

Third time charm for Front Street?

For a change, timing, conditions and community support all here

By Carol Latter

Nearly a year after the state pulled the plug on Capital Properties as the developer of the \$150 million Front Street retail, entertainment and residential complex at Adriaen's Landing — and 10 months after last fall's failed attempt to find a replacement — the Capital City Economic Development Authority (CCEDA) appears to be just weeks away from inking a development agreement for the project with H.B. Nitkin, based in Greenwich.

Although negotiations about the terms of the agreement are still ongoing — it is expected to be signed by the end of the summer, says CCEDA spokesman Dean Pagani — Brad Nitkin is making no bones about his commitment to the project, and to Hartford.

"I think we're very selective on the projects that we get involved in," says Nitkin, who spent many years as a real estate lawyer before turning his hand to development in the late 1980s, and whose company currently owns retail and office properties throughout Connecticut and New England. "When I commit to a project, I commit to it 100 percent, because I have to really believe in it. I am 100 percent committed to Hartford because I really believe in Hartford."

That wasn't always the case, admits Nitkin. When he learned through industry circles that the state was seeking a new developer for Front Street, "I was as dubious as the next guy about Hartford — mostly by its reputation," he says. "Over the last 15 years, the success of many of our projects outside of Hartford has really been as a result of the decline of Hartford."

Still, he says, he was "curious," and came to the city to inspect the site. "And as soon as I looked at what was happening in downtown Hartford, I had an epiphany. I called my office

and said, 'This is really exciting. Let's get the copy of the RFP from the State of Connecticut and let's go after this project.' And I threw myself into it."

These days, all doubts are gone. With the completion or imminent opening of a broad slate of multi-million dollar projects — from the Connecticut Convention Center and the Marriott Hartford Downtown alongside it, to 55 on the Park and Trumbull Centre near Bushnell Park, to the offices, shops and soaring 35-story residential tower under construction at Hartford 21, there's an energy and excitement about the city that Nitkin finds contagious. "When you see Hartford, it is just remarkable what's happening here now," he says.

Nitkin believed in the Front Street project so strongly, he says, he decided to assemble "a world-class team of professionals" to tackle it. Chief among them was Robert A.M. Stern, a world-renowned architect and the dean of the Yale University School of Architecture, who operates his own architectural firm in New York City.

For Stern, as for Nitkin, seeing was believing.

Nitkin, who is currently working with Stern on a soon-to-be-announced residential project in Greenwich, and also knows him through his involvement with the dean's council of the Yale School of Architecture, invited the architect to come to Hartford.

"He came up and saw the site and he was as excited about it as I was, because it's really a unique opportunity to create a place," Nitkin says. "Rarely as a developer are you given a blank slate to work from. And it's an opportunity in a prime location in a part of downtown Hartford that's near the interstate, that's near the river, that's across from the convention center. It's a great location, and the state is cooperating by putting in all of the infrastructure."

Undeterred by the arduous process of finding a developer capable of moving the project forward in a timely way, the state last August sunk its own shovels into the ground, beginning construction of two new roads north of Arch Street, one running east-west and the other north-south, as well as the first of two on-site garages planned for the site. The state had already completed much of the environmental and utility relocation work, and obtained all federal and state environmental approvals.

That, along with the support the project is receiving from all quarters, says Nitkin, will make the project substantially easier to complete. That's not to say it will be easy — chiefly because the Front Street project "is so massive



Brad Nitkin surveys the site at Front Street, where his company hopes to build a new residential, retail and entertainment complex.

development, CCEDA is giving Nitkin and his team a lot of leeway. The new roads have divided the 6.5-acre site into four quadrants, but Pagani says, "within that map, we are as flexible as we need to be. We want to do whatever makes the project work for the city and the developer."

One of the mayor's past complaints about the project was that the City of Hartford was kept out of the loop concerning how and when it would proceed. That's no longer the case.

Nitkin says Hartford

Mayor Eddie Perez was the first person he visited during his community fact-finding mission, and he has been meeting with him regularly since then. "I asked the mayor his opinion on every issue involving the site, and we've involved the mayor's office in everything that we're doing. So even though our project is technically with the state, ... I think his office has a lot to contribute, and I look forward to their continued contribution."

"We're starting from scratch."

—Brad Nitkin, developer, Front Street

As far as Front Street's design is concerned, Nitkin says, "we're starting from scratch. Robert Stern will be coming up with his own design for the site, and we're in the process of working with him now on those designs."

Nitkin's company is also wooing national and regional retailers and restaurateurs for the ground floor space in the project, and has already leveraged his existing relationships to make several potential tenants aware of the project.

"The biggest challenge we have is getting retailers here so they can see what's happening in Hartford, because Hartford has an image and a reputation that we have to make people realize is not current," he says. But he adds, "I'm finding that once I bring them to the site, they're enthusiastic."

Pagani says the state is "very concerned that the retail development be done in a positive way. We don't want to end up with 200 housing units and a bunch of empty storefronts." But he adds that CCEDA has every confidence in H.B. Nitkin, which owns several shopping centers, including Somerset Square in Glastonbury. "His retail experience helped him win the competition [for Front Street]. He had some experience and relationships in the retail

area that we hope will make it easier to fill that space."

There will also be a strong local retail component. The state pushed hard with Capital Properties to ensure that local shop owners and restaurateurs would have a presence at Front Street, once a strongly ethnic section of Hartford before its residents were moved to make way for commercial development.

"For our new project to be successful, it has to feel genuine and authentic, and feel like it's always been a part of Hartford," Nitkin says. "Having pre-existing Hartford retailers join into this project adds to its sense of authenticity and genuineness, and we are committed to including local businesses in the project."

A larger player will be ESPN, which signed on under the last developer and has committed to building The ESPN Experience, which Nitkin describes as "an interactive museum of both historic videos and historic sports memorabilia. They're making a very significant investment in the site." Nitkin is also in discussions with a television studio interested in broadcasting from the site.

A major difference from Capital Properties' concept, which included apartments as the residential component, is that Nitkin is "seriously considering" building condominiums instead, an idea supported by the community. That idea is also bolstered by the success New Haven developer David Nyberg is seeing with his conversion of The Metropolitan at the corner of Ann and Pearl streets, Nitkin says.

Real estate broker Peter Nowak lauds that decision, saying it will provide a tremendous boost to Hartford, and to its real estate market. "If Front Street is going to be done the way [Nitkin says] it's going to be done, it's going to change the whole landscape of Hartford," Nowak says. "This isn't going to be a 9-to-5 city anymore. People aren't going to drive home to the 'burbs at 5 o'clock and leave the city a ghost town. And that's important."

The Adriaen's Landing project marks something of a departure for Nitkin's company, which until now has concentrated mainly on office projects and shopping centers.

Front Street, he says, "is the first downtown mixed-use project that we're doing. But it's really no different, other than in scope, from other projects that we've done in other communities. It's just bigger. What makes it easier is how many people are really cooperating with us, and who are part of our team, and who are supportive of seeing this happen."

And there will be no more dillydallying or foot-dragging, as has been the case with past developers, he promises, saying, "We're absolutely committed to doing this as quickly as it can be done."

in its scope."

That being the case, and conscious that the state has already gone through two previous developers in its quest to get the project off the ground, Nitkin says when he was selected as the only developer the state was negotiating with, he decided to adopt a methodical, rather than headlong, approach.

"The state wanted me to immediately jump in with Robert Stern and start doing it in a hurry," he says. Instead, "I decided to ... ask the state for a period of six weeks where I could go out into the community, and interview and solicit opinions from opinion leaders in the business, civic and not-for-profit communities in Hartford. Because it's not really for us, I think, to dictate what is the appropriate use for the site."

He adds, "Just philosophically, it was very important to me that I go to the different leaders in the community, and not only ask for their opinions, but really ask them for their support in helping to make this happen. From that consensus, we are putting together our vision of what the project is going to be."

What Nitkin heard was encouraging. Everyone from top executives at major corporations like St. Paul Travelers and The Phoenix Cos. to the executive director of the Wadsworth Atheneum endorsed his company's plans to take over the reins of the project.

"I think that people want to see us succeed. I think people feel that we're in the right place at the right time, and I feel great about that," he says. "We're cooperating with all these parties to see what we can do for each other."

The timing of the project is still up in the air, but Pagani of CCEDA says the developer hopes to break ground in the spring, adding that the project will likely take two years to complete.

So what will Front Street look like?

Pagani says apart from stipulating that the state's goals are to have at least 200 units of housing space and 150,000 square feet of retail