

Pawcatuck ready to pop?

FROM A1

property owners and successful business owners remain bullish on the downtown. They have improved their properties and are planning to do more.

"If we just get these buildings updated, people will come. I'm fully rented now and when I finish the two apartments, they will rent quickly," he said. "There are people who want to come down here."

Lathrop said that his grandfather used to run a tire shop in the same building that he is in and then his father ran his business there, as well. Since opening Best Energy downtown more than five years ago, Lathrop said his business has increased.

"So it's the romantic notion of my family business and the traffic," he said about his decision to move downtown.

Dave Hammond, chairman of the Economic Development Commission, said he and other members have worked closely with Vincent to target certain areas that would benefit from rewriting of zoning regulations to spur investment. One of those initiatives resulted in the new PV-5 zone for 156 properties in the downtown that expands the list of permitted commercial uses, loosens restrictions on floor-area ratio, open space, setbacks, height, parking and other requirements, increases the density for mixed commercial and residential projects and streamlines the permitting process.

"Pawcatuck is never going to look like downtown Mystic but we need to contemporize the uses that are allowed there," he said.

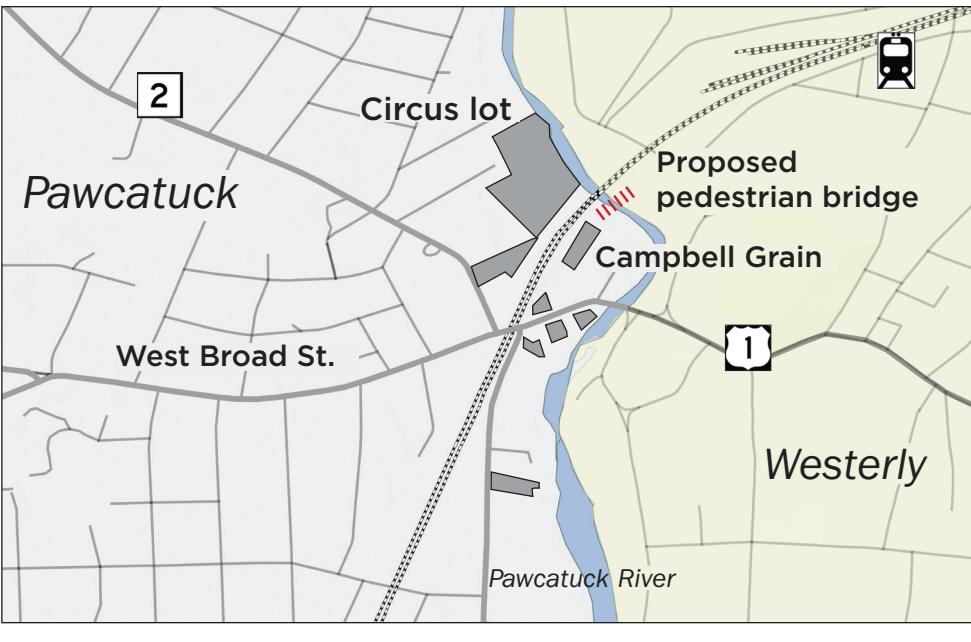
Another initiative resulted in the establishment of the Heritage Mill District, which allows a wide variety of commercial uses in the underused mills along Mechanic Street and River Road, beyond their historical manufacturing use.

It also streamlines the permitting process by allowing planning staff to approve some uses without zoning commission review and loosens lot size requirements.

These efforts and others have not been without community input. Last year alone, the EDC, along with Vincent's office, held 20 community forums in various areas of town to get comments and suggestions on development and zoning issues from residents, businesses and property owners.

Barriers to investment'

What may turn out to be the most significant change to drive investment is the town's decision to decrease the "look-back" period on improvements



SOURCES: TOWN OF STONINGTON, CONN. DEEP, RIGIS

PROPERTY UPDATES

Dave Hammond, chairman of the Economic Development Commission, and Jason Vincent, director of planning, offered the updates on some of the vacant properties:

34 W. Broad St.: This long-vacant building was sold last year to a California man who is working with an architect and exploring code and zoning requirements for a renovation.

46 W. Broad St.: Parties are interested in the vacant Citizen's Bank building and town officials expect a new tenant when it comes up for lease this spring.

27 W. Broad St.: The abandoned Campbell Grain

building has been partially dismantled. Vincent said the town is working with the owner to find a firm to complete the project.

59 W. Broad St.: It is only a matter of time before the vacant building that last housed the West Broad Street Bistro restaurant is rented.

20 Mechanic St.: Parties are interested in the former Han's Dynasty restaurant building.

It works like this: The additional taxes generated through private investment in the downtown would then be reinvested into downtown upgrades such as sidewalks, lighting, landscaping and possibly a pedestrian bridge into Westerly at the end of Cogswell Street and the development of the so-called "circus lot" a vacant 5.6-acre parcel at the end of Noyes Avenue that has frontage along the river.

"If neighborhoods look attractive, people will want to invest in them," Vincent said.

Linking with Westerly

The pedestrian bridge project was first designed 15 years ago to link up with a proposed Westerly riverwalk that never happened. The bridge, which would need to span just 75 feet of the river, would link the end of Cogswell Street, which is home to the Riverwalk condominium project and two renovated mixed-use buildings, with High Street in Westerly in the vicinity of the train station and the Savoy bookstore.

Existing stone abutments could be used. The project is estimated to cost about \$1 million and there would have to be easement negotiations with property owners in Westerly and with Amtrak, which owns the adjacent railroad.

It would provide an easy and scenic pedestrian link for people in downtown Westerly to explore downtown Pawcatuck and vice versa.

"Targeted public investment can create private investment in the community," Vincent said.

While the town could ap-

Above: From left, an abandoned pump house on the former circus lot at the end of Noyes Avenue; the partially demolished Campbell Grain building at 27 W. Broad St.; the former West Broad Street Bistro building, at 59 W. Broad St.

At left: The dark gray shaded areas on the map show vacant properties in downtown Pawcatuck. The proposed pedestrian bridge over the Pawcatuck River is shown in red.

PHOTOS BY JOE WOJAS/THE DAY

MAP BY SCOTT RITTER/THE DAY

"We've made a lot of structural changes. The downtown hasn't popped yet but it's on the verge of popping," said First Selectman Rob Simmons. "If I was an investor seeking real estate in the town, I'd invest in Pawcatuck. That's where you're going to get the most return on your investment. It's where the opportunity lies."

"We're clearing the obstacles to development but the work is by no means done. We now have to attract private investment," he added. "We also want to make sure the municipality does not get in the way. We have to stay the course and not be cynical."

The newest business to arrive in the downtown is Revive Salon, which is located in a two-story brick building at 29 W. Broad St.

"I just have a really good feeling about being in downtown Pawcatuck. There's a young, fresh vibe down here and I want to be part of the rebuild," owner Jen Keena said. "It's almost a little cityish."

Keena said she was attracted by the brick building and the visibility for her business, which is passed by 26,000 cars a day. Since moving to her new location in September, she said her business has tripled.

'People will come'

One of downtown's biggest believers is Jim Lathrop, who owns Best Energy in the visible space he leases at the corner of West Broad and Mechanic streets.

He has been trying — unsuccessfully, so far — to acquire the two buildings on either side of his, one of which was badly damaged by fire and is boarded up. He also owns the building at 29 W. Broad St., which is home to Keena's salon, a tattoo shop and an engineering firm. He is in the process of renovating the second floor into two apartments.

"It's these and other blighted properties in the downtown that have really affected ev-

that trigger costly flood elevation improvements.

Previously, property owners were limited to investing 50 percent of their property's value on improvements over a five-year period if they wanted to avoid having to comply with current flood elevation requirements. That often deterred property owners from investing and led to properties being abandoned, Hammond said.

Now, they can spend up to 50 percent in one year, allowing them to make significant investments over a few years without the additional cost of flood upgrades.

There is also an effort to get the flood gates along River Road certified by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which would lower insurance rates in mill areas. The town also has obtained a grant to study a walkway along the river behind the mills.

"We're trying to remove the barriers to investment," Vincent said. "There's not one golden bullet, we have to try a lot of different things."

"You have to have consumer confidence to attract investment. Each step we've taken is designed to do that," added Hammond.

The two men pointed out that unlike downtown Westerly, downtown Pawcatuck does not have a "major benefactor." That is a reference to mutual fund company chairman and philanthropist Chuck Royce, who has renovated the Ocean House, Watch Hill Inn and Weekapaug Inn and owns and has rehabilitated many downtown Westerly properties.

Hammond said the EDC is in the early stages of looking into creating a tax increment financing district, which would provide needed funding for downtown improvements.

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