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## Car Spa for the Busy Modern Family

By [Richard Metcalf](#)*Of the Journal*

COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE: The average household has nearly two of them, with some owners even giving them names and showing off their photographs.

Cars.

Bill Hays spent more than 30 years spiffing them up, most of that time as owner of Albuquerque's two full-service Rain Tunnel Car Washes.

"I dried cars, vacuumed them, drove the cars on and off. I cashiered. I wrote tickets," he said. "It was a full-time job."

Now it's Buck Buckner's turn.

In November, Hays, 66, sold the two Rain Tunnels to Buckner as a way to force himself into retirement. "I sold when I did not want to," he said. "I knew I had to."

For Buckner, a 40-something former business alliance and marketing executive for an energy company, it's his entry into a business that has attracted his interest for years.

"I wanted to spend time here in Albuquerque," said Buckner, who traveled a lot in his old job. "I wanted to get into something simple, not that this is really very simple."

Buckner garnered attention two years ago when he proposed the Classic Emporium, a mixed-used development centered around a car wash, at Juan Tabo and Lagrima del Oro NE. The car wash, to be called Classic Auto Spa, would have been located with shops such as a dry cleaner, newsstand and coffee shop.

"Classic E," as Buckner calls it, died for lack of financing in May 2005. Despite the proposal's failure, he said, "All was not lost."

He and Hays got to know each other during that time, Buckner said, and the relationship led eventually to his purchase of the Rain Tunnels for an undisclosed price.

The two Rain Tunnels had attracted interest from potential buyers both local and as far away as Houston and New Jersey, said John Lastra, business broker at Grubb & Ellis New Mexico.

One of the attractions was the real estate.

"For most small-business owners, owning their land is a dream," he said. "Car washes are a little unique as a combination of location and business play."

Another attraction was the track record of the two car washes.

"Rain Tunnel had been around for years and had a lot of customers," said Lastra, who marketed the business for Hays.

Hays had owned the Rain Tunnel at 5101 Lomas NE, near San Mateo, since 1974 and the Old Town Car Wash (later renamed) at 2100 Central SW, at Rio Grande, since 1989.

Each location requires 30 full- and part-time employees— "a fluid number"— for the 67 hours of operation in a typical week, Hays said.

"It's an entry-level job. People are coming and going," he said. The beginning hourly wage is in the \$6.50-to-\$6.75 range with tips.

"You have to pay more than the minimum wage (of \$5.15 an hour)," Hays said. "Labor is expensive, so car washes are going more automated."

Buckner plans to continue running the two Rain Tunnels as in the past while he analyzes the operation. The name, however, will be altered slightly from Rain Tunnel Car Wash to Rain Tunnel Car Spa.

"I think it matches well with the market we serve— the active lives of families and trying to address their needs in maintaining the appearance of their vehicles," he said.

And Buckner hasn't given up on the Classic E concept.

The main financing issue with his original proposal was lack of management experience, specifically that Buckner had never run a car wash.

Now he'll gain that experience and, after eight to 12 months, Buckner said, he'll begin to evaluate sites for a third Rain Tunnel, most likely the mixed-use Class E variety.

"We've got a team in place that will build that model and bring it forward," he said.

**LEASING INDECISION:** Doubt about Lovelace Health System's future in the Southeast Heights discouraged some potential buyers of a building near Lovelace Medical Center on Gibson SE.

Lovelace was nearing the end of a lease for the 22,266-square-foot building at 1400 San Mateo SE, a short walk from the medical center, when it was put on the market last August. The list price was \$1.9 million.

The building generated a lot of interest until potential buyers found out the lease expired at the end of 2006, said Brent Tiano of Grubb & Ellis New Mexico.

"A lot of them got squirrely and nervous," he said.

The squirreleness was fed by Lovelace's announcement last November of plans to close the 500,000-square-foot medical center on Gibson.

Lovelace uses the building at 1400 San Mateo SE for offices and as a computer data center for medical records, said system spokeswoman Susan Wilson.

An out-of-state buyer, represented by real estate agent Sally Kim, was in the process of purchasing the building when Lovelace said it wanted to negotiate a new lease. Those negotiations are currently under way, Kim said.

Tiano and Grubb & Ellis associate Trudy Jones represented a group of local investors who sold the building.

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