

EPA FINDS LOTS TO LIKE ABOUT NEW SUBURBAN HOME IN LENEXA

BY KEVIN COLLISON

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Karl Brooks remembers well the first time he toured the sleek former Applebee's headquarters building in Lenexa with its hyper-green features, including a Brazilian hardwood exterior, wide-open floor plan and natural light flooding almost every corner.

"My feeling was, what an incredible workspace," said the regional administrator for the federal Environmental Protection Agency. "It was clearly a 21st century building. I started thinking this could be really fun and good for this region."

Despite the anguish the EPA's move from its building at 901 N. Fifth St. in downtown Kansas City, Kan., caused Unified Government officials, Brooks said the relocation to the four-year-old building in the Southlake Technology Park has been a big morale boost for his agency.

And to his amazement, when Applebee's was lured by Missouri tax incentives two years ago to leave its then-new headquarters in Lenexa for Ward Parkway in Kansas City, the company left behind more than \$2 million in barely used furnishings, including cool office furniture, luxury wood conference tables and high-end appliances such as Wolf stoves.

"We saved a ton of dough for the taxpayers and accomplished the move much faster and on or under budget," Brooks said.

The EPA's move to 11201 Renner Road was completed in mid-October, and a formal dedication is scheduled for early December.

And while it sounds counterintuitive, Brooks said the 650 full-time and contract employees at the new EPA regional headquarters get out of the building more now that they're in a suburban office park, as opposed to being in the heart of downtown Kansas City, Kan.

"Our KCK building was a classic, late 20th century vertical building with hard-wall offices for management, cubicles for the staff and a cafeteria in the basement," Brooks said.

Now EPA employees can work together much more easily on the open, two-level building, and impromptu meetings have occurred walking around the lagoon outside their offices.

More than a half dozen ride their bicycles to work, something that never happened at the former downtown location.

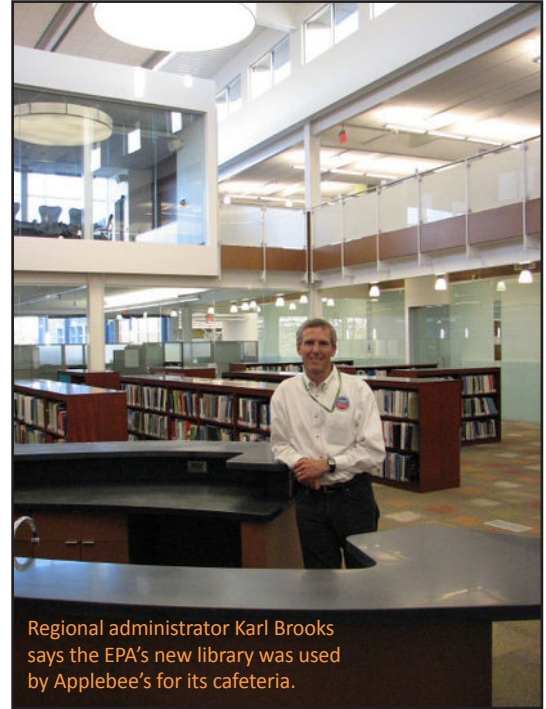
"The biggest difference between Strawberry Hill and here is how it allows us to work outside the building more," Brooks said. "People didn't leave the other building much, and there was a limited amount of interaction with downtown KCK."

"We've already found out that walking around the pond twice is a 30-minute meeting."

Brooks was appointed regional EPA administrator in 2010 after teaching history and environmental studies at the University of Kansas for 14 years.

He emphasized his agency did not have the lead role in moving from the downtown offices specifically built for the EPA in 1999. The key player was the General Services Administration, the federal government's landlord agency.

"The GSA had been in negotiations for a long time. ... Once the GSA made it clear the negotiations were not going to produce a lease, we helped with our requirements. Once the GSA selected the building, our job was to work with the contractors."



Regional administrator Karl Brooks says the EPA's new library was used by Applebee's for its cafeteria.

The building on Renner Road is owned by an affiliate of New York-based Lexington Realty Trust.

At first, federal officials thought they would need to build an addition to the 187,000-square-foot building to accommodate all the EPA workers. But once they began exploring the wide-open floor plan, it was determined that additional space wasn't needed.

That shaved about \$22.5 million over the cost of the 20-year lease. The deal is structured so the EPA has a 15-year lease with a five-year option. The total value of the lease over 20 years is \$98.9 million.

One of the bigger objections to the EPA moving from a central location in the metro to southern Johnson County was the extra drive — and the environmental cost — it would cause employees. Brooks said that hasn't been the case.

"Quite a few of our employees are from Johnson County, Lawrence or Topeka," he said. "As far as we know, the change in commuting miles was a complete wash. The biggest frustration was for people in the Northland having a longer commute."

The building itself has LEED Gold certification from the U.S. Green Building Council, and its operations are rated at LEED Platinum. It's 32 percent more energy efficient than its former downtown quarters.

Brooks said the EPA still has a laboratory operation in downtown Kansas City, Kan., that employs about 80 highly trained people.

"I understand the frustration people had about our departure," he said, "but at the end of the day, the GSA had to find reasonable space at a good price for taxpayers."

Meanwhile, back in downtown Kansas City, Kan., Unified Government officials hope a tenant will be found soon for the five-story building the federal government left behind, with its unique atrium.

"We're transitioning to the marketing stage of trying to find a new tenant," said Doug Bach, deputy county administrator for economic development.

"We're optimistic. It's a big building. It was built to suit for the EPA, which makes it challenging, but it's great office space."

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