

FEATURED

## River, boardwalk and Mother Nature a perfect mix

Bill Cantwell 12 hrs ago



TIM JEAN/Staff photo Former State Rep. Brian Dempsey, left, and Gov. Charlie Baker walk along the boardwalk while touring Harbor Place shortly after it opened.  
Tim Jean



For weeks, I'd been telling myself that one of these days, I was going to take a walk at the new Harbor Place complex.

But I kept finding ways to put it off.

Not that I haven't had an opportunity to take the walk. Every Saturday morning, I stop downtown to do a little banking. One of the places I do business with is Pentucket Bank, which happens to be directly across the street from Harbor Place.

For weeks, I'd been going into the bank and peering across the street at Harbor Place. But I never walked across and into the new complex to experience what people are talking about — the boardwalk along the river.

Lots of locals have remarked about the walkway along the river. I'd seen it when driving across the Basiliere Bridge, but only from a distance.

So there I was walking across Merrimack Street for my first real visit to the project, which is supposed to boost the economy of the eastern end of downtown.

It was anything but a sun-splashed day, overcast and cooler than the previous hot summer days we had enjoyed. I used a walkway between two of the buildings, passing through a courtyard. It was surrounded by high-rise buildings dotted with a porch outside of each apartment — an impressive sight that made me imagine the view of the river from the higher levels.

The courtyard spilled onto the boardwalk. The walkway extends from Basiliere Bridge on top of the floodwall all the way east to an older boardwalk behind Haverhill Bank in the center of downtown. The entire stretch of boardwalk is nearly 20 feet above the surface of the water, a great view.

With only an occasional person walking by, it was quiet — so quiet, in fact, that I could hear the splash of a fish on the other side of the river. In that area of the Bradford Rail Trail was a fisherman casting out over the water.

A bird swooped down to the river's surface and grabbed a fish that was swimming too shallow. In the distance, just beyond the Basiliere Bridge, sat boats packed against docks at the Crescent Yacht Club. On one of those porches, four stories up, on one of those porches a man walked out of his apartment and gazed at the river, drinking in the images.

This wasn't the Haverhill I grew up knowing — and I was glad for the change. Back in the '70s, you'd rarely see a boat on the river. Fishing was uncommon (who wanted to pull one from that cesspool?). The river was heavily polluted, driving certain fish and birds elsewhere.

The Merrimack was not a place to take your family for an enjoyable afternoon.

It's taken time — decades — but the city's relationship with the river has completely changed. All the ingredients are there — sightseers, fishermen, boaters and a healthy Mother Nature. Developers are looking to invest along the river and people want to live there.

The next time you have a chance, do what I did — go for a stroll on the boardwalk and take in the sights, the sounds, the smells.

Watch closely for the hovering birds, or toss a fishing line into the water.

You might indeed get hooked.

Bill Cantwell is editor of The Haverhill Gazette.

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