

'Good things are happening' in downtown Norwich

Bond package still a necessity, mayor says

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Norwich, Conn. — Prominent business activities downtown are increasing as a Nov. 2 vote on municipal borrowing nears. Mayor Peter Nystrom says the government programs are needed to see the recovery to fruition.

The largest retail portion of the Wauregan Hotel has been taken over by a veteran restaurateur. The Social Security Administration is moving to new quarters in the Mercantile Exchange building. The long-dormant building at 34 Courthouse Square is abuzz with renovations. A beauty parlor called Loft Hair Skin Nails opened recently in a prominent spot overlooking Main Street. The number of ethnic restaurants continues to increase. The Harp & Dragon Pub has expanded and is scheduled to cut the ribbon on its new space this month.

"We're very excited about recent developments," said Bruce Becker, a Fairfield-based entrepreneur who owns the historic Wauregan Hotel and also redeveloped the property. "Some good things are happening."

Nov. 2 vote

City leaders, including Nystrom, want to boost downtown partly through a \$3.38 million bonding package set to go before voters next month. Rose City Renaissance, an agency that works to bolster downtown, laid off its director, its only full-time employee, in August. Yet the neighborhood appears to be righting itself without assistance, although several storefronts remain vacant.

"While I'm glad things are happening, I'd say mostly what we're seeing now is a shuffle," Nystrom said Wednesday. "I'm still advocating for the bonds."

Downtown will continue to underperform and remain an unfair burden on the city's taxpayers unless code enforcement problems that prevent occupation of many second-floor spaces are fixed through the bonding, Nystrom said.

"Without those spaces occupied, we're not maximizing downtown," he said.

Nystrom also views the bonding as a way to make Norwich less dependent on state aid.

A restaurant called the Mediterranean Express Cafe is scheduled to open as early as Nov. 1, said Mirjana Sorensen, the Wauregan Hotel's property manager. Sorensen declined to give the name of the new operator, but said he once owned the Villa Mediterranean at the Taste of Istanbul. Josh Varsen is the former owner of the Villa Mediterranean. His name is still on the door of the now-vacant space at 51 Broadway next door to Billy Wilson's Ageing Still. The Villa's sign is still there as well.

Varsen also owned the now-shuttered Castle Pizza on East Main Street. The new Mediterranean eatery is taking over from the Wauregan Cafe & Deli, which closed in July.

Mediterranean Express is taking a short-term lease with plans to go long term if the business proves popular, Sorensen said. Varsen declined to comment.

Offices to move

The Social Security Administration will move 15 to 20 workers from the Thames Plaza at 101 Water St. up the street to 55 Main St. some time during the first three months of next year, according to Beth Judd, president of leasing agent Konover Commercial Corp.

The administration has signed a lease to occupy 6,000 square feet at 55 Main, better known as The Mercantile Exchange building. Richard Reynolds, a Massachusetts-based manager at the U.S. General Services Administration, signed the lease. He did not return a call seeking comment.

With the new lease, The Mercantile Exchange is now 32 percent occupied, Judd said. The building is owned by Norwich Community Development Corp. and leased to the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, owner of Foxwoods Resort Casino and MGM Grand at Foxwoods, under a 20-year master lease. The building opened in 2004.

NCDC Executive Director Bob Mills couldn't be reached for comment.

Two of the tribe's departments are Mercantile Exchange tenants. Others include CME Associates, Loudon Legal Group and the State of Connecticut's Workers Compensation Commission.

"It took a while to get this lease, but we're really happy to have this new client," Judd said of the Social Security Administration.

Workers from LaBossiere Builders LLC, of Danielson, and David Electric Inc., of Pomfret, were busy this week inside the long-vacant 34 Courthouse Square. LaBossiere employees were installing first-floor interior partitions and carpets, while David electricians were adding new lights and switches.

LaBossiere representatives didn't return a call seeking comment on the latest developments.

The space at 100 Main St. now home to Loft Hair Skin Nails was vacant for three years, said Keri Manuel, co-owner of the beauty parlor. Manuel and her husband, Eric, are optimistic about a downtown revival.

“We think there’s a lot of potential here,” she said a few days before the shop’s Oct. 2 grand opening.

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