

FEATURED

A whole new perspective

Harbor Place: Bradford's new view of downtown

By Mike LaBella Staff Writer 5 hrs ago



The downtown Harbor Place project, seen from the Bradford side of the Merrimack River. PAUL BILODEAU/Staff photo

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For decades, the view of eastern downtown from the Bradford side of the Merrimack River was anything but impressive.

The rear of old, deteriorated buildings hovered over the waterfront. The dominant image was of the old Woolworth building, which sat vacant for more than 40 years. Its condition showed that age.

But now the view from across the river is far different — and is catching the eyes of people who live and work in Bradford.

The Harbor Place project dominates the view, replacing the Woolworth and several other Merrimack Street buildings that have been demolished.

One Bradford business owner said he and his employees get better views of the project's construction than people on Merrimack Street right next to Harbor Place.

Patrick Lane, owner of Arthur Sharp Farm Supply and True Value Hardware on Middlesex Street in Bradford, said he and his employees have watched Harbor Place grow from the time the Woolworth building was demolished and the land was just a hole in the ground.

"We talk about it quite often as we can see it from our yard where we sell plants and gardening supplies," Lane said.

"We've been watching it daily, and since our bank is Pentucket Bank, it's easier for us to walk across the Basiliere Bridge than to drive."

On each of those walks, Lane can't help but notice how fast things are moving along.

"We've watched it expand and get bigger and nicer," he said about Harbor Place. "The new boardwalk is coming along nicely and is already within 10 feet of the existing boardwalk behind Haverhill Bank on Merrimack Street. It's fenced off, but you can see how close workers are to connecting the two boardwalks together."

Harbor Place is designed to boost the economy of eastern downtown. The project will have a UMass Lowell satellite campus, several businesses, dozens of apartments on upper floors, and the boardwalk and a courtyard for public access to the river. City officials said the project will serve as a catalyst for more redevelopment on Merrimack Street.

William Pillsbury, the city's economic development director, said the new 650-foot-long boardwalk runs along the top of the flood wall and will meet up with the existing boardwalk behind Haverhill Bank, allowing for a long stroll overlooking the river with views to the Bradford side.

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.

Lane said the courtyard that is taking shape between the two Harbor Place buildings is still a construction zone.

"You can tell it will be really nice and will face the river, so people there can see us," he said.

"We plan to put up a sign at the back of our building to invite people over," Lane said. "The back of my building is a huge mural for the rail trail. So the people sitting there sipping on an ice tea can see our mural and wonder what we have inside."

Lane was referring to a giant mural created in 2013 by students in an Access 21 program at Haverhill High School. The project combined community service, art and biology.

The students painted images of native plants such as sumac trees and cattails, as well as animals such as deer, foxes, coyotes, great blue herons, eagles, seagulls, geese, beavers, turtles and turkey vultures. The images were on large panels mounted on the back wall of the Arthur Sharp store, which abuts the Bradford Rail Trail. The mural is 80 feet long and 20 feet tall.

Lane said the exterior of the Harbor Place commercial building looks mostly done, and that work has been happening weekdays and Saturdays. He said the adjacent apartment building is moving along, and that windows are now being installed.

"It's amazing how fast they are building it," Lane said. "They are working like crazy to get it done."

Construction has necessitated closing a short section of Merrimack Street for one or two days a week during the past few months, although access to the parking deck and the Pentucket Bank drive-through has been available to drivers.

Pillsbury said the street closures are winding down as fewer heavy materials need to be lifted by a crane.

He said project continues to be on schedule and that crews continue to work on the exterior of the buildings as well as the boardwalk and public plaza, both of which will be at the edge of the river.

"The plaza and boardwalk should be completed within a month or so," he said. "Then the emphasis will move to the interior of the buildings."

Pillsbury said the goal is to open the Harbor Place commercial building to tenants for the completion of their interior work this summer. UMass Lowell students could be taking classes there as early as this fall or in January 2017.

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, with the first-floor restaurant/retail space to be made available first, followed by the opening in late fall of apartments.

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