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Group honors North San Jose development pioneer David J. Brown

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Luck, timing and a recession all played a role in launching David J. Brown's 30-year career that began when orchards covered the Santa Clara Valley. It ended with Brown's vision transforming North San Jose into Silicon Valley's Golden Triangle.

Brown, the founder of Orchard Properties, was honored May 20 during an event at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Santa Clara when the Silicon Valley National Association of Industrial and Office Properties inducted him into the Developer Hall of Fame.

Brown developed 7 million square feet of commercial real estate across 1,400 acres throughout Northern California. He was chosen this year to join developers Richard Peery and John Arrillaga, who were honored by NAIOP in 2007, and John A. Sobrato, honored in 2008.

"Dave Brown is the North San Jose commercial real estate market," said Dan Amend, NAIOP's president and head of Toeniskoetter Construction Inc. "It exists because of him."

Brown, who was the lead man for Boise Cascade Building Co. in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was the beneficiary of the company's hard times. It started when Boise decided to get out of the development business and sold its land in North San Jose to Brown, taking a significant loss. Brown founded Orchard Properties in 1973 when commercial real estate was barely on the radar and handled just enough land deals to survive until 1977. Then, Amend said, Orchard Properties took off.

"From 1977 through 1983 is an absolutely amazing and prolific time in which Orchard built and sold, and built and leased. They were developing over 1 million square feet a year," Amend said. "They went from barely making it with five people who were trying to figure out what to do with North San Jose, to doing a major deal with IBM. As tech proliferated, they went on to develop 7 million square feet."

In North San Jose, Brown said, he could see how the intersections of U.S. Highway 101, state Highway 17 (which is now Interstate 880), and Brokaw and Trimble roads illustrated real estate's simple maxim: location, location, location.

"One of my gifts is that I have a vision," Brown said from his current home in Paradise Valley, Ariz. "I could see long-term with the location of the airport and intersection of two freeways what would happen. It was a matter of time."

Joe Lewis, president of Orchard Commercial, worked with Brown for years before buying the company in 2001. Even with his front-row seat, he still marvels at what Brown accomplished.

"To get to buy all this land with nothing down, then to have Silicon Valley take off, that doesn't happen very often," Lewis said. "But you've got to know what to do with it. Dave Brown knew what to do, and he created this marvelous organization to do it."

Brown believes that as the head of Orchard Properties, his legacy is the type of project — "instantly landscaped, limited on-site parking, sign controls" — that served such tenants as Apple Computer Inc., Alterra and International Business Machines Corp.

"Peery and Arrillaga did it before us, but the difference was they bought parcels of land here and there. We acquired tracts of land, which encompassed hundreds of acres," Brown said. "When we started, the area was planted in orchards. Today it is planted with thriving businesses in environmentally sensitive business parks."

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