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New Rochelle Bets on Its Downtown for Growth

City makes most of train station's location, paves the way for new stores, restaurants and apartments



Buildings next to the New Rochelle station on Metro-North's New Haven Line.

PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By

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New Rochelle is about to test its latest efforts to become Westchester's shopping and entertainment destination by adding stores, restaurants and thousands of apartments to its aging downtown.

Just north of New York City, New Rochelle has joined a growing number of municipalities in the region tapping into the idea of bustling downtowns that have mass-transportation options nearby. To that end, the City Council late last year signed off on a rezoning plan that allows about 1 million square feet of retail space, more than 2 million square feet for offices and as many as 5,500 apartments.

The city and the city's master developers, RXR Realty and Renaissance Downtowns LLC, shaped a zoning policy aimed at giving the public improvements that residents want and giving developers a predictable—and potentially faster route—to construction.

A key element to getting projects off the ground quicker is a generic environmental-impact statement. To obtain an environmental-impact statement specific to a proposal can be costly and time-consuming for a developer. Under the new policy, the most that could be required of a developer is a shorter supplemental environmental-impact analysis if the project falls within the new zoning boundaries.

"It's not just that we have a plan," said Luiz Aragon, the city's commissioner of development. "We have turned 274 acres of our downtown into a shovel-ready site."

A \$120 million mixed-use project only minutes from the train station, served by Metro-North Railroad and Amtrak, was announced earlier this month and could break ground by the beginning of the fourth quarter. The owners of the property, investors led by ABS Partners Real Estate LLC and Brause Realty Inc., formed a joint venture with RXR as the developer to build a complex that includes a 28-story tower with about 270 rental apartments, retail space and a roughly 10,000-square-foot theater for live performances—one of the public improvements requested by residents.



A rendering of 587 Main St., a mixed-use development proposed for New Rochelle. *PHOTO: PS&S CONSULTANTS*

"Rather than coming with the mind-set of what we want to build, we ask them [community members] what they want to see built," said [Scott Rechler](#), chief executive of RXR, "so what is produced has the fingerprints of what's important to the community on it."

Other improvements requested by residents included improved streetscapes, a pedestrian mall, bike lanes, the establishment of a downtown cultural retail and entertainment district and a food hall.

In New Rochelle, RXR and Renaissance Downtowns set up an office downtown, created a website and used social media to solicit ideas and gauge their popularity. City officials and developers hosted meetings in restaurants, auditoriums and even residents' living rooms.

"It gives them pride of authorship, as they learn about the need for density, the need for height, the need for uses that in the past might have caused concern," said Donald Monti, chief executive of Renaissance Downtowns.

Residents and elected officials came to the process with their fair share of concerns about development, including worries of displacement and an increased burden on existing taxpayers for increased schools and emergency-services costs. The new zoning allows 10% of new apartments to be affordable and provides incentives for more to be built. It also requires developers to contribute to a mitigation fund to pay for needs that come with growth.

New Rochelle saw its downtown follow a progression common to cities and towns nationwide. During the first half of the 20th century, the area was a retail center for the region and had greater density, said Mayor Noam Bramson. The growth of the car culture and shift of the population north and east were partly responsible for a decline that left Main Street with a 50% vacancy rate in the 1990s, Mr. Bramson said.

The city has worked to reverse its downtown decline in the past two decades, adding a few luxury residential apartment towers, specialty shops and mom-and-pop restaurants, many serving up ethnic cuisine. But the redevelopment has been slow and piecemeal, and was stalled by the financial crisis.

Elected officials and developers believe the city is poised to take advantage of the global trend of urbanization, attracting millennials priced out of New York City as well as empty nesters in the region.

"New Rochelle experienced what a lot of so-called inner-ring suburbs went through," said Lawrence Levy, executive dean of the National Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra University. He added: "But the smart ones have begun to adopt smart growth and transit-oriented principles that essentially say, 'If you want to revive, you've got to recognize your assets like train stations and downtown businesses that are still there, and go vertical and denser.'"

The mayor hopes other developers will take the cue of RXR and Renaissance Downtowns.

"When you have a strong entity placing bets on New Rochelle," Mr. Bramson said, "it sends a signal to the rest of the business community."

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