

Tapping into Seymour's appeal

MATTHEW HIGBEE mhigbee@ctpost.com

Article Last Updated: 04/13/2007 09:12:25 PM EDT

SEYMOUR — On a rainy Wednesday afternoon, Nathan Lejensky was hunting for bargains on Bank Street, the town's budding antiques district.

In particular, he sought factory lights, the big metal kind that hung from the ceilings of the copper and brass mills and factories once lining the banks of the Naugatuck River. The 31-year-old dealer wanted to resell them in his Stamford antiques booth.

"They're hot right now," Lejensky said. After an hour of browsing, Lejensky didn't find the lights he was looking for. But he did buy a 1920s space heater for \$18. He planned to rip out the coil and replace it with a high-intensity bulb. The heater-turned-lamp, he said, might sell in the hundreds.

"People like the industrial look," he explained.

Now that the machines have quieted along the Naugatuck River Valley, leaving most of the factories empty shells, a style that was once functional has a cache. And Lejensky isn't the only one trying to mine the town's industrial heritage.

A few months ago, in the most ambitious real estate proposal in local history, a Virginia development team announced plans to buy Housatonic Wire and incorporate the classic steel-framed brick mill into a luxury condominium complex with a 23-story tower.

Across the river, other developers are contemplating what to do with New Haven Copper, which closed last month after being in business since 1845. Whatever goes there next could create a public waterfront to complement a downtown business district that is in the early stages of a revival.

The tower

Although the town is still home to the Kerite factory, a heavy duty coil manufacturer with 200 employees, the industrial era is all but over for Seymour. Now in the process of reinvention, the town is also looking to protect itself from losing the very qualities that make it special.

Like much of the lower Naugatuck Valley, the town has recently seen a boom in new home construction. Many families who were priced out of lower Fairfield County and metropolitan New York have found houses they can afford in subdivisions built on former farmland. Most sales have been in the \$300,000 to \$400,000 range, according to area Realtors.

Developer Craig Dean, of Norfolk, Va., is betting that the trend can support something grander. Several months ago, he came to town with a bold proposal to convert the

Housatonic Wire building into offices. Next to it, they would erect a 23-story luxury tower with condominiums selling for more than \$800,000 each.

On a recent tour of Housatonic Wire, Dean said he was immediately drawn to Seymour because of its location in southwestern Connecticut and its industrial legacy. "I love this building," he said, looking up at the riveted steel framing. "There is so much character." The site of Housatonic Wire has been home to a manufacturing concern ever since the late 1700s, when water turbines on the nearby Little River supplied the power. In the present buildings, assembly lines churned out rifle magazines during World War II. In more recent decades, Housatonic Wire has produced thin steel wire for spiral notebooks, paperclips, common pins and cookware. With the factory down to one employee, President Alex Budzinski entered into a partnership with Dean to become a stakeholder in the project.

"People have said, 'Watch out for yourself and get a good lawyer,' " Budzinski said. "But as the months have gone by, I can tell you, Craig says what he means and means what he says. He's a straight shooter." Dean brought in Joe Migani, a local architect known for rehabilitating several historic buildings downtown. Designing a modern tower that dwarfs the town might seem like an odd addition to Migani's portfolio, which is filled with historic preservation projects.

But Migani said the tower would help his effort to revive downtown. It would bring residents closer to downtown, people looking to eat and shop. "It would be an icon," Migani added. At the official unveiling, townspeople greeted the proposal with awe. Dean had been involved in redeveloping the industrial area of Norfolk, Va., converting warehouses and factories into clubs, condominiums and restaurants.

The fact that he now wanted to do something big in Seymour gave the town a confidence boost.

"All of the town has come behind it to embrace it," Migani said. "All the assembled boards were present to hear the proposal and supported it. That has never happened."

Whether the housing market could support luxury condominiums in Seymour is an open question. Judy Larkin Nicolari, a local Realtor, said she initially didn't think the plan was realistic. But then she reconsidered. "It's on the water, and with what people are paying for water views anything is possible," she said.

Real estate professionals to the south doubt that the town could support the prices Dean is proposing.

"That might be a stretch," said Paul Jensen, a Shelton broker. "Seymour might not be ready for that." Dean, though he has not committed to a time frame for the project, is confident that the condominiums would sell. "It's not a home. It's a luxury lifestyle for people who want to sell their homes," Dean said.

Downtown While the town waits on Dean's project, officials are tackling the problem of downtown. Back when the factories were humming, no one considered downtown as something needing to be fixed.

For merchants, it provided the three most important virtues of business: location, location, location. Customers lived and worked nearby, and the critical mass of shops provided an array of goods and services, including groceries, clothing, alcohol, shoe-repair, furniture and theater. As people moved toward the suburbs, however, the services followed them to shopping centers with big parking lots.

By the 1990s, several once-prominent buildings were boarded up and the sidewalks were nearly empty. Where others saw blight, a local couple saw an opportunity. In 1995, Migani, and his wife, Joan O'Riordan, bought a block of deteriorated buildings along Bank Street and pioneered an effort to bring back downtown. After eight years of stretching bank loans and investing their own sweat equity, Migani's family opened the Seymour Antiques Company, a pink and pistachio colored building that would become the cornerstone of the antiques district. "What we are trying to create is a destination," Migani said. "There are studies that show antiques is a viable business model to bring people back into historic downtowns." Managed by Migani's daughter, Pia Migani, the three floors and 16,000 square feet are now filled with odd-ball collectibles, books, and a vast selection of vintage furnishings, most of which was assembled by Migani.

Storefront by storefront, the vision has started to catch on.

Antiques and interior decorating shops line both sides of Bank Street, each with a style that reflects the personality of its owner.

"It's an area where you can come and shop for the day," said Phil Oraziotti, owner of A Window in Time, which specializes in old tools, saws, and metalwork — collectibles he calls "mantiques."

Hilary Boris' store, Tickled Pink, has customers who travel from as far away as Long Island to shop from a collection that recently included neo-classical mantle pieces, vintage fabrics and a pink bicycle.

"The whole store changes once a week," said Boris, a purveyor of what is known as the "Romantic Country" aesthetic. Next to the Seymour Antiques Company, the Miganis are finishing the renovation of the old Eckhart Furniture building. By the end of summer, they hope to have the ground floors filled with a new tenant selling furniture.

Though the antiques district is a modest success, the downtown is still less than the sum of its parts. A pawnshop sits at the entrance to the historic district. The streets are a pleasure to walk, but lack several essentials to any thriving business district.

"I like the antiques boutiques district, but in order for that to thrive, you need a full balance of retail shopping, entertainment and dining," said Economic Development

Director Jon Szuch. "Everybody I talk to, they say they are sick of driving to Milford or Trumbull," Szuch added. "As far as I'm concerned, whoever builds a decent steakhouse has hit the Powerball."

The blueprint

Development is often thought of in terms of its benefit to the tax base. The value of a happening scene downtown, however, lies in the less tangible things that improve the quality of life. "The downtown has a wonderful fabric and scale and has a lot of untapped potential," said Ben Margolis, a planner with Phillips Preiss Shapiro and Associates. "The opportunity might be less about shopping and offices and more about bringing people together around civic events and dining."

Margolis is part of a major effort under way to help bring more pedestrians downtown and help the town replace its vanishing industries with new business. Since last year, he and planning consultants with Mt. Auburn Associates have been working with a cross section of residents and officials on a master economic development plan. The vision for downtown involves changes both big and small. An expanded program at the Strand movie theater, for example, could attract more foot-traffic. So could a small museum, improved lighting and outdoor dining. Some of the changes could also require revisiting the zoning ordinances to fit a district based on walking and shopping. With New Haven Copper coming on the market, officials have an opportunity to rezone the industrial site to attract a restaurant, stores or offices.

"Sometimes, when one door closes another one opens," said First Selectman Robert Koskelowski. Three developers have expressed interest to buy the property, according to Koskelowski, two of whom want to build restaurants with decks along the water and a view of the waterfalls. "I think it's a great idea. We really want to improve the downtown area, so when people come here, they'll say what a nice little downtown it is.," he said.

Redeveloped in the right way, the New Haven Copper property could give a dramatic lift to the downtown. It sits directly on the river with a view of the falls. At the end of Main Street, it is also a gateway. But more than a century of manufacturing at the site means a likely environmental cleanup. Landing the right new business, and helping it connect with all the needed resources to redevelop a potential brownfield, will not be easy for the town.

That is why a central recommendation from the master plan committee will be increasing the development staff available to the town. "The resources in the past have been limited at best," said Szuch. "Moving forward will require the willingness of taxpayers to fund qualified, professionally educated people for the betterment of the city."

Matthew Higbee, who covers the Naugatuck Valley, can be reached at 736-5440.