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News

Metropolis

Opinion

Blogs

About us

Coupons

Classifieds

Skyline

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Bidders and onlookers in Rosemont, where the old post office was sold

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By **DANNY FENSTER**

Contributing Reporter

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Through a stately white lobby of glass and marble, at the end of the hallway that splits the Louvre Ballroom wing of the Hotel Intercontinental O'Hare in suburban Rosemont, a massive, \$3,875 fine art print of Fidel Castro gazed from a distance at the back's of men lining the hallway.

The communist's smiling face, iconic cigar tilted upward with the curve of his grin, was an improbable image set against the foreground of businessmen in sharp suits who had gathered there last Thursday to bid on what once one of the nation's largest public buildings: Chicago's old main post office, which looms above the Eisenhower Expressway, vacant for years.

There was eager chatter in the hall before the day's main event.

"Are you bidding today?" they asked one another.

"I think it'll go for ten," said one.

"Ten dollars, or ten million?"

"Ten million, judging by this crowd," came the reply.

Inside Louvre Ballroom One, Robert Nord appeared relaxed.

A big, broad-shouldered man with a bright, broad face, Nord is prone to smiling. His drawl, tinged with a hint of the South, marks him as a laid-back, easy-going sort of fellow.

But Nord has 19 years and a family of in-laws deeply rooted in the auction business, and when he takes position in front of a microphone his demeanor changes fast. His speech quickens, his voice resonates and any notion of southern affability is soon lost in the business at hand.



The old Post Office above the Eisenhower was auctioned last week for \$40 million.
File 2009

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He ran the men assembled through a practice drill to prepare the crowd for the auction to come, an imaginary bidding for Wrigley Field.

Next came the real bidding. "Your opportunity starts right here," Nord said. And with that, perhaps the last clearly legible words Nord would speak, the bidding began on Chicago's old main post office began at \$300,000.

Inconspicuous glances from peripherals sought out any man with a bidding paddle.

"Ten million-can-I-get-ten-million lookin-for-ten-million ten-million ten-million," Nord shot off like a machine gun as his handlers jumped and ran through the crowd to spot bids.

Never have monied older gentlemen in tuxedos moved so quickly. They'd spot a bid and yelp back to Nord with a "Haaa!" or "Yes!" They pleaded with bidders — "ten million, come on give me ten million and we'll get this thing over with!"

Somewhere around the twenty-million mark it became a head-to-head showdown between a small group of Asian businessmen and a rotund older gentleman with a short white beard and bald head until, nearly 45 minutes after opening, bidder #27 — the bald fellow — was ushered into a back room to sign a contract for 2.7 million square feet of twentieth century Chicago history at a cost of \$40 million.

A mad scramble of reporters leapt up to get comments from all parties involved as the suits and ties milled about, smiling and chatting with one another about the excitement that had just passed, some lingering and some heading for the exit.

The tension and revelry dissipated precipitously.

In the corner, Robert Nord stood with his feet a broad shoulder width apart, his hands locked in front of him.

His slow drawl and affable smile returned as he watched the crowd shuffle out of Louvre Ballroom One, down the hallway and back into the stately white lobby of glass and marble.

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