



Promise of Revival
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Some post-industrial Northeastern towns wither. Their leaders talk about revival, but nothing comes of it. See Amsterdam, N.Y., once the "Rug City," now a shadow of its former vigorous self decades after the last carpet manufacturer moved south.

Others are able to forge new identities for themselves, owing to energetic leadership, good location, community spirit and the emergence of visionary, well-financed developers. See Lowell, Mass., which overcame the inertia that ravaged other New England textile towns.

With the unveiling of conceptual plans for Renaissance Place, post-Uniroyal Naugatuck is poised to claim membership in the second category.

A promising public-private partnership envisions the commercial and residential redevelopment of Naugatuck's riverfront and downtown. Features such as the railroad station, Uniroyal's Building 25, and the Green with its historic buildings, would remain. Developer Alexius C. Conroy hopes to tackle the daunting challenge of the former Uniroyal property in the future, but work on the downtown segment could begin as soon as next year. Mr. Conroy expects to build more than 500 condominiums and apartments and 363,000 square feet of new retail space in the predominantly commercial and light-industrial area between Church and Water streets. The project is expected to cost \$400 million to \$700 million.

The potential benefits are obvious. The new buildings would generate property taxes and jobs while placing a fairly light burden on municipal services, since most of the 1,000 or more residents of the condos and apartments would be childless. The quality of municipal services, especially the schools, would begin to improve as new businesses and industries began absorbing some of current homeowners' tax burden. Nearby property owners would invest in redevelopment and new construction, further boosting the grand list. Interest in the Uniroyal site would begin to build, perhaps helping to define the future use of a historic industrial property.

If this were just another pie-in-the-sky vision of bureaucrats and politicians who have one eye on the next election, heaping helpings of skepticism would be appropriate. But the presence of Mr. Conroy and his record of finishing what he starts should breed optimism. Based on what has been revealed since April 4, when Mr. Conroy introduced his ideas to the community, Naugatuck will benefit enormously if the project goes forward.

Just three cautionary notes:

Endeavor to avoid reliance on eminent domain. Mayor Ron San Angelo says he hopes the U.S. Supreme Court rules against residents of New London's Fort Trumbull neighborhood, where the city wants to bulldoze single-family homes in favor of retail, hotel and condominium developments.

The residents dispute the notion that a government agency can take private property just because officials believe someone else can make more productive use of it.

The ruling will be in hand before the first shovel blade bites the ground in Renaissance Place, but even if the high court goes Mayor San Angelo's way, borough leaders should proceed with caution. The use of eminent domain to gain possession of even one home or business could change the tone of the project from what is being done for Naugatuck to what is being done to Naugatuck.

Learn to distinguish between serious development and politically correct bling-bling, notably, the solar panels and windmills. Longtime residents know the Naugatuck Valley floor is neither reliably sunny nor windy, so placing solar panels and windmills there is simply a waste of gadgetry that would yield far more energy if installed elsewhere — in a high mountain pass or a desert, for example.

Be attentive to the nuts and bolts. "Condos," "apartments" and "retail" are highly flexible terms, as residents of Waterbury's Town Plot neighborhood are discovering. It is conceivable, even likely, the demands of economic viability will come into conflict with local custom and preference. If the public is engaged in the process and if the developer has a clear understanding of local expectations, satisfactory compromises surely will emerge.

These are exciting times for Naugatuck, filled with promise and high expectations for the future. But the Renaissance Place project isn't a spectator sport; it's a transformation-in-the-making that requires a high level of public engagement to come to fruition.