

Harbor Place, up close

By Mike LaBella Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, May 28, 2015 4:00 am

Editor's note: This special section focuses on the progress to be made in the eastern end of downtown through the Harbor Place project. It will bring in a UMass Lowell satellite campus, river boardwalk and courtyard, businesses and housing — all predicted to boost the economy.

Now this truly is progress.

For more than 40 years, the vacant Woolworth building haunted Haverhill, keeping the city from having an attractive gateway to the eastern end of downtown.

The building was so badly deteriorated that, at one point, pieces of it were falling to the ground and a large hole in the roof exposed the interior to the weather. Investors shied away from spending money in the area.

The haunting is over.

With this year's demolition of the Woolworth building, merchants and shoppers are bracing for a new economy in this end of downtown. The Harbor Place development is on the way — with a UMass Lowell satellite campus, businesses, a riverfront courtyard and boardwalk, and many more features.

Other buildings in the eastern end of downtown have also been demolished to make way for new housing and shops. And the state plans to help Haverhill target other locations in and around the downtown that can be rebuilt to generate more business and jobs.

The state is calling the project a model for a partnership of public and private money. It is generating excitement among downtown merchants and other locals who look forward to a busy eastern end of downtown.

How it all began

State Rep. Brian Dempsey, D-Haverhill and chairman of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee, has been credited with using his political influence to bring millions of dollars in state



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File photo A proud Brian Dempsey shows off an artist's rendition of the Harbor Place project.

money to Haverhill for the Harbor Place project, and for convincing UMass Lowell to be part of the complex.

Dempsey explained that the seeds of the project were planted three years ago when Robert Caret was hired as president of UMass and talked about having satellite campuses in the state.

"He came into my office one day to introduce himself and, after he mentioned his idea for satellite campuses, I offered Haverhill as a potential location," Dempsey said.

Dempsey said he reached out to Greater Haverhill Foundation members Ronald Trombley and Sally Cerasuolo-O'Rorke to discuss what their plans were for the Woolworth building, which the foundation had purchased.

"I talked about it as a possible site for a UMass Lowell satellite campus and I also spoke to UMass Chancellor Marty Meehan at the time," Dempsey said.

"At that time, the foundation said they'd begun talks with the Planning Office of Urban Affairs to utilize the Woolworth building and five adjacent parcels for a larger development, which was the beginning of it," Dempsey said. "We talked about incorporating UMass into the project.

"We coupled that with the vision for downtown Haverhill, in which we'd been talking about a new boardwalk, more open space, having a higher education institution there and other things," he said.

From talk to reality

Dempsey said the conversation then shifted to money and how much would be needed to make the project a reality.

"The work began in convincing Gov. Patrick's administration that the project would be transformative for Haverhill and that it warranted state funding," he said. "It was important to convince Patrick's administration to provide funding, and convince UMass to come here.

"All of those pieces were important to bring it together, but I can't stress the importance of the partnership between the foundation and Planning Office and their willingness to commit resources from the private sector," he said. "Without that commitment, the project would not happen. And we joined together as a team to make it a reality, along with the city's efforts."

Dempsey was able to secure more than \$20 million through MassWorks and other state sources for the project's infrastructure, along with resources in the state budget obtained through the legislative process.

"This is a project that will help move Haverhill forward," Dempsey said. "As you look around the state at state funding, there are programs such as MassWorks that are put in place for the purpose of helping communities transform their downtowns in particular."

Dempsey said Gov. Charlie Baker's administration is very supportive of Harbor Place, and sees it as a catalyst for other development downtown.

"The governor's new team, including Secretary (of Housing and Economic Development) Jay Ash are enthusiastic about Haverhill and I hope to make the case for additional funding as we go forward," Dempsey said. "This project is a catalyst for other opportunities to occur, not only downtown, but on the Bradford side. I think you'll see an enhanced use of the river as well, particularly with the boardwalk, which should stimulate activity on the river.

"I think Harbor Place will bring a lot of life to that area of Merrimack Street," he said. "With UMass Lowell students coming and going, a residential component and various commercial uses, it will be a very important project for the city."