

Making Lemonade Out Of Lemons

University Corners transforms downtown Wilkes-Barre into a unique opportunity.

Lindsay Sport

By the early 1990s, downtown Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, like the downtowns of so many other small American cities, was in a state of severe decline. “Throughout the ’70s and ’80s, we did some horrible things to our built environment,” explains Todd Vonderheid, president of The Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business and Industry. “We took down density, took down residential units. We did everything we could to make sure so no one could live there.” The plan worked; however, the repercussions were extremely severe. Retail vacancies shot up, translating into increasingly high office vacancies, as the perception of downtown continued to deteriorate. The community of Wilkes-Barre was desperate for change, but political battles and an unclear direction kept progress at a standstill. The city needed a beacon — a guiding light for reinvention.

“What occurred after that was that the community finally came together—the business community, the public sector, everyone — and said ‘You know what, we’ve



University Corners is an approximately 120,000-square-foot mixed-use development in downtown Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

got to come together and figure out how to move forward together,” remembers Larry Newman, vice president of community and economic development. Throughout

a series of public meetings in 2001, the community finally developed a clear blueprint for change in the form of a mixed-use development that would ultimately remake the urban fabric of downtown Wilkes-Barre. Now known as University Corners, the project serves as the cornerstone for the renewal of the city’s long-neglected resource.

University Corners is an approximately 120,000-square-foot mixed-use development located on East Northampton

Street and South Main Street in downtown Wilkes-Barre. Stemming from an existing stand-alone movie theater project in the works, the Chamber of Business development and the community worked with R/C Theatres to change the site in order to incorporate both commercial and residential units. The team added approximately 30,000 square feet of retail space, along with another 30,000 square feet reserved for residential units to the original plan for the 60,000-square-foot theater, creating a true mixed-use, urban lifestyle center.

Work on the project began in 2001, and in a true community effort the \$31.8 million project was built using land grants, loans and other contributions from the state of Pennsylvania, Luzerne County and Wilkes-Barre taxpayers, as well as the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business Industry. “The overall intent of the project was to re-mend a shattered downtown retail district. The concept really came out of the necessity to make lemonade out of lemons,” Newman says.

Now with 500,000 visitors frequenting



Stemming from an existing stand-alone movie theater project with R/C Theatres, the plan was adjusted to include both retail and residential components.

the site each year, University Corners has reversed the negative image of downtown. "The point was to do something so catalytic that it would change the way everyone looked at downtown, and that's just what it's done," Vonderheid says. With construction complete on the retail component, Carlsberg Management, along with help from Colliers Arnold, has taken over to bring a successful mix of restaurants and retailers to the site. "What's unique about Wilkes-Barre is everybody wants to have the retail come back downtown. Many cities are talking about it and whining about it, but Wilkes-Barre has done it, and that's what really drew us to become a part of it," explains Bill Geary, president of Carlsberg Management Company.

In addition to the movie theater, which opened in June 2006, current tenants include Quizno's Sub, Januzzi's Pizza & Subs and Blue Chip Gourmet. As for future tenants, the team is working together to bring in a brew house or Irish pub concept, a high-end fashion retailer, as well as more casual-restaurant dining. Even though new commitments are pending, Bill Fraser, senior retail specialist for Colliers Arnold Commercial Real Estate Services, says interest in the site has been high, an aspect that he attributed to the immense teamwork shown by everyone involved. "We are living in interesting times, and the key to this is forming solid teams and developing a business model that works. If you take a look at this project with how we've teamed up — the city, the chamber, Carlsberg Management and Colliers International — working together to take this vision and make it a reality, its kind of like, pardon the phrase, Developing 101," Fraser says.

Pamela Rudd, group marketing director/retail specialist for Carlsberg Management, agrees. "It's all about the partnerships. The strong advertising and marketing support brought forward by Carlsberg Management Company is what makes University Corners a thousand times better than a strip center or enclosed



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mall," she adds.

The success of University Corners can also be attributed to the city of Wilkes-Barre itself. Two institutions of higher education, Wilkes University and King's College, have campuses that bookend the retail district, bringing 6,500 students into downtown. The area also hosts three other colleges and universities in the greater Wilkes-Barre area alone. Downtown also serves as the largest concentrated employment center in northeastern Pennsylvania, with 14,000 daytime employees.

The center's location, with Boscov's and Barnes & Noble adjoining the site and a YMCA located across the street, makes it a veritable hub of downtown. And with the construction of the development's 21 loft spaces, set to begin on April 1, the downtown area will be fully transformed into a complete live, work and play area, rampant with pedestrian vibrancy. Construction is expected to take 5 or 6 months to outfit the first units, of which most are already spoken for. "We have folks that are literally beating the table and saying 'When can I pick out my tile?' So there's a great deal of interest due to the built-up demand," Newman says.

According to Rudd, University Corners' mix of opportunities will make it the center of the city's commerce, business

and entertainment. "This premier mixed-use neighborhood in the hub of Wilkes-Barre's primary business area will cater to our city's changing demographic through quality retail, restaurant and entertainment amenities geared toward contemporary families, upwardly mobile professionals and executives. We have festivals planned and many special events that will enhance the unfolding upscale urban character of Wilkes-Barre and the Northeastern Pennsylvania region. University Corners has raised the standard for future development of urban lifestyle centers and urban destinations," Rudd says.

What once was a struggling downtown in small-town America has been transformed into a vibrant urban environment, showing that no town is too small for change. "University Corners is the anchor for the reinvention of downtown Wilkes-Barre. It is a symbol of how this community has been able to, against all odds, reinvent its downtown as a regional shopping, entertainment and restaurant destination," Newman says. "It really has served as the rallying point for that effort and has proven to people that something they thought was not possible, was in fact not only possible, but could be more successful than they ever imagined." **SCB**