

# [IN] BUSINESS SIGHT

## SOLON GERSHMAN INC. ]

by catherine klene

### THE REAL ESTATE MARKET HAS TAKEN A BEATING

in the past few years, but Tom Stern, president and CEO of Solon Gershman Inc., has rolled with the punches. A commercial real estate company, Solon Gershman Inc. has not only remained independent; it has maintained strong client relationships and even widened its reach. “The St. Louis market is not as good as it has been, but there are opportunities,” Stern says. “There aren’t extreme highs and lows you see in other markets. We’re comfortable doing business here.”

The company was founded by its namesake in 1948. (The same Gershman also founded Gershman Mortgage, a commercial and residential mortgage company, in 1953.) Gershman was involved in the company until his death in 2003, and Stern says working closely with Gershman for 35 years allowed him to fully understand commercial real estate services. Today, the company manages approximately 7.5 million square feet valued at more than \$650 million, including the Park 270 office buildings and Timberlake Corporate Center.

The company focuses strictly on commercial real estate, managing and developing properties for new and existing owners. “There’s a lot more competition on the residential side, and we have a much larger presence on the commercial side,” he says. “We opted to stay out of residential, and it’s proved to be a good move for us.”

While residential real estate faces blocks of unsold homes, the commercial side has its own challenges with struggling tenants and closing businesses. Stern says understanding tenants and accommodating them during difficult times has strengthened his business and his relationships with owners and tenants.

This flexibility includes allowing tenants to remit reduced rental fees, as long as they make the effort to pay. “We have a lot of longtime tenants, and we’ve come to know and admire their work ethic,” he says. “As long as they’re making an effort, we’re hopeful the owners we work with will do likewise. Nobody likes empty properties.”

Solon Gershman Inc. also has focused on growth. It recently acquired the management division of Coldwell Banker Commercial, which increased Gershman’s property management portfolio by 30 percent and added 20 more licensed brokers to the company. “This acquisition allows us to provide more services to our existing clients, and to theirs,” Stern says.

A focus on St. Louis is at the heart of the Gershman business philosophy; all its properties stand within a few hours drive from the city. “The St. Louis area is a very solid market,” Stern says. “We enjoy a good reputation with the people we serve and the people we compete with. That puts us in a very special place. We’re confident we’ll be successful going forward.”



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TOM STERN