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Middletown's North End Seeing Growth, Change

New Construction, Businesses Inspire Hope

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MIDDLETOWN —

Monday's official opening of the new Community Health Center building on Main Street is a milestone in the slow but steady revival of the North End, and many view the state-of-the-art, environmentally friendly brick building as a symbol of how far the neighborhood has come.

The North End has long been plagued by poverty, dilapidated housing and drug problems. But these days, say local activists, residents and business owners, the neighborhood is slowly turning around.

By the end of the year, the north end of Main Street will have two brand-new buildings — the CHC building, and another at 505 Main St., replacing the building that collapsed in the winter of 2011. Add expanding businesses, a thriving neighborhood elementary school, a popular farmer's market, a new community garden on Portland Street, and the sense of growth and change in the North End has many feeling optimistic.

"We've depended so long on the central business district to be that economic engine. It's so nice to see that drive for what's bringing people to our town has another dimension now with the North End," said Mark Masselli, chief executive officer of the CHC.

His company's \$17 million, 48,000-square-foot primary care medical building held its grand opening Saturday. Centralizing the location of the CHC, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, will bring doctors and other medical professionals to work, eat and shop in the neighborhood.

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Masselli said it is important for the CHC to have a close relationship with North End businesses to work with them to continue to improve the area.

"We share Main Street. Forget what part of the community we come from," Masselli said.

Phil Ouellette, the owner of Eli Cannon's Tap Room, located next door to the new CHC building, said teamwork will help all the Main Street businesses grow and compete with other towns.

"It's not me against Luce [Restaurant]. It's Main Street Middletown against West Hartford. Let's compete against other Main Streets," he said.

'On Right Track'

Ouellette and longtime Eli Cannon's manager Carrie Carella recently opened the NoRA Cupcake Company and Eli Cannon's Trading Company across the street, in a portion of the former Little Tibet building. Together they are trying to give the neighborhood a new identity — "NoRA," or north of Rapallo Avenue.

"It's a marathon, it's not a sprint. It took the North End a long time to get this way and it might take a little while longer to get squared away but we're on the right track," Ouellette said.

As the majority of Main Street celebrated a renaissance in the early 2000s, the north end of the street still struggled with violence, drug activity, neglected buildings, absentee landlords and a generally scary reputation. More recently, the \$22 million Wharveside Commons housing development, completed in 2007, has drawn a different, less transient type of resident to the North End.

Masselli said he is surprised how well North End businesses have fared in the last few years, compared to national trends. He said the area's diversity and walkability have allowed businesses to flourish.

"It's booming right now in the North End," said Michael DiPiro, one of the owners of the accounting firm Guilmartin, DiPiro & Sokolowski and co-owner of 505 Main St. The two-story buick building collapsed in February 2011 under the weight of that winter's heavy ice and snow. In the wake of the disaster, DiPiro and Michael Sokolowski decided not only to stay in the North End, but to construct an even bigger building, a show of faith in the neighborhood, DiPiro said.

"There's a collaboration between everyone — the city, the Downtown Business District, the chamber [of commerce], Wesleyan. That's part of the reason we decided to rebuild," DiPiro said.

He said the investment by business owners, including by the Community Health Center, has made a huge difference in the North End's image.

"I got here in 1984, and it's completely transformed itself. It's a great place to come and spend some time," DiPiro said.

DiPiro's and the CHC buildings and the Liberty Square project — the Peter Harding building that houses the popular It's Only Natural market — will be the catalyst for neighborhood growth throughout the next decade, said North End Action Team Executive Director Izzi Greenberg.

"We, I think, are really on the right track," Greenberg said. "The commercial district certainly is growing. The investment by Peter Harding, for instance, that was in retrospect even more of a milestone for this next wave in revitalization of this neighborhood than we thought."

Mayor Daniel Drew attributed much of the neighborhood's successes to the individuals working hard to change the long-standing negative perception of the North End.

"We have a lot of devoted and dedicated people working to improve that part of town," Drew said. "We need to put in place strategies to help us continue to advance that growth. I see only good things happening."

Drew said a visible police presence in the neighborhood and business incentives will help the area continue to grow.

He said the community's affection for the North End was evident several years ago when a fire gutted the landmark O'Rourke's Diner in 2006. Two years later, thanks to a massive fundraising effort, a completely refurbished diner reopened.

"The whole community banded together to bring back a local landmark," Drew said. "You can't replace that kind of deep commitment by your residents to the health and vibrancy of your community."

Still Much To Do

The North End boasts diverse dining options, including Tibetan, Vietnamese, Mexican, Jamaican, Italian and Chinese restaurants. Larry McHugh, president of the Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce, said the international flavor has drawn people from outside Middletown.

"When you go into our restaurants, they're all destinations. People come from all over to go those. That also generates into excitement for people about what's going on in Middletown," he said.

The North End's boosters admit, though, that housing in the area could be improved.

In addition to the 96-unit Wharfside Commons, 17 houses in the area were renovated last year by the Nehemiah Housing Corp. – a small amount of progress as the city works on improving the quality of North End housing.

"It's a dynamic neighborhood and yet there's still more to do," Masselli said. "Housing issues are still paramount. We really need quality market-rate housing in the North End and we need people who live downtown to have disposable income."

"There has to be a little more effort on home ownership. Not everybody can own, but you just want enough that creates that level of civility in the neighborhoods," Masselli said.

Greenberg said the city has made progress with enforcing building codes to improve housing quality, but more still needs to be done.

"Another big hurdle for this neighborhood is having the ability to proactively inspect rental units for

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safety and health violations. If there were a mandatory two-year inspection you wouldn't ever have families living in such degradation," she said.