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COMING ATTRACTIONS... Cinema set to debut in time for holidays

BY JOHN TOWNES

After a decade of planning and a year of construction, the Beacon Cinema complex in downtown Pittsfield is slated to open a month earlier than projected. Following a midnight showing of *New Moon* (a continuation of the *Twilight* series) on Nov. 20, the official start of regular operations is scheduled for more traditional hours later that same day with the premier of Disney's 3D version of *A Christmas Carol*.

The Beacon project has included the extensive renovation of the five-story Kinnell-Kresge building, which extends from 57 North St. rearward to McKay Street. The completed complex will include a six-screen multiplex and a mix of retail, restaurant and office space.

In a larger sense, completion of the Beacon has been long-awaited in the community — both as a return of downtown moviegoing and as an anticipated anchor and stimulus that many hope will push the ongoing effort to revitalize downtown Pittsfield to the next level.

It is also an important physical change for Pittsfield, as the building had long been a highly visible symbol of decline in the core of downtown.

While time will tell whether the Beacon can ultimately meet the high expectations placed on it, the transition from being a perennial work-in-progress to an established element of downtown is a significant milestone for the \$21.2 million redevelopment project.

"Before we started, never in my wildest imagination did I envision that it would take so long to get to this point," said Richard Stanley, the project's developer. "It was a very difficult project to bring to fruition."

Nevertheless, said Stanley, he retains his enthusiasm and confidence about the venture.

continued on page 14

Downtown at turning point with several projects

BY JOHN TOWNES

Through a combination of planning and coincidence, downtown Pittsfield is on the brink of another of its periodic turning points. Several elements are poised to bring a new look — and, many hope, new vitality — to the city center around Park Square.

Among the most visible changes are the long-awaited Beacon Cinema complex (*see accompanying story on this page*) and ongoing city and state construction projects that will create new traffic patterns and alter the visual streetscape of the southern gateway to downtown.

Also contributing to change in this section of downtown is the current redevelopment of the former Union Federal Saving Bank

building across the street from the Beacon Cinema, which will bring new housing and street-level eateries to a site that had been unused for many years.

These and other initiatives are intended to bring new economic

and social activity to a section of downtown that was once the literal hub of the Berkshires. The block just north of Park Square where the Beacon

is located was once bustling with stores, shoppers, workers and strollers. Since the 1970s, however, this same area came to symbolize the declining fortunes of downtown as stores closed, vacancies increased, the sidewalks became significantly quieter and several once-prominent structures fell into visible disrepair.

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NEWS ANALYSIS

FROM TOY MERCHANT TO MAIN STREET STAKEHOLDER

Tom Levin takes on new role with downtown redevelopment project

BY BRAD JOHNSON

For the past dozen years or so, Tom Levin has occupied himself with fun and games as proprietor of Tom's Toys in downtown Great Barrington.

Now, he is venturing into the grown-up world of commercial real estate investment and development — in the process becoming a significant stakeholder in the bustling Main Street business district.

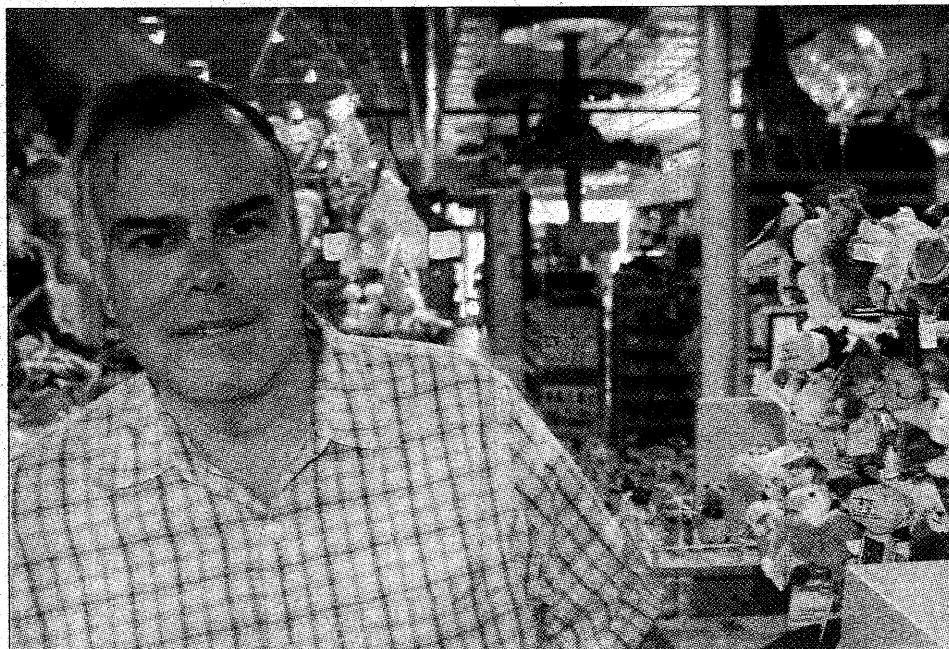
In June 2008 Levin purchased the century-old commercial building at 293 Main St. for \$2.1 million. In the year since then, he has completed his own relocation of Tom's Toys into one of the street-level storefront spaces. He has also begun a multi-phase renovation and restoration of other portions of the building that will boost his investment in the property by about another \$1

million and will bring a sizeable amount of new commercial office space to downtown Great Barrington.

"This is going to be a nice addition to Main Street," said Levin. However, both the redevelopment project and Levin's own role in pushing it forward are unanticipated results of what began as a simple search for a new location for Tom's Toys.

Levin opened Tom's Toys in 1996 in leased space at 307 Main St. and built a solid business there by offering a wide selection of high-quality games, toys and educational items — many of which were not likely to be carried by major chain toy retailers. (In 2000 Levin opened a second business in town, JWS Art Supplies, in a storefront space on nearby Railroad Street.)

continued on page 23



Tom Levin's purchase of a building on Great Barrington's Main Street fulfilled his goal of finding a long-term location for his successful specialty toy store. It also placed him in the commercial redevelopment business as he has moved forward on a restoration project that will create a new supply of downtown office space.

COVERstory

Beacon Cinema continued from page 1

At the same time, he added, much will now depend on how well the Beacon performs as a business — including such factors as its ability to attract audiences for the theater and tenants for the commercial space.

"Was it worth it? Right now, I'd say absolutely yes," said Stanley, who previously built the Triplex Cinema and other projects in the Great Barrington area. "But you should probably ask me again a year from now, because I'll have a clearer answer to that question then."

The extensive redevelopment of the 53,660-square-foot complex combined preservation and new construction. While the basics have been determined, the exact

configuration of interior office and retail space will be based on the mix and needs of tenants, according to Stanley.

The theater entrance lobby and an adjacent storefront will be on North Street. Office space will be located in the upper levels of that front section.

To preserve and restore the original North Street facade, many of the tiles and other architectural detailing were repaired on site. Others that could not be repaired were sent to a company in California, where exact duplicates were made, shipped back here and installed.

The rear section on McKay Street was gutted and the existing structure has been enlarged to add to the height with an addition made of insulated steel panels.

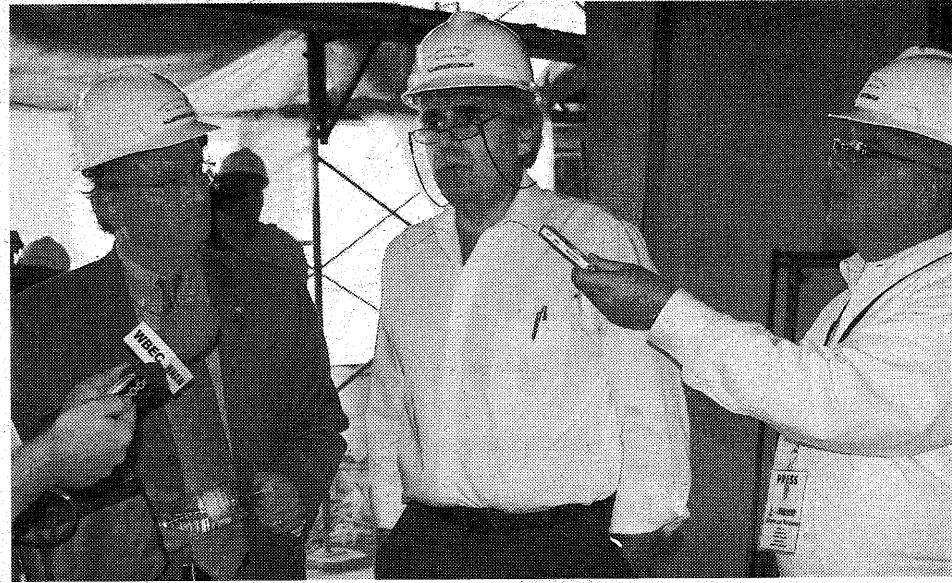
The actual theater auditoriums (see story on page 16) are located on two levels in the new section in the rear. They will occupy the equivalent of four stories, with each theater level including an additional story for height and projection equipment. Escalators will take patrons from the lobby to the upper-level theaters. (There will also be an elevator for the disabled.)

There will be additional retail or restaurant space in the lower level off McKay Street and along Burbank Alley on the building's north side.

Allegrone Construction was the general contractor for the project, and Allegrone Masonry handled the facade restoration under a separate contract.

The cinema itself is expected to create 30 new jobs. The other activities in the commercial spaces are projected to create another 40 jobs over time. The redevelopment project provided between 70 and 80 jobs during the construction.

Currently, the Beacon has one committed tenant, the Marketplace Cafe, whose plans to expand to the site (see story on page 15) were made public at a Sept. 16 press conference and site tour where Stanley and city officials announced the new opening date for the



Richard Stanley (center) fields questions from the media during a Sept. 16 site tour of the Beacon Cinema complex. Stanley, along with Pittsfield Mayor James Ruberto (left) and officials with Downtown Inc., held the event to announce that the much anticipated downtown attraction would be opening ahead of schedule.

cinema. Stanley said that while he has done some scouting for tenants, he has waited for the complex to be completed before actively marketing it.

"After giving a tour to one potential tenant during construction, I realized that it was really difficult for people to envision what it would look like when it's completed," he said. "Once it is actually open, people won't have to use their imagination, and we can really start marketing it aggressively."

One curve ball that has emerged since the project shifted from its long planning stage to actual construction is the economic downturn of the past year, including the negative impact it has had on commercial real estate.

Stanley acknowledged that the economic climate has given him some nervous moments, especially as construction was starting during the most dramatic stages of the financial crisis last year.

"There's no doubt that I've been concerned about the leasability of space in this economy," he said. "But there are a number of optimists who believe we've passed the low point in the economy. I'll also take the advice of those who say that this point in the economic cycle is the best time to get started."

Remnant of hard times

The Beacon is the latest in a series of downtown projects that have been completed in recent years, including the neighboring Central Block office and retail complex, the restoration and reopening of the Colonial Theater, the move of Barrington Stage Com-

pany into a renovated theater on Union Street, and a number of other private redevelopment initiatives in the city center.

Prominently located at the southern entrance of downtown near Park Square, the Kinnell-Kresge building was built in 1918 by Dr. George Kinnell, a local veterinarian, and the S.S. Kresge chain of 5-10 cent stores. It was designed in the Venetian Gothic Revival style with a glazed terra cotta tile and brick facade by Joseph McArthur Vance.

Once part of a thriving retail block, by the 1990s the building had become a decaying eyesore. At the low point of downtown's fortunes, it was one of numerous vacant or underutilized structures in disrepair along North Street, including the adjacent Newberry's building, the nearby Palace Theater and the England's building, among others.

Even as those other sites were subsequently cleaned up, renovated or torn down and converted to other uses, the Kresge building remained a stubborn remnant of that difficult period for the city. In the 1990s, folksinger Arlo Guthrie acquired the building with plans to refurbish it as a performance space and multi-use facility, but that concept never materialized.

The cinema project, meanwhile, originated in the late 1990s, when Downtown Inc., a downtown business association active in revitalization initiatives in Pittsfield's city center, formed a committee to explore the possibility of bringing a movie theater into downtown. Originally the committee was looking at a different potential site: a parking lot on the corner of McKay and Depot streets. They contacted a variety of theater operators, including Stanley, but they did not have any takers.

"I wasn't interested in opening another theater just to run a theater," said Stanley. "My interest is in projects that stimulate community development, and I see theaters as a vehicle for that. To me, the earlier McKay Street location was a yawn because I didn't think it would do much for North Street."

A few years later, when the Kresge Building became available, the committee

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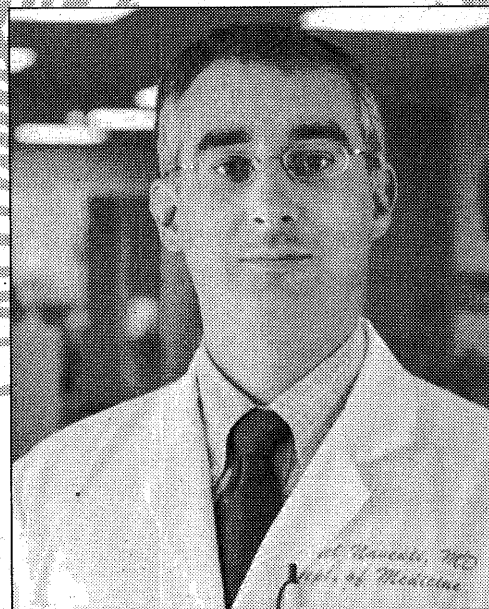
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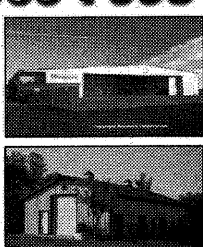
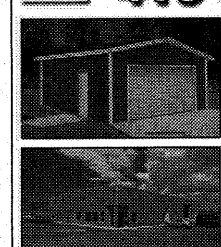
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contacted Stanley again. "I saw the Kresge Building as having the potential to really make a difference, because of the spillover of people onto North Street from the theater and commercial activities there," said Stanley, whose business enterprises are based in South Egremont. "Also, I was impressed at the determination of the city to make its downtown succeed."

In 2004, Stanley agreed to take on the project. The project also gained the active support of Mayor James Ruberto and other city officials. Stanley purchased the building from Guthrie and the project began to move forward.

Along the way the concept was expanded from a movie theater to a multi-use commercial complex. The overall project is being developed under Stanley's management by North Street Cinema LLC, and the theater will be operated by Beacon Cinema Inc.

The project was funded through a combination of sources, primarily from the sale of federal and state historic preservation and new market tax credits that were financed through Massachusetts Housing and Investment Corporation. The city provided a \$600,000 temporary bridge loan, and five local financial institutions also jointly offered another \$1.2 million bridge loan while the tax credits were being dealt with.

Overall, 34 percent of the project's total cost is covered by debt financing, while the tax credit financing has covered 49 percent,

with 1 percent funded by grants. In addition to personally guaranteeing the debt financing, Stanley provided 16 percent of the equity.

Originally, construction was slated to begin in 2007. However, the National Parks Service declined to give the approval necessary for the historic tax credits because it believed the original plan did not preserve enough of the structure to qualify.

To avoid losing this vital component of the financing package, a new plan was drawn up in which the core interior structure would be extensively rebuilt, while the exterior and some sections of the interior would be preserved. As a result, the existing tiles and other features of the North Street facade were either cleaned up or recreated to restore the building's original appearance.

This design change significantly delayed the start of construction, and the additional historic restoration work substantially increased the cost of the project.

However, once Allegrone Construction began work last autumn, it went somewhat faster than expected, and the original planned opening date of Dec. 14 of this year was moved forward by nearly a full month.

Broad support

Stanley said that during the long and often frustrating planning process, the support the project received from a wide range of constituencies – including city officials, banks and other members of the business

community, and the public at large – made all the difference.

"The community has been absolutely fantastic to work with," said Stanley. "That's what kept me going. When I did the Triplex in Great Barrington, I felt like I was on my own. But here, the powers-that-be were ahead of the curve and had a vision for the future. They were willing to invest the necessary time, money and energy, and we all worked together to achieve this. Almost everyone I've encountered has been totally supportive. Wherever I went in Pittsfield, people would come up to me and say, 'How can we help you to make this happen?'"

Nevertheless, the project has had some skeptics who contended that it was inappropriate for the city government to invest so much attention and resources into what was essentially a private development venture. A related criticism was that the focus on downtown took away attention from other local priorities, including the city's overall infrastructure, neighborhood needs and the effort to bring in new industries.

Stanley and other proponents contend that the city's downtown revitalization is necessary for other aspects of community development.

"In medical terms, it's like treating the heart because so many things radiate from that," said Stanley. "As the heart of Pittsfield, the ability to bring in new businesses elsewhere in the city depends on having a healthy

downtown. Years ago, I remember talking to a former director of the Berkshire Chamber of Commerce, who said that Pittsfield was doing everything it could to attract new industries. But when they came in to look at the city, North Street was always a roadblock because of the condition of downtown."

While emphasizing that the Beacon will not be a panacea for either downtown or the city's economy, Stanley believes it will stimulate downtown on many levels in the long run.

"There are no magic bullets that solve everything," he said. "This is just one aspect of what is needed. In terms of revitalization, it's important to look at downtown as a mall. The first thing you need are big anchors that will attract people and bring in other businesses."

Stanley noted that while the recently added Colonial Theater and Barrington Stage Company also serve as anchors that attract people to downtown on a regular basis, the Beacon will likely provide a steady new baseline of activity.

"Those theaters have also been keys, but they only are open in certain months or certain days," he said. "The difference is that the Beacon Cinema will be open every day of the year. So that's a constant flow of potential customers in all demographic categories coming downtown 365 days a year. That will create a new market for other businesses." ♦

Beacon attracts south county caterer for satellite site

The Marketplace Cafe is expanding from its main site in Sheffield with a second outlet in the new Beacon Cinema complex in downtown Pittsfield.

According to co-owner David Renner, the timing is right to open a second cafe due to a combination of developments in downtown Pittsfield and the status and goals of their business. "We've been looking to expand for awhile," said Renner, who, with his business partner Kevin Schmitz, operates the cafe and a catering business in Sheffield (along with their long-standing retail business in Guido's Fresh Marketplace in Great Barrington). "The cafe is doing well, but its growth is limited in Sheffield. We had been wanting to open something in downtown Pittsfield for a number of years."

Renner noted that they had considered several possibilities in the past. They were invited to move into the Central Block building at 75 North St. when that project was in its early stages, and they had also looked at setting up a cafe in Spice when the original plan for that operation was to have several restaurants. They also had been approached by Beacon Cinema developer Richard Stanley to move into that complex in the early planning stages of that project several years ago.

"Those earlier plans didn't work out, and we weren't ready when Richard Stanley originally contacted us, but we continued to keep our eyes on Pittsfield," said Renner. "We saw great potential there, with the Colonial Theater, Barrington Stage and other developments, as well as the presence of so many offices and Berkshire Medical Center. It seemed like every time you went to Pittsfield there was something new. Recently, we decided we were ready, and we got back in touch with Richard Stanley."

The Marketplace Cafe will be located in a storefront space of about 1,400 square feet with an entrance on North Street in the Beacon building. The site will have seating for about 45 customers. There will also be an emphasis on take-out service. It will have a staff of six to 12 people.

Renner said they expect to draw a mix of customers, including downtown workers, other walk-in traffic from North Street, and audiences going to the Beacon and other attractions downtown. He said it will be open during the daytime for breakfast and lunch as its core schedule. "We will also have evening hours, but haven't decided how late we'll stay open yet," he said.

The Marketplace business is based in a building in Sheffield at 18 Elm Court (just off Route 7 in the central village) that Renner and Schmitz acquired about two years ago. After renovating that space they moved their catering operations from their previous longtime location in a commercial building on Crissey Road in Great Barrington. The new location allowed them to add a cafe operation to their original catering business. The Sheffield facility and its kitchens will also be used to prepare ingredients for the Pittsfield cafe.

Renner said that the Pittsfield site will be very similar to the cafe in Sheffield. "Our approach is to take food to a fun level without being pretentious about it," he said.

It will feature sandwiches, salads, soups and pastries, and other items including a selection of breakfast burritos. "We also will serve specialty coffees and related drinks like espresso and latte," said Renner. "We're sticklers about how we do those drinks, and our service staff will include trained baristas."

They are currently working out the details of bank financing for the new cafe. Renner said they expect to open sometime between the Nov. 20 opening of the Beacon Cinema and January 2010.

He added that they also hope to eventually open other branches of The Marketplace Cafe in other communities in the region. "The Sheffield cafe is our prototype and it works well," he said. "We hope to take it to a couple of other locations around here at some point." ♦

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COVERstory

Stadium seating, digital format among attractions

The Beacon Cinema will be managed by Richard Stanley's company under the name Beacon Cinema Inc. Stanley also operates the Triplex Cinema in downtown Great Barrington.

While they will be siblings, the two cinema facilities will be managed separately, said Stanley. He noted that they will be autonomous in terms of booking and scheduling of films.

"The selection and booking of films will be handled separately for the Triplex and Beacon," he said. "In the film industry these days, there really isn't any advantage whether you are dealing with distributors as one theater or two."

The six individual theaters in the Beacon will use digital projection equipment. While many theaters still use traditional mechanical projectors and film, the industry is moving towards distribution and presentation of movies in digital format. "The transition to digital is moving rapidly, and these days a theater



can get just about any film in the market in digital form," noted Stanley.

The Beacon theaters also have stadium seating, in which the floor is on a more pronounced incline to allow for clearer sight lines to the screen. (This feature was also

utilized for the North Adams Movieplex 8 when it moved from its former Curran Highway location to redeveloped space downtown in the former Kmart plaza in 2006).

Beacon Cinema will have a main entrance and lobby off North Street. The six theater spaces (which range in size from 140 seats to 182 seats) will be situated on two levels in the building. There will be two conces-

sion areas, one of which will include a small bar area. Stanley, who has an all-alcohol license for the complex, has asked the city for permission to allow consumption of alcoholic beverages in the theaters.

In terms of the types of films, Stanley said it will be a mix of mainstream commercial fare found at most multiplexes and independent, foreign or other specialty films shown in art-house theaters. It will also feature special-event films, including 3D movies, live simulcast sporting events and other alternative programming.

"It will be community-based programming, based on what local audiences want to see," he said. "We'll start out with a wide range of films, and over time the schedule will be tailored to reflect the types of films that people are choosing to see."

Stanley expects that the core audience will come from central Berkshire County and nearby communities. "The rule of thumb in the theater business is that the primary audience comes from an area that is within about a 20-minute drive," he said. "We're basing our projections on that, but I also think that with 3D films and stadium seating and other attractions here we'll also be drawing from all of Berkshire County and towns like New Lebanon, N.Y." ♦

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Downtown Inc. looks beyond Beacon to next stage

For Downtown Inc., the opening of the Beacon Cinema will complete a series of goals that were set out in a 1997 community-based strategic plan for revitalization, according to Peter Lafayette, vice president of the downtown businesses association.

"The opening of the Beacon is very gratifying as the last big piece of that strategic plan," said Lafayette, who is executive director of the Berkshire Bank Charitable Foundation. Before his current job, he was active in the Central Block and other downtown development projects as longtime director of the community-based Berkshire Housing Development Corp.

As the curtain rises on the Beacon, Lafayette added that Downtown Inc. and other civic leaders are looking ahead to what is still needed. "Now we'll be starting the process of drawing up a new plan with goals for the next five years," he said.

Yvonne Pearson, executive director of Downtown Inc., sees the Beacon as an important turning point, although she said there is still much that needs to be done.

"Downtown is in a good place now," she said. "We're not where we want to be yet, but when you look at downtown now compared to five years ago, it's a marked difference for the better. And I think we'll see the downtown landscape change significantly over the next two years."

Pearson added that the current situation is building on previous momentum and a series of cumulative changes.

"I've been with Downtown Inc. for 15 years, and during that time there has been a dramatic turnaround," she said. "One thing has led to another. The development of the Central Block was one catalyst. We have seen a domino effect, with the construction of the Legacy Banks building, Berkshire Bank moving into the old firehouse, and other developments. We've also seen the Colonial Theater and Barrington Stage emerge as anchors for both ends of downtown, and now the Beacon provides another major attraction on this section of North Street."

Pearson believes that the city's cultivation of the arts and entertainment has been an important stimulus in this process.

"I realize that there are varied opinions on this, but I see the arts and economic development as going hand-in-hand," she said.

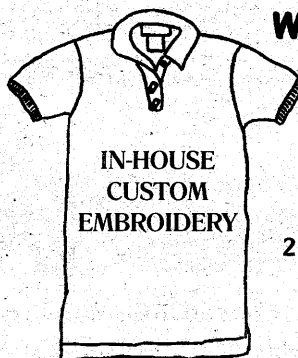
Pearson believes that downtown Pittsfield will not return to its prior role as a regional shopping center, but instead will be a diverse mix of businesses and other activity.

"My theory about downtowns is that they won't become retail hubs again," she said. "Instead, downtown Pittsfield will grow with restaurants and entertainment and niche businesses. It won't have big department stores, but it will have shops like women's boutiques."

Pearson said that the next phase of strategic planning will look at what other specific elements the public would like to see in the city center as priorities.

"We have to think about what the community really wants downtown, and work to bring them in," she said. "There's still a lot of work to be done." ♦

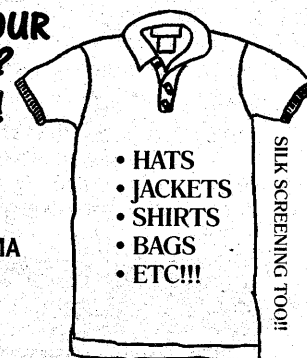
"We have to think about what the community really wants downtown, and work to bring them in. There's still a lot of work to be done."



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Downtown dynamics continued from page 1

The ultimate impact and prospects of success of the Beacon and these other new projects and ventures will only be known over time. As an immediate effect, however, they will spruce up the appearance of this key section of the city center, and will help rectify long-standing practical and perceptual obstacles for the ongoing effort to revitalize downtown Pittsfield.

The road work, which was started this summer and will continue next year, will eventually remove the chaotic rotary traffic pattern around Park Square that for decades has confused, frustrated and occasionally frightened visitors and local drivers alike. Instead, northbound drivers will have the option of continuing in a straight line from South Street to North Street, which will also clear up congestion for east-west traffic. The project has also included the rebuilding of South Street and the addition of brickwork in sidewalks and other features to enhance the visual appearance of the city's southern gateway and Park Square.

The Beacon Cinema complex and, on a smaller scale, the Union Federal redevelopment are expected to bring more people downtown, which revitalization proponents hope will also bolster the market for new and existing retailers, restaurants and other commercial and civic activity.

Progress seldom occurs in a straight line. At the same time these projects were advancing, another prominent site in that block became vacant in late summer with the closing of Bobby Hudpucker's restaurant, a business that had opened to great fanfare in a large retail space adjacent to the future Beacon site in 2007. In the past, that could have been seen as a more serious setback to the progress of downtown, while today the impact of this loss is in some measure offset by other advances.

Decades-long effort

Revitalization of Pittsfield's city center has been a long-standing, and often elusive, goal that has been a focus of successive city administrations, the business community and the general public for as long as downtown has been struggling.

Since the early 1970s, Pittsfield's downtown has experienced a mix of problems that are both specific to the city, and reflect patterns typical of many older communities in the latter decades of the 20th century. The shrinking and eventual departure of General Electric and the winnowing industrial base prompted a decline in the population, at the same time that retail activity shifted to outlying shopping centers. Some observers believe downtown's prospects suffered a major blow with the defeat of a plan to build a regional shopping mall near Park Square in the early 1980s and the subsequent construction and opening of the Pyramid Mall in Lanesboro. The demise of the city's downtown movie theaters and other attractions also reduced its role as a center of local entertainment and community activity.

At the same time, many public and private initiatives have sought to reverse this trend. These were undertaken on various scales – from large strategic master plans to individual ventures and community initiatives. Some took hold, resulting in short-term improvements in the downtown landscape, while others never got off the ground.

Despite the dashed hopes and frustrating sense of stagnation and decline, there was a consistent shared determination within the community and a common underlying strategy that persisted throughout these years. In basic terms, the focus has been on fostering a mix of offices, retailing, restaurants, arts and entertainment, and other community activities that would collectively bring people back into the downtown and attract investment. The ultimate goal has been to reach a "critical mass" that could sustain momentum despite the success or failure of any individual business or project.

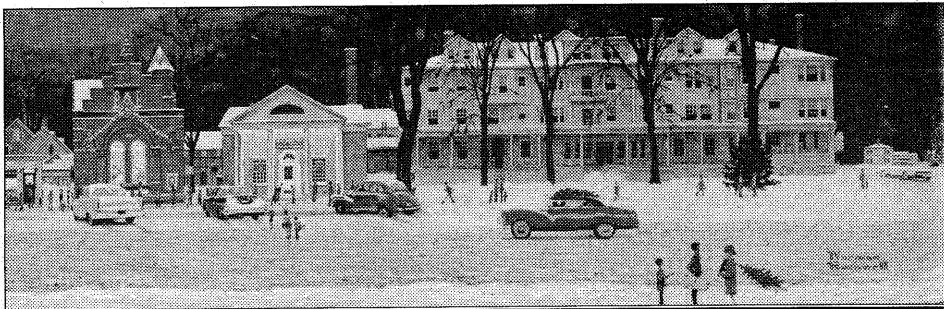
Because it has been an accumulation of many individual factors – including advances and setbacks – the process of revitalization has not been easy to characterize at any one time. In some cases change has been dramatic; in others it has been reflected in smaller signs. Since the mid 1990s, many problematic properties have been rectified, including the conversion of the former Newberry building into the Central Block, the replacement of the former England's building with a new financial center, and the demolition of the dangerous and unsightly Palace Theater building for a new pocket park and parking lot.

Other high-profile public or private projects have created new magnets for downtown, including the Colonial Theater, the move of Barrington Stage Company to Union Street and the redevelopment of the former Besse-Clark building into the Spice restaurant. Other private investments, such as the redevelopment of several buildings on upper North Street by George Whaling, have upgraded broader sections of the city center. The city's cultural mix has also become more diverse, due to an influx of artists and young people and the increasing presence of new ethnic communities.

All of these and other factors have contributed to a gradual evolution, rather than any single turning point. One longtime downtown business owner has suggested that the best way to appreciate the progress of revitalization would be to compare time-lapse views of North Street at various intervals over the years.

No one would say that downtown Pittsfield has reached its revitalization goals yet. There are still numerous vacancies, the sidewalks are often quiet, worries about street crime persist, and some businesses that banked on the advent of a new customer base have closed their doors. The current national and regional economy has also added a cloud of uncertainty.

These issues aside, there is a growing consensus that revitalization has been moving forward in recent years, and that the myriad of independent efforts and initiatives are collectively providing the elements that bring the elusive goal of critical mass ever closer. ♦



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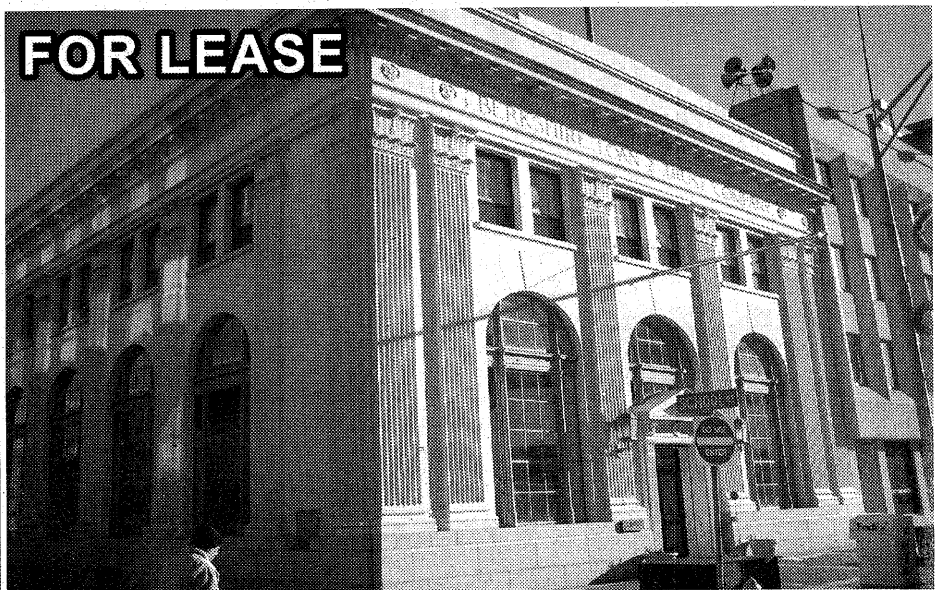
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