

Developer Bob Cohen remembered as a visionary



BOB COHEN
1985

Cohen Development Co. founder dies at 80 after fighting cancer for 15 years

BY PAUL GORDON
OF THE JOURNAL STAR

PEORIA — Bob Cohen fought a gallant fight against prostate cancer, defying odds while living 15

years after his initial diagnosis.

"It finally caught up to him, but he put up a good fight for a long time," Les Cohen said Thursday when talking about his father. "Even though he was bedridden the last four and a half months, he stayed involved with everything. That's the way he was."

Bob Cohen, who founded Cohen Development Co. in Peoria nearly

40 years ago, died Wednesday. He was 80.

Cohen developed Westlake Shopping Center in Peoria — his best known local development — and his company owns or is involved with almost 4 million square feet of retail real estate, most of it outside the Peoria area, including in Florida and Wisconsin.

He was described by other area

developers as a strong competitor who always wanted to do what was right for the community.

"He was bird dog for property, I know that. He was one of the grandfathers of the development business in Peoria," said Gary Matthews, president of EM Properties Ltd.

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Matthews first came to know Cohen when he would go to International Council of Shopping Centers conventions while employed at Becker Cos.

"We never did any deals together, but Bob was always right there, working it at those conventions. This is a sad day," he said.

David Joseph, president of The Joseph Co., said Cohen was already a strong developer when Joseph was just getting started in the business.

"He was a worthy competitor, but he was also very civic-minded and wanted to do what was best for the community," Joseph said.

Diane Oberhelman, chairman of Cullinan Properties Ltd., said Cohen was visionary in some of his developments, showing no fear in trying new things — including the design of modern outlet malls with his development of Tuscola Mills.

"He was never afraid to take a leadership position on something, and I had a lot of respect for him for that," she said.

Friend Jack Teplitz said Bob Cohen was an "original."

"He had a unique perspective of looking at things. He clearly did one of the first major malls in Peoria, Westlake Shopping Center, and was able to have a vision to look as to how the shopping center industry was going to develop. He had a good sense of humor and a very inquisitive mind for looking at

things. He was certainly a great person to work with. He had a lot of empathy," Teplitz said.

Former Mayor Jim Maloof said Bob Cohen was an asset to the community, one which will be missed.

"The Cohen family is just symbolic of what Peoria is all about. The furniture company is one of absolute integrity. They were not only great retailers but great community activists.

"Bob will be missed. He was a good developer, a real credit to the community, an integral part of the community," Maloof said.

Les Cohen said Cohen Development Co. was once listed as one of the top retail development firms in the country. It reached heights because of the

energy Bob Cohen instilled in the company.

Even later in life, when he moved to Florida, he stayed in constant touch with the company. And in the last few months, while bedridden, "he still called every day and left messages and kept up with what was going on. He was sharp right until the end," Les Cohen said.

His father beat the odds, he added, by making sure he got the best doctors he could and being actively involved in The Prostate Cancer Research Foundation. "That gave him purpose and helped keep him going. He lived many years longer than his doctors expected him to."

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