

A tale of two downtowns

What New London can teach Torrington

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NEW LONDON — There's a sense in this city's downtown of something happening.

Planners with experience revitalizing downtowns call it a "sense of place." Storefront shops are open and inviting, the 37 restaurants' and bars' sand-

wich boards and neon signs announce specials of the day and signs and brochures brand downtown as "The District."

A decade ago, "The District" was hardly the "fun delicious historic scenic cultural district" that's promoted on the New London Main Street website.

"This place was so dead 10 years ago, there would have

been tumbleweeds down the street," said Penny Parsekian, New London Main Street's executive director. "It was a disaster."

Such a scene is still not unfamiliar to Torrington residents. Except for Main Street Marketplace, the nine-week event that draws thousands downtown on summer Thursday nights, and

for a smattering of car shows and large Warner Theatre events, Torrington's downtown most days stands quiet, with no foot traffic, no bustle, no vibrancy. There is no downtown cafe or diner for that cup of morning coffee. Three years ago downtown hosted six restaurants; four remain. About one-third of the businesses in downtown storefronts keep limited hours or are open by ap-

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pointment only.

New London faced a similarly bleak atmosphere. That city's professionally-staffed, 12-year-old New London Main Street Center maintains that it is not an irreversible trend.

New London has not solved all its problems, but the city has "set the table" for revitalization, said John Simone, executive director of Connecticut Main Street Center.

"Downtowns need to be looked at as one integrated organism — it all needs to work as one integrated place," Simone said. "You need to have someone who can ask, 'What are the right mix of uses? How is it all promoted? How do you look at future development?' And all those things need to come together, and if you don't have a management program in place, there's no entry or way for that mechanism to happen."

Simone and other downtown planners advocate the professional management of downtowns, something Torrington has not yet considered.

A downtown professional management program at its start is "really about building consensus and building partnerships," Simone said. Later, successful management programs coordinate with landlords in finding the right spaces for businesses, planning large-scale events and renovations and coordinating funding for street-level capital improvements and renovation projects.

"That all takes money, but on top of that, it takes more expertise than what volunteers alone could do," Simone said. "You just get into more sophisticated, complex things and you just require professionalization."

Torrington has the Torrington Development Corp., a nonprofit entity that has focused mostly on infrastructure, seeking to make downtown more pedestrian friendly. The TDC does not engage business owners, stage events, set standards for shop hours or content. Any efforts like that in Torrington are led by volunteers, and their history includes the range from failure to success, with a lot of well-intentioned but inconsistent starts in between.

"I'm always very much in favor of the idea that if it's been a volunteer effort, then it should remain a volunteer effort," Mayor Ryan J. Bingham told the Board of Finance on Tuesday, referring to news of the loss of two key volunteers who helped beautify the downtown. That's because once the city starts funding something, Bingham said, it's difficult to stop.

Bingham said "there's certainly a lot of private momen-



New London Main Street Executive Director Penny Parsekian looks over the amphitheater in downtown New London with Connecticut Main Street Center Executive Director John Simone.

turn pushing the agenda," referring to the purchase last year of 125,000 square feet of retail, office and residential space by the newly formed Torrington Downtown Partners.

"We have a good mix now working hand in hand with volunteers," Bingham said. "I think you have to keep pushing in all directions."

"I think the biggest thing is to keep the positive momentum downtown and making it more attractive," Bingham said in an interview. Asked whether that means a professional organization being formed to take downtown to the next level, Bingham said, "That may be a role the (Torrington Development Corp.) starts moving in as they start looking for a new direction."

The three-year-old Torrington Development Corp. has a paid executive director and a 21-member volunteer board of local business people and city officials. With that plan complete, Development Corp. members are participating in a study of three cities that have undergone successful arts and culture-based revitalizations.

Torrington Development Corp. President Jack Boer has hinted at the need to focus on more economic development efforts downtown, but action on such an initiative has been on hold with the launch of the study partially funded by the University of Connecticut.

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NEW LONDON MAIN STREET'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The last effort to organize merchants was in the late 1990s, with the volunteer Main Street Action Team. The team wanted to create a special tax district for downtown businesses that would fund projects and possibly a professional manager. The initiative did not get off after a year.

"For whatever reason, they were not able to raise enough money from the private sector," Simone said. "But that was 15 years ago. Things may be different today."

New London's Main Street program relies on private donations for about three-quarters of its funding, said Parsekian, the nonprofit's executive director. Beginning with a budget of \$120,000 in 1998-99, the center had just one employee — the executive director — and steadily grew to about \$300,000 between 2003 and 2007, then to the \$400,000 budget it maintains today.

The private funding comes from corporate sponsorships, memberships from area businesses and various grants.

"There was a big surge of

support in the beginning," Parsekian said, partly because the city had been named a host of TopSail, a parade of tall ships that drew 900,000 people to the city in 1998. The organization was first solely focused on preparing for that event, coordinating 600 volunteers in the process, "so it was a huge amount of work and did not leave time for strategic planning."

The key to attracting support after the parade was a public relations effort aimed at getting the public to understand that downtown was key to the city's overall success, Parsekian said. "First you have to make the case that downtown is an important economic engine," Parsekian said. "If it's in the case of Torrington, the downtown represents the larger picture, and it's a potential source of tax revenue for the city."

But, she acknowledged, such an effort can take years.

When the New London organization first started its Food Stroll events, in which New London Main Street convinced

restauranters and store owners to put out thousands of dollars worth of free food to attract foot traffic, many owners felt it was all for nothing. But when those restaurants began seeing Food Stroll attendees returning for dinner months later, they realized the event was a success, Parsekian said.

Downtown merchants can be a tough and fiercely independent crowd, Parsekian said. Building confidence that New London Main Street is an effective organization has taken years. Only in the last six months has New London Main Street been able to effectively help coordinate a widespread merchants' association, for example.

"It's really, really important to have a merchant's association, but until recently we'd been unsuccessful doing it," Parsekian said, until six months ago when she recruited two shop owners to serve as co-chairmen of the newly formed association.

Volunteers still play a major role in New London. One of the professionals in Parsekian's office is solely devoted to 300 volunteers: She creates a monthly volunteer-only newsletter, trains them, coordinates them during events and plans a yearly dinner where the organization and city officials heap praise.

"Volunteers are very labor intensive. Nobody knows auto-

matically, exactly what to do," Parsekian said. "You have to coordinate them and make them feel good about what they're doing."

Another position in the New London Main Street office is devoted to marketing, a full-time job that encompasses maintaining the organization's constantly-changing website and calendar, sending out a weekly email blast that updates subscribers on downtown activities, and producing a "Map & Guide" that's distributed as far away as Hartford. The brochure lists every downtown retailer, historical attraction and restaurant and nightlife option.

The organization also tries to accomplish one large project every year. In 2009, it was the construction of two key entrances to downtown dubbed "gateways," that improved signs, lighting and sidewalks. That project cost \$200,000, with \$25,000 raised from corporations, \$50,000 from grants and \$125,000 in city funding.

This year, New London Main Street will open an ice rink downtown that Parsekian said she hopes will draw thousands throughout a season when downtown typically experiences its slowest shopping days.

"I can't imagine having volunteers do this stuff," Parsekian said. "I think it's so important for Torrington (to have a professional downtown organization) but I wish there was a simpler way to get it done."