

ESL in the News



DIANA LOUISE CARTER • STAFF WRITER • APRIL 18, 2010

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Dave Fiedler wanted to communicate stability and a long-term commitment with ESL Federal Credit Union's new headquarters.

"We didn't want a building that would be ostentatious or over the top," said Fiedler, CEO of the financial institution that began as an in-house bank for employees of Eastman Kodak Co. in 1920.

"We're a Rochester institution," Fiedler said. "Our future depends on how well Rochester does." And being downtown helps Rochester do well, he suggested.

Being downtown also seems to have boosted ESL employees, who are enjoying a state-of-the-art, LEED-certified building (it still has the new-building smell), and walking the streets at lunchtime as they get to know or get reacquainted with their urban environs.

Chris Williams, a senior systems analyst who has worked at ESL for 29 years, said the downtown building gives employees a new reason to be proud.

"I think this building projects the image of an almost \$4 billion financial institution," he said.

ESL's five-story headquarters at 225 Chestnut St. opened to employees in March. The 350 workers moved in three stages.



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From left: Krissie Kuper, Cory Popen, Kim Ferrell and Jim Melia meet in one of the bank's break-out rooms at ESL's downtown headquarters. (WILL YURMAN staff photographer)



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The new ESL building creates a sense of movement with its curving façade. (WILL YURMAN staff photographer)

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Petula Clark's 1960s hit song "Downtown" greeted employees as they traveled the walkway from their new parking garage to the office building, where they were met with balloons and gift bags including maps and coupons for downtown businesses.

ESL FEDERAL CREDIT UNION HEADQUARTERS

Where: 225 Chestnut St., Rochester.

Since: February for the computers; March for the employees; April 5 for the new branch.

Who: 350 of ESL's 600 employees.

Size: Five stories, 170,000 square feet.

Coolness factor: The curving front of the building makes it almost seem to unfurl as you drive by.

Wild-card factoid: Because of its energy efficiency, the building usually operates in cooling mode, even during Rochester's winter.

The new branch of the credit union opened on the first floor of the \$58 million headquarters on April 5, with little fanfare. When construction workers doing internal finishing and landscapers planting trees and shrubs are gone, ESL will finally have a ribbon cutting on May 20.

Fiedler got his wish in the expression of the building, designed by the Rochester architectural and engineering firm LaBella Associates. Three sides of the building and all sides of the parking garage are brick (some of it actually panels of formed, dyed concrete), employing a material already well-represented in the architectural vernacular of southeastern downtown.

The façade of the building makes a statement both solid and airy, with pillars of Brazilian granite alternating with banks of windows. The top of the building features a row of metal projections that could be seen as wings.

The building has a sense of movement created by its curving façade, echoed in floor patterns, ceiling features and furniture containing arching lines, circles and ovals. As a result of the concave structure of the building, when you drive by it reveals itself gradually, noted Walter R. Rusnak, ESL's senior vice president, who had a key role in planning for the building and moving into it.

Inside, light is a predominant feature, especially in comparison to the windowless former discount department store in Irondequoit where the headquarters had been.

"You feel the sunlight, you see the sunlight no matter where you are in the building," said Martial Bednar, who heads internal communications.

At least two of the five floors contain the sea of cubicles common to many offices, but these cubicles are cooler than most: Computer work stations can be jacked up in an instant should a worker prefer to stand while working, and returned to sitting height just as easily. Employees were able to pick features they wanted in their workstations.

In addition, the cubicles are surrounded by banks of windows and a wide swath of space dotted with sitting areas where handfuls of employees can take a lunch break together or hold a casual meeting while also taking in a view of the Strong National Museum of Play and other downtown features. The front corners of the building contain conference rooms and small corner lounges.

Francine Patella-Ryan, ESL's public affairs director, noted that the new building's air temperature is a whole lot more comfortable and consistent, too. At the former retail space ESL inhabited in Irondequoit, the heating and cooling system was designed for a large, open retail space, not the warren of offices it had become; the new building was designed not only to accommodate office workers but to be ultra efficient.

ESL in the News

In 25 months, ESL went from announcing plans for a headquarters downtown — the first financial institution to do so in many years — to a fully operational building, which is something of a miracle as construction projects go. The recession actually helped ESL meet its timeline. Expiration of its lease in Irondequoit next month added urgency.

"All of a sudden, building when no one else is building becomes very attractive," Fiedler said. "Our timing couldn't have been better."

Material costs were down, except for steel, and construction labor was plentiful. Fiedler called the architect, the contractor (LeChase Construction) and the office furnishings provider (Merkel Donohue) a dream team. And he credited city officials for expediting their normally year-long approval process so ESL could meet its lease-end deadline.

Downtown was actually one of three locations ESL seriously considered when it decided to move. But the chance to make a statement about faith in Rochester drove the decision.

"Downtown Rochester is poised for a resurgence," Fiedler said, citing recent figures that show about 3,000 people living within the Inner Loop and more coming. As residences increase, so do services and retail options.

"I've had many people say to me they switched accounts to ESL because they appreciated the commitment to Rochester," Fiedler said.

ESL began planning this move years before it announced the plans to the community in February 2008. As far back as 2004, Rusnak said, the company began to assess its space needs, which included room to grow. The new headquarters has 350 people but can take an additional 150. One place the credit union plans to expand is in small business loans.

There were also lots of technical needs, as might be imagined with a company that keeps electronic records of financial transactions and offers [Internet banking](#). During construction, ESL created its own backup data center in Ontario County that took over for a few days during the move and remains as a backup. Rusnak said ESL previously contracted with a third-party provider for that service.

Perhaps because a parking garage was included in the building plans from the get-go, employees voiced few concerns about moving from the suburbs to downtown, ESL officials said.

Some, in fact, liked the idea of returning to downtown after starting their financial services careers in other downtown institutions that have ceased to be locally owned.

"It's a whole different view of downtown," said Carmen Allenbrandt, manager of product development. The Penfield resident worked at the former Rochester Community [Savings Bank](#) on Franklin Street before starting with ESL 15 years ago. After returning to downtown, she loved being able to walk to St. Mary's Church on Washington Square Park for holy days during the Lenten and Easter seasons.

Allenbrandt expressed an equal amount of affection for her new work space.

"This building is so awesome," she said.

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