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## Big Deal, Big Relief

Every family has a jokester who hides a piece of the group jigsaw puzzle in his pocket in order to blithely pop it into the last remaining empty space and look like a hero. The Capital City Economic Development Authority didn't have it so easy when it came to producing the final piece in the downtown development plan known as Adriaen's Landing.

The agreement was hard-won to build Front Street, a residential, retail and entertainment complex meant to complement the Connecticut Convention Center and give downtown residents a place to shop and relax.

In the end, it took pieces from Hartford Mayor Eddie Perez, Gov. M. Jodi Rell and the developer, Bradley Nitkin of the HB Nitkin Group of Greenwich, to complete the deal. They will all be heroes if the vision for this important link lives up to its promise.

Originally, CCEDA wanted to see 200 apartments on the site and 100,000 square feet of retail space. A cautious Mr. Nitkin wanted to build the project in phases, with 60 units of housing and 43,000 square feet for commercial use. Mr. Perez, compelled to safeguard taxpayers' money, insisted on withholding subsidies unless the whole project were built.

Happily, all were willing to compromise. The first phase of the development will fall in the middle, with 115 apartments and 60,000 square feet of retail space. To make that happen, the state kicked in more money. The \$55 million project will be built with \$22 million in state funds, \$7 million-plus in grants and loans, a tax agreement with the city and the rest from the developer.

This investment is certainly preferable to a gaping hole in the heart of Hartford, an empty lot that was starting to symbolize empty dreams. For his part, Mr. Nitkin, who has a good track record, said he has commitments from "first-class" tenants including restaurants and places of entertainment.

To his credit, he has said in the past that it was not up to him to dictate what Hartford needs on the site, and that he spent time listening to the desires of people who live and work in the capital city. He also has said he would encourage some local merchants to set up shop on the site. The developer is off to a good start by deciding to keep the name Front Street, an homage to the old Hartford commercial district razed for redevelopment.

Mr. Nitkin's inclusive attitude should extend to the

design phase of the project. With renowned architect Robert A.M. Stern involved, it is a good bet that the development will be in proper scale with its surroundings. Mr. Stern designed the contemporary Mark Twain museum as a perfect complement to the author's Victorian house, no easy task.

Still, CCEDA should insist on a public meeting or two on the proposed design so the people who will use Front Street can comment. This might avert some of the mistakes of the past. The original design for Columbus Boulevard is an example of the power of public input. It was to be disastrously wide and pedestrian-unfriendly until protests from the neighborhood produced the present pleasing result.

Mr. Nitkin is in a better position to succeed than he was 18 months ago. Housing is opening up downtown like dandelions on a spring lawn. Support businesses, including a grocery store, are starting to follow. The commitment to Front Street may be the tipping point that turns a rising star into a comet.