

## What's in a name?

By Mike LaBella Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, January 21, 2016 12:39 pm

With a name like Harbor Place, you'd expect it to have some connection to water.

So it's no surprise that the downtown's biggest developments in decades is situated on the banks of the Merrimack River, close to where sailing ships were built more than a century ago and where, in later years, steamships packed with passengers traveled back and forth between Haverhill and Salisbury's beachfront rocks.

The \$70 million Harbor Place development, which is being built almost exactly where the city's shipyards existed, will feature a satellite campus for UMass Lowell, plus businesses and housing.

William Pillsbury, economic development director for the city, said construction of Harbor Place will be completed this year.

"The exciting and transformative Harbor Place project is proceeding right on schedule," Pillsbury said. "First, the steel began to rise out of the remains of the former Woolworth building and utility work was installed. Today, the entire structure is framed and the interior is beginning to take shape. Soon the building will be fully enclosed and the windows overlooking the beautiful Merrimack River will be in place."

Harbor Place is designed to boost the eastern end of downtown the way that hundreds of new housing units in old vacant shoe factories have helped the western end of downtown in recent years. That housing, plus a new parking garage and a popular restaurant district, have brought a new energy and economic boost to western downtown.

"For many years, we've tried to highlight the water," Mayor James Fiorentini said. "It's the centerpiece at that end of town and it is the main entryway into downtown."

Fiorentini said as many as 10,000 people a day drive by this area and will see Harbor Place. He said it has the dual advantage of being on the water, which highlights the riverfront, and also puts to use this historic property that went unused for decades when it was occupied by the vacant Woolworth building.



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AMANDA SABGA/Staff photo  
The Harbor Place project is enclosed in plastic to allow construction during the winter.

Pillsbury said all of the city's development efforts in this area seek to activate uses on the waterfront and return the waterfront to its prominent place in the city's history.

Harbor Place is being built on the site of the former Woolworth building, which opened in 1949 and closed in 1970.

"We will see in the Harbor Place project and several others that will commence ... the negative impact of the flawed urban renewal projects of the 1960s reversed," he said.

"The spaces leveled by urban renewal will be filled with the walkable, pedestrian-friendly, Merrimack River-focused development Haverhill has long desired and will now see," he said.

The 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 two groups have received millions of dollars in funding from the state with the help of Haverhill state Rep. Brian Dempsey.

The first phase of the project is a five-story commercial building where the former Woolworth building stood vacant for more than 40 years.

The steel frame of the building it up and work is happening within the structure, which will house HC Media on the first floor, the UMass Lowell satellite campus on the second and third floors, Pentucket Bank on the fourth floor and tenants yet to be chosen on the fifth floor. A plaza and two other public entrance points will provide public access to the river, where a boardwalk will be built.

That building 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. A boardwalk will be built along the river behind the development. Future plans may include a boat dock.

Haverhill has a rich shipbuilding history dating back to the 1600s, with most of the shipbuilding taking place on the river between Washington Square and where the Buttonwoods Museum is now located on Water Street.

Ships were also built in yards just downstream from the Groveland Bridge and in Rocks Village.

The bulk of shipbuilding activities in Haverhill ended in the early to mid-1800s.