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The repurposing of existing buildings and infrastructures in New Hampshire to fit present economy - by Bruce Waters

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Bruce Waters, Lang McLaughry Commercial

New Hampshire has become an ultimate “recycler” by using existing building inventory in the continuing economic growth being witnessed. New Hampshire, being one of the smallest states in the Union, has limited real estate resources in terms of land mass and developable areas, especially when we cherish our “open spaces” and our “recreational needs” for our residents and visitors thus removing certain land areas from development.

The attitude in New Hampshire, where we “Live Free or Die,” is based on saving past history and repurposing our existing building inventory instead of simply building another “out of place” or new building in the “suburbs” or infrastructure deficient area.

As suggested by Meg White of Realtor.com, “Rather than building new, updating anything from defunct car dealerships to former box stores to underutilized industrial factories can make for a more authentic commercial district that better serves the people who live, work and play there.”

The repurposing of buildings is evidenced from Portsmouth to Keene to Manchester to Claremont and in the north-country in towns like Berlin, Littleton and Gorham. After a simple review of commercial property opportunities in New Hampshire, it is easy to identify from branch banks, stately residential structures, former mill buildings and vacant retail space for repurposing and renovating relative to more appropriate and new uses that fits our present economy, rather than using precious resources that may be better used in the future?

Based on my personal experience, I have been involved in the repurposing of many underutilized facilities, the most recent a 40,000 s/f former woolen mill in Lebanon, N.H. The facility is located in the Central Business District and within walking distance to restaurants, banks and other services, an element of importance when repurposing older facilities. When we first started, the facility had pigeons living in the 4th floor and the remaining levels were being underutilized by an obsolete industrial user. Today, based on the vision of the owner of the building and the obsolete business, the facility is the home for over 10 high tech companies and “new” economy users, with a total employment base of over 200 employees, all supporting the vitality of the downtown Central Business District.

If it was decided to build the same 40,000 s/f office building, as new, it would have had to be built in an “industrial park,” far away from commercial activity and attractive services for the employees. The “urban” environment for employees is very appealing and utilizes existing infrastructure. This example is easily identified in other areas such as Manchester, Concord, Rochester and Nashua to name a few.

Repurposing commercial property in New Hampshire is very attractive, but may not be as easy as building new, but there are ways to reduce costs besides attracting deep pocket tenants. Although

New Hampshire is not known for “big government,” there are certain strategies and programs that owners and developers have used for the repurposing of N.H. Properties that are granted historic status by the federal government are eligible for federal tax benefits including up to a 20% tax credit. The state, for their part, has designated over 189 “economic revitalization zones” throughout the state, providing tax credits for, in part, the repurposing of existing buildings and infrastructure to create jobs. Many buildings previously used for industrial, commercial or retail purpose have utilized this program and revitalized many areas by using existing resources.

The “grand daddy” of all New Hampshire repurposing facilities is the re-use of the former Pease Air Force Base, now known as Pease International. Pease International is now a prospering business and aviation industrial community covering 3,000+/- acres of world class office and industrial space. What was once a shuttered and underutilized former military base, has been repurposed as a juggernaut of economic vitality for the seacoast area of N.H., as well as for all of N.H. and New England.

As most experts suggest, “repurposing in New Hampshire” is experiencing a renaissance and as long as there are empty buildings, and attractive locations, adaptive re-use is going to continue in N.H. As they say, “The greenest building is the one that is already built, and adaptive re-use is good for our communities and cost effective.”

Bruce Waters, CCIM, is senior broker for Lang McLaughry Commercial, West Lebanon, N.H.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540