

A post-industrial tale of two cities

Watervliet and Cohoes suffered after industry fled, but things are looking up

By [JIMMY VIELKIND](#), Staff writer

Click byline for more stories by writer.

First published: Monday, October 6, 2008

COHOES — Five years ago, Remsen Street was a depressing shadow of its former self.

Longtime Cohoesers remember the street as a thriving commercial strip. First it was jobs that moved beyond the city lines. Then it was people who left. Like most downtown areas, it slid slowly into disrepair.

But when Sal Prizio first saw Remsen Street, he saw opportunity. The Brooklyn transplant moved to the Spindle City this summer, and in August, he opened Bread and Jam, a coffee shop and venue.

"As time passed, I saw it getting better and better," said Prizio, who used to work at a record label. His rent is much lower than it was at a site he considered in Saratoga. "There's more risk because it's not set in stone, but there's more potential here. Cohoes was a hopping little city back in the day, and it's cool to see that reviving."

Remsen Street is in the middle of a modest renaissance. Just down the street, there's the Hometowne Pizzeria. And Dnipro, a Ukrainian deli and specialty fish store. LinguaLinx, a translation company, moved 30 jobs to a downtown building in August.

The revived downtown strip is part of Cohoes' efforts to carve out a niche in the Capital Region as a potential destination for those seeking an urban lifestyle in a smaller community, Mayor John McDonald said. Small and dense, Cohoes is walkable, intimate, and easy to get to. But it doesn't have many of the problems found in the region's larger cities.

"A lot of the people who are moving back to our urban communities are the ones who fled" to suburbs a generation ago, he said. "People want vibrancy. They want the ability to do their own thing. They want to be able to walk there. Who are we trying to attract?"

He tapped on "The Rise of the Creative Class" by Richard Florida, which sits on his desk. Florida defines the "creative class" as a mix of white-collar professionals, artists and media workers.

Step one in attracting them, McDonald says, is housing. Since taking office in 2000, around 400 condos have been approved, mostly in the Harmony Mills complex along North Mohawk Street.

People living in those high-end lofts, McDonald said, are looking for a place to go; hence the focus on what he calls "in-fill redevelopment."

On Remsen, the first step was to spruce up tired storefronts. According to Ed Tremblay, director of community and economic development, \$640,000 in Main Street and Small Cities grants from the state have spurred more than \$2.5 million in private investments over the last 18 months.

One grant recipient is Diane Conroy-LaCivita. In 2006, she bought three adjacent buildings and began renovating.

A wine shop focusing on New York lines opened that November. A year later, she was able to open a bakery and cafe, and is renovating the third building into a tapas bar.

"We're hoping it could become a destination location," she said.

To the south, Watervliet has been dealt a similar hand — an older city that lost industrial jobs — but is playing it differently. During his successful campaign last year, Mayor Mike Manning talked about trying to make Watervliet into a bedroom community. But Watervliet's most salient feature — the massive arsenal at its core — recently began to stir.

In May, Army officials agreed to lease 57 acres of the property to industrial development. Several bids are now being

considered, Manning said.

"It was a game-changer," he explained.

The challenge now lies in planning to make that happen. Rosemary Nichols, Watervliet's newly hired director of planning and revitalization, said that will likely include examining how to integrate the arsenal into the surrounding city.

The goal is to make things attractive for people to settle.

"You can say to heck with business. We have transportation and we can just encourage people to live here," Manning said. "But I think we're looking toward a mix."

For Prizio, the change in Cohoes is already well under way.

"Hopefully, if we get more good, solid retail, we get more foot traffic," he said. "Once the perception has changed, the perception becomes reality."

Jimmy Vielkind can be reached at 454-5043 or by e-mail at jvielkind@timesunion.com.