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## Haverhill has new downtown target

Will use \$9M from state to lure mix of residents, business

By Mike LaBella [mlabella@eagletribune.com](mailto:mlabella@eagletribune.com) Nov 14, 2016



HAVERTHILL — With \$9 million announced by the governor for Haverhill's downtown Merrimack Street last week, city officials are looking to build on the progress that began with the construction of Harbor Place.

William Pillsbury, the city's economic development and planning director, said Haverhill's plan for Merrimack Street is to create a diversified economy to include retail, offices and housing in that eastern section of downtown.

"We want to continue to provide for things such as an expansion of the (river) boardwalk and look at providing additional infrastructure such as parking to support housing, retail shops and commercial space," Pillsbury said. "To do that, you need to provide additional infrastructure, which could also include roadway improvements, boardwalks, lighting, benches, trees and security cameras."

He said the idea is to build off the investment being made in Harbor Place, which has a new boardwalk in addition to the previously existing boardwalk behind Haverhill Bank on Merrimack Street.

Phase 1 of Harbor Place, a partnership of private developers and the state, is a newly constructed building on the site of the old Woolworth building at the eastern end of Merrimack Street. That building will house a UMass Lowell satellite campus and a variety of business offices. Phase 2 of Harbor Place will include a mixed use of residential and commercial spaces, with parking.

"What you're seeing in society is a bit of a shift ... a desire among people interested in living in a downtown setting that is accessible by mass transportation such as the train, and has a support structure of stores and restaurants," Pillsbury said. "It's true in other areas as well. There is a move towards a more transit-oriented population."

### **People moving downtown is key**

Pillsbury said one of the fundamental things Haverhill has done is reintroduce residents to the downtown — "people with disposable income who can use stores and restaurants," he said.

"Ten years ago, we didn't have the downtown living spaces we have now," Pillsbury said.

The move toward drawing residents downtown began in the western end, which had several old shoe factories that were vacant. The city convinced developers to take over the buildings and convert them to hundreds of apartments and condos. That brought a new residential population to the city center — people who walk from their homes to restaurants, lounges and other businesses, and spend money.

Now the target is Merrimack Street in the eastern downtown. Existing businesses there such as the A1 Deli, Barrett's Specialty Foods and Haverhill Beef company are expected to benefit from the addition of housing units and new businesses.

"We've had great conversations about tying the Landmark Building into the boardwalk, and we'd love to see more of this form of existing building owners looking to tie into what we are doing," Pillsbury said. "I think Merrimack Street will look very different in the future and the \$9 million will help prepare for its continued transformation."

The Landmark Building on Merrimack Street contains a variety of businesses and offices.

**'It's a gem of an area'**

Local Attorney Scott Gleason and his brothers Sean and Thomas Gleason own a large office building farther down Merrimack Street. Scott Gleason said he is looking forward to continued growth, development and investment in Merrimack Street by "legitimate future-thinking business people and community leaders."

"It's a gem of an area and, as the city's population has grown based on outstanding state and local leadership, Merrimack Street offers a wonderful alternative for a city accessible by rail," he said, "and you have far less expensive property on the river."

Gleason said the growing popularity of Merrimack Street has translated into an offer from someone to purchase his building.

"I have been approached to sell," said Gleason, who would not elaborate on any plans a potential buyer might have.

"Our only plan is to be the hardest-working law firm we can be," he said. "I think there's obviously a lot of people who have done a wonderful job bringing excitement and development to the downtown, and I'm very excited about that. State Rep. Brian Dempsey and Mayor James Fiorentini have done a wonderful job with everything."

City Councilor Melinda Barrett, owner of Barrett's Specialty Foods at 103 Merrimack St., envisions a Merrimack Street with an 18-hour economy.

"Right now at 5 p.m. there's nothing going on, while Washington Street (in western downtown) is really hopping," Barrett said. "UMass Lowell (the satellite campus at Harbor Place) will contribute to an 18-hour economy as I assume they'll have classes day and night."

"I'd love to see more office space, and I've heard rumors that Sal Lupoli's project might include office space or possibly something with an education component and a restaurant," she said of the plan by the builder of the Sal's Pizza empire to put a restaurant in eastern downtown. "More restaurants bring more people. And some businesses might want to be downtown instead of in an industrial park, whether it's light manufacturing or something else."

"I think the \$9 million (state grant) is a first step, but there has to be private money, too," Barrett said. "So if that state funding helps bring in that private money, it will be a good thing."

City Councilor Thomas Sullivan is a local attorney whose office is on the second floor of the Landmark Building. He said he'd like to see a mix of residential on the upper levels and commercial on the lower levels of new projects he hopes will replace old buildings on the river side of Merrimack Street.

"Most of the buildings are just waiting for the right buyers to come along and transform each site," Sullivan said. "More residential would be a great thing for the downtown as a lot of our young people don't necessarily want to buy single-family homes and would rather be in an urban center, a downtown area where they are close to restaurants, coffee shops, retail stores and the train — which is vitally important to future growth."

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