

Harbor Place shrugs off weather

By Mike LaBella Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, December 24, 2015 4:00 am

Old Man Winter, whether he brings extreme cold or heavy snow, will not stand in the way of the Harbor Place project progressing during the next few months.

The main Harbor Place commercial building has an external wrapping that allows crews to continue working inside the structure during the winter. The steel framework of the second building in the downtown complex is also being constructed.

The continued progress has downtown merchants excited and expecting the project to be completed on time and open in mid-2016.

"People are excited that the project is moving along so quickly," said City Councilor Melinda Barrett, who owns and operates Barrett's Specialty Foods on Merrimack Street. "Everyone is hopeful for the future of the project and its impact on this part of the downtown."

The Harbor Place project will bring a UMass Lowell satellite campus, housing units and businesses to the eastern end of downtown.

Barrett said she is eager to see the project completed because it will bring students, residents and others to the downtown in the wake of the loss of two businesses that recently left.

Lahey Health Behavioral Services vacated the building at 60 Merrimack St. recently. A debt collection business that operated out of the Landmark Building at 80 Merrimack St. shut its doors in late summer, resulting in the loss of more than 60 jobs.

"I lost a few hundred customers so we're hoping things will improve when Harbor Place opens," Barrett said, noting that other downtown businesses also lost customers when the two businesses moved out.

William Pillsbury, the city's director of economic development and planning, said workers recently wrapped the five-story Harbor Place with a material that allows them to continue to work as the weather gets colder and winter conditions arrive.

Inside the wrap is ongoing construction of the building structure in preparation for windows, siding and other parts of the project, he said.

"All elements of exterior structure will then move to interior construction," Pillsbury said.

Water and sewer work continues to take place at night to minimize traffic disruptions and is almost complete, Pillsbury said. Connection of water and sewer lines to the buildings has been taking place,

he said.

"Overall, the project is proceeding on schedule and on budget," Pillsbury said.

Pillsbury said the goal is to open the five-story Harbor Place commercial building, which will include the satellite campus for UMass Lowell, to tenants for the completion of their interior work in June of 2016. Students could be taking classes as early as the fall of 2016 or in January of 2017.

The Harbor Place commercial building being constructed at the site of the former Woolworth building at the eastern gateway to downtown will have HC Media taking up a portion of the first floor, the UMass campus on the second and third floors, and Pentucket Bank on the fourth floor. Discussions with prospective tenants for the fifth floor are in progress.

Pillsbury said the same construction activity is taking place at the adjacent residential/commercial building.

"That is also proceeding on schedule," he said.

The neighboring six-story building, referred to as the Merrimack Street building, and its connected riverfront wing are expected to be available in the fall of 2016, with the first-floor restaurant/retail space to be made available first, followed by the opening in late fall of apartments.

A plaza and two other public entrance points will provide public access to the river. The six-story residential/commercial building will include 80 housing units and first-floor retail shops and restaurants.

People will begin moving into the project's new housing units and shopping at its retail stores. The public will begin using the boardwalk along the river.

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.

Lahey Director of Communications Áine Greaney Ellrott said Lahey left the three-story building at 60 Merrimack St. to accommodate the development plans of Harbor Place.

Ellrot said that Lahey ran three programs at 60 Merrimack St.: An outpatient counseling clinic; an adult day treatment program and an office headquarters for Lahey's emergency psychiatric mobile teams.

One those programs, Lahey's Adult Day Treatment, moved to 76 Merrimack St., Suite 5, and has seven staff members.

Ellrot said Emergency Psychiatric mobile teams continue to work in Greater Haverhill, with offices

at 233 Lincoln Ave.

"They are a team of mobile crisis counselors who work out in the community and in local hospital ERs," Ellrot said.

Ellrot said 1,800 active patients were transferred either to Lahey's Lawrence and Beverly clinics or to other local (non-Lahey) mental health providers — depending on the patients' needs or preferences.

She said most of Lahey's 74 outpatient staff chose to stay with Lahey, while 20 percent decided to retire or chose to not apply for other positions.

Outreach staff transferred to Lahey's long-term location at 6 Concordia Drive, where extra space was available.

Ellrot said all phone numbers for the moved programs remain the same as they were.

Stacy Bruzzese, CEO of the Greater Haverhill Chamber of Commerce, said while the Lahey Clinic vacating the building may be negative for patients and employees in the short term, it could potentially pan out in a business sense for the eastern end of downtown.

"It can be a positive in the long term," she said. "With the development of Harbor Place next door ... I know from experience that when communities start to redevelop, you get a whole new energy in the area."