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Metro Hartford - Our lights are shining bright as the Hartford region continues to thrive - by Rebecca Nolan

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Rebecca Nolan, MetroHartford
Alliance and CEDAS

Recently, I was asked, “How much longer do you plan to stay in Connecticut? If you’re the last one out, make sure to turn off the lights.” That’s a tough question to swallow as someone who works in economic development. I am here to tell you not only is that the wrong question to ask, but that not only will the lights remain on, but they will shine brightly for generations.

Over the last 16 years the Hartford region has had a lot to celebrate. I say enough of the gloom and doom and let’s celebrate our many victories as a region and state. It’s not my imagination. I’ve witnessed significant change in greater Hartford. Naysayers would have you believe greater Hartford is headed in the wrong direction, but I believe we are thriving and building positive and exciting opportunities and energy.

Articles previously published by the NEREJ have highlighted positive growth: “Planned and Ready to Go!; Keep your eyes on the Road; Catch Them Doing Something Right!; Where Imagination is Innovation - Innovation Changes Communities; Metro Hartford, We’re Home, and you can find dozens more that will accurately tell our story and highlight our economic growth.

Several examples illustrate our success, including:

- The demolition of old buildings to make room for new development, like the former Civic Center retail space to the Hartford 21 building towering over our skyline;
- The conversion of former office space to residential housing, including the former Bank of America high rise to 777 Main Street Apartments;
- Improvements and investment to infrastructure connect us to global prospects, including CTfastrak, Bradley International Airport expansion and a regional high-speed rail system connecting Springfield, Hartford, and New Haven; and
- Mixed-use development projects that provide a better quality of life, including former CIGNA

campus excess property to Gillette Ridge Golf Course.

This all illustrates why I can't be persuaded that the lights are going off.

More recently, there has been investment in technology innovation supporting our targeted industries (InsurTech - Hartford Accelerator); the creation of shared workspaces and entrepreneurial work (ReSet, Upward Hartford, etc.); and educational institutions that support workforce development (University of Saint Joseph, UCONN Hartford, Goodwin College, etc.). All this proves there is more than the negative narrative we often hear in the news.

I was inspired by the Connecticut Economic Resource Center's recent CelebrateCT event. In the Capital Region alone, awards were presented to two outstanding examples of success. Joining Technologies in East Granby is celebrating 25 years in precision machining for the aerospace, healthcare, and the defense industry. Its chairman, Michael Francour, founded the electronic beam welding technology company and now with 114 skilled and talented employees, JT continues to expand its facility. The second award went to the newly-opened UCONN Hartford Campus, which has integrated unique educational opportunities throughout the city. With more than 3,000 students, and 300 educators and staff, the Hartford campus brings new vitality to the region.

By the way, we also happen to be making tremendous strides in another industry people may not know about: craft beer, which is bringing a new focus on tourism. One of 44 breweries in Connecticut, Alvarium Beer Company in New Britain has grown nearly three times its estimated original projection. Located in the city's downtown, the local craftsmen are helping to drive economic development. In other parts of the state we also celebrate two more winning breweries: Stony Creek and the Beer'd Brewing Company. In Branford, Stony Creek has contributed to economic development by cleaning up brownfield sites and locating within new transit-oriented development areas and are hosting more than 300,000 visitors annually.

Jasko Development LLC, another winner, has been developing housing projects for decades. With the use of the Historical Tax Credit Program, Jasko has added two new commercial buildings in New Britain as part of that city's renaissance.

Let me conclude by recognizing Oz Griebel, the Alliance's current president and CEO who is stepping down at the end of 2017 to pursue new opportunities. Under his leadership the Alliance has worked to elevate economic development in the region, and the evidence is loud and clear in this article. He is a visionary. While transitions can be nerve-racking, it also brings a remarkable opportunity to evolve and continue playing an integral role in developing these kinds of successful projects and initiatives. To accomplish significant change the plan must include additional support and investment from the private sector.

So as we bid adieu to Oz, I am extremely optimistic the state, the Hartford region, and the New England Knowledge Corridor will continue to thrive, invent, and of course we will need to add more extension cords – because our lights are brighter than ever and will be for generations!

Rebecca Nolan is vice president of global & domestic business development, MetroHartford Alliance and president, Connecticut Economic Development Association (CEDAS), Hartford, Conn.

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