

The Portwalk revival

Demolition of downtown eyesore marks the start of a new era for downtown Portsmouth

By Michael McCord

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On June 11 in Portsmouth, demolition began of the Parade Office Mall, an eyesore remnant from the urban renewal craze of the 1970s. What comes next represents the latest — and most ambitious — chapter in the “new urbanism” transformation of downtown Portsmouth: Portwalk.

“We’re delighted to be moving full speed ahead on Portwalk, and to continue helping Portsmouth develop its vision for the city’s Northern Tier,” said Jeff Johnston, a principal at Cathartes Private Investments, which owns the property. “We’re proud to bring this high-quality hotel downtown, create good jobs for Portsmouth, and formally begin Portwalk, a development that has received tremendous community support every step of the way.”

In place of what was universally hailed as the ugliest building in Portsmouth — some even said in the entire country — the first Portwalk building will be a 128-room, LEED-certified Residence Inn by Marriott that also will include retail shops and dining along the street level.

Johnston said the hotel, which is being co-developed with Schleicher and Stebbins Hotels, is scheduled to open in summer of 2010.

Since it purchased the parking lot-heavy Parade Mall property in 2002, Cathartes Privates Investments — a 17-year-old private company with more than \$600 million in projects in New England — has intended to remake the Northern Tier area that encompasses Deer, High and Hanover streets to Maplewood Avenue. The goal is to create a pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use area that will draw people and commerce to the downtown area.

Johnston said the first phase is the 131-room Hilton Garden Inn and the Harbour Hill Condominiums, which opened in 2006. He said that when the project is completed, Portwalk will ultimately feature four LEED-certified, mixed-use buildings. In addition to the hotel, Portwalk’s master plan includes 36 downtown condominiums, 15 to 20 retail shops and restaurants, and more than 175,000 square feet of downtown office space situated above Portsmouth’s first underground parking garage.

Johnston said the development will include Portwalk Place, a new private street connecting Deer Street with Hanover Street, which is designed to extend the Vaughan Mall walkway to complete a pedestrian loop and create a walkable connection between downtown and the Northern Tier.

“This fits into the historical nature of Portsmouth,” Johnston said.

‘More vibrancy’

The project is already drawing positive reviews. In April, the New England Chapter of the Congress for New Urbanism awarded Portwalk’s lead architects, Boston-based Elkus Manfredi, its “2009 Urbanism Award” for Portwalk’s sustainable, mixed-use design and architecture.

Elkus Manfredi has designed high-profile downtown projects in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Seattle.

The project also could be a needed economic boost for Portsmouth, Johnston said. The hotel — which should take about one year to complete — is projected to generate approximately \$250,000 in new annual tax revenue for the city, create 200 construction jobs and as many as 75 permanent hotel and retail jobs.

Chuck Locke, a co-owner of Gove Construction, said his Portsmouth-based site development company will add to its 25-employee staff because of its work as a subcontractor for the job.

“These are local tradesmen who are anxious to get back to work,” he said.

“Portwalk is an exciting mixed-use project that will add more vibrancy to our downtown’s northern tier area,” said Portsmouth city manager John Bohenko. “It’s wonderful to redevelop the old Parade Mall site with a project like Portwalk that will complement our unique downtown very well and will offer an active, pedestrian-friendly destination for residents and visitors alike.”

The development is long overdue, said Lisa DeStefano of Portsmouth-based DeStefano Architects, the project’s local architect.

DeStefano also has a personal perspective as a Portsmouth native whose family used to live in the Northern Tier before the arrival of bulldozers and parking lots in the 1960s and 1970s. She said that the city had begun planning for the area’s redevelopment as far back as 1995 and the fruits of the studies and the city’s engagement to work with developers was bearing results.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity to see this growth in the north end,” she said. “Every time I started a presentation about Portwalk, the one thing I noted initially is that the existing Parade Mall was not good urban development because it discouraged the pedestrian experience and was more focused on parking. This development allows for proper urban planning, and it will bring back the vitality to this area.”

DeStefano said one of the strengths of the project will be to draw larger retailers into the downtown area, where space has been at a premium.

Johnston said the development will proceed in phases — in part due to the sluggish investment market and also to help the area absorb the dramatic changes to come.

“I think it’s much easier for the city because it would have been a large disruption,” he said. “This allows us to use the rest of the site for staging and it makes it more financially manageable for us.”

Cathartes has acquired and developed more than 40 properties, including office and retail projects on Elm Street in Manchester and at Fox Run in Newington.

More information about the project can be found at www.portwalknh.com.

<http://nhbr.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090703/INDUSTRY09/906309919/-1/NEWS05>