

In downtown Reading, a revival

With \$5.5m reconstruction project completed, area attracting new businesses



Many potential business owners passed over Reading the past few years, opting not to take the risk in opening up shop in one of the many vacant storefronts that dotted downtown.

“They just didn’t see Reading as a happening place,” said Town Manager Peter Hechenbleikner.

Now things are happening.

With the recent completion of a \$5.5 million downtown reconstruction project, Reading officials see the streetscape transformation as the crown jewel of what will come to be a more vibrant downtown.

Reading has already begun attracting new restaurants and shops as the town gears up for a Special Town Meeting later this year to consider new zoning that would allow for a mix of residences and businesses in the area.

The revitalization project was conceptualized 14 years ago by the town’s steering committee, said Hechenbleikner, and primarily consists of reconfigured streets, new pavement, curbs and sidewalks from Town Hall, down Main Street several blocks to Washington Street. It took nearly two years to complete, sometimes snarling traffic in the process.

Even before the construction was completed, a new Italian restaurant, Ristorante Pavarotti, opened on Main Street in anticipation of things to come. Opening some time this month is the town's only butchery, The Olde Redding Butcher Shoppe on Haven Street.

The construction sparked a rejuvenation of sorts for existing businesses, such as Walgreens and Danversbank, each of which did some primping and repainting. The Bank of America on Main Street made some renovations, while the neighboring family-owned restaurant, Christopher's, moved nearby and doubled its seating capacity. Owners Laurie and Bill Cushing are already enjoying a 30 percent increase in business at the expanded breakfast and lunch spot.

With the installation of granite posts at each intersection to identify crosswalks and lend protection for pedestrians, Hechenbleikner said all of downtown is safer for folks walking, which he predicts will increase foot traffic thus boosting local business. The majority of the funding is coming from the state's Mass Highway Department, while the town foots about \$500,000 of the bill.

The former downtown had some traffic issues, with one confusing intersection where three streets converged - Lowell, Main, and Hamden streets. A stoplight was removed and the flow of traffic reconfigured, Hechenbleikner said.

Keeping in line with the town's old New England facade, antique-style light posts and traffic lights were installed and stamped concrete pavers resembling cobblestones were used in two expanded parking lots on Main Street.

New saplings were added near Town Common, which as they grow will expand the span of trees strung with twinkling lights along Main Street during the winter holiday season.

In an effort to spur more community involvement, an "Adopt an Island" campaign was launched and four landscape islands were installed. Three local landscape companies and Reading Cable TV signed on to maintain the islands with plants and flowers.

The town's historical commission followed suit by raising funds to install 10 engraved granite pavers on either side of Main Street that each recall a specific local historical event. Commission members plan to embark Saturday on the first in a series of free walking tours elaborating on each event, said Kathryn Greenfield, chairwoman of the Reading Historical Commission.

Resident James Lynch bought 18-20 Woburn St. in the heart of downtown three years ago after a fire destroyed the building. His development plans were put on hold until now. He envisions a tavern or pub opening in a portion of the 10,000-square-foot property, with four retail outlets occupying the other units.

Gregory Chesnulovitch, who also lives in town and owns the new butcher shop, bought the Haven Street property shortly after the longtime Atlantic Food Mart closed just down the street. Chesnulovitch worked as a butcher at the former market for five years and saw this as an opportune time to open his own business.

"There's a feeling of neighborhood in Reading, and so many are looking forward to walking downtown to shop," he said.

At the site of the former Atlantic on 30 Haven St. a development is proposed that would have business and restaurant space on the lower level with three floors above for apartments; but for the project to go forward it would require Town Meeting adopt a mixed-use overlay district.

“If you took a sample vote right now, you’d see that it would pass overwhelmingly,” said Hechenbleikner.

Reading officials looked to other communities such as Melrose, Lexington, and Andover for ideas on downtown improvements, said Hechenbleikner. Andover is wrapping up its own downtown revitalization project, said Town Manager Reginald Stapczynski. That project spurred similar enthusiasm within the business community.

“It’s a well-established economic development fact that investing in the infrastructure of the downtown will lead to private owners investing in their own properties,” he said.■