaks about all future plans in terms of "we" because his latest success with the Potomac Landfill came to fruition with the backing of J.V. Elrod, a wealthy landowner who has made Davis manager of his business dealings.

Elrod, 85, is a retired attorney for the federal government who resides in Sarasota, Fla. Davis esti-

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mates his employer is "worth \$95 to \$101 million" and says Elrod is currently buying abandoned houses for resale "to give him something to do."

"He's never been married, but he's a great man," Davis says. "He's been in real-estate-development-investment for about 30 years. He backs everything I do."

As the man behind the man, Davis is promised 20 percent of every land deal he negotiates in addition to a regular salary, he says. Understandably, he is looking forward to seeing promising futures of several hundred of acres in Prince William and Stafford through to their lucra-



By Clifford Owen—Potomac News

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tive fruition.

Davis is a busy man these days, usually working about 12 hours before heading home to his wife, Patricia, and their family.

"There are two things the Lord taught me how to do well: one is how to raise young 'uns and the other is how to make money," Davis says.

"I have five children, from age 28 to a baby 2 and a half years old,"

growing up, it wasn't uncommon for people to begin straight from high school."

One son, 21, recently graduated from the Florida Institute of Technology and is a pilot.

"I want him to fly my corporate jet someday," Davis says. "I do, really."

Davis has spent months away from work to be with his family, when his professional life can be put on hold.

When opportunity knocks, however, there is no time to waste, Davis says.

"And Elrod has been a golden opportunity for me."

For Davis' family, business dealings have sometimes meant seeing Dad only on weekends. The entrepreneur says greater success is worth some sacrifice, especially when investment is as solid as the ground he walks on.

"This area needs landfills," he says. "It's a question of supply and demand, that's all."

Davis speaks easily about his ambition, and is not insulted at being called an opportunist.

"If you want the best things in life, money is important," he says.

"I don't worship it, but if I go to Reno I want to stay in the best hotel, eat the best food.

"... I'm the kind of person who's willing to roll the dice."

Davis has a likeable, down-to-earth humor. When he talks, he talks about money.

"Just look at my plush office," he says jokingly. "... One day I'll

have mink carpet this thick." He held out his hand, two inches between forefinger and thumb.

Davis does not lose sight of the risks involved in business, and he admits he has known failure.

"Yes, it is a risky business. I could lose it all," he says. "I've lost a great deal, so I know what that feels like.

"Three of four years ago, when the interest rate was at 21 percent, it hurt me a great deal. I lost enough to support me for the rest of my life. The initial thought was just to end it all, but I realized that life is too short to do such a stupid thing."

Once the economy picked up, Davis started over again.

Now he finds he sometimes loses sleep. It's not because he is remembering tough times, but because he's looking forward to future investments.

He says he is not a workaholic and looks forward to retiring. He says he's got no retirement age in mind, but that is not to say he has no firm ideas on when the time would be ripe.

"I will retire when I have \$10 million. ... Making money is just like reading. Once you learn how you never forget."