

Downtown New London Reaches for New Heights with Help from NLC's America Downtown Program

by Dolores Palma, Doyle Hyett and Denise Belser

Today, there is a vibrancy that is uniquely New London, Conn., — thanks to a downtown that is full of pride, a rich maritime history, forward-looking businesses, popular restaurants, creative galleries, a bustling nightlife and strong family values. The city and local non-profit groups have taken many steps to help the community realize its vision of downtown New London as a more vibrant and attractive place to live, work and play.

Set in motion nine years ago when the city first took advantage of NLC's America Downtown Program, the resulting Downtown Action Agenda has come to fruition, and along with it the need to define the next phase of action for moving downtown forward, according to Martin Berliner, New London's recently retired city manager.

Last October, New London's City Council generated a lot of buzz when it announced that NLC's downtown technical assistance experts, HyettPalma, would be returning to the city to update the 2001 Downtown Action Agenda. News quickly spread throughout the community, as the Office of Development and Planning contacted members of various downtown groups to schedule site visits and meetings over a four-day period. Although some questioned why the City Council would ask the outside consulting firm to return for a second time in nine years, most agreed that an outside perspective would be paramount to the success of the city's overall economic development activities.

The NLC team welcomed the opportunity to revisit New London in late 2010 to assess how well the community had implemented its America Downtown Action Agenda since it was completed in 2001 and to launch the America Downtown update service offered in partnership with NLC. The opportunity to update a Downtown Action Agenda has recently been made available to cities that have previously participated in the America Downtown Program and would like to move their downtown enhancement efforts



Hygienic Arts is among the enhancements in downtown New London, Conn.

on to a new level. NLC launched America Downtown in 1992 as part of a national program to provide direct, hands-on help to community leaders who want to start, refocus or energize their downtown enhancement efforts.

The America Downtown Program adheres to a proven and inclusive method of engaging residents, city officials, and downtown business and property owners in cities and towns across the country. Many New London locals recalled this process from almost a decade ago and came to the highly anticipated October town hall meetings fully prepared to articulate their hopes and aspirations for their downtown's future.

New London residents quickly listed the reasons why the city's present architecture and deep water harbors on the Long Island sound are two of the city's biggest assets to be marketed to investors and new businesses. The recurring question was how to accomplish this task and which organization(s) would have this responsibility.

While those participating in the meetings agreed that downtown New London has seen vast improvements over the past nine years, some of the same issues that were present in 2001 were also discussed — remaining vacant store fronts, the desire for additional foot traffic, insufficient street parking for downtown residents, limited public transportation to access downtown including the disconnect between local colleges and the downtown district and inconvenient traffic flow for both residents and visitors.

Very little discussion took place about the landmark Kelo legal case and the bitter taste

that ensued for many who protested against the city's decision to forcibly relocate property owners under the state's eminent domain rules. Instead, high praise was given to city officials and their private sector partners for staying the course and completing many highly visible initiatives recommended in the original America Downtown Action Agenda, including a downtown park along the Thames River, construction of more than 100 market-rate downtown housing units and the rehabilitation of more than 100 existing downtown housing units, beautification programs focusing on improvements to the façades of downtown's historic buildings, increased street lighting, better street signage and improved relations with the local police department, especially during SailFest, the city's largest maritime festival.

According to former mayor and current City Councilor Rob Pero, "We have made a good deal of progress and downtown revitalization remains a top priority."

Last June, the city completed a highly anticipated project to restore the historic Parade area in front of downtown's Union Station and adjacent to the municipal public parking garage, as an open plaza with public art, a fountain and community gathering areas offering views of downtown and the waterfront.

"A key goal," said Pero, "is to enhance the experience of visitors to New London and passengers on Amtrak, the bus lines, Cross Sound Ferry and Shoreline East Commuter Line. These downtown enhancements have brought in substantial new revenue to the city since com-

Need Help With Your Downtown? Meet one-on-one with NLC's America Downtown consultants, HyettPalma, at the upcoming 2011 Congressional City Conference in Washington, D.C. At no charge, HyettPalma will offer professional advice to help city officials tackle their tough downtown issues. For more information, contact Denise Belser at (202) 626-3028.

pletion of our initial America Downtown Action Agenda."

Apart from the Downtown Action Agenda, the city recently approved a \$6 million bond issue to further enhance downtown's marine facilities and a \$10 million bond issue to improve sidewalks and infrastructure in downtown and throughout New London.

"The task of continuing the vision for the city's downtown is essential, but at times can also be somewhat daunting given its importance to the city as a whole," said Berliner, the former city manager.

One of the great joys of New London residents and visitors alike is the organic culture of downtown that has developed over the last decade. The upspring of a growing restaurant, arts and cultural scene along Bank Street and State Street — as new businesses such as Chaplin's Restaurant, Pincl A Unique Boutique, and the Provenance Center Gallery, join long-time downtown anchors such as Hygienic Arts (created in the old Hygienic Restaurant building) and Dutch Tavern (an Eugene O'Neill haunt) — is now a testament to the new, blended vibrancy of downtown

New London.

Impressive strides have been made in implementing New London's 2001 America Downtown Action Agenda. And, with New London's 2011 Downtown Action Agenda now in place — intended to guide the downtown enhancement effort over the next five-years — the community is motivated anew.

"Propelling downtown on to even greater levels of success will be a challenge that requires collaboration among our residents, business improvement organizations, and city hall," said Pero. "I have no doubt that we will be more than able to meet that challenge."

Details: For more information on the America Downtown Program, visit the America Downtown webpage at www.nlc.org/enterpriseprograms/ Americadowntown or e-mail Denise Belser at belser@nlc.org.

Dolores Palma and Doyle Hyett are the founders of HyettPalma Inc., a national consulting firm specializing in the economic renaissance of downtowns and older business districts. Denise Belser is the NLC program director for America Downtown.

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Government" will feature results of three recently completed surveys of sustainability across U.S. cities, towns, and counties. Speakers include Ken Rosenfeld, director of NLC's Sustainability Program, Tad McGalliard, director of sustainability at the International City/County Management Association and Jared Lang, program manager, Green Government Initiative, National Association of Counties.

The second workshop, "Building a Green Economy: Strategies for Cities" will feature representatives from local government, research, and business to discuss how public-private partnerships are being developed to move policies at the local, state and federal level that will strengthen local economies and create quality green jobs.

To learn more, view the on-line program of events, or register to attend please visit: www.greenjobsconference.org.

Details: To learn more about NLC's Center for Research and Innovation's work on sustainability issues, contact Tammy Zborel at zborel@nlc.org.