

NORTHAMPTON
EASTHAMPTON

Hampshire County sees progress emerge

By FRED CONTRADA
fcontrada@repub.com

NORTHAMPTON - The logjam appears to have broken.

After years of stagnation, the economy is flowing again in Hampshire County. While it might not result in an immediate-flood of money, officials in Northampton and Easthampton hope a rising tide of revenue will give their communities some relief.

For nearly a decade, as state aid declined, Northampton looked to the development potential on Village Hill for its economic future. Although several projects on the former Northampton State Hospital land are either starting or have come to fruition there recently, Mayor David J. Narkewicz and economic development director Terry Masterson say they were pleased to see progress in other parts of the city in 2013.

By Narkewicz' estimate, a dozen projects with a market value of \$85 million will bring in \$1 million in new revenues. Among these are two new office buildings on Atwood Drive, two new hotels and new automobile dealerships which are finally urging King Street towards its development potential.

Narkewicz was pleased to attend at a ribbon-cutting for a 40,000-square-foot office building next to the Clarion Hotel and Conference Center on Atwood Drive. Developer Curt Shumway is putting the finishing touches on a companion building. Both are in demand by medical offices.

"It's driven by the new model for health care," said Narkewicz, "the integration of medical services. They have great access to Interstate 91."

Shumway plans to build a new, 100-room hotel in place



Staff photo by JOHN SUCHOCKI

Terry Masterson, right, Northampton's director of economic and community development, and Mayor David Narkewicz talk about the city's future late last month.

of the Clarion that currently occupies the site. This and the 108-room Fairfield Inn under construction on Conz Street will bring in an estimated \$250,000 in new hotel room taxes.

New car dealerships on King Street have given life to a commercial strip that city leaders have been trying to jump start for years. The TommyCar Auto Group bought the former Kollmorgen complex, razed the building and is nearing completion of a Volkswagen dealership there.

Next door, Colvest has been working to revive the long dormant Hill & Dale mall. Greenfield Savings Bank has a new branch at the mall, and Pioneer Family Practice, an affiliate of Baystate Health, is a major tenant in the 22,000-square-foot main building.

Meanwhile, Lia Auto Group built a 9,000-square-foot Kia dealership on King Street next to its existing Honda dealership, and Northampton Ford relocated from its Damon Road site to a bigger site on nearby Bridge Road.

Projected improvement in and around the Three County Fairgrounds and the prospect of passenger rail returning by 2015 have created more possibilities for economic development.

"We're very bullish on Northampton right now," said Narkewicz. "People are making significant investments here."

A few miles down Route 5, the city Easthampton is hoping for similar gains.

In December, Easthampton received a \$400,000 state grant

to construct a boardwalk along Nashawannuck Pond. The scenic 30-acre pond is stocked with trout and almost in the center of downtown. Former Mayor Michael Tautznik and new Mayor Karen Cadieux both hope it will provide new recreational uses for locals and draw people from out of town.

"We're trying to develop Easthampton as a destination," said Tautznik, who long advocated for the project. "We envision a more robust downtown than we can support on our own."

Complementing the boardwalk is another project financed by the state that will include a boathouse and ramp to the pond and provide parking.

Although Easthampton has been drawing both energy and residents from the bigger, pricier Northampton for a while, leaders are not promoting it as another Northampton.

"We're very proud of this city," said Cadieux.

While its wealth of old textile mills became eyesores when that business stopped, they are now being converted into housing and commercial space and are perhaps the city's greatest hope for development. The MassWorks Infrastructure Program is providing \$2.75 million to connect several old mills and reconfigure them to face the Manhan Rail Trail, where they will attract more use. The money will also pay for new water mains, bury electrical lines and create space for emergency vehicle access.

Please see **Bullish**, Page D9

Bullish: Progress seen

Continued from Page D8

Tautznik also is excited about a pair of breweries which could help Easthampton grow a reputation in the world of beer. The Abandoned Building Brewery is setting up shop in one old mill, while the Fort Hill Brewery is planning to open on Fort Hill Road.

The state Cultural Council has already paved the way for what is billed as "a pedestrian experience" by naming Cottage Street a cultural district, and the rail trail has been drawing people on bicycles for several years.

Put it all together and Easthampton promises to get along very well as its own destination.

"We're not the county seat (as Northampton is)," said Tautznik. "And we don't have Smith College. But Easthampton is centrally located, has low taxes and affordable housing prices."