

Stoneham Center celebrates progress, looks to future

By PAT BLAIS May 12, 2017



Stoneham has seen at least four major construction projects take place in its downtown in the past several years which has sparked a renewed interest and buzz about the local destination downtown.

It's a long-coveted resurgence, but with the rebirth of Stoneham's primary economic engine comes new challenges and questions as to who should lead what comes next.

Over the past decade Stoneham Square, a quaint, but charming town center uniquely anchored by Stoneham Theatre, has undergone a dramatic transformation as millions of dollars have been invested into the area.

In fact, since 2007, with the rehab of 426 Main St. from a dilapidated furniture storage warehouse into a marquee development containing ground-level retail space and 48 luxury condominiums, at least four major building projects have followed, including:

- The erection of the new three-story Petrillo Building at 411 Main St., not far from Stoneham Theatre, where ground-level retail space is topped by 25 rental apartments;
- The ongoing construction of a new three-story structure at 370-380 Main St., located across from Stoneham Theatre by the Town Common, which will include ground-level retail space and upper-story commercial office suites;

- A major rehabilitation of the 11,500 square foot Heritage Building at 335 Main St., which contains retail and office space next to the Stoneham Post Office;
- The revitalization of the Dow Block in Central Square, a historic multi-tenant landmark located by the corner of Main and Central Streets.

According to a 2014 strategic action plan commissioned by the town and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, demographic data indicates there is room for even greater expansion, as an analysis of Stoneham Square concluded further redevelopment could result in the opening of another 10 to 15 retail storefronts.

The long-term vision plan for Stoneham Square also predicted the town will see 189 new households come to Stoneham by 2020, while at least 450 new housing units will be needed in town by 2030.

With young professionals increasingly relocating to vibrant community centers, the same Stoneham Square Strategic Plan also suggested at least a third of that new housing should be located in the downtown area.

Last month, the Board of Selectmen re-pledged its support of the 2014 downtown action plan at the urging of representatives from the Stoneham Community Development Corporation (CDC), a newly-formed private non-profit that intends to raise funding for a host of Stoneham Square initiatives.

“The strategic action plan does two things for Stoneham. It identifies marketing strategies for Stoneham Square, and it’s a set of 40 recommendations to help the square function better for everybody,” said Stoneham CDC leader Rachel Meredith-Warren, a local School Committee member who helped craft the downtown action plan in 2014.

The Stoneham CDC, which just formally banded together this spring, plans to collaborate with members of a Stoneham Square Merchant Group, a Stoneham Square transportation advisory committee, and a general Stoneham Square advisory group.

Already, the private organization hopes to raise money to install bicycle racks along Main Street and to host events like a Stoneham Summer Film Festival to lure visitors to the downtown region.

However, with the new advocacy group emerging alongside other special interests pushing to implement some of the 40 recommendations included in the five-year planning study, town officials like Selectmen Thomas Boussy and Caroline Colarusso questioned whether private individuals are pushing to usurp their board’s authority.

"I understand what you're trying to do, but there's a bit of confusion on this side," said Boussy, who has led several government initiatives aimed at helping out Stoneham Square merchants. "It's confusing as to who's driving the bus here. [The Board of Selectmen] sets policy, and when people have problems, they call [us]."

"I think the average person sees all these boards out there and gets [confused] about what their roles are. Maybe some of that [lack of clarity] is our fault. But I do think there needs to be some communication. It's hard for people to understand everything that's taking place," agreed Colarusso.

Other local officials, like Board of Selectmen Chair George Seibold and Town Planner Erin Wortman, welcome the surge of public interest and support from local residents and merchants.

"It's a true collaborative effort. Under no guise has any advisory group [intimated they retain the authority] to make decisions or set policy," said Wortman. "They're the workhorses behind the scenes. They're merely people who have the time to gather the information for the policymakers to make educated decisions."

Rebranding Stoneham's Image

Back in the early 2000s, a dejected Wakefield businessman caused a stir in town after walking away from plans to open a new breakfast diner in the heart of Stoneham Square at 362 Main St., situated right next to the Town Common.

Embittered by what he characterized as vain attempts to pull simple building permits for the enterprise – where a small diner had operated years prior – the aspiring restaurateur whitewashed the windows and left a message etched in the glass for local officials. It read, "Thanks for nothing".

As time passed, those trying to revitalize the community's economic engine repeatedly pointed to that message, which remained prominently visible for months and months for all to see, as synonymous with Stoneham's overall treatment of its business community.

The friction recently expressed between business representatives and town officials over who is accountable for forging the future of the downtown area has its roots in that history of mistrust.

Since first assuming office in 2012, Boussy, vowing to change the way the town works with its business community, has taken a particular interest in revitalizing Stoneham Square.

Besides trying to bring new visitors to local shops by moving a farmer's market from the Senior Center to the Town Common, the senior selectman was also largely responsible for convincing a food truck festival organizer in 2015 to host one of its showcases in Stoneham.

Boussy was also directly involved in talks with local real-estate businessman Craig Celli and the owners of Cassidy Landscaping to foot the bill for the outdoor skating rink on the Town Common each winter. He is also credited with convincing Chris Senna, a local developer and property manager whose firm has a considerable Stoneham Square portfolio, to rebuild 370-380 Main St. in exchange for Stoneham's support of Massachusetts' first-ever Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) agreement.

Despite those efforts, the town government's bad reputation still lingers.

In fact, earlier this spring, during a local Planning Board meeting on a zoning proposal to loosen Stoneham's signage bylaws to benefit downtown businesses, a long-time merchant lamented what he perceived as great obstacles to turning public opinion in favor of the new bylaw.

"I've been quite cynical [about this proposal going anywhere], because Stoneham, for as long as I've been here, has the feeling of being anti-business," said David Kurdzionak, the second-generation owner of a jewelry store in the heart of Stoneham Square.

Perhaps indicating those impressions were misguided, local citizens earlier this month overwhelmingly passed that zoning change, which will allow Stoneham Square businesses to obtain licenses to place A-frame or sandwich board signs by their storefronts.

According to Meredith-Warren, the formation of the Stoneham CDC, as well as the efforts of other advisory panels to implement the Stoneham Square Strategic Action Plan, should not be viewed as an attempt to circumvent the very town officials who have labored to better relationships with the business community.

However, she did contend those interests, which include broad representation from citizens, town officials, and merchants, can weather the winds of change that so often overtake political bodies.

"This is the fourth incarnation of the Board of Selectmen since the strategic action plan first started. That's a lot of political turnover," she said. "I think that's why having these long-term plans in place is so important, because it provides continuity of vision."