

'Baby Factory' no match for market pressure

September 15, 2004

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For untold numbers of Americans, their first experience as a consumer was with products that came out of the "**Rubens Baby Factory**" in Chicago. Officially called **Rubens & Marble Inc.**, it's been around since 1890 and in the same location since 1936, turning out T-shirts that hospitals all around the country place on newborns, accessorizing their birthday suits for the first time.

That location is 2340 N. Racine, in the western part of Lincoln Park, where it has long since been surrounded by the leaded glass, the flowering window boxes and the high prices that denote gentrification. A property just north of it, the trade school Coyne American Institute, has been sold to be replaced by housing.

So Rubens & Marble President **Richard Rubens** figures it's time to go. He has hired **Newcastle Ltd.** to conduct a sealed-bid auction of his property. Responses are due Oct. 29.

By some estimates, his 32,000-square-foot land site could command more than \$11.5 million. Rubens, the fourth generation owner, said he'd rather stay in a building he's known since age 7. But the reality, he said, is that the business is failing.

The manufacturing of infant underwear has moved to China and Pakistan because of the cheap labor. In the meantime, Rubens said his prospects have suffered because of government-mandated increases in the minimum wage. "I tried to raise prices to make up for that and lost a lot of business," he said. Discount stores used to be big customers, but now he sells mostly to hospital suppliers.

After World War II, Rubens & Marble had about 300 people on the payroll. Today, the count is 38. Rubens figures he'll cease operations sometime in November.

Another factor in his decision is that he's 59 and his two sons, one a doctor and the other a lawyer, don't want to follow his footsteps into the "baby factory."

Developers have pestered him over the years to sell, so he figured he'd put it up for auction to get the best price.

But now with the shutdown looming, his staff is working overtime to meet the orders from customers that haven't lined up new suppliers. Rubens said he's had to resist the temptation to stage an equivalent of those never-ending "liquidation" sales of Persian rugs.