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FEATURED

City dedicates boardwalk to state Rep. Dempsey

By Mike LaBella mlabella@eagletribune.com Dec 16, 2016



Tim Jean

TIM JEAN/Staff photo State Rep. Brian Dempsey looks toward Haverhill Mayor James Fiorentini and thanks him for his help over the years in politics while speaking during the Harbor Place boardwalk dedication ceremony.



HAVERHILL — More than 100 people gathered in the new Harbor Place building Friday to celebrate the naming of the city's new boardwalk in honor of state Rep. Brian S. Dempsey.

Dempsey, who helped secure \$36 million in various forms of state funding for the \$70 million project, is credited with not only paving the way for the project, but bringing a satellite campus of UMass Lowell to Haverhill, which officials said was crucial to making the project happen.

During a ceremony Friday, various guests spoke glowingly of Dempsey, including Mayor James Fiorentini, who told the crowd that Dempsey gets a lot of support "from our great legislative delegation."

Earlier this week, Fiorentini filed an order with the City Council to name the boardwalk section behind Harbor Place after Dempsey.

Councilor William Macek, one of Dempsey's council colleagues in the late 1980s when Dempsey was council president, said that the honor wasn't nearly enough to commemorate Dempsey's impact on the city, and moved to dedicate not just a section but the entire boardwalk — from the Basiliere Bridge to the Comeau Bridge — to the chairman.

The council unanimously approved the order to include Macek's recommended language.

UMass President Marty Meehan credited Dempsey with including the university in the Harbor Place project.

"Every community in this state wants to have a UMass presence," Meehan said. "When this idea (satellite campus) came up I had five other mayors call me to say 'we want you to come to our city.'"

Pointing to Dempsey, chairman of the powerful Ways and Means Committee, Meehan said: "We're here because we developed a business model of how we could do a satellite campus. We gave it to the chairman of ways and means and he made this happen."

UMass Lowell plans to offer classes and workshops for business executives along with an "innovation hub" that will include business incubator space with 3D printers, laser cutters and other technologies used in the design and development of products of the future.

The university will also offer continuing education programs in criminal justice, psychology and business, as well as an MBA program and other educational opportunities, in addition to degree programs offered through Northern Essex Community College.

Meehan added that Dempsey used his role in public service along with "all of his clout, all of his smarts and all of his brainpower to make things happen in his hometown, the city that he loves."

"This was his vision, he stuck with it, he was persuasive to everyone he dealt with, and he delivered," Meehan said. "This building and this economic development project here is something that Brian Dempsey made happen and will last and have significance for the next 100 to 200 years."

House Speaker Robert DeLeo interjected his speech with humorous anecdotes about Dempsey, such as "I consider him my closest friend in the legislature and besides that I know he's a little jealous of me, quite frankly, and I think that's what this boardwalk was all about. I come from Winthrop, which is right on the ocean, and this is the closest he could get."

DeLeo, on a more serious note, said the dedication of the boardwalk in Dempsey's name was "well warranted."

"When I think of what's going to happen in this area in terms of housing in terms of education and in terms of the economy, because of the efforts of Brian and a host of other people, it's such a wonderful day for the great city of Haverhill."

Dempsey told the crowd that Harbor Place probably would not have happened had not DeLeo appointed him chairman of Ways and Means.

"He has put me and the city of Haverhill in a tremendous position to capitalize on the great position of being chair of the House Ways and Means Committee," Dempsey said.

When the City Council approved the boardwalk dedication earlier this week, several councilors spoke of their own personal experiences with Dempsey, a former councilor who has risen up from City Hall to the right hand of House Speaker Robert DeLeo.

Councilor Thomas Sullivan, who is related to Dempsey by marriage through an aunt, Lillian Levasseur, spoke of Dempsey's winning his first term on Beacon Hill in 1990 over Sullivan's then-boss, state Rep. Frank Emilio, a win which Sullivan said "turned out to be the best thing to ever happen for the city of Haverhill."

During his tenure as a legislative aide for Emilio, Sullivan realized the power Dempsey currently wields, a position that essentially controls the state's purse strings and allows for projects like Harbor Place to come to fruition.

Recalling the dedication of a Round Pond boat landing he pushed for in commemoration of former Conservation Officer Steven Woidyla prior to his death earlier this year, Sullivan said one of the best parts of the boardwalk dedication is that Dempsey is still here to see it.

"And it's even more special that Brian is still with us to be recognized by this honor bestowed on him. That doesn't always happen, and it doesn't happen often enough here in the city," Sullivan said.

Macek added that Dempsey, 50, could climb higher in the legislature. Councilor Melinda Barrett, whose Merrimack Street deli has a front row seat to Harbor Place's rise, equated Dempsey's efforts to those of a legendary U.S. senator and presidential candidate from another Merrimack River mill city.

"He's Haverhill's version of Paul Tsongas," Barrett said about the late statesman from Lowell.

During his long career in city politics, Councilor Joseph Bevilacqua said despite Dempsey's record of accomplishment and aid to the city, the greatest testament to his success is that he is still "Brian from Haverhill."

The Harbor Place project is a partnership between the nonprofit Greater Haverhill Foundation and the Planning Office for Urban Affairs, the nonprofit residential development arm of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston.

The five-story Harbor Place commercial building, built on the site of the former Woolworth building, is ready to accept tenants and will include HC Media in a section of the first floor, UMass-Lowell on the second and third floors, and corporate headquarters for Pentucket Bank on the fourth floor. The fifth floor was recently purchased by the foundation and a local investor and will likely be leased as "preferred" office space.

The neighboring six-story Merrimack Street building and its connected Riverfront wing includes 80 housing units on upper floors and restaurants on the first floor.

The first residential tenants began moving into the building this week.

Staff writer Peter Francis also contributed to this report.

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I hope he walks and not drives to the dedication.

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