

FEATURED

Harbor Place boardwalk impresses first guests

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Tim Jean

Business owners and locals came out to take a walk of the new Harbor Place boardwalk. The official opening of the boardwalk will be after Harbor Place is completed at the end of the year. The boardwalk runs along Merrimack Street from the bridge to Haverhill Bank. TIM JEAN/Staff photo

HAVERHILL — More than 200 people took a stroll along the new Harbor Place boardwalk on Friday when the project's developers hosted a sneak peak before the official opening at the end of the year.

The tour was led by state Rep. Brian Dempsey, Mayor James Fiorentini and representatives from Merrimack Street Ventures, a partnership of the Greater Haverhill Foundation and the Planning Office for Urban Affairs that is building Harbor Place.

The 15-foot wide, 650-foot long boardwalk sits atop the floodwall protecting the downtown and runs along Merrimack Street from the Basiliere Bridge and connects to the roughly 150-foot long boardwalk behind Haverhill Bank.

Shortly before the 1 p.m. start of the tour a huge crowd gathered just outside the main entrance to the Harbor Place commercial building. From local business owners to Haverhill residents to city and state officials, the tour attracted people of various backgrounds.

Jackie Martini, 25, owner of Lioness Boutique on Wingate Street recently celebrated one year in business and was drawn to the Harbor Place event.

"I wanted to learn more about what is happening in Haverhill's downtown," Martini said. "This should bring a lot of new people and a lot of good things to Haverhill."

Pastor Donna Collins of Phoenix Rising United Church of Christ, which recently opened at 192 Merrimack St. in the former Garand's Discount building, sees parallels between her church and Harbor Place rising at the site of the former Woolworth building, which she says many people hoped could be saved.

"You can't live in the past," Collins said. "You have to make history, which this transformative project is doing. It really is changing the face of Haverhill and breaks the moniker that hung over the city after urban renewal."

As the crowd began its walk along the boardwalk, an airplane that circled above towed a banner that read, "Happy Birthday Brian and Sally."

Dempsey had a huge smile on his face as he looked up.

"It's a very nice surprise," said Dempsey, who turns 50 on Sept. 30.

Sally O'Rorke, a member of the Greater Haverhill Foundation, turns 60 on Saturday.

When asked if she arranged for the banner, O'Rorke just smiled.

Dempsey, who helped cut the ribbon to officially open the boardwalk, said the Harbor Place project has been a long time coming.

“You can feel the excitement and optimism at such a development,” said Dempsey, who helped obtain \$36 million in various forms of state funding to assist in the \$70 million Harbor Place project. “Having UMass Lowell as part of Harbor Place really brought things together and allowed us to attract other tenants.”

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 was recently purchased by the foundation and a local investor and 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.

Rocky Hebert, whose family operates Haverhill Downtown Boxing on Orchard Street, was surprised at the size of the boardwalk and the views it affords to the Bradford side of the river as well as views upstream and downstream.

“It’s really beautiful,” Hebert said.

State Rep. Diana DiZoglio called views from the boardwalk “breathtaking.”

“None of this would have been possible without the leadership of Chairman Dempsey,” DiZoglio said. “Haverhill is blessed to have him fighting on its behalf and I’m humbled to be part of the city’s legislative team. I encourage all Merrimack Valley residents to pay Harbor Place a visit.”

Downtown resident Francis Bevilacqua III, 37, owner of Fortis Construction of Haverhill, said the Harbor Place project “legitimizes” the downtown.

“The size and scope of the project is a cornerstone and I really like that they are making a walking loop connecting both bridges,” Bevilacqua said. “It will tie everything to the waterfront, which should be the focus.”

William Pillsbury, the city’s economic and development director, said the new boardwalk is a “tremendous addition” to the city and will help accomplish the dream of a more than one-mile walking loop that includes the Bradford Rail Trail, which is currently under construction.

After many visits to the Harbor Place construction site to see the progress being made, retired union electrician David Bird, 67, of Bradford said he was excited to see how the boardwalk turned out.

“This project is going to bring people to Haverhill, it will help our tax base and it’s nice that we’ll have UMass Lowell here, although I’m a die-hard fan of Merrimack College hockey,” said Bird, who served with the Navy’s Seabees in Vietnam.

State Rep. Linda Dean Campbell looked out at the river, which she says is one of the city’s most important assets, and just took in the expansive view.

“I congratulate all of the people involved in this project as it will change the city and bring people downtown,” Campbell said.

Calling the boardwalk “broad and beautiful,” State Sen. Kathleen O’Connor Ives, who is soon due to give birth to her first child, said Haverhill residents and visitors to the city are going to “love” the boardwalk.

“From this sneak peek, I was impressed with the different generations of people who showed up today,” she said. “We have a cross section of residents who are experiencing being on the river.”

Organizers of the tour said Haverhill is on the move as a “gateway” city taking full advantage of its distinctive assets, including educational and cultural institutions, and, historic buildings for economic growth. They noted Harbor Place is one of the largest projects launched in the Merrimack Valley in decades and is a transformative investment for Haverhill.

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