

Moving up in class



The TradeCenter 128 office center in Woburn; below, Middlesex Superior Court is one of the tenants in the new TradeCenter 128 in Woburn.

New office center aims to make Woburn a destination address for businesses seeking quarters with top-notch amenities

By Eric Moskowitz
GLOBE STAFF

With a rounded atrium entrance, windows that shimmer in unbroken lines, and a three-story drive-through gateway arch, TradeCenter 128 cuts a striking figure alongside Route 128, where it commands nearly 600 feet of frontage. But the most remarkable thing about this office center may not be its appearance but its address: Woburn.

Potential tenants scouting for high-end offices in the suburbs have traditionally started with Waltham, at the intersection of 128 and the Massachusetts Turnpike, then looked north through Lexington and Burlington, where millions of square feet of Class A office space line highway access roads.

But Woburn, which lies

east of Burlington, represents a dividing line. Although it has two relatively new pockets of first-class space on its eastern edge along Interstate 93, the historically industrial city hasn't been a player in the high-end 128 market.

Locally based Cummings Properties hopes to change that with TradeCenter 128, where it is putting the finishing touches on a 530,000-square-foot complex, the equivalent of 12 acres of office space.

"A lot of people who have historically gone to the Waltham and the Burlington areas for their first-class office space haven't looked at Woburn because there haven't been a whole lot of options, but that's now changing," said Eric S. Anderson, a Cummings vice president in charge of leasing. TradeCenter, he said, will "help put Woburn on the map." The site doesn't lack for visibility. The state estimates that more than 170,000 vehicles pass daily along this stretch of 128. But filling the complex isn't easy in an uncertain economy, when

companies may be hesitant to expand or relocate.

"We're sensing a little bit of a wait-and-see approach," said Anderson, whose firm has signed leases for about one third of TradeCenter.

That figure includes the 132,000-square-foot courthouse that Cummings built in a year and opened in March after winning the bid to house Middlesex Superior Court for three years, at nearly \$28 million, with an option for two more years. (That building can be converted to office space in the future.) More than 300,000 square feet of space remains available in the accompanying building, the

seven-story, 400,000-square-foot flagship that stretches along the highway.

"Cummings will have to prove that that location will work for companies that want big pieces of space," said Torin Taylor, a senior director at the commercial real estate services firm Cushman & Wakefield who specializes in the north-suburban market along 128 and Interstate 495, and who is not involved with TradeCenter. This complex is near the Burlington border, but Woburn doesn't have the same cachet, he said, because it lacks the history and supply of first-class office space: "Burlington's the sexier pick."

How higher-end Route 128 market stacks up

On an 18-acre parcel with more than 550 feet of frontage on Route 128, Cummings Properties is putting the finishing touches on TradeCenter 128, which the company hopes will make Woburn a larger player in the 128 office market dominated by communities to

	Total office space	Class A office space	Class A average rent	Class A availability
Waltham	9 million sq. ft.	5.4 million sq. ft.	\$39.03. per sq. ft.	18.2%
Burlington	6 million sq. ft.	4.7 million sq. ft.	\$32.50 per sq. ft.	21.4%
Woburn	3 million sq. ft.	1.7 million sq. ft.	\$28.70 per sq. ft.	23.3%

Source: Jones Lang LaSalle. Figures are as of close of first quarter 2008. Rents are gross annual rates.



Cummings acquired the site in 1996, attracted by the highway frontage. The property previously housed a Sylvania manufacturing facility and, later, a trade center that hosted flea markets and fairs.

The developer initially updated the existing 167,000-square-foot trade building for offices and planned to add two Class A buildings along the highway, the company's first in the area. But it postponed those plans after the dot-com crash created a glut of office space, and so it could focus on the Cummings Center in Beverly, where it converted the vacant United Shoe Machinery Corp. headquarters into 2 million square feet of office and laboratory space.

Cummings returned its attention to TradeCenter after winning the courthouse bid. Starting construction with a tenant was unusual for the company, which typically builds on speculation. That might pose a problem for other firms in a slow economy, but Cummings finances its projects itself and also serves as its own designer and general contractor.

The debt-free approach is one of the qualities that put Cummings at No. 19 on

Buildings Magazine's A List last year of 25 industry leaders, amid many larger companies. It has also enabled the 300-plus-employee firm to avoid layoffs in its four-decade history, Anderson said.

Dennis A. Clarke, president and CEO, said Cummings has no qualms about proceeding with TradeCenter.

At a ceremony in March in which state and local officials celebrated the new courthouse - a move triggered by the poor condition of the Edward J. Sullivan Courthouse in Cambridge - Clarke asked attendees and court employees to suggest TradeCenter to their friends in the business world. "As you can see, we have plenty of available space," he said.

Tamie Thompson, a Jones Lang LaSalle managing director who has tracked this region for nearly three decades, said she expects 2008 to be positive in terms of vacancy-absorption, although space may not be filled as quickly as last year. The commercial market is not tied

to the residential market, and interest along 128 north of Waltham remains strong, driven by higher rents and lower availability in Waltham, Cambridge, and Boston for Class A space, she said.

Class A, or first-class, is a subjective but widely recognized designation that conveys large lobbies, ample use of glass, plentiful parking,

fine finishes such as wood and marble, and other amenities.

At the end of the first quarter of 2008, Woburn had 3 million square feet of office space, less than 1.7 million square feet of which was deemed Class A, according to Jones Lang LaSalle. That compared with 4.7 million square feet of Class A space and 6 million square feet of total office space in neighboring Burlington.

Cummings hopes to lure tenants to Woburn with comparatively cheaper rents for Class A space than in competing communities to the southwest on 128, and by touting the proximity to Interstate 93, among other benefits. The first companies to sign have come from

Burlington, Cambridge, and New Hampshire.

Cummings - which owns and manages almost 10 million square feet of office, retail, and research space in the Greater Boston area - has a history of filling its properties with a diverse array of smaller companies. At TradeCenter, it would first like to lure a larger firm that could fill one or more of the 72,000-square-foot upper floors, which offer views all the way to Boston's Back Bay on clear days.

Woburn had no Class A office buildings until the early 1990s, when Unicorn Park was developed near the Stoneham line. A second cluster of Class A space sprouted in the northeast corner of Woburn, along Presidential Way, after the state added a highway ramp (Exit 37C) there to connect to Interstate 93.

Paul Meaney, executive director of the Woburn Business Association, said city officials in previous decades did not pay much attention to aesthetics or to the types of firms that could be attracted, and as a result Woburn became home to a succession of low-slung, metal-sided storage and manufacturing facilities.

"I take some fault for it," said Meaney, who served on the City Council in the 1970s and '80s. Woburn's spirit as a "workingman's city, a blue-collar city," was a source of pride and local identity, but it didn't foster selective zoning or development attitudes at a time when officials were eager to lure new businesses to provide jobs and generate more taxes from underutilized properties, he said. "It's a little different now."

Meaney said he believes TradeCenter will reach its occupancy goal, and he believes the distinctive appearance, and location, will help.

"You're going to remember that building when you look for it," he said.

TradeCenter 128 will 'help put Woburn on the map.'

Eric S. Anderson
Cummings Properties
vice president