

Picture brightens for artists and Pawtucket

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By Sacha Pfeiffer, Globe Staff | February 7, 2007

PAWTUCKET, R.I. -- Art can pave the way to economic success.

That's the driving principle behind this former manufacturing city's eight-year-old effort to attract artists and arts organizations, and the initiative has had remarkable results.

In the last three years alone, more than a dozen vacant or underused commercial properties in downtown Pawtucket have been sold for artistic uses. Two mills have been turned into condominium complexes with 85 units for artists, and two more are in the works. On the city's outskirts, a huge "artisan village" of live/work lofts, artist studios, retail space, light manufacturing, and restaurants is in its early stages. Tax incentives, grants, and low-income loans often made those projects possible.

All told, about 500 artists live or work in Pawtucket, and organizations such as Stone Soup Coffee house, Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre, Foundry Artists Association, and Mixed Magic Theatre call the city home.

"Pawtucket had been thought of as a boring, dying mill town," said Steve Kumins, executive director of the Arts Exchange, a center for art and arts education downtown, "but by being friendly to artists and having this buzz that it's a city on the move in the arts community, it's really changing its image inside the state. Pawtucket is no longer a joke."

The Arts Exchange and the Gamm Theatre are prime examples.

Seven years ago, city officials were searching for ways to reuse the hulking, century-old Pawtucket Armory, which had been vacated by the National Guard in 1994. The 48,000-square-foot building was eventually sold for \$1 to the Pawtucket Armory Association, a newly formed nonprofit group that proposed turning the building into an arts center.

In 2003, the first phase of renovations, which cost \$850,000, began: converting an adjacent impound garage into the new home of the Gamm Theatre, which relocated from Providence. The 120-seat venue opened in November 2003 and has since grown from fewer than 100 subscribers to more than 1,400, according to Kumins. Its five-performance season runs from September to June, and its current production, which closes Feb. 25, is four one-act plays by Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett, and Peter Barnes.

The second phase of renovations, in 2005, was the \$4.5 million makeover of the 1894 armory, which had no heat, no plumbing, a leaky roof, and minimal electricity. The turreted, castle-like brick building now houses Arts Exchange offices and, on its second and third floors, the Jacqueline M. Walsh School for the Performing and Visual Arts, Rhode Island's only public arts high school, which opened in 2005.

Phase three will include construction of dressing rooms, education space, and a theater in the armory drill hall. The three phases are expected to total \$8.1 million, paid for by private financing, foundation grants, federal appropriations, and state and federal historic preservation tax credits.

The city launched its arts initiative in 1999 by creating a 307-acre "arts and entertainment district" that encompasses more than 60 downtown streets and 22 mills. Art sold in the district is not taxed, and artists living and working there are exempt from paying state taxes on income from their work. Spearheaded by Mayor James E. Doyle, the tax incentive program is an economic development tool designed to bring people into blighted areas.

"We view artists as small businesses, and we believe artists can be an economic engine, and a lot of cities just don't get that," said Herbert Weiss, Pawtucket's economic and cultural affairs officer. "They separate the arts off into some sort of Neverland. But everything we do for small businesses, we do for artists."

That includes securing low-interest loans for artists who want to renovate buildings and helping them find locations to set up shop in the city, where heated studio space can be had for \$6 a square foot.

"Try finding that in Boston," Weiss said.

"We think of ourself as a David between two Goliaths -- Boston and Providence," he added, "but we've carved out a little niche."

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