

Baby boom generation key to Cohoes' renaissance



The Lofts at Harmony Mills covers much of North Mohawk Avenue in Cohoes.

COHOES — On Oct. 15, Kathleen Casey-Kirschling — the nation's first baby boomer — applied for Social Security retirement benefits.

That filing by the New Jersey woman who was born seconds after midnight on Jan. 1, 1946, served as a milestone in U.S. history: the dawn of the baby boomers' golden years.

Over the next two decades, about 80 million Americans are expected to follow Casey-Kirschling in filing for Social Security benefits at a rate of over 10,000 per day. The retirement of boomers — born between 1946 and 1964 — promises to change the nation's economic landscape, along with the Capital Region's.

While that tsunami of retirements threatens to sap the nation's labor force and deplete its coffers, it also promises to replenish some long-neglected parts of the country. And in this region, that boomer potential is especially strong in Cohoes.

Three days after Casey-Kirschling applied for her Social Security benefits, the Gordon Companies celebrated the opening of The Seasons of Mohawk Pointe in Cohoes.

That 37-unit condominium development on North Reservoir Street offers views of the Cohoes Falls and it aims to attract both boomers and young professionals. Mohawk Pointe is one of several condominium projects that have either been recently completed or are under way in Cohoes.

And with the condos have come new businesses that are revitalizing downtown.

"Cohoes has been a sleeper. It's only recently that it's been recognized as a true bedroom community with lots of potential," said Tracy Metzger, president of the TL Metzger & Associates real estate firm.

Cohoes started to fall into that slumber decades ago as its textile mills abandoned the city. After that, a mastodon skeleton and department store that both incorporate Cohoes in their names were two of the city's biggest claims to fame.

Now, Cohoes officials and developers hope condo projects along the Hudson and Mohawk rivers can fuel an economic revival the same way those waterways powered the city's mills during the 1800s.

By 1870, Cohoes had established itself as a leading textile manufacturing hub, owing to the availability of cheap hydroelectric power. The city housed six large cotton mills that included 203,000 spindles, 18 knitting mills, two foundries and three machine shops.

During the second half of the 20th century, most of Cohoes' mills relocated or closed. Only one mill remains operating in the city. Cohoes' leading employers are Mohawk Fine Papers, Northeast Health and the local school district.

LIVING ON THE WATER

An August report by TL Metzger found that Cohoes was by far the region's leader in condo development. By June, it had 139 existing units on the market and 105 new construction units for sale. An additional 425 units had received conditional approvals from the city.

"Definitely, Cohoes has the best waterfront around, and people like living on the water," said Dean DeVito, a principal of Prime Companies.

Prime is establishing a 222-unit condo complex on a 15-acre peninsula of Van Schaick Island, near Peebles Island State Park. DeVito, who has spent the past three years planning for Water's View, said the pending retirement of the boomers and the high price of land is making it the right time to build in Cohoes. The average price of his condo units is over \$200,000.

Also on Van Schaick Island, a 96-unit condo complex dubbed Admiral's Walk is being built. Developers and city officials plan

to establish a waterfront bike trail that runs past the condo complexes and spans from Peebles Island to the Green Island Bridge.

"It's because Cohoes is the crossroads of the Capital District. Because of location. A number of [condos] are on the water. Cohoes is bordered by the Hudson and the Mohawk, which makes it unique," said Metzger.

But only recently has the city aggressively tried using its waterfront assets to its advantage, Cohoes officials and developers say. Mayor John McDonald III said he began to realize the waterfront's potential a year after he was elected, in 2000.

McDonald, who was re-elected to a third term in November, said a study of the Route 470 Corridor, which connects Colonie to Troy, made it clear Cohoes needed more "shareholders" or residents to leverage more economic development.

"When I started, I couldn't get a developer to return my calls," said McDonald.

McDonald said Cohoes is looking for a boost from a certain demographic that will not be too taxing on the city school district: the boomers.

"Now you have a mayor and his staff who have been aggressively marketing the beauty that [Cohoes] has," said DeVito.

McDonald hopes the expected boomer influx will offset the population losses the city has experienced. Between 1990 and 2006, Cohoes' population dropped 10.8 percent to 15,011, according to U.S. Census Bureau. McDonald also hopes businesses will follow the boomers downtown.

RENTAL INVENTORY

Along with the surge in condo development, the city is adding scores of apartments to its inventory, namely at a massive textile mill on North Mohawk Street. Long Island investor Uri Kaufman has poured millions of dollars into the renovation of Harmony Mills, a massive brick complex about as long as the Empire State Building is tall. In March 2005, construction crews started demolition work at the mill, which was built between 1866 and 1872.

Harmony Mills' overhaul is being conducted in two phases. The first phase included the development of 96 apartments and a two-level parking garage. In December 2005, tenants started moving into the building.

By November, 98 percent of those upscale apartments were leased. Planning for the second \$24 million phase, which includes the development of 141 more apartments, is under way.

Kaufman said the mill's buildout should be completed by mid-2009. DeVito's business manages the Mohawk Street property.

The promise of a heavy concentration of affluent boomers and young professionals has already lured two pharmacies into downtown. A CVS in 2003 opened on Columbia Street and a Rite Aid opened last summer on Ontario Street. McDonald also runs Marra's Pharmacy on Remsen Street.

"You're going to see boutique-like businesses continue to flourish," said McDonald.

Over the last two years, Remsen Street has been abuzz with activity, especially among niche retailers. Newcomers to the strip include a store selling New York state wines, a European-style deli and a knitting shop. A farmers market moved to Remsen Street last summer and a painter-sculptor team are converting a former bank into an arts center called The Foundry for Art Design + Culture.

"We've played a part in it, but the lion's share goes to Mayor McDonald," Kaufman said of Harmony Mills' role in Cohoes' renaissance.