

Attleboro is a city on the cusp

Sunday, March 9, 2008

ATTLEBORO - At the ramshackle end of its life, the Sugarman Building, which once housed jewelry and box-making companies on South Main Street in the heart of the city, was nothing more than a warehouse for coffins - a somber and potent symbol for the death of an era where the mix of numerous factories and stores downtown created a vibrant center and a vibrant city.

But the Sugarman Building, its coffins and the insidious decay it represented, are long gone, something Mayor Kevin Dumas said residents might easily forget in the rush of daily events coupled with the seemingly plodding pace of seemingly endless efforts at city renewal.

But it's something they should remember when considering the validity of Boston Magazine's designation of Attleboro as one of the best places to live in the Boston area, he said.

While the magazine's praise for the city was based mostly on its bold \$60-million downtown revitalization initiative, its new industrial business park and its reasonable housing costs, its designation as a place to be didn't just appear after a couple of years of work, the mayor said.

It comes after decades of effort by multiple administrations, councils, school committees, redevelopment officials, private businesses and perhaps most importantly, residents, Dumas said.

While some might say the city doesn't seem worthy of praise, nothing could be further from the truth, said the mayor who is a passionate booster of the place he has called home for his entire 32 years.

The city has come a long way from days of seemingly omnipresent decay, Dumas said.

Dumas was aware of a constant and creeping rot even as a boy of 8 or 9 years old. The mayor said he was a youngster who had a greater interest in the physical appearance of the city than most kids his age and the plethora of decrepit buildings was distressing.

"I remember riding through the streets with my mom and dad and thinking we can do better," Dumas said.

There was a lot to be depressed about, he said.

Boarded up businesses dotted the city for most of his childhood.

There was the Sugarman Building and the Bates and Klinke building next door. There was the Simmons Co. off North Main. The Saltzman Building on Park Street. The

Balfour Co. on County Street was still functioning for much of his youth, but it was on the way out finally leaving a mammoth plant vacant in the heart of the city.

There was also a rundown area where city hall now stands. There was the former Burger Chef on Pleasant Street, the Wonder Burger on Falmouth Street, the former A & W Root Beer at County Square and Bliss School on Park Street. Dumas remembers them all.

Gradually through the investment public and private funds, all were torn down and replaced or renovated in the span of 15 or 20 years.

"People forget about these transformations, but there was blight all over the place and when you start to add them up, the change in the city is significant," Dumas said. "It's a massive, massive transformation from where the city was to where it is today. And of course we're continuing that transformation with the (downtown revitalization) project." Perhaps the seeds of the new downtown project were laid with the razing of two blocks in the heart of downtown for new retail space and government center, the city's first urban renewal project that took place in the early 1980s.

Demolition began when Dumas was 7 or 8.

While he was just a child, the change brought joy to his young heart, he said.

While most kids were excited to see bulldozers smashing buildings, Dumas said he was excited because it meant positive change for the city.

"My parents couldn't figure me out," he said. "But I remember jumping for joy when that happened. I remember driving with my parents toward the block where London's (Department Store) was and it was completely leveled. I didn't understand the context, but I was excited the downtown was going to change and something new was going to take its place."

And later, one by one throughout the 1990s and into the new century, decayed structures in the heart of the city fell. But not only did they fall, they were replaced with something better.

Christopher Heights rose from the site that held Sugarman and Bates and Klinke.

CVS occupies the Simmons property. Eight upscale condominiums took the place of the Saltzman building. Balfour Riverwalk replaced Balfour Co. Burger Chef was razed for Bristol County Savings Bank and Wonder Burger was torn down for Cameron Roofing. The A & W eventually made way for a Dunkin Donuts and Dominos Pizza and The Community Visiting Nurses building emerged out of a dusty parking lot on Emory Street. Bliss School was turned into housing.

The city and its residents didn't sit still.

In its brief analysis of the city which focused on the most recent events, Boston Magazine said Attleboro is fighting the good fight and may be on the road to a new prosperity.

"After decades of manufacturing decline this once thriving industrial outpost is battling back," the magazine said. "Attleboro may be poised for another heyday."

While some residents may have been surprised by the recognition, Don Smyth wasn't. He knows how far his adopted home town of 30 years has come.

Smyth, 56 and 24 years older than the mayor has a longer historical view than Dumas. He was the city's assistant planner and the project manager for the first urban renewal project which spawned government center and a new retail block in the mid-1980s.

He was there as a major effort to improve the city began and he agrees with the magazine's comment.

"We are battling back, it's a long battle, but we are battling," he said.

Smyth, who continued to help the city move forward as a member of the Attleboro Redevelopment Authority and as the Executive Director of Friends of Attleboro Interested in Revitalization after he left city employment, said downtown still had remnants of hustle and bustle with drug stores, shoe stores and department stores when he moved in around 1980.

Balfour Co. was still thriving on County and combined with other businesses created a foot traffic and vibrant downtown.

"When I came, it was still doing fairly well," he said.

"I remember on payday there would be lines out the door of the bank with people cashing their checks during their lunch hour."

But the age of malls was eating away the customer base. That coupled with the loss of a number of downtown factories put the center into a steady decline.

And even though the city is working its way back, it's something that could that could take another 30 years to take hold, Smyth said.

A \$60 million multi-decade plan that aims to bring condominiums, retail space and transportation improvements, to the center will not take place quickly.

That ultimately a revitalized downtown with hundreds, if not thousands of residents living close to trains, churches, the library, museums, stores, banks, the YMCA, parks and major roads will emerge, is the hope - an urban village in the heart of an old city.

Changes are hard to appreciate because they come slowly, Smyth said. The industrial

business park for example will be 10 years in the making when buildings finally appear next year.

The changes in the city are an evolution, not a revolution, he said.

"Unfortunately, to do something like this takes an incredible amount of time," he said. "The vision is there, the plan is there, but it's not something that happens overnight."

Attleboro resident Tim Pouliot, 56, a lifetime city resident and the owner of Park Place Realty, believes Boston Magazine and the city are on the right track.

He's old enough to remember the good times, too. The snack bar at Woolworth's on a Wednesday or Thursday night was popular. He remembers hitting White's Records for the latest Beatles LPs. And like thousands, he worked in a factory near the center which made it convenient for him to leave work and patronize the shops.

Now he's investing in the center with a brand new real estate office. He sold the new condos next door and while the real estate market is abysmal, especially for condos, he get still gets walk-in customers which give him hope for the future.

People who come to Attleboro from the Boston and Providence areas are following the train and are looking for less costly homes, Pouliot said.

And most aren't even aware of revitalization efforts, he said.

That is something that can only add allure to the city, Pouliot said.

The "downtown feeling," or a recognized community center is something people miss, he said.

Malls don't provide it and if the city can, it could well be popular.

"I think a lot of people would like that," he said. "That community feeling that we had in the '60s and '70s. You don't get that anymore."

Downtown needs a specialty shop like an upscale coffee shop as a start, said Pouliot, who is enthusiastic about ongoing streetscape renovations.

"When that happens I think you are going to see people start to gravitate to downtown," he said.

GEORGE W. RHODES can be reached at 508-236-0432 or at grhodes@thesunchronicle.com.