

Mayor James M. Ruberto: A Look Back

The Beacon and beyond

• The mayor and others reflect on his eight years in office — the good and the bad.

By Dick Lindsay

Berkshire Eagle Staff

PITTSFIELD

The Beacon Cinema project was stuck in the planning stages when James M. Ruberto took over as Pittsfield's mayor in January 2004.

Then, early in his tenure, Ruberto struggled to help developer Richard Stanley get the \$23 million project on a fast track toward completion.

Ward 6 Councilor John M.

Krol Jr., an aide to Ruberto at the time, thought the project was doomed.

"At one point, I even advised the mayor to forget the project because it seemed dead for the umpteenth time," said Krol, Ruberto's public-affairs coordinator from August 2005 to June 2007. "And yet he never quit on it. So today we have The Beacon Cinema — the house that Ruberto built."

The Beacon project involved the renovation and conversion of the Kinnell-Kresge building on North Street into a movie

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2011: Pittsfield Mayor James M. Ruberto, who has been at the city's helm since 2004, relaxes in his office at the end of his storied tenure. The creation of the Beacon Cinema complex ranks high on his list of successes.

Ben Garver (above) and Eagle file photos / Berkshire Eagle Staff

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Downtown revitalization a key component of Ruberto's legacy as mayor of Pittsfield

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theater, office and retail complex. It all opened in November 2009, primarily due to Ruberto's convincing the City Council, state and local lending institutions to help finance the project.

"Public-private partnerships are at the key of the success of everything that has occurred in Pittsfield the last eight years," Ruberto said. "Were it not for the generosity of the banks and companies ... we would not be nearly as advanced as we are today."

Ruberto, 65, was reflecting on his eight years in office — four consecutive two-year terms.

A Pittsfield native and a retired corporate executive in the plastics industry, Ruberto will end his tenure as mayor next month. He will be succeeded by former city councilor Daniel L. Bianchi, who will be sworn in on Jan. 2 as the city's 38th mayor.

Saying " my time has come to step aside," Ruberto decided last January to not seek a fifth term. Bianchi became the mayor- elect when he defeated councilor at large Peter M. Marchetti in the Nov. 8 election.

Only one Pittsfield mayor — James Fallon from 1938-47 — has served longer than Ruberto, whose successes include a cultural and economic resurgence downtown, an improved public school system, and the creation of jobs through new and existing business.

Among his failures, critics point to his inability to deliver economic success beyond North Street and a lack of attention to residential neighborhoods. They also cite how he wouldn't listen to opposing viewpoints, and they accuse him of playing political favoritism, especially during his final term.

Eariler this year, Ruberto appointed Tricia Farley-Bouvier, his public-affairs coordinator, as the director of administration services and named Greg Yon, husband of Ward 1 Councilor Christine Yon, as head of the Maintenance Department.

Both were done as acting appointments that didn't require council approval.

"[Ruberto] did many good things in the early years, but I felt he hurt his legacy in this last year," said Councilor at large Melissa Mazzeo. "He put too many of his friends into positions ... and he didn't seem to care."

Ruberto said one of his biggest failures in his eight years in office was in not recruiting more minorities to work at City Hall and in the public schools. Recruiting in both sectors would have better reflected the city's diversifying population, he said.

While Ruberto had his share of disappointments, his supporters say his positive attitude and love for his hometown are what Pittsfield needed to start its revitalization in the post-General Electric era.

Under Ruberto, empty North Street storefronts started to fill with merchants and restaurateurs thanks to the Beacon, the reopening of the Colonial Theatre, and Third Thursdays, the city-sponsored monthly block party from May through October.

"The enthusiasm he had was infectious," said City Council President Gerald M. Lee. "It started with the Colonial, and the revitalization took off from there."

Ruberto said he had a game plan for the downtown, and he stuck to it.

"The job of mayor is to set the vision for the community — plain and simple," he said.

Former Pittsfield Mayor Edward M. Reilly noted that "having a goal is key to being a successful mayor."

Reilly, the city's chief executive from 1992-1997, praised Ruberto for sticking with the plan to revive North Street.

"He gets a lot of credit for the downtown," Reilly said.

"If you're active and work hard, things will get done."

Ruberto also saw the need for school improvements by re-activating the School Building Needs Commission five years ago. The panel is studying several options for the Taconic High School campus: Build anew, renovate, or a combination of renovation and additions. The city and SBA have said the renovation of Pittsfield High School should follow the Taconic project.

With City Council support, Ruberto also boosted public education by adding 50 to 70 teachers and educational programs, he said. The mayor cited how the investment in the Pittsfield Public Schools has resulted in higher MCAS scores throughout the school system, along with a higher graduation rate and lower dropout rate at Pittsfield High and Taconic.

Ruberto's vision also included using — again with City Council backing — economic development funds and tax incentives to lure new employers. LTI Smart Glass and the Ice River Springs water bottling company were among businesses that brought new jobs with them and added to the city's tax base.

Lenox-based LTI relocated the majority of its manufacturing to Federico Drive, while Canadian-based Ice River opened a new bottling plant in a vacant warehouse on West Housatonic Street.

Nevertheless, Ruberto's political adversaries felt it wasn't enough.

"[He] did a fairly good job with economic development, but didn't do what he promised because he didn't put the most qualified people in charge," Mazzeo said.

Ruberto often was criticized for his appointments to the Pittsfield Economic Development Authority, charged with overseeing the marketing of the William Stanley Business Park. PEDa has landed only one tenant — Mountain One Financial of North Adams — since PEDa first gained partial control in 2005 of the 52-acre site once home to a General Electric power transformer plant.

Mountain One is building a new center at the corner of Silver Lake Boulevard and East Street, while a second potential William Stanley tenant, Action Ambulance, is negotiating a lease agreement with PEDa to build a new facility in the business park.

Action opened its Pittsfield operations Feb. 15 out of a facility on West Housatonic Street.

"A lot of talk of marketing, but virtually nothing has been done other than clearing away the buildings, leaving a giant open wound in the middle of the city," said a Pittsfield resident who didn't want his name published.

But the Ruberto era brought stability to city government, especially the working relationship between the mayor and council, according to City Clerk Linda M. Tyer.

"He was able to prove that government works best when there is collaboration between the mayor and City Council," she said.

Tyer was the Ward 3 councilor from 2004 to 2009, before Ruberto tabbed her as the replacement for City Clerk Jody L. Phillips, who vacated the position in January 2009 for a private-sector job.

Ruberto, however, credits Lee, the council president, with helping to maintain the stable mayor-council relationship. Lee has led the 11-member panel since Ruberto's first term.

"He has been a willing supporter and private critic," Ruberto said. "He helped me bend in some ways to reality when it came to some things I wanted accomplished."

Ruberto also forged a lasting political and personal bond with John Barrett III during Barrett's last six years as North Adams' mayor.

Barrett was voted out of office in November 2009 after a 26-year reign in the county's only other city.

The two grew closer after Ruberto's wife, Ellen, died in July 2009 after battling a rare form of cancer. Barrett understood the pain Ruberto was going through, having lost his wife, Eileen, to cancer in 1990 during his fifth year in office.

"They say it's lonely at the top. It's even lonelier when there's nobody to go home to," Barrett said.

Ruberto acknowledges that losing Ellen made his last term “much less fun.” Others said his close-minded managerial style worked against him in his administration’s later years.

Former city employee and longtime Ruberto critic Jeffrey Ferrin cited how Ruberto “failed to communicate with the public.”

“ When there was gangrelated activity three years ago, he never held a press conference to support his police department,” said Ferrin, who lost to councilor Paul J. Capitanio in the Ward 3 council race last month.

Ferrin and others also say Ruberto wouldn’t listen to opposing viewpoints, criticism that Ruberto backers say is unfounded.

“He had a very open admin-istration ... contrary to popular belief,” Lee said.

After Ruberto clears out his personal belongings from City Hall, he’ll head to his second home in Bonita Springs, Fla., and stay through spring training to watch his beloved Boston Red Sox in nearby Fort Myers. He said his longterm goal is to take his political skills to another community in need of revitalization.

Does that include a consulting job? Two years ago, after Barrett left the mayor’s office, Ruberto hired him to help him improve the delivery of city services to Pittsfield residents.

“Perhaps — you never rule out anything,” Ruberto said.

“If there is an opportunity to have influence, I would be interested.”

To reach Dick Lindsay: rlindsay@berkshireeagle.com, or (413) 496-6233 ‘ **They say it’s lonely at the top. It’s even lonelier when there’s nobody to go home to.**

Ex-North Adams Mayor John Barrett III, who, like Pittsfield Mayor James Ruberto, lost his wife to cancer ’