

IN GOOD COMPANY



Front and center

The long-awaited Front Street project is now well underway

■ From the beginning, the idea of transforming the long-neglected, unsightly Columbus Boulevard area on Hartford’s riverfront into a glitzy destination for a broad mix of visitors seemed like an ambitious – some said unrealistic – dream.

But 10 years after a development team was assembled to plan nearly \$1 billion in publicly funded projects at Adriaen’s Landing, and eight years after the first shovel was sunk into the

ground, the last piece of the mega-project is on track for completion.

After years of delays, construction on Front Street finally got underway in November. The two-phase restaurant, retail and housing project, set on nine acres, is named for a thriving neighborhood of Italian immigrants that once stood in the vicinity.

Peter Christian, director of development and acquisitions for developer, H.B. Nitkin Group, said the first phase of the project will primarily be a restaurant district, with 65,000 square feet of dining and entertainment space. It could house anywhere from eight to 12

eateries, including “a coffee shop, a breakfast place and a number of full-service restaurants,” he said.

Funding for the project totals \$30 million – \$20 million in public funds, and \$10 million in private.

The two-block restaurant district is designed to support the Connecticut Science Center, and the convention center across the street, and to offer new lunch and dinner options to people working or visiting attractions downtown.

A new garage containing 280 to 350 spaces will join the state-built parking structure that’s already on the property.

Mr. Christian said no date has



by Carol Latter
Photo by Brian Ambrose

been set for the beginning of phase two, which will cover the other half of the site – two blocks on the east side of Prospect Street. But he noted that H.B. Nitkin has “a limited timeline with the state. It’s roughly a three-year period to get started.”

Current plans call for that phase to include housing on the parcel that the *Hartford Times* building currently occupies, with ground floor retail and additional parking. The façade of the existing building would be retained. He said the 200 residential units will include a mix of styles, but most will likely be studio and one-bedroom rentals.

The second phase is also expected to include roughly 80,000 square feet of commercial space. The northwest corner of the lot will likely house two floors of retail, he said.

Asked if any potential restaurant operators have been lined up to occupy space in the first phase of Front Street, Mr. Christian said, “There’s a lot of interest in the

project, but of course, we’re in tough economic times. A lot of restaurateurs are sitting tight. They like the concept and they think it will be successful. Just finding local restaurateurs looking to open an additional location, or a national chain looking to expand into this area certainly will take some doing, but all of the response to the project has been positive.”

He added, “I think the location of our project certainly helps – **being right across from the convention center and the science center, and being right off I-91**, with ample, convenient parking. Talking to retailers and restaurateurs, they say this is all something that they look for.”

Ron Morneault, owner of Stackpole Moore Tryon Tuesday’s on Trumbull Street, and former head of Business for Downtown Hartford, said restaurants are “the highest and best use of that space.” The only question, he said, is “how that might negatively impact some of the restaurants in

this part of downtown.”

Mr. Christian said he doesn’t feel there will be any negative impact, noting that through this project, H.B. Nitkin is hoping to create “a critical mass of restaurants” to draw people downtown.

“We have the ability to really create a destination where people go to dinner, and then go to listen to music or take in a play – as so many people do in South Norwalk or New Haven, where there are 15 or 20 restaurants within a few blocks.” Blue Back Square in West Hartford has achieved that same critical mass, he said. “So that’s why we think we have a good chance of being successful.”

He believes Front Street will attract “quite a mixed bag of people, including residents of Hartford who see this as a new area of the city.” Restaurants built on the site will cater to that mix, he added.

“There will be family concept restaurants, and some upscale concepts that will tie in with convention goers. We’ll have takeout

BUSINESS BRIEFS

CT business closures spike

■ Nearly 3,500 Connecticut businesses closed their doors in the first three months of this year – a spike of 16 percent over Q1 2008.

This is the highest number of closings in any first quarter since 2000, when the state began recording business starts and stops.

Business closures numbered 983 in January, 818 in February and 1,676 in March.

Almost 7,000 new businesses began operations in the first quarter of this year, but that was a decline of 13 percent from Q1 2008.

“Connecticut businesses are clearly struggling to stay afloat,” said Secretary of the State Susan Bysiewicz. “Our state must maximize and leverage federal [stimulus] dollars to get those funds into the hands of Connecticut entrepreneurs as quickly, efficiently, and transparently as possible.”

Fred Carstensen, director for the Center for Economic Analysis at the UConn, said before these latest losses, “Connecticut was already the only state in the nation with fewer business establishments than it had 20 years ago. Adding to this, the absence of meaningful job creation in those 20 years and declining median household income since 2000 paints a stark picture of a state economy in long-term decline.”

that workers can eat at lunchtime, or can pick up on the way home at night. So we see the audience as both local residents and residents of the suburbs, visitors to the Wadsworth and the science center, and visitors from out of town. The daytime office population will have new places to go, with [nearby] steps that lead to Constitution Plaza.”

Mr. Morneault, owner of the 100-year-old clothier in Hartford’s Central Business District, said, “any development, as long as it’s successful, is a good development.” But he’s not convinced that the retail component planned for phase two is the best choice for Front Street.

“It’s isolated,” he says of the site. “It’s not connected [to downtown]. Food is different because across the street, you have visitors coming to the convention center and the science center, and food is going to sell. It’s easier for it to be successful. Mercantile retail really needs to be clustered together – a better location is the

Pratt Street, Trumbull Street, Asylum Street area. But for restaurants and entertainment, I think it’s great down there. I can’t think of a negative thing about it.”

Mr. Christian said regardless of Front Street’s makeup, **“the more development that’s going on in Hartford, the better.”** It all helps to create more development.”

The Front Street project has been a relatively long time in coming. Manhattan-based Capital Properties Associates was named the preferred developer for the site in June 2001, and inked a development agreement to build a residential/entertainment/retail district there three months later. Capital Properties was eventually fired, after repeated delays.

H.B. Nitkin, which also owns the Shoppes at Somerset Square in Glastonbury and was handed the reins of the Front Street project, was supposed to have broken ground in 2006. But then a number of factors, including rapidly escalating construction costs – in

part due to skyrocketing prices for steel – intervened. The project plan was reconfigured and split in two. Last fall, with construction costs down and state funding for the project in hand, the Greenwich-based developer saw no further reason to wait.

In the meantime, however, the delays, on top of the debacle with Capital Properties, raised a lot of eyebrows – as well as questions about when, or whether, the project would ever begin.

“At first, I used to respond to it,” Mr. Christian said. “And then I realized that responding to it when things kept getting stalled was really serving no purpose. Now, it’s, ‘Look outside the window.’ I’ll let the construction speak for itself at this point.”

At press time, foundations were being poured. Steel erection was scheduled for May. “Then, during the midsummer, you’ll start to see some of the façade work going on. Building B, the northern one of the two, is scheduled to be finished by the end of

Axsys Tech’s 1Q earnings up

■ Axsys Technologies Inc., a Rocky Hill company that produces surveillance cameras and imaging systems for the aerospace and defense industries, posted a 37 percent quarterly profit increase and a jump in sales of 18 percent to \$66.6 million.

The company, which went up for sale in March, said it expected to hit its 2009 financial projections. In February,

the company had forecast full-year sales of \$278 million to \$282 million.

Health Net penalized \$1.3 million

■ Connecticut’s insurance commissioner ordered Health Net of Connecticut to pay \$1.3 million in fines and restitution after a market conduct examination revealed violations of state law.

Health Net was ordered to pay \$496,000 in fines, and an addi-

tional \$60,000 to the Insurance Department Education Account, which helps protect Connecticut consumers through educational programs. The company also paid \$750,066 to consumers whose claims were wrongly denied or processed.

The Insurance Department discovered multiple violations to Connecticut insurance laws related to improper claim processing and settlements related to out of network and

mandated benefit claims, as well as violations involving the licensing and appointment of agents.

The company was ordered to ensure its practices and procedures align with Connecticut law, and make a compliance report to the commissioner within 90 days.

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January, early February 2010. The second building will be finished by the end of April, early May, along with the new parking garage."

He said that despite the portioning of the project into two phases, "the exterior design is still relatively the same." The buildings, designed by Robert A.M. Stern Architects of New York, will have "balcony levels, a glass curtain wall, and a limestone exterior look, with pediments. It's the same sort of look as what's always been designed and it fits in well with the whole area. Robert Stern Architects have an incredible affinity for designing within the environment.

Hartford City Hall, the Wadsworth, Travelers Tower – those are all architectural gems, and this building complements those and fits in very well."

When Front Street does open, it will mark the successful completion of the Six Pillars Project by the state agency, the Capital City Economic Development Authority.

As for what the next stage of Hartford's development will be once Front Street is completed, CCEDA Executive Director Jim Abromaitis, said, "no one should probably be satisfied that there's an ending point."

He added, **"The challenge is trying to make sure that once**

all of Adriaen's Landing is completely finished, the same momentum does eventually spread to the rest of the city.


As far as Hartford is concerned, I think it's made great strides. If someone looked at the Hartford of today and compared it to 20 years ago, they'd see that the skyline has changed."

He believes progress will continue to be made, though he conceded, "a lot of that will depend on [private investment]. That will continue to be the main determinant of what will get done. The days of the large mega state project have probably taken a back seat for a while."

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