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Metro Hartford 2010: Planned and ready to go

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There is an old quote from Albert Einstein: "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." There is also an often repeated 2009 quote: "Survival is the new success," which may be partly the result of the first!

It is clear that we are now moving away from doing business as usual as we address our economic reset. While many of us have seen transactional real estate activity slowed, as an economic developer, we could not be busier. Business has been motivated to make some structural changes, however, we see continued due diligence activity while also waiting to hear those yet to be determined deployment dates. Our municipalities are taking positive steps to encourage development and there has been state legislation to encourage growth in targeted industries. Let me give you some examples of these trends:

Jonathan Wheeler of The Clarion Group has been in demand by senior leaders and leadership teams to help enable them to better understand their situation, options and co-creatively pave paths forward. He saw 2009 as a year of "contracting and resetting." "The fall focused [business] on how to grow based on the new economic realities and assumptions about the markets. These now smaller businesses are rethinking themselves and are in a reinvention phase of their business models, strategically looking at how markets are served, how they are organized and how leadership leads."

Barbara Hampton, founder of Jamestown Advisors, recently spoke before the Hartford Area Business Economists, bringing attention to the changing nature of work and its impact on workforce and workplace. To this point, there has been a lot of discussion about the move toward a more virtual/remote workforce, yet to date, we have not really felt an impact. As Barbara pointed out, there now appears to be a "perfect storm" of factors that will make a more virtual workforce more attractive and dramatic. Here in the Hartford region, we are seeing organizations planning and reducing their cost of operations and workforce support by 40% or more while creating workplace environments that are fostering measurable productivity and have attracted some of the best and brightest talent.

In response, our municipalities are recognizing that they need to attract the talent as well as the business with new emphasis on community and reviving its town centers. Even as the downturn began, rather than retrenching, the City of Manchester was forward thinking in its planning approach. In December 2008, the board of directors expanded Manchester's Redevelopment Agency to focus on the Broad St. commercial area. This section of the city has about one million s/f of commercial property with nearly one-fourth currently vacant. Last year, an \$8 million bond passed in every one of its ten districts, empowering the city to work with potential developers in transforming this vacant, privately owned, 300,000 s/f Broad St. Parkade into a relevant residential, mixed-use district. In addition, the city collaborated with the Council of Governments and EPA for a Smart

Growth Implementation Grant. As a result, Manchester is being recognized as a model for New England in redeveloping vacant shopping centers in a sustainable way.

The town of South Windsor is also diversifying and will soon be home to a new full service, state-of-the-art motion picture and production studio and mixed-use development. Looking ahead, the town has enacted a new film ordinance that will streamline the permitting and regulatory process. And not to stop there, following South Windsor's lead, the MetroHartford Alliance will be promoting the region-wide adoption of a uniform film industry process.

In November, AI Engineers, Inc., unveiled a final design for what is slated to be Hartford's first LEED Platinum building, the AI Tech Center. Demolition on the southeast corner of Constitution Plaza is nearly complete in preparation for this 12-story office building that will be located at the gateway to the city. Abul Islam, president and CEO and Michael Patenaude, general counsel for AI Engineers, have an article which follows and presents some tenant advantages for locating in a LEED property. State planning and legislation also has its eye on enhancing the environment for key sector expansion. With formal legislation enacted in early 2009, the "insurance capitol of the world" can now allow for captive insurance companies to be licensed and domiciled in Connecticut. Companies seeking an alternative risk approach to their insurance can capitalize on Connecticut's long history of insurance and its unparalleled workforce of actuaries, risk managers and underwriters, specifically in the Hartford region.

There is much more to tell and across most industries but to sum it up, Václav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic, said, "Vision is not enough; it must be combined with Venture. It is not enough to stare up the steps; we must step up the stairs." Well, I believe that the Hartford region has been visioning and venturing. We are planned and ready to go!

Sandra Johnson, EDP, is vice president and director of business development for the MetroHartford Alliance.