

# HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

MARCH 16-22, 2018 • VOL. 48, NO. 46 • \$6.00

## Helping out

As board chair, this Sysco exec plans to expand the nonprofit's services

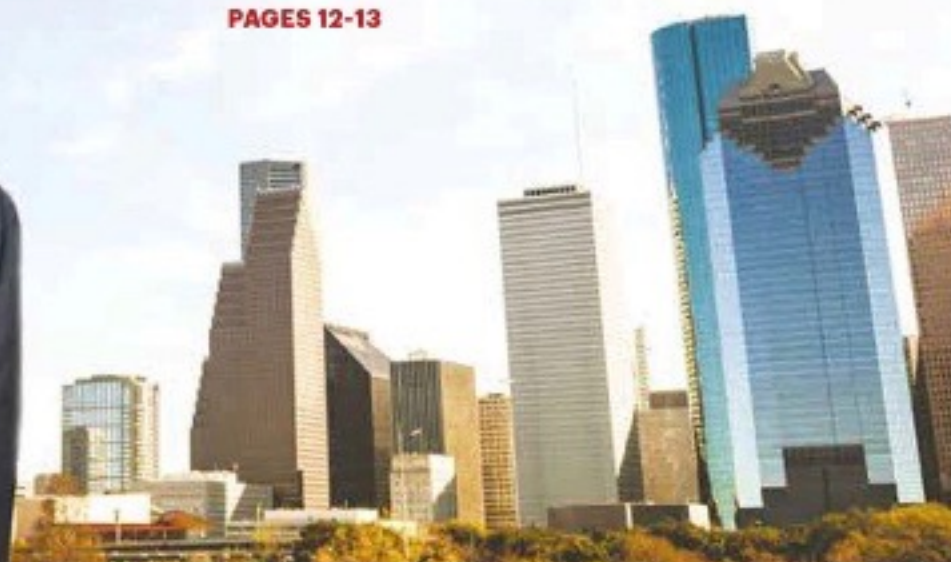
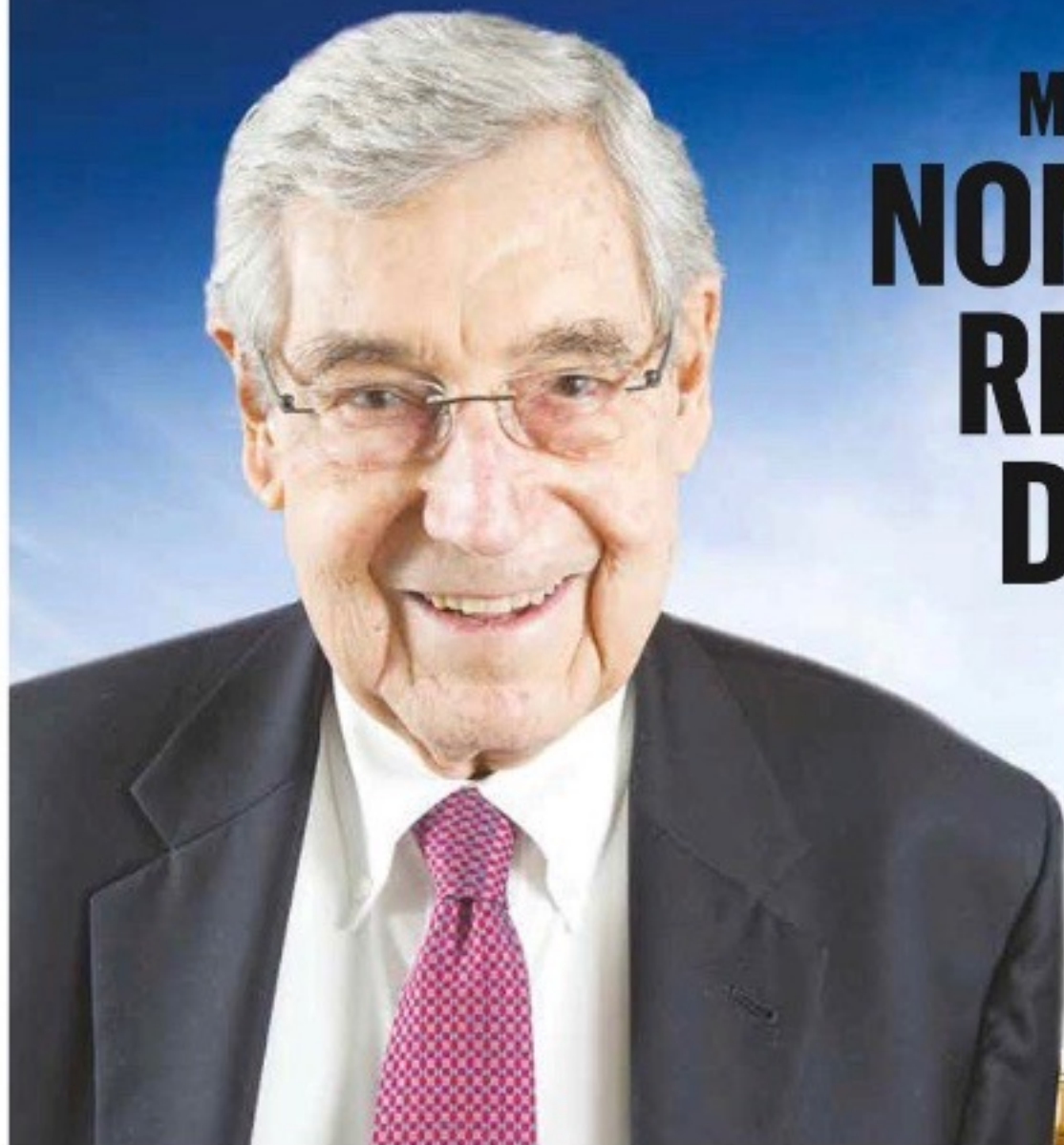
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JIMMY MORELAND/HBJ

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## COVER STORY

# THE OPTIMIST'S APPROACH TO REAL ESTATE

ROBERT BLAND SR. FIRST CAME TO HOUSTON IN THE 1970S AND HAS SINCE BUILT DOZENS OF RESIDENTIAL PROJECTS IN THE BAYOU CITY.



Robert Bland Sr. is the founder of Houston-based Pelican Builders.

JIMMY MORELAND/HBI

**M**ost weekdays, one can usually find Robert Bland Sr. at either his office off San Felipe or his latest condominium building, The Wilshire, less than a mile away. However, the 90-year-old developer hasn't forgotten about his projects in Sugar Land and The Woodlands – but he saves those trips for the weekends.

A former World War II and Korean War veteran, his early career days took him around the world building military facilities including a tank repair shop and bases in countries such as Portugal and Pakistan.

Bland, founder of Houston-based Pelican Builders Inc., has collectively built hundreds of condos, townhomes and houses in the Houston area for more than 30 years. Bland, who lives in one of his own properties, thinks the condo high-rise will define the future of living in Houston.

Despite his long and illustrious career, Bland has no intention of slowing down. He and his business partner Derek Darnell are currently on the hunt for two more project sites and plan to break

ground on their latest project, The Revere, within a few months.

"It's a fun, creative business," said Bland, as he drove toward The Wilshire in his silver Cadillac sedan on a Thursday morning. The father of three and grandfather of five reached into his blazer pocket a few times to grab his phone and take some business calls.

"What used to take days now takes minutes," Bland said, talking about the speed and scale of business today. While he recalls manually sending business letters back in the day, now he uses either a desktop in his office – which happens to sit next to a Brother typewriter – or a computer at home for after-hours emails. The nonagenarian prefers not to text.

The Wilshire, a 96-unit condo near the River Oaks District, has 13 units left with several tenants in the closing and move-in stages. Bland, a civil engineer by trade, is intimately familiar with details both large and small.

"These things just don't happen," Bland said. "You've got to think and plan and work with architects, designers, consultants. You've got to be creative and

work with the whole staff."

His superintendent, Patrick McGinnis, knows to expect a few calls from Bland throughout the day.

That Thursday morning, Bland knew exactly what he needed to see. A fifth-floor condo buyer had requested a steam heater for the master bath shower, but it had some issues with excess steam that eventually got resolved. He still went straight to the master closet to check on the equipment.

"We keep tabs on everything," he said. He carries around four folded-up letter-sized pages in his jacket pocket at all times, including two spreadsheets detailing the units sold, the units closing and the units remaining.

Bland's civil engineering background helps with the building and construction side of the development business. But, "selling is fun, too," he adds.

Originally from New Orleans (his company name is an homage to the state bird of Louisiana), Bland came to Houston in the 1970s and soon after, built the third high-rise ever in the city, The Woodway, in 1974. At the time, the Galleria had been built, but outside the Loop there were no

high rises except for an office building. Bland and his team built without any presales.

"It was a big mystery," he said. "People would say 'Hey, a condo in Houston; is it going to sell?'"

"We just dug a hole in the ground and built it," Bland said. He recalls a large sign they had put up outside the building that could be seen when driving down Woodway that kept track of the number of units available and the number of units sold. "We changed the numbers every day and the newspaper would take pictures of it."

Back in the '70s, a 1,500-square-foot two bedroom, two-and-a-half bathroom condo sold for \$67,000.

"That just shows you, you really can't go wrong on real estate," Bland said.

Real estate is a business not without its challenges, with the highs and lows tied to the local economy. When oil prices and then Houston's economy tanked in the 1980s, Bland went to build homes in Orlando and Ft. Lauderdale while his family stayed in Houston. In 2001, he broke ground on his Highland Tower project just two months before the col-

lapse of Lehman Brothers. The units took two full years to sell out after the building delivered.

"You've got to be an optimist," he said.

Bland is very optimistic when it comes to high-rise living in Houston. Within five to 10 years, he wouldn't be surprised to see older apartment complexes torn down in favor of some form of high rise.

"I think that's what the future of Houston is," he said.

Ric Campo, chairman and CEO of Camden Property Trust, has known Bland since 1979, when Bland was building the Greenway I and II condominiums and Campo worked for the Houston-based development company behind Greenway Plaza, Century Development. Campo was then one of Bland's financial partners when he started Pelican.

He describes Bland as a perfectionist, but also a quick thinker and adapter to the changing winds that can dramatically impact the real estate business.

"So many people when they get into a tight spot, don't know what to do and they just kind of freeze," Campo said. "He's always ducking and bobbing and moving around, trying to find some new way to

solve the crisis he's in. He's resilient."

After stops at The Wilshire and the title company, Bland drove a bit farther out to Somerset Green, the London-inspired inner-loop community developed by Houston-based Hines Interests LP. Pelican offers three- and four-story detached homes in the community. Bland drove by the water features and roundabouts.

He parked the Cadillac and walked into the Pelican sales office, shaking hands with everyone inside. His sales associate informed him how after some time, sales had picked up, with seven homes sold in the last month. In total, 27 lots out of 100 have sold. The first condos came online in the midst of the oil slump.

"See, it has an identity now," Bland said enthusiastically about the development.

Heading back to his office from Somerset Green, his phone starts buzzing again. Bland reaches into his pocket and sees this time, it's his daughter Brenda's name flashing across the screen and not a business associate. He smiles and answers, asking her if she had made it back in town safely that morning.

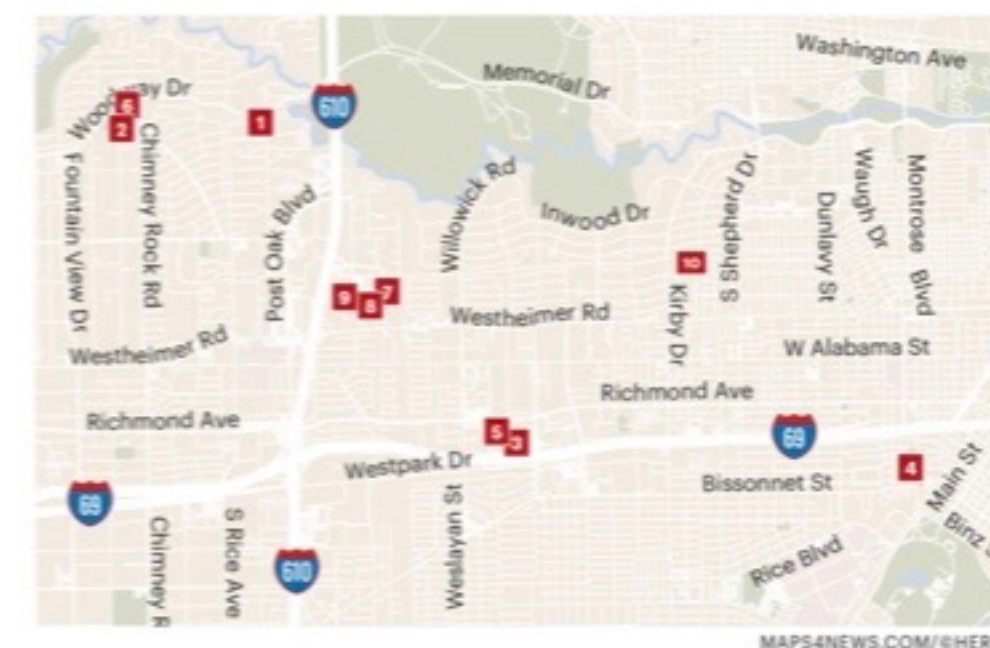
"Oh, I'm so glad to hear it," he shouts enthusiastically into the phone. Brenda asks her father what he's doing at the moment.

"Oh me," he says into the phone. "I'm working!"



Ric Campo

## HIGH-RISE CONDO PROJECTS ROBERT BLAND SR. HAS BUILT IN HOUSTON



MAPS4NEWS.COM/6HERE

### 1 THE WOODWAY

5001 Woodway, 77056

No. of Stories: 20

No. of Units: 98

Date Completed: 1974

Sample price of a current unit: \$335,000

### 2 WOODWAY PLACE ATRIUM

661 Bering Dr., 77057

No. of Stories: 9

No. of Units: 50

Date Completed: 1977

Sample price of a current unit: \$125,000

### 3 GREENWAY I CONDOMINIUM

15 Greenway Plaza, 77046

No. of Stories: 19

No. of Units: 200

Date Completed: 1981

Sample price of a current unit: \$224,000

### 4 5000 MONTROSE AT THE MUSEUM

5000 Montrose, 77006

No. of Stories: 18

No. of Units: 90

Date Completed: 1984

Sample price of a current unit: \$245,000

### 5 GREENWAY II CONDOMINIUM

14 Greenway Plaza, 77046

No. of Stories: 19

No. of Units: 200

Date Completed: 1983

Sample price of a current unit: \$320,000

### 6 WOODWAY PLACE

651 Bering, 77057

No. of Stories: 18

No. of Units: 95

Date Completed: 1985

Sample price of a current unit: \$240,000

### 7 THE BRIARGLEN

2211 Briarglen, 77027

No. of Stories: 8

No. of Units: 68

Date Completed: 2007

Sample price of a current unit: \$475,000

### 8 HIGHLAND TOWER

2207 Bancroft, 77027

No. of Stories: 17

No. of Units: 93

Date Completed: 2010

Sample price of a current unit: \$449,000

### 9 THE WILSHIRE

2047 Westcreek Ln, 77027

No. of Stories: 17

No. of Units: 96

Date Completed: 2018

Starts at: \$800,000

### 10 THE REVERE

2325 Welch, 77019

No. of Stories: 9

No. of Units: 32

Date Completed: 2019 (Estimated)

Starts at: \$1.6M

SOURCE: PELICAN BUILDERS, HBI

## CLOSER LOOK

### ROBERT BLAND SR.

Founder, Pelican Builders Inc.

Age: 90

**Family:** three children, Robert Bland Jr., Brenda Willson and Ellen Bland; five grandchildren: Allison Bland, Robert Bland III, Scott Willson, Lauren Willson and Kristen Willson

**First job:** worked as a field engineer for a general contractor in New Orleans, building overpasses and underpasses for trains and highways

**Interesting fact:** Lived outside the country for 15 years, building military facilities around the world and later the Hiram Bithorn Baseball Stadium in San Juan

### PELICAN BUILDERS INC.

HQ: Houston

**Year founded:** 1998, formerly known as Bland Development Corp.

**Top executives:** Robert Bland Sr., founder, and Derek Darnell, president

**Ownership:** Privately held

**Employees:** 14

**What it does:** Houston-based residential development company

**Revenue:** \$50 million a year on average. Bland Sr. said this year revenue is above \$100 million because of The Wilshire sales.





# RESIDENTIAL REAL ESTATE HUB

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COMING SOON

## New apartments coming near Houston Farmers Market

Dallas-based Lincoln Property Co. bought a little more than 8 acres near the soon-to-be-reimagined Houston Farmers Market off Airline Drive to build a four-story, Class A apartment complex.



Becky Hand

Becky Hand and Tom Dosch with Houston's Dosch Marshall Real Estate brokered the deal. The land originally belonged to an unnamed out-of-town investor from Waco, Texas, and was sold for an undisclosed amount. This

will be Lincoln Property's first multifamily project in Houston in about 30 years, they said. Requests for comment from Lincoln weren't immediately returned.

The apartment project will include about 300 units and will have surface



MAPS4NEWS.COM/HERE

parking rather than a parking garage, Dosch said, due to the larger 8-acre size. Dosch and Hand estimate it could

be about 18 months before any units are available.

They received several offers from

apartment developers, investors and townhome developers, Dosch said, all eager to embark on land they consider ripe for redevelopment.

"This is a unique opportunity to come into a market that's changing very rapidly," said Dosch, principal at Dosch Marshall.

Located near the Heights, the area will likely start to see new residential and commercial projects crop up as the market's new look is complete. The apartment site is at 700 W. Cavalcade St., near the corner of West Cavalcade and Airline and about a mile southwest from the intersection between the 610 Loop and Interstate 45.

In 2017, Houston-based MLB Capital Partners closed a deal to acquire a controlling interest in Farmers Marketing Association of Houston, Texas Inc. and the Houston Farmers Market. A complete redevelopment is in the works.

### ► HOT MARKET

## RIVER OAKS CONDO PROJECT TO BREAK GROUND IN SPRING, DEVELOPERS SAY

Developers of The Revere, a luxury condominium project designed with River Oaks empty nesters in mind, plan to break ground this spring on the nine-story mid-rise said to look reminiscent of a sophisticated Park Avenue walk-up.

The 32-unit condo is close to being 40 percent presold. On a recent stop at the condo sales center on Welch Street near Revere, Robert Bland Sr., founder and principal of Houston-based Pelican Builders Inc., shared details of his 10th high-rise project in Houston.

The location and audience determined a lot of the scope of the project, he said. The high-end units will feature 11-foot high ceilings with plenty of space for art enthusiasts to display their collections. Large windows will give residents views of River Oaks and Montrose. The luxury units will feature hardwood floors, custom wood cabinets, Sub-Zero and Wolf appliances and fireplaces. Units vary in size from 2,800 to 3,800 square feet while prices span from \$1.6 million to \$2.6 million.

Less than three miles away, Pelican's other project The Wilshire is 13 units away from being completely sold out. While The Revere will have more of a classic, traditional feel, the 17-story Wilshire has a more modern, sleek look. Houston-based Kirksey Architecture designed both projects. Along with two- to three-bedroom floor plans, some with a study and den, the building offers guest suites and two lounges for resident events and everyday use. The units range in size from 1,392



COURTESY PELICAN BUILDERS INC.

A rendering of the entrance at The Revere at River Oaks, a luxury condominium building proposed by Houston-based Pelican Builders.

to 3,561 square feet and in price from \$800,000 to \$3 million.

In addition to a 25,000-square-foot outdoor patio with outdoor pool, cabanas and kitchen is a small gate on the edge of the Wilshire's patio. That gate provides residents with a direct, walkable route to the Target next door.

### ► MOVING ON

## HISD BOARD OK'S JOB-CUTS MOTION, DOES NOT ANNOUNCE SUPERINTENDENT REPLACEMENT PLANS

At the March 8 board meeting, Houston Independent School District trustees didn't announce what's to come next following Richard Carranza's abrupt announcement he's leaving to become chancellor of the New York City public school system just 18 months after he arrived in Houston.

Referring to Carranza's departure as "the elephant in the room," Board President Rhonda Skillern-Jones said the district will go on and will get another superintendent.

"The work doesn't stop; the sky is not falling," she said.

The trustees didn't discuss whether an interim superintendent would be chosen or if they would begin a candidate search for a permanent replacement, but they did approve a motion that could pave the way for staff cuts as the district tries to find ways to address the looming \$115 million projected budget shortfall for the next school year.

Reasons for the shortfall include an expected decline in revenue from lower property values after Hurricane Harvey, as well as changes to funding models, expected lowered enrollment post-Harvey and recapture payments to the state for the now property-wealthy district.

Employees in "critical shortage areas" such as secondary math, science, English, bilingual education and some special education areas won't be considered for potential cuts. However, other teaching and administrative positions could be considered for "program changes," or any elimination, curtailment or reorganization



PAUL TAKAHASHI / HBJ

Richard Carranza announced March 5 that he's stepping down as superintendent of the Houston Independent School District to head the New York City public school system.

of a program, according to the meeting agenda.

Skillern-Jones ended the meeting by reminding everyone that the financial strains would require cuts from not just some but all schools.

"I've heard a lot of people say, 'What's going to be taken from my school,'" she said. "What school would you like us to take from?"