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Re-use of New Hampshire's downtown buildings will create economic sustainability

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Central business districts of all sizes, statewide, are working to bring businesses and people back "downtown." Based on the growing awareness of energy costs and the excessive use of new materials for construction, the redevelopment and use of already in-place facilities and buildings is making this effort a little easier.

The majority of N.H. downtowns were created because they were the most convenient and central area for trading goods and services for the rural community. Combine this natural central area, with the fact that most downtowns were located where "cheap" energy could be found by the use of hydropower from the rivers that run through them.

The construction of so many buildings in our downtowns for the purpose of producing products from the cheap energy 100 - 150 years ago, are today's inventory for a more sustainable economic future. Even better, many of these older buildings are being renovated and re-used by employing many sustainable and eco-friendly techniques.

In the last few decades, building or renovating green has evolved from an idealistic concept shared by a few developers to a mainstream phenomenon.

From my experience tenants are demanding energy efficient and sustainable facilities while property owners are focused on improving their buildings and standards being requested by the consumer.

Recently a 10,000 s/f sporting goods shop opened in a closed independent pharmacy building in Lebanon...but what is truly remarkable, the owner of the building has unilaterally agreed to re-façade the entire front of the building with an architecturally appropriate energy efficient window system.

It is simple to understand why downtowns have become so attractive for development in the context of the realities of our energy future. The re-use of existing structures, using less natural resources to building new, the convenience of a central location, employing the ability to use more public transportation and our enlightenment of new energy efficient building techniques all add up to a much reduced "carbon footprint" and a more sustainable economic future for N.H.

The goal is apparent for each community when asked about downtown redevelopment or re-use; it has to be a private/public partnership in most circumstances with a threefold goal; to achieve a most desirable urban village where residents and visitors can work, live and play, using less resources and energy.

Based on my local knowledge, a prime example of this type of development would be Dartmouth College's efforts in Hanover in the creation of the South Block. The development will create new in-town housing, retail and office space. The influx of new residents and businesses simply insures the continuing success of other businesses as well, with more customer base, but with less community impact.

Dover, once a thriving port town along the Cochecho River is currently going through a planning process to redevelop the river front, but at the same time reconnecting and utilizing the resources of the existing downtown. Because of this effort, the downtown has already started to experience a revitalization, evidenced by the location of the Children's Museum of N.H. into an existing 3 story downtown building. Based on reports, this new cultural downtown initiative will bring 100,000 visitors to downtown. You might only imagine what this type of opportunity the customer volume will provide for centralized downtown businesses.

In Durham another downtown planning effort is emerging. Durham is the recipient of a new planning process created by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) under their "Blue Print for America" development template.

The project will potentially redevelop a 10 acre site in downtown, replacing an inefficient aging strip center.

In Manchester, Eliot Health Systems will renovate and re-use the former JAC PAC facility just south of the CBD. This 226,000 s/f project could have been located on any other typical site associated with open field suburban development, but the downtown location was selected because of its central location, proximity to other downtown resources and the social consciousness in focusing in on less use of energy for traveling and an opportunity to employee sustainable building techniques to create an efficient operating future.

There are so many other examples of new development and activities in many N.H. downtowns, but the common thread to all new redevelopment and re-use in downtowns is to create an energy efficient way to sustain our society, while growing our economy at the same time.

Clearly, this was the intent and motive of our forefathers, before the suburbanization of our economy after WWII and cheap energy. Those days are in our rear mirror and we need to pay attention to the incredible opportunity and resources being offered in our downtowns. "What goes around, comes around" and that is a good thing for N.H. and its economy.

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