

Fortner Upholstery Growing into South Side Warehouse, Making Room for Others

By **Susan Post** - August 25, 2017



A cavernous 220,000 square foot warehouse on the South Side at 2000 S. High St. is the new home of a growing Fortner Upholstering, and in the not too distant future, a number of other local businesses.

Trading fire trucks for furniture, the core of the compound was built in 1882 and served as the Seagraves Fire Truck Manufacturing facility for seven decades. More recently it was the headquarters of Jet Container, and now, another business with a long history.

Justin McAllister purchased the 88-year-old Fortner family business from his grandfather seven years ago. Originally rooted in residential reupholstery, "That business model has changed quite a bit over the last 30 years as a reflection, really, of the globalization of the furniture market," McAllister says.

No longer was it less expensive to have a piece of furniture recovered than just buy something new. And while residential reupholstery has remained a pillar of the business, the services have skewed to a higher-end market.

As McAllister examined the changing furniture industry when he took the helm in 2010, he asked himself, "How do we make sure we have opportunities to grow and stay relevant?"

He identified two avenues for expansion for Fortner Upholstery: retail and commercial.

The family business tackled the retail component with a storefront at 1271 Edgehill Rd. on the edge of Grandview, selling their products and representing other furniture lines. To address the opportunity in the commercial sector in both reupholstering and manufacturing furniture, Fortner expanded from a single production building to two.





The new facility allowed Fortner to update processes that made it more competitive. Instead of one craftsman seeing a piece all the way through from start to finish, they developed a more efficient manufacturing model that could yield pieces in the hundreds.

As the business continued to grow, "We were in three locations, with not enough space in any them, and it's inefficient to be in three locations," McAllister says. "So we began to formulate a plan to say, 'Ok, we need to put ourselves under one roof for manufacturing, one location for retail, and we need more space.'"

In the hunt for a larger facility, a serendipitous meeting put Fortner's director of operations next to Jet Container's director of operations during a manufacturing class. Granted a tour of the space, McAllister fell in love with the history and the character of the building.

The convincing and the closing took time, but allowed McAllister to further plot the sustainability of the move to the South Side warehouse. Did the facility make sense for

Fortner? With 220,000 square feet of space, they could set up their commercial reupholstering and manufacturing operations and leave themselves room to grow.

“We look to ultimately occupy probably about half of it,” McAllister says.

Contemplating what to do with the other 100,000 plus square feet of space, they connected with John Mally of NAI Ohio Equities (which now serves as the leasing agent for the building). McAllister found that not only was there a market for leasing out the remaining space, “In fact, it could be really neat,” he says. “What we began to see is there is actually a benefit to both.”

McAllister is excited by the synergy of the businesses and organizations that have already expressed interest in the space. The [Alternative Fashion Mob and its Fabric design resource center](#) is a likely tenant. McAllister has talked to woodworkers and metalworkers – a skill set they sometimes have a need for in the furniture business.

McAllister and Mally have roughly divided the remaining 115,000 square feet into around 30 spaces. But, they will look to TRIAD Architects for the final design and vetting their plan with code.





As Fortner settles into their new digs, additional tenants are still a few months away.

“We are hoping by the end of the year we’ll have a few leases in place, but also have a really good strategy in place of how we want to fill out the rest of the areas” McAllister says.

More than a space that’s the right size for their business to continue to grow, the South Side has an emotional connection for McAllister. It’s where his great-grandfather and grandfather built the business.

“So there’s definitely a feeling of a homecoming,” McAllister says.

For more information, visit fortnercommercial.com.









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