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ULI report rips Bridgeport, offers solutions

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BRIDGEPORT — The city has a legacy of unethical practices, a closed-shop mentality and an ethics problem.

There is no overall vision and the master plan does not agree with zoning code. Schools are in poor shape, there is a lack of housing, property taxes are too high, economic development agencies are redundant and the city has a poor relationship with the state.

While most of those criticisms are probably not news for anyone familiar with the state's largest city, they represent the main findings of a national consultant group, which recently studied the community.

The Urban Land Institute's 113-page report offers a wide range of advice on how to solve those problems, along with dozens of suggestions about how to revitalize Bridgeport.

The report, in essence, is a starting point for discussion about the future.

"It was a worthwhile endeavor," said John Klein, president of People's Bank and chairman of the Bridgeport Economic Development Advisory Council. BEDAC was formed by the state during the corruption scandal that engulfed former Mayor Joseph P. Ganim to recommend projects worthy of state funding.

"There is a lot that can be useful that will come out of this. We need greater consolidation and efficiency in our economic development process. But change is always difficult," Klein said. That discussion will officially begin May 10 when a steering committee, assembled by Mayor John M. Fabrizi begins analyzing the report.

The committee will eventually become a larger Bridgeport Partnership, consisting of leaders from business, politics and other walks of life. Recommendations from the partnership will go to a Bridgeport Summit.

A leadership council, consisting of representatives from surrounding towns, is also recommended. Hartford and New Haven have similar structures to help hash out regional issues.

The ULI report is the result of a weeklong visit by a nine-member panel of experts in urban design, planning and other fields. The group interviewed some 250 people during the process.

Fabrizi has embraced the report, declaring it would be fully implemented before anything was put down in writing. But many of the recommendations — consolidating 11 separate development agencies and arriving at a vision for the future — will likely be controversial.

The central theme of the report is the city needs system-wide changes. ULI concluded the city must find new ways to approach redevelopment, abandon its "victim mentality," shore up ethical standards and move away from its long-held belief that Bridgeport will again be a manufacturing hub.

ULI urged the city to concentrate on retail, residential and office development. In some examples, officials are already doing that, as evidenced by plans to convert the former downtown Citytrust bank building, the Arcade Hotel and a building on Golden Hill Street into apartments, offices and stores.

But the report also advises the city to "back burner" much heralded plans to create an industrial park within the Remington Woods property, a project which has been trumpeted for years. It also recommends luxury housing within the former Remington plant on lower Main Street. That facility has been targeted for industrial development for years.

One suggestion, to convert Sikorsky Memorial Airport in Stratford into an office park, has already been discussed and rejected by the city, despite some support in Stratford.

ULI pulled no punches in its belief that the city must move away from manufacturing.

"The panel believes the effort to rebuild the declining manufacturing sector is the wrong path to take," ULI said.

While current manufacturing remains important to the city, ULI said prosperity can no longer be tied to industries like shipbuilding, metalworking and specialty equipment. Robert Christoph, president of RCI Marine, the city's Steel Point developer, agreed with the report's conclusions about the waterfront peninsula. ULI backed his approach to build a mix of residential housing, retail shops and offices on Steel Point.

But Christoph said he's seen similar studies in other communities, and they have produced mixed results. "It's a bunch of knowledgeable people taking hip shots without a lot of time. Some of the things mentioned are badly needed. The city is not tasked to get out front and know where they are going," Christoph said.

"There is too much finger pointing. Someone has to grab the ball and say this is where we are going. The mind set has to change," Christoph said.

He recalled efforts in Miami Beach to find a new direction. RCI developed a major marina and associated stores and housing in the community.

"Miami Beach thought it was a resort/convention city. But a lot of people were going to neat places. So it became a residential component of Miami. It took awhile to reinvent itself, and a phasing out of the old guard. It became a lifestyle community. Bridgeport may be beginning this process," Christoph said.

Not everyone, however agrees the ULI report is on target.

Robert Scinto, a major Shelton developer who owns one the largest office buildings in downtown Bridgeport, said the city should concentrate on manufacturing.

"Don't drop the manufacturing idea. Right now the state is not growing so why is there a need for new offices. Light manufacturing and high end buildings is what's needed," Scinto said.

"The [the ULI panel] probably all went to Harvard, and none of them have tried to rent a building. They don't know what they are talking about," Scinto said.

The city, Scinto said, must clean up its image and restore key areas, like northern downtown and the abandoned buildings along Interstate 95. "Tear them down and build new," Scinto said.

By contrast, ULI urged an "adaptive reuse" philosophy in which old buildings are restored and used for new purposes.

City Council member Robert Walsh, D-132nd, labeled the report "interesting.

"Implementing it is a whole different matter. Part of the city's problem is a parochial approach. All they will do is codify it by putting in the same people who run things now and nothing will be any different," Walsh said.

"I agree the city needs to change. Right now, if they can get an extra dime of revenue, then it's a good idea," Walsh said.

Hadley, the city's economic development director, agreed with most of the report.

"We are a dysfunctional family. The structures need to be more organized. They heard a disconnect. Is it manufacturing or a predominance of offices or a residential city or a destination city," Hadley said.

"It's like tuning an orchestra, but some are tuning to C, while others are tuning to B flat. We are not using all the strengths the city has. The victim mentality is so troubling," Hadley said

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