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River City Renaissance

By SUZANNE DEWITT | Published: APRIL 25, 2014



Haverhill's Harbor Place Project Casts A Vision of Vibrant Life Along The Merrimack

Downtown Haverhill used to be a bustling place; people reminisce about Woolworth's soda fountain and the whooshing pneumatic tubes in Mitchell's department store. Those days are long gone. Woolworth's has been closed for twice as long as it was open, and the east end of Merrimack Street has become a place to avoid. But that is about to change.

Imagine a day spent cruising the Merrimack, starting with breakfast in Newburyport and ending with dinner and music in Haverhill while overlooking the reflection of romantic gaslights on the sparkling water. Picture a sunny day of shopping, with children laughing as they wave at boaters drifting by. Envision a waterfront lifestyle with snow shovel-free, underground parking and soaring property values. Contemplate strolling down a boardwalk and art-enhanced rail trail, crossing two bridges along the way.

If you can imagine all this, you have caught the vision of a new Haverhill, beginning with two multiuse buildings that will replace the abandoned Woolworth's property and adjacent empty structures. Harbor Place will be filled with apartments, shops, offices, and restaurants, and its tenants will include UMass Lowell.

The project, set to begin this year, is a joint venture of the Greater Haverhill Foundation (GHF) and the Planning Office for Urban Affairs in Boston (POUA). Lisa Alberghini, president of the POUA, says, "We've got two nonprofits doing the right thing for the right reasons. No one's out to line their pockets. We are creating a place where people can live, work, learn and recreate. Given what people have been looking at for the last 45 years, they are very excited."

The power behind the project is the river. "In my youth, this was an open sewer. It was 'what color dye is running today?' In August you would have a fish kill and you'd wait for the tide to wash them out to the ocean. There was no reason to want to face the river," recalls Ronald Trombley, managing director of the Greater Haverhill Foundation. The shoe industry no longer befouls the water, but the old building designs simply don't foster an enjoyment of the waterfront. Scott Cote, president and CEO of Pentucket Bank and president of the Greater Haverhill Foundation, says, "People want to see the city revitalized, they want to see the river opened up."

As Alberghini puts it: "Nobody uses the river here. It's just crazy."

But that's not how it's always been. In the 1800s, Haverhill was a port. Three of its sea captains traded in the West Indies, and lumber came on schooners from Maine. "It's not a coincidence that this is being

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The commercial building on the corner of Merrimack and Main will contain a mix of businesses including shops, the UMass Lowell Haverhill satellite campus, and a first-floor restaurant with glass walls overlooking the river. For 70 years, a flood wall behind the existing buildings prevented access to the river's edge. In contrast, Harbor Place will be constructed at the height of the wall, and will include a public waterfront plaza with three wide, inviting corridors for pedestrian access to a new boardwalk. Renderings courtesy The Architectural Team.

called Harbor Place," Trombley says. "Haverhill was a port city, and it forgot itself. We're just reclaiming what it was."

A major element of the project will be the construction of pedestrian walkways on both sides of the river between the Comeau Bridge and the Basiliere Bridge "For years, people have been talking about building a boardwalk, but a boardwalk to what?" Trombley asks. "To build it in a vacuum didn't make any sense."

The project "opens up the other side of the river, as well," Cote says, commenting about the rail trail art walk project to be begun in 2015. "There are going to be commissioned artists to build key structures, and new lighting."

Alberghini continues: "For the last 70 years, there was no public access to the river. Now there will be a plaza with three beautiful access ways."

The promise of a waterfront lifestyle is compelling.



Harbor Place will be the last navigable stop for large recreational boats coming up the Merrimack River. The Basiliere Bridge will invite boaters into the harbor, its gaslight-style street lamps evoking the romance of Paris and Québec. Each apartment in the brick

Riverfront residential building will have a balcony and windows overlooking the resurrected harbor and adjacent river vistas.

"People my age are saying, 'Do I really need a house with all this space anymore?'" Trombley says. "But you don't want to move to a smaller house in a subdivision; there's nothing going on. Here, you could have an underground garage and a boat out front. You could leave your condominium, spend the day at Salisbury Beach, go across and have dinner in Newburyport or Amesbury. Not a bad life."

It's easy to see how people might be tempted by this vision of la dolce vita. "If I'm of that mindset, I'd better move fast before I get priced out," Trombley warns.

Cote agrees, saying, "When you build this, you will have [home owners and business people] reinvesting in their property. It will be a huge growth initiative for the city."

For some, the loss of the Woolworth building will be a sad moment. Alberghini says the iconic soda fountain is being donated to the Haverhill Historical Society. "We'll keep what we can and honor the legacy of the building and the historicity of the site," she says.

Then, Harbor Place should become a source of new memories in a revitalized and vibrant city, thanks to the efforts of nonprofit organizations, private institutions, and government agencies all working together to create a vision of beauty and prosperity from the dirt and ashes of neglect.



Editor's Note: For more on Haverhill's Renaissance, read our special section inside the May/June issue of Merrimack Valley Magazine.

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