

# Downtown Bridgeport under construction

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*The Arcade Mall*

BRIDGEPORT -- Five years ago, Bridgeport's downtown offered little but fast-food chain eateries, marginal shops and small businesses scattered among empty, graffiti-defaced storefronts.

People visited with a purpose -- their job, jury duty at the Fairfield County Superior Courthouse, shopping for clothes at Jimmy's Army and Navy Store -- then quickly departed. Since then, several of the vacant, deteriorated buildings began to gleam again, hundreds of residential units were created and new restaurants began to give people a reason to visit and, most importantly, stick around downtown.

The rocky economic climate has slowed that progress significantly over the last two years. Funding sources are scarce, leaving developers to scramble to get projects -- some announced with fanfare years ago -- off the boards and into the ground. Compounding the problem is the reluctance by commercial and retail enterprises to invest in a new venture.

Chosen in 2005 to transform several blighted blocks owned by the city, developer Eric Anderson, of Urban Green Builders, has witnessed the ups and downs of downtown revitalization first-hand. With Anderson's renovation of the Citytrust building at 955 Main St., the Arcade shopping mall on the next block and the 144 Golden Hill St. building, more than 200 units of housing have been added to the downtown inventory. Those projects are now 95 percent occupied, he said.



*Apartment building at 144 Golden Hill St*



*City Trust building*

Kristal Francis, who moved into the Citytrust building in September 2008 as she awaited renovations to be complete on the former Arcade Hotel, said her decision to live downtown was easy. "I went one day after work to see the (Arcade) building and knew right away that this was the next move I was going to make. I wanted to be a part of change, an urban pioneer," she said.

"Once the Arcade was open and ready, I'll admit I was a little sad to move out of the Citytrust building," Francis said, "but once I saw that atrium, I started to smile again. It was nice to see that the apartments are not cookie-cutter and bland." Despite his success providing affordable, attractive housing units downtown, Anderson has found it difficult to fill retail spaces in the three buildings. "The retail market has been very tough," he said, "but everyone else has been going toward lots of vacancies and we've been slowly getting people in."

So far, the Main Street Pharmacy, a Citibank branch, clothing store GumDrop Swap and eateries Amici Miei and Fraiche Burger are the only retail tenants in Anderson's three buildings. A photography studio, an ice cream shop and a cupcake store are scheduled to open soon. GumDrop Swap owner Gabby Fludd said when she saw the Arcade, "I fell in love with it and I said this is where I want to be."

At GumDrop Swap customers drop off their children's clothing, collect points known as "gumdrops" for each item and use those to acquire clothing of a different size. To swap, customers must pay a low monthly fee. Years ago, the Bridgeport resident was one of the first tenants of the Read's Artspace building. "It was my first home when I moved to Connecticut," Fludd said. "I know it's safe to live and work here."

To get things moving again, Anderson is working with the Connecticut Housing Finance Authority for financing to fit out retail spaces in his buildings, including a planned grocery store at the Arcade. Also, because of the issues he has faced, Anderson has decided to delay plans to build a new tower building in the Downtown North redevelopment zone, consisting of the blocks bordered by Gold, Golden Hill, Main and Middle streets and half of the blocks on either side of Main Street between Golden Hill and Fairfield Avenue.

Instead, he will focus on renovating two dangerously deteriorated structures on the site that now are surrounded by concrete jersey barriers to prevent pedestrians from getting too close. He recently applied to CHFA for funding and is waiting for the agency's response.



*Kuchma property at the corner of Fairfield Ave. and Lafayette Circle, in downtown Bridgeport,*

Developer Phil Kuchma knows about waiting. He has waited nearly two years to fill the gap created when the failing economy forced a major funding source to drop its backing for a mixed-use building he was building at Lafayette Circle and Fairfield Avenue. The half-finished structure has come to epitomize all the other stalled efforts to revitalize downtown.

Kuchma said he expects his final funding source -- a loan from CHFA -- to be in place soon. Once that happens, construction work will move "full-speed ahead." He estimates residents could be moving in to the residential units by late fall. Kuchma said he also expects a dry clean business, liquor store and a unisex hair salon to occupy three of the seven retail spaces on the building's ground floor. They will join the restaurants already on lower Fairfield Avenue in Kuchma's Bijou Square, including Epernay Bistro, Las Vetas Lounge and Two Boots.

Those eateries are doing well, he said, especially when events are held at the nearby Klein Memorial Auditorium and the Arena at Harbor Yard. "There is always additional business when there are events going on," he said. "It really changes the amount of people who come to the restaurant very noticeably." Kuchma said in recent years he has seen a lot of new faces downtown. "Most of the business that comes here is from the suburbs," he said. "Most of the time I see people I don't know. That's what I want to see." Kuchma said he also regularly gets calls from people looking for space to open a new dining spot downtown.

That's music to Brandon Hall's ears. Hall, a principal in Norwalk-based Forstone Capital, has contractors working on interior demolition of the water-damaged Mechanics & Farmers Bank building at 930 Main St. "We are excited," he said. "In the state it was in, you couldn't even walk potential tenants through the building."

Hall said once completed, he envisions retail, commercial and residential tenants in the once-grand stone structure. Forstone has also seen progress in the buildings the business purchased in partnership with Spinnaker Real Estate, also of Norwalk. The two companies purchased a nine-building portfolio from People's United Bank in late 2008. The building at 779 Main St. was renovated last year and now houses nonprofit

Casey Family Services. The partners will also soon welcome Wholesome Wave, a nonprofit focused on nutrition, into a street level space at 189 Main St. The company is moving to Bridgeport from Westport.

Despite the signs of improvement downtown, though, plenty of work remains to be done. The stretch of Main Street through northern downtown is still flanked by blighted or boarded-up buildings -- like the Poli and Majestic Theaters the city has put up for sale -- and weed-choked parking lots. Adam Wood, Mayor Bill Finch's chief of staff, said the city has started to clean up the blocks to the south of the Cardinal Shehan Center to make the area more "aesthetically pleasing" by demolishing the former convenience store building at 1290 Main St. several weeks ago.



*333 State St. in Bridgeport CT*

The lot will be used as a municipal parking lot until a development plan is approved for the area, said Donald Eversley, the city's economic and community development director. "We are reviewing the condition of the remaining structures on that block to determine their viability for improvement and development," he added.

The city has also been assured by owners of the building that formerly housed the Azteca and Ocean Sea Grill restaurants, across the street from the shuttered theaters, that their site will not be inactive much longer as it is undergoing renovations.

Wood said the city's redevelopment hopes have been slowed -- and, for years, nonexistent -- by the lack of funds for the expensive makeover of the many old buildings. But, he added, officials are confident that now that downtown revitalization has begun, nothing will stand in the way of continued progress.