

Local

Downtown Norfolk undergoing development resurgence

By Brock Vergakis | AP May 2

NORFOLK, Va. — On one of the most valuable pieces of waterfront real estate in downtown Norfolk, a once lively marketplace and marina sits almost entirely empty aside from a Hooters restaurant.

But after decades of ups and downs, the Waterside Festival Marketplace on the banks of the Elizabeth River is finally about to be put out of its misery. This past fall, the city turned over the keys to the two-story, 1980s-era building to The Cordish Companies, a Baltimore-based group that has helped revitalize urban areas in Kansas City, Houston and Baltimore, and built major entertainment complexes near major pro sports franchises in Philadelphia and St. Louis.

City officials say by the end of 2016, the marketplace will be reborn as Waterside LIVE! — a retail, restaurant and nightlife district that will serve as a regional hub for tourists and residents alike. Little will remain of the original building, which will be gutted and opened up to the water and help connect the riverfront to a downtown that is undergoing a rapid transformation.

The reincarnation of Waterside will be one of the final pieces of the puzzle to a downtown revitalization plan that has been decades in the making, and ironically, started with the construction of the original Waterside in the early 1980s.

“We’ve had to reinvent Waterside at least three times so far, and this will be a fourth,” said Norfolk Mayor Paul Fraim. “People are attracted to the water. The entertainment that Cordish will produce there, we think, will be very attractive to groups of folks of all ages.”

Waterside has faced difficulties in the past, in part, due to other downtown successes, including the launch of a downtown shopping mall and the growth of the Granby Street corridor, which is now lined with local restaurants and bars.

A few blocks away from Waterside, construction is already underway on a city-backed 300-room Hilton hotel, conference center and upscale restaurant complex that city officials have been trying to find a way to bring to fruition for about a decade. It sits at the corner of Main and Granby Streets, making it a symbolic shift away from the central business district of office towers toward the part of downtown that’s supported by residents who live in condominiums and a growing number of modern apartments.

Once a place with empty storefronts and a reputation for crime, downtown Norfolk is now asserting itself as the destination of choice in Hampton Roads for millennials, retirees and visiting businesspeople who want to be within walking distance of nightlife and other cultural activities. It’s a remarkable turnaround considering the region’s major industry — defense — isn’t concentrated downtown, but rather on bases, shipyards and industrial areas scattered throughout the region.

“I think most people would think most people living downtown are also working downtown, but that’s just not the case,” said Buddy Gadams, whose company, Marathon Development, is downtown’s biggest residential landlord. He said only about 10 percent of his residents work downtown.

Mary Miller, president of the Downtown Norfolk Council, said projects like Waterside Live can draw people to the area. “This will give them a new reason and reintroduce them to downtown.”

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