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SUDBURY SEES BENEFITS OF MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENTS

Redevelopment Of Raytheon Property Moves Quickly Through Local Hurdles

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BY JAY FITZGERALD | SPECIAL TO BANKER & TRADESMAN

Twenty years ago, Sudbury officials probably would have bemoaned the loss of a major employer like Raytheon and the prospect of 50 acres of light industrial land along Route 20 sitting vacant for perhaps years.

But the gnashing of teeth and wringing of hands didn't happen after Raytheon, less than two years ago, made it official: It was closing its huge Sudbury R&D facility, first built in the 1950s, and moving most of its hundreds of employees to Marlborough and elsewhere. Fortunately for Sudbury, it was prepared, having studied in advance its options should Raytheon close the plant and having seen Raytheon vacate a similar R&D facility in Wayland, just a few miles east along Route 20, early last decade.

"We were ready," said Pete Abair, chairman of the Sudbury Planning Board. "We already knew there was a slim to none chance of attracting another light industrial or office tenant. We had plans."

And those plans, calling for a mix-used redevelopment of the 50-acre Raytheon site with a combination of retail and housing, have already been presented to and approved by Sudbury voters at a Town Meeting.

National Development, the new owner and master developer of the Raytheon site, expects to break ground later this year on the first phase of the massive redevelopment: Construction of a 45,000-square-foot supermarket to be leased to Whole Foods. Later, after the vast majority of the Raytheon facilities are demolished, National Development plans to oversee construction of 35,000 square feet of additional retail, a 48-unit assisting living facility, 60 units of age-restricted town houses and condominiums and, with AvalonBay Communities, 250 apartment units, some of which will be designated affordable under Chapter 40B.

"This is really a big trend in our business," said Ted Tye, president of National Development, referring to communities approving more compact, mixed-use developments, rather than single-use residential, industrial, retail or office developments. "Cities and towns are really embracing this."

The somewhat astonishing quickness of Sudbury's approval of the new Meadow Walk project is not only the result of the town taking proactive steps in anticipation of Raytheon shuttering its facility one day. The town also benefited from seeing what has and hasn't worked in other towns facing similar redevelopment decisions.

In neighboring Wayland, residents debated for years what to do with an abandoned Raytheon facility, also sitting alongside Route 20 just up the road from Sudbury. After a Town Meeting rejected an earlier plan, voters eventually approved in 2006 what today is Wayland Town Center, a massive mixed-use redevelopment with 117,000 square feet of retail, 18,000 square feet of offices, and 112 condos, apartments and 40B rental units.

"We were not used to this kind of change," said Sarkis Sarkisian, the town planner in Wayland. "It was a difficult process. It was a challenge. But it turned out well in the end. It's going to be beautiful once all the trees are grown in. The town is already really benefiting from it."

In Woburn, Mayor Scott Galvin has his sights set on a slightly different type of mixed-use development at a former General Foods gelatin plant along I-93 and I-95, known locally as the "Gelly site." The mayor is pushing for the site's redevelopment into a biotech research, advanced manufacturing and office park, combined with about 60,000 square feet of retail and 150 to 200 housing units. The mayor's vision is at odds with those of the proposed developer, Legatt McCall, which wants hundreds of thou-

sands of square feet of retail and more than 300 housing units.

But the two sides agree on one thing: Any redevelopment has to have a mix of uses. "To make many projects work these days, you have to have some sort of mix," said Galvin. "I firmly believe we need mixed use. It's what other towns are doing too."

Indeed, the planned Meadow Walk Sudbury project is just one of many mixed-used redevelopments that National Development has been involved in over the years, either as master developer, co-developer or as an investment partner. Among them are The Market Street project in Lynnfield; the District Burlington, formerly the New England Executive Park; University Station in Lynnfield; and the Ink Block redevelopment of the old Boston Herald plant in Boston's South End.

While mixed-used developments of some kind are now all the rage, Tye and other experts stress that not every site is suitable for mixed-used projects. "It all depends on location," Tye said, noting that access to public transit or major roadways are among the keys for successful redevelopments. "We only look for 'A' locations – and Sudbury is an 'A' location."

Robert Buckley, a land-use attorney and senior partner at the law firm Riemer & Braunstein LLP, said he's seeing suburban towns increasingly embrace the idea of compact, walkable, mixed-used developments that evoke more of a communal atmosphere.

But he agreed that location is critical to the success of such redevelopments – as well as whether towns have the needed infrastructure to handle large projects, such as water and sewer hookups.

"Some of them will not be able to do these type of projects for various reasons," said Buckley. "But I think you're going to see more towns looking into these options. It's what the market is demanding." ■

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