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A Mighty Hammer in Southbridge

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J. Gabriel McCarthy, a real estate developer in Southbridge.

But only for a limited time.



Developers tackle tough projects to enliven downtown

Looking at the pictures on the town of Southbridge's web site, one might get the impression that the folks in charge have stopped caring about what outsiders think of the old factory

town on the banks of the Quinebaug River.

It's hard to ignore the fact that the photos of downtown were taken on some dreary, overcast winter day. The ornamental trees that line Main Street are bare and black, and the sidewalks, churches and municipal buildings look cold, dark and desperate.

But a cadre of developers with successful Southbridge projects already under their belts says the city - because of their projects - is attracting the hip, artsy crowd for whom most "renaissance" cities pine. That crowd might say Southbridge's renaissance has been "organic." The truth is, Southbridge's continuing facelift and revitalization is a testament to the power of private enterprise to undertake and complete difficult and expensive projects in places where means, opportunity and demand intersect.

Projects With Punch

Native Irishman J. Gabriel McCarthy swings a mighty hammer in Southbridge. He has redeveloped six severely distressed commercial buildings in town, and until he applied for and received an affordable housing grant to build four apartments on the top floor of what was once a dog food factory at 12 Crane St., he hadn't used a cent of public money. McCarthy said the availability of developable property in Southbridge combined with low rents and high interest from artists, young people and those who simply want a more urban lifestyle make Southbridge a good investment for developers willing to take on challenging, complicated renovation projects.

"There's still a lot of room for growth," he said. "I saw this 25 years ago in London, and those houses can't be bought for 1 million pounds today."

By the time McCarthy and partner Roderick P. Murphy are done renovating 12 Crane St., they will have spent more than \$2 million.

Across from the shining silver 12 Crane St. is McCarthy's Flat Iron building, a bright yellow Victorian-era building that houses a restaurant, a seasonal ice cream shop and apartments. McCarthy has also tackled and redeveloped the Vienna building, the Clemence House - an old box factory on School Street - 398-400 Main St., a number of residential buildings and the Universalist Church on Main Street. Just a few years ago, that building was called one of the state's 10 Most Endangered Historic Resources by Historic Massachusetts.

The Flat Iron and 12 Crane were also awaiting the wrecking ball when McCarthy bought them.

McCarthy describes the financing for his projects as "madly looking for benefactors," and he says he has business with every financial institution in and around Southbridge.

Madly looking for benefactors and humbly approaching every bank and credit union for specialty loans and favorable terms may still be easier than laboriously greasing the slow, slow wheels of government, especially in a town where long-time residents may be jaded about what is actually possible.

But McCarthy doesn't dislike Southbridge's government.

In fact, he praises its officials for being "very much on board with getting Southbridge to be the place to come."

"The streets are kept clean," he said.

And McCarthy's projects do more than just attract visitors and new residents. They create jobs at the restaurants, offices, galleries, hotels and shops there, and McCarthy has a commitment to use local labor for all of his Southbridge renovation projects.

McCarthy and his wife Margaret Morrissey say they were taken aback by the number of skilled laborers willing and able to work in Southbridge.

Rebirth Of The Cool

City officials recognize that to be successfully reborn, the city needs investment by both the private and public sectors.

City Manager Clayton Carlisle called McCarthy "a dynamo when it comes to the resurrection of defunct properties."

He said McCarthy's projects and others like them undertaken by developers Dan Matte, Dan Flynn and others, could probably only be done by private developers without putting the tax dollars of skeptical citizens at risk.

"They're difficult," Carlisle said. "Sometimes the cost is more than to build new," and it takes vision to "break them loose" after years of vacancy and neglect. "So many years have passed," he added. "Somebody has to come up with something new to do."

And something new is exactly what Southbridge is getting in the form of new residents and new business and property owners attracted to the city from other towns in the area, especially neighboring Sturbridge.

The coffee shop at McCarthy's Flat Iron building is owned by a gentleman who moved it from Sturbridge. Flynn and Matte, the developers of the Bramble House, a flower and gift shop, are also from Sturbridge, as are the owners of the shop.

McCarthy said Southbridge is attractive because "the rents are attractive, and it is an actual town center, the only real town center in the area." And that allows McCarthy to give buildings like 12 Crane, with its shocking silver exterior, a big city treatment.

Morrissey said McCarthy and the artists he's attracting to Southbridge "are looking at the town with virgin eyes, where some of the locals have taken it for granted. "People just go about their business here. They forget about the promotion of (the town)."

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