

Harbor Place 'sold out' as downtown rebirth continues

By Mike LaBella mlabella@eagletribune.com | Posted: Saturday, May 16, 2015 12:25 am

HAVERTHILL — The Harbor Place project is “sold out” — and that’s good news as the eastern end of downtown braces for a comeback, local leaders said.

They said all spaces of the commercial project planned for the site of the former Woolworth building have been sold or leased.

They also said the downtown comeback will have plenty of support as it spreads down Merrimack Street toward Washington Square. The state is providing Haverhill with two experts to help existing businesses grow and recruit new businesses to the area.

Those announcements were made Friday at a gathering in the Pentucket Bank community room across from the Harbor Place construction site.

Local and state officials, along with representatives from the two agencies that partnered to build Harbor Place, celebrated the signing of lease and purchase-and-sale agreements for spaces.

They said every floor of the five-story building now has an owner or tenant. A second announcement was made concerning expert economic development assistance being provided to the city at no cost. Consultants Peter Abair and Brian Groth will help the city craft an economic development master plan.

Abair, director of economic development and global affairs for the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council, provides consulting services to companies looking to locate to or grow in Massachusetts.

Groth is a project manager and designer from Portsmouth. Officials said his creative vision, analytical skills, and public outreach experience are assets he brings to the Haverhill Partnership that will allow him to play the lead role in implementing a strategic plan for Haverhill.

City Economic Development Director William Pillsbury said Abair and Groth, in addition to Noah Koretz, an economic development expert who was recently provided to the city at no cost by MassDevelopment, will form a new team to assist the city in its efforts to grow existing businesses



Harbor Place

Rep. Brian S. Dempsey, chairman of the Mass. House Committee on Ways and Means, speaks during about the Harbor Place development in downtown Haverhill.

and recruit new ones. Koretz will work in Haverhill for the next three years, helping revitalize the city's Merrimack Street district.

"It's like drafting three first-round draft picks for the city's economic development team, which up to this point has been me," Pillsbury said. "These are important resources we've never had before."

At Friday's meeting, project leaders talked about the companies and organizations that will take spaces at Harbor Place.

HC Media plans to occupy the first floor. UMass Lowell will have a satellite campus on the second and third floors. Pentucket Bank will occupy the fourth floor and the fifth or "penthouse" floor now has an owner.

Lisa Alberghini, president of the Planning Office for Urban Affairs, said local CPA Randall Bennett, in partnership with the Greater Haverhill Foundation, purchased the top floor. Bennett, a member of the foundation, said the intent is to find a suitable user in the future.

"We hope to find the right tenant or purchaser as this is the premiere office spot in Haverhill," Bennett said.

The \$70 million Merrimack Street Ventures 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 Boston Catholic Archdiocese.

The first phase of the Harbor Place project is a five-story commercial building where the former Woolworth building stood vacant for more than 40 years. It will be followed closely by construction of a neighboring six-story building to include 50 units of workforce housing, 30 units of market-rate housing, and first-floor retail shops and restaurants.

Mayor James Fiorentini told the crowd on Friday that for years people had made suggestions for reuse of the old Woolworth, including as a church and an antiques store.

He said it took the vision of the Haverhill Foundation to buy the building. He said that led to a partnership with the Planning Office for Urban Affairs, which in 2010 converted the old Hayes factory building on Granite Street near the downtown train station to 57 one- and two-bedroom apartments.

Florentini noted the efforts of state Rep. Brian Dempsey, chairman of the powerful House Committee on Ways and Means who has been credited with using his political influence to bring millions of dollars in state money to Haverhill for the Harbor Place project, and for convincing UMass Lowell to be part of the complex.

Dempsey said that in addition to the Foundation and Planning Office, there were many others who

supported the project, including Haverhill's legislative team of state Reps. Diana DiZoglio and Linda Dean Campell, and state Sen. Kathleen O'Connor Ives, as well as city officials including the mayor, City Council, school officials and representatives from other city departments.

Alberghini said the gathering was a celebration of partnerships and called Harbor Place a "truly transformative development that will change the face of Haverhill forever." Officials said the project will also serve as a catalyst for future, additional development in the area.

"The presence of the university will bring dramatic change to downtown Haverhill," Alberghini said of the UMass satellite campus.

Joanne Yestramski, vice chancellor of finance and operations for UMass Lowell, said the school is looking to expand its "2 and 2" program with Northern Essex Community College. She said UMass Lowell already has a satellite program at Northern Essex and that it is looking forward to the expanded space offered by Harbor Place to house bachelor degree programs such as psychology, business administration and criminal justice.

"NECC sends more of its graduates to UMass Lowell than any other school," Yestramski said.

In a dramatic presentation created by foundation member Sally O'Rorke, buyers and tenants, along with many of the people who made Harbor Place possible, were called to the front of the room and handed giant puzzle pieces, which they placed on a large poster board.

Among those who assembled the puzzle displaying an image of a completed Harbor Place were Matt Belfiore of HC Media, Scott Cote of Pentucket Bank, Thomas Mortimer of Haverhill Bank, Yestramski, Bennett, Dempsey, Fiorentini and Dorene Conlon of Bank of America.

The first piece of the puzzle was set in place by foundation members O'Rorke and Ronald Trombley in recognition of the foundation having purchased the key Woolworth building property in 2005.

Pamela Goldberg, CEO of Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, a public agency that works to support a vibrant, growing economy across the state, announced a new Haverhill Partnership in which the city will be provided with the two experts in helping existing businesses grow and recruiting new innovation businesses.