



ARCHIVE

# Building on their principles

## Hummingbird Wholesale's new headquarters incorporates its owners' ideals of sustainability

By Ilene Aleshire

The Register-Guard

APPEARED IN PRINT: SUNDAY, FEB. 26, 2012, PAGE D4

Charlie and Julie Tilt are getting ready for the official opening of the new headquarters of Hummingbird Wholesale this week. But, to them, the remodeled warehouse at 150 Shelton McMurphey Blvd. is more than just a new address for their business, and the tenants who share it.

It's a wood and bricks and glass statement of their commitment to protecting the environment. It embodies their belief that buildings should be friendly and comfortable for humans. It's their vision of community.

And, Charlie Tilt acknowledges, it is also way over budget. When it came to a battle between principles and pocketbook, principles won.

"It literally did cost twice as much as we had budgeted for," Tilt said. "We were fortunate that our bank, Pacific Continental Bank, was supportive in the process."

“Thankfully, my sister (Sue Zeni, a co-owner of the building), and my partner (Julie), also were supportive,” he said, as were friends of the family during what turned out to be a \$2.7 million remodel of a building they bought for \$1.39 million. “We’re probably not going to break even for the first seven years or so,” Charlie Tilt said, “After that, it will get better.”

In the end, he and his wife, Julie, ended up with the building they wanted. The company, a regional distributor of organic bulk goods, has garnered a fistful of awards in recent years for its meteoric growth and its emphasis on ethical practices and environmental concerns, including the Regional Award of Merit for Economic Enhancement, Oregon Organic Coalition Award of Excellence, Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce Emerald Award for Growth, and the Mayor’s Bold Steps Award.

When they outgrew their old headquarters, Tilt and his wife decided to buy, remodel and expand the former Down To Earth warehouse, reusing and recycling materials where possible and making the building more environmentally friendly and energy efficient.

For example, skylights, clerestories and solar tubes were installed to use natural light; the building envelope was highly insulated; the roof was lined with photovoltaic solar cells and hot-water panels.

There is a demonstration wall that uses straw-bale insulation, a solar water heating system and high-efficiency ground and air-source split heating, ventilation and air-conditioning systems.

Although there is one utility bill for the entire building, Tilt incorporated individual metering so tenants could be billed for their actual use of utilities as an incentive to conserve.

In addition to creating a template for green building practices, Tilt also wanted to create a template for how people can work together to build a building. “Men have a long history of conflict, of starting wars,” he said, “I decided, this is going to be about collaboration.”

Starting with his real estate broker, Justin Schmick, who went far beyond what a broker is usually called on to do, Tilt said, he chose people he had faith in.

He hired Eugene resident Nir Pearlson, a longtime friend, as architect and Jamie Paddock of Paddock Masonry as general contractor because he knew their work, felt they shared his commitment to green building, and trusted them to make his vision a reality, he said.

They, in turn, helped Tilt find other companies with experience in green building to do work from plumbing to wiring to masonry.

When Tilt first walked into the room full of contractors to share his vision of the project, and the working relationship he hoped to have with them, “I thought they were going to say ‘He’s a Eugene

idiot' and throw me out of there," he said.

Instead, Tilt said, he found the contractors open, even enthusiastic, about his plan.

Tilt was delighted when contractors began coming to him with suggestions that would make life easier for other contractors, that would save him money, or that would be an improvement on his ideas. He was thrilled when he saw workers who were experienced in green building techniques and workers who were steeped in more traditional building practices sharing ideas and information.

Tilt concedes he sometimes made life more difficult for the contractors because of the changes he made as the building progressed, changes that added to the cost of the project.

"I'd say 'That doesn't look quite the way I wanted it to, let's just move that.' There were lots of challenges for the contractors on that job, mostly out of my ignorance and my approach. ... The simple movement of a switch costs hundreds of dollars," Tilt said.

Right up to the end, Tilt was still making changes, including upgrading the commercial kitchen that can be rented by small local food companies who can't afford a licensed commercial kitchen on their own.. Originally, he envisioned renting to businesses making raw foods or foods like sandwiches that wouldn't require cooking. But then he decided to include cooking options because of the shortage of commercial kitchen space for rent, which meant adding a range hood — at a cost of \$18,000 .

He worries that the kitchen rent he will charge — \$15 per hour — is steep for a start-up or other small company, but said he needs that to pay the loan he used to buy the equipment. And he figures the smaller companies can share the kitchen — "It's big" — and split the cost.

Energy Design, a Eugene firm, was the largest subcontractor on the job, installing a new electrical system, lighting, energy-efficient wiring and controls. President Vince McClellan thought a moment before describing what it was like to work on the project.

"It was a bit crazy," he said. "We were the biggest sub, so a lot of the changes ended up falling in our lap. But we're very pleased with how it came out. There were a lot of neat ideas there. When you build something like this, rather than tearing something down and then building it up again, there was a lot of excellent building material that was saved. I liked that."

Energy Design specializes in green projects but even McClellan said he was impressed by the Tilts' commitment to eco-friendly design: "Charlie had a real eye for energy efficiency and conservation."

Tilt's light fixtures, for example incorporate photo sensors that automatically adjust the level of

lighting in the banks of lights in the warehouse based on how much light is coming in through the skylights.

“Another neat project (is) the integrated solar project on the south side of the building,” McClellan said.

“The solar modules we used are actually the roof of the loading docks, rather than using separate material for the roof and putting solar modules on top of the roof. The solar produces more power because there’s nothing behind the solar modules to trap heat — the hotter a solar module is, the less heat it puts out.”

Sometimes, elements of the building were so innovative and new that they ran into problems with inspections and permitting, McClellan and Tilt said, like the generator for emergency exit lighting. It can be used for more things than just powering the emergency lighting, McClellan said. It also can run on biofuel — “Charlie creates a certain amount of waste oil in the processing he does,” McClellan said. “He thought he should be able to use it in the diesel generator.”

The type of generator that was installed was not the large self-contained unit usually put in commercial construction, McClellan said. And, while “it was way bigger than what we needed for emergency egress lighting,” he said, “We had trouble getting a permit for it.”

But the work is now all, or at least mostly, done and the tenants have been moving in. The Tilts have signed leases for all but but 400 square feet of the leasable space in the building, starting at \$1.31 per square foot. “That was definitely a bit of a challenge for Julie and me,” Tilt said. They needed the rent to make the project feasible, but they also wanted businesses that would work well together.

“In our concept of what we wanted to create, we were hoping to get food businesses interested in recycling, reuse, and that were energy conscious,” Tilt said. “We wanted community and collaboration, some activities that benefited each other. And we wanted people that would appreciate a building that was warm and human and had lots of natural light. With public spaces, you have to have hard things that take abuse — which we didn’t — or people that are grateful and will take care of the space.”

Now that the work is, for the most part, done, Tilt said, “I’m so relieved, even if I’m in debt for the rest of my life. I’m very happy to be de-stressing and trying to regain my humanity.”

The Tilts wanted to name the building for something meaningful to them and initially thought Viva! was a perfect name. But they discovered a vegetarian grill in Eugene was already using that name. They decided “We’re big, he’s small, we should pick another name,” Tilt said.

Then they came up with the truly perfect name, Stellaria, a name that Julie Tilt had previously used for an herb business, Charlie Tilt said.

“We want people to think of how even a star shining brightly can light up the sky,” he said. “We’ve made some bold choices, taken risks. But we are profoundly committed to our life choices.

“This building is our one little step, it’s what we can do. It’s not very important, probably, but it’s what we can do. And if you get enough bright stars, then you get the Milky Way.”

“*We are profoundly committed to our life choices.*”  
— *Charlie Tilt, CO-OWNER OF HUMMINGBIRD WHOLESAL*

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## STELLARIA

Address: 150 Shelton McMurphey Blvd.

Owners: Charlie and Julie Tilt, Sue Zeni

Architect: Nir Pearlson

General contractor: Jamie Paddock, Paddock Masonry

Size: 36,000 square feet

Tenants: Elements Acupuncture and Wellness, Eliel Fionn’s Felties & Consultations, Healing Scapes, Healthy Democracy Fund, Hummingbird Wholesale, Lane County Farmer’s Market, Mark Donahue Rolfing, Momentum Therapies, Not Your Mom’s Sandwich Shop, Rolf Prima, Rural Development Initiatives, Well Balanced, Willamette Farm & Food Coalition

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