

# SUBTROPOLIS

## THE SITE OF THE POSTAL SERVICE'S UNDERGROUND FULFILLMENT CENTER

**I**t's not Batman's lair or an underground city in a dystopian zombie movie—it's where the Postal Service stores stamps. SubTropolis is an enormous underground office and warehouse complex in Kansas City, MO, that houses the USPS Stamp Fulfillment Services (SFS) office.

From its cavernous office, SFS ships hundreds of millions of stamps, stationery and other products daily to customers—postal patrons, businesses and collectors—that order them online, from catalogues, or by phone and fax and mail. It also ships to post offices for retail sales.

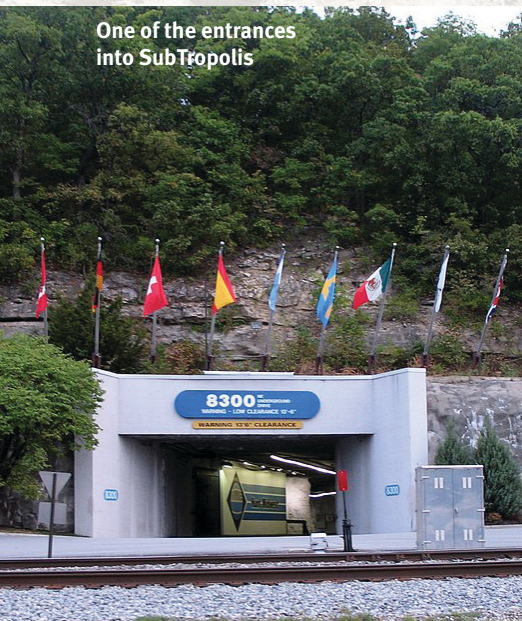
"It's a very interesting place to work," USPS Director of Stamp Services Bill Gicker, who oversees SFS and its 180 employees, said. And it's a big place to work—SFS occupies 520,000 square feet. But with 7 million square feet of commercial space available, space is what SubTropolis has going for it.

SFS is only a small part of this enormous office and storage complex that began in the 1940s as a mine. The 270-million-year-old limestone dug out of the mine was used to pave roads and airport tarmacs in Kansas City. The miners left behind 55 million square feet of underground space, with 14 million square feet suitable for use as office and warehouse space. Lamar Hunt, the late owner of the NFL's Kansas City Chiefs, saw the

potential and, through his company Hunt Midwest, developed about half of the usable space for commercial use. The company opened SubTropolis for tenants in 1964; SFS arrived with its stamps in 1982. Hunt Midwest calls SubTropolis the world's largest underground office space.

The room-and-pillar method of mining, which digs open space under a roof held up by pillars of rock left in place at regular intervals, turned out to be a great way to organize office space. In between the pillars, 10 miles of roads and two miles of railroad track allow tenants to move their goods in and out, with 500-plus truck docks providing access to the outside world. The pillars also function as address markers to navigate the cavernous space—SFS is located at Pillar 210.

Doing business underground is inexpensive compared to above-ground building space—it was cheaper to use the old mine than to build a new building, so rent is about half of what buildings on the surface charge. But construction cost isn't the only advantage.



One of the entrances into SubTropolis



The Postal Service's Stamp Fulfillment Services office in SubTropolis

Below: A site plan of SubTropolis, showing the scope of the underground facility

Opposite page: A USPS pack station



“At any given time, we have about \$3 billion worth of stamps within the facility,” Gicker said, adding that protecting them from the elements is essential. “One of the primary reasons that any of the companies that are in the caves are there is climate control.” At 160 feet below the surface, the space has a constant temperature of about 65 to 70 degrees, so “it’s very easy to control for humidity,” he said.

“Especially when stamps were still gummed, humidity control was very important,” Gicker said, “because the gum liner was exposed. It’s less of an issue now, but it still keeps stamps in really good condition, and keeps them flat—there’s no curling.”

Stamps, and the many other products stored there by other compa-

nies—from automobiles and boats to archived paper and film—are safe from the elements year-round. That translates into a savings of up to 70 percent of energy costs for tenants.

SubTropolis is also conveniently located near the geographical center of the country, an advantage for shippers like SFS that send their products everywhere.

Local letter carriers get to glimpse the place, delivering daily to SubTropolis’s above-ground mailroom.

From “the caves,” as SFS employees call their home, they were busy fulfilling about 59,000 orders every day during the peak season last month, most within one or two business days. “They turn things around very quickly,” Gicker said.

If having millions of tons of rock over your head makes you nervous, Hunt Midwest says that the limestone, including 10,000 pillars holding up the roof, is six times stronger than concrete. Besides the SFS employees, 2,000 other office and warehouse workers at SubTropolis toil under the rock each day.

There are some hazards involved, though. Due to erosion and settling, the cave floors can tilt.

“Where the automated machinery is, that is actually at a bedrock level, so that nothing moves under that machinery and it stays nicely aligned,” Gicker said. But in the office space, staffers joke about getting a good seat at meetings in a certain conference room so they won’t roll away from the table on the tilted floor.

Then there’s the sound of explosions in late afternoon. “Around 5 o’clock every day,” Gicker said, “there is blasting. You can hear the explosions as they make the caves bigger.” Hunt Midwest is expanding the useful parts of the cave and digging down to bedrock to add stability. “It’s a little unnerving,” Gicker added.

The blasting, though, is part of working in a huge underground office that has unique advantages.

“The nice thing is, if we get tight on space,” Gicker said, “they just blast out a wall and we expand into it.” **PR**