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Computerized kiosk keeps owner in virtual contact with tenants

With owner Laura Logan always on call, Meadowlark Storage in the Village of Fredonia is a one-person operation.

That is unless you count Megan — an onscreen avatar who guides prospective tenants through the rental process on a newly installed payment kiosk at the business' entry drive.

Meadowlark Storage has grown into a thriving enterprise since Logan took over the operation 11 years ago.

Work crews are currently scurrying to complete the final two buildings on the 5.6-acre property at the southwest corner of Meadowlark Road and Highway 57.

"They have to be done by Nov. 1 because that is when I've been telling customers they would be ready to rent. Sixteen of the 48 units in the buildings are already rented," Logan said.

When those two last steel storage buildings are complete, there will be 389 units at the site.

Logan said the occupancy rate is about 90%.

"When I bought the property 11 years ago, my vision was to have it full developed in 10 years. Then the recession hit, and I adjusted my vision to 20 years because there wasn't as much new home construction. Building contractors are usually our biggest customers," she said.

Even with the stumbling economy, Logan's initial projection was pretty much dead on.

The self-storage units are available in a dozen different sizes, ranging from 5-by-10 to 12-by-35-feet. Options include climate control and electrical service.

Monthly rental rates range from $30 to $125.

Logan said the demand for larger units has increased over the years as tenants look for a secure location to store their boats and RVs.

"Boat storage is a big thing here, with Port Washington being so close. Most of my customers

come from Port or Fredonia, although we draw people from all over Ozaukee County and even northern Milwaukee County," Logan said.

"Often people will first come to me because they want a place to keep their boat over the winter, but then they find it is so convenient to leave it here and not worry about keeping it in their yard."

Part of the appeal is the peace of mind offered by having the property surrounded by a locked gate and monitored by an array of 20 security cameras.

"I can keep an eye on the cameras from my computer at home, and even from my smart phone," Logan said.

Logan and her sons, Reed, 12, and Jack, 10, live just a mile away, in a rural home not far from her second business, a 40-acre tree farm on Hawthorne Road in the Town of Saukville called Just Trees. The farm sells mature evergreens to landscapers.

"I have a rule not to take calls during dinner and homework time, but my cell phone is always on and I always respond to calls right away," Logan said.

She now has an instant connection to the business' digital kiosk, too.

"I am not very tech savvy, but the kiosk is pretty amazing. It uses a character called Megan to walk people through the rental process, telling them what units are available and at what cost. It accepts cash, credit cards and checks, and can print out a rental agreement or have it e-mailed to you," Logan said.

"There is also a built-in camera, so I can watch the whole transaction from home."

Logan said she had been thinking about putting in an office at the storage site, but the efficiency of the 24/7 kiosk may have eliminated that need.

Logan was an enterprising businesswoman even before she became the sole provider for her family after her husband's unexpected death a decade ago.

"I actually decided I wanted to become a landlord and make money by renting to tenants when I was a student in Madison. That seemed like a pretty good arrangement to me," Logan said.

Relying on a real estate how-to book called "Zero Down," she bought her first rental properties at age 21 in her native Janesville and then Whitefish Bay.

By selling one of those buildings, Logan came up with the capital to buy the self-storage property. She never stopped growing the business.

"I was looking for a business that wouldn't take me away from spending time with the boys, and it has worked out great," she said.

Her sons are now old enough to help out around the business, sweeping out units, picking up trash and weeding.

She contracts with neighbors to do the lawn mowing and snow plowing.

Logan has shown an innate business sense.

The sharply sloping terrain of the Meadowlark Road property forced her to seek 16 feet of fill to fully utilize the site.

She ended up getting the needed soil from the crews working on the reconstruction of highways 57 and 33 and the We Energies power plant in Port Washington.

“I knew they would be looking for a place nearby to get rid of the excess dirt, and I needed it to level off my property. Sometimes, you just have to know enough to ask,” Logan said.

She is poised to expand the business even more, recently purchasing an old auto salvage yard about a half mile west of the storage building property on Meadowlark Road.

Extensive testing delayed the completion of that purchase, but Logan said the Town of Fredonia site — which will offer outdoor storage — should be ready for tenants next spring.

A ban on outdoor storage has been an ongoing issue with Village of Fredonia officials, forcing Logan to look elsewhere for that service.

She serves as an officer with the Wisconsin Self-Storage Association and sees the field as burgeoning.

“The storage building concept really came into its own 20 years ago, and it took off about five years ago,” Logan said.

In many ways, she said, the business is an accurate barometer of the economy.

“Things were pretty slow for a couple of years, but then I could tell the economy was slowly improving because people started looking for places to store their boats,” Logan said.

“Now, I can tell things are still getting better because they are coming in with new boats.”

Image Information: MEADOWLARK STORAGE OWNER Laura Logan demonstrated the newly installed digital payment kiosk at her Fredonia business. A construction crew is hurrying to complete the two final buildings on the business’ property by Nov. 1. The 5.6-acre property at the corner of Meadowlark Road and Highway 57 has 389 storage units.

Photos by Mark Jaege