

The Record

Sunday, August 10, 2008

Historic makeovers gain ground in cities

Paterson transforms its old mills

By **DONNA ROLANDO**
SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

From Washington's battle-grounds to the Hindenburg's fiery fate, New Jersey is teeming with history, yet have you ever thought about making history your home?

That's the very opportunity that has been available for almost 30 years in Paterson's 118-acre Great Falls Historic District. Where immigrants toiled long hours on behalf of the Silk City, families made their nests in the 1980s at the 110-year-old Essex Mill on Mill Street and the city's oldest mill — Phoenix on Van Houten Street. Not only did this preserve Paterson's past but it also cradled the city's future, providing 146 living quarters.

What started in the '80s with these two mills proved contagious. Today, Paterson Mayor Joey Torres said redevelopment is proceeding, with a "half-dozen projects" fulfilled and just as many on the drawing board.

"We can't afford to keep these buildings vacant," since it invites vandals, vagrants and scavengers, said Torres.

He said the key is developing housing for diverse incomes and turning some of the 40-odd mills into workplaces.

Ron Emrich, executive director of Preservation New Jersey, a Trenton-based non-profit, said transformations like Paterson's are gaining momentum in the Garden State, which nonetheless lags behind its neighbors.

"It's a huge trend across the nation. Developers are returning to the cities, and that is where the historic buildings are," he said.

Also, as transportation costs go up, and more empty-nesters leave their big homes in suburbia, historic makeovers in the cities are gaining ground, Emrich said.

"In a lot of places like Jersey City, Paterson and Trenton, they've been slow to catch on," said Adrian Fine of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "New Jersey's finally catching up, and it's positive. This is a win-win situation."

Jennifer Monaghan of the state Department of Community Affairs said redevelopment is a "vital piece" of New Jersey's comprehensive smart-growth strategy.

"In addition to creating housing units, the reuse of historic structures contributes to the diversity and stability of commu-

nities," she said.

Since New Jersey's housing market is one of the most expensive in the nation, she said, "developers are looking to convert existing underutilized or abandoned buildings."

Jersey City project

It's hard to talk redevelopment and not mention The Beacon in the heart of Jersey City, where 1,200 luxury condos will rise up from the old Jersey City Medical Center, built largely during the Great Depression but with no skimping. Emrich said federal historic preservation tax credits are making projects like The Beacon possible.

"We have the largest historic restoration in the United States and the largest in New Jersey's history," said George Filopoulos, president of Metrovest Equities Inc., the New York firm restoring The Beacon.

"It's all been meticulously restored inch by inch," he said. "It's been a very, very long process, but the results are breathtaking," he said of 30-foot ceilings, a marble billiard room and an art deco theater.

He expects that the historic character will be a strong selling point for the condos — studios are priced in the mid-\$300,000 range and a penthouse went for \$2.3 million. The project is moving toward a year 2011 fin-

ish with more than 300 units built so far.

Morristown has two residential developments under way that are heavy on history. Just drive past the city's 2.5-acre historic Green and one can't miss the billboard heralding "Yesterday's landmark - today's hallmark." It's talking about 40 Park, a seven-story condo to offer 73 homes priced at \$400,000 to \$2.3 million at the former home of Epstein's department store.

Debra Tantleff, vice president of development for Roseland Property Co. of Short Hills, which is building the project, said its proximity to the Green will attract buyers.

Roseland Property also is creating housing opportunities at Vail Mansion, built in 1917 on South Street in Morristown with a 36-condo project that is near completion and almost sold out, she said. Nearly a century ago, Theodore Vail, president of American Telephone & Telegraph Co., and chief architect of the Bell System, commissioned the design of the mansion. Since 1922 until a few years ago, the mansion was used for municipal offices for Morristown.

"You really feel like you're part of the mansion, yet you're in a downtown environment," Tantleff said.

On the rise of urban projects, she said, "It adds a significant level of character and detail to a project. There's something very special about being able to bridge the past of a community and its future."