

Connecticut Post

Bridgeport looking north for inspiration

Officials view turnaround in Lowell

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Sunday, October 24, 2004 -

Trendy shops, museums and restaurants now line the narrow, winding streets of Lowell, Mass., a one-time mill town nestled along the Merrimack and Concord rivers.

The sidewalks are busy, and traffic moves slowly between paved roads and cobblestone cross streets. Miles of canals that once powered huge textile mills are lined with walkways and apartments. A historic trolley provides cheap transportation to dozens of points of interest.

Along the edge of downtown, long-closed textile factories are transformed into pricey condos, some selling for upwards of \$1 million. An arts district features lofts and blocks of shops, crafts stores and other enticements for shoppers and browsers.

The Lowell of today is a stark contrast to what it was 25 years ago, when hulking factories sat vacant and the city of about 105,000, about 30 miles north of Boston, was widely written off as bleak and crumbling.

"We are proud of what's been done," said Kendall Wallace, publisher of the Lowell Sun, the city's daily newspaper.

"Going back 25 years, we were at the bottom. Unemployment was high and no one wanted to live here. The school system was really bad," Wallace recalled.

A delegation of business leaders and city officials from Bridgeport, Conn., toured Lowell last Thursday to see if the city's success at rebuilding offers lessons for Connecticut's largest city, where efforts to spark a similar revival have largely floundered over the last three decades.

The Bridgeport group also wanted to learn about a study recently completed by the Urban Land Institute, which helped Lowell prioritize its latest redevelopment push to transform the remaining factories into 2,000 new condos and apartments.

The ULI is being hired to conduct a similar study in Bridgeport, and is expected to start work in January.

"There are a lot of similarities with Bridgeport," said Michael Nidoh, a Bridgeport city planner who was among the group touring Lowell. "They have gone through what we are going through now."

Paul Timpanelli, president of the Bridgeport Regional Business Council, said the ULI study will aim to help Bridgeport determine if its downtown strategy

a planned mix of housing, office and retail space

is on the right track.

The \$100,000 cost of the study will be shared by the BRBC, local businesses and the city.

Lowell officials encouraged the Bridgeport group to work with the ULI, saying the process was helpful.

The study "validated what we were doing. That's important," said Jim Cook, executive director of Lowell Plan, a nonprofit corporation founded to guide redevelopment efforts.

Cook said that Lowell, four or five years ago, launched an innovative loan program for small businesses willing to locate downtown. The fund was created by nine banks, which initially offered \$1 million for loans.

The fund now tops \$3 million, and some 23 loans have been issued, with only two failures, Cook said.

"We needed to upgrade downtown. We have helped open restaurants, men's stores, gift shops, art galleries. We didn't want things you would see in a mall," he said.

The city also built a baseball stadium and sports arena in the late 1990s, at about the same time similar facilities were constructed in Bridgeport.

"We had to think outside the box and take a chance," said Bill Taupier, former Lowell city manager.

"It took courage. We took a chance on an arena and a baseball field. But more importantly, the us-versus-them mentality has shrunk. That was probably the most important thing to happen," Taupier said.

Today, affluent Boston residents are snapping up the new condos.

The city's efforts years ago to attract galleries and artists

a sort of So-Ho meets Greenwich Village theme

is now paying dividends, city officials said.

"To enhance the community, we created an artist district. We made that first building [lofts for artists] a test case. A Boston developer created over 50 units. From there, other buildings were attractive to us," said Matt Coggins, Lowell assistant city manager for planning and development

The small Bridgeport delegation, which included Ernest Trefz, owner of the Bridgeport downtown Holiday Inn; Philip Kuchma, a contractor who has a downtown Bridgeport redevelopment plan centered around an old movie theater, and Robert Laska, publisher of the Connecticut Post, agreed Lowell's record is impressive.

But several of the visitors pointed out that Lowell's downtown, with its former factories, larger footprint, tightly woven streets and proximity to Boston, offer more to work with than is available in Bridgeport.

They also said that Lowell's former textile mills, unlike the vacant heavy-industry factories in Bridgeport, were left relatively clean of environmental contamination, which meant they were easier to redevelop.

Still, the group acknowledged there are similarities between the former manufacturing hubs.

Lowell began its downtown rebuilding efforts with new housing for artists, and Bridgeport officials are eagerly awaiting the debut of a similar venture, with artist lofts nearing completion in the former Read's department store.

"Lowell has been at it about 25 years. Hopefully, we will get there too," Timpanelli said.

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