



# SUBTROPOLIS BUSINESS BENEATH THE GROUND

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## THE BEGINNING

Imagine working at a facility that's completely unaffected by the weather, so enormous it can fit over forty pro football stadiums, and so secure that it has government security status—and it's all underground.

This isn't science fiction; this is SubTropolis, a massive industrial complex lying 150 feet under Kansas City, Missouri. Formerly a mining operation in the 1940s that produced construction materials, it has housed underground tenants for over fifty years.

SubTropolis was the brainchild of longtime Kansas City Chiefs owner Lamar Hunt, who moved the Dallas Texans to Kansas City while creating the AFL in the 1960s. Hunt wanted to make an investment in the area, and he purchased land to build an amusement park, Worlds of Fun.

Under the amusement park, however, was the mining operation that his real estate development company, Hunt Midwest, owned. Hunt realized that there was a multimillion-square-foot opportunity right in front of him (or, more accurately, under him) and started leasing out industrial space in the excavated limestone. Among the first tenants were Ford, Pillsbury, and Russell Stover.

"Today, we are a full-service commercial real estate development company," says Mike Bell, VP of Hunt Midwest. "Our biggest asset is SubTropolis, which is the world's largest underground business complex. To put it in perspective, our current footprint

of six million square feet of leased space is larger than forty-two Arrowhead Stadiums, and we have another eight million square feet of industrial buildings to construct."

Why would a company want to lease space a hundred feet or more below a metropolitan area? Location, location, location—or, more specifically, what SubTropolis's unique location provides. "We offer several important benefits to tenants," Bell offers. "The most prominent is free heat because limestone is the perfect heat sync: in its natural state, it's a constant 68 to 72 degrees. In fact, SubTropolis received a perfect 100 percent rating from ENERGY STAR®. Tenants enjoy that benefit not only in their marketing but also in their bottom line."

Bell says that such savings and consistency of operations are available in few other places in the US—and that attracts many different industries. "We have automotive companies that support the nearby Ford manufacturing plant here because they can do the work the same way 365 days a year, in the same environment, versus on the surface, where it's hard to replicate that consistency because of the seasons," says Bell. "Likewise, it's the perfect environment for animal health products. The US Postal Service keeps millions of dollars' worth of stamps here. Underground Vaults and Storage stows away original Hollywood reels of movies like *Gone with the Wind* and *Wizard of Oz* in its 200,000 square feet of space."

And then there's the location itself. Geographically, Kansas City is virtually

in the center of the country, which is a logistical windfall for businesses. "We are right on I-435, which connects a mile away to I-35, which goes north and south; and a few miles south of us is I-70, which goes east-west," notes Bell. "Because of this, tenants can reach the majority of the country from here within two days." Thus, distribution-based companies like Hallmark and Paris Brothers have their distribution centers underground in SubTropolis.

## A PILLAR OF EFFICIENCY

SubTropolis has other eye-catching benefits as well. "People want to be good stewards for the environment and want to know the company they're doing business with is in a sustainable location," Bell shares. "What better place to be than the underground? We're using Mother Nature's existing rock as our structure."

Plus, time is money—so being able to scale quickly is also a tremendous benefit. "There's actually an underground building code in Kansas City," Bell reveals. "Because we're horizontal, these buildings are like part of a floor and expansion is like a tenant improvement permit for that customer; I like to envision it as a skyscraper on its side. We usually have a permit to expand somebody's space within a week."

But all the benefits of this stellar location would be diminished if the complex itself were difficult to navigate. Instead, SubTropolis has an amazingly efficient road grid that stretches over eight miles and is illuminated by over 10,000 energy-efficient LED light bulbs. "We've laid it out like you would on the surface," Bell says. "Our roads

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are forty feet wide. We have north-south roads and east-west roads. They all have numbers, and the street addresses are pillar numbers. For example, an address might be 8600 NE Underground Drive, Pillar 200. Plus, we have six entrances, which keeps traffic flowing freely.”

**ROCK-SOLID PROTECTION**

For such an enormous entity, it’s no surprise that security is paramount. With government agencies as tenants, commissioned security officers are present around the clock, 365 days a year, and cameras monitor the whole facility. Cave-ins and natural disasters aren’t a concern, either, because limestone is six times stronger than concrete. “A few years ago, tornadoes touched down in the metro,” Bell recalls. “It was pretty severe weather—yet we had no idea it was happening. It’s the same every day here. We call it ‘68 and overcast.’”

As a result, SubTropolis has attracted a new clientele in recent years, according to Bell. “Because of the natural and onsite security and the predictable temperatures, this is the perfect location for data centers,” he explains. “A few years ago, we opened the SubTropolis Technology Center to provide the power and the fiber necessary for data centers to flourish. Phase one is a 400,000-square-foot footprint, and our anchor tenant is LightEdge Solutions, a



company that provides collocation and managed services. Hopefully, they’re the first of many tech tenants.”

But do people actually like working underground? “That’s the first question prospective tenants ask,” Bell says. “The employees here always say they love the environment. Think about it: in winter, if you park in your garage, you don’t have to wear a winter jacket or boots to work. In summer, your car isn’t 150 degrees from sitting in the hot sun all day.”

“Here’s another example,” Bell continues. “We lease space above SubTropolis as well. Knapheide Truck Equipment has a facility

on the surface and one in SubTropolis. They use transferring to the underground as a benefit for people working on the surface—productive employees get rewarded with SubTropolis! It’s a great testament to employee satisfaction here.”

**A FOUNDATION OF COMMUNITY**

Following in the footsteps of its founder, SubTropolis also gives back to the Kansas City community through its annual Groundhog Run, which raises money for a local children’s organization called Ability KC. For the past thirty-five years, the dual 5K/10K race has helped raise between \$200,000 and \$250,000 a year, drawing runners from all over the world simply



because of the experience. “They love it because they can wear shorts and a T-shirt in January,” Bell says. “The typical comment is some variant of ‘Wow!’”

“Wow” is certainly a frequent reaction when people discover SubTropolis—and the role it plays in the country. “We touch a lot of industries and a lot of people’s lives, probably without them even realizing it,” Bell comments. “If you’ve seen a Ford Transit on the road, it’s been here. If you’ve purchased stamps at the post office, they came from here. If you’ve had Parisi coffee, it was stored here. And if you buy something from a Hallmark store other than a card, it would have come from here as well.”

“It’s hard to comprehend how big it is until you have visited SubTropolis,” Bell concludes. “The size we have, the scalability, and the low-cost operational benefits are fantastic. We’re in the heart of the country, we’re protected by rock, and it’s a great family-owned business. We are going against the norm, though. People always have questions like ‘An underground what?’ But they’re always amazed when they experience SubTropolis.”

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