

New development director sees potential

Written by Brad Durrell
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Bringing home the bacon. That's what Mayor Bill Finch hopes new Economic Development Director Donald Eversley can do for the city.

While many people have roles in turning around Bridgeport, Finch said Monday, the economic development director's position is key to creating jobs and expanding the tax base.

"It's the one we really look to set the tone and bring home the bacon," Finch said during a City Hall Annex press conference to announce the selection of Eversley to fill the post.



Donald Eversley

Eversley was president of the Providence Economic Development Partnership (PEDP), an economic development agency in Rhode Island's largest city, from 2004 to mid-2007.

Finch said Eversley played a role in the resurgence of Providence, often cited as one of the great urban turn-around stories in the nation. Eversley also worked in economic development in the Bronx, N.Y., and has been a government, corporate and entertainment attorney.

"Providence," Finch emphasized, is the one word that best describes why Eversley was chosen for the Bridgeport job after a national search.

"We know that Don's record in Providence was fantastic," said the mayor, also praising Eversley's "capacity, personality and perseverance."

For his part, Eversley said Bridgeport can be revitalized despite the difficult economic times.

"We can adapt, change and cultivate the processes that have worked in other places," he said, noting his familiarity with urban renewal efforts in cities along the Northeastern waterfront, from Baltimore to Portland, Maine.

He said Bridgeport has an advantage because it's inexpensive compared to the rest of Fairfield County and the entire greater New York City region, where the economy remains relatively strong.

"The opportunities — the upside potential — are very, very unusual for this area," said Eversley, adding most nearby communities are fully developed or don't want large-scale development.

He said many developers flocked to Providence "unannounced" for the same reasons — it was an attractive, less expensive alternative to overpriced, nearby Boston.

"Money finds opportunity," Eversley said.

'A commanding presence'

Council President Thomas C. McCarthy, who worked with a committee that conducted the job search, said he was impressed with Eversley.

"When he interviewed, he popped," McCarthy said. "He has a very commanding presence. When he speaks, you lean in and listen. I think he'll be a great salesman for Bridgeport."

Paul Timpanelli, Bridgeport Regional Business Council president, said Bridgeport can learn from what happened in Providence.

"Bridgeport is very similar to Providence, with similar opportunities, similar challenges — and they overcame many of those challenges," Timpanelli said

He said all the high-caliber people who applied for the Bridgeport job says a lot about the city's development potential.

Edward Lavernoich, city interim economic development director, said Eversley had "a proven track record." Lavernoich said Eversley found ways to get business and real estate projects financed in Providence.

The PEDP operates a commercial loan program, provides technical assistance to businesses, and advises city leaders on development strategy.

Finch and others praised Lavernoich for serving as interim development director for much of 2008. Finch said Lavernoich, who now likely will go back to being a deputy director, had done "double duty."

There also was praise for the City Council for increasing the Economic Development Department budget in fiscal year 2008-09 to create new positions, based on an outside committee's recommendations.

Eversley agreed that Bridgeport has many challenges. "I arrive in your city with no magic bullets or solutions," he said.

"We must re-adjust in the current economic climate," said Eversley, pointing to the real

estate downturn and financing problems for developers. This may mean altering plans when necessary, such as pursuing less condominium development due to the weak housing market.

But Bridgeport should be boosted from the many people rediscovering the benefits of urban living, such as being able to live close to a workplace, Eversley said.

A major reason why the city is ripe for development? "The receipt you're getting at the gas station these days," he said.

The city also has the potential to offer "the human interaction I sense many people are missing in smaller and more rural communities," Eversley said.

To spur private investment, Bridgeport must increase cultural opportunities, create jobs and provide "a good, clean living environment," he said.

Green development

Eversley said the city has \$2.3 billion of projects in "the pipeline." He is particularly eager to work with Finch on making the city a more environmentally-friendly community with energy-sustainable projects.

"That's the wave of the future," he said.

Eversley is expected to start his job sometime next week. Nancy Hadley vacated the economic development director's position after Finch was elected in late 2007. Hadley had been appointed by former Mayor John M. Fabrizi.

Eversley grew up in New York City and said he has passed through Bridgeport regularly in his travels, watching the development progress. He has a brother who lives in Milford.

For the past year, he has been a development finance and strategy consultant in Providence.

Eversley left his position in Providence after Mayor David N. Cicilline was re-elected in late 2006, blaming his departure on budget

considerations and the fact Cicilline is preparing a run for governor. He said this meant decisions were being made in “a more political footing.”

He has experience working in a city with a history of political corruption.

Providence Mayor Buddy Cianci, largely credited with the city’s resurgence, was convicted of federal corruption in 2002 and served almost four years in the same federal prison camp as former Bridgeport Mayor Joseph P. Ganim, who was convicted of corruption in 2003.

Cianci was released from prison in 2007 while Ganim remains there.

Eversley was appointed in the aftermath of the “drama” of the Cianci scandal, he said, which involved payoffs connected to economic development projects.

“There was massive shredding when I walked in,” Eversley recalled of his first days on the job in Providence. “I inherited no files.