

Maine Street Station rolls through weak economy

Excerpts from an article by Steve Mistler (full article published: October 16, 2008)

BRUNSWICK - Under skies as fickle as the economy, state and local dignitaries gathered Tuesday for the ceremonial groundbreaking of the \$23 million Maine Street Station project.

The event took place on the weed-strewn, 5-acre lot previously dormant and contaminated for nearly 30 years. The landscape is expected to change dramatically in the coming weeks, as construction begins on three of the project's six buildings.

Officials, including Gov. John Baldacci, all expressed confidence in the multi-use development's success, particularly its transit component, which is expected to host the Amtrak Downeaster by 2010. However, amid the proclamations of faith was an unmistakable undercurrent of relief that the project is moving forward at all.

"Maine Street Station is important because of the (closure of Brunswick Naval Air Station)," Hilary Rockett of JHR Development said. "Today it's even more important because of what's going on in our economy. I've talked to a lot of colleagues and developer friends of mine who are walking away from projects right now."

Baldacci told the gathering that Maine Street Station shows the state's banking institutions are "healthy and sound."

"They have resources and they want to participate," Baldacci said. "And that's a message for others in the Maine banking industry and the credit unions."

According to JHR's project manager, Mike Lyne, stricter financing for Maine Street Station will necessitate an aggressive construction schedule. He said he hopes the first three buildings will be up and running by July 2009.

Lyne was hopeful that JHR's signing of tenants and the groundbreaking would create momentum for the development.

One of those tenants will be Bowdoin College, which will occupy the 3,500-square-foot building at the corner of Maine Street and the railroad tracks. Bowdoin plans to create a store and visitor center where it will sell apparel and books. Bowdoin will also occupy some office space on the second floor of Building 3, one of two 20,000-square-foot buildings in the center of the development.

Building 4 is expected to house the train station, which has recently doubled in size, from 1,200 square feet to 2,400 square feet. Rockett said the train station will include ticketing and a visitor's center.

The presence of Maine Eastern Railroad, which served as backdrop for the ceremony, and the eventual extension of the Amtrak Downeaster, seemed to generate the most enthusiasm for the project.



Gov. John Baldacci, left, developer J. Hilary Rockett Jr. and Brunswick Town Manager Donald H. Gerrish celebrate at the Maine Street Station groundbreaking on Tuesday.

"To be able to extend passenger rail and preserve our quality of life and natural resources is hugely important," Baldacci said. "You're going to have a huge opportunity to showcase this community and have access to passenger rail and stay interconnected."

Patricia Quinn, executive director of the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority, highlighted the economic benefits of the Downeaster's arrival. She said transit-oriented developments like Maine Street Station had the potential to create \$3 billion in construction investment, 11,000 jobs and \$72 million a year in tax revenues.

Referring to recent legislation that will fund rail improvements and expansion to Brunswick, Quinn said, "We'll be able to put \$1 million to \$2 million back into our economy instead of watching it go out our tailpipes."

Overall, Baldacci said, the project was worth the state investment.

"We are getting back to basics in our economy," Baldacci said. "We're recognizing those things that are of value and strategically investing in them. ... This project works."
