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## City's new centerpiece: Harbor Place will be focal point of downtown, officials say

Harbor Place will be focal point of downtown, officials say

By Mike LaBella [mlabela@eagletribune.com](mailto:mlabela@eagletribune.com) 2 hrs ago



Amanda Sabga

AMANDA SABGA/ Staff photo Harbor Place will anchor the eastern end of downtown with new shops, offices and classrooms.

HAVERTHILL — The first tenants of the new Harbor Place commercial building are poised to begin moving in by the end of the year, but before that happens the public will get a sneak preview of the project.

At 1 p.m., Sept. 23, members of the public are invited to take a stroll along a new 650-foot-long wooden boardwalk built atop the floodwall, then step inside the gleaming first-floor lobby, which leads to what will become a beautifully landscaped plaza overlooking the Merrimack River and ringed by patio tables outside of the restaurants expected to move in.

"This is an exciting day for Haverhill with more to come," said state Rep. Brian Dempsey, who along with city officials and members of the Harbor Place development team took a tour of the new building Thursday.

Dempsey, who helped secure \$36 million in various forms of state funding to assist in the \$70 million project, began his tour at the corner of Merrimack and Main streets, just outside the corner entrance to Harbor Place and adjacent to the Basiliere Bridge.

This is where the new boardwalk actually begins. It's intended to be part of a loop of about a mile linking the Bradford side of the river to downtown Merrimack and Washington streets via the Basiliere and Comeau bridges.

Accompanying Dempsey were Mayor James Fiorentini and his chief of staff, David Van Dam, William Pillsbury, the city's economic development and planning director, and Greater Haverhill Foundation members Sally O'Rourke and Ronald Trombley.

"It was a lot of work to convince Gov. Patrick and Gov. Baker that this is a transformative project for the city and a catalyst for other projects in the downtown," Dempsey said while strolling the new boardwalk. "This was a significant commitment by the state to make this a reality."

Dempsey said he sees Harbor Place as becoming a destination by boat and by car, by foot and by bicycle.

"I think we'll see more restaurants and people congregating here for lunch and dinner," he said. "It will be a destination for people all over."

Pillsbury said the plaza between the Harbor Place commercial building and adjacent residential/commercial buildings will be open to the public, as will a second plaza on the opposite side of the residential building, where two buildings were demolished this week: 68 Merrimack St. and 60 Merrimack St.

Phase 2 of the Harbor Place project calls for an additional residential building at that site, along with additional underground parking and first-floor commercial space.

"Phase 2 will begin after the feasibility study and financing are in place," Trombley said.

The Harbor Place project is a partnership between the nonprofit Greater Haverhill Foundation, the same group that developed the Ward Hill Business Park in the 1960s, and the Planning Office for Urban Affairs, the nonprofit residential development arm of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston.

In 2010, the Planning Office for Urban Affairs converted the old Hayes factory building on Granite Street near the downtown train station to 57 one- and two-bedroom apartments.

The Harbor Place commercial building, built on the site of the former Woolworth building, is nearly complete and will include HC Media in a section of the first floor, a satellite campus for UMass Lowell on the second and third floors, and corporate headquarters for Pentucket Bank on the fourth floor. The fifth floor, which was recently purchased by the foundation and a local investor, will likely be leased as "preferred" office space with "spectacular views of the river."

The neighboring six-story Merrimack Street building and its connected Riverfront wing will include 80 housing units on upper floors and first-floor retail shops and restaurants.

Pillsbury said the new boardwalk is a "tremendous addition" to the city, being able to accomplish the dream of a more than one-mile walking loop that includes the Bradford Rail Trail, which is currently under construction.

The new 650-foot long boardwalk will soon connect with the existing boardwalk behind Haverhill Bank, which will be extended, city officials said. There are no immediate plans to connect to the boardwalk the city built several years ago behind the Tap Restaurant on Washington Street, however.

Pillsbury said walkers or cyclists can enter the boardwalk at Harbor Place, travel along the river and exit onto Merrimack Street then down Washington Street, passing by restaurants and shops before crossing the Comeau Bridge at the western end of downtown. The trek continues onto the rail trail, exiting at its eastern end onto the Basiliere Bridge and returning to Harbor Place.

Mayor James Fiorentini paused to view work in progress on the main plaza, which will have an expansive grassy area at the same level as the boardwalk. The mayor said he had hired a "peer reviewer" to look at the designs for the plaza, and that the only recommendation they made was to have wooden benches instead of metal for enhanced aesthetics.

"We also asked for a railing design that would not obstruct views of the river," Fiorentini said.

Fiorentini said that before Harbor Place was even a concept, a number of suggestions were made for the former Woolworth building site.

"Some wanted Mitchell's back," Fiorentini said about one of the popular department store that drew people from all around to Haverhill's downtown in the 1950s and into the 60s. "That's not a vision for today. The vision for today is not to recreate the 1950s, but do something entirely new. And it would not have happened without Brian Dempsey's help."

O'Rorke brought the group into the lobby of the Harbor Place commercial building, and pointed out an area on the wall where a time capsule will be placed. The capsule, which is intended to be opened in 25 years, contains a brick from the old Woolworth building, a 2016 Hillie T-shirt, photos of downtown White's Corner as it looks now and as it looked in 1892, letters written by students in Haverhill's Public Schools, a copy of the June 15, 2016, Eagle-Tribune with the front-page headline "Greetings, citizens of Haverhill 2041," a \$20 bill with the image of Andrew Jackson, a Market Basket receipt and several other items.

Merrimack Street Venture Properties, developer of the downtown Harbor Place project, and the Team Haverhill civic group organized the time capsule project that was proposed by O'Rorke.

O'Rorke is planning a "sneak peak" for the community on Sept. 23 at 1 p.m. She said construction at the site will be suspended for that hour so that visitors will not have to wear safety helmets.

"All are invited to attend and details will be announced shortly," O'Rorke said.

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